

Boobs

The Jews crossed the Red Sea so that Jacob Kentor could finally go to Hooters. And he did—after Bar Mitzvah—after Hebrew school and Talmud flashcards. After *please be seated*, Torah Aliyah, after Kleenex, after *Mazel Tov*, after Nana Rochelle’s forehead kiss. After buffet banquet pizza slice and disc jockey with a goatee. After inflatable guitars and “Kokomo” on the dance floor. After the girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney didn’t show. After Jacob’s heart broke for the first time. After slow dance with the needy girl by default. After Rabbi said, “Go on and be gracious,” Jacob Kentor went to Hooters after school on a Monday.

For years, Jacob heard rumors about the Promised Land in the locker room during gym. It was one of the last chain restaurants in town, if you could even call it that—a *restaurant*. It was so much more than that. The men of Eighth Grade always showed up with t-shirts from their birthday dinners, all marked up with buffalo sauce and sharpie signatures from girls who added hearts and smileys to their names. They all looked the same, all the t-shirts, all the signatures. One Eighth Grader said that all the women gave him their phone numbers and that he could text them whenever he wanted, even if they didn’t always text back. All the guys knew who Stacey was. None of them seemed to know how to describe her boobs. Jacob longed to be involved in that timeless struggle, and as he readied himself for manhood, his parents decided not to totally suck for once and let him join the brotherhood of wings—as long as he wasn’t alone.

That’s how PJ Sotheby got involved, even though he definitely wasn’t a man.

PJ carried a flannel handkerchief on his belt loop and called it a snot rag but everybody knew it was part of a baby blanket. It was like he got younger with age. In 6th grade, PJ was all right because his parents still lived together. Then they split up and he became a wuss about everything. In 7th Grade, on the trip to the Chippewa Natural History Museum, PJ wouldn't walk through the exhibit about birds because he didn't want to know where chicken nuggets came from. It was stupid, and he was stupid, but Jacob had to take someone to Hooters and PJ's dad was the most okay with the whole deal:

In honor of ~~my~~ his birthday, Jacob will choose 1-3 friends for a trip to Hooters at 2:50 on Monday, May 2. Nobody go anywhere alone. Not even the bathroom. Everybody gets SIX wings and ONE soda. Free refills. No beer.

That's what the permission slip said. Jacob's mom signed the bottom and she made three copies for him to hand out at school. George, Chris, and the DiMicci twins all said no in their moms' handwriting. Mom made three more copies, then another six or so, and by the end of the week, all of Freedom Point Junior High and their moms knew that Jacob's mom thought it was okay for children to go to Hooters and just do whatever they want. Some kids didn't even come to the Bar Mitzvah after the permission slips went out. The girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney was, for one, *very grossed out* and, therefore, definitely not *maybe or maybe not* flirting anymore. The only girl that showed at the party was the needy girl who got weird off of too many kiddie cocktails. PJ showed up to the ceremony and the party, both uninvited, just because he found an invitation in the school library and worried that people might talk about him if he wasn't

there. He spent most of the night near Jacob's mom and told her she was very beautiful and warm and that Jacob was lucky to have her. He said he had never seen a woman with so much hair and that she looked like Black Beauty but with nicer teeth. By the end of the night, Jacob's mom gave PJ a permission slip and let him choose a keepsake from her purse. Jacob watched him rifle through a pocket of used up handkerchiefs during the limbo. In his three hours as a man, he had never seen anything dumber.

PJ was still dumb by the time Monday rolled around. Jacob tried to ignore the second handkerchief on PJ's belt loop as kids walked between the two of them at the after school pickup. Everybody slammed the doors on their parents' SUVs as Jacob watched PJ sneeze and then try to decide which handkerchief to use. The girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney stepped off the curb with her friends as they passed by. Then the girl looked at Jacob and pretended to barf. All the girls congratulated themselves for being so funny in girl whispers. Jacob took his backpack off and turned to face PJ, who wiped his snot with his bare arm.

"Listen," Jacob said. "This is supposed to be a guys day for men only because that's just what it is and I could have chosen a cell phone instead of this, but I chose this because this is what men do and I have waited a very long time to do this, so if you feel like you don't want to do this because it's too grown up for you, then that's fine, we can all just go home, and, like, wait for everyone to not totally suck all the time." Jacob picked up his backpack and put it back on. He turned to face the street again. PJ wiped something out of his eye and rubbed the handkerchief ring with the palm of his hand. He slid the scraps out of the way and pulled some dumb note out of his pocket, bending down to the ground to flatten out all the corners. When he stood up, he cleared his throat.

“I found this in the trash. I think a girl wrote it.” He said the second part again a little softer and held it up and winced a little. Jacob turned back just to roll his eyes and caught a glimpse of the signature purple lowercase pen ink that may or may not be related to Walt Disney. Typical girls always trying to make noise about nothing. Post-breakup whatever.

“PJ, you gotta be real dumb to just go digging through the trash, you know. That’s not something you should just do, you probably got some stupid disease.”

“I didn’t,” PJ whined, “I said I found it *near* the trash.”

“Whatever.”

“I don’t even *like* the trash...”

“I said whatever, PJ. Just be a pussy to yourself.” Two wannabe thugs walked by smoking pretzel rods as PJ kept rustling the note around his hands. It still sounded crispy, couldn’t be that old. The Walt Disney girl probably went on and on about nothing at all. She probably just drew pictures of her dumb camp friends or her dance team or her dumb cousin that sold beaded lizard key chains to raise money for endangered teacup pigs. Not that Jacob was listening or whatever. PJ rustled his way closer and closer to Jacob on the curb.

“You want me to read it?”

“No.”

“Because your name is in it 13 times, I counted.”

“Good for you.” Jacob moved into the street as a mini van approached.

Mom rolled up to the curb and ducked down behind the wheel. She wore sunglasses and a sweatshirt hood and rolled the windows down as she slowed to a stop.

She shout-whispered at the boys to get in the car. That's who she was after the permission slips went out. It was very dumb, among other things.

PJ waved with his whole body and called Mom *Mom* like it was okay.

"I didn't know you were coming!" he said. "I would've brought my haiku poem, I got a B, because there's always room to grow!" Mom took her sunglasses off and gave PJ a round of applause. Jacob took his backpack off and tried not to implode from embarrassment.

"Where's dad?"

"He couldn't get away, another one of those crash diet patients." Jacob rubbed the back of his neck and let out a long sigh. Everything sucked. PJ spoke and it got even worse.

"I didn't know your dad was a doctor." Jacob crossed in front to the car door, mumbling under his breath.

"He's not, he's a nurse."

PJ sat shotgun and gave Mom a hug. He asked her to buckle his seatbelt while Jacob searched his bag in the back and started detangling his headphones.

"Can you just drop us at the drugstore?" he said. Mom slid her hood off.

"Are you sure?" That wasn't in the permission slip."

"Nobody gets dropped off by their mom at Hooters," Jacob said. "Unless they're a baby. Just drop us at the drugstore, we'll walk the extra blocks."

Mom took to the road as PJ started talking about how his dad was probably going to miss him a lot because usually he visited his dad's firm after school and waited for him in the lobby. Jacob put his headphones on and pretended not to hear him. He watched

kids out the window hit each other with backpacks on the street corner. Near Park Place, some kids tried to feed a squirrel a piece of a bike tire. PJ felt the need to interrupt.

“Mom, I found a note about Jacob in the trash.” He was such a little bitch.

“I thought you said it was *near* the trash.”

“Yeah that’s what I said, *near* the trash.” Mom went off about how PJ should be a CSI or something equally not true because that’s just the kind garbage that Moms have to talk about to feel alive. PJ made a slow move towards his front pocket.

“You wanna see what it says? I’ll read it, I don’t mind!”

“No,” Jacob said. “If my name’s in it, I get to say, and I say no.” Mom stopped at a light while PJ balled the note back up. His voice got all whiny.

“Well why not? Don’t you wanna know what she said?”

“*She?*” Mom said it in her snoopy mom voice.

“Yeah,” PJ said, “do you know who Walt Disney is?” Jacob kicked the back of the passenger seat and PJ yelped. He rubbed his shoulders up and down like all the bones were broken or something dumb like that.

“What gives?” He said it so high, like a dog whistle or something.

“We’re not talking about the note, I don’t care about the note, because privacy is privacy and today is guys day. Guys don’t gossip. Unless you’re not a guy.” PJ looked over at Mom and let out a long whimper cry.

“I’m a boy,” he said, all sad and helpless, fishing for a hug or something.

Mom rubbed PJ’s head as Jacob rolled his eyes so hard that he felt something come loose in his brain. In that moment, it was clear—it was a long, long road to paradise.

While the rest of the car sang along to a radio jingle, Jacob got lost in the landscape outside his window. A group of girls ate dandelion leaves near Butternut Square. A kid near the west side stoplight walked with his mom to Freedom Point Diner. Jacob felt bad for him because he remembered what it was like to not be an adult and it was totally the worst. He felt sorry for his friends that had the dumbest parents ever. He felt sorry for the girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney because, by the end of the day, she would just be some girl who didn't even compare to the real women of Hooters. He felt sorry for himself because he wasted six months trying to impress such a dumb nobody.

"You know," PJ said, turning around in his car seat. "If Mom wants to come with us, that'd be okay with me."

"Right here is fine," Jacob said. "Just drop us up here on the right."

Mom pulled the front tire up on grassy median in front of the drugstore and put the car in park. Jacob zipped his headphones up and PJ unbuckled as Mom started digging through her purse. She pulled an envelope out that said **NOT MONEY** and talked into the mirror.

"You take this and be extra careful. My treat."

"Right," Jacob said. "We'll call you."

PJ said thanks about a dozen times before finally getting out. He waved goodbye from the curb and Jacob watched the van get smaller and smaller on down the road. When it disappeared, Jacob surveyed the land. PJ clung to a lamppost and asked if cars ever drive up on sidewalks. Everything seemed faster and louder than in the car. For a brief moment, Jacob struggled to remember which way they should go. He wondered if

his mom might loop back and point them in the right direction, but when it didn't happen, Jacob and PJ just started walking until it made sense. Near the town bog, they passed a China Express.

"I ate there once with my mom," PJ said. He said it again when Jacob didn't respond. "Over there, I ate there with my mom once."

"What do you want, a medal?"

"It was noodles, but not like macaroni. It was slimy, but not like macaroni. The sauce was called something weird. I don't really know, but you should get it some time. I don't really know what it was though, but I can ask my mom when I see her again." Jacob kicked rocks while PJ started sounding out nonsense words, trying to jog his memory. He finally got quiet after a few minutes. When he started up again, he almost whispered.

"You think she's coming back?"

"Who?"

"Mom."

"Which one?"

"Mine."

"I don't know, PJ. I don't even know her."

"Yeah but one time she said that she deserved somebody better and in the note I found, that's what it said about you, so I figured—" Jacob smacked PJ on the back of the head. His eyes got wide in shock, like it wasn't already coming to him.

“I said shut up about the note already. You got a lot of nerve to just do whatever you want after I was nice enough to let you be a guy for the day.” PJ’s voice cracked as he whined under his breath.

“But we aren’t guys, we’re boys.”

“No PJ, I’m a man, and you’re a baby.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.” PJ stayed real quiet after that, all torn up over nothing. Jacob worried that if he started crying, somebody would think he hit him and Hooters wouldn’t happen. He tried to muster up all his energy to say one nice thing to clear the air and keep PJ going. It was very difficult.

“You say a lot of garbage without thinking PJ. That’s probably why your mom left.”

“Probably,” PJ whispered, all dumb and sad.

“But you gotta just grow up, just be a man, just, I don’t fricking know. Look at a baseball card or something and be that person. You gotta just take care of your own self now.”

“I know,” PJ said. “My dad already told me.”

The sun felt hotter and higher as they went, but Jacob didn’t want to bring it up because he didn’t want to give PJ the impression that they were going to keep talking about stuff. After a block or two, Jacob started to sweat and PJ started singing a Disney song to himself. At that point, Jacob knew he should have chosen the cell phone.

When he stopped by the Old Dairy Queen to tie his shoe, PJ started up again.

“I heard about Stacey. She sounds, like, real nice,” he said.

Jacob didn't say anything back, which PJ took as a cue to start asking about the girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney. He yammered on about how she probably wouldn't even be that pretty if they lived in a bigger town because his dad said that his mom was *very* pretty until they moved from St. John's to Freedom Point and the population got a little bigger and that's why they're divorced. PJ said the last part a couple of times, a little quieter each time.

"That's why they're divorced. That's why."

PJ had something in his eye the rest of the walk. He didn't say much, which was fine because there wasn't much else to say. The girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney *wasn't* that pretty. In fact, maybe she was ugly or fat compared to a super model. Not that it mattered. Just around the corner was a place full of very cute *and* hot *and* skinny *women* who were too grown up to be as dumb as the Seventh Grade girls of Freedom Point Junior High. The women were all there just waiting to touch Jacob on the shoulder and say things like "yes master" and "of course" and "I kiss on the first date." They definitely wouldn't let him down, that's for fricking sure. PJ interrupted Jacob's daydream.

"I see it," he said. Jacob looked back at PJ's outstretched arm. Both boys stopped and squinted as PJ spoke again, almost breathless. "There it is."

Jacob looked on. Two dogs barked at a stray orange balloon three corners up near a gas station. He followed the balloon with his eyes as it drifted higher, up and up, up into the clouds, smaller and smaller until the glow of an orange sign distracted him. It was bigger and brighter than the rest of Freedom Point, and almost not even *in* Freedom

Point, almost on the other side of bordering St. John's. In his 23 hours as a man, it was literally the most beautiful thing that Jacob had ever seen.

Without saying anything, the boys took off in a sprint. Their backpacks hit each other until PJ saw a flower and felt the need to announce that he was going to stop to pick it. Jacob kept on and started to feel sorry for the sort of Walt Disney girl again. In his last few steps, Jacob fell into a slow jog and then walked it off on the front lawn of the restaurant. He replayed everything that all the Eighth Graders had said and thought about the commercials he had seen—all the guys-guys packed around the bar for the big game. Women with beer or a beverage of your choice. Boobs and loud music. And boobs. \$20 bills. Michael Jordan was in one of the commercials. He'd probably gone there like a billion times because all the women touched his shoulder and not just anybody gets to touch Michael Jordan. Michael Jordan probably *loved* Hooters because Hooters was what it was all about: A real life party with real life babes who all aimed to please all the grownup guys-guys—Jacob, now, included.

When PJ finally caught up on the restaurant lawn, both of them adjusted their backpacks and combed their hair with their hands. Sweat was everywhere, for every reason. The lawn smelled like onion rings. Jacob and PJ both got real quiet and headed for the entryway. Right in front of an ashtray, PJ asked Jacob if he wanted to see the flower that he picked. It was literally the worst timing.

When Jacob opened the Hooters door, a wave of air conditioning and barbecue musk washed over him, and the place was so dark that he almost couldn't see. PJ stood behind him and held onto his backpack zipper until they made it through the foyer and Jacob told him to lay off. When they got inside, neither of them said a word.

The walls were made of dark hardwood, like somebody stapled tree bark in giant sheets, and old dusty photos of girls with big hair were tacked up around the room. All of them seemed to be on a different angle. There was a plant in every corner and one still had a price tag. Somebody left a crayon with a bite out of it on the hostess stand. Two guys with eye patches sat at a table near the price tag plant and one of them seemed to be hiding a pile of crab leg shells under his chair. People clapped on TV for a golf channel putt. A fat guy in a polo shirt did a crossword by the bar register. He was almost big enough to be taken away in an ambulance for just being. The people at the hospital probably knew all about him. Dad would probably have the scoop. It'd probably be a good story, whenever things finally slowed down and he had the chance to come home. An A.C. unit buzzed in a nearby corner, before shorting out and smoking a little bit. Jacob felt instantly cold, his sweat freeze-dried. PJ's teeth chattered by his ear.

“Do we seat ourselves?” he said. Jacob spoke without moving his mouth.

“I don't know.”

“Should we call your mom?”

“No,” Jacob said. “Why would we go home?” PJ got even closer.

“This place looks like murderers,” he whispered. His hand hit Jacob's thigh as he massaged his belt of handkerchiefs. Jacob took a few steps towards the fat man at the register and cleared his throat. The one eye patch guy repositioned his feet to hide his stash of shells. Somebody had a good swing on the green on TV. Jacob cleared his throat again and waited for the fat guy to look up. PJ interrupted.

“Is Stacey here?” he said real loud. He held his flower out and looked dumb.

Jacob couldn't believe that PJ believed in *anything* that the guys said anymore, let alone

what they said about Stacey. He wondered which one of them had the balls to make the whole thing up. He wondered if Stacey was code for something else. He wondered if those kids back near Park Place finally got the squirrel to eat that piece of the bike tire. Somebody missed an important swing on TV. Jacob pulled PJ's backpack strap and turned to leave.

"Sure," the fat guy said. "Stacey's here." The boys stopped moving.

"*She is?*" PJ said. "Um. Okay." Nobody said anything else.

"So...do you want me to get her?" the fat guy said. PJ turned to Jacob who took a deep breath and rolled his eyes.

"Whatever," he said.

"Sure!" PJ said. He said it a few times, getting louder each time. "Unless she's busy." Jacob watched the fat guy look around the dining room. The eye patch guys laughed at the pants that the TV golfers were wearing. The fat guy shrugged.

"Nope," he said. "Got an hour before dinner rush, I'll give her a holler. You boys want to take a seat?"

Jacob and PJ crossed over to a barstool table and climbed up to sit down. The fat guy disappeared into the back. He poked his head out and yelled across the room a moment later.

"You want me to give her that?" He pointed at PJ's hand and the messed up flower. PJ looked across the table.

"Can I stop and get another one for your mom?" he said.

"Whatever," Jacob said. "I don't know." He rolled his eyes so hard that it hurt. PJ leaned over and held his hand out to the fat guy.

“I guess so,” he yelled. The fat guy looked even fatter as he got closer and took the stem. Jacob had never seen anyone so fat in his adult life. If that was the face of Hooters, he didn’t even want to know what somebody in the back looked like. Stacey probably didn’t have a leg or something. Or she probably had a Siamese twin and that’s how those guys got so many signatures. Not that the signatures meant anything anyway. The Eighth Graders probably never even went to Hooters. *And why would Michael Jordan lie like that?* Jacob felt sorry for himself while PJ read a menu.

“Do you think the children’s quesadilla is spicy?” he asked.

“We’re not staying,” Jacob said. PJ looked all sad and dumb.

“We aren’t?” he said. “Then why’d we sit down?”

“I don’t know,” Jacob said. “Because my backpack hurts.”

“It does?” PJ said. “Because mine hurts too but I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t know if you would know what I was meaning when I did.” PJ kept yammering on and being the worst until Jacob couldn’t take it anymore and put his head on the table. He rubbed his eyes with his fingertips until PJ suddenly stopped mid-sentence. Jacob lifted his head and let his eyes refocus, and PJ looked two shades more wussed-out than usual. Jacob assumed a spider had walked by or the museum eagle had returned, but when he rotated on his stool towards the kitchen, all of his insides unraveled. She was real.

Every step she took was in slow motion and when she moved, Jacob swore he heard a guitar solo that was literally the coolest. Her hair was as beautiful as a golden retriever and it was big and it was all in a pile on her boobs. The men of Eighth Grade were right. There wasn’t a word for those. Not even in Hebrew. Her t-shirt fit very good.

So did her shorts and her butt. Not that Jacob was looking. Her legs and her face looked like she had just gone somewhere hot like Hawaii and got a suntan. Her face had plenty of makeup on it, but not the kind all the dumb Seventh Graders bought from the movie theater bathroom machines. Real stuff, like colors that a clown would use. Like turquoise. As she got closer, she smiled, holding PJ's stupid flower. It was such a slap in the face to give a woman like that a flower so dumb. The worst. Thank god he had Jacob around. Stacey was so sexy that Jacob had to put his backpack on his lap and recite his Haftarah to settle down. Then Stacey smiled. He was done for.

"Which one of you do I thank for this?" She held the weed up to her face and took a big smell. What a woman. Jacob looked at PJ and hoped he was rubbing his handkerchief loop under the table.

"B-both of us" Jacob said. "It's...we got it for you." Stacey took another whiff and put the flower on the table. Then she reached out and put a hand on Jacob's shoulder. One of her nails had a Playboy bunny on it. Her boobs had almost nothing on them. Stacey smiled at both sides of the table.

"You two are the sweetest guys I know." Jacob lowered his chin into his neck and forced his voice to get deeper.

"I know you are but what am I?" he said. Stacey just laughed because she was the best and skinny and pretty. Jacob could barely remember the name of the girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney. Not that it mattered. Finally, a real woman who could keep up with a real man had arrived.

"What are you gentlemen drinking?" she said. She pulled a notepad from the waistband of her shorts. Classic Stacey.

“Do you have bottled water?” PJ said.

“We want Pepsi,” Jacob said. “We’ll both just have Pepsi.” Stacey scribbled on the pad without even looking. So her.

“And wings,” Jacob said. “We both want six wings.”

“How hot do you want them?” She was such a tease and she was hot enough to be in every music video.

“How hot is mild?” PJ asked.

“We want them as hot as you can make them,” Jacob said. “Whatever other guys get, that’s how we eat ours.”

“Your wish is my command,” she said and Jacob readjusted his backpack as his lap got hotter. It didn’t even feel physically possible to look her in the eyes anymore. Stacey turned back halfway across the floor. “Don’t you go anywhere” she said. She moved her hips back to the kitchen. PJ and Jacob both sighed.

“I like her personality a lot,” PJ said. “They don’t make them like that anymore.” Jacob didn’t say anything back because there wasn’t much else to say. She *did* have a great personality. *And* boobs. And she didn’t have to call her mom or sign a permission slip or do any of the stupid stuff that dumb, flakey, Seventh Graders of Freedom Point Junior High had to do. She was free. She was real. She showed up and when she did, she chose Jacob’s shoulder to touch. There, on the other side of town, after what felt like years of wandering, Jacob had finally become a man.

PJ blew bubbles in his soda as Jacob started talking.

“Hey, what else did it say?”

“What did *what* say?”

“The note, what else did it say.” PJ smiled all dumb and big and burrowed his way back into his pocket. The ball looked all soft and warm as he unwrapped it. PJ pointed to smeared purple ink spots as he gave a play by play. One part had a ketchup stain on it. The note definitely came from inside the garbage.

“She says that her camp friends know about the time you got your ear pierced and it got infected and she doesn’t feel bad for telling them.”

“What a bitch.”

“Yeah totally,” PJ said. “She’s a witch and a real mean person and, like all of that stuff.”

“What else?”

“She says that she doesn’t like-like you anymore, but if you buy her a necklace, she’ll reconsider it, so.”

“What a bitch,”

“Yeah, but, like, for really.” PJ rolled his eyes and started bubbling again. He scrunched the straw wrapper into a worm and then spoke real slow.

“So...are you gonna buy her one?” It was actually the dumbest.

“PJ, you need to try thinking before you say crap.”

“Okay,” he said real soft.

When the wings arrived, Stacey touched Jacob’s shoulder again and told him to enjoy before disappearing. PJ wussed out and wiped the sauce off his wings with a table napkin. Jacob ripped through the wings until he couldn’t feel his face anymore. Then he pulled the leftovers apart so that Stacey would think he ate those ones too. When she

came back to check on them, he said he was doing great even though his insides were very likely on fire. She touched his shoulder again before departing.

“I think she likes us,” PJ said. “I bet she’ll talk about us after we leave, but like in a real good way, like she misses us almost.”

“Whatever,” Jacob said. He almost started to feel bad for PJ in that moment, but something stopped him. Then Stacey came back and Jacob remembered what it was.

“Stacey,” PJ said. “Do you like us?”

PJ was literally the absolute worst.

“You know, I’m not supposed to play favorites here at Hooters,” Stacey said with her arms crossed and a dramatic pout. “Because then feelings get hurt.”

“Duh,” Jacob said, “Why would you even ask that?”

“I don’t know,” PJ said. “I say a lot of things without really thinking.” Stacey laughed and played with her notepad.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I work with a lot of people who say a lot of things without thinking.” God. She was so wise or pretty or both. Jacob watched her look around the restaurant. The eye patch guys were gone and a trail of crab leg shells traced their route to the door. Stacey leaned in and lowered her voice.

“You wanna know a secret?” she said. Her eyes got bigger and all the creases on her lids filled up with extra turquoise shadow. She tucked her notepad in the back waistband of her shorts and PJ and Jacob leaned in.

“I *really* like you guys,” she said. “Probably more than any guys that have come in all week.” PJ leaned forward on his barstool.

“More than all the boys that come in, too?”

“Yes,” she said, “All the boys, too.” PJ took a deep breath and sighed and smiled in relief. Stacey put her hand on Jacob’s shoulder. By the end of the meal, she’d probably do it at least half a dozen times. Being a man was the opposite of suck. Being a man ruled. Stacey looked around the restaurant again, rising up on the tips of her white sneakers to check every corner of the place. She leaned back in and whispered.

“Do you wanna know why I like you guys so much?” she said. Jacob thought it was nice that Stacey kept including PJ in on his seduction. What a woman. Class, that what she had. PJ showed all his teeth and nodded as fast as he could. Jacob played it very cool while getting ready to adjust his backpack on his lap again. Stacey slid her Playboy bunny nail from the front of her waistband to the back, and pulled her notepad out again. She fluttered her eyelashes and flipped to the very back, page by page. She smiled before sliding the notepad on the table. Jacob didn’t take his eyes off her face until she opened her mouth.

“Do you wanna know why?” she said again. She tapped her finger and Jacob let his eyes drop. Taped to the back of the notepad was a Polaroid of a boy Jacob seen around school.

“You remind me of my son,” she said. Jacob watched PJ’s eyes fill up with tears of joy. His elbow moved around as he played with his handkerchief loop. Stacey asked if he was alright and PJ smiled his stupid smile and said he was so honored that she would say something like that because having a mom is so great and not everybody gets to see their mom all the time because sometimes moms stay in St. John’s with Charlie from next door.

“But I’m just a boy,” he said. “so she’s still got time to come back.” Stacey nodded along and made an equally stupid face, while Jacob felt tiny on his barstool. After all that work—after Hebrew School, Talmud flashcard. After please be seated, Torah Aliyah, after six-block drugstore walk for freedom, Jacob’s heart broke for the second time. Stacey tied a table napkin onto PJ’s stupid belt loop as Jacob let his voice return to its normal pitch.

“Do you have a phone?” he said. He couldn’t take his eyes off the Polaroid.

“Sure,” she said, “just ask Tony, sweetheart.” She motioned with her neck to the bar while PJ laid his head on her arm. Jacob monkeyed his way off his stool and crossed the floor in fast motion. The fat guy in the polo stacked cups of ranch dressing and fiddled with the lids. He looked bigger than ever, maybe even older. Jacob asked for a phone and when the guy handed it to him, he wondered if the girl who may or may not be related to Walt Disney might be home. He wondered how much a necklace would cost. He started dialing and his mom picked up.

“I’m almost ready,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m on my way. Walgreen’s.”

“You can just come here, out front, it doesn’t matter.”

“Okay,” Jacob’s mom said. “But warn all the men that a girl is coming.”

Jacob nodded and took a look around the restaurant. He wondered where they all might be.