Precious Moments
By David Hirshberg

Isaac Indursky was the smartest kid in our Jewish day school class, despite the fact that no matter what the question was, Isaac's first response was always, "It's in the bible." For everything there is a season, I guess.

I was inclined to be charitable to Isaac, that's in the bible, too, because that's what my Uncle Gabe would say sometimes: "It's in the goddam bible, all right already, for chrissakes," and that ended that, whatever the *that* was.

Uncle Gabe was my mother's younger brother, and he hung around with toughs we called either rocks or hoods, depending upon whether we were talking about an Italian or an Irish guy. The most notorious hood was Riordan (we never knew if that were a first or last name), about twenty five, a ramrod-straight six foot three, weighing in at more than two hundred pounds, sculpted in his T-shirts with a Popeye-like chest and arms that stretched the fabric to the breaking point. But it wasn't just his physical presence that intimidated us. The cop who walked the beat had brass buttons and ribbons that could barely contain his torso, yet he didn't frighten us, perhaps because the uniform's symbolism gave off a comforting blanket of protection, much like that of the soldiers at the army recruiting station on Fordham Road, with whom we'd exchange salutes as we walked by, clanking our cleats on the way to a baseball game against one of the Catholic high school teams.

Riordan's potato-thick brogue was inflected with singsong refrains typical of other Irish immigrants, and he used words that I didn't understand, like *manky*, *spanner*, and *gammy*, but that, too, wasn't the cause for me to be wary. No, I rather thought that it was the cloud of Catholicism that swirled around his presence, that combination of incense, holy water, flowers, oils, and candles, blended together in an aroma that attracts other believers with a sense of familiarity by creating an invisible shroud, and to this day I'm not sure if it represents the boundaries to protect a community or a barrier for those others who don't share their faith. Uncle Gabe told us that Riordan attended Mass every morning, and we wondered if he made confessions on account of his street fights, drunken brawls, drag racing, petty thievery, knocking over mailboxes, or threats to those who simply got in his way. We never knew of any of the other Catholic hoods ever attending church. They certainly never smelled as if they did.

But truth be told, we never wondered if anyone thought we Jews had a particular odor, especially since we had Havdalah services on Saturdays at sundown when we lit candles, sipped wine, ate challah, and sniffed the spices that permeated our clothes and hair, a scent that marked our outsider status.

In those days, The Bronx was divvied up into fiefdoms based on religion, regardless of economic class. We Jews held ground along the Grand Concourse, a north-south route that bisected several enclaves of Irish, Italian, and eastern European Catholics, and snaked around a shrinking German Lutheran territory near Van Cortlandt Park, an area that had been strictly off limits to our parents just a generation before. Rumor had it that Arthur Indursky's father would sneak into the Edelweis bakery on the way home from Alexander's department store, where he worked as the controller, making sure to ask Herr Woitach to put his Lebkuchen or

Berliner in a brown paper bag, heaven forbid he should be spotted on the street advertising that he'd patronized a shopkeeper in a community that our neighbors still thought had unrequited love for a certain unmentionable Reich.

In the mid-sixties, our neighborhood began to change with an influx of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, and a concomitant exodus of Jews taking flight to Co-Op City, a Babel-esque monstrosity that sprang up like a mammoth wave to destroy 300 acres of tidal pools and marshland, robbing our territory of one of the few areas where kids from all backgrounds could hunt for tadpoles, skim stones, make reed horns that would trumpet our excitements, or just pretend to be Huck Finn for a few hours, sneakers tied around our necks by our shoelaces, pants rolled up to our knees, Goldbergs interacting with Pappalardos, O'Tools, Espinozas, Novaks, Stinkowskis, and Washingtons, without parents, without rules, without fears.

When we were younger, we'd bike to these wetlands, and arrange for Uncle Gabe to pick us up at a pre-determined hour in his Ford pick-up, where we'd sit in the open air flatbed, nestling in between endless coils of wires, stacks of tubes, specialty equipment to measure various aspects of electricity, and boxes with exotic tools that we'd imagine could crack locks on safes, the grand sum of all these things giving rise to my friends' speculation that my uncle wasn't an electrician, rather, he was a criminal, a *no-good-nik*. I must admit, the thought did cross my mind, so I asked my parents about it one day. My mother was indignant.

"How could you possibly ask that? My god! What on earth are you thinking? My brother a criminal? I'm glad your grandmother isn't alive to hear you ask that!"

My father, on the other hand, simply said, "He was the wire man for the Rosenbergs," with a straight face, and with that, my mother rolled her eyes, frowned, picked up a cast-iron frying pan, and shooed us both out of the kitchen. My father winked at me, then went into the bathroom to smoke a cigar, something he wasn't allowed to do.

On the last day we were allowed to play in the wetlands, the silt fences resting in big orange coils, ready to spring loose and choke off our explorations and imaginations, we gave a lift back to a new kid from Poland who'd twisted his ankle when he'd stepped into a deep bog. Driving on the Grand Concourse, he was pointing and counting, then at a light, asked my uncle, "Mr. Hirshberg, are all Negroes Jewish?"

I'd never seen Uncle Gabe flummoxed.

"Marek, what? What do you mean? David, is this one of your jokes?"

I shook my head. "Marek, umm, what?"

"There," Marek pointed. All Uncle Gabe and I could see were Black women and men chatting on the steps of a building.

Then, “Over there, too,” he said animatedly, pointing to the other side of the street where other African Americans were walking out of another building.

“See? See!” Marek said while pointing, “The letters, the writing over the door there, see?”

“Oh, okay,” Uncle Gabe said, “yeah, sure, I get it, Marek, let me explain. These buildings? They’re churches, really, despite the Hebrew letters that you see above the doorways. These folks aren’t Jewish. There are no Black Jews,” he said, which, I reminded my uncle a few years later of the great irony of his definitive response to Marek, in that after Uncle Gabe’s divorce from his first non-Jewish wife, he married a Modern Orthodox African American widow, whose three children are my very Jewish African-American cousins.

“But, but…” Marek stammered, “if they’re churches, how come the words aren’t in Latin?”

“You see, Marek, it’s different here than what you have in Poland. Warsaw, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“So, some people, say Jews, Jewish people, lived here and they built synagogues, just like these,” he pointed as we got the green light and started up again, “and had Hebrew letters carved into the stones above the doorways, usually something from the bible.”

“The old testament?”

“Yes, but we call it the Hebrew Bible. No matter. Anyway, it meant that the building was a synagogue, that’s all. Then, well, you know, a lot of Jews moved away…”

“In Poland, too,” Marek interjected.

“Well, a different kind of move away here,” Uncle Gabe said, finding it difficult enough to explain the concept of demographically changing neighborhoods to a kid whose house was passed down from generation to generation, and also not wanting to tread on Polish complicity or acquiescence in aspects of the Holocaust. “What happened here, and in lots of other places in the U.S., people, immigrants, come here and they’re very poor, usually don’t speak English—not like you, Marek—your father came here to teach, I understand,” and I nodded, impressed that Uncle Gabe had remembered that I’d told him about Mr. Wroblewski’s position on the faculty of New York University’s Bronx campus that overlooked the Harlem River. “Then,” he began to cruise, mirroring the speed he was allowed to reach on the express lane of the Grand Concourse, “after a while, they learn English, get a job, make some money, and move to a better place. Like here, on the Grand Concourse. Most of the Jews who used to live here came to America, and first settled in a place in Manhattan, down near the tip, where you could almost see the Statue of Liberty from the boats that carried them from Europe. You with me?”

Marek nodded. This was news to him—and me as well. I'd heard a few anecdotes about my grandparents living on the Lower East Side, usually framed as tales of the woebegone with snappy, upbeat endings, sometimes the punch line being delivered in Yiddish, causing me to pay special attention to each word so that I could get the whole meaning in context.

"Those places were tenements. Do you know what that means?"

Market shook his head.

Uncle Gabe explained what this kind of a building was in such vivid detail that I realized he must've grown up in one, this was from memory, and it made me understand how lucky we were to live in a five-room apartment with hot water, two toilets, and no relatives or boarders sleeping on several layers of carpets near the radiator under the windows. He went on to tell us about pushcarts, cobble streets made fetid from horse dung, clotheslines strung from window to window, mothers leaning out of windows shouting orders and warnings to their kids, young girls working 10-12 hours a day in the needle trades, fathers attending classes at night learning rudimentary English, enough to get by as a transit worker or elevator operator during the day, remembering to switch to Yiddish to hondle with the fishmonger or the tailor, then stopping by a bar on the way home to have a drink of two cents plain. Then it came time to explain about moving to The Bronx, and how the Chinese came to inhabit where the Jews had lived on the Lower East Side, and now how many Jews were moving to Co-Op City, or to the South Shore of Long Island and to lower parts of Westchester County, which opened up apartments for African Americans and Puerto Ricans—who he explained were American citizens, much to Marek's amazement. "It's what we do in America," Uncle Gabe went on, "we're always on the move, always looking for something better, not just Jews, everyone," he said, which got me wondering if my parents were plotting to leave The Bronx and upend my life, which could only be for the worse, notwithstanding how my father's cousin painted a bright, vivid picture of a private house with a yard and a garage that he'd recently bought in Mount Vernon.

Marek became my best gentile friend despite the fact they we went to different schools, observed different religions, had parents that voted for different political parties, and ate different foods, as I'd politely refuse his mother's entreaties to eat bologna sandwiches on white bread with butter, feigning a mild stomach ache or telling her that I'd already had a snack. Marek was a natural athlete, so we bonded over sports, meeting on those summer days when there were no religious instruction classes, the days were long, and the games at the park were endless, mostly baseball but also soccer. In the summer before my senior year of high school, I was the first-basemen ringer on his Catholic Youth Organization baseball team which won the championship, my celebration ending prematurely before the end-of-game prayer. On Sunday afternoon, tall, blond, blue-eyed Marek would come over to our territory, the magnet that drew the Jewish girls to the stoops or inner courtyard of my building, just "happening by" or "on the way" to see a friend, an opening comment that wasn't followed up by a "see ya," our spot was their final destination, so Marek's presence gave me an opportunity to let my shyness down a smidgeon, to try to come to terms with the world of sixteen and seventeen year-old girls.

Marek would hold both a literal and figurative court, talking about his early days in Warsaw, occasionally breaking into French, which seemed to make the girls swoon, despite the fact that they, too, were fluent in multiple languages. All of them could speak Yiddish, many could speak Hebrew, some could speak Russian or Rumanian or Hungarian; but these were seen as inferior to the elegance of French, which Marek would dip into to make a point, punctuating a sentence with an exclamation like the fencer he was, singing out '*pret'*, '*allez'*, or '*en-garde'*, dancing with his baseball bat as a foil, saber, or epee, thrusting towards a girl, having her squeal with delight, watching the others clap or put their hands over their mouths. It was a performance that I enjoyed, and thinking about it now, I was never jealous or envious. It was clearly the definition of true friendship, and it was reciprocated in an equal fashion.

In September, we all went back to school, our universes separated by only a few miles, yet they seemed light years away. In class, each time I raised my hand and gave a non-religious interpretation to a question that dealt with civics or history or economics or sociology, Isaac Indursky would give me a look I interpreted as him having pity for me. And when the subject was religion itself? It wasn't just a facial expression. His whole body would slowly contort—his back would arch, his head would sink into his neck and then turn on its side, his fingers would tap against his thumb, a kind of drumming that I suspected was him unconsciously keeping time to when I'd either be excommunicated or would finally see the light.

He knew I couldn't just accept the stories in the bible as having been factually correct. Although I loved the image of the enslavement to liberation journey, I'd argue with Isaac about the scenes of Moses and the snakes, the angel of death, the parting of the Red Sea, the Golden Calf, and even the origin of the Ten Commandments. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't dismissive of the value of the lessons they taught. I was as proud of my ancient ancestors for demonstrating Jewish strength in many stories of the bible as I was of the Israel Defense Forces who raced through the Mitla Pass on the way to the Suez Canal. This was the only time that the school ever permitted the radio to be on during classes, an allowance so monumental that we actually took notes listening to Douglas Edwards, Dallas Townsend, and Mike Wallace give updates with the same breathlessness as we'd devote to Phil Rizzuto and Jerry Coleman, who'd give us the play-by-play of Yankees' games. Isaac said all of this would be put into a future new 'Text,' a word he emphasized by giving air quotes, and we all snickered at the thought that a new bible would emerge, as unlikely as the establishment of the third Temple in Jerusalem.

Our scoffing at Isaac's literalism was kept under check by Rebecca Slevin, the best looking girl in the school who seemed to have an inexplicable fondness for Isaac—notwithstanding his short stature, thick glasses, and unathletic physique—so we monitored ourselves when we noticed her nearby. She was the envy of every guy in our class, and as we got older, we jousted like deer in a never-ending rutting season, trying to get the attention of girls, and of Rebecca Slevin, in particular. We all fantasized about her, some more openly as others, but the truth of it was that despite her beauty and engaging personality, no one ever asked her out,

the intimidation factor had taken hold of every one of us. With the exception of Isaac, who asked her to be his date for the senior prom, telling us that it was a reprise of what was in the bible, an update of the original Isaac and Rebecca story in Genesis.

Rebecca was one of those sophisticated girls who'd grown up in Manhattan, which was the Promised Land for those of us who lived in six-story apartments close enough for our fathers to walk to work. She pronounced it Mn-hat-n. A slight change in pronunciation can have such a significant impact on meaning, whether it's done intentionally or not. If you say Man-hat-tan pronouncing both t's prominently, you're either learning English as a second language, or you're from the mid-west, and have most likely never met anyone from the City. If you say Man-hat-an with the accent on the hat, you'll be able to qualify as a broadcaster, one of their goals being to expunge all traces of regional accents and to create an American language as bland as American fast food. But if you say Mn-hat-n, you signal the world that you were born at New York Hospital, treated Central Park as your personal enclave, took entrance exams to get into nursery school, snacked at Zabar's and Ben's, summered in the Hamptons, and considered Vermont as really the only borough where you could honestly get in some good skiing.

Rebecca worked at the local drug store after school, ringing up doodads and knick-knacks at the front cash register, opposite from the pharmacy. Once, I swiped a box of rubbers that I put inside my coat, then nervously bought some gum from her, making small talk, hustling out the door, wondering if I'd hear a thundering voice calling out *thief!*, a word that would cause my mother to sit *shiva* for me, *how could I have raised a goniff*?

I took Janie Lieberthal to the prom, while my best Jewish friend Harvey Schwebel brought Esti Weissman, his girlfriend from Camp Ramah. While both of us had a good time, we were constantly craning our necks to search for Rebecca and Isaac, cringing when we observed them clinging to each other in a slow dance. Around eleven o'clock, we all headed to McAnn's, an Irish pub on the New York side of the border with Fairfield County, which was convenient for us, as you had to be 21 to drink in Connecticut. McAnn's was a singular place, in that it was frequented by Catholics, WASPS from Greenwich, and those Jews brave enough to explore this netherworld of the *galut*. By and large, we were accepted, probably because we didn't wear our kippas, tucked our mezuzahs underneath our t-shirts, refrained from using Yiddish terms like schmuck and putz, and generally were on our best behavior not to be noticed.

It worked, except as it pertained to Rebecca. You could see guys' heads turn towards her when she walked in ahead of Isaac, her hair done up as if it were a perch for a crown, wearing her mother's dazzling hoop earrings, her tight-fitting dress accenting a perfect figure, her two and a half inch heels lifting her 5'7" frame above most of the oglers, and her skin slightly bronzed from spending Sundays on the roof of her apartment with a reflector. You could also see the *you've got to be kidding* looks when they realized that she was with Isaac, who became a twentieth century Nachshon ben Aminadav, the first Hebrew who jumped into the Red Sea, as he plunged into the crowd to open up a spot on the hitherto crowded bar for her, with nary a hand wave or other gesture necessary to assure her of a stool.

It was that night that Schwebel told us that he wasn't going to college in the fall.

"I've asked for a deferment," he said.

"For how long?"

"Three years."

We were stunned.

"What are you going to do?" Janie asked. "I mean, you worked so hard to get in and now, what, you're throwing it away? Why? What's going on?"

"I'm going into the army … the IDF," he said after a pause during which he scanned our faces and realized he needed to be more specific. His mother, the quintessential Riverdale synagogue leader—officer, head of the women's club, organizer of the book group, part-time Hebrew teacher, and volunteer for any cause for which the senior rabbi requested her participation, was Israeli, I knew, but I'd never connected the dots as to his possible enlistment in the IDF.

"Do you have to?" his date asked.

"That never came up," he said matter-of-factly, but not unkindly. "I actually don't know. So it's possible I volunteered before being summoned." With that, he raised his hand to catch the attention of a waitress. He turned to me and said, "I just made the decision yesterday, so don't feel I've kept it from you." He cuffed the back of my neck and then swept his hand up to mess my hair, which I didn't mind because, well, I had a crew cut and anyway, it was clearly a sign of affection. Clicking our glasses, I offered him a toast. We expressed excitement for his new adventure, although left unsaid was our concern for his safety. With our chatter, laughter, and what could generously be described as self-absorption, we didn't hear Isaac's voice until its shrillness broke through our conversation cloud, like an unanticipated thunderclap that could disrupt a beautiful sunlit day.

"She's … he's … out … outside … we were … come … "he exclaimed breathlessly, in staccato-like fashion, eyes wide, head shaking from side to side, reaching for my hand, Schwebel's arm, "please …hurry … hurry." He whirled around, a full 360, meant to ensure that we were following him, which we were, not knowing what was going on, but never having seen Isaac in this manner, we knew something was wrong, not the least of which was what looked like his shirt, tie, and jacket were wet, likely the result of a beer spilled or dumped on him. Schwebel and I did our best to say "excuse me, sorry, coming through*,"* as we brushed some guys from the sides and backs, their annoyance contained somewhat by the fact of our sizes (Schwebel was almost 6'6", two inches tall than I), and the assumption that something out of the ordinary was going on. I scoured the room but saw no sign of Rebecca. We pushed a few kids lounging by the door to the side, and followed Isaac to the far end of the darkened parking lot where I caught a glimpse of a big guy holding onto Rebecca in front

of a car. Before either Schwebel or I could make a move, we heard the sound of broken glass from a tire iron coming down all over the car—on windows, doors, lights, the hood—from a guy who whirled around and then whacked the kid holding Rebecca on the back of the leg, prompting screams of agony interspersed with curse words as he dropped and then writhed on the pavement. The tire iron guy kicked him repeatedly, and yelled something none of us could hear over the hubbub from everyone who'd followed us out to the lot. It was a performance, the likes of which none of us had ever witnessed. He then went over to Rebecca, asked her where her *boyo* was. He spotted the three of us, and splayed his hands out wide as if he wanted to engulf us all in a big hug. With a smile that could've been the model for what we'd carve into a Halloween pumpkin, Riordan said, "Well, lads, I *banjaxed* that *gombeen*, don't you know," and jutted his jaw in the direction of the guy still on the ground, squirming in pain that his leg was busted. "A *gammy* tool," he said in a self-satisfied manner, whereupon I put it all together, what must've happened: the guy on the ground, likely drunk, had pulled Rebecca out the door, slammed his drink into Isaac, and was going to take her into his car. It was then I noticed Marek getting out of his father's Dodge. Marek told us that he'd driven into the lot just at the time that the guy now on the ground had his arm around Rebecca's neck. His yelling and horn honking had alerted Riordan, who was in the woods taking a leak.

All at once, we asked Rebecca if she was okay, and although shaken up to the point where she couldn't talk, she wasn't physically harmed, and clearly wanted to go home. Janie Lieberthal and Esti Weissman also indicated they wanted to leave, so I gave Isaac the keys to my father's '53 Plymouth, shook his hand, gave all the girls a hug, and waited in the lot to make sure no other car followed them.

At the bar, I bought a few rounds for Schwebel, Marek, and Riordan, noticing that Riordan now treated me as an adult, not the nephew of his friend Gabe. At one point, I told a joke that he thought was uproariously funny, and I gave him a gentle nuggie on his arm as he was slapping the bar counter, convulsed in laughter. He instantly shot up, turned to face me, made a fist, pretended he was going to cold-cock me, saw me wince, then resumed his laughter, having made me the butt of his joke. Here we were, four musketeers, all tall and athletic, two Jews and two Catholics, two not-quite yeshiva *bochers* and two not-quite altar boys imbibing more than beers, downing some of each other's experiences with girls, sports, families, teachers, bosses, shopkeepers, and bar tenders (who never asked for IDs), absorbing some other cultural mannerisms, cadences, and orientations without sacrificing our own.

That there are too few precious moments like this that we can recall and savor when we're young may be why many fail to be connected to others as we age.

A few days later, I said goodbye to Schwebel. Something more than my closest buddy was leaving my life. What, youth, innocence, naiveté? Whatever, he was taking it with him. *Don't let him get away, keep him here and out of harm's way.* But the greater the distance between him and me, the greater the separation from our childhood. Who was more frightened, Schwebel, who was heading off into the great unknown, or I who was staying, with no concept of my destiny? Schwebel's leaving was evidence that I was coming of age. Everything had always gone more or less according to form up until then. I was moved along

like some pre-selected composition that was programmed for the player piano. I could hit the keys all right, but it didn't have an impact on the music that I heard. And so, too, with my life.

Right after Labor Day, we all split up. Marek started at NYU uptown, Rebecca Slevin returned to Mn-hat-n, enrolled in Hunter College with a plan to be a teacher, Janie Lieberthal joined Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University intent on majoring in Jewish Studies, Esti Weissman enrolled in the Rutgers College of Nursing, while Isaac Indursky and I headed up to Waltham, Massachusetts, where we agreed to be roommates at Brandeis, anticipating the continuation of our disagreements, enjoying the give-and-take that was perceived to be theater by others.

On my last day before heading off to college, I stopped at the pharmacy, apologized to the pharmacist for my theft of the rubbers, and took out what I owed. He waved it off, telling me to put it into the Jewish National Fund box next to the cash register. Anyway, I'd never used them; they'd been a gift to Marek.