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"A beautiful, human telling of a boy's relationship with his grandmother . . . entirely believable."

Rabbi Joshua Caruso, Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple

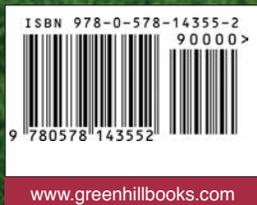
"A simply beautiful story about people."

Minister Rachel G. Hackenberg

Fig's life in seventh grade is perfectly normal: his Life Science teacher hates him, his dad is forcing him to attend bar mitzvah classes because his mom would have wanted it, and he's just been passed over for the travel soccer team in favor of Gus Starks, a ball hog and a bully. As if Fig's life needed one more complication, his grandmother Gigi is unexpectedly coming to stay with him and his father.

But as Gigi helps Fig navigate the obstacles of seventh grade and a tough soccer season, Fig comes to understand some important things about his religion, his family, and himself.

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ONE

If there was one place in the whole world where Fig felt truly at home it was the soccer field. At the moment, the guys were doing a drill—working in groups of three, one-touch passing until they'd made seven touches. Whoever made the seventh touch fired a shot on goal. Fig was working with Tony and Raj. Tony was Fig's best friend, and the three boys had been playing soccer together since second grade.

Fig, a natural rightie, was working hard today on using his left foot more. In the drill, he was in the middle between the two others, dishing the ball left and right. Tony made the fifth touch back to Fig, who stepped over the ball then nudged it backward with his left heel to Raj, who hammered it home past a tired-looking Simmy.

"Goal!" Fig shouted, pumping his fist in the air, and he and Tony fake mobbed Raj, rubbing his head and pounding on him as though he'd just won the World Cup.

Waiting for their next turn, Fig and Tony watched another trio working the ball around. When Joey D. took a shot and missed, Gus Starks barked at him.

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“C’mon man! I was wide open. *Pass* the ball!”

“What’s Starks talking about?” Tony asked Fig. “He doesn’t even know how to pass.”

Gus Starks was a ball hog. He was also a bully in general. And, starting next week, he was set to be the newest player on the Elites, the premier traveling team Fig dreamed of playing for. Made Fig want to puke.

“You know he sucks, right?” Tony said. “He scores a lot because he’s a ball hog, but Starks is no better than you. You’re the one should be moving up to the Elites.”

“Yeah, well that’s not happening, is it?” Fig said.

“The good news is, after Saturday’s game, no more Gus,” Tony said.

“Right. Good riddance.”



Coach called a five-minute break and shouted for everyone to get some water. The early October afternoon was unseasonably hot—Fig could use some water—but he’d forgotten his water bottle, so as the others headed over he stayed on the field and worked on a new trick he’d seen on YouTube.

It had been a rough day. D- on a science quiz. Completely forgot an assignment in math class. And then when Rachel Friedman asked him in study hall if he would “be a sweetheart” and make a few posters for the school

play, the Wicked Stepsisters—that’s what Tony called Rachel’s mean friends—made him feel like such a jerk. He was annoyed at himself for saying yes. She was just using him. Fig’s dad and Rachel’s dad worked together, and Fig and Rachel had apparently known each other since before they were born, but they weren’t friends anymore. Not really. Now that they were in seventh grade, Rachel had developed a trio of stuck-up friends who barely acknowledged his existence.

It was good to be outside now. On the field.

“All right, split-squad scrimmage,” Coach announced, clapping his hands to indicate the break was over. “Drag that goal closer,” he instructed, pointing to where he wanted it placed. Shortening the field would reduce the running back and forth—no one’s favorite part anyway—and emphasize passing and foot skills.

Behind Tony, Fig saw his dad’s car. Was it time to go already? On Wednesdays Fig had to leave practice early, which he hated doing, to go to class at the synagogue, which he didn’t love either. And scrimmaging was the best part of practice, the most like a real game.

“Oh, man,” he said, gesturing behind Tony.

Tony turned around. “Oy vey,” he said and smacked his hand against his forehead. Besides eating an occasional bagel, “Oy vey” was the only thing remotely Jewish that Tony knew. He’d picked it up from some movie, and he got the biggest kick out of saying it every time Fig’s dad came to get Fig for class. A real comedian.

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Fig gave Tony another smack on the forehead, then scampered away before his friend could retaliate.

Fig rode his bike to practice, so it was embarrassing that his dad came to pick him up in a car. The temple was only three miles from the practice field, and Fig could have ridden his bike there. While his father had never said it in so many words, Fig was pretty sure his dad didn't trust him to leave practice on time. He was probably right.

Fig's father got out of the car and stuck out his clenched hand for the fist bump that had replaced hugging in public when Fig was in fourth or fifth grade. "Hey, chief."

They strapped the bike onto a rack on the car.

"Good day?" his father asked when they got back in the car.

"It was all right."

"School go okay?"

Fig nodded.

"Lot of homework?"

Fig shrugged.

"Well, my day was fine. Thanks for asking," his father said with mock enthusiasm. "Great chat." He turned on the radio. It was tuned to NPR. It was always tuned to NPR. "You can put on whatever you want."

Fig nodded but did not reach up to change the station.

When Fig was born, twelve and a half years ago, his mother apparently used to joke that her son had gotten her husband's last name but her religion. Like it was some

sort of deal they had made. His dad's last name, Newton, wasn't Jewish, but they made up for that by giving him the unmistakably Jewish first name of Elijah. That name stuck till second grade, when a classmate gave him the not very clever nickname of Fig—"You know, 'Fig Newton.' Like the cookie!" Now even his dad called him Fig.

His father had been raised "vaguely Protestant," as he put it, but except for a funeral and a couple of weddings, Fig had never seen his father go to church. Evidently, religion wasn't high on his list either. But he had promised Fig's mother that their son would be raised Jewish and go through the preparation for a bar mitzvah. The problem was, Fig didn't really feel Jewish. He wasn't sure what to feel where religion was concerned.

When the car came to a stop in front of the synagogue, Fig's dad turned and gave him a serious look. "Gigi's coming to stay with us for a few days."

That was random.

"Gigi?" Fig asked.

Fig's Charleston grandmother, his mother's mother, came north to visit for a week every summer. And Fig went to South Carolina to stay with her at spring break. But they never saw each other in October.

"She's going to have a few tests at Great Lakes."

Great Lakes Medical Center was the big hospital in town. As their ads constantly assured everyone, Great Lakes was "a world-class medical center," a place where famous athletes and oil-rich sheiks came for surgeries. Gigi

needing to come for “a few tests” didn’t sound like good news to Fig.



He was late, as always, and the halls of the synagogue were empty. At the end of a long, dim hallway light seeped out from under a door. This end of the hallway had been strewn with a few old, overstuffed couches to create some grown-up’s version of a teen atmosphere. The custodian was on his hands and knees, picking up broken pretzels from the before-class snack. Paper cups were scattered on the tables and on the arms of the sofas. Fig was tempted to grab a handful of pretzels from the bowl on the table, but he held back.

He put his face to the thin vertical window in the classroom door and looked in. Dr. Bischoff was gesticulating wildly. Dr. Bischoff was not only weird—on that Fig could see eye-to-eye with the other kids—but he was also confusing. A microbiologist at the university, Dr. Bischoff was very into being Jewish, but he had once admitted to the class that he wasn’t even sure about the existence of God. That combination just didn’t make sense to Fig. Shouldn’t a religion teacher be sure about his beliefs? From his vantage point, Fig could see the very large bald spot on the back of Dr. Bischoff’s head.

He pressed his nose harder against the glass. Two girls

were not so secretly looking at a magazine together, and behind them Fig could see a boy, maybe his name was Jacob, nodding off like an old man in front of a TV. Fig dreaded the thought of going in. The only thing that kept him from walking right back outside was the soccer trip Fig and his father were planning for next summer. His father insisted on calling the trip—to see soccer matches in four different cities in ten days—“your bar mitzvah trip.” Fig knew he was a jerk for being anything other than super grateful, but more and more these days the trip was feeling like a bribe to get Fig to go through with this bar mitzvah thing.

Dr. Bischoff’s grinning face popped up on the other side of the glass. Fig jumped back, forced a smile, then opened the door.

“The Prophet Elijah, ladies and gentlemen!” Dr. Bischoff practically shouted. He was the kind of teacher who liked to make up goofy nicknames for all his students. “What a great honor,” he added with a bow, then handed Fig a piece of paper with an outline for the evening’s lesson. Fig felt his face grow warm as he slunk to the back of the small classroom and took a seat behind a girl with three ponytails. He would have preferred to slip in unnoticed, but the class was too small for that. The eight or nine other kids all seemed to know each other from years of Hebrew school together. Fig knew no one. Whatever. He had friends. He didn’t need friends here. He looked up at the clock—eighty minutes! As Dr. Bischoff tried to engage

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the class in a discussion of repairing a broken world, Fig took out a pen and committed himself to a careful study of the trio of braids in front of him, a detailed sketch that stretched like tentacles around the words on the page.