

SIXES AND SEVENS

## 1. Tear Gas

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It's a warm night--I'm walking down the highway with my parents, at the tail end of a very long line

of bigger people, marching. I can see the brown dust beneath our feet, and hear the whizz of cars, but the primary vibe is a wave of two-syllabled sound:

all of us chanting "PEACE! NOW!" And it's a demand, not a polite request; a demand borne of conviction. I add my voice to the wave of adult voices, knowing

why I am there and what we're doing; I wear a little gold peace symbol on a chain around my neck and a white enamel dove pin on my sweater. Though my parents and I lag at the rear of the line because of my short, chubby legs, I feel no separation due to kidhood; it doesn't matter that I'm seven. I'm moving along with the movement people, accepted as one of them.

And the light fades with sunset; the dusk turns to dark and then a murky haze cut with searchlights. Of a sudden, there's a shift in the unified body of the march, and then

an uproarious scattering I cannot understand. Everyone in front of us, suddenly, is turning around and running BACK. Back at me. Into me. Over me. My smallness works against me now; I'm knocked to the ground and trampled. What's going on? Where's everybody going?

A tall man stops and picks me up. He places me atop a low brick wall; I can feel the still-sunwarmed cinderblocks supporting me as he promises, "You'll be safe here—just don't move." Maybe I'm on the verge of crying from being kicked about, because he magically produces an Almond Joy candy bar, the sort of treat I'm only supposed to have on Special Occasions, and all I can think of is: surely this is a special occasion, a rare night in my life. This is my private *brucha*, my *shehechyanu*, the blessing over the meal of my first big political demonstration.

My parents are atheists, intermarried, critical of organized religion; I know I am a Jew, but I haven't been to Hebrew School or exposed to the formal history of Jewish learning in Eastern Europe--or I would know that in the old country it was customary

for young boys on their first day of school to have honey dropped on their tongues as they learned the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This was to equate sweetness with the study of the Word. For me, this happens at Century Plaza in Los Angeles, in 1968, when I am seven. Gratefully taking candy from a strange man, a scenario that in any other context would suggest obvious dangers, I will forever equate sweetness with peace activists, with men who resist militarism, with Movement People who pause in their own nightmare cacophony to care for a small girl.

But this moment, which I associate with finding kinship and trust in Movement People is, at the same time, the very moment when my parents feel utterly betrayed. This was supposed to be a peaceful protest. No action, no sit-down strike, no violent provocation of police. That was what they had brought me to see: democracy and pacifism in action. There was a permit for this march; everyone had agreed to keep moving in one calm and steady loop. But others more radical had fucked up, sat down, blocked traffic, shouted taunts; and now police were clubbing heads. The air fills up with tear gas, screaming, blood. My Bluebird leader's best friend, a grown-up named Evelyn Stern, is up near the front of the march and runs to jump over one of the freeway walls, rolls down

to the ground. The teenage big sister of my schoolmate Ali confronts the police, begs them to stop, and gets their billy club in her eye. My mother looks up and realizes there are security men on the hotel roof with machine guns, pointing them at us. And as I am having my epiphany with an Almond Joy bar, my parents are maneuvering me back, back, the long way to our car, shaken with betrayal, treading water on the tsunami of radical change. This was no place for a child, their relatives would shame them, two hours later. No place for a child.

## 2. Surf Ride

My father comes home from work in his cool little convertible sportscar, the Sprite. *Let's go to the beach.*

We leap into the station wagon with our salt-stained hooded sweatshirts. The radio is playing the Turtles, "Happy Together," or Nancy Sinatra, "These Boots Are Meant for Walking." We jump on the Santa Monica Freeway to the beach just beyond where our car shoots out of the tunnel toward Malibu.

We bypass the beachfront club where Jews can't go. My father tells us what Groucho Marx said after being turned back from a "restricted" beach: "My son is only half Jewish, so can he go in the water up to his knees?" This is how I learn there are other half-and-half kids who, so oddly, may enjoy greater privileges than those available to their Jewish mom or dad.

This is how I learn that prejudice affects *famous* people, *even if they're in the movies*. Am I willing to go in the water up to my knees? If my mother cannot follow?-- if I have to

watch her on the shore, like Miriam, waiting for the Red Sea of anti-Semitism to part forevermore and let her pass through?

This is morality, encountered in a grain of sand. And then: my father parts the ocean for me.

My father is all I know of God. At the edge of the water my old man takes over; he's a bodysurfer, at home in the ocean, and he teaches me about California waves. This is a cultural key of a very different kind from Jewish knowledge; it's Gentile *mishegoss* of the highest order; Jews in Beverly Hills have swimming pools; the goyim surf, risking their necks.

But: both Judaism and Christianity agree on the significance of immersion in water: the *mikveh*, the baptism; and, though untutored in liturgy, I accept the ocean as God-like. It's something larger than us all. I never lose this feeling that every wave is holy. And I must bow my head to enter, every time.<sup>1</sup>

I hold my breath and push my face into the water. My handsome cousin Steve has shown me how to put my face in the shallow end of his backyard pool. Now, at the beach I lower my face into the less predictable ocean surf, getting used to timing breaths and feeling waves slap past me. And when I master breathing my father begins taking me out

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<sup>1</sup> In July 2004, UPN television ran a series entitled "Amish in the City," which included a rural Amish couple's relocation to Los Angeles. Overwhelmed by their first trip to the beach, they wept at the sight of the ocean and thanked God for allowing them the blessing of such an experience--similar to the Jewish prayer of thanks for reaching a first-time/unique occasion.

into “big water” on his shoulders. He teaches me that swimming in the rough Pacific means knowing who is dominant. The ocean is on top. The ocean always wins.

So you use your puny human mind and discipline it this way. You merge with the ocean’s own intelligence. Walk sideways into a wave to avoid being knocked over. Now wait for the next wave. Not that one; wait for *your* wave. Into its perfect yawn you may dive, holding your breath.

Careful. Careful to keep your face parallel to the ocean floor. Now, in that eternity of waiting in dark water, listen to the lifespan of your wave passing overhead. To emerge at the wrong time would be sheer folly. *Listen*. When the roar dwindles, when the rush of rough tide over the back of your legs has ebbed, then pop up through the top, with as much force as possible. Shoot up through that roof and in one motion, inhale and check to see when the second wave is coming. There. Now ride that next one in.

I’m a real California girl now. Sun and sea. I never wear my shirt at the beach or on the trail at Yosemite, where we go hiking and camping. I’m neither boy nor girl; I’m merely six, I’m seven. Yeah, I know the scent of a redwood campfire, the rhythm of a wave.

### 3. Drop Drill

First grade begins, but it's complicated by a teacher's strike. We're squeezed into half-day classes, and watch our teachers marching on the pavement holding signs. It's 1967 and everything's political. On the first day of first grade, in Miss Moseley's class, we're introduced to war and bombs and dying.

*Does anyone here know what a DROP DRILL is?* my teacher asks, in a kindly voice, and the roomful of "gifted" six-year-olds all gaze back at her in blank consternation.

Someone has to be an expert. We've been hand-picked for our brains.

The tallest of the five Susans in our classroom thinks she knows, and raises a long, blond arm. *Come on up, Susan*, beckons Miss Moseley, and as Susan stands in front of us in her stiff slip and party dress, her buck teeth worse than mine, Miss Moseley orders, *DROP!*

And poor uninitiated Susan sticks out her wrist, opens her hand, and drops her snotty Kleenex on the floor.

And the air raid siren goes off, a distant reminder of impending doom. It blasts off every Friday. But we schoolkids never talk about that sound. We adapt to this new game of hugging the chalky classroom floor on those random days when our teachers stammer *DROP* in the middle of math or just before recess. *DROP* means that like so many

obedient chipmunks we hurl ourselves down under our desks, doubled over, hands clasped behind the neck, young behinds pointing to the sky as we sneak a peek upwards at ancient wads of chewed gum on the undersides of desks.

*DROP* will not protect me, my mother has explained, but I worry because it's an assignment I can fail. *None of you moved fast enough!* my teacher complains during one drop drill. We learn that we have, disgracefully, flunked our atom bomb test, although it isn't quite expressed that way. I'm already used to getting A or Excellent in every subject; hence the panicky disgust when a C in "Safety" shows up on my report card, spoiling my perfect record. Apparently, I'm no more than average in preparing for nuclear war.

My parents have rolled up our American flag and locked it away in the front closet. They're cutting up chicken wire and crepe paper and making a giant peace sign rigged with Christmas lights. It's going to hang in the window this season, and keep the war away.

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