

AARON HAMBURGER

## Simple Past Present Perfect

**B**AY RIDGE, BROOKLYN, late September 2002. A beautiful fall morning. What was once called an *Indian summer*, but Jacob is learning to expunge such phrases from his lexicon: *Indian summer*, *Dutch treat*, *French kiss*. Is French kiss okay? Not that it matters; he hasn't French kissed a guy in months.

Jacob collects American slang expressions the way his mother collects first editions of E. M. Forster novels, the way his friends collect bedmates in gay bars. His ESL students adore studying American slang, preferring it by far to yet another unsatisfying explanation of the present perfect versus the simple past.

They complain: What's so perfect about the present? Why is the past simple?

He's been teaching for over a year and still has no good answers.

Jacob races up the steps from the subway lugging English textbooks, photocopies, a box of chalk, and his laptop, in case he gets a free minute to work on his novel. (He never does.) The aproned women selling trays of taquitos and the day laborers hoping to get picked up for construction jobs watch curiously as he jogs past them, down 4th Avenue. According to the self-help books Jacob reads to improve his life—his mother mocks them as New Age claptrap—the present moment is always perfect. Nothing needs changing about it except his own thinking.

At this present moment he's in a rush because the R-train, rumbling along even more slowly than its usual crawl, has deposited Jacob in Bay Ridge with five minutes to get to class. En route, he recites his mantra: You're not a loser. Not a sexually frustrated unpublished writer teaching English to immigrants to pay bills. Not a grown man living at home with Mommy. You're a miracle worker spreading a message of hope and love.

Jacob turns down a side street of brownstones and spindly trees sprouting radiant crowns of gold leaves. The pollution smells sharper than in Manhattan; here the air has a deep tang of iron like the smell that was everywhere last September, when the Twin Towers fell.

His destination is the Arab American Lutheran Church, a red brick building with a soot-streaked stained glass rose window and a stout central bell tower. A bald man with bronzed skin is watering the flowers by the fence. As Jacob trots up to the side entrance, the man bows and shuts off his hose. Jacob waves theatrically and calls out, “Shukran!” Thank you.

“Shukran,” the man says in a husky voice. Every day, they perform this friendly ritual.

The bulletin board by the door is crowded with messages about job training, money for 9/11 victims, and a flyer that says “Peace” in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. Passing the kitchen, Jacob smells strong Turkish-style coffee brewing. Fatima, the daytime caretaker, dashes from room to room, unlocking doors and yelling in Arabic on her cell phone. Her four-year-old son is breaking toys in the playroom behind the social hall, which doubles as Jacob’s classroom on weekdays. There are nineteen adult-sized chairs for Jacob’s twenty-five students, so on rare days of full attendance, the students take turns sitting in the kid-die chairs.

Jacob’s first day on the job was last year, September 11th, 2001, when his school rented classroom space from a Jewish day care center in the neighborhood. Jacob remembers the frantic parents picking up their kids while his adult students showed up for school with cheerful smiles. Jacob overheard a mom explain to her kid why this was happening: “Because we’re friends with Israel.” In reply, the kid wanted to know, so why are we friends with Israel?

The news about the World Trade Center was so fresh it had only broken in English, a language his students didn’t speak. Jacob first explained what was happening in his broken Spanish to the Latino students, who quickly left the room. The Russian, Chinese, and Arabic students watched in confusion as Jacob tried to reach the interpreters on a landline; mobiles weren’t working. Not until all the students had heard the news and returned home did he think to call his mom, let her know he was safe. When she heard his voice, she broke into a wail.

Classes resumed the following week. But in the months that followed, the employees at the day care center grumbled that Jacob’s students were too loud, too friendly to the children, and too redolent of cumin or body odor. At the end of the year, they canceled the school’s rental contract, for “security” reasons. Hence the move to the Arab American Church.

As Jacob drops his things on the desk in his classroom, the students call out in unison, “Hello, teacher!” Fatima’s son briefly looks up from the plastic toy car he’s furiously smashing against the floor in order to wave. Yasmin, a tiny young woman from Yemen wearing a salmon-colored hijab, runs to shore up his teetering tower of photocopies. “Please. I help you.”

“Thank you,” says Jacob. “It’s alright. You can sit down with your friends.”

Yasmin smiles shyly, bows, then returns to her seat.

Only six students so far. Jacob can predict their attendance based on the weather. If it’s too sunny and warm or too rainy and cold, students tend to stay home. Partly cloudy skies with temperatures in the upper 50s is ideal weather for a full class.

However, weather can’t account for the continued absence of so many of the surly Russian Jewish grandmas who’d attended Jacob’s classes religiously at the Jewish day care center. When Jacob asked the few Russians that remained where their friends were, they merely shook their heads. Finally one woman explained, “We don’t like Arabs.” She waved her arms and made a noise like an explosion. “Nine-one-one. World Trade Center.”

“But these people are innocent,” Jacob said. “They didn’t do anything on 9/11.”

The woman shook her head. “I don’t like Arabs. Arabs, bang-bang.” She mimed a gun going off and marched away.

Jacob wishes he knew the right words to bring together the Russians and the Arabs, who sit on opposite sides of the room, while Chinese and Spanish speakers form a neutral buffer zone in-between. (If he were a student, that’s where he’d sit.) He likes to imagine the Russian grandmas offering advice and comfort to the young Arab moms, separated by oceans from their own mothers. Sometimes he breaks the class into small multilingual groups, but as soon as they finish their tasks, the students retreat to their tribes.

Fatima pokes her head into the room and yells: “Get out of there! You know you’re not supposed to play in here.” She grabs her son by the wrist, then smiles at Jacob. “Not you, of course. You want coffee? I can bring some. Oh, the Pastor would like to meet you.”

Jacob feels a spike of panic, as if he’s been called to the principal’s office. He asks Yasmin to lead a workbook exercise—she consents with a deep pink blush—then climbs the tight staircase to the Pastor’s

office, which has been converted from a storage closet beneath the bell tower. The room has a single tiny window and smells of cooking oil from the kitchen below, where Fatima's high-pitched voice rings through the floorboards. There's barely space for a cabinet and a worn wooden desk, let alone Pastor Al-Amin, who's over six feet tall and slouches to avoid hitting the ceiling as he rises from his chair. He extends a large hand, lightly covered in black hair, and grips Jacob's soft white hand.

Jacob expected Al-Amin to be a wizened, silver-haired codger with pale, dry fingers and garlicky breath. But the Pastor has broad shoulders, a handsome aquiline nose, smooth, olive skin, and a fashionably trim black beard that outlines his firm jaw.

"Please sit." He gestures stiffly to a wooden chair as if his black blazer is too tight. "The ladies are very happy with your teaching. They say you are very kind."

"That's nice of them to say," Jacob says. Compliments make him squeamish, so he tends to deflect them. His sister's the same way, but not his brother, and especially not his mother.

"They say it because it's true." The Pastor sinks into his chair. "Tell me about yourself?"

"There's not much to tell. I'm a lifelong New Yorker. I went to Columbia for undergrad and grad school. Then I moved back in with my parents." Jacob still uses the plural of "parents," though his dad died last year of cancer. His mom claims he's a 9/11 victim, arguing that the shock of the news hastened his end.

"What did you study?" asks Al-Amin. His light brown eyes have a gentle expression.

"Creative writing. Pretty useless." Jacob thinks of his former classmates, who'd praised the technical proficiency of his prose, but complained his stories were missing something. What exactly? No one could say. Now six of them have book contracts—and look where he is. He'd thought teaching English might be a good profession for a writer-in-training (or a writer-in-waiting-for-a-book-contract), forcing him to confront the intricacies of his native language up close, but his work has led to more mystery and confusion. Like countable and non-countable nouns, phrasal verbs, and the dreaded present perfect.

"I disagree," says the Pastor, his head and shoulders backlit by the light coming through the thin window behind him. His voice is surprisingly soft for such a big man, and he speaks with a trace of an

Arabic accent that adds elegance to his words. "I find creativity highly useful."

"But not very lucrative. See, my sister's a lawyer. And my brother's a financial analyst."

"And like them, you help people who desperately need your services." The Pastor sits forward in his leather office chair, revealing a rip in the upholstery masked with blue duct tape. "Without your classes, many of these women would not leave the house. Their husbands would not let them go out on their own. Here, they find community, purpose. Something to look forward to besides cooking or cleaning."

"I'm glad," says Jacob, ashamed of his self-pity. His students, so eager to learn, accept his verdicts with unquestioned authority. In English, unlike writing, there are right and wrong answers. Either your verbs agree or they don't. Even his famous mother, for all her lectures and readings, does not command such respect from her undergrads. "They're nice women."

"I also think you are a nice man," says Pastor Al-Amin, "though behind the niceness, I sense a certain loneliness. Am I right?"

Jacob, who's closeted with his students, is unsure of how candid he should be about his lackluster love life with a pastor. "My father died last year."

"Ah, I'm sorry. And your mother? How is she?"

"Fine. She buries herself in her work." Jacob squirms in his chair. "She, uh, writes too. Books, articles, essays. Barbara Yelinsky. Ever heard of her?"

The Pastor shakes his head, and Jacob feels deeply relieved.

"Anyway, she's highly prolific," he says.

"That's wonderful. Very impressive," says the Pastor. "No?"

Jacob shrugs. You wouldn't be saying that if you knew my mother's work, he thinks.

"Perhaps her success makes you a bit uncomfortable," Al-Amin says. "My father is also a pastor, back in Ramallah. A renowned man, admired in the community. Maybe that's why I came to America, so I wouldn't be compared with him."

"I'd never want to be compared to my mother," says Jacob. "I'm nothing like her."

"You might be," says the Pastor. "Don't undervalue your talent."

"I didn't mean that. I'm just saying, we're very different writers." Al-Amin watches sympathetically, waiting to hear more, but Jacob

changes the subject. “I almost forgot, I have something to tell you. I was going to tell Fatima, but since you’re here . . . I have to cancel class next Wednesday.” He hesitates, then explains, “It’s the Jewish New Year.”

“Ah, yes. Happy Rosh Hashanah. It’s late this year, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” says Jacob, surprised to hear him speak Hebrew. “How did you know?”

“I have several Jewish friends. Does this shock you?”

Jacob shrugs again. Calling himself Jewish feels inaccurate since he no longer follows traditional religion. He’s only going to *shul* for Rosh Hashanah because it’s a family thing.

Al-Amin smiles. “Please, let us be frank together. Perhaps you’re surprised to hear I have Jewish friends because I am Palestinian.”

“Not at all,” says Jacob. “It makes no difference to me.”

“Then I hope you’ll consider me your friend.” Al-Amin opens a desk drawer, removes a pink flyer, and hands it to Jacob. “You might be interested.” It’s an announcement for a public conversation between Al-Amin and a Reform Jewish rabbi. An interfaith dialogue.

“This looks interesting,” says Jacob. “I’ll try to make it.”

“Do more than try. As a favor between friends. Won’t you come?”

Jacob looks up, meets the searching look in the Pastor’s velvety brown eyes. Maybe it’s only because he hasn’t gotten laid in a while, but, Jacob wonders, *Is this guy hitting on me?*

AFTER WORK, Jacob takes the subway to his gym in Chelsea, popular with muscular gay couples who take turns spotting each other while bench pressing. Huffing on a treadmill, he thinks of Al-Amin, how blithely he received the news that Jacob lived with his mother. Usually when Jacob meets men, he does a delicate dance to describe his humiliating domestic situation—maybe that’s why he’s chronically single. He’s trying like hell to save for first and last months’ rent, but in New York, money leaks out of your wallet.

His workout finished, Jacob showers, then studies himself in the mirror. No Brad Pitt, but he’s cute in a nerdy way: wavy black hair which smells of the free minty shampoo at his gym, a lean build, cool glasses. His self-help books recommend lobbing compliments at his reflection, but the best he can do is, “I wouldn’t throw you out of bed.”

He stops by Boy Bar for happy hour, partly to delay going home because tonight his mother is having one of her soirées. This one is

sponsored by *Commentary* magazine to celebrate her latest publication: *In Defense of Great Books: How the Left and Radical Islam Are Destroying Our Culture*. It came out two months ago, but she's still celebrating.

A couple of guys look at him encouragingly, but he ignores them. Last fall, in the weeks right after 9/11, he'd been a total slut, hooking up every weekend, sometimes twice or three times in one day. But now that the dust has quite literally settled, and the smell in the air cleared, he hasn't been in the mood for passion.

Sipping the dregs of melted ice from his highball glass, Jacob stares out the window at a row of newspaper boxes. Tattered, graying 9/11 flyers that say, "Have You Seen Me?" are taped over with handbills for gay parties. The flyers remind him of the pastor for some reason, of his deep brown eyes, which weirdly inspire the faint stirrings of an erection.

His glass dry, Jacob rides the C-train to his mother's apartment on the Upper West Side. "Hey, Jakey!" says the doorman, because that's what he used to call Jacob when he was a child.

Getting off the elevator on the tenth floor, he hears voices echo down the hall. Evidently, he's come home too early. The living room is packed with friends and admirers as well as strangers who aspire to enter that enchanted circle. Pushing his way in, Jacob inhales deep whiffs of perfume and hot gougères. His mother, standing by their box piano, has paused her lecture to bask in their applause. She's wearing a man's sport coat and a black and white polka dot tie. Her brown hair streaked with gray is short and spiked, and as she speaks, she examines the room through oversized black-framed glasses, perched on her sharp nose.

His mother resumes speaking in her precise, reedy voice. ". . . and that's the difference between literature and sloganeering, between the human complexities of Woolf, Joyce, and Forster, and the current mania for victimization narratives, bean counters, the diversity police."

Jacob listens to her hold forth on the glories of E.M. Forster for the crowd ("Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest"), and he feels stirred by the soaring oratory, the ferocious intelligence. While lecturing, his mother's harsh features soften, not into beauty exactly, but something more interesting. Her conservatism is seductive—treacherously so. He'd far prefer to be a student in Barbara Yelinsky's Great Books class at Hunter College than to be her son.

The talk ends, and the crowd searches for free wine and what's left of the canapés. While trying to sneak off to his room, Jacob is trapped by one of the *Commentary* editors, a family friend who marvels at both his mother's brilliance and how much he's grown. She'd never have recognized him. And yet she did recognize him. "What do you do, Jacob?"

Writer or teacher? Each answer invites unwelcome questions. As his mother appears by his side, he decides to go with writer.

"Oh?" the friend replies. "Barbara, you never said. So, Jacob, what have you published?"

"Nothing," he says, staring her in the eye. "Nothing at all."

His mother rushes to fill the awkward silence. "Jacob's an excellent writer."

"But not half as excellent as E. M. Forster," Jacob says.

"Very few living writers are," replies Barbara. "Unless you count *Maurice*, which I don't. Too bad it didn't remain suppressed. Not for the homosexuality, but the bad art."

Jacob has heard this line countless times, perhaps most memorably when he came out to his mom, during his sophomore year of college, and claimed kinship with Forster, her favorite writer. "I have zero problem with anyone's sexual lifestyle, Forster's or yours," Barbara said at the time. "I'm a libertarian, not a neo-con."

Jacob excuses himself and goes up to his room. He sits in bed with his laptop and searches online for Al-Amin. Nothing pops up. Eventually he snaps the laptop shut, closes his eyes to meditate, but his thoughts keep drifting toward Brooklyn, and that invitation to the interfaith dialogue thing. Maybe he'll go.

Maybe? he thinks. Who am I kidding. Of course I'm going.

His mother opens his door without knocking. A hazard of living with the Great Barbara Yelinsky. Jacob can't even jerk off in his own room; he's learned to do it in the shower.

"They're gone," she says. "The coast is clear." She's watching him with her lips pursed, as if she's trying to coax out meaning from a particularly dense line of poetry.

"Thanks for letting me know," he says. "Do you want something?"

He knows what she wants: a genuine moment. As a kid, he used to crave this kind of connection with her, but she was always too busy with her essays to notice. When he was a teenager, she finally published her first book, *Why the World Wants to Wipe Out the Jews, and Other Essays on Hypocrisy*. Yes, the Great Barbara Yelinsky was a late



bloomer. Was that when he began resenting her? While she was lecturing about Judeo-Christian values, and he was sneaking into gay bars? Or is his bitterness a more recent result of his literary frustrations?

"It's so quiet here late at night," she says, "without your father turning the TV on at full blare." Jacob smiles involuntarily at a memory of his father, whose hearing faded in his last years. "Did anything interesting happen during your English lessons?"

"How would that be possible? You weren't there."

Wincing, his mother removes her glasses, squeezes them in her hand. Her face looks haggard, sagging. If only he and his mom could speak fully, honestly, the way people learned to do in self-help books. But he's become accustomed to hiding his life from her.

"Okay," she says, "you're in one of your moods. I'll leave you alone."

"Good idea," he replies. "That's what E. M. Forster would do."

THE MONDAY BEFORE Rosh Hashanah, Jacob's school has invited a guest to speak about tolerance. It's part of a post-9/11 citywide program; for participating, their school receives a special grant from the mayor's office. Though he sympathizes with the program's goals, Jacob would rather not sacrifice class time for it. His students are starting to grasp the difference between simple past and present perfect, and he hates to lose that momentum.

Jacob passes out donuts and paper cups of juice. The guest speaker uses vocabulary that's too advanced for the class. Yasmeen sits up in her seat straining to understand, but the others give up the effort. When the speaker leaves, Jacob asks, as he's been directed, "What lessons did you learn from this program?" No response. "What will you remember?"

Finally, Yasmeen raises a timid hand. "We got donuts!"

Afterward, the Pastor invites Jacob to his office for lunch. There's fresh fluffy pita from a local Arabic bakery, and a yellow lentil soup with an intoxicating earthy smell. The Pastor hands him a plate of quartered lemons and invites Jacob to squeeze one over his soup. He does, and acid from the juice burns in a paper cut on his thumb.

"Tell me about your book," says Al-Amin, so Jacob struggles to describe his sprawling cast of characters, carefully curated for diversity: an African American NYU student, a working class Irishman, a Latino lawyer, a Jewish lesbian rabbi. The scene is New York on 9/11. The plot hinges upon several coincidences engineered to force these disparate people to cross paths.

“I guess I’m trying to write the great 9/11 novel,” Jacob says sheepishly.

“Isn’t it a bit soon?”

Jacob has the same concern but fears if he doesn’t get the jump on this subject, someone else will do it ahead of him. “Can’t I write about what I want?”

“Of course,” says the Pastor, “if that’s your passion.”

Jacob cringes. The word “passion” reminds him of cheesy soap operas.

“What do you want to say about 9/11?” asks Al-Amin. “What’s your point of view?”

“I don’t have one,” says Jacob. “As a novelist, my job is to describe reality, not to judge.”

“I don’t know much about fiction. But I know reality, and sometimes it demands a little judgment.” Al-Amin folds his arms. “Here’s an example. When I was a student in Bible college near Hebron, one day, Israeli soldiers burst into my home and arrested me without charge. They held me for three months. They tortured me.”

Jacob sucks in his breath. “How did they torture you?”

The Pastor shakes his head. “I don’t like to speak about the things that happened in the Israeli jails. In the end, no charges were filed and the government admitted my innocence. I was released without an explanation or apology. It took me a year to recover from my wounds. Even now, I am unable to raise my arms above my shoulders.”

“That’s awful,” says Jacob. But the words feel inadequate. No, Jacob feels inadequate.

“Eventually I came here, to serve this congregation of poor immigrant families, the ones who cut hair, prepare falafel, or drive the car services. Together, we bought this abandoned church and are bringing it back to life. This church, this city has been a refuge.” His eyes glisten. “9/11 has brought new challenges. You should have seen the graffiti on our walls last year.”

Al-Amin’s head droops, and Jacob wants to offer a hug, or . . . something. But he has nothing, except for a lame-sounding apology, “I’m sorry.”

“No, I should be sorry,” says the Pastor. “I invite you to lunch and I burden you with such a story. At least I hope the food was good.”

You’re apologizing to me? Jacob thinks. An ambulance screams by, and he has to wait for it to pass before answering. “Oh, it was. It was delicious.”

“I have to be a good cook. I live alone.” Jacob’s gay-dar perks up. Lives alone? A good cook? “But I may not be single for long. Fatima keeps trying to marry me off.”

“Why hasn’t she succeeded?”

The Pastor scratches his ear. “I haven’t met the right person.”

“Me neither,” says Jacob, noting the use of the gender-neutral “person.”

“You can’t force people to love,” says the Pastor. “It must occur naturally.”

“I want you to know. I’m coming to your interfaith dialogue.”

“I’m very glad. Both our peoples have tasted the bitter poison of exile. God is calling us to listen to each other instead of fight each other.”

That’s beautiful, Jacob thinks. More beautiful and natural than anything I’ve written. He wishes he could steal those lines for his novel, and then feels ashamed of the wish.

FOR DECADES, the Yelinsky family has attended Beth Shalom, House of Peace. The name always seems ironic to Jacob during the High Holidays, as desperate congregants push past each other in a scramble to save the best seats. But this year, with the added security presence, cop cars and pat-downs at the entrance, peace seems ever more distant.

Jacob tries to tune out the ancient words of a religion that he rejected long ago for rejecting him Levitically. He wants to use this time to meditate, but he’s distracted. He has a fetish for dark-haired men in suits, powerful-looking men with bold noses and full lips and loud, brash opinions about everything from the Yankees to the right temperature for cooking steak.

This year’s service is a special one for the Yelinskys. Their matriarch is giving a talk about the lessons of 9/11 and its special meaning for Jews. (Spoiler alert: It means Israel is the light of mankind.) Jacob’s siblings are both in attendance, which is unusual. On High Holidays, Jacob’s brother goes to an egalitarian service at a temple he belongs to and rarely attends. Jacob’s sister, who lives in Boston, has flown in for this occasion.

After services, they have a catered lunch at their mother’s apartment. Jacob sits there alternately bored and seething as his siblings exchange investment strategies and stories about their marvelous career accomplishments. He has nothing to say until the conversation shifts to a recap of his mother’s well received sermon that morning.

“Israel boasts a vibrant art scene, a booming economy, a robust free press that openly discusses abortion or homosexuality,” says his mother. “While in her neighbors. . .” Barbara’s the type of person who refers to countries in the feminine singular, “the sole evidence of modernity is the bastardization of cell phones to trigger bombs, and TVs to broadcast anti-Semitic paranoia. Who is the Palestinian Martin Luther King? The Palestinian Gandhi?”

“He’s right here in New York,” Jacob interrupts, and for the first time, everyone at the table turns his way. “Sure he is. And if you don’t believe me, I can introduce you to him.”

His sister rolls her eyes, and his brother interrupts the chewing of his brisket long enough to say, “There he goes again, always stirring things up to get attention.”

“No, no,” says Barbara. “Give the boy a chance to have his say. Jacob?”

Jacob runs up to his room, as he used to do as a child throwing a temper tantrum, but this time, it’s not to sulk. He returns to the table with a flyer for the interfaith dialogue.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, he and Barbara ride in a car service driven by a Pakistani man to Sunset Park. The driver has scotch-taped a picture of the Twin Towers to the back of his headrest. Jacob has on a tight black shirt and expensive jeans. Barbara wears a bold eggplant-colored pantsuit whose effect is marred by her beige sensible shoes, the color of a bandage.

Why did she come? Well, she’s never one to back down from a dare. Or maybe she’s sincerely curious about her younger son, wants to know what his life is like when he’s not in her apartment. Nah, he decides. It must be because she can’t turn down a dare.

They arrive early at the church. The old man who usually waters the flowers stands by the door. Today he wears a suit but no tie. He and Jacob exchange their shukrans.

“What did you say to that man?” Barbara asks in a fierce tone that makes Jacob shudder.

“I only told him thank you in Arabic.”

“Oh. And how do you say that?” He tells her and she repeats it awkwardly. “Shu-kran?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

Barbara looks over her shoulder and with a grand wave, calls out: “Shukran.”

“Shukran, shukran,” the man grins.

Interfaith dialogue. It’s working already, Jacob thinks, his heart fluttering.

He wants to show her his classroom—where he feels strong—but they’re late. Already most of the chairs in the social hall are taken. Jacob waves to Fatima, who’s busy jamming in a few more seats and doesn’t see him. He and Barbara find seats in back, beside several children’s crayon drawings of lions and lambs taped to the walls.

The program begins ten minutes late, as the Pastor comes in with a young woman who calls herself Rabbi Debbie. (“Rabbi Debbie, indeed,” Barbara scoffs.) Al-Amin wears a short-sleeved, black button-down shirt with a white clerical collar, black pants, and shiny black shoes that squeak on the floor. He could have stepped out of one of Jacob’s fantasies.

“Welcome, dear guests,” the Pastor says, extending his arms.

Al-Amin and Debbie exchange inspiring stories about family, food, and shared values. Jacob is charmed by an amusing anecdote Al-Amin tells about his first Passover seder, when he thanked his hosts for “breaking bread.” He speaks passionately, sincerely, about reconciliation between two ancient peoples. Debbie, who plays guitar and sings in a high, tremulous voice like Joan Baez, leads the audience in a song she’s composed, titled, “Salaam, Shalom, Peace.”

After the discussion, Jacob has never felt so proud. He wants to tell his mother, that guy is my friend. Didn’t E. M. Forster say if forced to choose between my country and my friend, I hope I’d have the guts to betray my country? Instead, he asks, “Well?”

“He talks prettily, I’ll give you that much,” she says.

“I want you to meet him. You’ll like him.” What he means is, I want you to like him.

They wait as members of the audience shake the Pastor’s hand, bask in his warm smile. At last, it’s their turn. Jacob feels nervous as Barbara looks the Pastor up and down. Finally, she tells him: “I grew up in a neighborhood like this.” An innocent enough remark.

“Was it a nice place to grow up?” Al-Amin asks in his soft voice, muffled by the buzz of conversations in the echoing room. Barbara asks him to repeat himself, which he does, rocking on his feet. Jacob fantasizes about offering the Pastor a chair so he can rest.

“Yes, it was, unless you were a Jew,” she says. “The kids called me Christ-killer and threw stones at me. What is it about Jews that pro-

vokes non-Jews to throw stones at them?"

Jacob blushes, but the Pastor merely bows slightly. "That sounds like a painful memory."

"Here I am, just turned sixty, and the words still burn," says Barbara.

"My religion is famous for the phrase 'turn the other cheek,'" says Al-Amin. "But I prefer a saying of Oscar Wilde: Forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them more."

"Hey, that's terrific," Jacob says, mulling the significance of the Oscar Wilde reference. What straight guy quotes Oscar Wilde? "Mom, did you know Oscar Wilde said that?"

Barbara waves his question aside. "Pastor, I understand that your brother-in-law is currently in prison for being a Hamas activist, is he not?"

He is? Jacob thinks, horrified by the turn in the conversation. How does she know that?

"True," says Al-Amin. "But I'm standing here, not him." Fatima approaches to ask him something in Arabic. He replies, and then she marches off, as if she's unhappy with the answer.

"Mom, you're not being fair," says Jacob. "That's like saying when my novel gets published someday, it should be judged based on what you've written."

"But you will be," says Barbara. "Fair or not, that's how the world works."

"To judge anyone," says the Pastor, "based on the small amount of knowledge available to us as children of God is an exercise in vanity. I know only that we must love each other."

"So you condemn nothing?" Barbara asks. "Not the suicide bombing, rocket fire, explosions on buses, in discos, restaurants, and shopping malls?"

"The Apostle Matthew says we must love our enemies and pray for our persecutors," the Pastor replies. "If you love only those who love you, how will you ever achieve peace?"

Strike two, Jacob thinks. The man's a genius. He wishes his mom would finish her grilling, but she's not done. "How about Nazis?" Barbara asks.

Jacob groans. "Really, Mom? Nazis?"

"It's not a rhetorical question. Several of his people say they wish Hitler had finished the job. They also, paradoxically, deny the Holocaust."

Al-Amin takes a long breath before he replies. "I believe bringing the Holocaust into any discussion of Israeli-Palestinian issues leads to distortions on both sides."

"And what does your side want?" she asks. "Seriously, I'd like to know. Peace or revenge? Because if it's peace, your people could have had a state after Camp David II."

Jacob moves to interrupt, but the Pastor holds up his hand and says, "Imagine you live in a house. One day, your neighbor says, I will take your house from you, but you may live in the attic and the basement. Only you must not cross through the house to get from one part to the other. Would you accept such an arrangement?"

"A very good question," Jacob says. "Mom, we should get back to Manhattan."

Barbara refuses to follow his lead. "So you reject the so-called two-state solution?"

"You ask me many questions," the Pastor says, raising his voice. "May I ask one of you? Do you believe in the right of Palestine to exist?"

"Before 1948, no Arab born in what is now Israel would have called himself a Palestinian or a Jordanian or Egyptian or anything but an Arab," says Barbara. "Since 1948, a Palestinian nation was invented, founded on a culture of hijacking and suicide bombings. In other words, a death cult. If you were ever permitted to form a state, whether in an attic or a basement, with no Jews left in it to kill, what would its animating function be? You'd have to turn on each other."

"Are you calling me a murderer?" asks Al-Amin.

"Mom, please," Jacob says. "No serious intellectual denies the Palestinians' suffering."

"Intellectuals are easily seduced by sentimental horror stories of the downtrodden," she replies. "But at root, they're as maudlin as Dickens and the death of Little Nell."

"I am fond of Dickens," says the Pastor.

"You would be," says Barbara.

"Sentiment, emotion, they make us human." The Pastor nods at Jacob. "Like your son. You could learn from his example, his kindness toward his students."

Hearing this compliment, Jacob feels embarrassingly warm. But Barbara tells Al-Amin, "You're wrong. It's reason that makes us human. Pastor, for how long will your young people study hatred instead of

history, bomb-making instead of engineering, slogan-chanting instead of poetry? Where are the Palestinian Nobel Prize winners, the artists, scientists, and yes, the peacemakers? Where's the Palestinian Gandhi? The Palestinian Martin Luther King?"

"If he is alive, he is probably being tortured in an Israeli jail!" Al-Amin raises his right hand as if to strike, or give the Pledge of Allegiance. Instead he balls his hand in a fist and punches his other hand. A cluster of people chatting nearby fall silent and stare. "Excuse me," he says, bows his head, then quickly leaves the room. Jacob feels ashamed, as if he'd just sucker-punched his new friend. What was he thinking, inflicting his mother on this poor man?

"You can't get anywhere with this guy," his mother harrumphs.

"That's my friend you just humiliated," he says.

"Don't tell me you're on his side," says Barbara.

"I wasn't thinking about sides," he says. "I was thinking about manners." He feels dizzy now, out of place, and he can't think of what to say, like a teacher without a lesson plan.

His mother says, "Let's call a car service and go back home. We'll talk about it later."

"No," says Jacob.

"Alright, we won't talk about it later."

"I don't mean that," he says. "I mean, I'm not going back with you."

"YOUR MOTHER proved her point," says the Pastor in a sad, weary tone on Monday when Jacob comes up to his office to apologize. "She's right. I am an angry Palestinian. I do wish for the Israeli state as it currently exists to be destroyed. And if you were me, you would too."

The two of them are standing in the little room, and the Pastor does not invite Jacob to sit. Jacob feels small and petty beside him.

"You're not angry at all of us, are you?" he asks, wishing he had the courage to ask: Can I still be your friend? And if the answer is no, what can I say to change your mind?

The Pastor asks: "Knowing your mother and her ideas, why did you bring her?"

"I thought if she listened to you, she might change her mind," he says.

"Is that really why? Or were you hoping for some other reaction?"

"Thinking of it now, I know it sounds ridiculous, but I thought it might help." But that's not all, Jacob thinks. I wanted her to meet my



friend, my smart, handsome, kind Palestinian friend. And to be impressed by him as I have been. “Anyway, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry is for when I spill the tea or when Fatima’s son breaks a toy. Not for the things your mother said to me.” Al-Amin laughs bitterly. “She talks of Gandhi. When Gandhi was alive, even he wasn’t Gandhi. They called him a terrorist for insisting on his people’s liberation.”

“In some other context,” says Jacob, “she and you might really get along.”

“But this is reality, not one of your stories, and in reality, we don’t get along,” says Al-Amin. “So you must choose a side.”

“I don’t believe in sides. It’s a trap, a false choice. I don’t believe in fighting.”

“And you think I do? I was a student in Bible College, for goodness sake. But the fight came to me.” Jacob’s phone rings in his pocket, but he ignores it. “Someone’s calling you,” says the Pastor. “Maybe your mom?”

“Maybe.” But Jacob knows it’s his mother calling yet again, wondering where he is.

“You’re not going to answer?”

Jacob shakes his head.

The Pastor sits at his desk. “Somehow I feel she’s here with us now.” He folds his arms. “Fond as I am of you, I have work to do. And you have English lessons to teach.”

I’m fond of you too, thinks Jacob. “Actually, my classes are finished for today.”

“Then you can go home.”

Jacob doesn’t want to leave, but there’s no point in staying. “I don’t exactly have one right now. I’m staying on a friend’s couch. I’m searching for a more permanent home.”

“Aren’t we all,” says the Pastor.

Jacob turns red. “Jesus,” he says. “Sorry, I mean . . . well, I don’t know what I mean.”

“I really must get to work.” The Pastor gestures toward the door. “We’ll see each other.”

Walking out of the church, Jacob replays the conversation with the Pastor, but ultimately, it’s too painful. Instead, his thoughts drift back into the past, landing on 9/11, and the end of that long and terrible day. The subway shut down, so he’d been stuck in Brooklyn until late afternoon, when a few of the trains were back in service. To get home

he had to take the F to the G to the E. At one point, he waited on an outdoor subway platform in Queens with a view of the tip of Manhattan, shrouded in black smoke. He stood there, thinking, will I ever get home? Do these lines even connect?

In the end, the answer was yes. But the journey took much longer than he'd imagined.