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"Rules of Engagement"
by Darryl Benjamin

The year was 1969. Our bungalow colony was one town away from the Woodstock music festival, but I was 14, but my mother wouldn't let me go.

Woodstock represented everything that terrified my mother: disrespectful children, poor personal hygiene, and the specter of drugs, personified by a foul-smelling Hippie with needle tracks up his arm and dilated pupils.

According to my mother, Jews didn't take drugs. She would have dropped dead had she known that I was introduced to marijuana by one Michael Rosenbaum, an Orthodox Jew from Grant Street in the Lower East Side.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was summer and we were stranded in a bungalow colony in the Borscht Belt. The season was ending and we had nowhere to go. We had sold our house on Long Island, and most of our possessions were in storage.

A bungalow colony is a cluster of cottages usually found in the Catskill Mountains of New York, where the Yiddish people annually memorialize Moses' 40-year trek through the desert by migrating *en masse* from the heat of the city to the green coolness of the mountains. In fact, so many Jews of vaguely Russian and European extraction summer there that the region is nicknamed the Borscht Belt, after the foul-tasting beet soup which is their national dish.

But what I want to tell you about happened a year later, when I found myself a world away from Woodstock, the Bungalow Colony, and Michael Rosenbaum.

Eventually we were saved by a friend of a friend, who found this crappy apartment complex called, deceptively, "Fernwood Estates." It was about as much an Estate as I was King of the Catskills. One of the men who lusted after my mother knew the manager, and on the strength of his recommendation – or maybe out of pity for her story – the manager waived the extra month's rent and deposits that had blocked our way. Only I had to give up my dog.

"There's no way I'm giving up Bessie," I told my mother.

"That," she said, "is not your decision," and because I was 14, she was right.

Bessie had been Sid's Bar Mitzvah present seven years earlier. I inherited her when Sid moved on to girls and cars and, later, college. Bessie and I became inseparable after my father left. She was the only one who was reliably there for me. She kept me sane. But no, Fernwood Estates didn't allow dogs, and my mother was implacable. Bessie had to go to a kennel.

She escaped almost immediately and I found her barking at the door when I came home from school. Fortunately my mother was not at home. I hid her in my room for a week until she was discovered. Back to the kennel she went, only the next time she escaped she was run over by a bus.

It was pretty much all I could stand. I spent the rest of the fall crying, listening to "Love is Blue," and hating my mother.

When I wasn't fighting with my mother I felt sorry for her. Everything she believed in – marriage, family and religion – had been trashed when my father left home for his nineteen year old *shiksa* secretary – from Georgia, no less.

Something indefinable vaporized after my father left. I felt cheated and I resented both of my parents.

Woodstock was her personal tragedy, an intolerable weight. Her poor second-generation Jewish upbringing in Brooklyn hadn't prepared her for the fact that she was no longer a wife and a mother but now simply a mother, a very different equation, one that did not compute.

Mother's name was Rose. She looked like the Jewish answer to Marilyn Monroe – brunette, curly hair, sultry eyes, high cheekbones, even a strategically placed beauty mark applied with a cheap black mascara stick. She frequently returned from a Sisterhood brunch and floated through the door like a butterfly skittering over a cloud of fallen petals. "Did you have fun, mom?" I'd ask her, and she'd always say the same thing, "Lovely! We had such a lovely time!" I knew she went there to forget, but home again she couldn't avoid remembering, and soon slipped into a black despair. I think she preferred to think of herself as 'gregarious,' a word that sounded like gorgeous.

She decided to find a husband. She joined the Jewish chapter of "Parents Without Partners," where the recently and not-so-recently divorced got together to strut their stuff. The hotels where the Jewish Chapter of PWP held their get-togethers were in the Borscht Belt, of course, which, it now seems clear, was the reason she had decided to spend the summer there. She needed a husband.

In the Spring of 1970 she was gone for weekends at a time, only to find, upon returning, that a stray basketball had been thrown through a window, or a hole knocked into the wall. My mother accused us of ulterior motives, which we denied. I wondered, though, briefly, if I was as angry as she accused me of being, or if I was merely clumsy at sports.

I wasn't used to seeing my mother size up men like briskets. She introduced me to a steady stream of possible husband timber – or fodder – some not even from Parents Without Partners. Men who were as foreign to me as the terrain of the moon which, together, my mother and I had watched live on TV the previous summer. Joey was an Italian guy with possible mafia connections and a craggy pocked face set with steely blue eyes. He hunted deer a lot and asked me how my grades were. Sven was a Swedish guy who said "Whatever you want" whenever you asked him what he wanted for dinner or what he wanted to do for the day. My mother rejected them all, although most of them seemed serious about her.

Then my father married his girlfriend. I still wanted him back. "I'm in too deep now," he said to me in a moment of candor. And indeed it was so; his new wife was pregnant and I was told I would soon have a new half-brother or sister. There was something about the finality of the word 'never' as in 'never coming back' that couldn't be digested, and that made me mad. Is this what it means to lose one's innocence, I wondered – to be angry, hurt and in despair? Was the cost of growing up disappointment? It all happened so fast.

One Sunday afternoon late Spring my mother returned from a Parents-Without-Partners shindig at Kutcher's Country Club. When I entered the kitchen she was sitting at the plastic table sipping coffee, humming and staring into space. I noted with relief she hadn't yet seen the scorched marshmallows dangling from the ceiling.

I sat down. "You met someone, right?" I asked.

"No, not exactly," she said evasively.

"Then what?"

She paused for a long moment, drawing in a deep breath. "I sold the extra freezer," she announced triumphantly, as if she was delivering important news and is suddenly relieved.

I looked at her expectantly.

This time she met my eyes. She spoke slowly to me, as if I was a moron. "You know, the. . .extra. . . freezer we don't use? The. . .one. . .in storage? Well, I sold it."

I was confused. "I thought you went to your meeting."

"I did," she said, sipping coffee. "And I sold the freezer."

"OK, I understand." I said, to reassure her I am hanging on her every word. "So who bought it?"

"A man," she answered simply, and slipped off into a reverie.

So, I discerned, she has met some guy at the divorcee rummage sale, and he bought our freezer. Great. What could be more natural? "Well?" I said.

"Well, what?" she snapped, her antennae up and ready to fence.

"So tell me about this guy."

But she faded again, softening.

Then she straightened up and stretched her back, her hands over her head. "Well," she told me, "He's from New York. He's German. . ."

"German?"

That surprised me. My father was rabidly anti-German since the Second World War. He refused to buy or even use anything from Germany.

"*Jewish* German," mother corrected, ignoring my expression, "His family got out on one of the last boats. He was a Bar Mitzvah there. Anyway, there's nothing to tell. That was a long time ago. Now he's got a business that could use the freezer."

"What kind of business?"

She hesitated. "A deli. A Jewish deli in Queens."

"He works in a deli?"

"No," mother said carefully, again enunciating every syllable as if I am a lobotomized nuisance, a sluggish dunce, "He *owns* a deli."

Suddenly I feel depressed. "What about dad?" I choked. "How do you mean?" she asked. "My father was a jerk for leaving, no doubt, but at least he was an *educated* jerk," I said. He had (heroically, I thought) put himself through night school at Brooklyn Polytech to graduate with a degree in engineering. His father was a penniless immigrant who worked in a shoe factory.

"How could you go for a guy who owns a deli?" I demanded. I had started then, and couldn't stop. "You're dating a guy whose first move is to buy your freezer? Very classy," and here I paused to deliver the kicker, "At least I don't sell off major household appliances for love," I said.

She went for the fly swatter and I beelined it to the basement. "Just you wait until I catch you," she said as she jumped to her feet. She always caught me.

A week later, he showed up with a small truck he'd rented. His name was Max. I wished he would take the damned freezer and leave. But he stayed for coffee. Clearly he was interested in more than a freezer.

"So you're German, huh?" I asked him. I'd never met a German.

He looked at me with a wan smile. "Yes."

I was uncomfortably aware that we are checking each other out.

He spoke in short telegraphic sentences. "Hitler made life impossible for Jews. We were in Hamburg. I was just a kid. Like you."

"When did you start the deli business?"

"After the war my brother and me went into the business together."

I found out he and his brother hadn't seen eye-to-eye. His brother was overly generous with the goods; he made the sandwiches too thick and the profits got eaten by his friends. They split up. To hear it from Max, he was the steadfast heroic businessman, his brother indulgent, undisciplined. I pictured Max making thin sandwiches and overcharging everyone. "We're still friends," he assured me with a wry smile.

I was surprised how forthcoming he was with personal details. He was unpretentious and I found myself liking him, if reluctantly.

He was not handsome, the way mother's other boyfriends had been. He was short and round-faced and spoke with a hoarse, loud voice and sometimes you could hear a German accent. You could easily imagine him in suspenders and shorts doing an up-and-down oompah dance with a stein in his hand. The worst part was he really *did* own a deli in Queens. Someone who couldn't cut the mustard, although that's probably what he did all day. His attitude was serious with a hint of devilish humor, which he expressed with circumflex eyebrows propped over brown eyes. Was he really as shrewd as he was trying to appear, I wondered?

Two weeks later, he proposed to my mother and she accepted. My mother's decision to marry the Deli Lama shocked me. Neither of them asked my permission — not that they were required to — but it would have been nice.

It was clear to me that my mother still loved my father. She was emotional when she spoke about him and she called him at the drop of a hat when we were misbehaving, which was frequently. I knew she was lonely and scared. If it was enough to drive her to marry Max, it must, I reasoned, be worse than I thought.

I argued with her. "But he's a deli guy!"

"He's hard working," she responded.

"But he doesn't make any money," I said.

"He's regular and steady. We'll get by."

"But you don't really know him."

"We'll get married a year from November. That will give me more than half a year to get to know him. Besides, I like him."

"Do you love him?"

She was quiet and looked away. "He'll make a good husband," she said finally, in a voice that was meant to be confident.

To escape Fernwood Estates, my mother humming happily as she planned her future with Max, and the hole in my life where Bessie and my father had been, I planned a bicycle trip through Europe with my friends for the coming summer.

"You're not going on a bicycle trip through Europe," my mother said to me when I told her.

"It's already planned," I said. We butted heads every day for a week. Then my mother counter-attacked.

"I tell you what," she said at the end of the week, "Why don't you do your senior year in Israel? That way you'll be away from me for a whole year instead of just a summer."

She handed me a roughly torn square of newspaper from the New York Times Magazine's back pages. Her legs were drawn up beneath her as she sat on the couch. I could tell she'd been saving up this one for a strategic moment.

I glanced at it. "Send your child to a Private High School in Israel," the small ad suggested. "Jewish Values Instilled," it crowed, as if the ones in America weren't sufficient. I'm sure that was the key line that caught my mother's eye because it was the one that rankled me most.

It was sponsored by the Zionist Organization of America. I was horrified. I was sure I hardly qualified as a Jew, let alone a Zionist.

I shook my head. "Too many Jews. I'd rather go to Europe with my friends."

She cocked her head slightly. "You're an odd boy," she said.

I was offended. "Did it slip your mind there's a war going on?" I flapped my arms in her face.

"In case you haven't noticed, Arabs are killing Jews over there. I'm supposed to be one of the tribe, am I not? I could be blown up, for god's sake! Killed! Is that what you want?" I bit my tongue, because what I wanted to say was, "The same way you sent Bessie off to be killed."

She appeared so calm and serious as she intently studied my face. She picked up the *Ladies Home Journal* from the floor and pretended to read it. "We'll discuss it when you're in a better frame of mind," she said absently.

I guess my mother had decided that a boarding school tucked away in Israel's ample Jewish bosom would somehow save me. Or maybe it was more likely she didn't know what to

do with me. I was insolent. I called her a bitch once, and she chased me around the basement with a flyswatter raising welts on my legs. "Where did you learn such language?" she demanded. Of course I had learned it from my father, but she preferred to blame my friends and, by knee-jerk association, society at large.

I was tall and gangly, with thick glasses and too much hair. I think mother hoped Israel would fill me out and I'd come home neat and tidy with a small woven yarmulke perched squarely on my head.

I knew nothing about Israel. It was some country where the cab drivers were Jewish. That was the extent of my knowledge, despite years of Hebrew school, which remain a total blank. Reform Judaism was pretty much blank. I sensed no spirituality, only ritual, which seemed empty.

The closest we came to behaving like real Jews was on Passover or Yom Kippur. My mother wasn't terribly religious but every once in a while she'd get it into her head to instill us with "heritage." On High Holidays she'd sit us down and dust off a warped vinyl record of a cantor chanting Yiddish folk songs, which had nothing whatsoever to do with the holidays, that she'd bought at some rummage sale. None of us understood a word of Yiddish beyond *klutz*, *schmuck* and now, of course, *shiksa* Why did she even bother? I felt that either we should go for religion in a big way or not at all.

And now she wanted to send me to Israel?

The deli wasn't doing well, we learned. At best, it broke even. Max worked 18 hours day and complained nonstop he can't get good help.

The next thing I know my mother suggested and Max accepted that I work for him. In fact, he jumped at the chance. What's in it for Max is a captive kid he can pay on the cheap, and

further ingratiate himself to my mother by doing her this favor. "It will give you time to think about Israel," my mother said, and I heard it like it's a sentence. I'm sure they were both hoping for some soon-to-be stepfather-to-stepson bonding to take place. I wanted none of it. What I wanted was a chance to escape from them.

The deli on Hillside Avenue in Jamaica, Queens had plenty of passers-by and regulars. A large plate-glass window faced the street. Part of my job was to keep the potato knishes flipping appetizingly. We sold cigarettes and beer, which by far outsold the hot pastrami and corned beef sandwiches, though they were popular at lunch and dinner. I was fascinated by the huge barrels of pickles and cole slaw in the back room. Downstairs in the creepy basement Max kept cases of soda, mountains of chips and cold rooms for meat storage.

Max's management style was as simple as it was Teutonic: "Always look busy." And secondly, an important corollary repeated frequently, "Always do what I say."

Right from the start it was a disaster. I couldn't do anything right, according to Max. I talked too long to the customers – especially the pretty ones – and apparently I only made sloppy sandwiches. I could never find the right cases of soda to bring up from the basement, never mind that the basement had only one light, and it flickered, a paltry seventy-five watt bulb activated by a disintegrating string.

But I digress.

Max closed shop like clockwork every night. The smell of grease was thick in the air, a nasty film of grime covered the surfaces like a biblical reckoning. Even the glass display cases, glistening in the morning, had become semi-opaque. My job was to shine, sweep and wash. Then refill the cole slaw and potato salad trays, restock sodas and bread, and set up the tables.

None of it was especially difficult, except for listening to the conservative 24-hour talk radio station that Max favored. Predictably, the subject matter was pro-Nixon boot-licking — how escalation was a good thing, the only way we were going to win. The true escalation was the daily death count. And it wouldn't be long before I was of draft age.

My father was opposed to the war. He had seen some awful things in Europe, but what I think most influenced him now was his political young wife who was strongly against it.

"If you are drafted," my father assured me, "my sister in England will take you in." He was prepared to ship me off to England and make me a British citizen. And I was prepared to go.

Max, on the other hand, was pro-war. After his family escaped from Germany he became a U.S. citizen and joined the American army. He was a communications officer in France during the Second World War. According to Max, the American Government could do no wrong.

One night Max locked the front door and switched on the radio as usual at closing time. The announcer and his guest were arguing whether Kent State was an 'incident' or a 'massacre.' "It will matter to the future," the jock said in a sonorous voice. The battle lines were clearly drawn and the rules of engagement stated that from the authorities point of view they were blameless and therefore it would always be an Incident, something unfortunate to be brushed aside and forgotten in time. To the students and young people who expressed shockwaves of unprecedented anger with a single voice, it was a Massacre. Although it had been a couple of weeks since the shootings, the radio was consumed with it. Facts were only now coming out.

Naturally the announcer defended the National Guardsman, who I had to admit, fired democratically on protestors and passers-by alike. The results were four students shot dead (one through the throat) and nine wounded (one permanently paralyzed).

The announcer said the students somehow deserved it, that their behavior was un-American, and that they were revolutionaries trying to destroy higher education in Ohio.

The big lie was the students were shot from three hundred yards and were unarmed. They posed no conceivable threat to the guards, themselves, or anyone.

I listened helplessly to the dogmatic cant of the broadcaster's drone. How easily lies flowed, like sputum! I couldn't decide if I felt angriest on behalf of the students, who were, after all, older college students that I only felt a limited sense of brotherhood with, or at Max's bobble-headed nodding affirmation and murmurs such as 'of course' and 'that's right.'

What I felt most was outrage.

At last I couldn't stand it any more and I said, "That jerk doesn't have a clue what he's talking about. He's so taken with himself he fails to notice the slender connection between brain and mouth."

At first, Max looked confused. Then he began to heat up, slowly, like an engine, as dawning occurred. I continued to speak in this manner until Max blurted, "That's the trouble with youth today, they've got no discipline."

"What has discipline to do with anything?" I shot back.

His eyebrows elevated, forming a comical M. "Listen," he chuffed, "if they had been brought-up right, they wouldn't be burying the constitution or burning the ROTC building." He says the word *listen* in two distinct notes, drawing it down into an imperative, making his response more a sermon than conversation.

"First of all," I said, pushing the broom harder than it needed to, kicking up all sorts of grunge, "that ROTC building was empty and condemned; second, the constitution burial was a symbolic act to show Nixon's disregard for civil liberties."

"What's Nixon got to do with anything? You think he's responsible for the deaths?"

"Killings," I said wearily, "not deaths." I was frustrated because I knew I would never get through to him. But I couldn't stop.

Max continued, oblivious to my growing rage, "you can't let them run around like a pack of wild animals. How are we going to win the war without everyone's help?"

I stop sweeping. "Including us wild animals? Why would you want our help?" I asked, my voice cracking. "Everyone in this country is supposed to have the right to say what they think without getting shot. Only a Right Winger would disagree."

The air in the room vanished and a vacuum replaced it. Max's face turned beet-red and he gasped for breath. His pudgy frame shook with fury. A ten-inch meat cleaver appeared in his hand and he went after me.

"Are you calling me a Right Vinger?" he blew his stack in a heavy German accent which suddenly surfaced, probably because I pushed every button in his repertoire.

It was too late; I decided I couldn't put the sauerkraut back in the barrel. "You sure *sound* like a Right Winger," I taunted.

Then I thought about my father, how he was probably sickened by what happened. I remembered when we held up signs and protested in Manhattan. How a pro-war group had swept through the ranks like a squall and my father deflected someone who attempted to knock my sign out of my hand. I felt protected and proud.

Max lunged at me and I ducked around a few of the freestanding square tables in the rear sit-down restaurant. I was lighter on my feet, no doubt at least in part because Max had been hitting the potato knishes too hard lately. As I disappeared down the basement stairs I heard him shouting, "Are you calling me a Nazi?"

At that point it occurred to me he might be kidding. No one had ever threatened me with a weapon before, let alone a meat cleaver. True, I had been chased around the basement by my mother and a fly swatter on multiple occasions. And there was a time my father chased me around the dinner table after I informed him that any rice served me by his new wife had better be Uncle Ben's or I wasn't going to eat it. But he only had bare hands — no cleaver — and anyway, I managed to lock a door between us before he could reach me.

I hoped I would be as lucky this time. When Max reached the bottom of the stairs he cooled down a bit, maybe the chilly moist air of the basement helped. I crouched behind a vertical stack of Wise Potato Chip boxes. I could hear sighing and muttering in German, and then the sound of heavy footsteps trudging up the stairs, leaving me alone eye-to-eye with the Wise owl.

When I was kid we had a steady string of black maids. Once one of them had jokingly brandished a knife at me while we were putting away clean silverware. My mother had fired her the next day.

Despite the evidence that Max was certifiably nuts — and clearly a danger to my health, both mental and physical — my mother sided with him.

"You have to learn to get along with people," she admonished me. I shook my head in disbelief. "Go tell that to Hans," I said.

Anyway, Max never apologized. I returned home for the rest of the summer. "That's what's wrong with you kids," he said disgustedly as he drove me home. "You've got no discipline."

I wondered where his discipline had gotten him? Was his failing deli his best effort? I felt disgusted for him and sad for my mother.

If she wanted him, she could have him. He was insane and she had killed my dog.

I decided to check out the school in Israel.

My interview with the school representative was in a decrepit building in midtown Manhattan at the Zionist Organization of America's headquarters. Frankly, I expected more from the Zionist Organization of America. At first, I figured they were more or less like the Boy Scouts of America, except without the bonfires. But then while on the elevator I pictured something plush, sleek and modern, manned by Hasidim, ultra-religious Jews in militant black clothing who sweated too much and required that you prove your Jewishness before they would condescend to speak to you. Would they give me a blood test? Was there a one-hundred percent effective blood test for Jewishness? Were we supposed to have red blood cells with nuclei shaped like tiny stars-of-David?

The offices were as shabby as the building, with photocopied memos scotch-taped to yellowing walls, no posters or color anywhere. I wondered what I was doing there. I wasn't a Zionist — I wasn't entirely sure what one was — but it smacked of fundamentalism, which made me nervous. There was no secretary to greet us.

Anyway, however Jewish you had to be, I was pretty sure I didn't qualify. Though I had been bar mitzvahed, the rabbi's speech said something about hoping I turned out to be a *mensch*, who is a do-gooder, but as far as I could tell I had yet to earn the title. The more I thought about it the less I wanted the label. I mean, look at Richard Cory. He did pretty well for himself in the normal department until he blew his brains out. A life of normalcy is a doomed life.

We sat in the waiting room. My mother read a magazine with a picture of a pretty young girl on a ladder leaning against an orange tree. She was picking oranges and the caption read, "While the Bullets Fly" – which didn't exactly set me at ease.

A door opened and in walked a man with a chest like the ten commandments; double-breasted stone, but stylishly open at the neck. His face, heavily creased, looked as if he hadn't smiled since 1948. We left my mother in the reception room leafing through a pamphlet titled, *"The Future of Zionism: Your Children."* It gave me the willies.

As soon as we entered the big man's office, his demeanor changed from unsmiling to morose. "Sit down," he ordered. Not "please" or anything. I couldn't place his accent.

He checked out my application through heavy squinting, and every once in a while he threw in a frown. A minute passed. I thought he had completely forgotten about me.

"So tell me," he said, suddenly, sitting up in his chair and casually tossing my application on his desk. "Why is it you want to go to the Sadie Bromberg Memorial Academic High School?"

The name cracked me up. What a mouthful! How could I tell anyone I was going to the Sadie Bromberg Memorial Academic High School? I would have felt more comfortable with P.S. 31.

He picked up a pen and poised it over a sheet of paper. I hesitated, brushing my curly hair from my eyes. I was tempted for the barest moment to break down and tell him the truth: how miserable my life had been since the divorce, about my lost dog Bessie, about my mother's unpredictable behavior – but no. He wouldn't have understood.

"Yes?" he urged me on.

"New horizons," I blurted. I tried to look sincere. "I think there is always something new to learn." Then, more confidently, "I want to go to the Sadie Bromberg Memorial Academic High School for new horizons." Where I picked up this 'New Horizons' crap I'll never know. It just came to me.

He jotted this down. Backwards. Was this guy kidding, or did he really write in Hebrew?

He seemed satisfied. I know this because he grunted.

When he was done he smacked his lips and sat back in his chair, as if he had just had lunch. Casually, Mt. Sinai hands me a news article describing how yet another bunch of university students burned down the ROTC building on their campus.

I looked it over as if for the first time. "Good for them," I thought, "They might as well say it loud and clear while they still can, before they come home in a box or get sucked into a money-grubbing rat-race where you have to watch everything you say and do with morbid attention."

Suddenly Max's face loomed before me. "No discipline, that's the problem," he says over and over, his voice like a saw on fresh pine.

"So what do you think of all this campus unrest?" the man asks grimly.

"Oh, they should certainly take a rest, I think they work too hard," I said, and then, straightening my back, I said slowly, "There are better ways than violence to express discontent," quoting from a social student book.

The Zionist looked at me poker faced and then wrote furiously.

But he was just getting warmed up. "Do you approve of America's involvement in Viet Nam?" he asked, picking his nose.

Suddenly I felt angry. Here I was, trying to make a good impression, and he was picking his nose. If he didn't care about impressing me, why should I care about impressing him? Maybe I should drop my drawers and casually wipe my ass. How would he like that? What if it was OK with him, some kind of typical Israeli thing? Maybe they're all weird. I couldn't bear going to a country where it was considered polite to pick your nose in public. I wouldn't be able to touch the food, or shake hands.

I drew in a deep breath. "I believe," I said, with as much authority as I could muster, "America should fight only if our borders are threatened."

This was consistent with Israel's policy, or at least I imagined it was. He grunted again, wrote some more, and stood up. Was it over? Already?

He lunged for a tissue and blew his nose loudly and without any trace of embarrassment. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying it. I averted my eyes, which then fell on his notes. They were in Hebrew. And here I thought it was all a myth. I was convinced Hebrew and Sunday school were plots invented by parents to get us out of the house on weekends. Not once did I suspect the language was actually used. I looked at him with renewed interest.

"Yes?" he asked, sitting down heavily.

"Well. . . I was just wondering. Are you Israeli?"

"Yes," he replied, the closest yet he'd come to a smile. "Can't you tell from my accent?"

"You're the first Israeli I've met."

We stared at each other in silence. I was uncomfortable; he was inscrutable. "Is it true Israeli women braid their armpits?" I asked.

He looks at me with surprise. "What?"

"Nothing. Just something stupid I heard from a friend." From Michael Rosenbaum, in fact.

He nods, sitting down. "One more question. Have you ever taken drugs?"

I had half-expected this question. I wasn't quite sure how I would handle it, however. I figured I had pretty much blown my credibility. A version of the truth shouldn't hurt too badly. On the other hand, Zionists probably did not like drugs, even if a religious Jew had introduced me to it. He would simply refuse to believe it. His pen was raised over the paper, ready to condemn me. I decided to lie, for a change.

"I tried marijuana once. But I didn't like it. It made me giggle." Zionists probably do not like people who giggle.

Finally, it was over. "Thank you, we'll be in touch." I was grateful he didn't shake my hand. We walked out together. In the next room my mother could barely contain herself. I waited wordlessly by the elevator, just to torture her.

"Well? What did he say? How did it go?"

I shrugged. "Ok, I guess, but I don't think they'll accept me. I told him I tried pot once."

She turned pale. "You did what?"

"I tried it once. I told him I didn't particularly like it."

She thought this over. "Oh. Well, at least you were honest."

I didn't tell her the Israeli reminded me of Max, the way he sat in casual judgment of people he didn't know. The way he was probably judging me for lacking discipline. What was the point? It would lead to unnecessary argument. I knew I could snow this guy because I knew he was full of shit.

A few days later we received the phone call that I had been accepted.

I lit a joint to celebrate and told my mother the smell was incense. She bought it, too.