

Even Heroes Sometimes Sink

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For Joe

Author's Note

Although this story is based on actual people and events, it's a novel, not a biography or a precisely accurate memoir. I've been inspired, but not limited, by what really happened.

Tolling for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed...

—BOB DYLAN, "CHIMES OF FREEDOM"

One

“Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.”

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *Walden*

HE COMES TO ME IN DREAMS...ENTRANCED by the sound of softly pounding waves, I don't know exactly where I am, but I can see Simon's face. It changes before me from young to old, the curly full hair now dark brown and long, now shorter and silvery grey—the beard appearing and disappearing, also changing from dark to light. He is sixteen or he's sixty, but I almost always see him smiling—his electric, exuberant smile. How did I not see beyond that gleam? How did I fail to perceive the subtle sorrow in his eyes—his concealed solitude, his unspoken loneliness? Sometimes, he stretches his arms wide as if to embrace me—or forgive me—or answer some enigmatic question of great significance. And then, inevitably, he fades away. Like a foggy mist disappearing into nothingness, he vanishes from my sight—and I feel guilty for not having held him closer, for not understanding more, for being too afraid...

I've been agonizing over whether I should try to tell this story, or whether I'm even capable of telling it. Like most guys, it's a lot easier for me to talk about cars, sports, or politics than to discuss anything involving my deeper, more personal feelings, so certain things, which maybe shouldn't, generally get avoided. Don't most of us, men and women, get agitated and uncomfortable dealing with subjects which provoke our strongest, uncensored emotions? But

then there's always the looming mirror and the fear of feeling like a wimp, who slips away from what ought to be confronted. After all, I'm supposed to have passed beyond childish things by now—I'm in my sixties. To face myself with any decent self-respect, I need to at least try to understand the truth about the most puzzling relationship of my life.

I want to tell the story of how I formed what I thought was my closest friendship, and how, without knowing it, I let that relationship slip away. In many ways, this might ring out like an anguished confession because it deals with the shortcomings of two men who were too unconsciously macho to be completely honest with each other. Intentional or not, we guys manage to evade each other at critical moments, to scoot around the heart of the wound—even guys who think they're best friends. And I've been as dense as they come, blinded, like most people, by my own self-centeredness.

Simon... Simon Isaac Lieberman and I thought of ourselves as extremely liberal and progressive, part of a new age of men and women who would transform the world. Like most people, however, we drastically underestimated the clinging power of old, instinctive values and habits that ran counter to our desires for emancipation and change. Despite growing up in the Age of Aquarius, flaunting our long hair and beards and feeling irrepressibly free, in many basic ways, Simon and I remained confused, hung-up males, trapped in the sad, patriarchal tradition of stifling some of our most profound and disturbing feelings.

There was no repression of feelings, however, when I heard the shocking news about my friend a few days after Christmas, several years ago, back in 2010. My wife, Danielle, came running from outside into our kitchen, cell phone in hand, her voice shaking with horror, her face streaked with tears, as she blurted out: "Simon's dead! He is gone! Simon's dead!" With her slight French accent,

she repeated the last words as I stood there frozen in disbelief and bewilderment.

No, no—this is impossible. I struggled to comprehend the agonizing syllables I had just heard. Completely overwhelmed, I shook my head and crumbled into tears, whispering, “It can’t be—it can’t be true.”

“I’m afraid it is, Cheri...I’m so terribly sorry...” She grasped my arms and held me as I stared at her blankly. “What a horrible shock and tragedy for Simon’s family...It’s Reuben on the phone. Perhaps he can explain.” She handed me the phone.

Reuben was Simon’s oldest son, whom I had known since he was an infant. Nearly forty and single, he worked for Simon’s Los Angeles-based parking lot company, a firm that had doubled in size to five thousand employees since Simon became CEO about twenty years ago. It was a family firm, he was quite proud to say. His father and uncles had started it, and all three of Simon’s sons worked for the highly profitable enterprise. Of course, the three young men made excellent money, but Simon had shared his doubts with me several times about whether his sons and the company were a good fit. Reuben was his biggest worry since he was the most determined and effective in hiding his emotions.

Although I could hear obvious grief in his voice, Reuben sounded almost matter-of-fact as he described what he knew of his father’s death. “He drowned in a river in Buenos Aires, a few blocks from his hotel. He and my mother were there, trying to reconcile.”

“Trying to reconcile? Had something happened to them?” My eyes widened with this second shocking revelation.

“So you didn’t know? I guess he didn’t tell anyone.” Reuben continued his incredible story, describing how Simon, my supposed dearest friend, had separated from his wife, Rachel, two months earlier, after getting busted for a long-time affair with his secretary. The estranged couple had gone to counseling and then, on the

counselor's suggestion, to Buenos Aires, to try to heal their broken marriage. Pathetically, I knew nothing about any of this.

Reuben explained more. Apparently, Simon had drowned in the Buenos Aires river, Rio de la Plata, in the early dark hours of Christmas morning after he and Rachel had spent Christmas Eve dining in a nightclub. He had been drinking heavily that night and later went walking alone by the river. Reuben's brother, David, had flown down to the Argentine capital to comfort their mother and to work with the police in identifying and releasing Simon's body. His excellent Spanish would help in dealing with the Argentine authorities.

"He drowned in a river?" I asked incredulously. Simon and I had become best friends taking classes and surfing together at UC Santa Barbara. It was hard to imagine my old surfing companion, a veteran of countless waves and wipeouts, drowning in a placid, big-city river.

Reuben offered a likely possibility: "It was Christmas Eve and he was under a lot of stress with my mother. He probably drank way too much—maybe enough to pass out and fall into the river... Or maybe he stumbled onto the wrong street and got assaulted by someone, who dumped him into the water... But I have to tell you something else... The authorities in Argentina are at least considering the possibility of suicide."

"That's got to be just a legal formality. Simon would never kill himself. You don't think he could have killed himself, do you?" I paused after this mention of what seemed preposterously impossible, but Reuben didn't say anything. "What about this affair you mentioned?"

"I thought you knew," Reuben replied.

"I didn't know a thing. Your father used to tell me that your mother was the perfect wife for him."

"Perfect, because she was perfectly blind. My father had been having an affair with his secretary for seven years. I found out

about it six years ago when I saw the two of them walking on the beach.”

“Six years ago! What did you say to him—or to them?”

“I told him, privately, that I think I understood his situation and that I could keep a secret.”

I paused in reflection. “You were willing to hide his affair from your mother for six years?”

Reuben also hesitated a moment before continuing. “I think I understood his situation. Of course, I was surprised—and sad for my mother—but I guess I realized that something was probably missing from their relationship—for whatever reasons...and that he was trying to take care of things...in his own private way. I was okay with that...I could go along with that, and everything was fine...until...”

“Until what?”

“Until my brother David saw the same scene I saw—Dad walking hand-in-hand with Heather, his lovely secretary, in a skimpy sundress, right on the same Venice beach where I saw them six years earlier.”

“How did David react?”

“David doesn’t see things the same way I do. He’s married, you know, to a very strong, educated woman, with strong opinions. And he tells Susanna everything—poor fool! The two of them got pretty upset. David and his wife demanded—they insisted—that Dad had to own up to everything in front of everybody—the whole family.”

“In front of the whole family?”

“David and Susanna made Dad confess everything at a family meeting—in front of our mother, all three of his sons, his daughter-in-law, his brother and even our grandmother—his own mother. I think my brother just wanted to end the hypocrisy.”

Reuben described how, according to David, the middle son, Simon’s seemingly pious life was a total sham. His pretense of being

an observant Jew, his self-righteous presiding over a large family and giant company—all this was a complete farce in the light of his years of adultery. “David’s pretty religious himself these days,” Reuben added, “at least compared to me. Not that he goes to synagogue that much...just in the way that he sees things more black or white.”

Reuben explained what happened after Simon’s forced confession. He and Rachel separated for a few weeks. Then they tried getting back together with the help of a counselor she thought would be good for them. Again, I knew nothing about any of this, not having spoken to my friend since the end of the summer. Usually we talked on the phone every few months, but these months, the most critical of his life, we hadn’t spoken at all.

Reuben let me know the funeral would be in three days, on Friday. He hoped I would speak at the memorial service. He wanted me, as Simon’s longest and closest friend, to be there for his memorial, but he understood if I wouldn’t be able to make the 700-mile trip from Ashland, Oregon to Los Angeles. Of course, I would come, I assured him. We arranged to meet at Simon’s house on Thursday afternoon. The whole family would be there. He asked me to bring my guitar.

Stunned with all that Simon’s eldest son had just told me, I shared with my wife the bizarre details I had just learned that defied comprehension. Besides the agonizing reality that my cherished friend was gone, there was the fact that he had somehow drowned in a river in Argentina, the discovery that he had been cheating on his wife for seven years, and the curiosity that his two oldest sons had taken opposite positions on whether his affair could remain a secret.

“And which son do you think did the right thing?” Danielle asked, while she seemed to ponder the question for herself. “Which son was the most wise?”

"I don't know," I said blankly.

"I don't know either," she responded. "I like the son who asked for complete honesty, but maybe complete honesty was too much for Simon. And to ask him to confess in front of the whole family—to endure all that humiliation...that could make anyone want to die."

"Are you saying you think maybe Simon committed suicide? Reuben didn't say that! It's just a legal formality the authorities have to consider." I was revolted at even contemplating the possibility that Simon's death could have been intentional. "It had to have been an accident—or possibly a murder...Maybe someone was trying to rob him."

"I don't know anything" Danielle replied. I guess when we go down to Los Angeles, we'll know more. What do you want to do right now?" She stared at me patiently.

What I needed and wanted was a sauna. It would give me time, probably alone, to clear my head and think about Simon and the amazing revelations his son had just shared with me. After that, I wanted to see my daughters. Because of the holidays, my beloved girls, now grown women, were both nearby, staying with my ex-wife at her farm on the edge of town. They'd arrived in Ashland with their spouses and kids just a few days earlier. For my own solace, I wished to see my daughters, but I wanted them to come over without their kids, who were just toddlers then. To me, it didn't seem right for the little ones to see me like this—for them to have to witness, or for me to try to hide, so much grief. Danielle said she'd telephone the girls and tell them the tragic news about Simon. I headed for our health club and my old friend, the sauna, a comforting ritual Simon and I had enjoyed many times together over the years.

Sitting alone in my familiar wooden box, I contemplated all that I had just learned. I poured water on the rocks, and they hissed, producing swirling puffs of steam. The sweat pouring out of me

seemed fitting. I wanted cleansing, deep cleansing. I longed to rid myself of something—to purge myself of the blindness and stupidity that had somehow allowed a cherished friendship to grow so thin. How had I permitted a best friend to become nearly a stranger?

I faced my own guilt in sweaty nakedness: Why hadn't I called in the past three months? But then again, why hadn't Simon called? If his marriage of thirty-seven years was on the verge of busting up, why wouldn't he call his closest friend? Admittedly, since my first marriage had lasted only half as long and I had a series of short-lived relationships between marriages, I'm certainly no expert on the subject. But Simon and I had pondered the mysteries of the opposite sex together since we were teens. Why, with his secret affair revealed and his marriage on the brink—why would he not confide in his closest friend?

The words of Simon's repeated phrase to me about his marriage, on the rare occasions that I would ask him about it, now echoed through my head: "Rachel is the perfect wife for me—she's every woman to me." He would say these words, half-laughing with his twinkling eyes and broad, handsome grin. Hearing this refrain, I would sometimes wonder if he might be alluding to his wife being content in her own sphere, running their home, while allowing him an unusual amount of freedom. I knew that as an extremely wealthy man who travelled a lot, he had ample opportunity for brief sexual encounters with women he might meet at business gatherings or bars, maybe even hookers. But these relationships, if they existed, would mean little or nothing to Simon emotionally, I assumed. And surely, he wouldn't want me to ask about such salacious things, right? Doesn't the transgression of cheating deepen, heaping more shame on the cheater and his deceived spouse, if we discuss steamy details with our closest friends? And if he tells me his secret, how do I not tell my wife? The dilemma deepens. So I was discreet. I didn't ask probing, potentially embarrassing questions.

Sure Simon...Rachel's perfect for you...

But having two significant relationships at the same time can kill you if you've got a conscience—and Simon had a big-time conscience. To have a seven-year relationship with another woman while he was married did not seem in my mind like something my deeply ethical friend would do. Had I lost touch with the person he had become? I struggled to accept that for years my best buddy had been living a double life: The pious, seemingly conservative Jew whose devoted wife lit the Sabbath candles and cooked delicious kosher meals for extended family gatherings every Friday night, the man who went to an Orthodox synagogue each Saturday morning, immersing himself in a Hebrew God's moralistic admonitions—this same man was a total hypocrite, living a completely separate life, frolicking with his secretary on the beach, or in a hidden bedroom somewhere in Venice.

I recalled an odd story Simon had told me involving his secretary. Simon's younger brother, a solitary, emotionally locked-up guy, probably a victim of Asperger Syndrome, had resigned from the family company, from his position as chief accountant, because of a secretary. Years ago, Simon had told me about the incident, about his brother demanding that he fire this secretary. Simon didn't want to fire the woman, and his brother quit over it immediately. The nearly silent, lonely man retreated to his Santa Monica condo where he plays video games endlessly in utter isolation. End of story, or so I thought. When Simon told me about the conflict and its resolution, I thought the point concerned his brother, his mathematically gifted, socially inept brother. I didn't think about the secretary. Simon hadn't even bothered to mention her name.

The sweat poured out of me as I faced a difficult truth: I realized I hadn't reflected on or asked enough questions about the secretary. I hadn't pressed Simon to explain why his brother was so intent on her being fired. My friend had offered me a hint, a possible

doorway into what was really going on in his life, but I had missed the subtle opening. How many other invitations into his heart had I been too blind to see?

Two

“Let me admonish you first of all to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and to dare to love God without mediator or veil.”

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “ADDRESS TO THE DIVINITY CLASS”

WHEN I GOT BACK TO MY house, my two grown daughters were there, to offer whatever comfort they could to their grieving dad. We all gathered on my bed—Danielle, my daughters, and I—and we cried for the loss of a beautiful man. We cuddled and held each other and cried. Our two mini-Aussies sat on the edge of the bed and stared at us, disturbed in their own way by our profound emotions.

My girls, who were then in their mid-thirties, had known Simon practically their entire lives. They’d swum in his gorgeous Brentwood pool. They’d enjoyed champagne at his elegant backyard parties. They’d been to his sons’ lavish Bar Mitzvahs, just as Simon and Rachel had attended my daughters’ weddings. They’d witnessed Simon’s immense intelligence, the way he could catch you at just the right moment, riveting you with his dark eyes, to ask the perfect, penetrating question. They’d seen his kindness, his wild laughter, his unabashed joy for life. They understood the depth of my grief.

During these moments of profound sorrow, as I was compassionately cradled by my three closest women, I sensed how fortunate I was to be enveloped by so much love. They held me on our bed and comforted me for several minutes until eventually, my sobbing and shaking subsided. My daughters had almost never seen me cry, and never like

that. Finally, I calmed down and with a shaky voice, talked about the deep connection I always felt with Simon, my pain in not knowing or asking about his marital troubles, my fears that I had let an intimate friendship dissipate on cruise control, and eventually, I got to some pragmatic details about upcoming traveling plans. Danielle and I would be driving to L.A. Wednesday, the following morning. The memorial would be on Friday, and the burial on Sunday, New Year's Day. We expected to return to Ashland in five days and could still, hopefully, spend a few days with my daughters and their kids. At least, that was our plan.

About a half-hour later, the four of us walked toward the front door and hugged intimately. As she and her sister were leaving, Joelle, my older daughter, inquired about my wife's son Albert, her rather new stepbrother, who lives in Southern France. She asked about his health, remembering that he had recently been struggling with dysentery, something he'd picked up on a trip to Senegal.

"That's so kind of you to ask," Danielle responded. "He is much better now. The dysentery, we think, is finished, and he is back in Aix. My son and his crazy voyages. Thank you for thinking of him." Danielle worries a lot about her son, my adventurous step-son.

After my daughters left, Danielle and I packed that night. Our two mini-Aussies, Luna and Biko, sat on our bed and stared nervously once they saw us stuffing our suitcases. They could read the signs of their impending abandonment, and they whined. To appease them, we repeated, "We'll be back soon." We all tell our own little lies.

I had to look hard in my closet to find any clothes that would be dressy enough for an urban funeral. In his life as an L.A. business executive, Simon was used to wearing suits and ties, but as a retired teacher living in laid-back Ashland, Oregon, it had been years since I wore a tie, and I still don't own a suit.

Danielle and I left early the next morning for the long trek to Los Angeles. Even though we were in the last days of December, we didn't worry much about hitting snow on the mountain pass just south of Ashland or the other highly elevated parts of the journey because recently, it had been unseasonably warm. After checking the weather reports, we were so confident about road conditions, we didn't think we needed to take our all-wheel drive SUV. We assumed our front-wheel drive Mazda, which got better mileage, would be good enough for what we expected to be an eleven-hour trip.

During our first hour, we were pretty quiet, lost in our own contemplations. Having so much to think about, we didn't listen to any music, preferring silence. After about an hour of driving, however, as we approached magnificent Mount Shasta, whose snowy peaks melted magically into the clouds, I pulled out a CD of the Beatles, *Abbey Road*. Simon and I had adored that epic album during our senior year at UCSB.

As we listened to the opening song, "Come Together," Danielle and I began to sing along softly with the chorus. Gently smiling, she turned toward me and said, "And now since we have such a long drive ahead of us—and especially now because of this tragedy, I want you to tell me again how you and Simon first came together, how you came to be the best of friends. Tell me, so I can understand better how you came to love this man so much."

"You know some of the stories already."

"I wish to know them better—and some new ones. Besides, maybe remembering the old stories with me will help you to think of what you might like to say when you speak at his funeral." She squeezed my thigh for emphasis.

"Maybe the stories will just make me more depressed than I already am."

“Cheri, how much more depressed can you get? Maybe if you talk about the best times you and Simon shared together, it will make you less sad.”

“YOU make me less sad,” I said, squeezing her hand still on my thigh.

“So now tell me again how you and Simon met. It was in high school, wasn’t it?”

“No, it was in junior high. We had a bunch of classes together, and we were both going through the whole Bar Mitzvah training process at about the same time. Besides that, we were both relatively short. That was another connection between us, and Simon joked that our Hebrew ancestors must have drunk way too much wine when they chose the measly age of thirteen as the right time for entering manhood. After he says this, when the two of us were halfway alone in our school hallway, he opens his locker, suddenly pulls out a *Playboy* magazine, unfolds it and points to the juicy centerfold, the full-length naked beauty, and then with a huge grin, he says, ‘I think before we can really enter manhood, we need to enter something like this.’”

“So being small didn’t stop him from thinking big about the girls, yes?” my wife observed.

“Exactly. Simon was always interested in the girls, even when he was less than five feet tall.” Intuitively, I could surmise what Danielle was going to bring up next.

“So you and Simon—you both lost your virginity with the same girl—am I right?”

“Yeah, we both lost our virginity with the same girl.”

“Yes, and at the same time?”

“The same girl at the same time. In fact, I think we did it in the same way. You know this story embarrasses me.”

“But I love it anyway. So tell me again, why did you choose this particular girl—to make love with her at the same time—for your first time?”

“I didn’t choose her—Simon did.” And so I began to recount with my wife the odd tale of how Simon and I managed to lose our virginity together with a stranger.

“We’d just graduated from our high school, and both of us were on the edge of losing our virginity with our girlfriends. We were mostly ignorant about the act itself in those pre-pornography days, and we were both pretty nervous about our upcoming performances, so Simon came up with the idea of a test-run. He suggested that we’d be more successful and hopefully more ‘awesome’ lovers with our girlfriends, if we had some ‘mentoring experience.’”

“And then he met this girl to give you the mentoring experience?”

“Yes. You love this story, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. And this beautiful girl, this *jeune fille*—what was her name again?”

“I didn’t say she was that beautiful, and her name was Dolly Johnson.”

“Dolly Johnson—I love that name—not exactly a Jewish name. She was not a girl your Jewish mothers would have loved.”

“She was not a girl our Jewish girlfriends would have loved. She was brown-skinned and pretty, a mixed-race girl Simon had met near one of his father’s parking lots in downtown Los Angeles. She liked vodka and 7-UP. We were all barely eighteen. At least she told us she was eighteen. Anyway, we were just old enough to rent a motel room.”

“So, who rented the motel room?”

“I did.” I reminded Danielle that by the summer we lost our virginity together with Dolly Johnson, I had grown to five-foot nine, but Simon, with his late-growth genes, was still about five-foot four.

“So, the two of you cheat on your girlfriends, and then you have to live the lie of silence, all because you think this experience with Dolly Johnson will help you become fabulous lovers and

then you can impress your girlfriends more. You poor boys! And did it work?"

"Of course not. But the weird experience did make us partners in crime. We eternally shared this half-kinky secret. Actually, that senior year in high school, we'd already been partners in plenty of crimes, sharing lots of secrets. We'd ditched school several times, jetting up the coast to go surfing in Ventura, sometimes getting away with it, but also getting busted three different times by the school authorities, who would inform our outraged parents."

Danielle smiled, "You and Simon must have loved that time. Two nice Jewish boys discovering the joy of rebellion."

As Danielle and I drove through the Siskiyou Mountains early that morning, I shared some old memories about Simon and me. Our friendship really took off when we were sixteen, and we discovered the University of California at Santa Barbara. Simon and I got to go there on a special program the summer before our high school senior year. That's when we became best friends. We thought we'd found heaven--living in the dormitory together, taking college courses on the gorgeous, ocean-hugging campus, learning to make music together, and wildly enjoying our first surfing adventures on the soft, user-friendly waves.

I described how Simon and I began each day that summer with a run on the beach. I'd been on our high school track and cross-country teams, and Simon, who had been on the gymnastics team, wanted to help me train for the coming season. We'd leave our dorm in the soft colors of dawn and run along the crescent-shaped beach to the Goleta Pier and back. It was about a mile each way, and although Simon, who was really strong in his upper body, would try his best, he wasn't that fast, so to keep us more even, I would wrap about twenty pounds of weights around my ankles and wrists, and we would accelerate together in bliss toward our imagined finish line.

Those mornings were heavenly, and we'd end our runs, diving into the ocean, completely exhilarated. Marveling at the distant, yet sharply focused contours of the mountains on Santa Cruz Island, deeply inhaling our fragrant new freedom by the sea, we asked ourselves how in the world would we ever be able to endure returning to our little high school, with its petty rules and drudgery, imprisoned again amidst the smoggy hills of West Los Angeles?

It was during that summer that Simon and I became good friends with Sally and Cindy, two girls from Ventura, who were also students in the special university program. With these two girls—the four of us were sixteen—Simon and I discovered the pleasure of making simple music together. No, we didn't sing "Kumbaya" by a campfire on the beach, I assured my wife, but we did sing "Blowing in the Wind" and "Mr. Tambourine Man," and we learned how to do harmonies. Sally and I played guitar, three of us sang, and Simon played harmonica. He and Cindy ended up getting involved more than musically.

We loved our classes that life-changing summer, especially a philosophy class taught by an enthusiastic fellow from Columbia University. He loved Nietzsche and his quest for unvarnished truth. To our profound delight, he made us love Nietzsche and our own quest for truth. This instructor—Danto was his name—would get all excited about proving God's existence with words. He called these verbal proofs of God's reality "ontological" arguments, and one day he came to class super-hyped because he'd come up with a new one himself. We called it the "Dantological" argument. To Simon and me, however, the short, bald professor's verbal proof, his enumerated logical argument aimed at verifying God's existence, although intriguing, failed to be any more spiritually significant than the archaic Hebrew we had to recite about God in the synagogues our parents had forced us to attend.

Our most meaningful and personal encounters with the divine, I reminded Danielle, came later that summer when Simon and I backpacked in the Sierras together, trekking through Kings Canyon, and, as she put it, we “lost our virginity with God.” While we drove, I elaborated on a story my wife enjoyed about Simon and me, our exodus from our lives as observant Jews. A somewhat-bruised survivor of a rather strict Catholic childhood, Danielle loves to hear others speak of their own journeys toward spiritual emancipation. One day, in an enlightened age, she believes this forcing of one’s religion upon an innocent, defenseless child, who knows little or nothing of any alternatives, will be recognized as a form of child abuse. And as for those of us who have managed to escape from and move beyond what we were indoctrinated with as children, naturally, we pray that day of spiritual freedom comes soon.

As for Simon and myself, we’d both endured years of Hebrew School, the arduous preparations for Bar Mitzvah, forced synagogue attendance on Saturday mornings, plus weekly obligations in Sunday School and Confirmation classes. Yet after that first experience of camping in Kings Canyon blew our minds, spiritually speaking, both of us resolved that we were finished with going to synagogue. We felt as if we had met God face to face—eye to eye—in the stars. Neither of us city boys had ever seen what the night sky actually looks like—not like that. You could say we discovered our own “original relation to the universe,” as Emerson memorably put it.

“Don’t you feel like you’re finally feeling God!” That’s how Simon expressed it, smiling exuberantly and stretching his arms out wide to the glory of the sparkling cosmos. The endless hours learning Hebrew, the weekday afternoons and weekend mornings spent confined under a synagogue ceiling—all these efforts seemed so misdirected and futile, when the divine could be felt so powerfully and personally, spending one open-eyed night in the mountains under the infinite, starry sky.

Danielle wondered how our parents accepted our decision to no longer go to synagogue. I explained that it was a lot harder for Simon's parents than for mine because both of his parents had barely survived the Holocaust, and they were more religious, more orthodox. After Simon told his folks about his spiritual experience on the mountaintop, his father exploded with, "No son of mine is going to become an atheist!"

"But on the mountain, Simon found God—he did not lose him," Danielle erupted with incredulity. "His father could not understand anything beyond his own way of thinking."

"Isn't that true for most everybody?" I countered.

As for Simon's father, he was a severely authoritarian guy, accustomed to giving orders to minimum wage employees in his parking lots. Often, as he barked commands, it seemed he treated his family as if they were his lowly paid workers. His dad was a difficult man to challenge, and to him, God lived in the Torah, in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Israel and on Mount Sinai, not on a California mountaintop. It was as simple as that. Therefore, from his father's vantage point, by refusing to go to synagogue any longer, Simon had become an atheist. "When things got bad with his parents after that," I explained in summation, "they blamed everything on the idea that he had lost God."

"Even though in reality he had found God," Danielle replied, amused at the irony.

"But he lost the Hebrew God," I added, "the one his parents still believed in, the angry guy in the Torah, who gives commandments and allows genocides. He came to a philosophical conclusion about that God."

Simon had become convinced that this omnipotent, supposedly benevolent, Hebrew God that his parents still worshipped dutifully, could not possibly exist because if God were all-powerful and all-good, how could He have permitted the Holocaust or any

of the other horrible things that happen to innocent people? That was the unanswerable question Simon, like many perplexed souls, pondered, and the infuriating paradox definitely alienated him from his parents' religion.

Understandably, their son's new-found belief, the notion of the Hebrew God being dead, irrelevant, or non-existent, deeply upset Simon's parents. Quite aware of their disappointment and anger, I imagined they partially blamed me for his changed outlook since his departure from the old ways occurred after our summer at UCSB and our backpacking trip, weeks later, in the Sierras.

In spite of the Nazi nightmare which they had miraculously survived, Simon's, parents somehow never lost their faith, their belief in the religious traditions that had led so many to the gas chambers. After Simon left his inherited faith, influenced by the freedom-preaching Nietzsche we had read in our philosophy class and especially by our personal spiritual encounter in the star-filled mountains, his parents grieved over what they perceived to be his spiritual confusion. I tried not to feel guilty when I would see them, despite my sense that they believed Simon's friendship with me was fundamentally connected with his becoming the so-called atheist.

His mother once cornered me in her kitchen and barked with a heavy accent, "You used to be such a good boy, Ronnie, a wonderful student like Simon. But I can't understand why the two of you stopped going to *shul*. You know you'll always be Jewish, no matter what you do or don't do. Even if you marry a *shiksa* and live among the *Goyim*."

Many years later when, to my surprise, Simon found comfort in attending synagogue again, his parents were overjoyed. Their wayward son had somehow found his way back to his religious roots.

Listening to my story, Danielle expressed amusement at Simon's eventual return to religion. "God works in mysterious ways," she said, with a slightly mocking grin.

“He certainly does. Like when He managed to bring us together,” I added with a smile.

Danielle laughed, but she corrected me on my paternalistic assumptions about the Creator. “Yes, She certainly loves the great Mystery. She’s all about Mystery. Absolutely. But I myself would prefer a little less Mystery right now. Could you please slow down a little on these mountain curves?”

I eased off on the accelerator as we gazed down on tranquil Shasta Lake, encircled by snow-frosted mountains and forests of emerald-green fir. Glancing at the placid, dark blue water, my mind drifted to images of Simon sinking lifelessly in a far-away river in Buenos Aires. Somehow, he had jumped or fallen into the water, descended to the river’s muddy bottom, and drowned. I cringed at what I envisioned, slowing down a little more for the sharper curves, as the road brought us dramatically closer to the gleaming water.