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THE LAW OF RETURN

JANUARY 2008 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

Before you send another anonymous e-mail to Itzakh's Myface.com page, you touch the four corners of your computer monitor with your cursor. Next, you find the exact centre pixel on the screen and click twice with your right mouse button. This habit's usually no problem, but on Itzakh's page the centre of the screen launches a Sonic Youth mp3. If you click and the volume of your computer happens to be turned up, Lee Reynaldo and Thurston Moore's harmonized guitars scream through the door of your office to an audience of legal secretaries and senior attorneys who collect Nana Mouskouri records.

This is what happened that first time you found Itzakh's page. Margarita, the secretary nearest your office, swiveled in your direction. You thought quickly enough. You shouted "Sorry, darn e-mail greeting cards."

The problem was that each time you tried to click out of the site, you had to touch all four corners of the screen then click on the middle which started the mp3 with its simple riff and the lyric "Mildred Pierce, Mildred Pierce, Mildred Pierce."

"Sorry. Computer's frozen."

Actually, it was you who was frozen. After your fourth attempt to click the centre pixel with your right mouse button you managed to get your foot into position to switch off the power strip. With your right hand on your mouse and your left foot on the power strip two feet to the other side of the desk, you looked like a contortionist.

That's exactly what you are. You have a wife. You can keep a job. But both are a struggle when you're not on medication or in therapy. You have always had friends, although none of them know about your OCD. At least, you've never talked about it.

Crashing your computer cost you two drafts: a letter to the Office of Administrative Hearings and a structured settlement in a worker's comp matter involving an employee with Tourette's who won't take medication. Her attorney was pleased by your offer but you had trouble explaining why it took you so long to draft the agreement.

Had you clicked Sonic Youth loose again, Margarita would have come in to either help or at least get a look at the world's most annoying greeting card. She would have found a middle-aged man looking at the Myface.com page of an eighteen year old Israeli male. If anyone checked with the system administrator, it wouldn't be that hard to show that you've visited Itzakh's page four hundred and sixty seven times. That's nearly two-thousand clicks to all four corners of your screen and almost a thousand right-clicks on the middle pixel. You would say, "I know what it looks like. It's not what it looks like. I'm not a molester. I'm his kvater."

No one in your office is Jewish. In fact, Margarita comes closest and she's a Mormon from El Salvador. You certainly aren't Jewish. There are no Jews named Lucky Tang.

It would make more sense to say, "I'm his godfather." That's the rough translation from the Yiddish for the male who carries the eight-day-old baby boy from his parents to the mohel for the bris. Once you explain the role of the kvater, though, people might recognize that the only difference between being a molester and a kvater is three-thousand years of ritual and the blessings of a rabbi.

Eighteen years ago, you participated in an act of genital mutilation.

You wouldn't say "godfather," because you're desperate to confess your story of how you came to spend forty hours of your life Googling Itzakh's name. Even though you got your routine down to ten seconds, you spent at least seven billable hours in the last three months ritually clicking your mouse before writing the following e-mail, "So Dude, what's with calling yourself "Mildred Pierce?" I'm down with the Sonic Youth thing, but have you seen the movie? ... Peace, Sonic Boomer."

It took you twenty-three drafts.

Margarita is on a call with someone else's client. As DSM categories go, OCD can be helpful for an attorney. If your compulsion took the form of checking dates and citations repeatedly, it would be great: you would bill a thousand extra hours a year and no one would notice your odder routines.

You regret calling yourself "Sonic Boomer;" it's a giveaway that you're not eighteen years old. Wikipedia can only help you fake this shared interest in all things post-punk for so long. Itzakh already asked, "Dude, how did you find my page?"

It does occur to you that Thurston Moore turns fifty this year. The Sonic Youth guys are way closer to your age than Itzakh's. The Joan Crawford movie, *Mildred Pierce*, is too old even for you to remember as anything other than late night TMC fare.

You should have told him who you are. Instead, you claimed that the “Goo” album is your favorite because even though Sonic Youth went commercial they managed to do it without selling out. Now, you’re stuck. To have OCD is to have a gift for finding ways to get stuck.

You’ve done the therapy—a few sessions. You’ve even twice done the medication for six months. But you like the expiation that comes with the rituals. Your mouse clicks are like sanctifying all the information that comes off the Internet. It isn’t like you check doorknobs constantly or wash your hands fifty times a day. You haven’t done that since college.

JULY 1994 NICASIO, CALIFORNIA

Your best friend at work (she gets through the day continuously listening to Todd Rundgren CDs before switching to Gram Parsons) shows you something on the computer called Inktomi.

“My boyfriend helped develop it. It’s called a “search engine;” it uses something called a “spider” to find anything on the Internet.”

“The first hit’s free, right?”

She laughs. Even though you’re married, the first name you enter is your ex-girlfriend Nina’s, with whom you haven’t spoken in six years. Nina’s Inktomi search brings back, “Gödel Institute fellow looking for a bone marrow donor.”

Nina has leukemia. How old is the article? Is she still alive? Would your bone marrow match? Worse, would your bone marrow have been a match?

Your mind and fingers become flies trapped in the World Wide Web. Your OCD bonds with the possibilities of Internet searches. You spend three weeks searching frantically for Nina on Inktomi.

In the second week, your best friend at work tells you, “I’m breaking up with my boyfriend. I’m tired of being with a poor graduate student. How do you make money from a search engine?”

You find Nina’s phone number. Her life partner, Elaine, answers and promises to pass your message on to Nina. “She’s fine now. I’ve heard about you. I’ll have her call when she has a chance.”

A week later you’ve heard nothing. You send Nina an e-mail to an address found through another Inktomi search. You call again and Nina answers the phone. “When I got sick we thought about calling you. I did an alternative treatment. I’m doing fine. Can we talk soon? This isn’t the best time.”

A later search turns up her obituary on a higher-mathematics listserv. You call Nina’s parents. Her mother answers. “Before Nina died, she phoned me. She wanted to call you back, but

couldn't in front of Elaine. Elaine never told her you called. Nina was really excited to hear from you, Lucky."

JANUARY 1999 SAN RAFAEL, CALIFORNIA

This is your real life. Thirty to forty times a day, you run the same Google searches for a dozen individuals with whom you've lost touch. Instead of looking to God for answers, you search Google. It isn't that strange. Isn't the World Wide Web as close as we come to grasping the infinite? After all, Google is a number just short of a mortal's capacity to comprehend infinity. Besides, search is easier than concordance.

Most searches return the same result. Maybe every seven months, some new link appears or old ones disappear. When you were a child, stations didn't yet broadcast 24-7, so you watched TV test patterns. You knew it had to change to regular programming eventually. You wanted to be there when it happened.

After Nina, the searches became habit. You added the names of everyone you'd ever lost touch with. When Itzakh's mother abducted him to her native Israel after she lost the California custody case with Ambrose, your best friend, you added the ten-year-old Itzakh to the list.

2004 JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

When Ambrose first went back and forth to Israel to challenge the rabbinical court's ruling voiding the California order, your Internet searches turned up nothing about your godson. An Israeli psychologist who never spoke to Ambrose determined that Itzakh and his mother had such an unhealthy bond that any separation from her risked his nervous breakdown. The Israeli psychologist confirmed that Ambrose appeared to be the more competent parent. It was just that if Itzakh went to live with Ambrose for any period, the separation guilt exacerbated by Nava might lead to Itzakh attempting suicide.

After the ruling, the court let Ambrose see his son alone. Itzakh spent two minutes in Ambrose's hotel room then ran out screaming, "Go away! You're not my father. You hate my mother."

For five years, Ambrose's trips met with the same result—no Israeli court would return a Jewish son to an African-American father.

On one trip, Ambrose e-mails you a photo. In the image, he stands between two strangers in front of a high stone wall. It's not clear how the parts of the wall bond together. Ferns grow from between some of the cracks. It's the Wailing Wall, a holy place in Judaism as the site of the second temple. To Moslems, it is the spot where Muhammad tethered his horse before ascending to heaven. The Jews claim that the Moslems didn't consider the wall a shrine until the last century. The Moslems insist that the Jews didn't pray at the wall until after the Balfour Declaration.

The e-mail reads, "The custody case has been the subject of two Haaretz editorials. It's so well-known that these two came up to me to tell me, 'We know this is hard. But leave your son alone. He'll be well taken care of here. We once lived in Chicago. He'd be seen differently in America.'

"You wanted to know how it's going. This is how it's going."

You zoom in on the photo. Pieces of paper (possibly prayers or blessings) stick out from most of the cracks. Is Itzakh hiding behind the wall like some Waldo children's book, his foreskin slipped between stones?

OCTOBER 2004 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

When Ambrose returns, he calls you to talk. Every time, you end the conversation with "You're too good a father for Itzakh not to come back to you. He has to know how much you love him. He was ten. Let him get away from Nava. One day you'll hear from him."

Every time you say it, your fingers type on an imaginary keyboard and your hand moves to the four corners, then the middle. On the phone it isn't a big deal. In person though, Ambrose stares at your hand and asks what you are doing. Always a quick thinker, you say, "I'm crossing myself ..."

It might work with someone else, but you both know that neither of you is religious. Ambrose's eyes widen and he says, "Right ..."

"I'm crossing myself to ward off vampires."

Ambrose spits laughter. Tears come to his eyes. It's now a shared joke between the two of you.

SEPTEMBER 9, 2001 PETALUMA, CALIFORNIA

Inktomi has been replaced by Google. It is now like Inktomi never existed. You are at work. You normally do your searches early in the morning or just before going home. You make the mistake of doing one in the middle of the afternoon. After you touch through the corners of the screen, you type Itzakh's name in the white search box. His name has never turned up a link. It's the first time

you've searched for Itzakh in months. The screen belches something that has nothing to do with famous violinists or Israeli politicians. *Children's Internat Math Contest Honorable Mention—Itzakh Woods. 12 Holon, Israel <http://www.mathkids.edu/contest/2001>*

You touch all four corners of your computer screen then e-mail Ambrose. "Look, Itzakh's good at math like you. He's using your last name."

Ambrose e-mails back within the hour. "Thanks so much. It's the only thing I've heard of him. At least I know he's doing okay in some way."

"See, things aren't all bad. Talk in a couple days."

This is what good kvaters do.

DECEMBER 23, 2000 4 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

In your office, you keep a black and white photo that your wife took and framed. In the picture, Ambrose carries Itzakh (then eight years old) as they stand next to your daughters in your driveway. Before you do searches for Itzakh, you look at the photo to remind yourself that a bond this obvious can't be completely broken. Itzakh and Ambrose have the same broad white-toothed smile. It occurs to you that this is one of the few times you remember Itzakh smiling after age five. Mostly, you remember him walking in the door and demanding to be fed, hitting kids he'd never met at public playgrounds, and spitting in the face of a woman who sat him on her lap.

Three weeks ago Marie framed a copy of the photo and gave it to Ambrose. He cried and hugged her. After everyone else was in bed, you asked Ambrose, "Am I the only one who talks to you about Itzakh?"

"You're the last one who does," he said, soft and hoarse.

Ambrose's second wife Christina determined that the futile attempt to recover Itzakh was destroying Ambrose. They began to travel. She encouraged Ambrose to take up Aikido, a martial art based on the idea of perfect circles. Ambrose mentions the custody case less and less.

Yesterday, you asked about Itzakh (you can't help yourself); Ambrose answered slowly. "Itzakh will have to come back to me. If he does, I'll be here. He made it clear that the court fight is tearing him apart. I need to respect that."

You made the sign of the mouse cursor to him and whispered just beneath audibility, "He'll come back. He knows you love him."

It doesn't keep you from Googling. You just don't mention how often to Ambrose and you never mention it to Christina. Christina is Catholic. She talks about the importance of "free will."

Before they married, she asked Ambrose to annul his marriage to Nava so they could wed in the church.

Ambrose insists that his only religion is the San Francisco Giants. He agreed to the annulment because the religious details didn't matter to him as much as they did to Christina. Nava refused to let Itzakh go to his own father's wedding. She left a message on Ambrose's answering machine, "How can Itzakh be our child if our marriage never existed?"

It's three in the morning. Ambrose is getting in his car for his drive home. Still, you haven't asked the obvious question: "Should I stop asking you about him?"

You make the sign of the mouse with your right hand then hurry inside to the comfort of your Internet provider.

SEPTEMBER 1999 HAYWARD, CALIFORNIA

In Department 9, the Family Court Division of the Superior Court of Alameda County, Nava screams at a white-haired African-American man, the judge: "You got your position through affirmative-action. No wonder you believe this garbage about Parent Alienation Syndrome. You don't understand any of my concerns in this case."

Nava's fourth lawyer (she fired the first three) is dressed in a black floor length dress and covers her head with a dark kerchief. Twelve years ago, the lawyer converted to Orthodox Judaism and now observes Shatnitz, traditional dress. "My client apologizes," she says. "This is an emotional proceeding for everyone concerned. She believes that her son's life is at stake."

Before the hearing, Ambrose's lawyer explained Parent Alienation Syndrome (PAS) to you. Even though the ten year old Itzakh says he wants to be with his mother, it's because she's systematically alienated him from his father by exploiting the child's natural desire to believe his mother. She apparently tells him things like, "Now that he's married again, your father doesn't want you. I'm the one who cares. I would never marry again because I have to look after you. I love you that much. I would die without you."

The evaluating psychologist, who made three home visits with each parent, and spent six sessions with Itzakh alone, has convinced the court with testimony that Itzakh has been brainwashed.

"Get your client under control," the judge orders. "It's bad enough that your client claims that she could teach this child more about African-American roots than his father."

Nava ignores her attorney's frantic hand signal. Her voice fills the courtroom. "I know about W.E.B. Dubois and Richard Wright. As a Mizrahi Jewess, I know more about being black than the father. His family is wealthy. Rich blacks have lost these things. Ambrose can't know what it means to be a member of an oppressed group."

When the judge rules, he makes one mistake. He doesn't order Nava to turn Itzakh's passport over to the court. He gives her three days to bring Itzakh to Ambrose.

OCTOBER 2006 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

Over the years you have sent Ambrose occasional links to Itzakh's whereabouts. He appeared in an oboe recital in Jerusalem. He showed up on a list of international anime fans. Itzakh has an Ipod and he's in an online forum looking for Hebrew firmware. At first, Ambrose would e-mail back a quick note of thanks. After the Ipod, he stopped. You send them sometimes anyway.

In the last year, your contact with Ambrose has become less frequent. He is busy with aikido or on another trip with Christina. When you do talk, it's limited to whether you care to keep rooting for Barry Bonds. You do agree that baseball's best leftfielder is being picked on partly because he's black.

Much to your surprise, a new link in Itzakh's search results appears about "Parent Alienation Syndrome." The sixteen-year-old Itzakh Woods-Israel has posted a column about the evils of PAS. It's on an anti-PAS website filled with testimonials from children who were abducted by one of their parents. In each case, the child tells a story of having been molested or abused by the left behind parent. "I was not brainwashed to hate my father, I hate him for a good reason."

Itzakh's story includes the following: *I was urinating on myself when I was nine. My father would yell at me and hit me whenever he would discover that I'd wet myself. I would cry. A psychologist claimed that I had parent alienation syndrome and an American judge who had a vendetta against my mother believed the flawed and inaccurate report. PAS has ruined my mother's and my life. I've been through a lot. I'm just grateful for the love of my mother, the only person who knows what I've been through.*

It's the first Itzakh link you can't even consider sending to Ambrose. For the first time in years, you don't touch your computer for a whole week.

FEBRUARY 1999 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

He's in the fourth grade. You are showing him a videogame on your computer where you conquer the world by managing cities, resources, and armies. As you start the game, he grabs your hand

before you finish tracing the corners of the screen with your mouse. Forty-five minutes in, you smell something on your office chair. Itzakh has peed all over the upholstery.

Your first impulse is to yell, but you don't. Still, you hear it clearly in your head, "You're fucking nine-years-old, what the hell's the problem?"

Ambrose still seems to hear what's inside your head. He first pulls you aside outside the door of your own study. His voice is preternaturally gentle and protective. "He's just distracted. He didn't want to quit playing. Don't make him feel bad like there's something wrong with him. Nava's been giving him a very hard time about it."

Ambrose slips back in and whispers something in Itzakh's ear. He squeezes his son's shoulder. Itzakh looks down and then catches your eye. It amazes you that he shows no signs of embarrassment. Ambrose takes Itzakh back to the bathroom to help his son clean himself and change. It strikes you that Ambrose is incapable of ever hurting Itzakh in any way. Abraham had proven his devotion to God by being willing to kill his only son. No God could scare Ambrose enough to ever hurt Itzakh.

When they return to your study, you're looking at Ambrose. As Itzakh's father, Ambrose has achieved a kind of grace that you envy. *He's a better father than you*, you tell yourself. *This is the best my friend will ever be at anything.*

You gave your favorite chair to Goodwill. You disinfected the seat cushion until it wore through the fabric.

APRIL 1, 2007 LOGAN AIRPORT BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Flying back from your stepson's wedding, you pull out your new cell phone, the one that gives you Internet access anywhere. The buttons already show signs of wear. Maybe it's the colour of the fabric on seat 15C, the exit row you always ask for, but you remember your office chair. In your head, you see the photo of Ambrose and Itzakh. You look up The Book of Job on Wikipedia. You squint at the tiny letters. In one passage, Job's friends come to him and say, "Surely you must have done something to anger God for all this to happen to you. Just ask his forgiveness."

Job refuses to admit any wrongdoing and he also refuses to curse God. As you imagine the scene, Job has Ambrose's voice.

Three religions tell the story of Job and the story of Abraham. In all three, Abraham is more revered. Job is just some good man tested by God. If Ambrose is some modern Job, what is your part to play? And did Job really take up Aikido the last four hundred years of his life? You touch all

four corners of the screen with your stylus. The stewardess insists on watching you switch it off. On landing, you'd turn it on again but you've run down the battery.

OCTOBER 2007 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

In the last year, you have found dozens of new Itzakh links and bookmark them. Almost all are about Sonic Youth, Nine Inch Nails, and Hole. Otherwise, the online Itzakh is a kind of test pattern. You still check repeatedly so you can witness the moment Itzakh contacts his father. A few months ago, someone told you about Google Alerts, a service that tells you when a new search item appears for a subject. It wasn't fast enough.

You haven't talked to or e-mailed Ambrose in weeks. Still, you've convinced yourself that your searches must play some role in returning Ambrose to that state of grace you witnessed in your study. You even tell yourself, *this is why I have OCD. No ordinary person would be this stubborn. If you resumed medication, could you care like this?*

To your delight, Itzakh Woods has a new link, a Myface.com page. Before you can read, you click on the centre pixel and "Mildred Pierce, Mildred Pierce" blares through the door of your office.

Eventually, you study the photo in the upper left corner of the page. He's smaller and lighter-skinned than Ambrose. He has Nava's intense brown eyes. But for the first time, you see Ambrose's triangular nose and high cheekbones and that chin that comes out in front of his mouth.

OCTOBER 15, 2007 SANTA TYRONE, CALIFORNIA

You study Itzakh's Myface.com page ninety-seven times in two weeks. Once you got past the photo and the Sonic Youth mp3, you find dozens of messages from his Myface.com friends. Unfortunately, most of the messages are in Hebrew. You find English messages from a "Nadia Stardust," which you assume to be an alias. Anyone who claims that she once got drunk and started singing like Joe Strummer from The Clash but now can't remember it would want an alias.

Nineteen messages in, it becomes clear that they've never met in person. In message twenty-three, Nadia tells Itzakh, "I've never known my dad."

"He must have been a real bastard," Itzakh replies. "I know what that's like."

Message forty tells her, "By the way, maybe we could meet, I'm going to Brandeis in the fall."

"Are you going to see him?" she asks.

"He doesn't know."

You send Itzakh an anonymous e-mail. "Cool page. Thurston Moore is like God, only Thurston's at least six inches taller than God." You sign your message, Sonic Boomer.

A day later, Itzakh replies, “Welcome to my page. Sonic Youth rules.”

Generic, but it feels good.

NOVEMBER, 2007 EUREKA, CALIFORNIA

You’re in one of those depositions where the other lawyer talks too much. A member of the Klamath tribe fell off the backup of a pickup while intoxicated at a construction site. Indian Health Care says his care belongs to the Worker’s Comp System. The carrier insists that his therapy belongs to Indian Health Care.

“What would Squanto say?”

Your Thanksgiving joke falls flat and the other attorney goes back to talking. You pull out your cell phone and e-mail Ambrose. “You probably already know this, but it looks like Itzakh’s at Brandeis. Every teenager in the world must have a Myface.com page.”

You’re surprised to get an e-mail from Ambrose: “No, didn’t know that. Hope he’s happy.”

On your way home, you keep thinking about Itzakh being back in the United States.

For several days, you hear nothing from Ambrose. Eventually you send him an e-mail about the Giants signing Aaron Rowand. You then send one that’s never failed to provoke: “Tiger Woods is more Asian than he’s black; they don’t have tigers in Africa.”

No reply, not even Ambrose Woods’ usual, “They don’t have woods there either, but I’m so black.”

Is Itzakh happy? On his Myface.com page he doesn’t look unhappy. He’s not smiling like in the photo on your wall, but he’s not necessarily not-smiling. Can people be happy even without being complete?

You keep thinking about *Mildred Pierce*, the movie. Joan Crawford, pre-*Mommie Dearest*, plays the world’s most devoted mother to the world’s least grateful daughter. Left by her husband, Mildred Pierce vows not to let her daughter ever want for anything simply because she has no father. Mildred builds a restaurant empire with the help of her African-American housekeeper, Butterfly McQueen, the same actress who said, “I can’t birth no baby,” in *Gone with the Wind*.

After Thanksgiving, you decide to draft another e-mail to Itzakh. “Your father loves you. What you say about him simply isn’t true. None of what you’ve been told about him is true. You have to remember your tenth birthday party.” You don’t send it.

JULY 1999 TILDEN PARK BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

Itzakh opens presents at his tenth birthday party. Christina makes sure that he saves the cards as she keeps a list of who gave him what for thank you notes.

All of the guests are boys, friends of Itzakh's from Alameda County's only Hebrew private school, except your daughter, Tally, who minutes ago watched awkwardly as a bare-chested Itzakh played capture the flag on the soccer field. Ambrose had his shirt off, too, the only adult to join the boys. They were all laughter and smiles especially when he snuck up on Itzakh from behind and lifted him on his shoulders. Itzakh squealed with delight. At one point, Ambrose pulled you aside to tell you. "Nava keeps getting the judge mad. She won't shut up for some reason. Maybe we'll get something for the forty thousand dollars we've put into lawyers."

Last night, you realized that you had no idea about gifts. You called Ambrose. "For a Godfather, I've not been very good. What does he want?"

"What does he want or what should you get him?"

"He wants to be with his father ... If only I could give you both that."

"He's really been interested in World War II lately. He knows a lot about it."

You tell Marie, "For some reason Itzakh's become obsessed with the biggest war in history."

Itzakh gets to your gifts. He unwraps the first, an illustrated history of World War II with photos of tanks, airplanes, and submarines. There are also pictures of the Holocaust, but he doesn't stop for them. He flips through the pages happily, then drops the book into a pile of "favoured" gifts.

The second is a young adult book about the Tuskegee Airmen. He sees the cover then drops it into discarded wrapping papers, a sweater, and a pair of hiking boots.

"Itzakh, you need to say 'Thank you,' it was nice of Lucky and Marie," Christina reminds him.

"Thanks for the book ..." Itzakh says flatly.

These are the last words you will exchange in person with your godson.

The parents of the other kids arrive. They speak to one another but barely acknowledge either Marie or yourself. They talk about the school, a recent tuition hike, and somehow segue into how the State of Israel pays a bonus to Jewish families with multiple children.

"If you're willing to live on the West Bank, you don't even have to work."

One dad who has five children says, "I've never been there."

The dad with the Israeli accent says, "Not a problem. You know about the Law of Return."

The dad says, "Here, they only pay welfare to ..." He manages to stop himself before Ambrose turns around, but the other father nods.

JULY 1989 BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

It's the first time you've ever heard the word "kvater."

"It's like Godfather. In fact, it's Yiddish for Godfather, kvater-Godfather," Nava explains.

You agree to do it after Ambrose tells you it's a way to honour your friendship.

"You're also going to be the Sandak," Nava goes on.

"Is that Yiddish too?"

"No, Hebrew."

"Sure, whatever ... I'd be honoured."

A week later you are at their apartment and the scene is more like a made for cable situational comedy than any kind of religious ceremony. Ambrose introduces you to the mohel, a short-bearded man who happens to be both a rabbi and a doctor. For now, he's in a business suit, though he already wears a yarmulke. At one point, he pulls a polished stainless-steel scalpel from his pocket to show that he's all set.

"You're the kvater?" The mohel's voice crosses surprise with measured diplomacy. After all, this is Berkeley.

"They do have a colony of Jews in Kaifeng, China who have been there since the Yuan Dynasty."

The mohel listens to your history lesson and mentions that hundreds of Jews came to Shanghai to escape Hitler. You don't bother to tell him that you're not one of the Kaifeng Jews, but it's clear enough when you make the mistake of sitting in Elijah's chair. He gently reminds you that it has to stay empty. "It's bad luck," he warns. "But only if you do it during the ceremony."

Nava's friends are behind the couch. You stand for the ceremony next to Elijah's chair. There is Ambrose who is 6'1" and African-American, Nava who isn't quite 4'10", the mohel now dressed in his robes, and you, maybe the only Asian-American kvater in the year 1989 or whatever its Hebrew Calendar equivalent is. Ambrose beams as he holds the eight-day-old Itzakh.

Another friend of Nava's stands behind the couple with a video camera the size of an overnight bag. A series of extension cords connect the camera to an outlet in the kitchen. Nava and Ambrose were married at city hall seven years ago on twenty four hours notice. The bride and groom wore white T-shirts with the phrase "Generic Spouse" printed above a barcode. At one point, the extension cord just misses toppling several platters of food including a bowl of cocktail sausages. They're Nava's idea; it's just one of those Nava things, like when she chooses that moment to tell the

assembled guests, “You know in some bris ceremonies, the mohel sucks the blood out after the incision.”

Even the Israelis don’t laugh. The mohel shakes his head to make it clear that this is not in his plans. From the back, an accented voice pipes in, “Maybe if he gets a nice tip, we might talk him into it.”

This draws laughter, but not much. After another minute, the mohel clears his throat then motions for you to get Itzakh, a tiny mocha-coloured baby with his father’s curly hair, from his parents. The eyes are clearly Nava’s. They’re far too serious for a baby. Itzakh is naked beneath the blanket. You smell the sweet scent of recently applied baby powder on him. He’s light as a loaf of bread, but you’re terrified that you’ll drop him. You can’t wait to deliver him to the pillow on the table. Minutes earlier, the mohel explained that your duties as Sandak include holding Itzakh’s legs apart during the ceremony so the scalpel has a clear path. Before you grab Itzakh’s little feet, the mohel motions for you to stand back.

“Before I say the blessing, I think it’s important that we all remember and for some of you that we understand the significance of the bris. It is a custom that started when God commanded Abraham to carry out the ritual of circumcision on his son as a mark of his faith and identity. In return, God promised that his people would someday return to Canaan, the Promised Land. It is a sign of our commitment to our faith and our God.”

Maybe if Nava hadn’t joked, the mohel wouldn’t have included the history lesson. His speech restores a measure of solemnity to the room. It’s not a sitcom any longer. Itzakh doesn’t appear to be listening. You suppress an urge to touch all four corners of his body to make certain that he stays in place. You then try to catch Ambrose’s eye. You want to shout, “This is really *really* Jewish, and neither of us is Jewish.”

Ambrose misreads your expression and smiles blissfully back at you. None of Ambrose’s family is here for the bris. They live four hundred miles away and Nava has never gotten along with them. You realize it never occurred to you to ask if they might be there.

There is no way for you to back out. That only happens in bad movies. The mohel did mention that non-Jews sometimes serve as kvaters for progressive couples from Reform temples. You remember that Nava claims that she hadn’t been to temple in five years except for Yom Kippur. *As Reform as it gets*, you reason.

The mohel signals for you to take Itzakh’s feet and spread them gently. He completes his blessing then unfolds his scalpel. “Don’t be nervous,” he whispers. “I do this all the time.”

It takes less than two minutes and you have the best view in the house. There's much less blood than you imagined and Itzakh barely cries. The mohel wipes it quickly with a bit of surgical gauze dipped in disinfectant.

"Everything's fine," he whispers again. "You did your job well. You're a true friend."

Your fingers still shake. As soon as the mohel signals that your job is done, you get away from the table. "Were you the one who was supposed to carry Itzakh over to Ambrose and Nava after the bris?"

Fortunately, there's a kvaterin, an Israeli woman who has done this twice before. She's a forty-two-year-old friend of Nava's who asked for the role because she still wants to get pregnant. You wind up last in line to hug Nava and Ambrose.

You don't eat beyond socially necessary amounts. After the food, Nava and Ambrose open gifts as the bris becomes more like a baby shower. There are brightly-coloured clothes, a variety of educational toys, and some of the Israeli friends bring items of religious significance. You sheepishly hand Nava a Giants cap still in a bag. "It felt a little weird wrapping a gift for an event like this," you mumble.

Ambrose breaks into a smile at the sight of the stylized-orange SF on the front that looks like Chinese calligraphy. Ambrose wants to try it on Itzakh, but Nava pulls the baby away. "Too big for him, maybe when he gets older. Besides it just came from the store, might not be clean."

"Nava's not a big sports fan," Ambrose says softly. "And she's superstitious."

"I don't care, he's going to a game with us in a few years," you say. "Maybe for the Bar Mitzvah, we'll get season tickets. If Nava wants to come, she can. If not, we'll have a great time together, anyway."

Nava changes the subject. The mohel left minutes ago to coach a Bhat Mitzvah in Concord. In his absence, Nava takes the opportunity to loudly inform the room, "The Mohel told me it was easy because Itzakh's was unusually big."

She pokes Ambrose with her finger and he laughs. You all begin to talk about Itzakh's future. Nava talks about oboe lessons, schools, colleges, and the size of Itzakh's penis. Ambrose and you joke about little league and garage bands. Impulsively, Ambrose holds a well-covered Itzakh up above his head as if to present him to all the guests. His voice fills the room: "I can't tell you how much I love being a father."

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