

Holy Fear

When I see my little brother Jack, I'm expecting a goofy six year old jumping up and down on my parents' bed wearing his Batman pajamas. But instead I see a middle aged man wearing a navy blue blazer with a belly hanging over his belt. As he stands up the curb waiting for me to pull up he is slightly stooped. Clutching the hood of the car, he slowly lowers his body down to the passenger seat as if every movement is pure agony.

"Gee, Jack what happened to you?"

"I have sharp pains shooting down my back."

This is very bad news because touring Jerusalem requires climbing up and down stairs.

"Maybe you should see a doctor and get some pain medication?"

"No need. Once I'm up and walking I'll be OK."

I could play it safe and suggest that he get a message at the hotel spa and then then we take it easy and hang out by the pool. But the tour of the Rabbinical Tunnels was booked over three weeks ago, and the hummus restaurant already has my mouth watering. I am feeling annoyed like the time that his stomach ache prevented us from seeing Disney on Ice. But this time I won't let his aches and pains stop me from giving him a wonderful day.

"OK, we're off. But let me know if you are tired, and we'll turn around and go back."

I pause and then add, "It's really wonderful to see you".

And it really is. Just breathing the same air with him makes me feel more connected to myself. After living in the Middle East for over two decades, my childhood has faded away to the point that I don't remember who I am or where I come from any more. There is that easy simple consciousness of childhood taking

over my mind; when everything was really only about me; before I had a new country and my own family.

Even though we are both adults, I reach over his lap and fasten his seat belt as if we are in the back set of our parents' station wagon. Just the sound of the buckle snapping reminds me of the smell of my father's cigar, and the hot ashes flying in through my open window as we sail down the highway.

He starts to turn towards me but then decides against it, and keeps his gaze forward and his back straight, "So what you've been up to?"

I don't know where to begin, because I really can't even remember where we left off, so I throw him a few sound bites: my business is going strong, my husband is volunteering as a traffic cop and my son is struggling but pulling good grades studying engineering. I ask him what's new with him. He sighs.

"Mary quit her part time job. Rachel is in New York auditioning but no parts yet, and I'm pretending to teach, but I'm mostly battling jet lag."

"Well I'm glad your job brought you to Israel!" I sound like I am trying to cheer him up, like I am putting a Band-Aid on his knee after he fell off his bicycle. I am even beginning to sound silly to myself like a mindless cheerleader, the optimist who is always trying to cover up all the bad things.

When we arrive I gently lift him off his seat to help ease his pain and his face wrinkles with a grimace. We walk side up side one step at a time until we approach a café with a view of the ancient walls marked by bullets and cannon balls. He lowers himself down slowly while I guide him into the wooden chair. I take colorful pages out of my purse about the history of Jerusalem from King David to Suleiman the Magnificent, when he reaches into his back pack and pulls out a Red Sox cap. The hiss of the coffee machine is overridden by my memory of the sound of a crack of a bat.

"Jack, do you remember when you almost caught that fly ball?"

He nods delicately.

I remember everything. The ball fell just a few feet from his chair but then rolled underneath. He scrambled under the seat to get it, when a man with a beard and a hairy arm reached down and gave the ball to a little girl sitting next to him.

When Jack came back to his seat empty handed, I was sad for him, and I wanted to know why he didn't ask the man to give him the ball, since the girl was only three or four and probably couldn't appreciate it. Then he said something that surprised me. He said that seeing the little girl smile up at her father with admiring eyes was enough satisfaction for him.

Now I am smiling at him with determination as if I am tempting him, to be just a bit nostalgic, and leave the pain behind. To dip back into the days when he was still young, without long plane flights, and being paid to stand in front of a classroom and drone on and on about Big Data. When life was simpler and he could smile more easily.

Come on, come on, it's not that hard. I keep trying to telepathically make him smile. He grins at first and then his smile fades, as if a dark thought swept across his heart. Although Jack sits in the shade, and there is a cool breeze there are beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"Jack, you feeling OK?"

"Sometimes in crowded places I feel trapped."

I look right and left, but there are no walls. We are sitting in a courtyard, and I can't imagine how the gentle breeze and smell of pine trees could make him feel confined. Over 200 people could fit in this open space.

"Just last week at the cinema I had a panic attack. In the middle of the movie I crawled over dozens of knees to get to the lobby."

"No way. That sounds horrible."

Now I am seriously worried about him. His brilliant mind that delivered perfect SAT scores should let him watch a movie from beginning to end in peace.

"Have you gone for treatment?"

He shakes his head no.

"Why?"

He shrugs, as if there is no explanation needed. He does what he must, he suffers. Unbelievable.

I convince myself that despite his aching back, and his fear of cramped places, now is the right time for him to overcome his fears. In the Rabbinical Tunnels there is the ancient source of healing that is rumored to cure all types of diseases. Perhaps

he has been sent here to me, stooped and bathed in a cold sweat so I can help deliver him from himself. My childlike belief in superpowers comes back, with the memory of sitting on the porch of our summer cottage pouring over old Superman comic books. Even though they are torn, and the lake water dripping from our wet bathing suits smears the ink, we are fully immersed, drawn into every frame.

Somewhere deep down he can also remember feeling invincible. Perhaps if he reaches back into his past he can walk down several flights of stairs and wander around in narrow hallways surrounded by thick walls of stone without being afraid.

But before I can take a chance and challenge him I need to know if he is ready to let go of his fear.

"Since when have you been claustrophobic?"

He looks up the stone walls towards the cloudless blue sky and I'm not sure if he is trying to resist the sense of being trapped, or if he is reaching back to find a memory.

"Since junior high. You remember Stephen Wheeler?"

"Yeah he was creepy." I vaguely remember that he used to torture stray dogs, and I used to cross the street every time I saw him coming. He always looked like something bad waiting to happen.

"One day he followed me home after school, grabbed my math book and pitched it in the dumpster. When I reached down to get it, he pushed me in."

I imagine being surrounded by old tuna fish sandwiches and globs of American chop suey, then the sound of a metal door slamming and sudden total and complete darkness.

"How did you get out?"

"I banged and banged on the metal door until the janitor opened it."

"How come you didn't tell me?"

"I was too ashamed. Besides what could you have done?"

I was silenced. He's right. There's probably nothing more pathetic than an older sister trying to protect you. But I am horrified by the fought that he kept all that misery locked inside for so many years, and never felt safe enough to share it with anyone.

"If this happened in junior high, how come you were normal in high school?"

"You think I was normal? Did you ever go with me to a movie, or see me in an elevator?"

I lost contact with him when I went to college in Jerusalem, and whenever I came home to visit my Mom was hovering over us, so we never really had a chance to talk. There are a lot of things I don't know about Jack and I am realizing that he probably thinks I am a horrible sister, and even worse he's probably right. I was probably so busy making pretend everything was fine, I didn't open my eyes to see what he was going through.

"I'm sorry you suffered so much."

Then I finally give him that big hug I've been waiting to give and I'm relieved he doesn't wince in pain.

As we leave the café with the tables crammed together he is looking more relaxed and isn't sweating so much. The sight of all those people steeped in faith wearing their cloaks and carrying their symbols has made his pain fade. He appears seduced by the clinking trinkets and the brightly colored rugs and has plunged into his thirst for adventure.

We meander through the line of cafes and stores selling prayer beads, holy water and icons. There is the smell of incense and the sound of children singing as they walk in matching white gowns towards a small chapel with a gold dome. As we venture through the Arab Market, I hear shopkeepers shouting in English, French, and German and I point out to Jack the intricate carvings on the giant silver urns.

A young boy pushes a wheelbarrow overflowing with T-Shirts and sweat pants down a narrow stone path, and I place my hand on my brother's elbow and gently steer him to the right to prevent him from being run over. As we pass by large barrels of fragrant orange and brown spices he picks up the pace, I assume he is more comfortable. But then again I fear that his sudden haste could be because of a panic attack. I want to see his face to see which it is, but the crowds are pressing so tight I can only walk alongside him and can't seem to catch up to walk by his side.

I hold on tight to prevent us from being separated. He ploughs ahead with determination and the crowd parts easily. Perhaps now that we are older and he towers over me, he is acting as my guide blazing a path through the jungle of arms

and legs. I guide him gently with my finger tips to make sure he heads in the right direction.

After we wind through the market, the crowds thin. At last there is breathing room, and there is the smell of rosemary growing wild in the park, and smooth beige stones covering the floor, and the walls with voluptuous red flowers flowing down from window boxes hanging over our heads.

We find ourselves looking down at the Western Wall from a staircase several floors up. The orthodox Jews, some wearing fur hats, many with long black cloaks are in small groups bowing rhythmically as they pray. Mixed with the splotches of black and white there is a sudden splash of red or orange as high school students and tourists blend in with the devoted.

After we reach the bottom of the stairs we meet up with our tour guide at the mouth of the tunnels. We join a couple with a gritty New York accent, and a family of a stocky mid-westerners. As we descend into the tunnels, Jack is holding on to the rope and is smiling and looking confident. I am not sure if his grin is forced or natural, if he is holding back a need to blot in the opposite direction.

We continue down a path that takes us further and further away from the blue sky all around us there are halls of hardened mud. We approach an enormous white stone that forms the base of the temple. It is the size of a city bus and weighs 640 tons, and the guide explains that we don't know how ancient builders managed to quarry the stone and put it here.

Then to my surprise Jack raises his hand. I am beaming as his big sister proud that he is ready to share his expert opinion as an MIT graduate, and enlighten us about the history of civil engineering.

But instead of quoting some brilliant research that has been shared only with a few worthy experts, he suggests that the rock is made out of concrete. I am shocked. Natural stone has cracks, fissures and detectable grains that can't be mimicked by concrete, the guide explains. Even I could have told Jack that. "Besides", I ask Jack, "Can you imagine King Herod driving around in a concrete mixer?" I am wondering if Jack has lost his mind, wondering how he could make such a silly claim. He may have other problems besides his claustrophobia and aching back.

The guide announces with a grand gesture that the next passageway takes us to the point that is closest to where The Ark of the Covenant once stood. But Jack doesn't seem eager to get any closer, he is looking nervously down at the ground. I wonder if I was too hard on him, and managed to break his concentration, and take away his confidence. I try to think of something to say that will inspire him.

"Just think about this magical place. We are closest to the home of the Ten Commandments; the basis for codified law throughout the world and the belief system for three religions. "

He doesn't care. He is not impressed. He is beginning to break out in a sweat again.

"There are no dumpsters or bullies here", I tell Jack. I offer to hold his hand, and usher him through the ancient hallway so he can get to the other side, but Jack shakes his head. I remind him that he has studied gravity, acceleration, and quantum mechanics and he must know deep down inside that it is very unlikely that tons of earth and stone will suddenly fall on his head.

Then I become desperate and ask Jack what it would take for him to make it through. He says there needs to be an opening with no people inside, where he can make a run for it. He tells me I should wave him in when the coast was clear, and shout out his name.

"Like waving you into home base?" I ask.

"Yup", he agrees leaning down as if he is getting ready to sprint.

So, I clear the passageway, run down to the end of the tunnel and then squat down as if I am a coach at home plate. I wave wildly with my hands, trying to tell him to come make a run for it. I scream his name but he doesn't reply. Instead of seeing him come fast in my direction, two little girls, possibly twins, skip through the passageway, laughing and smiling, wearing pink dresses with bows.

That is an awkward moment for me. My heart is aching for my little brother. Girls younger than his daughter do something that should be so simple, but for him, but for some obscure reason is so difficult. Perhaps he watches them too, and that's what makes him give up.

I see Jack's Red Sox baseball cap, move up and then turn away, becoming smaller and smaller. His claustrophobia has won. I leave the group and rush back to

the entrance frantically searching for Jack. Using my elbows for leverage, I fight my way through a group of tourists who have only begun their descent.

There is in my mind a movie of him falling or hitting his head on a stone, or worse having a heart attack from all that stress. There is the horrible realization that there is no way that they can get an ambulance in here. Against my own common sense I bring him to the most terrifying place of all, and cause his demise. The cover of the dumpster falls, darkness settles in, his heart beats fast, and I powerless to save him.

Back at the beginning of the exhibit, I find him. He is sitting on a stone bench; red in the face from either excitement or embarrassment. There is no one crowding around him. If he made a scene no one noticed. He is just another tourist who managed to be confused and come out the exit.

I give him a hug and smile. There are no words for this. We don't talk about the tunnels, or why he went back. I don't ask him if this or that hurts or if he is feeling trapped, and he doesn't volunteer any information about how it felt to feel the walls crashing in, and why he just had to make a run for it. My only goal is to take him to that hummus restaurant so he can sit and drink and recollect himself. What's done is done.

But I am beginning to feel silly, understanding how unrealistic and misguided I really am. It is more likely those walls are made out of concrete, than he would willingly go down into those tunnels with me. Maybe my pointless exercise was more about my ego and less about my compassion. Perhaps I am just a silly cheerleader after all, and we should have stayed at the hotel and not even bothered. But just when I am in the middle of beating myself up it appears as if the fear is receding and Jack is experiencing a mild recovery.

On the way to the restaurant we visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where six different denominations fight over precious real estate. It is dark and crowded filled with Ethiopian pilgrims but Jack marches in happily. We crash a lecture from a British tour guide, who has a group of gray haired ladies cluttered around him, and Jack listens carefully to the history of the place, fascinated by the different versions of the actual location of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

We weave through the crooked alleys of the Arab market, and Jack is thrilled to pick up Harvard University shirts in Hebrew for his wife and daughter. Well they are not MIT, but they are still good enough for him.

In an underground café to eat humus, and drink Turkish coffee. The walls are made from the same rocks as the Wall, but the arches are low. If I extend my arms I can reach from one end of the restaurant to the other, but Jack doesn't sweat or complain. Suddenly there are thousands more interesting things to talk about than an aching back or walls closing in.

We begin to talk about him in high school, how he balanced all of his books on his hip every day for fear he would forget his locker combination. Then I ask about his friend Rob that dressed up every year for Halloween like a British general with a red coat and a musket and...

Then Jack looks at me and arrows shoot out from his eyes. He blurts that he hasn't seen Rob since Mom banished him from the house. After he spilled orange soda on her Persian rug.

"Living with Mom was hell, after you went away to college."

"Yeah, she took a bad turn for the worse after Dad left."

I am silent and nod my head, encouraging him to continue, although I am afraid to hear more.

One Thanksgiving she was preparing butternut squash with marshmallows, and she was totally stressed as usual before entertaining. She lashed out at him, and asked why he wasn't offering to set the table, or do the dishes, or anything. He told her instead of getting angry at him, why doesn't she just ask for help.

"Ah, yes but she didn't want advice, she just wanted you to take out the trash."

Yes, but then I realize he doesn't understand this method of managing Mom. Although she was neurotic, and sometimes abusive, I understood she just needed some sympathy and that was usually enough to put out the fire. He was always the logical one, trying to find the reason behind her hysteria, and suggesting a solution and that just made her madder.

After he gave her advice on how to delegate tasks, she ordered him to leave. He slammed the door behind him, and then she locked the deadbolt. He walked

took a walk around the block, and cooled off. But when he came back to the front door and banged and banged she didn't let him in. She wouldn't budge. She refused to open the door, even though the guests was coming to eat in only a few hours.

Either she chose to ignore him, because she was too busy cooking and forgot him, or she was so angry she couldn't be responsible for what she would do if she saw him.

Having nowhere to go, he hopped on his bike, and rode and rode with no particular path or destination, just burning off his anger. When he was just so exhausted he needed to stop for a drink of water, he found himself at a Shell gas station. He had no idea where he was, or how he got there. He managed miraculously to find his way home. When he returned she behaved as if nothing happened.

"I'm sorry she terrorized you." I told him. "But you weren't the only one."

I tell him my own war stories. Bursting into my room she complained about the tasteless trinkets my father bought her, throwing large shapes made from jade and ivory on the floor, saying she can't bear to see them anymore. She stormed out of the house without saying where she is going or when she's coming back.

I came back from work with ice cream stains on my uniform dreaming of a shower and bed when my mother asked me to give her the car keys so she can put an end to her misery. First I hid the keys in my underwear drawer, then I finally decided to put them under my pillow thinking she would never look there, and even if she did, she would have to wake me up to get them.

I pause, and he is quiet, and then I try to find some way to connect our memories.

"Jack, she had a bad period that's for sure, but at least we all managed to pull ourselves together in the end. One thing for sure is that we are both survivors."

We smile at each other and clink our water glasses together with a "cheers".

Jack and I order more coffee, even though it dark black and bitter, and even though the restaurant is more crowded than the rabbinical hallways we escaped. We ping pong memories back and forth until we need to leave to avoid driving down windy mountain roads in the dark.

As we head home, Jack falls asleep and I am relieved that we finally began to discuss those things that we kept buried for so long. Perhaps it was the luxury of being alone together without our mother, partners or kids hovering around us or perhaps the adrenalin of trying to make it through the tunnels. Or maybe way down under those tunnels, there lies the holy tablets that the Romans never found. They are hidden so deeply that no one can extract them, yet their healing energy mysteriously gives people the strength to face their pain until it slowly ebbs away.

Jack tells me that now that his manager knows he has a sister in Israel, it looks like he can come to teach classes as often as every six months. For his next trip he wants to climb Masada, because he hears that this ancient fortress is the inspiration for the setting of some unpronounceable city in Lord of the Rings. I didn't see the movie or read the book, and have no intention of doing so. But it is still a lovely place and I would love to share it with my little brother.

But I have my own secret fears. I am tempted to confess to my brother that those narrow paths with only a rope to protect you from toppling down a stone canyon can be terrifying. But suddenly it doesn't seem so scary. Go figure.