

So maybe having
a bat mitzvah wasn't my idea
originally, and maybe I hadn't
completely made up my own mind
about it, but who was that know-it-all
Sheila Rosenberg, with her big hair and
rubbery lips and runny mascara, to wrinkle
her nose at my OM necklace and say whether
I'm Jewish enough to have one or not? I
stared at the back of her smug, composed,
curly-haired head and made up my mind:
**I AM HAVING A BAT MITZVAH, SHEILA,
I thought at her, AND YOU'RE
NOT INVITED.**



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When Ben-o came over on Saturday for movie night, my dad answered the door wearing gray silk pajama bottoms and his *Math Teachers Play by the Numbers* T-shirt, an unlit pipe clenched between his teeth.

“Ben-o, old chap!” he cried heartily. “How are you, dear boy?”

Daddy was practicing his Jay Gatsby routine—so embarrassing. His eleventh-graders were reading *The Great Gatsby* in their English class, so he planned to go to school on Monday in character—even though he teaches math, not English. I hoped it wouldn’t turn into a phase, like last year, which was much worse—steampunk. At least he doesn’t go around wearing a leather helmet and aviator goggles anymore.

“Good, Mr. Feinstein.”

“Joshua, Ben-o, pal,” Daddy said, slapping him on the back. “Call me Joshua.”

I wished he wouldn’t call him Ben-o. It sounded stupid when he said it. Ben-o started being called Ben-o because of

the other Ben—Ben D.—who moved away in fourth grade. But Daddy didn't even know that.

Ben O'Connell is like my best friend in the whole world, besides Rebecca. He lives three floors down, so we practically grew up together. He didn't even put on shoes to come upstairs.

I stood across the room, next to Mum, watching with embarrassment. Daddy teaches trigonometry and calculus. He is, by definition, not cool, but he tries to compensate by getting into whatever "all the kids" are into. Which is double uncool, but his students love him. Mum, on the other hand, doesn't even try to be cool. It's one of her more endearing qualities.

"Tara," she said, "go and rescue Benjamin from your father." She gave me a not-so-subtle push forward, sending me not-so-gracefully bounding across the room. "Come along, Joshua," she added.

"Hey," I said when they left.

"Hey," Ben-o said.

I looked him up and down, puzzled. "Why are you dressed like that?"

He was wearing a red polo shirt, tucked into a pair of jeans with no obvious holes in them. Something was up with his hair, too, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

His face flushed all the way up to his ears.

"Like what?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Like—since when do you tuck in?"

Ben-o surveyed himself in surprise, as if his shirt had tucked itself in when he wasn't looking. He shrugged.

"Never mind," I said. "You look nice, is all."

"Um, thanks," he mumbled.

We went to the kitchen then and made two bags of microwave popcorn. I covered mine with *chaat masala*, an addictive mix of Indian dry spices made especially for snacks, but Ben-o just had salt on his, because *masala* powder makes him cough.

No kidding, India has the best salty snacks in the world. Nothing we have in the West compares, not potato chips or pretzels or even nachos. I've never understood why Americans are so crazy for Mexican food but not Indian. The secret Indian snack-food ingredient is mango powder, which is Hindi for "that which makes everything taste delicious." Between that and the black sea salt, once you start eating it, you can't stop.

I get my snacketite from Nanaji—my Indian grandfather. His favorites included *chana jor garam*, whole chickpeas mashed flat, fried, and seasoned with *chaat masala*. *Golgappas*, crisp pastry globes filled with a spicy liquid that you had to pop in your mouth whole. Crunchy *bhel puri*. Steaming samosas. Savory *aloo tikki* patties. Then there were the sweets.

"Once you have tasted proper *kulfi*," Nanaji used to say, dreamily, "you will forget your ice cream."

Ben-o had brought over his whole binder of horror-movie DVDs. We agreed on *Bloody Fools*, a goofy vampire story where everyone talks in fake British accents.

He slouched down next to me on the couch, fiddling with the remote. I reached over and touched his hair. When we were little, he used to let me braid it or gather it up into a ponytail and then spring it free. I loved the way his hair, if you stretched it, was long and silky, and then you let go and it *sproinged* back into place. You wouldn't have guessed how long it really was unless we went swimming at the Y and he was just coming out of a dive off the high board and it was all plastered back and reaching past his shoulders. One shake and the curls would bounce back into place.

Today it felt different. Coarse. Not curly.

"Why's it all fluffy?"

"That happens when I comb it."

"You can't comb curly hair! Even I know that," I said. "You have to just let it go natural. Or cut it all off." Boys can be so clueless.

Whoosh. I saw his right ear and cheek go red again.

I wondered what was up with him lately. Combing his hair, tucking in shirts—the week before, he'd brought over flowers for Mum, from his mom's rooftop garden.

The movie started, and we both shrieked in pretend-terror when the first vampire, Joffrey, jumped out from behind the fake boulder—as if we hadn't seen it like a hundred times. We clutched hands, laughing and shivering.

But then Daddy came in with some tall iced teas, and Ben-o dropped my hand and scooted to the other side of the couch. Daddy put the tray down on the ottoman and sat in the adjacent armchair.

“I say, old sports. Whatcha watching?”

“*Bloody Fools*,” Ben-o mumbled, taking an iced tea from the tray.

“Beg pardon?”

“That’s the name of the movie,” I said.

“I hope it’s not rated R,” Daddy said. “Let me see the box.”

“Daddy! We’ve seen this movie like a hundred times.”

“We have?”

“Not you—me and Ben-o.”

He watched with us for like ten minutes, totally ruining the mood, especially because he kept laughing at how dumb the movie was. Which was true, but that was sort of the point. When Daddy wasn’t looking, Ben-o did a fake stretch and draped his arm over the back of the couch, around my shoulders. Which was totally weird, especially with my dad sitting there, alternately chomping on an unlit pipe and loud-slurping an iced tea. I started to giggle. If Ben-o’s move was a joke, I didn’t quite get it, but I laughed as if I did. I felt his arm stiffen, but he didn’t move it.

Mum poked her head around the corner. “Joshua,” she said, motioning with her eyebrows that he should join her in the other room, but Daddy remained oblivious.

“What?” he said.

“Leave. The kids. Alone.”

“Oh, right,” he said, standing up. Then he added, without even looking, “Both hands where I can see them, O’Connell.” Ben-o dropped his arm.

After that, he didn't try to put his arm around me again and I didn't play with his hair. We just watched the movie, laughing at all the best parts and imitating the actors' terrible accents.

"Jolly good," we told each other when it ended.

"Yes, smashing."

"Brilliant, what?"

Ben-o lapsed back into silence after we'd run through our repertoire of undead-Englishman impressions. He started messing with his hair. I regretted saying anything about it, but honestly, what was up with him lately? He never used to care when I teased him. Or not know what to say. Finally, I asked, "Do you want to watch another one?"

"Nah," he said.

"Want to play a game?"

"Sure."

I fished out two controllers from the cabinet under the TV and handed him one. I popped in Stingray Rampage without even asking, since we're pretty evenly matched in that one.

He seemed to be more comfortable now that we were facing the screen instead of each other.

"Who'd you get for homeroom?" he asked.

I made a face, even though he couldn't see. "Ross," I said. "You?"

"Heinrich."

"So jelly," I said, demolishing an alien. Mr. H is our science teacher and the adviser for Robotics Club. He's

probably my favorite teacher ever. I have a tiny crush on him because he wears short-sleeve plaid shirts and enormous black-rimmed glasses and I like the way his hair sticks up in the back when he's writing on the board. "Oh, and—Rebecca's walking with us on Monday. She doesn't have basketball until next week."

"Hey," Ben-o said, "want to join the chess club this year? It's on Tuesdays after school."

"Can't," I said. "Hebrew school."

"Oh, right," he said. "This is your last year, though, right?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking, *Next year I'm gonna have to come up with a different excuse*. I really didn't get the appeal of competition chess. But if I said that out loud, I would get a full-on strategy lecture from Ben-o.

"When is your thing?" Ben-o asked, meaning my bat mitzvah.

"December," I said. "If I go through with it."

"Like you have a choice?"

"Of course." When Mum enrolled me in Hebrew school two years ago, I was skeptical—for one thing, the other kids had already been going for three years, so I had a lot of catching up to do—but we all agreed to keep an open mind. "You can't force someone to have a bat mitzvah," I told Ben-o. "Like—they have to believe in God and stuff." At least, I assumed that was true.

Whether or not *I* believed in God—that was the main question. I had thought about it all summer, and I still

didn't know the answer. There wasn't even anyone I could talk to about it. I mean—it wasn't exactly something you wanted to ask your rabbi. Rabbi Aron is probably the coolest rabbi in the world, but still. My heart did a flip just thinking about that conversation: “*Um, Rabbi? I have this friend who maybe doesn't believe in God . . . Can I—I mean, she—I mean, he . . .*” See? Scary.

“Well, I don't have a choice about my confirmation,” Ben-o said. “Not that I'm against it.”

“Hmm,” I said, which is what I say when I don't want to argue. Not being against something isn't the same as being for something. Having a confirmation or a bat mitzvah is a big deal. A commitment. Not a decision to be taken lightly. Or just because everyone else is doing it.

“Aren't you a little bit worried, though?” he asked after a while.

“About what?”

“Like, if you don't have one—that you might go to hell or something.”

Well, *that* hadn't occurred to me before. I took out three of Ben-o's Stingbats while I considered the question. “I don't think Jews believe in hell,” I said.

Ben-o glanced at me, then back at the screen. “Seriously?”

“I don't think we have one.”

“That's weird.”

“Why's it weird? Maybe believing in hell is weird.” For some reason, all this talk about religion was making me feel defensive.

“No, that’s cool, only—like, how do you know right from wrong?”

“I just *do*. So do you.”

“But maybe that’s because I was taught about heaven and hell and stuff.”

That made me upset. So Jews not believing in hell meant we couldn’t tell right from wrong? What about the other gajillion people on the planet—the Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, atheists, et cetera? It wasn’t like they were going around killing each other all the time.

“No,” I said. “I don’t believe you. You’re a good person, in here.” I thumped my chest, taking a hand off the controller. “You’re not just pretending to be good because you’re afraid of going to hell. You were born good.”

Ben-o cringed, then swooped in and captured one of my Stingbats.

“I guess so.”

But what if he was right? What if, by not having a bat mitzvah, or by being Jewish instead of Christian, or maybe, just maybe, not believing in God—what if I was doomed? Condemned to some nightmarish eternity? Was that a good enough reason to have a bat mitzvah or, in Ben-o’s case, a confirmation? Go through the motions, just in case?

We played in silence then, and without mercy. I got the feeling Ben-o was a little offended. So was I. That felt weird and uncomfortable. We finished a level, and pretty soon after that, Ben-o said he had to go home.

“I’m sorry,” I said as he was leaving.

Ben-o smiled. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, shaking his head. His hair barely moved. “It doesn’t matter.”

I hoped he was right. But I knew deep down that he wasn’t—that it *did* matter, in ways I had tried not to think about before. Like—did my having a bat mitzvah mean that Ben-o and I would have less in common? I hadn’t ever thought so before, but I’d also assumed we had the same ideas about right and wrong. Something else was nagging at me, too—nothing to do with Ben-o. It was this: Was I about to become more Jewish, or less Indian? Did making a choice—to do something I wasn’t even sure about—mean having to leave Nanaji behind? Because that was never going to happen. Not ever.