

# Into the Holy of Holies

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Mordechai wears all eight of his fake-gold girly girl necklaces at once: two stars of David, three chais, one mezuzah, one “Mordechai” in Hebrew letters, and an Israeli Defense Forces artillery pendant. All from museum shops and market stalls in the Arab quarter and souvenir stores along Ben Yehuda Street. His parents shelled out fifty shekels a necklace, because Mordechai’s their only child and requires rewards for good behavior. My dad told him he looks like the mensch version of Puff Daddy, but I prefer Mordechai The Dead Kid. Pretty soon, I’m going to punch his Kool-Aid stained mouth, knock his needlepoint yarmulke back to Cleveland.

Mordechai The Dead Kid keeps jumping up my back, trying to tap the top of my head, while our guide, Moshe, is speaking the scientific truth, instead of mumbo jumbo from the Old Testament. We’re standing at this overlook on Mount Scopus, listening to Moshe explain the Gichon Spring, how a karstic spring recycles rainwater through limestone. Moshe wears aviator sunglasses attached to a cord, a watchband equipped with a compass, and he’s the only cool person on this trip. Mordechai has a fat mom

named Barbara who wears a fanny pack full of falafel and goat-shwarma. His dad, Leon, wears jogging-shorts that are too tight at the crotch, a tank-top that shows his wanna-be-Maccabee muscles, and he flaunts his Israel knowledge in the form of questions: "But as Jerusalem grew, the spring wasn't supplying enough water. What about the aqueduct Pontius Pilate built?"

From up on Mount Scopus, I can't understand how this is the quote unquote Promised Land, Jerusalem worth fighting for through the ages. It's 1997, and I guess there was more green and less brown before the a-hole Romans chopped down the trees to build crucifixes for the Jews. When I tell my mom Jerusalem and all these hills look like something God hacked up, something dry and scratchy, she just looks up from her wheelchair and says, "Cool it, Cal."

"OVERRATED," I say. "OVERTIRED," she says, and turns back to the view. My mom's been fighting cancer for three years now, and I guess she doesn't have time to talk about the reality of things, not anymore. I can't talk serious with my dad or Daniel, my fifteen-year-old brother who's not nearly as smart as I am at twelve and three-quarters.

We're riding around Israel in an air-conditioned bus with eighteen people from a conservative congregation in Cleveland—grandparents, families with kids, a just-married couple—and meanwhile my family comes from a reform congregation in Kentucky. Emily, this tall, tanned fourteen-year-old who's having a second Bat Mitzvah over here, said she didn't know Jews lived in Kentucky. I said, "Well, here I am, and yes, we even have a synagogue, but you're probably not gonna find us with names like Mordechai."

Emily grinned, and it felt good to make her grin. "Are both your parents Jewish?" she asked. "Yeah, but my mom converted," I said. "From Christianity?" she asked. "I guess so . . . it's never really come up," I said. "The Orthodox would say you're not really a Jew," she told me. "Come again?" I said. "Your mom's lineage is what makes you Jewish," she

said. "That's not fair," I said. "Guess not," she said. "Not everyone can be a purebred," I said. Emily laughed, her sea-green eyes as lovely as Eilat stones.

This afternoon I find an ancient coin at an archeology ditch for tourists. Everyone's down in the dirt digging with trowels, finding nothing but broken pieces of pottery, stuffing their clear plastic bags because they're allowed to take home souvenirs. Meanwhile, I'm standing outside the ditch, sifting sand through a screen, thinking about the way archeology gives us the *real* story, physical evidence, not some scribe's overblown imagination. After a while, I spot this puke-green crudded-over coin. I close one eye and hold it up to the other . . . there's a wreath on it. I yell, "Hey, I found a coin," then the supervisor scrambles over and snatches it.

At dinner, everyone thinks it's really cool I found a coin, especially Emily. To be honest, it *was* really cool. My mom says if finding a coin were going to happen to anyone, it was going to happen to Cal. People smile at her with concerned expressions, or expressions of pity, and I guess all her extra makeup and silk headwraps aren't fooling anyone.

We're eating at a seaside restaurant, Moshe's cousin's restaurant, kabobs and salad and wine under Chinese lanterns. I'm not allowed to drink any wine, and my mom is chewing so slowly, cutting so carefully, it's obvious she doesn't want to be eating at all. Leon starts lecturing on The Law of Return, how a person needs only Jewish heritage to gain Israeli citizenship, which makes me wonder if I'm ineligible due to my mom. Emily is sitting next to Daniel, showing him the henna tracings on her wrist, and I'm thinking she actually likes the idiot. Then Mordechai The Dead Kid comes around the table and kisses my cheek, so I give him the old forearm shiver, a light shot to his chest.

He screams and runs to his mom and everyone gives me startled looks, or nasty ones, especially Leon. My dad

clamps down on my thigh and whispers, "Go wait on the bus," and that's fine by me, because outside the restaurant, Moshe is having a smoke, and I ask him if I can have one, too. He asks, "You smoke, Cal?" "All the time," I say. "Since when?" he asks. "1995," I answer. "Year of Rabin's assassination," he says, and goes into his shirt pocket.

Standing on the curb, smoking our cigarettes, Moshe and I have a prime view of the most fiery sunset in the history of sunsets. All that low light really shows the lines in Moshe's face, all his knowledge and calm. His cigarettes are stronger than tobacco dip, and pretty soon my head is swimming. I get nosy and ask him if both his parents are Jewish. He chuckles and says yes, but he's not very religious. That surprises me, because I thought everyone over here would be super religious, more so than Americans. I tell him my family is only religious at the High Holy Days, and only because my mom makes us go to services. "Good for her," Moshe says. I tell him she converted after she married my dad, and that every year she visits my school to teach the gentiles about Chanukah, the gentiles being everyone except for me. "Must be lonely," Moshe says.

I tell him my mom has started going to temple on Friday nights, for Sabbath, but thank God she doesn't make me go with her. Moshe says, "A little extra praying can't hurt." I ask, "What, I should be praying for my mom?" "If it feels holy," he says. "What exactly *is* holy, anyway?" I say. He takes a drag off his cigarette and says, "Good question," then looks off at the sunset. "Dialing up the Big Guy in The Sky?" I ask. He grins and says, "Okay. For some it means praying, finding strength, peace of mind through the Big Guy in the Sky. There are plenty of other ways to be holy, too."

While I'm wondering what those other ways might be, two very, very pretty girls about Emily's age stroll by eating ice-cream cones, machine guns slung over their shoulders. The I.D.F. trusts teenagers enough to carry guns, and I like that a lot. Moshe says, "*Shalom aleichem*" to the girls, and

the girls smile their pretty smiles. Moshe starts telling me about the town we're in, Jaffa, how he loves the salt air blowing off the Mediterranean, the view of Tel-Aviv around the shoreline. It strikes me that Moshe is an always-happy guy, but I can't believe it's possible for people to be happy *all the time*.

Daniel comes out to admit he paid Mordechai five shekels to kiss my cheek. Even though I hide my cigarette behind my back, he sees smoke and says he's going to tell our parents I'm dead meat. But I don't even have to blackmail him, because Moshe puts his hand on Daniel's shoulder and says, "One day you'll want him as a friend." My brother just looks at him without saying anything, the breathing in his chest slowing ever so slowly. It's like Moshe is letting the air out of him, releasing the valve on an inflatable dummy. When Daniel asks for a cigarette, too, Moshe says, "Time to go, my friends."

Back at the hotel, after our parents have said good night and behave, Daniel sneaks out of our room, telling me to stay put or he'll kick me a new one. I rig the bathroom door so a cup of water will spill on his head, then I get into bed and flip around the channels. I find a Hebrew dub of *Indiana Jones*, the one about the Holy Grail and its healing powers. I wonder how religion and fantasy, like the Holy Grail, give people strength and peace of mind. Bible stories seem like what people believe when they don't have anything else to believe, or when they're too scared not to believe. That makes human beings sound weak-minded and sad, but I'm sorry. I've seen lots of bushes over here that would burn well, but people didn't understand wildfires or lightning strikes in 1400 BC.

After midnight, my mom comes back in her nightgown. I have to look away—I can see too many bones in her upper chest, the skin over them is as shiny and sheer as cellophane. I tell her that Daniel is out in the streets of Tel Aviv with

Emily. Mom just lies on my bed with her head propped on her elbow, looking at me. I ask if she can't sleep. She gives me this happy/sad smile and tells me how much she loves me. I tell her my theory on religion. She doesn't agree or disagree but tells me we're alike in personality, strong-willed and opinionated, and how that can be a good thing and a bad thing. I ask, "Are you mad at me for popping Mordechai?" She chuckles and says Mordechai reminds her of me when I was eight. I look at her like she's crazy and say, "I hate that kid." She gives me a real look of concern, as if I said the worst thing imaginable. I say, "His life expectancy is about two more days," just to make it sound even worse. "Somebody is gonna have to teach you to be more tolerant," she says, then stares into my eyes until tears come into her own.

I try to watch *Indiana Jones* while my mom tries to sleep, curled up next to me under the sheet. I wonder why my not being tolerant is so upsetting to her. It seems that people should tolerate only what they think is worth tolerating—they should have a choice in the matter. But I decide to act more tolerant on this trip, if it'll make my mom happier.

She's been asleep for maybe twenty minutes when she starts writhing around, bicycling her legs, rubbing her face like it itches. I say, "Stop it! Stop it!" to wake her up; maybe she's having a nightmare. She blinks for a minute, looking up at me with no expression at all. I ask if she needs my dad—maybe she's had some kind of stroke or something—but she makes a sour face and shakes her head back and forth—he keeps trying to feed her Demerol, she tells me, but she doesn't want too many painkillers, doesn't want to sleepwalk through Israel. I ask, "But you're taking all your other pills, aren't you?" She says, "Of course I am, Cal . . . but sometimes . . . sometimes I wonder if they're finding their destinations."

"Cal, you need to understand something," she says. "What's that?" I ask, but don't want to know. "I've been

very sick," she says, and I'm horrified to hear *her* say that. I get up and head for the bathroom, having forgotten my trap for Daniel, and get soaked. When I come back out, she's sitting on the end of the bed, staring into the television, its light changing on her face.

For some reason, I want to ask what religion she was born into, how she decided to convert. I sit down next to her, thinking about the question, but not asking it. Maybe it seems off the subject. Or maybe it'd be like admitting she may die soon. Or maybe if she hasn't talked about it yet, she doesn't want to talk about it ever. Maybe there are things one particular person just doesn't want to talk about with another particular person, even if they're both strong-willed and opinionated.

"I'm what ya call a mess," she says, and turns to me with a crooked smile. I ask her what the hell she means by that. She says problems besides her cancer have started to develop, serious ones the doctors can't really fix. Now I start crying, and tell her if the Holy Grail existed, I'd find it for her.

The next morning, I wish last night were a dream. When Mordechai comes bopping down the bus aisle with his bag of pottery pieces, necklaces in full effect, my dad hooks him around the waist and says, "You should start a museum in America." I say, "Or a glass bottom boat business in the Dead Sea." Mordechai says, "Duh, there's nothing to look at in the Dead Sea," and my dad and Mordechai slap fives.

Sitting in the back of the bus, Emily's Eilat stones are bloodshot; Daniel's whole head looks purple, like he's a newborn. My mom falls asleep as soon as she hits the seat. I try to ignore Leon chomping his energy bar, lecturing some grandma on polyunsaturated fats. I'm not hungry but have a candy bar for later. Our family didn't make it down for the hotel breakfast for the third time in six mornings, and

we were supposed to eat a good one today. We're climbing Masada.

Through the tinted window, I see Moshe standing outside the hotel with a Styrofoam cup, waiting to tell his customers good morning in Hebrew, which is *bo-ker tov*. I wonder what fills his life when he's off duty, if he has a family, people to take care of, a worry in the world. At the sound of jets overhead, he shades his eyes and watches the sky until the noise fades. My dad leans across the aisle and says Emily's Bat Mitzvah is later today, the tour of the Western Wall tomorrow. I roll my eyes because even though I still like Emily, we'll be sitting through a Bat Mitzvah of a girl we've known for just a week. My Bar Mitzvah is coming up, and my dad wants to buy me a tallis from a store in The Holy Land. That seems more legit than Emily's deal, her taking a whole chunk of our time to do something she's already done, as if God is going to judge her second Bat Mitzvah more holy, or give her longer to live or a happier life just because she was B.M.'ed in Israel.

To hell with everyone else's complaining; I'm happy to be hiking up a huge sandy mountain in the Negev Desert in one-hundred degree heat with the sun shedding serious U.V.s. The Snake Trail, the best name ever for a trail, takes forty minutes to hike, and it's narrow and steep, like it might have been in the Roman Period. When I was about nine, I saw a made-for-T.V. movie about Masada and loved it. Especially the Roman catapults pounding the fortress, the bravery of the Jewish Zealots when they murdered their own wives and kids, then committed suicide so the Romans wouldn't get them alive. The Zealots were as tough as nails, and the story of Masada seemed a lot more believable than, say, the one about God parting the Red Sea.

My mom decided to wait on the bus, which is idling with the air blowing hard. Moshe is staying behind, also. Daniel and Emily took the cable car up with all the old

people. I'm hiking up behind my dad, who keeps stopping for water breaks. He's not usually this wimpy, and I notice he's gained a lot of weight in the last year, which worries me because he runs on the treadmill every night. Mordechai and Barbara are bringing up the rear, Mordechai stumbling along on his toothpick legs, Barbara stumbling along in her black shirt and black pants and black sandals that make squishing sounds.

Heading into a turn, Leon hoofs by in a hurry, pumping his arms, checking his diver's watch. That putz wants to beat everyone to the top, or else he's trying to make it up in a certain number of minutes. I take off after him, and in no time I'm hot on his heels, shouting, "On your right." I smile over my shoulder and wave goodbye, and then I start jogging, leaning my body into the mountain, kicking some serious butt to the top of Masada. Once I've put some distance between us, I stop and look out across the heat-blurred desert, the wind whistling in my ears. I see small pools of water in the distance, like teardrops.

I'm eating my melting candy bar when Leon rounds the bend, his tank top soaked with sweat and his chest heaving and the look of defeat in his eyes. He presses a button on his watch and says my dad threw up because of the heat, but he's going to be all right. I don't think he's lying, but something makes me say, "You lie." He says no, he's not lying; it happened right after I took off. I say, "Bullshit." He just shakes his head, presses the button on his watch, starts up the trail. "You're a jerk for leaving your family behind," I shout. He stops and presses the button on his watch, comes back down. "You're one confused kid," he tells me, "and we're waiting right here for your dad." "Who the hell are you?" I say, then blast up the trail.

On top of Masada, stone ruins maze all over the place, some of them roped off because their mosaics are still intact. Emily and Daniel are sitting on the mountainside with their legs dangling under the railing. A few grandpas

are chatting with the tour guide, this beautiful woman with skin the color of a chocolate milk shake made with vanilla ice cream. I lie down on a sun-baked rock with my hands behind my head, imagining the Zealots v. the Romans, the clear blue sky my movie screen. I start feeling relaxed and content. I like being alone in a cool place, having time to imagine cool things. Maybe this is what Moshe meant by being holy in other ways.

Leon doesn't talk trash to me when he gets to the top, just peels an orange and slobbers it all over the ground. After Mordechai and Barbara show up, I really start wondering what happened to my dad. The guide gushes all over Mordechai for making it up so quickly. Instead of sweaty, his hair looks bushy and parched, which reminds me of how mine used to get. To no one in particular, I say, "Where the hell's my dad?" The husband from the just-married couple says, "Lost his breakfast on The Snake." Then his wife elbows him and says, "He had to go down . . . I'm sure he'll be fine."

We eat lunch at a kibbutz where they grow melons and tomatoes and grapes and greenhouse flowers, and even raise bumblebees for pollinating the flowers. I guess the communal idea of a kibbutz is a good one, if you don't mind living in the desert with people in floppy hats who smile a lot and tell you to smile if you're not. My dad is drinking plenty of water and looks okay. My mom feels more awake. Everyone else looks exhausted, sitting on the shaded grass, eating burritos bought from the kibbutzniks.

After lunch, Mordechai plays on the playground, a sandy area with a tire swing, a gutted tractor, a seesaw made from a wood plank and a steel drum turned on its side. I wouldn't mind checking out the tractor, but I watch my mom instead. She's sitting in her wheelchair, gabbing with a group of ladies from our tour and the kibbutz. My mom is doing most of the talking, the ladies smiling and listening

closely. One of them squats down and takes my mom's hands. So many people love my mom besides me. They gravitate to her, even when she's not her usual lively self. I wonder if her usual lively self is being replaced by her holy self, and that's why we're here, in the Holy Land.

Daniel is dabbing an aloe leaf on Emily's sunburned nose, and I almost vomit my burrito or yell, "Get a room." I figure Moshe is off with his kibbutz friends, and I have no one to talk to until my dad calls Daniel and me over. He's standing under a fig tree and tells us he has something to tell us. Whenever he starts out that way, I automatically think it's bad news about my mom. This time, he says the three of us are Kohen Jews, descendants of the High Priests of Jerusalem. "Very rare," he says. "Moses' brother Aaron is our forefather." Daniel says, "So you're telling us we're Jedi?" My dad bursts out laughing—he'll laugh at Daniel's jokes even when they're bad. "No," he says. "It just means you're descended from the most revered part of ancient Judean society." I say, "What else?" My dad says, "You should be able to do this," and splays his fingers between his middle finger and his ring finger, like a V. Daniel says, "Dr. Spock's 'Live Long and Prosper' sign?" My dad says, "It's how Kohens held their hands to bless people." I try to split my fingers the same way, but they won't cooperate. I say, "Does being a Kohen mean anything today?" Daniel says, "It's not gonna help you get girls, if that's what you're thinking."

I turn to the hills, to see if anything looks different now that I'm a Kohen. It all looks the same old, same old. I ask my dad why he didn't tell me sooner. He says, "I didn't think you'd care." "Well maybe I do," I say. "Then I'm glad your mother wanted me to tell you," he says. "How long has *she* known?" I ask. "Cal, she didn't know until I told her today," he says. "Well I'm glad she's around to tell you to tell me things," I tell him.

Emily's Bat Mitzvah is held in a courtyard, closed in by three apartment buildings with balconies, and a flight of steep stone steps. The steps lead up to a hillside full of pines. I'm not sure what area of Jerusalem we're in—probably the Old City, but a part where people actually live—it seems like a strange place to hold a Bat Mitzvah.

A robed rabbi greets us in an American accent, directs us to sit at the foot of the steps. There's a table covered with a white cloth and decorated with yellow and purple flowers. On the table there's a Torah and a prayer book. Emily wears a white dress with ruffles at the shoulders, a blue yarmulke, a tallis with bands of blue at the fringes. My mom is wearing the amethyst earrings my dad bought her on the way back from the kibbutz, at a jewelry shop owned by Moshe's uncle.

It's around six o'clock, the sun nicking one corner of the courtyard's pinkish tiling. The air smells sweet and my mom tells me it's jasmine. The rabbi quickly lights the Sabbath candles, quickly says the Hebrew blessing, and I get the idea he's rushing—maybe Emily's parents aren't paying him enough. Emily begins leading us in the service, and we say the words,

*When we honor parents and children, and speak  
the truth, we begin to be more holy.*

*When we keep Sabbath for study and prayer, we  
begin to be more holy.*

*We begin to be more holy when our thoughts  
are kind and our deeds are just.*

*Blessed is the Lord, the holy God.*

Those keys to holiness seem like a lot to consider, if you were going to truly consider them. Emily starts chanting the Hebrew from her Torah portion. Chanting is almost like singing, and I've never heard a chanted Torah portion until

now. It sounds a lot harder than just saying it, which is what my rabbi is teaching me to do for my Bar Mitzvah. It occurs to me that my mom might not live until my Bar Mitzvah. That's a pretty pessimistic thought, but it just sucker-punches me out of nowhere. I tell myself my Bar Mitzvah is only four months away, and my mom's as tough as a Zealot.

Emily's voice sounds pretty, just like the rest of her, and maybe her chanting is echoing out into the rest of Jerusalem. My mom rubs my back and smiles, and I realize a lot of people are smiling. They must think the service is lovely, or holy, or something. When the rabbi places his big hairy hands over Emily's head to bless her, he's not using the Kohen V. I wonder if there's some law forbidding non-Kohens from using the sign, even rabbis. Maybe if I were to become a rabbi, I'd have super Kohen powers. Maybe I'd be able to give people a blessing deluxe, or save them from serious illness.

I figure the service is almost over, short and sweet, but the rabbi doesn't get through Emily's blessing. There's shouting behind us, from the top of the steps. Some guy in a clown mask with bright orange hair is hopping up and down, waving his arms, shouting in a foreign language. Moshe stands and shouts back in Hebrew. The man stops hopping and sets his feet out wide and raises his arms to the sky. "Come, children!" he shouts. "Listen to *me!* I will teach you the fear of the lord!"

Everyone's jaws have dropped, and after a moment of letting the guy's words sink in, I think, "To hell with *you*, man." I glance back at Emily who looks petrified, not angry, like me. The clown is jumping around again, and Mordechai has begun crying, and one of the grandmas says, "*Oy veh.*" Moshe starts up the steps, like he's going to kick butt, and I'm betting Moshe can kick some serious butt. The guy keeps shouting until Moshe is halfway up, then he runs away like the wimp he is.

Everyone's looking at each other in shock and fear, but

I'm not afraid, just angry enough to kill the guy. I think about beating him with a baseball bat or chopping him with a samurai sword. Coming back down, Moshe says, "Just a harmless *majnoon*, people . . . a crazy man," and waves his hand for the rabbi to continue. But the rabbi is still stunned, looking up the steps. My mom says, "Just hold on a minute . . . is everyone okay?" People start mumbling and shaking their heads. They can't believe what just happened; they want to know what the world has come to, as if the world revolves around them, as if this shouldn't have happened because it shouldn't have happened to *them*.

After a few minutes, the rabbi goes back to blessing Emily, and then Emily's second Bat Mitzvah is over. Moshe distributes candy for us to throw at Emily, but she's busy crying into her mother's shoulder. My mom tells Moshe that instead of passing out candy, he should be talking to the group about what just happened, putting everyone at ease. I decide that lady still knows how to take charge when she needs to.

Back on the bus, Moshe stands at the front and says there're crazies in Jerusalem who think the End of Days is near, junk like that, but they're usually harmless. Meanwhile, I'm thinking this is just intolerable, religion and everyone's crazy feelings about it—I'm talking about the crazy guy *and* Emily's family—all the time and money people waste on it, all the people they hurt because of it. I also remember what my mom said about being more tolerant, the promise I made to myself to be more tolerant, but the anger is banging around in my skull, and all I can do is close my eyes.

Someone asks why that particular courtyard for the Bat Mitzvah, and how the heck the guy knew we were there. Moshe says having a Bat Mitzvah at the Western Wall would have meant following Orthodox customs, which would have meant women watching the service from the women's prayer section, away from the men's section, where everything would have been going on. And Emily's father

would have had to read Emily's Torah portion *for her*. And Bar and Bat Mitzvahs at The Wall can only take place on Mondays and Thursdays. And there are only a few times of the year when you're allowed to chant your Torah portion. Moshe's idea was to hold the service as close to The Wall as possible—his friend owns the apartment buildings and the courtyard—while avoiding the hassles. He has no idea how the crazy guy knew we were there. Maybe he lives in the apartments.

My throat is tightening up because I'm wondering why all those silly rules for Bat Mitzvahs at The Wall; why having a Bat Mitzvah close to The Wall is so important in the first place? Couldn't it have been held at a nice secure synagogue in Jerusalem? Emily's mom has joined Emily in crying, and Emily's dad is leaning over the seats with his hands on their shoulders, tears in his eyes also, and I'm thinking cheer up. What's the big deal? So your daughter's second Bat Mitzvah was interrupted by a crazy guy. There're a lot more worthy things to cry about, if you're going to cry.

I can hear Mordechai's voice from behind me, growing louder second by second. He's chattering about opening his museum back in America, charging admission, but giving discounts to kids under eight, and Leon is trying to get discounts for senior citizens, and I can't help myself when I turn around and yell, "You're ruining my trip."

Pushing my mom's wheelchair into the hotel, she tells me the clown probably scared Mordechai, and talking about his museum was comforting, and I shouldn't have yelled at him. "That was mean," she tells me. "I don't know who taught you to be so mean." I don't know why, I guess it just slips out, but I ask, "Why the hell are we even here?" She turns around and stares. "You weren't even born Jewish," I say. She squints her eyes like I've lost my mind. I stop pushing her wheelchair and just leave her there.

As I pass through the lobby, my dad comes from behind

and grabs my arm, yanking me along. He swings me into a cushy chair, squats down in front of me. Emily walks by and sees the scene. It's obvious my dad wants to knock me a good one, give me the old forearm shiver. He says, "You cannot just shout insults at Leon and Mordechai, and you definitely, definitely cannot say mean things to your mother." When I ask why not, he glances left and right, and his eyes are glistening when he whispers, "God dammit, she's your *mother*."

Walking along Ben Yehuda Street, Daniel's wearing sunglasses even though it's twilight in Jerusalem. I feel exhausted after what happened in the lobby. My dad gave us his credit card to eat something within walking distance. I think he and my mom were just as exhausted as me.

Daniel says, "Maybe it's Purim." Everyone on Ben Yehuda is dressed in costume, hundreds of milling people wearing silly costumes—sitting outside just one café, I see a vampire, a shepherd, a stewardess and a pilot, a Cleopatra, a robot, a Noah with stuffed animals—Cleopatra catches me staring and winks her big dark eye.

Daniel heads into a store blaring rock music out its door, I follow him like a puppy dog. T-shirts are hanging from the walls and the air reeks of incense. A short guy with face piercings and tattoos is standing behind a glass case, spraying Windex and ragging it off. The shirts have silk screens of American rock bands, the name of the band in Hebrew. Daniel asks for Nirvana and The Grateful Dead, size large.

The guy goes into the back room without saying anything, comes out with the shirts. Daniel inspects the screen printing, pulls out my dad's credit card. "Wait a minute," I say. "I'll take two of those, too." Daniel says, "Hey," and the counter guy looks at Daniel, then back to me. I hold up two fingers and say, "Medium." Daniel says, "Since when do you like—" but I point into the case and say,

"And a pair of those handcuffs." The guy says, "Out with mommy's credit card?" I say, "Yeah, mommy's credit card, what difference is it to you?" The guy says, "Awwwww, Mommy loves her little pilgrim."

I slam my knee into the case as hard as I can, and then Daniel and I are back out onto Ben Yehuda, weaving through the crowd. I don't know if the glass cracked, but my knee is throbbing something fierce. After a few blocks, we duck around a corner and Daniel starts saying, "Shit, shit, shit," and I figure he's going to give me the forearm-shiver. I check my knee—it isn't bleeding. Daniel wads up the shirts he swiped, wedges them into a gap between two walls. Then he slaps his forehead and says, "Holy shit, you're gonna get us thrown in jail." I flip him the bird and say, "You're the one who started the shopping spree."

Much to my amazement, a smile creeps across his face, and it seems like he hasn't smiled at me in a long time—months, maybe even years—and somehow I know what's going through his head. We don't even have to talk about it.

We buy dreadlock wigs and sunglasses to wear as disguises, and then we're blending in with the rest of the costumed people, keeping our eyes out for police, going into shops and charging pocket-knives and I.D.F. fatigues and boomerangs, paying in shekels without knowing the dollar amount, and Daniel even buys a silver bangle, and I even buy a Persian bongo drum. My heart is racing faster than I can move, but it's more thrilling than nerve-racking, and Daniel and I are almost like friends, having such a great time that after we get back to the hotel everything seems worse than before.

The next morning, it's hotter than blazes at the Western Wall Plaza. The cobblestone area is packed with tourists and police and Hassidic men in black hats and suits and white prayer shawls, and women wearing crocheted kerchiefs on their heads—my mom tells me they're called babushkas.

She seems to have already forgiven me for what happened in the lobby, but if I were her, I'd let me suffer some more. I was awake all night feeling guilty, more about how I treated my own mother than abusing my dad's credit card. I thought about Emily's service, what it said about becoming more holy, and decided my thoughts can be unkind, my deeds can be unjust, and I don't keep the Sabbath. I'm not sure how a person honors parents and children, but I'm pretty sure I don't do it. On the other hand, I do speak the truth, which usually gets me into trouble.

People are lined up along the wall, saying prayers, rocking back and forth, one arm raised against the stone. The men are in the men's section, the women in the women's, and I wonder why the rest of us Jews should have to follow Orthodox customs. Everyone on our tour is dressed in long pants and seems more serious, more respectful. Or maybe they're feeling bummed after the clown incident. Mordechai has finally taken off his necklaces. Daniel looks nervous, glancing around, as if he expects to be arrested for last night.

Moshe leads us to a spot where we can stand together and talk. He tells us The Wall was originally a retaining wall for the Temple Mount, the plaza, a Roman garbage dump. Plants are growing out of cracks in The Wall, and Moshe tells us one type is poisonous, so don't eat any. Nobody laughs. Moshe puts up his hands and says, "It was a joke, people."

Somehow it bothers me that poisonous plants grow amidst all this holiness. Maybe I'm a poisonous plant amidst all this holiness, too. Moshe says we'll get a chance to pray at The Wall, but first, we're going into a tunnel that runs beneath the Temple Mount. Inside this tunnel is a sealed passage to what was once the Holy of Holies, a gold-plated chamber that housed the Ark of the Covenant. Only high priests could enter the Holy of Holies, and I assume by high priests, Moshe means Kohens.

Entering the tunnel, we pass under a vaulted stone arch that Moshe says once supported a bridge. I feel a little disoriented because in biblical times ground level was higher than it is now. My mom is shuffling along without her wheelchair. Nobody is talking, only tipping back their heads to look up at the arch. As we move deeper into the tunnel, sunlight disappears and the air gets cool.

Electric lights prevent us from bumping into the walls, each other. The ground is soft, and I can't hear our footsteps. It's like we're floating, and for some reason I imagine that everything in Israel is an illusion—Moshe, Masada, Emily's Bat Mitzvah, this tunnel—even my mom's sickness—the whole thing is just a projection by God, because He wants to teach me a lesson, or test me, like when He fooled Abraham into almost sacrificing Isaac at Mount Mariah. I guess my particular lesson is supposed to work off guilt, how lousy it feels, but feeling guilty is fine by me. When it comes to bad feelings, I'd take guilt over anger any day. In fact, I'd take guilt first, sadness second, and anger last.

We pass into a wider part of the tunnel. Display lights illuminate a huge stone block that almost touches the ceiling. The group gathers around it without Moshe telling us to do so. My dad and Daniel stand in front of one of the lights, its glow haloing around them. Those two remind me of solar eclipses, and I have a spooky feeling that seeing them in that light, side by side, will come to mean something in the future. Moshe says the stone is one of the biggest building stones known to man, limestone from the First Temple of King Solomon. My mom steps forward and puts her palm to the rock. Leon says it weighs over five-hundred tons. As we move away, people touch the stone the same way as my mom.

Soon we come upon a small table with prayer books and flickering candles. Everyone takes a book and proceeds toward a spotlit area on the wall. I figure this must be the

sealed passage to the Holy of Holies. We assemble in front of a low arch in the wall, filled in with stone. The stone has a greenish-goldish tint. It shimmers with moisture, as if water is seeping through. I can see folded pieces of paper wedged into the cracks. I assume people do the same thing here as at The Wall—write down prayers to deposit into the rock.

People keep their distance and whisper about what they see. My dad has his arm around my mom—I don't know if she's tired from standing, or if they want to be close. In a low voice, Moshe says this is the closest you can get to *Kodosh HaKodoshim*, The Holy of Holies, the holiest point in the world, at least if you're Jewish. Even the priests had to keep out, except on certain holidays. Maintenance men would descend into the chamber through trapdoors, and couldn't look at the ark, only the part of the wall they were working on. It strikes me that something as holy as the Holy of Holies should've been accessible to everyone who wanted access—a public Holy of Holies, with the Ten Commandments outside the Ark, in plain view. All the people should've had equal opportunity to find holiness, without going through a high priest.

Moshe suggests we recite the Mourner's Kaddish, a prayer that honors God's holiness while mourning our deceased loved ones. People open their prayer books. I have to admit I always liked saying Kaddish, only because of how the Hebrew words sound together, the rhythm of the prayer. We say, "*Yit-ga-dal ve-yit-ka dash she-mei ra-ba be-al-ma di-ve-ra chi-re-u-tei . . .*" I know the words by heart and glance around while I recite them. A few people are looking over at my mom. Maybe they think that soon enough, the prayer will apply to her, and I can't help feeling angry, can't help wanting to tell them she's not dead yet, and they better not write her off, or else the prayer will apply to them, too.

Even though we don't kneel in Judaism, my mom kneels

down at the bottom corner of the arch, her own little piece. The Kaddish has ended and people are returning to reality, are beginning to snap pictures. Nobody seems to notice my mom in the background. My dad squats down behind her, puts his hand on her shoulder. Daniel is standing off to the side, his hands in his pockets. It occurs to me that I should say a prayer for my mom. Maybe the Sh'ma in Hebrew, or my own original words to God. This would definitely be the place to do it. I might regret it if I don't.

But Leon's high-tech camera flashes a million times before the shutter snaps, and he keeps telling Mordechai to stop making faces. By some miracle, my mom is still focused, isn't aware of anything but herself at the Holy of Holies, connecting with God. That part makes me happy, her connecting with God and that nothing could possibly hold her back. I wonder how it feels to achieve so much holiness, what happens inside a person's mind. I wonder if I'll ever know what my mom is feeling this very second.

I half-expect something to happen, something I never believed possible. Like she turns into a hummingbird and flies out of the tunnel and lives for many more years suckling the nectar of The Promised Land. I realize that if she were to turn into a bird, my mother would disappear. No way is she disappearing, I tell myself. But if she's only aware of herself connecting with God, and if she's only going to continue connecting with God, continue to get more holy with all her mind and all her heart, maybe she's not going to have any mind or heart left for my dad, Daniel, and me.

I imagine two hands of light emerge from the arch and beckon her inside. She stands, and my dad lifts his hand off her shoulder, and, smiling, she steps through the stone, into the Holy of Holies. I'm standing there in shock, thinking she's forgotten every last bit of reality. She isn't thinking. She's a clueless little kid, without a worry in the world. I want to jump in after her—I have that power as a Kohen—and follow her wherever she goes.