

Song of Songs
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Shortly after his bar mitzvah, David became a religious fanatic. He had the zeal. It was a zeal like any other, like any pubescent boy's for cars or pinups or Dungeons and Dragons, only David's was for God. David believed in God more than his parents did, and he told them so. He informed them when the food was unkosher and when the dairy mingled with meat on the dirty dishes in the sink. He watched for their inconsistencies. Once, David witnessed his father opening mail on a Saturday. David knew it wasn't a major violation, but it was a violation. You're not allowed to do that, David said. His father never did it after. David was like a police officer—a halachic patrol.

Taking up two shelves in the family's living room, there was a Talmud. Eighteen volumes and bound in leather, it was a thing carried from Romania by David's grandfather, a Hasid. For his bar mitzvah, David's parents bequeathed him this Talmud. David carted it upstairs to his room in several trips, and he began reading it late into the night, with a flashlight under the covers. By the time he was ready for yeshiva, he knew his way around it.

In yeshiva, you take a partner, and together you argue. You interpret the Torah, finding legal commentaries from the eighteen volumes of Talmud to help make sense of it. You interpret the interpretations, always following each thread to the word of God, always asking the questions, What did God say? What did Moses hear? What did the rabbis mean when they wrote it down?

David could trace the pathways back to God more quickly than his partner, so the rabbis paired him with an older boy. David outpaced that boy too, and in time he'd

exhausted every student in the school. In four years, he was arguing Talmud with the head rabbi. It normally takes seven years to graduate yeshiva, but so impressed was the head reb with the breadth of David's knowledge and the intensity of his belief, he ordained him then and there. David became a rabbi.

David believed. He believed that God invented the six hundred and thirteen laws that governed Jewish life, the ones that say you can't mix meat with milk or wool with linen, the laws that demand you spurn the sensual delight of a woman's hair or her voice or even the sight of her. God had handed David a sacred mission. God cared if David opened his ears to the sound of a woman singing. He cared if David talked to shiksas. So David didn't. From puberty forward, David put up a shield, protecting himself with prayer.

After yeshiva, David wished to continue his studies. Harvard took him gladly. He studied Jewish Thought. On his first day in Boston he wandered Cambridge in a black coat and black brimmed hat. His beard reached to his stomach. Peering out from his black clothing, his nose beaklike against pale cheeks, David had the appearance of a gray and sunken old man. If you looked closely, though, you could detect something youthful in his features, and this was what made him look odd. If David looked odd, so did the rest of Harvard Square: It was the early seventies. You could be odd. David was but another strange figment.

A voice spoke from behind: Like the getup, it said.

I am not a hippie, David was thinking. He turned and saw a woman: She was dark, with thick black hair, Jewish to the lining of her miniskirt. She invited David to her apartment, and because she was Jewish, he thought maybe it was all right to go. She

quizzed him about his costume, all the while her thighs walking from room to room, her thighs sitting on the bed, her Lilith lips laughing at him. He ran out of there, wondering what had happened to him, wondering why he'd submit to such temptation.

David knew God would place other challenges before him. Indeed, Harvard proved no place for a man of Orthodox, anti-secular beliefs. He came to understand, vaguely, that to study Judaism in a secular institution was a thing entirely divorced from Yeshiva Talmud. Talmud relied on the belief that Jewish thought was the only thought there could be. To suggest there were others was blasphemous. David's field, Jewish Thought, was impious in its premise. God chose the Jewish people to keep His thinking alive. His thinking, the only thinking—not a thinking in contrast to others.

David enrolled in courses in history, where he found his religious self growing ever more intolerant of his secular self. In yeshiva, there was no such thing as history. There was the history of the Israelites laid out in the Pentateuch, yes. But that past was simply what God had communicated to Moses, and Moses to the rabbis, and the rabbis to the rabbis younger than they, and those rabbis straight on down the line to the boys in yeshiva. The rabbis knew the six hundred and thirteen laws because word of them descended directly, through the Chosen People, from God. God's laws and God's stories never changed. One needed to learn them, and touch them—like jewels in an heirloom that never lost their luster. At Harvard, history changed according to he who studied it. Young scholars revised, and rerevised. The past was but a plastic pearl, floating singly out at sea.

David persevered, over time learning to split his life into two spheres, the religious and the secular. He went to the jazz clubs and record stores under the Citgo

sign, with its light-lines vectoring to the center and then out again, to the center and then outward. He made friends with jazz musicians and the students who knew them. He frequented the Museum of Fine Arts. Gazing at the brushstrokes on the Picassos, the ink ellipses on the Pollacks, he sometimes experienced an ineffable kind of a thrill, a thrill that felt spiritual. For David, Picasso exalted. Miles Davis exalted. Judaism, he knew, was hostile to both. Slowly, David allowed a part of himself that wasn't Jewish to creep into the core of his being.

After Harvard, David needed a job. Rabbis earned better than academics, so he took work presiding over a small Orthodox synagogue near downtown Boston. He made \$26,000 a year, in nineteen seventy-six, to deliver just one short sermon a week. It was a tenure-track beginning, however scrappy the synagogue. The interior was covered in a sky-blue paint that was peeling off swathes of wall. Every week, the rabbi noticed another swath of wall unpeeled. The dereliction of the synagogue proceeded in direct proportion to the sloughing away of worshippers. The Jews were deserting in favor of a more fashionable, more secular way of life. Sometimes on shabbos, there were too few male worshippers to make a minyan—the quorum of ten required to hold public services—and David had to send for recruits from a synagogue across town. Seeing the faithful flee, he became more ardent in his faith. He no longer wanted to compromise, and he shunned his circle of friends from the jazz clubs and record stores at Kenmore Square.

After a few years, the young rabbi took a promotion away from Boston. It was a move up, far from the humble blue temple with the waning flock. By the nineteen eighties, David was earning on a par with the stockbrokers and advertising copywriters

who were his faithful. He lectured as a junior rabbi at the best-endowed synagogue in Toronto. He ran his fingers along the temple's gold-plated Torah on the High Holidays—at sermons that synagogue members reserved for years in advance, paying hefty sums to attend.

When Rabbi Rosen wasn't busy commemorating shabbos and bar mitzvahs and brises, Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur and Pesach, the rabbi explored the cultural life of his new city. He visited the Toronto Museum of Art and the jazz clubs, and even browsed in music stores. There, he occasionally purveyed the samplings of vocalists; his favorite were women, and he listened under the heavy burden of Jewish injunction against them. When he went to museums or music shops or jazz clubs, he changed out of his tailored suit and yarmulke and wore street clothes: a fine leather jacket purchased at Macy's; a leather cap where his black hat once sat. No one need know he was a rabbi.

Rabbi Rosen was still not married, and this was cause for concern among the top rabbis and many of his congregants. There were many offers to fix up the rabbi with this cousin or that workmate, but none of the women appealed to him. The idea of a woman boiling chicken, scrubbing pots with scrupulous attention to where the meat washed off and where the milk washed off, caused him to lose his appetite—for food, for love, for the vaulted mitzvahs of family.

One time, he struck up a conversation with a woman in a music store. The woman was not wearing a wig. This was the first thing the rabbi noticed, because the women in his congregation all wore wigs. Bewigged, they adhered to the halachic injunction against hair: A woman must shield her sensuous locks from the sight of all men not her husband. In some circles of Orthodoxy, women went so far as to shave their heads—just in case. A

single thread might break free—and why tempt the innocent Moshe? The thought that the rabbi might marry a woman who was bald made him happy to be a bachelor.

The woman in the music store was blond, with delicate painted nails and a smooth neck. She was a shiksa, shiksa to her peroxide roots. They got to talking. Her name was Sammy. Like Sammy Davis, Jr., and about as Jewish. Nevertheless, he asked her for a date. She never had to know he was Jewish, never had to know he was a rabbi.

The rabbi picked her up at her apartment. He was struck by how rarely since he'd lived in Toronto he'd visited places where people who weren't Jewish lived. There was a doorman, with a uniform he might have lifted off a Beefeater. Everything in Sammy's apartment had a fluorescent cast: the kitchen bulb, the lithographs of acute-angled faces in acute-angled sunglasses. He felt cold. Shiksa art. Goy aesthetics.

How about some Indian food? Sammy suggested.

The rabbi held no illusions: Indian food was not kosher. Vegetarian, true. Kitchen roaches and clarified butter, however, would surely fail the halachic litmus. But, who would spot him?

Sure, the rabbi said.

Even if someone did happen to glimpse him, who could know him in the unlikely getup of a leather jacket and motorcycle cap, with the unlikely companion of a miniskirted peroxide blonde with nails painted red and glossy.

His cap hardly covered his head; he'd pushed it so far back it slid to his collar. It barely protected that vulnerable spot watched by God, was balanced just high enough so the rabbi could push it forward if someone spied him. And if that someone saw him—in Aladdin's Bombay Cafe, before a plate of potatoes and peas in brown sauce, aloo gobi,

which looked like meat—what could matter anyway? It would be off, the whole charade, the whole game that says God cares exactly where on your skull your cap sits.

Sammy was a waitress. She was telling the rabbi, in cruel detail, about the foibles of the proprietor at her restaurant. Aside from committing the mortal sin of insisting that Sammy and the other waitresses pool tips, Sammy's boss was bald. He was bald in such a way that not even a part so far to the side of the head it started at his ear could hide it. His scalp, Sammy was saying, was oily, as if he primed it with hair tonic. He had no hair to prime, she said. Then she repeated the line, as a joke.

Sammy stopped talking. The rabbi felt nervous, wondering what she thought of him. She looked at the rabbi long, focusing on the brim of his cap, her head cocked.

“David?” she asked. “Why don't you take off that stupid hat?”

It occurred to the rabbi: She thinks I am bald. I am not bald. And I hate this cap. I hate the way one spot on my head stays sweaty my entire life. Let the top of my head breathe, he was thinking, and he removed his cap. And as dinner progressed he returned to imagining, between bitefuls, what a great night he would have, back at the shiksa's apartment. And then he saw, across the room, staring at him with a look of utter stupefaction, the daughter of the president of the synagogue.

Over the next weeks, nothing was said.

The rabbi donned the motorcycle cap another night. He was hosting a friend from Harvard, touring the city's classier night spots over talk of art and the past, mingling with the city's lawyers and judges and doctors. The rabbi took his friend to a male entertainment center—not the usual strip joint, but a sophisticated establishment, where

businessmen take their clients. When they left, on the street outside, stalling in a slowly purring Mercedes, was the vice-president of the synagogue.

It wasn't long before the vice-president suggested Rabbi Rosen take a leave of absence. The rabbi went on a six-month sabbatical. He sublet an apartment in New York City, resolving to continue work on the Harvard dissertation he never published. It concerned a mystic Jewish scholar and rabbi from the eighteenth century, Franz Zamoreizchik. Zamoreizchik was philosopher and a Jew, as if such a thing there could be.

The rabbi felt himself to be in hiding, but even in New York City synagogue members from Toronto turned up on the sidewalks or among the stacks at Jewish Theological Seminary and the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library. They saw him studying or on his way to study, in his yarmulke, or his black hat, and his pressed suit. The rabbi was still careful what he wore. He looked like a rabbi like any other. But he felt himself living the conflict of a decade before. For the first time since Harvard, he recognized his struggle as not merely one of chafing against the constraints of a culture obsessed with appearances, against that world where holy men checked bald spots to see that yarmulkes were in place. Almost worse, the rabbi felt unable to resolve his two notions of God: the God who bellowed proscriptions against pleasure at the top of Mount Sinai twenty-three centuries ago, and the God who condoned the experience of epiphany: in art, in song—the God who *was* the feeling of epiphany. The rabbi grew increasingly aware that in order to hold firm his faith in the God of the six hundred and thirteen laws, he needed to shun the intellectual world of philosophy and history, the cultural world, even the world of the scholar Zamoreizchik.

The rabbi never stayed home one Friday night the entire time he spent in New York City. He never once lit candles for shabbos. He put on his leather jacket and his cap, and he prowled the jazz bars and film houses. He went to the Village Vanguard and drank nonkosher beer, ran into old friends from Harvard. One shabbos he saw Quincy Troupe, the jazz writer, who was an old friend. “Hey reb,” Troupe said, laughing at him. “How come you not home eating boiled chicken?”

The singer was Shirley Horn. Her voice was the consistency of oysters sliding past the back of the throat. *Touch me till I tremble....* Shirley Horn was spiritual. God knew. God liked outstanding music. Shirley Horn was more inspiring than a rabbi’s sermon, more instructive than a single word in a single lecture by Rabbi David Rosen.

The rabbi became contemptuous of the Jews he saw near the New York Public Library, which was just blocks from the Forty-seventh Street Diamond and Jewelry district. On New York Public Library days, he took his lunch at a fast-food restaurant frequented by the blackhats called Kosher Delight—Burger King of the Hebrews. Out front, electronics stores boomed advertisements for sensuous and secular merchandise, flaunted images of skin and legs and women, women with hair, and flesh, and cleavage. Just next door at Kosher Delight, Orthodox and Hasidic Jews muttered prayers to themselves while looking down, shielding their own innocence. They were Orthodox Jews, the rabbi thought as he watched them, with the maturity of self-righteous fourteen-year-old pests; hypocrites who say they are as pious as Moses on Mount Sinai; they who resemble the Jews of Egypt; they who haven’t changed since, with their houselights rigged to timers for the shabbos, with their multimillion dollar computer wholesale outfits whose product—ancient as the Dead Sea scrolls—they wouldn’t even allow in their

homes. Jews who travel to the city on schoolbuses from little enclaves in Brooklyn where they can't even read the newspaper because it's too salacious. The business pages, the business pages they read.

The rabbi recognized the Jews of Kosher Delight because he'd been one of them. Now he knew better: How little their obscure rituals meant to God—grimy tendrils of tefelin dangling under black coats in summer; effete sidecurls; bald spots protected by black hats.

The rabbi stood at the fast food counter surveying the greasy kosher French fries, the greasy kosher Kentucky Fried chicken, the Caribbean staff in orange-striped polyester uniforms from the same wholesaler that supplied McDonald's. The only decent people here, the rabbi was thinking, were the staff. A young woman smiled at him and asked for his order.

Cheeseburger, he said.

She laughed.

Just checking, he teased.

She kept grinning, speaking slowly in a rolling Jamaican accent. Shalom, she said.

Shalom, shalom, ve'eyn shalom, he quoted to her. It was Zamoreizchik. Peace, peace. But there is no peace.

After six months, Rabbi Rosen returned to Toronto and resumed his post. It was unclear whether he would stay. At that time, the congregation was amurmur with news of a recent high profile case of a girl from a good family who died of an overdose. Crime was escalating in the poorer neighborhoods due to the rise of crack cocaine, and congregation

members feared its spread to their homes. At shabbos, the wife of the president of the synagogue suggested Rabbi Rosen take on the topic of drugs. She was an elegant woman, with hair from so fine a wig house you had to know she was Orthodox to know it was fake. Rabbi Rosen would be speaking for Pesach, a holiday that honored the exhilaration of knowing God. Why not use the message of Pesach to turn teens away from drugs?

The rabbi had smoked pot several times; he felt dishonest telling kids to keep off the scourge. What did he have to teach them? The president and his wife wanted a rabbi who was a role model. Who was he to hold himself up? And what did he know of addiction, the craving of a troubled soul?

Thinking to better understand, the rabbi went to a part of town frequented by drug dealers and hookers. He approached a man in an overcoat who looked like either a dealer or a pimp or both, and he asked where he could score.

The pimp didn't even look at the rabbi—his leather jacket and his cap, his clipped beard, everything so alien in his bearing. Then the man answered, eyes fixed on an invisible point well beyond him, You a cop?

No, Rabbi Rosen answered. A rabbi, actually.

The man looked at the rabbi, bemused, and then laughed a languid couple of roars, sleepy rolling roars. C'mon, he said, shaking his head at the pavement.

They went into a little hotel, the kind that rents by the hour. The manager looked at them, his face the shape of a question mark. The rabbi imagined what his dossier at the synagogue would read after he was found here, dead, with a skinny stooped crackhead perched over his body and laughing. In the dossier, a blank page in place of the last page. We didn't understand.

Upstairs, the dealer sat on a stained beige bedspread, so bland the contours of the bed faded right into the offwhite walls. The dealer was still shaking his head, grinning. He handed the rabbi a pipe, this time looking at his eyes. In the dealer's eyes, the rabbi found none of the desperation he expected. He saw no pain, no destitution. He saw bliss.

And the rabbi felt bliss. He felt content. It didn't bother him to know the dealer could kill him at any moment, that he could die, here, bleeding color into the opaque surroundings. And the rabbi thought, This is God, crack is God. And then he thought, This is not God. God remains after the high leaves. God doesn't fit into your life for a moment to distract you from misery. God endures. The bliss of crack was hollow.

For Pesach, the rabbi stood on the pulpit at his synagogue, the temple of seventeen hundred modern families, one of the largest, most pious, most charitable, most enduring synagogues in the country, the fanciest shul, the shul with a million in assets, with the shiniest mahogany paneling and the most tasteful gold detailing in the pews. Rabbi Rosen spoke about the dangers of feeling too good. That's the nature of material pleasure, he said. It is ephemeral, and you want more. Not so spiritual pleasure, which lasts forever. Like a poem.

After, the president's wife told the rabbi his sermon was wonderful. Where did you come up with that? she asked.

He didn't say that he came up with it while he was high on crack. Two weeks later, the president fired him anyway.

The rabbi did not mourn the loss of his job. Why was he a rabbi to begin with? For the money: \$100,000 a year. The ephemeral pleasure. It was a career like any other.

The synagogue awarded Rabbi Rosen a generous severance and never let slip that he left for reasons not his own. He took a trip to Thailand. There, he met a young student training to become a Buddhist priest. The man had never heard of Judaism, and did not know it was the Jews who were God's Chosen People. He did not know that God ennobled the Jews with the mission to sustain His thinking. The man had never heard of Moses, knew only vaguely of the Bible's resonance.

The monk took the rabbi to a peak high above the monastery, where the monk sat for six hours each day before the terraced emerald hillside, numbing his thoughts from the insides of his eyelids. In the monk's face the rabbi saw clarity, not contradiction, not the weight of arcane ritual. When the monk looked out over the stones jutting from the landscape, their surfaces smooth and cool, like the air, the rabbi saw a calm lifting from the monk's body, and he imagined he might physically touch it. Watching him, the rabbi became calm himself. Watching the wind in the cypress trees, he listened closely to its sound. He heard a voice singing, the voice of a woman. He saw the naked flesh of a woman's shoulders.