

Mordechai & Abigail

Mordechai and Abigail's parents were tipsy on red wine, teetering on their barstools around the kitchen counter like four Bobo dolls. They had also managed to spill red wine on the small white poodle, Sparky.

Mordechai grabbed the sticky dog. He tucked her underneath his armpit and dropped her to the ground once they made it to the backyard. He was about to let her go, save at least something from his family before it was completely destroyed, when Abigail bounded down the steps and out the back door with a towel wrapped around her body. She jumped when she saw him.

"I thought you were upstairs," she said.

"I'm going to let Sparky go. Don't interfere," Mordechai said.

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Look what they did to her." Abigail looked down at the dog's once white fur. The spilled wine looked like a large birthmark splotched on top of her fur.

"They didn't."

"Oh, but they did."

"Poor, poor Sparky." Abigail bent down to pet the dog, stroking her fur in a big ring around the wine stain.

"It's like animal abuse."

"No it's not, it's like an accident," Abigail said. She yawned and looked out at the lake. "Let her go back inside, she's fine." Sparky ran in circles attempting to lick the unreachable stain on her fur. Mordechai would not go as far as to call Sparky fine, but he walked her back inside

the house and let her roam free once again. Maybe he would get lucky and she would roll around on the white carpet.

Abigail and Mordechai looked through the glass doors into the house. Abigail's mother was laughing so hard tears streamed down her face and Mordechai's mother kept swatting something invisible with both hands, her square acrylic nails slicing the air. Mordechai turned and walked to the edge of the porch. He jumped off the deck and onto the lawn with both hands in his pockets. He knew Abigail would follow him out to the lake.

He sat down on the edge of the dock and felt Abigail's close proximity radiate all over his body like she was a halo of light burning his skin. His stomach swam. He wanted to run his hands through her dark curly hair. He gulped, feeling a stirring in his groin.

He suddenly broke the silence, "What were you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were you going for a swim?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said.

"You can still go in. I'll go with you if you want, the water's warm."

"I don't really feel like going in anymore."

"Oh, okay." They let the silence wrap around them like ribbons of the warm lake water. The moon looked like a small white bean. He tried not to focus on her breathing or the way her body felt in space so close to his. She remained very still, swirling the tips of her big toes in the water. He thought of a thousand things to say, but none of them would sound right released from

his mind out into the world. He was glad she never looked over at him, although he stole sideways glances at her.

They'd been next-door neighbors since they could remember. Mordechai couldn't recall the exact moment he fell in love with her. This large secret of his felt all-consuming all the time. He had to work not to reveal any of his feelings for her. He knew she could not love him as he was then—pale and scrawny, more chicken than person, with gangly arms and a mouth full of metal. But someday she might; someday she could have the capacity and he didn't want to mess that up.

So instead of confessing his feelings to her, he climbed from his roof to hers when she was staying late at school or on vacation with her family. He left messages for her on small, rolled scraps of paper—his very own Wailing Wall. He kissed the notes and stuck them under a loose brick by the chimney. He felt close to Abigail when he did this. He liked to think about her finding the notes sometimes, what her face might look like. He never signed his name, but he knew she would know they were from him, of course.

He wanted to do things with her, everything. He wanted to eat cereal with her, alone, in their own kitchen and wake up next to her and pick out songs and ties, climb hills, skip rocks, skip school, explore the world with her.

Something suddenly compelled him to slowly lean down, so as not to frighten her, and kiss the birthmark that looked like a drop of coffee on the top of her right shoulder. She turned her head to smile at him, a sleepy grin; he felt as though doors were opening inside him. Encouraged, he ran a fingertip along her neck down to her collarbone. He didn't dare look up into her eyes again. Finally working up the courage, he cupped her cheek and kissed her. When they pulled apart, he watched her try to process what had happened, the way her long eyelashes

scraped the bottom of her eyes, the pinpricked freckles spread over the bridge of her nose, her unruly black curls and the frizz floating around her head. Fireflies alighted the forest around them, buzzing and flickering like an auditorium of a thousand watching eyes.

Abigail furrowed her eyebrows and stared down at her hands which were clasped tightly in her lap. Mordechai recognized the look on her face as confusion and remorse. As quickly as the doors had sprung open, they were closing and locking themselves again inside him. Abigail pushed herself off the dock and slipped into the lake without a word. Mordechai, too embarrassed to wait for her to resurface, walked back to the house alone.

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Mordechai now sits slumped beside her. There's a bottle of swiped Manishevitz between them and two already empty ones off to the side.

"Bar mitzvahs! That's the root of my problem," Abigail says.

"I hate religion," Mordechai says.

"You have a Jew fro."

"I didn't choose to look this way," Mordechai says, defending himself.

"All the greasy, fried hors d'oeuvres, how do you say that? Or duh-erves?"

"Or derves. The way they make you sing in front of a hundred people in the peak of puberty is a fucking nightmare. Who came up with that idea?"

"God?" Mordechai's stomach growls and he coughs to cover the noise, grateful when Abigail resumes her rant.

"And the challah you shovel in your mouth right after the service because you're starving and feel like you might die from your grumbling stomach and you suddenly catch a glimpse of

what your ancestors went through those forty days and forty nights of wandering through the desert and maybe that's why they make the services so long."

"Two fucking hours too long," Mordechai mumbles. They pass the bottle back and forth, wincing at the wine's sweet taste. The electric slide plays from inside the ballroom; the guests scream and applaud with excitement as if they have not heard the song at every other bar mitzvah they have ever attended.

"And that is why I am about twenty pounds overweight," Abigail says, taking another swig of the Manishevitz. "That and the lingering freshman fifteen."

"You're not overweight Abs," Mordechai says softly. He wishes she could see herself through his eyes, lovely and perfect and glowing in the dark hallway like a molar in the hallway's mouth. If he were different, maybe then. They both stare into the dark space in front of them. Perhaps if his name was not Mordechai to begin with. He had long given up asking why he was given his name because the only answer he ever received was, "Because that's your name."

"But why? What does it mean?"

"It means that's what people call you."

"But why couldn't I have a different, more normal name? Like Jacob?"

"I don't know. You should ask your father."

"He cries every time I ask."

"Then don't ask."

"But why is it my name?"

"Because it is."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Mordechai had often thought about calling himself Because. No one makes fun of that word. It is a conjunction; it gives a previous statement reason to exist. Because had smooth, easily manageable hair. Because was going to travel the world and learn how to glass blow. Because did not give a shit about what others thought of him. Because would do whatever the hell he wanted, just because.

Abigail calls him Mordy, which reminds him of the word mortal, which reminds him of death. And the last thing he wants to do is associate Abigail with death. Mordechai can't stop the heat ripping through his body as he thinks of the last time they sat this close together at the lake house nine years ago when they were fourteen, the last time he felt this much hope that something between them might transpire.

Abigail interrupts his thoughts and exclaims, "Up! Come on, get up. I want to dance."

"Why?"

"To work off the Manishevitz, I don't know why, come on."

"You don't need to Abs."

"Okay thanks, come on."

"Seriously." He stands up, pushing himself off the ground, leaving her arms to hang in front of her. To hell with it, he thinks. "You are so beautiful."

"Oh shut up. It's the Manishevitz talking."

"No, it's not." He still loves her. God, why does he still love her? *Really, God, if you exist, why do I still love her?*

"What?" Abigail asks.

"You."

“Me?” Abigail looks around her then playfully points to herself. “Moi?” She steps away from the door leading back inside the ballroom and toward Mordechai.

“Yeah, you.” Mordechai rocks forward onto the balls of his feet with his hands in his pockets. His face feels hot and he has not felt this tipsy in a while.

“Who?” She steps closer toward him now.

“You.” The front of her body almost brushes against the front of his. She presses her hands against his chest and smiles up at him. “You,” he whispers. “You.” He kisses the side of her neck. “You.” He wraps his hands around the back of her neck. “You.” He puts his hands around her waist and pulls her in closer to him. “You. It’s always been you.” He presses his lips softly to hers, parting them easily. They both kiss gently at first, tentatively. He feels like light, warm and elusive. He knocks over one of the empty Manishevitz bottles, but ignores it and the probable part it’s playing in their kiss.

Suddenly, their cautious, restrained kissing turns wet and crazed. The door of the ballroom flings open, smacking Abigail’s back. Mordechai blinks open his eyes and stares over Abigail’s head into the eyes of all the bar mitzvah attendees. Mordechai’s aunt Mindy shakes her head, wagging her scrambled egg-like skin back and forth, narrowing her eyes at Abigail’s back. Abigail’s father turns and walks toward the bar. Hands pop up to cover open mouths. The purple, green, and blue flashing lights reflect off Mordechai and Abigail.

He stops kissing her, but she tugs on his tie, pulling him back to her. He gently pushes her away and whispers, “Turn around, actually” and he catches her arm before she has the chance, “Wait, don’t.” He wraps an arm around her back and moves them away from the door further down the hallway out of sight. Someone shuts the ballroom door and Mordechai leans his

back against the wall. Abigail rests her head against his chest and he kisses the top of her head, squeezing her into him tighter. If he could just pause time.