

THE BOY WHO HAD A PEACH TREE GROWING OUT OF HIS HEAD

He was at the track again. On a drizzly midweek afternoon in early November, looking through the Racing Form for a long shot whose name sounded as depressing as he felt. He scoffed at *Sunny Days*, laughed out loud at *Reason to Believe*, nearly vaulted on to the track to grab *Love Conquers All* by her bridle and say, “Oh Yeah? In what parallel universe?” He was hoping to find a mare named *Heartache* or a filly called *Twelve Months of Unabated Low Grade Nausea*.

Ben had gone into couples’ therapy with guarded optimism. Dr. Barry Linker was a short man in his forties with receding brown curly hair and a PhD from a college Ben had never heard of. He had chosen him for his name. Linker. A perfect name for a couple’s counselor, a man whose calling was to heal the injuries of wounded warriors on the battlefield of love. Also B. Linker without the period was Blinker. Hence his bets today exclusively on horses that were fitted with blinkers. The questions Linker had asked at the first session had penetrated deftly to the heart; and the insights he offered were perceptive and unsettling, forcing Ben to look at the dynamic of his fights with Victoria in ways he previously had not seen: His anger, his lectures, his analogies, his silence. Her avoidance, her changing her story, her apparent surrender, her exaggerated penance. Still, none of the horses he had bet today came closer than fifth. But he was not looking for omens today. That ship had sailed. They had considered the possibility of having their wedding right here at Santa Anita. The ceremony in the Winner’s Circle, the reception in the Paddock Gardens, weather permitting, or the Frontrunner Room.

Amazingly, on the racing card that afternoon, running in the fifth race, were horses named ENGAGED and SOMETHINGABOUT VICTORIA. Ben was essentially a rational man, but it would defy all logic to view the pairing of these two names on this particular day as mere coincidence. Ben put five hundred dollars on the exacta combination, which, if they came in first and second, would pay back in excess of eight thousand dollars. In addition to covering the cost of the event, clearly this was the Universe holding up the proposition of their union for scrutiny and evaluation.

A mile is eight furlongs, one thousand seven hundred and sixty yards. Their horses ran 1-2 for one thousand six hundred of those yards. In the final half furlong Victoria lost heart and faded from second to fifth. Ben tried to shrug it off as a meaningless event. A race is only an omen if it wins, he said. And he tried for all he was worth to believe he meant it.

Victoria had been a no-show at therapy. In fairness, she had never agreed to participate. Still, Ben didn't want to close the door on the possibility that she might attend, so when he filled out the intake questionnaire, he had indicated that it would be a couple's session. Why not err on the side of the possible? He had done everything he could think of, save sending a cab or a limo to pick her up, which he might have done if he knew where she was living. He had left entreaties on her voice mail leaving detailed instructions of time and place, hoping, even though she did not respond with so much as a single syllable, that she would surprise him. This was an unrealistic expectation, he knew. Even in the good days of their marriage (he believed there had been good days in their marriage) she had never found that little spark of delight that some mates have in

surprising their Significant Other. She didn't mind *being* surprised. So it was not that she was surprise-averse. It simply was not in her emotional vocabulary to initiate one.

Ben went in alone, feeling inexplicably fliver-limbed and unable to straighten his back right away. Sitting alongside the empty leather chair that he could not help but see as the metaphoric coffin of their marriage, he despaired of anyone ever wanting him again, and feared and that he would soon descend into hollow-eyed state of torpor and decay he had seen happen to other men cast aside onto the discard pile. Dr. Linker told Ben to hold that thought, and turned the plane of his body to the chair to Ben's right, and asked Victoria whether she had any feelings about what Ben had just said.

This was initially disconcerting to Ben. He thought he was being mocked, which send a crackle of anger and then shame down through his already quavering loins. But then he got it that this was some advanced psychological technique to make him fill in what Victoria would have said if she had been there, a doorway to his understanding her feelings. It was not that either. Dr. Linker, despite his gifts of insight and intuition, had a predilection for literal truth. So while he clearly saw there was but one person sitting before him, on his written schedule it had said couples session, Ben and Victoria Wexler, and he was programmed to give her equal time.

That weekend marked the one-year anniversary of the end of their marriage. Ben was observing the occasion over a breakfast of lox, eggs, and onions at Rosenblatt's, the kosher deli Victoria despised. It seemed a fitting way to mark the occasion, quietly spiteful, darkly ironic. Victoria was too highly educated to think of herself as anti-

Semitic. She had after all *married* a Jew. Unless, as Ben now speculated, she thought of it as her own personal pogrom, destroying the race one man at a time. He had, when they first started dating, overheard Victoria assuring her daughter on the phone that Ben wasn't "very" Jewish. He hadn't taken the comment as malicious. Coming from her sweet, blue-eyed unassuming face, he chalked it up to her being raised in a family of Irish alcoholics, whose small-minded prejudices could not but helped.

After two previous marriages, one short, the other of significant duration, Ben thought he had hit solid ground with Victoria. They were both in their forties, (ok, early fifties for him but close enough) in good health, with solid jobs and minimal debt; their habits of hygiene, tolerance for spontaneity, need for privacy, and sexual appetites were all compatible. They were done with raising their kids--Ben's two warring sons, Victoria's plaintive, pampered well-married daughter. So the ending, which had been brutal and cold as the month of February, had knocked Ben for a loop.

Among modern couples there is an implied Geneva Convention of civility, a hierarchy of ways to inform a mate that he or she has become an ex. Most courageous is the face-to-face encounter. You put your hands down at your sides. You don't duck. You take the full shit storm of your now-former partner's anger and rage. In descending order comes the phone call, the letter, the email, the emissary. Way down at the bottom would be things like murder, posting sex tapes, forging letters from the Board of Health naming his or her ex-lovers as people who have tested positive for HIV. Not far *above* those nasty extremes was Victoria's informing Ben via text message.

He had been trapped at a weekend-long academic retreat (punishment enough!) at the university where he was Director of Athletic Communications. Driven by the spate

of sex scandals at other institutions, a phalanx of lawyers from the chancellor's office had imposed a mandatory Preparedness Workshop, designed not so much to prevent sexual misconduct, as to protect the university from the legal and financial fallout that might result from it. Ben was nearly comatose from the eleventh PowerPoint presentation, when mercifully (he thought) his iPhone pinged and the following message appeared on his screen.

*When you get home today you will
see that I have moved out. Send any mail
for me back to the Post Office. Let them figure
it out. There's nothing more to say.*

Her message contained neither salutation nor signature, nothing to fan the slightest current of warm air to its icy body temperature. Ben tapped his colleague Daniel on the shoulder. They were down at the far end of the conference table, out of direct eye contact of the square-shouldered, middle-aged black woman who was leading the current segment. Daniel furrowed his forehead into long rows of irrigation ditches. "Is this a joke?" His gravelly voice was louder than he meant it to be and drew a sharp rebuke from the chairperson who cited the importance of the issue they were confronting, and if he didn't believe her to just turn on the TV.

When Ben got home later that day, true to her word, Victoria was gone. Not just gone, but erased. All evidence of her existence expunged. Clothes. Furniture. Pictures. Computer. Soaps. Books. DVDs. Baking utensils. Gone gone gone gone gone gone gone and gone. She also had not left a forwarding address, a note of explanation, a hate letter, a love letter, a litany of regrets, of accusations, of indictments, a picture of her new lover with a caption saying he's you only younger, smarter, richer, better looking, better

in bed. Anything that would have given Ben something to hold on to. Some understanding of what he had done that hurt her so badly. Or not done.

He recalled with nostalgia those early, openhearted days, when Victoria wanted him to know her. She had invited him to attend her AA birthday meeting. When she was called to the podium to accept her cake for twelve years of sobriety Ben was surprised at the professional panache with which she told her story: How it was when she was drinking and falling face-first into suburban rose bushes, forgetting to pick up her kids at school, flirting with their male teachers. Hearing her describe that life seemed to Ben like another person talking about yet another person. But it made him feel intimate with her and on the verge of love. Then at her thirteenth she told the same story nearly verbatim. With the same pauses for laughter, the same intonations. That gave him pause but he said nothing. The twelve steps were her dance, not his.

Of his own dance, he remembered on their trip to Argentina when she read the map wrong and got them lost in the mountains and he had said it was ok, absolving her by his largesse, but not by pulling to the side of the road, pressing both her hands in his, and telling her how ecstatic and grateful he was that she was in the car with him exploring this beautiful unknown place, and that as long as they were together they couldn't ever be lost.

Now a year later, as he cream cheesed his onion bagel and nodded for a refill on his coffee, it puzzled him that he thought of her as often as he did, was still so keenly aware of places he drove past that they had been together. They had no children together. They had seen each other through no profound loss. The indentation into the heart muscle should not have been deep. It should have reassumed its original shape by

now, as the mattress of their connubial bed had done once the weight-bearing body vacated.

It was a busy Saturday at Rosenblatt's. People were waiting to be seated. Ben mopped up the remaining scraps of his scrambled egg whites and onions with the last of his bagel when he saw an elderly man get to his feet from a booth at the back end of the restaurant. He had to be ninety, dressed in the habit of many elderly Jewish men, in a dapper sport coat, a pressed white shirt and slacks, a trim necktie, topped off with a jaunty chapeau. It may have been a flash of sunlight across the man's glasses, but Ben thought he caught a glimpse of an alert sense of humor in his ancient eyes. The long arduous journey to the front of the restaurant could have mirrored his ancestors' crossing the Russian Steppes. Ben's booth was the halfway point between Vladivostok and Petersburg, and when at last the old man came into range, Ben elevated from his banquette perch and sang out "Uncle," a respectful greeting he remembered from reading Sholom Aleichem stories in his youth.

The welcoming gesture was somewhat tempered by Ben's nearly toppling over, the result of the circulation in his bent leg having been cut off. The old man was startled at first, then fearful that he should know who this person was but could not place him. A relative, God forbid. Ben touched the man's shoulder as though his frame might be made of spun glass. "I thought you might want to rest. Sit. Have a cup of coffee."

"A cup of coffee? This is all you're offering? Coffee I can get anyplace." Ben was taken aback for a moment. The man's face shook very slowly. Ben realized he was witnessing mirth played at one-tenth its normal speed. Bracing one hand on the back of

the booth and the other on the edge of the table, the old man lowered his chrysalis of a body slowly down.

“So.” He looked across the table to Ben. “You’re Jewish?”

Ben nodded robust assurance.

“You go to temple?”

“Well...not so much lately. God can probably do without me.”

“What God can do without is not the kvestion. Can you do without God?”

The waitress was a tall stocky blonde of fifty who had taken a few wrong turns off Easy Street. Her nametag said Sunny, which had to be a joke. “Anything else?” was a rhetorical question. She had the check in hand ready to slap down on the table. Ben nodded to his guest on the other side of the booth.

“Oh, it’s you?” Sunny said, when she saw who was sitting there. “I thought we were rid of you today.” Her voice carried a gruff familiarity. Like a daughter-in-law who after thirty years of being constantly irked by her husband’s father, has come to love him more deeply than the man she had married.

“A nice glass of hot tea would be nice,” the old man said.

“A *glass* of tea?” Ben was sure the old man had misspoken

“Tea. In a glass. Like a human being.”

Ben turned to translate the order to Sunny.

“I know what he wants,” she said.

“Friendly girl,” Ben joked after Sunny had wheeled abruptly away. He extended his hand across the table and told the man his name.

“Ben?” The old man seemed ironically impressed. “A very modern name.”

“Wasn’t Benjamin somebody in the bible?” Ben was suddenly feeling the need to assert his Judaic identity.

“If I’ll tell you what’s a name...*Alexi Ivanovich Balabanoff*. This is a name.”

“That’s a name all right.”

“And if I’ll tell you what they changed it to, the goyim at Ellis Island, To *Alan Bland*.”

“That’s your name?”

“You call that a name. I call it an affliction.”

“I’ll tell you another name that’s an affliction.” Ben tried to mirror the old man’s expression of world-weary irony. “Victoria Baines.”

“Baines? The old man repeated the name like something was caught in his teeth.

“What did they change it from, Bialystok?”

“From Wexler.”

“From Wexler? How do you change a name to Baines from Wexler?”

“It’s simple,” Ben said. “You divorce Wexler.”

“You’re Wexler.” The old man got it. He smiled. Ben had won him. They were kindreds.

“You want to see something really funny?” Ben pushed his Iphone up in front of Alexi Ivanovich’s glasses with Victoria’s text message blared across the screen. “That’s how you change from Wexler to Baines.” He was used to people reading the message and blowing ‘whew’-shaped gusts of air from their mouths. For a while those downdrafts were all that had kept Ben afloat.

Sunny returned with the glass of hot tea. She served it in a saucer with a long spoon and four sugar cubes. Alexi Ivanovich set two cubes in each side of his mouth, then inverted the sugar dispenser over his glass. Ben watched it pour straight down for five, six, seven seconds, then had to humorously scold him. “Don’t you know all that sugar’ll kill you?”

“When I was in a Nazi death camp nobody had sugar.” As he stirred the undissolved crystals into centrifugal eddies and currents he spun a tale of his harrowing escape from Auschwitz in the arms of his father, living off whatever they could find to eat in the forest, pursued by the German SS, and how one day they came upon an abandoned gypsy camp with a ham still roasting on the open fire, and even though they were starving his father would never let them eat pork. “You know what’s *tref*?”

Ben took umbrage at the question. “Yes, I know what tref is! My name is Ben not Brian.”

Alexi Ivanovich took a sip of his tea and added more sugar to fuel the continuation of his story. Young Alexi and his father miraculously made it to Moscow, to what they thought would be safety. But now they found themselves fleeing from a regiment of Russian infantry who thought they were German spies. They were just emerging from the manhole into Red Square when Sunny returned to their table and plunked down their amended check. “I’ve got people waiting,” she hinted.

Ben politely deferred to his companion. “Can I get you anything else? A Danish? A bagel? A piece of strudel? I want to hear the rest of the story.” Sunny waited like she had been enduring a debate on C-Span 3.

“I guess not.” Ben finally said.

“You pay up front.”

“I know where I pay. I’ve been coming here for twenty years.”

Alexi began to gather himself.

“Wait. You left me in Moscow with you and your father coming up out of a manhole and half the Russian army waiting. I want to know what happened!”

“What *happened*? What do you think happen? They killed him.”

Ben’s head snapped back. He had been so geared toward an unexpected miracle that, he blurted out some idiotic response like, “How can that be!”

“This was also my thought at the time.”

“What did you do?”

“What does a person do?” He shrugged.

“I don’t know! What *does* a person do?” In Ben’s voice the rhetorical question transformed into a supplication.

Alexi poured another spume of sugar into his tea and tasted it. A smile burst over his face. He raised his index finger above his head like a man who had found the lost chord.

Ben did not want to appear unworthy of the wisdom being imparted to him. “So, are you telling me that the question isn’t how to *avoid* unbearable catastrophe, because there is no avoiding it? But that the question is how to *recover from it once it happens*?”

“You’re a very smart boy,” Alexi said, which may have been a compliment or a reprimand. He thanked Ben for the tea and began the arduous effort of getting to his feet.

“But you’re not going to tell me the secret?”

“Boychik, what secret?”

“How *do* you recover?”

Ben sensed a trace of impatience in the old man’s voice that he needed to be taught such a basic lesson.

“Listen to me. In my village of Simbirsk I went to school with a boy. Such a *trumbernik* like you shouldn’t know. A *bandeet*, do you understand? A trouble maker. Rules weren’t made for him. In the capital, Czar Nicholas III, he should rot in hell with vermin crawling in his chest, had been murdered. Stabbed to death. You understand that to the Czars, Jews were like so many pieces of charcoal.”

Ben nodded solemnly from the long experience he never had.

“Spies told the palace guard that the assassin’s brother lived in our village. So one day a regiment of soldiers rode into Simbirsk. They rounded up all the boys, brought them to the town square and said they would kill us one by one, the smallest one first, if someone did not confess the identity of the scoundrel who shed the beloved Czar’s royal blood. This was after they had ransacked the storehouses, burned all the grain, razed the schoolhouse, and turned pigs loose in the synagogue to show us that they were not here on vacation. Of course nobody spoke. Who did they think we were, their goats who would bleat at the point of a knife?

“So they pulled the youngest boy out of line and forced him to his knees. The major himself held his sword high above the head of the child. In the next moment he would be dead. But if I’ll tell you what happened next? The boy they were looking for, the boy whose brother had killed the Czar, was hiding all along up in a peach tree in the center of the square. Such a peach tree this was like you never saw. Every year it

produced fruit for the entire village. Hundreds of peaches. Thousands of peaches. So sweet you could die.

The boy stood up in the notch between the two boughs where he was hiding and called out to them: ‘The one you are looking for is here.’ The branches were dark as iron from the rains. His head slammed into the branch directly above him and stuck into the soft spot in his scalp. So when he jumped down out of the tree, a whole umbrella of branches, like deer’s antlers, was embedded in his head. He stood in front of the Cossack major, with his gold buttons up and down his uniform and a mustache that looked embarrassed to be growing on such a face.

“The boy spit on the ground at the major’s boots. ‘This land belongs to everyone,’ he said. ‘Russia is our mother and we are all her children.’ The major could not appear to be frightened, but if I’ll tell you that man was frightened to look at that boy. From the top of his head was a peach tree. But in his eyes was a look so fierce the devil would run from it. With his scimitar the major swiped at the tree. His blade flashed this close to the boy’s face and cleaved off the ripest peach. The boy didn’t flinch. The Major took a bite. Then he lowered his sword. He knelt down and kissed the earth and said ‘thank you mother Russia.’

“He ordered the regiment to clear the swine from the temple, to rebuild the schoolhouse, to restore the fields. The swine from the temple they could clear. The schoolhouse, they can start to rebuild. But severed grain you can’t put back on the stalk.”

“So what did you do?”

“Boychik you’re in America too long. What you do, is you do without. When it comes time to plant again you hope you’re still alive and that this time the Cossacks don’t come.”

Ben’s voice was tender with understanding. “Was that you? Were you the boy with the peach tree growing from his head?”

“Me? No.” A roguish twinkle shone through his wrinkled face. “But if I’ll tell you who that boy was. The boy with the peach tree growing out of his head?” His voice attained magnitude. “That was Leneeen.”

Ben’s jaw hung. “Are you telling me you went to school with Lenin?”

Alexi’s shoulders came up to meet his earlobes in a timeless Talmudic shrug. “Who knew then from Leneen? Until then he was just Ulyanov, a boy with a terrible handwriting.”

He noticed Alexi staring at the cell phone screen like it was the moral of the story. “I see!” Ben said, excited that he understood the truth of the message being taught to him. “You’re saying I should delete her text. Is that it?” The phone was in the palm of his left hand. “That’s it, isn’t it? It’s not about the avoidance of disaster, it’s about recovery! Thank you!” He read Victoria’s text message one more time, swallowed it whole like a cyanide pill, and then pressed DELETE. The words existed for one more moment of afterburn on his retina display. And then they were gone. Ben waited to feel enveloped in the magic surge of relief.

A thickset woman with heavy features had come into the restaurant and was waiting for Alexi at the cash register. She berated him as they went out the door together. He put his arm on her shoulder. She brushed it off. He put it back. She shook her head at

him and let it stay. On his way back home, Ben remembered he was out of milk. He stopped at his local market and came home with apples, raisin bran, pumpkin ravioli, toilet paper, and brown rice. He made coffee before he realized he had forgotten to buy the one thing he had gone there for. It made him picture the look Victoria would have given him if they were still together. He was surprised, as he pictured her face, to recognize for the first time that love aside, she simply had not *liked* him.

Her green coffee mug was still in the cabinet. The one she had bought on their honeymoon in Corrientes. It was not an oversight that she had left it here. She was too meticulous for that. Ben took it down from the shelf and tossed it into the trash. It nestled on top of a wad of paper towels at the top of the garbage can he had used the previous night to mop up a minor juice-making incident. There was more of her stuff here than just the cup. It was like he was suddenly seeing with a night vision camera all the things he had allowed to settle into the environment. He purged the Mixmaster, a set of steak knives, some Tiffany cut glass wedding gifts. He gathered them up in his arms, walked deliberately outside and set them outside at the curb.

He held on to one of her books. Not as a sentimental keepsake. He had never seen her read it. It was just interesting. It was called The Time Tables of History. The pages were set up in columns, listing all the events in the arts and science and politics and history that happened simultaneously, starting from Early Man and going right up to the present. He had always liked knowing what went with what and where things were in relation to other things. As a kid when he had gotten a globe for his ninth birthday, he had traced circles of latitude around the world to see which cities were on the same

parallel. He was shocked to discover that New York and London were not lined up. Not even close. Than London was as far north as Moscow.

He wanted to see what else of monumental importance had happened on the day Victoria had left him. But the book only went up to 1985. He flipped back idly through a few decades. Maybe Russia was on his mind after hearing Alexi Ivanovich's tale. He discovered an amazing pairing of symmetrical events that happened in 1849: The California gold rush AND the Communist Manifesto. The defining events of the two combating ideologies of the twentieth century, Capitalism and Communism, conceived simultaneously. What, if anything, should be made of that? Was the synchronicity of events due to cause or coincidence? That was what made him crazy. He knew which one he wanted it to be. If you know why things went wrong it would be in your power to avert them. Or it might be and even that was better than nothing

Ben was not consciously looking in the Timetable book for anything about Lenin. But when he came upon his life history he stopped to read about him. Lenin was one of those topics you think you know about, but you really don't. Like how the Electoral College works or photosynthesis. Lenin was born Simbirsk, just like Alexi Ivanovich had said, in the year 1870. His name was originally Ulyanov. He became Russian Premier in 1922 and then. Ben had to stop for a moment and look back at those dates. Born in 1870? If Alexi Ivanovich had gone to school with Lenin they had to be somewhere around the same age. So, born in 1870. School in 1878. That would have made him *sixty-five* when he escaped from the Nazi prison camp *in his father's arms* and saw him gunned down in the Moscow sewer system? How old would that make him now? A hundred and forty? The holes in the old man's narrative cascaded around Ben's

ears. What the hell was that cockamamie story about Lenin having a peach tree growing out of his head? He had a spasm of panic that in getting rid of Victoria's remnants and deleting her text he had done something horribly irrevocable. He ran outside to the curb to retrieve her things. But everything had already been scavenged.

He came back inside in a fog. He pulled out his phone and pressed buttons in every combination looking for a way to retrieve her deleted text. Each effort was politely taunted by a message onscreen that said MESSAGE. The screen sat in his hand, a dead cold organ. What could he possibly do? Dive into cyberspace and gather up the disintegrated phosphor? Put the wheat back on the stalk? What was cut was cut. He'd have to wait until spring to replant, if he lived. And until then, to just do without.

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