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8,450 Words

## The Rabbi

By: David Lettis

The people he met on planes never ceased to amaze him. The young mothers too numb to care that their unruly children were causing a commotion; the overweight smokers unaware that both their stench and girth invaded the privacy of their neighbors; the troubled youth ordering alcoholic beverages at ten in the morning while the tattoos from under their shirts screamed for attention. Lost causes. All of them.

Rabbi Ben Jacober once tried to help these souls. Now he endured them.

The crowd on his current flight was no different than usual. He found himself seated next to an elderly woman who placed her white fur coat behind her in such a manner that it crept into Ben's seat space and occasionally knocked the yarmulke from his head. On the other side sat an abnormally tall man who at one point must have been a basketball center; he now appeared homeless. The couple in the row behind him argued about their crying baby and a man

a few rows ahead cursed when the flight attendant confirmed his bag wouldn't fit in the overhead compartment.

Every week for the past two years, Ben had flown to New York on a Monday and returned home to San Francisco on a Wednesday or Thursday to prepare for the Sabbath. After six months, he stopped leading the Friday services at his Temple Beth El in San Francisco, but the flights continued. After a year, he stopped opening the Tanakh—a Hebrew book comprising the Jewish Scriptures; this specific copy had once belonged to his brother—but he continued to carry it with him on his travels. The Talmud he obtained during Rabbinical training had been gathering dust on a bookshelf for longer than he could remember.

“Oh, there I go again,” the woman next to him squeaked as she pulled her jacket back into her seat. Ben feigned a smile and readjusted his yarmulke. “I’ve grown so clumsy in my old age.”

“Ah,” Ben said.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” a woman’s voice projected across the plane. “The captain has informed me that we should have very smooth flight conditions and you should be expecting a very pleasant Saturday morning once we land in the Big Apple.”

Ben cringed at the thought. God purposely did this to him, killing his father on a Wednesday and forcing a funeral on Saturday morning. One last jab at his life decisions. Ben reached down to his briefcase and checked to make sure the sealed will remained where he had placed it. His father had been updating it monthly; this latest version was only a few weeks old. He then reached in and removed the Tanakh. He leaned back and held the book to his chest. He didn't open it. The words no longer held the meaning to him that they once did. He just held it against his chest, against his heart, and closed his eyes as his head rested against the seat. His

fingers could feel the old leather binding and the oils on the cover that had accumulated from two decades of daily handling. When the plane rumbled to life, he clutched at the book more tightly. The jet engines then roared and thrust him back into the seat. He felt the ground beneath him fall away as the plane lifted into the air.

Ben had never seen John F. Kennedy Airport on a Saturday morning and he grasped the Tanakh against his chest like a shield as he wheeled his luggage off the plane. He had stopped allowing the Sabbath to dictate his Saturdays around the same time that he left his duties at the Temple, but old habits die hard and navigating an airport on Saturday morning made his blood pressure rise. When he finally pushed open the exit door to enter the baggage claim area, small beads of sweat had formed on his forehead even though he could now make the walk from Gate 61 with his eyes closed. This time, he half expected to find his sister waiting for him. The past two years had been trying for the entire family, but surely she would greet him on the day of the funeral. Or maybe, as he stood still with only his neck rotating to scan the terminal, some bridges are too burned to repair. This was hardly akin to the return of the Prodigal Son, but even making the comparison seemed unfair. The Prodigal Son was greedy and selfish, Ben left to answer a calling.

A stranger bumped him as he stood alone in the terminal, knocking the back of his shoulder and forcing him to take a step from falling. It was a heartless act, perhaps one folded into the fabric of the universe by the Almighty himself to remind Rabbi Jacober that it's a heartless world, unforgiving and unyielding. Rather than confront the man and demand an apology, he gripped his Tanakh and took another step forward so he could hail a cab. Once

inside the taxi with a television screen in front of him blaring news about the day's latest pop star, his inability to sleep on planes—even cross-country red eyes—got the better of him. He closed his eyes for what seemed a second and opened them an hour later in front of a rundown condominium building in Brooklyn.

The façade of the six-story complex was constructed out of old yellow brick that provided a perfectly neutral canvas for the rusted iron fire escapes. Ben always took a few seconds to gaze up at them. Rusted or not, the red stairwells worked. They zigzagged from the roof to the road, culminating atop the “Red Velvet Cleaners” and a sparsely filled grocery mart. This particular neighborhood hadn't yet caught up to the gentrification of other parts of Brooklyn, so the cracks in the sidewalks hadn't been properly patched and trash accumulated in the corners of concrete stairwells. Ben noticed some of this trash as he walked up the stairs between the cleaners and grocery mart to let himself into the lobby. He used his key to open his father's mailbox. The Postal Service had not yet caught wind of his father's death, so Ben made a mental note to have it forwarded to his California address. He pulled the mail out—a few bills and advertisements tucked between *National Explorer*, *Outside Magazine*, and *Playboy*—and walked two more flights of stairs to let himself into his father's condo.

Ben's actions and movements continued out of pure motor memory. He threw his bag on the kitchen table in the dining room, which doubled as the foyer. He put on a pot of coffee and immediately went to the half bathroom off of the kitchen to relieve himself and to wash his hands and face. When he emerged, he expected to greet Franny, his father's day-nurse. Franny, a rotund Slavic woman who left her smile in the glory of Yugoslavia, would usually grunt a hello and remind Ben that he is a bad son. “Rabbi, pfft. Man of God would care for his father, pfft.

Rabbi.” She would then withdraw to the rocking chair and read magazines, emerging with meals, water, and pills.

Franny’s absence reminded Ben that his routine no longer suited the situation. Regardless, he poured two cups of coffee, topped them both off with the half-full bottle of Irish whiskey stashed above the refrigerator, and walked into his father’s bedroom. The bedroom was the only one that remained almost exactly as it had looked for twenty years. His room and his sister’s room still had beds, but were now mostly used for storage for medical devices and old boxes.

The sheets of the double bed were soiled and rumped. Ben could see the outline of his father’s body in the mattress in the exact spot he had passed away. Franny found him when she arrived early Thursday morning. There were still dishes on the bedside table and the light from the bathroom flickered as it began to burn out after remaining on for three straight days. Above the bed, a large golden crucifix watched over the room. Franny insisted on putting it up when she discovered the Rabbi’s father was a catholic. As Ben held the two mugs of coffee and stared at Jesus on the cross, he heard a knock at the front door. He placed one of the mugs on the kitchen table and walked to the door to answer it. When he opened it, his sister, Evelyn, stood with her arms crossed and an eyebrow raised.

“I figured I’d find you here,” she said.

“Yeah, came straight from the airport... to clean myself up.”

She contorted her face. “You flew in this morning? On the Sabbath?”

Ben swallowed. “It was the first ticket I could get.”

“The first ticket you could get from San Francisco to New York was this morning?”

Sensing her skepticism, he said accusingly, "I'm not the one who arranged his funeral on a Saturday morning."

"Dad isn't a Jew, *Rabbi*. The rules don't apply. And it's not like I'm exactly practicing." She barged in and found the cup of steaming coffee on the table. She picked it up and smelled it. "Whiskey?"

Ben nodded and held his mug up. "To dad."

They clinked glasses and let the hot coffee and harsh whiskey warm their spirits and then they both took a seat at the table and stared at one another.

"Franny told me that you... It's good that you've gotten to spend time with him."

"I wasn't sure you actually remembered where he lived," Ben said. He knew it was a petty comment, but he couldn't help himself.

"That's nice. While you're off in San Francisco, who do think was coordinating his care? How many times did you pay Franny or have to deal with her replacement when she was sick?" She sucked in the stale air of the condo and washed it down with her whiskey-spiked coffee. She licked her lips and looked around. "What a shithole. I hate this place."

"You used to like it. He wanted you to come visit."

"You talked about me in your little *visits*? Ew."

Ben shook his head. "Not really. We talked about... the Mets."

His comment made his sister laugh out loud. "So you got into the important stuff?"

"I had forgotten how nice it was to talk to him about the Mets. It's all we used to talk about before..."

"The fact you abandoned the family to run off and become a fucking rabbi?"

Ben laughed and looked at the ground. "Sure."

“You know, I know that it’s the day of his funeral and we’re supposed to be putting hard feelings aside to show our love for him and remember him for the loser dirt bag that he was, but I want you to know, I blame you. I won’t be able to move forward until I know that you know that. I blame you. I blame you for all of this. For everything.” She stopped to search her brother for any sense of emotion or understanding or regret. “He could have come back. We all could have come back. We should all be here.”

“Dad started drinking long before I left. You don’t want to hear it, but he started drinking before they even died. And I left because of his encouragement, to honor Mom. And John.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“It’s the truth. He told me nothing would honor them more than becoming a rabbi. Hell, I wanted to be a psychiatrist, but he wouldn’t let me.”

“Oh, Jesus. You know what, if you can even pretend to be a Rabbi and you care about helping people, then do me this favor. Tell me that you acknowledge it’s your fault.”

The words pierced Ben’s heart and soul like a sword. He had come to terms with his guilt years ago, but hadn’t actually said it out loud.

“If that will make you feel better, if it’ll help you get over Mom and John and now Dad, then okay, it’s my fault.”

Evelyn nodded once, a curt acceptance of her brother’s atonement. “Did you bring the will?” Ben reached for his bag and pulled the will out and slid it across the table. “I’m sure he left it all for you, but I’ll bring it to the attorney. Never mind the fact he has a grandson.”

“I don’t want anything. I’ll renounce my rights to it.”

“How noble.” She got up with the will and walked for the door. On her way out, she said, “Don’t be late for the funeral.”

Ben hadn’t set foot in a church since he was fourteen. Throughout his childhood, he spent Friday nights in Temple and Sunday mornings at St. Joseph’s. After the fire, his father would drag Ben and Evelyn in and then make them wait in the pews after the service ended while he gave his weekly confession. His father always seemed the happiest in those few minutes after church, marching proudly down the sidewalk to Casper’s Donuts and then leaving Ben and Evelyn while he went to watch football at Little Pete’s Sports Bar. He would stumble home drunk late at night. He wasn’t abusive, he just lacked the moral rectitude that a fourteen-year-old boy could reasonably expect from a father.

As he stood in front of the red brick church that looked more like a schoolhouse from the 1800s (he was always jealous of the more imposing gothic-style churches that were literally a block in every direction), he looked up at the lime green pillar and the large, circular stained-glass window. That pillar, reaching up to the clouds as though it spoke directly to God, and that window, with the Mother Mary so beautiful and welcoming, were sources of great pulling as he decided which spiritual path to follow. Perhaps if it had been a gothic church, the pull might have overcome the internal truth of his call to Judaism.

When Ben walked in, the smell of old wood and incense washed over him, transporting him back to his childhood. On instinct, he walked to a middle pew and sat along the aisle, exactly where he sat with his father. He saw his sister speaking with the priest, but other than a



few strangers who must have been his father's friends, there were plenty of seats to choose from. Not even Franny chose to show up.

The service began with a prayer by a new priest Ben had never met before. The priest then spoke of the deceased, honoring a life and sending him to God. He spoke of how he knew Ben's father only briefly, but in that time had forged a true connection with a conflicted man. Those confictions would be resolved in heaven where God himself would lead him to peace. Ben had spoken at many funerals over the past twenty years. He had comforted the aggrieved and helped guide surviving family members through the mourning process. He found it to be one of the more meaningful aspects of the profession. He helped people live moral lives. He helped counsel the members of his Temple through marriage and pregnancies. He helped develop Jewish youth through guided study. But above all, he lay his members to rest and reminded their families that they are not alone. He hoped he came off more sincerely than the priest.

When Evelyn rose to speak, he noticed the tears in her eyes. She tried not to smear her mascara when she delicately wiped off her cheek with the pad of her finger. She walked to the podium and looked at the crowd. She gave no indication that the church was virtually empty, turning her head to make eye contact with everyone in the room. She finally settled on Ben, staring at him with a distant gaze, much as a captain of a ship would squint to see the vague shape of land, or as a damaged soldier will stare at nothing and everything at the same time. She then made a weak smile at her son and began her eulogy.

“Thank you, Father Branson. I think when you say my father was conflicted, it was a euphemism for saying his life veered off course many years ago. Liver failure was actually a blessing. It's how the story had to end. There was no saving him.”

She once again looked at Ben. He could feel it coming. He could sense her forming the words into a weaponized slur and firing relentlessly.

“My brother, Rabbi Benjamin Jacober, certainly tried, though. Visiting him every week for two years, sitting and talking to him for days. I think the only reason he survived as long as he did is because of how much he enjoyed their conversations. I wish my mother and our younger brother, John, were still alive today. My father loved them and once he lost them, it was hard for him to come back. I think he could have.” She looked again at Ben. “I think the heartbreak of losing his family was too much for him.”

As Ben listened to her words, he finally relented to his feelings. He put his head into his hands and wept.

Ben walked out of the church alone. He needed fresh air, though, and felt stifled in the confines of the church. Walking down the sidewalk was the first act of normalcy he had felt since before he boarded the plane the night earlier. Around this time on the Sabbath, he would walk around the community and greet his neighbors and answer questions about archaic meanings hidden within Judaism. The sun now high overhead, he greeted no neighbors, but his legs could at least feel comfort in returning to the routine of his late-morning walks.

He didn't make it far before he felt the presence of a man walking beside him. With his eyes puffy and bloodshot, he looked at the man and saw a familiar face, albeit one he had not seen in many years.

“Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Jacober,” Rabbi Greg Lieberman said, his hands reflectively clasped behind his back.

“Rabbi Lieberman,” Ben said, sniffing to calm himself, “what a surprise. How are you?”

“Fine, fine, thank you. I should be asking you the same thing.”

“You heard?”

“The father of one my most popular students passes away, I hear about it.”

Ben nodded. Rabbi Lieberman was a major influence on his rabbinical development, encouraging Ben to pursue the Judaism that spoke to him. While most of his classmates remained conservative, Rabbi Lieberman and Ben helped promote the reform movement, calling it Judaism for Americans. Americans don’t speak Yiddish, Rabbi Lieberman had taught him, and they don’t speak Hebrew. They want their rabbis to know those languages, but they also want to be able to relate to their rabbis. Ben didn’t just agree with his mentor, he saw no other way of connecting to his future congregation. He took the teachings all the way to San Francisco where he joined a synagogue and developed a strong community under Lieberman’s ideals.

When Ben didn’t respond, Rabbi Lieberman said, “Rabbi Meyer called me to inform me you are no longer leading services and you’ve even stopped your Jewish instruction.”

It wasn’t a question, just a statement of fact to see where the words fell and how his former pupil would respond. It was a purposeful prodding, a last-ditch effort to rescue a man of God.

“It began to feel hypocritical,” Ben finally said. “It felt wrong. I couldn’t continue in good faith.”

“Ah, good faith. As opposed to bad faith. As opposed to faith in general.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

After a pause, Ben stopped walking. “I was flying back every week. I couldn’t give the congregants the time they deserve.”

“And yet they all supported you. Rabbi Meyer told me as much.”

“What can I do for you?” Ben said, not feeling the need to continue the discussion that reminded him all too well of the weekly reviews Rabbi Lieberman would conduct in Rabbinical college.

Rabbi Lieberman placed his hands on Ben’s shoulders and forced him to make eye contact. “I’m a friend, Ben. That’s it. I’m checking in on a friend. How are you?”

Ben felt his eyes tearing up again, but he took a deep breath to fight it. “I’m good. I will be good. It’s just...” He trailed off, but no words were necessary.

“You know, Ben, rabbis are not immune to tragedy. They’re particularly not immune to tragedies they haven’t recovered from.”

“We all have to make decisions,” Ben said, purposefully talking around the topic. “I chose to spend time here with my father.”

“Have you considered moving back here permanently?”

“No, my life is in San Francisco.”

“Is it? Ben, the real question is why you didn’t move back in the first place. You flew back to sit with your father all week only to return to the city where you are no longer working.”

“It’s still my life.”

“I understand, it’s difficult to drop the vanguard mentality, the excitement, only to move back to your roots. So then, is it too soon to ask if you’ll return to your post?”

It wasn't an unfair question. Ben had been thinking about it for months. Now standing in front of his mentor, he finally shook his head. "I don't think so. I, I just, the truth is, I can't at this moment tell you that I believe in God anymore."

Rabbi Lieberman laughed, making Ben crane an insulted eyebrow. "Oh, Rabbi Jacober, you were always stubborn. It's what made you so good at what you do, but it also is a fatal flaw. I thought you'd grow out of it. Learn, even. I thought your soul would settle, but you wanted to change the world and the hearts of men and women." Rabbi Lieberman sighed. "Ben, you've just spent the past two years proving you're a man of God. You have dedicated your life to God. You don't need to be a Rabbi to prove your worth. Even if you have lost faith and no longer believe, God still has faith in you."

When Ben turned down Rabbi Lieberman's invitation to join him for a post-Shabbat dinner, he and his old teacher parted ways, with Rabbi Lieberman eventually turning right to follow the path back to his synagogue. Ben continued walking along the damaged sidewalk, kicking trash when it was in the way, and occasionally closing his eyes while he rolled his head to crack the vertebrae in his neck. The sun felt no warmer than before, even though it broke through the thick cloud cover and shone upon his face. A soft breeze blew at his back, but it brought him no more comfort or agony than the cold breezes of San Francisco. It all just was, as it was before and as it would be tomorrow. Nothing changed other than his excuse to fly home every week.

As the church grew smaller in the distance, Rabbi Ben Jacober passed a homeless man sitting against the wall of a recently established Charles Schwab Financial Center. He didn't pay him much attention, other than a purposeful effort to walk around him. The man—with light

brown skin, a scruffy beard, and unwashed sweats that were likely donated from the local shelter—had a smile on his face as he watched the passers-by. He asked for no money and had a half-drunk McDonald's orange juice sitting beside him.

“Hey, my man, you got one of those funny hats!”

Ben stopped to process the words. He wasn't offended. The unbiased, pure-of-intention observation actually amused him.

“Yes, I do. A yarmulke.”

The man's smile broadened excitedly as he appreciated either the information or the indulgence.

“A Yarmulke? That sounds like a motorcycle, ha!”

“Yeah, I guess it does a little bit,” Ben laughed.

“So you one of them religious folks?”

“A rabbi. Yes I am.”

“A rabbi. You know, my father used to wear one of them hats.”

“The yarmulke? No kidding?”

“It's true. He was all spiritual.” The man began to laugh hysterically. “Oh, he was a good man.”

“He sounds like it. Well here.” Ben took his yarmulke off and handed it to the homeless man, who accepted it knowing that it was a significant gesture. Ben then took his wallet out and pulled out five dollars and handed it to him as well. “Go get yourself something to eat.”

“I will indeed!” He joyfully put the yarmulke on his head and stuffed the money into his pocket.

“Take care now,” Ben said as he began to walk away.

“And God bless you, sir!”

The comment startled Ben, but he composed himself, nodded a goodbye, and continued on his way. It didn't feel freeing to have his head exposed to the sky. It didn't feel as though a weight had been removed. He was surprised at how quickly he had offered to give away his yarmulke, but it felt natural and the man's gracious acceptance made Ben feel better if only for the minute. He didn't think that the gesture held any bearing over his future. He assumed he would return to San Francisco and have a frank conversation with his synagogue's board members. But that was for a later date. He had to get back to his father's apartment. He never got to finish tidying up.

That night, Ben began packing his father's apartment. He ordered pizza as soon as the sun went down and he dug into his dad's wine cabinet to find a ten-year-old Cabernet Sauvignon. He hadn't heard from his sister since the funeral, although that wasn't particularly surprising. He had yanked all the sheets off the bed and pulled most of his father's clothing out of the closet and placed them into black trash bags. His father's church would come by on Monday morning to pick up the donation. On the shelves above the hanging clothes in the closet, Ben found several boxes of books and notebooks and framed pictures. His father never bothered to unpack the photos or books after moving the family in after the fire. From the day they moved in—Ben fourteen, Evelyn eleven—the apartment lacked any sort of ownership or personality.

Ben pulled out a picture from when he was a boy. His mother was holding John in her arms. His dad had an arm draped over the shoulders of Ben and Evelyn. A moment in time captured and frozen of a perfectly happy family. Ben remembered that moment. His dad was

taking them to a Mets game, but his mom and John stayed home because John had come down with a cold that Ben had passed to him. An out-of-code electrical cable caught fire that evening, trapping the two of them inside while the others were at the game.

Ben turned the picture upside down and placed it on the carpet. True, had he not gotten his little brother sick, they would have all been at the game. True, had Ben stuck around, maybe he could have helped get his father back on his feet. True, Ben spent a majority of his time as a rabbi counseling his congregants that such thinking was harmful and even arrogant.

Ben spent the rest of the night sifting through pictures. He ate more than half the deep-dish pizza, feeding a hunger that he hadn't felt in months. When he finished the first bottle of wine, he opened a second. He pulled everything except the furniture into bags and boxes near the kitchen. Everything else he had hauled down to the dumpster, although he was so drunk by the end that he barely remembered what he threw away.

Ben woke early on Sunday morning sleeping on his father's bare mattress. He had drool hanging from the edge of his mouth, but the puddle blended into the soiled mattress. The box spring creaked as he rolled onto his back. He shut one eye to push back against the pressure of his hang over. A hang over. Ben hadn't been hung over since before rabbinical school. Sure, he shared the occasional whiskey with his alcoholic father, but he didn't drink like his old man.

He sucked in a deep mouthful of the morning air and could taste the grime from his unwashed teeth covered in pizza and wine. Wine. How many bottles had he gone through? He rolled off the bed and looked around the empty room. Sun was streaming through the bedroom window and he could hear the squeak of a bus's brakes as it pulled into a bus stop to begin its



Sunday service. He stood and walked into the family room. Franny's chair still faced the window, and he didn't know what to do with the couch that his father bought nearly twenty-years ago because the family couch had been burned in the fire. He and his dad and his sister spent four long years as a family on that couch, celebrating Christmas and watching Disney movies.

Ben took another deep breath and turned to look at the pile he had made for the church. It was an obscene number of items. On the kitchen table were two empty bottles and his father's bottle of whiskey, which was also nearly gone. The half-eaten pizza that he forgot to put in the refrigerator. And the picture of his family before the Mets game, before the accident. It all made him sick. He had to get out of the walls that were closing in on him. He looked down and saw that he looked presentable enough in last night's clothes. He put on his shoes and walked out the front door.

He walked the two miles in the brisk morning air to the gates of the Washington Jewish Cemetery. He hadn't been inside in years, maybe a decade or longer. The headstones were uncomfortably close to one another and the mausoleums cast imposing shadows.

He wandered up a path through several trees thick with leaves and passed several headstones that were taller than he was. In a small clearing, behind the more grandiose graves, he came upon two square stones. They were carved from granite with only the front polished smooth. He picked up two small rocks and dropped to his knees in between the grave sites. He put one rock atop each headstone.

He read the inscription on his mother's grave. Evelyn Jacober, The mother to us all. And on his little brother's headstone: John Jacober, A Son, A Friend, Our Little Rabbi.

Ben kneeled and petered back onto his haunches. He dropped his head. It was his fault. He had gotten John sick. He was the reason they stayed behind and didn't go to the Mets game. He was the reason John needed extra heat, which his mother obligingly turned up, causing the fire.

He never knew why John was born with the inherent religious bug. Not just a religious bug, but the Jewish bug. He went to Sunday school and was well on his way to becoming Bar Mitzva, something Ben and Evelyn could have cared less about. Religion was about weekend services; they were a chore, something that had to be done. If anything, Ben responded more to his father's church, finding comfort in the ability to absolve your weekly sins. But John embraced Judasim as though he had been touched by Yahweh. And then he was taken in what could only be considered an act of God. A fire. It became a burning bush in Ben's life.

Following their deaths, the family moved to the condo. Ben's father began drinking heavily. Ben had to care for the family and be the shoulder to cry on. He began to counsel his father and Evelyn. He opened the Tanakh his mother had given to John, which Ben rescued from the ashes. He found his calling, encouraged by his father. Rabbinical school immediately following high school.

"I'm so sorry," his dad would say to him late at night with alcohol on his breath. "I'm so sorry, Ben."

"It's okay," Ben would respond.

"It's not. I should have fixed it. I should have fixed it. Why didn't I fix it?"

But Ben knew it wasn't his dad's fault. And in his heart he knew it wasn't his own fault. Heaters break. Kids get sick. No, this was God's fault. He spent twenty years trying to understand God, trying to understand why he would take away his mother and his brother.

Twenty years trying to find his own answers by counseling others through their own confusion and pain.

As though providing a long-time coming answer, God finally spoke, taking away his father after two decades of alcohol-induced torment. Jews don't believe in hell. They live in hell. Or in the case of Ben's family, they lived in a crappy condo in Brooklyn, dying the slow death of undeserving souls.

On Monday, Ben went to the offices of Bernie Rump, attorney at law. Evelyn was already seated in Rump's office—one of only two in the firm—and had brought along Charlie, her son. Bernie was laughing as he shuffled through some papers and they all turned when Ben knocked on the glass and entered.

He had showered that morning, but he remained in jeans, which drew concerned looks from his sister.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

“Just cleaning out the condo,” he said without emotion as he took a seat across from Rump.

“I could have helped you do that,” she said.

“You could have.”

He didn't intend for his comment to come across so harshly, but it nevertheless stung. Evelyn didn't respond, but Ben could see her nod lightly and then turn to the attorney.

“We're all here,” she said.

“Okay, great,” Rump said. Bernie Rump made a living servicing trusts and wills of people with minimal assets. Unfortunately, the clientele often—not always—had mannerisms that were viewed as less than appropriate for standard social etiquette. Rump excelled at charming that crowd. “So, the old man finally kicked it, huh?” He laughed. “He would call me at least once a month to make adjustments. For crying out loud, he didn’t have much!”

He waited for his clients to laugh with him. When he didn’t receive the expected response, he swallowed and moved on. “Okay, well, let’s see here.” He opened the will and proceeded to read off the legally binding language. Then he got to the section that separated his estate.

“The condo will be signed over to Charlie Delaney, under the trust of his mother, Evelyn Delaney.”

That raised some eyebrows.

“Grandpa left me the condo?” Charlie asked.

“Sounds like it,” Evelyn said with a confounded expression.

“A financial estate, including a 401k valued at 1.3 million dollars, a checking and savings account valued at 256 thousand dollars, and bonds of 150 thousand dollars goes to Charlie Delaney, in the trust of Evelyn Delaney.”

Evelyn coughed so violently that she sprayed Rump with spittle. “The fuck did you just say?” she said. “What the hell was he doing with so much money?” She looked at Ben. “Did you know about this? Why didn’t he move to a better condo? Why didn’t he receive better care?”

Ben shrugged his shoulders. “He didn’t want it. It’s all Charlie’s now. Don’t go spend it all in one place.”

“And lastly,” Rump said, “the 1969 Mets baseball goes to Ben.”

Ben started laughing and then shook his head. “Lucky me.”

“There’s a note here,” Rump said. “You can have the ball, but only on the premise you never root for the God damn San Francisco Giants or the Godless Yanks. Additionally, if you no longer want to be a rabbi, you have my blessing. Maybe you can be a priest, or an artist. You liked to draw as a boy.”

Ben shook his head in disbelief, like he barely understood the words he just heard. “Does it really say that?”

“Yes, sir, right here.”

Rump showed him the page. Ben didn’t look. “Okay, so where’s the ball?”

“Congrats, buddy, you’re rich,” Ben said to Charlie.

Evelyn smiled but seemed uncomfortable. She squeezed her son close to her. “We have a lot to talk about.” She looked at Ben. “I don’t get it.”

“What’s not to get?”

“You were his... Why didn’t he leave it all to you?”

“He wanted to leave it to his grandson,” Ben said. “It’s not so unreasonable.”

“Yeah.” She nodded and tussled Charlie’s hair. “Now you better do well in school, young man. Looks like we can send you to college after all.”

Charlie pushed his mom’s hand away. “Mom,” he said. “Stop.” Charlie looked at Ben. “Uncle Ben, are you heading back to San Francisco?”

Ben nodded lightly, not wanting to answer. “Yeah I think so.”

“Why?” Evelyn asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Why are you headed back?”

“Would you want me to stay?” His question was laced with incredulity.

“Ben, I shouldn’t have said what I said. I’m sorry.” She looked at Charlie. “Charlie and I, we could use you around here. It hasn’t been easy.”

“I don’t think my life is here anymore. Now that dad’s gone.”

“Now that dad’s gone, you should feel free to come home. I mean, Jesus, did you two really not talk about anything on your little visits? What the hell were those about if not forgiveness? Or healing?”

Ben began to say something but stopped. He looked up at the gray sky. He was still looking to the heavens when he said, “My dad was sick, Ev. Do I need an excuse for visiting him when he was sick?”

Evelyn eyed him suspiciously. “Charlie,” she said, “why don’t you go wait in the car. I’ll just be a second. We can go get McDonald’s.”

Charlie didn’t question his mother. He stepped forward and hugged Ben around the waist, and Ben hugged him back around his head. Ben closed his eyes and squeezed him tightly as though he might not have another chance. When the embrace broke, Charlie smiled shyly and turned to walk to the car.

“Ben,” Evelyn said. Ben continued to watch Charlie walk away, but Evelyn continued to speak. “Dad was sick. He was an alcoholic and died from liver failure. Horrible stuff. You’re a rabbi. You make a living out of comforting the sick.”

Ben confirmed, "I am a rabbi. It does fall in my job description."

Ben saw her gulp, but a question was plaguing her. She had to get it out. She asked, "And how many of those people that you would visit, how many of them would you visit and give them the very poison that's killing them? How many, Ben?"

It took a moment for Ben to understand the accusation Evelyn had just lobbed at him. When it finally sunk in, his face went pale. "Excuse me? Their poison? You mean the alcohol?"

"Of course I mean the alcohol. Dad was a drunk. He died of liver failure."

"Exactly. He was dying. All he wanted to do was talk to his son and drink whiskey. Why would I deny him that?"

Evelyn smirked and nodded as though saying, "Whatever you say, Ben." What actually came out was, "Whatever helps you sleep at night, rabbi."

"You think I in some way contributed to dad's death by giving him drinks in his last dying days?"

"I'm saying I think you knew exactly what you were doing. Not that I really blame you. He should have died years ago. I just think it's amusing that a so-called man of God would fly out to New York everyday simply to ensure his father died a timely death."

"I don't even know how to respond to that, Ev. I was comforting dad. He asked me to fly out every week. Hell, he bought the tickets."

"He just knew you'd be the one willing to do it. He wanted to die. You wanted to kill him. I wanted him to die, I guess I'm just weak."

"Ev, I know you're upset, but you don't really believe that."

Evelyn smiled again. She stepped forward and put her hand on Ben's cheek. "I meant what I said, Ben. I regret saying what I said to you. I'm not angry you did what you did. I'm grateful. It'd mean a lot to me if you would stick around and help me with Charlie. He needs a father figure."

Her finger felt cold on his face, like a corpse reaching out and caressing him. "You just accused me of killing dad, and now you want me to help raise your son?"

"Who else is there?"

Rabbi Lieberman's office was not fitting for the head rabbi of Brooklyn's largest temple. But he had been in the office for thirty years since he was first hired as an associate rabbi and he had no interest in moving to the bigger offices simply for status.

When Ben walked down the hall, he could hear that Lieberman had company. "You think it's meant to be easy?" he heard Lieberman asking. "Being Jewish is a commitment, not a right. It's a privilege and you have to live up to that responsibility to honor those we lost over the years. That's what God asks of you. And you have to be willing to sacrifice for that. In this case, it means showing off your horrible singing voice."

Whoever Lieberman was speaking to laughed. Ben held back and leaned against the wall.

"You're ready," Lieberman said.

"Thanks, Rabbi Lieberman."

Ben watched as a small boy stepped into the hallway. Judging by the conversation, he was twelve-years-old and would soon be Bar Mitzva. Rabbi Lieberman appeared in the doorway



and waved as the boy walked down the hall. Lieberman's eyes settled on Ben and he sighed. "Three days, Ben. I can't decide if I was expecting you sooner or surprised to see you at all."

Ben didn't respond and Lieberman retreated into his office. Ben followed and closed the door. The office smelled as Ben remembered, with old books collecting dust and probably a small water leak somewhere that caused a musty smell. Lieberman sat on one of two green chairs sitting kitty corner to one another. A small table sat in between. He motioned for Ben to take the second chair. Ben shook his head and tried not to laugh at he entered what looked like the epitome of a rabbinical counseling set up.

"So, you're still here," he said to Ben.

"I'm still here."

"Why?"

"I'm taking care of my father's things. There are papers to sign, estate issues that need to be dealt with."

"Your sister lives here. Why doesn't she take care of it?"

"Evelyn? You clearly don't remember Evelyn."

Lieberman laughed. "I remember. I remember you watching over her like a hawk. Remember when she got asked to her school dance? I thought you were going to burst a blood vessel."

Ben chuckled. "I remember that."

They sat in silence for a moment. Finally, Lieberman said, "No yarmulke?"

"I gave it away," Ben said.

Lieberman furrowed his brow and clasped his hands in front of his chest. "To who?"

"A homeless man who said he liked it."

“Yes, God’s creatures are everywhere. Well, that can be remedied.”

Rabbi Lieberman took the yarmulke off his head and handed it to Ben. Ben slunk his head to the side in silent shame as he took it. “I can’t accept this.”

Lieberman brushed him away. “Don’t be ridiculous. You gave yours to a homeless person. I can give mine to a pupil I care for very deeply.”

Ben nodded and slid it atop his head. It felt right and warm, falling into his patch of hair like a wedding ring falling into the callouses formed on a finger after years of sitting in one place. Lieberman reached into a basket of single-use yarmulkes and grabbed one to put over his bald spot. The single-use yarmulkes were one-size-fits-all, so it looked comedically large on Lieberman’s slight frame.

“You know, Ben...” Lieberman said.

Before he could finish, Ben blurted out, “My sister accused me of killing my father.”

Lieberman raised his eyebrows and seemed taken aback. “Did you?”

“She also blames me for killing my mother and our brother. And she blames me for abandoning her.”

Lieberman laughed. “Good grief.”

“I know it’s not my fault.”

“Do you? You know it intellectually, sure, but do you really understand it’s not your fault? Ben, your mother, your brother, your father, God chose them, ordained them with a specific destiny and fate.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn’t have become a rabbi. It seemed like the right thing to do, to honor my brother and my family, but sometimes it just seemed like it was wrong. Cruel, even.”

“You gave your life to religion. You moved away. Your sister felt abandoned. If you didn’t have some guilt about that, I don’t think you’d be human.”

“Do you ever feel guilty?”

“I have no family, Ben, you know that. Sometimes, though, sometimes I wonder what could have been. Had I gotten married and had children, what it would have been like.”

“And?”

“And then nothing. I made my choice. I feel good about my choice, period. There are good times, there are bad times, high times, low times, but this is my life.”

“I would give my father alcohol. When I’d come to visit him, I’d give him alcohol.”

“Why?”

“Because he asked for it.”

“You knew it was wrong?”

“It didn’t feel wrong.”

“How long have you been coming out?”

“Two years. A little more.”

“And before that?”

“I hadn’t seen him for years.”

“Your father was saying goodbye, Ben. He didn’t expect to live as long as he did. He only made it so long because of your visits.”

Ben nodded. “Maybe.”

Lieberman stood up and opened a desk drawer. He pulled out an open bottle of red wine and two glasses. “Speaking of alcohol. I know this isn’t exactly kosher, but, sometimes you just have to do what you feel is right.”

Ben accepted the half-filled glass and they clinked.

“To old friends,” Ben said.

“To new friends,” Lieberman responded. He sat back down and took a sip, rejoicing as the wine coated his throat.

“The truth is, I couldn’t wait to get out of here. I never wanted to come back.”

“Like I said, you think you’re immune from tragedy because you’re a rabbi? Ben, you like to say you became a rabbi to honor your brother and to help yourself heal. The truth is, becoming a rabbi simply masked your trauma. Covered it up. You put so much time into answering your call and helping others, you allowed yourself to bottle up your own pain. Maybe talking to your father for the past two years, being with him in his final days, that just begun a process that should have begun years ago.”

“You may be right,” Ben said again, taking a sip of the wine. “You may be right.”

They sat and listened to the traffic of Brooklyn coming through the window and could see shadows forming as the sun sunk into the western sky.

“So now what?” Lieberman asked. “Sticking around? Back to San Francisco?”

“I was hoping you would tell me what to do.”

“Do you still want to be a rabbi?”

Ben nodded. “I think I do.”

“Well, in that case, one of my congregants, a young woman maybe your age, she has a nephew who’s been getting into some trouble. He recently lost his mother to cancer. He lives in the Bay Area. I was hoping you could meet with him for me. Maybe give her peace of mind.”

Ben nodded. He thought about Evelyn and Charlie. He thought about his life in New York. He thought about the yarmulke on his head and his life as a rabbi. He nodded. "Sure. I'd like to get back."

Ben purchased the first realistic flight out of New York and was packing his suitcase when Evelyn entered the condo with Charlie. Ben was sitting on his childhood mattress, realizing he'd never see the place again. In his hands he rolled the Mets baseball. It had been resting in the drawer of his bedside table, the one place he didn't look. His dad must have placed it there sometime in the last two years. He had never checked. Ben always slept on the couch.

"Ben," he heard Evelyn call out. "Ben, are you here?"

"In here," he said.

He waited as Evelyn and Charlie entered. Charlie was looking around, seeming to understand he owned the place.

"Hey, you're still here. I mean, I'm glad you're still here." Another woman entered. "Ben, this is Mary, the realtor. I figure we want to get this place on the market as soon as possible."

"Yeah, definitely." He looked at Charlie. "Hey, bud, decided to sell it?"

"Ben!" Ev said, shouting in a crisp whisper. "Let's not put this on Charlie."

Ben nodded. "Sorry." He gulped and stood. "Here," he said, holding the ball out to Charlie. "You should have this."

When Charlie accepted the ball, rolling it in his fingers the same way had Ben had been, Ben walked past with his suitcase.

“Ben,” Evelyn said. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” he said. “I’m going home. There’s a boy...” He looked at Charlie. “There’s a boy in San Francisco that I think I can help.”

“There’s a boy right here that can use your help as well. Your nephew.”

Ben nodded. “That ship sailed long ago. You’ll be fine.” He said this to Charlie. Then he turned and walked out, not waiting and not caring if Evelyn spoke or objected.

Two hours later, he was safely tucked into a middle seat near the middle of a dingy plane headed back for San Francisco. The woman next to him in the aisle seat pulled out a bag of barbecue potato chips and noisily began to eat. When she noticed Ben staring at her, she said with a mouth half-full, “Oh, sorry. I know how annoying this is. I’ll try to keep it down.”

“That’s okay,” Ben said. “We all have to eat.”

“I’m Rachel. Want a chip?”

Usually Ben would have scoffed, but this time he reached in and took one. Before he ate it, he said, “I’m Ben. Actually, Rabbi Ben.”

She laughed. People usually laughed when they first hear he’s a rabbi.