

Brotherly Love

Joshua Pascal steadied himself with his cane as he descended the stairs from his second-story apartment, careful not to fall as he had last Saturday morning around 3:00 a.m., when he sprained his ankle after a night of drinking with the guys. On Monday morning that little mishap earned him the nickname “Citizen Cane” among his coworkers at the art supply store. He hobbled to the corner, stood, watched, and waited. After a minute, he reached into his inside jacket pocket, pulled out a flask of vodka, and took a hefty swig. He couldn’t face dinner sober with his mother and brother. Who could?

When he slipped the flask back into its hiding place, he noticed his fingernails were dirty. He stuck his hand into the right front pocket of his blue jeans, took out his pocketknife, and opened the blade to clean them. One thing less for Mom to nag about. Just as he was finishing, he saw his brother’s new Mercedes approaching, about two blocks away. He whipped out a ballpoint pen and a small spiral notepad from his shirt pocket, glanced at his wristwatch, and jotted down, “Thursday, October 16th, seventeen minutes late.” In his desk drawer there lay

dozens of these spiral notepads. Ammunition for the future. He didn't want to be caught unarmed.

"Hey, Josh, how's the ankle?" Abel asked once Joshua was in the car.

"Not as painful as some things in life." He was thinking of the upcoming dinner, though his brother had no way of knowing it.

"Did Mom tell you? I got promoted to chief surgeon at the hospital."

"I'm glad Dad didn't die in vain."

"Oh, don't start that crap again, Josh. Dad died of a heart attack, and you know it."

"Yeah, a heart attack he got by working so hard to put you through college and medical school."

They scarcely exchanged another word until they got to their mother's house, in a working-class neighborhood where they had been the only Jewish family.

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"Hi, Mom. *Chag sameach!*" Abel said, coming through the front door.

"And happy Sukkot to you!" his mother responded. "Come, have a glass of wine to commemorate the—"

"Forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert and lived in huts," Joshua finished her sentence in a sing-song voice. "You say that every year, Mom. Just because I don't go to temple anymore doesn't mean you have to give me a history lesson on every Jewish holiday. Why can't we just celebrate Thanksgiving like everyone else?"

"I just want you to be proud of your Jewish heritage. And besides, you're just being cranky because your ankle hurts." She smiled. "Why don't you go and sit down at the table, you two? I have everything ready."

Abel and Joshua took their seats in the dining room, across from the living room, and their mother brought out the final platter from the kitchen. Whatever her failings, Joshua had to admit his mother could cook. It smelled wonderful.

“Go ahead and start the harvest bisque, boys. Joshua, did you hear that your brother got promoted to chief surgeon at the hospital? We are all so proud of him.”

“Yes, so proud,” Joshua said. He looked at Abel. “*Mazel tof*. So now you have your own little promised land flowing with milk and honey. I wonder how many Canaanites you had to slay to get that position.”

Abel laughed, taking no apparent offense. “Well, I did beat out several contenders, and there is a handsome salary increase to go with the new position.”

God, where was the avenging angel to smite the firstborn when you need him? “I guess there’s nothing in the hypocritic oath against bleeding your patients dry.”

“I’m a highly skilled surgeon, Joshua. I save lives. I deserve a good salary.”

Joshua took a big sip of wine. “I saved your life once and didn’t get paid a dime.” It was a deliberate provocation.

“O God, you’re going to bring that up again? We were just little kids.”

“Yeah, I was four and you were six. You were running by the side of the pool, slipped, and hit your head on the ledge.”

“It was just a little bump.”

“You fell in face down and would have died if I hadn’t pulled you out.”

“It was the shallow end. The water was only a foot and a half deep.”

“You can drown in four inches of water.”

“I would have stood up on my own in a couple of seconds.”

“You were out cold and would have died.” Joshua drained his wine glass.

“Joshua, don’t be so envious of your big brother,” their mother said. “Here, let’s start passing the baked salmon and the whipped butternut squash and sweet potatoes.”

The aromas made Joshua’s mouth water.

“Do you have to dote on him all the time?” He poured himself another glass of wine almost to the brim.

“But you know I love you both equally.”

“Do you now? Just look at the Abel Pascal Wall of Fame.” Joshua pointed to the living room. “There are four shelves full of his trophies and medals. And look at the pictures on the wall. There’s Abel the captain of the football team, the basketball team, the baseball team. Abel the track and field star. Abel the president of the student council, the homecoming king, and the valedictorian. Abel the full-scholarship recipient, the Harvard graduate, the Stanford Medical School graduate. And there on the side table next to the rocker is one grade-school picture of Joshua. You call that equal?”

“Well, you never won anything, dear.” She gave a pained smile.

“I won the spelling bee in the fifth grade.”

“I don’t recall that.”

“Of course not. That was the day Abel won the award for best all-around student athlete. You were too busy celebrating his success to notice.” Joshua drank half of his full glass of wine in a single gulp.

“Fifth-grade spelling bee,” Abel interjected. “Give me a break. It’s not Mom’s fault that you’ve wasted your life.”

“Maybe if I could have gone to college, I wouldn’t have.”

“But you couldn’t get into college with your grades,” his mother said.

“I wanted to go to the Art and Design Institute. They would have taken me.” He drank the other half of his glass of wine.

“Based on what?” Abel said. “Hanging out with a bunch of hoodlums and spray-painting graffiti on bridges and public buildings?”

“That was street art. And they were more of a family to me than you were.” Joshua refilled his wine glass almost to the brim again. Abel and his mother eyed each other.

“Street art? It was vandalism, and you got arrested for it,” Abel said.

“Yeah? Tell that to Banksy in London. His ‘vandalism’ has sold for over half a million pounds. That’s over eight hundred thousand dollars. Now that’s some *gelt*.” Joshua drank the better part of his wine.

“And if they ever catch him, they’ll throw him in jail.”

“Help yourselves to some mixed salad, boys,” their mother said. “It has lots of fresh vegetables.”

“Everything tastes great, Mom,” Abel replied.

It was true. Especially the salmon. Tender and succulent.

“Don’t take that as a compliment, Mom,” Joshua said. “It comes from a man utterly devoid of taste.”

“*Oy vey*, Joshua! Stop talking *shmutz*. This is a family occasion. Show your brother a little respect.”

Joshua finished his wine and refilled his glass again. “Moses said to honor your father and your mother. He didn’t say anything about your brother.”

“You’ve got some real *chutzpah* there, my little *boychik*,” Abel said.

Could the ten plagues of Egypt have been worse than these family dinners? They ate the rosca, stuffed with cinnamon, dried fruit, and nuts, in silence. As tasty as it was, no one showed any sign of enjoying it. Abel and Joshua didn't stay for coffee.

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"Do you have to ruin every family celebration?" Abel asked as soon as they were back on the road.

"That's the price you pay for ruining my life."

"When are you going to get it, you *schmuck*? We didn't ruin your life. You did that all by yourself."

"You got all the attention, all the opportunities, all the support. Mom and Dad hardly noticed me."

"While you were out getting into trouble with your hoodlum friends, I was working my *tukhus* off to get where I am today. It's not my fault that you didn't study, make good grades, and get a scholarship. And it's certainly not my fault that you started drinking so heavily. You're *schickered* today, aren't you?"

"Always so high and mighty. You doctors all think you're gods. I'm glad God doesn't think he's a doctor. Life would be one long prostate exam."

Abel turned and glared at Joshua.

"The red light!" Joshua screamed.

Too late.

* * *

After the collision Joshua checked himself. Nothing seemed broken. Minor cuts and scrapes. He turned to his brother.

“Abel, are you okay?”

No response. His eyes were expressive, but he couldn’t talk. Joshua shook his arm.

“Abel, are you okay?”

Still no response.

Joshua saw that his brother’s neck was swollen and that his face was turning blue. *O God, what do I do? He can’t breathe. What do I do?*

Joshua opened his door, grabbed his cane, and hobbled around to his brother’s door, but it was too bashed in to open. Shambling back around, he unfastened his brother’s seatbelt, struggled to pull him out the passenger’s side, and laid him on the ground.

If I don’t do anything, he’ll die, and I’ll get blamed. But if I do something and botch it, he’ll die, and I’ll get blamed. I can’t win here.

The driver of the other car staggered towards them. “Are you guys all right?”

“My brother can’t breathe! Call 911!” Joshua shouted.

Joshua dumped out his pockets, opened the vodka flask and the pocketknife, and took apart the ballpoint pen. On television there was always someone on the radio or the phone to talk the rescuer through an emergency tracheotomy. He would have to rely on his memory of those episodes. How ironic. Now he was operating on his brother, the chief surgeon.

He doused the knife blade with vodka. Then he located the soft spot under his brother’s Adam’s apple and shuddered as he made an incision. Not deep enough. He cut a little more. Next he poured vodka over the pen barrel and inserted it into the incision as a breathing tube.

Able started to breathe, and the color returned to his face. Thank God.

By then a small crowd of bystanders had gathered. They applauded Joshua. “Good job, son,” an older man said, patting him on the back. “You’re a hero.” Before he finished speaking, Joshua could hear the siren and see the flashing lights of the approaching ambulance.

Once the paramedics had Abel strapped to a gurney and in the ambulance, one of them said, “The impact of the other vehicle or the blunt force of the airbag may have broken your brother’s jaw. The mandibular fracture caused his neck to swell, which obstructed his airway. You probably saved his life.”

“Good,” Joshua said. “I hope it counts this time.”

Cane in hand, he walked away, still limping but holding his head a little higher.

Glossary of Names

Joshua: savior (Hebrew). He saves his brother’s life twice. He has the nickname “Citizen Cane” and plays the part of the biblical Cain, the envious brother.

Pascal: Passover (Hebrew). Joshua Pascal is “passed over.”

Abel: a homonym of “able.” Abel is the “able” one in the family.