

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*Shabbos Goy*

June 24, 1994

Grace Coolidge High School's graduation ceremony for the class of 1994 was most memorable for featuring a keynote speech from Chuck Schumer, representative of New York's 9th congressional district. Schumer told a moving story about how, when he was a teenager, he had an amazing career opportunity that he passed up on so he could stay close to his girlfriend. The audience gave out a collective sigh of approval. Tutting, Schumer held a finger aloft and hit us with the punchline: "Unfortunately for me, she broke up with me a few days later." *Funny rhetorical entrapment. Brilliant. I am going to have to remember that technique, Chuck.* It was an effective speech, and I didn't mind hearing it again a few years later at my college graduation. Still, when I saw him stand up to speak at Leo's college graduation three years later — by which time Schumer was a United States Senator — I left the ceremony early and got myself some coffee and three Boston Cream Donuts. After seeing Schumer those three times, I thought of him as a family friend, and enjoyed knowing that his graduation speech was so good he never updated it.

Class valedictorian Ari Zuckerman spoke right after Chuck. Since we had been friends since third grade, I was excited to hear his address. Unfortunately, by the time Ari took his place at the podium, my fellow graduates had become unruly. They were tired of sitting on white metal folding chairs on the football field, dressed in navy blue caps and gowns, baking in the blazing afternoon heat. Students were now openly talking with one another. Electronic hand fans appeared. A row of eight wise guys kept yelling, "Zuckerman's famous pig!" An inflatable beach ball magically appeared, was volleyed about for two minutes, and confiscated by security. (School Security! Always there to snatch the graduation beach ball and baseball caps off boy's heads, and to send girls home for showing too much leg. Never around any time I got jumped.)

By the time the valedictorian and community power brokers were done making speeches, and the names of all one thousand graduating

seniors were read aloud, I was sweaty and stinky, and my perspiration-dampened boxer shorts were clinging to my thighs. Clutching my diploma, I was looking forward to going home and having a long, hot shower. It would be a challenge finding my parents in bleachers filled with three-thousand immediate family members of all the seniors. I cast my eyes about for my friends. Most of them had already sprinted to their famished parents and fled the scene of the crime to get lunch out at local staples like Perkins, Denny's, or the International House of Pancakes. I didn't mind their vanishing act. In the weeks leading up to graduation, I'd done a good job of getting my yearbook signed by everyone I liked and snapping photos with my friends with my KODAK disc 4000. Since I was not going to Binghamton, I would probably not be seeing most of them again. Many of these soon-to-be-absent friends were people I'd known for four years, seven years, or my entire K-12 educational career.

When it dawns upon you that you won't be seeing a certain set of people ever again, something funny happens that is true whether the occasion is an impending departure from a school or a job: you feel liberated to act towards them any way you want. Of course, the question becomes, do you treat them kindly or cruelly? As graduation had approached, I realized that I had several options: 1) business as usual for the high-functioning introvert (or omnivert) and keep mostly to myself, 2) burn as many bridges as possible and act like an angry tool, or 3) behave much as Mitchell would, and be extra kind and extra just to everyone around me. I chose to honor my late friend by following the third path. I would kill everyone with kindness. If I was never going to see these people again, I wanted to end all our relationships on as positive a note as possible — so positive as to befuddle any one of them who had written me off ages ago as angry, withdrawn, or reactionary. I would show them just how cool I was. It was also a funny sort of revenge: Make them realize they should have appreciated me more while I was around by adding to my air of mystery and likeability with only a few weeks to go. Ironically, what started out half as revenge and half as a tribute to my late best friend wound up being a deeply emotionally and spiritually rewarding experience. I internalized the "niceness," stopped "acting" more like Mitchell and

wound up genuinely “becoming” more like Mitchell.

“The Path of the Righteous Mitchell” was a radical enough departure from my usual borderline-misanthropic behavior that I had to manufacture a new and more outgoing public persona for myself. I cultivated two slightly different personalities as part of my great fence-mending effort. When talking with the boys in my grade, I would be a loud, chummy Jimmy Stewart from *It’s a Wonderful Life*, talking boldly about my globetrotting plans, clapping folks on the back to congratulate them for their good fortunes, and putting positive spins on all bad news with brazen, unrealistic good cheer, in imitation of Jimmy Stewart’s gleeful exclamation, “Isn’t it wonderful, I’m going to jail!”

I created a separate persona for interacting with girls that was heavily influenced by the fact that I had utterly failed to find a prom date and had vowed never to ask out any other girl ever again. As a high school graduate, I was officially retired from dating for the rest of my life. Consequently, I assumed an “avuncular gentleman” personality when talking to girls. I stepped up my efforts holding doors open for girls, picking up items they dropped, and soberly complimenting them on their appearance. I tried mightily to pass myself off as a low-rent American Jane Austen hero. I was able to assume this persona because, as deferential and complimentary as I was, I projected no intention whatsoever of pursuing any of the girls I aided or complimented. I was there simply to say emotionally uplifting things to the girls, help them if possible, and get out of their way. I did not follow anyone around like a puppy, I made no passes at anyone, and I was determined not to be a nuisance in any way, shape, or form. The effect was striking. Even knowing I was straight and single, the girls in the school felt as comfortable around me as if I had been a eunuch or a safely gay friend. If I said something nice, they were not afraid to accept the compliment and thank me for it. If I held open a door or carried heavy books for a girl, she would thank me, and we would go our separate ways. For the first time since hitting puberty and becoming a sex-obsessed teenager, I was not a neutered Pepé Le Pew figure! Astounding. Also, if any boy insulted or accosted a girl in my presence, I would step in, doing my best impression of Edward Hardwicke’s Dr. John Watson from the

Jeremy Brett *Sherlock Holmes* series, and demand, quietly and firmly, that the “blackguard cease and desist his ungentlemanly treatment of this fine lady.” Independent of my influence, Leo developed a similar personality, in which he acted gentlemanly while retaining working-class New York affectations. Leo referred to our pseudo-British mannerisms and speech patterns as “BBC WOP.”

These two new “personalities” of mine — boisterous and demonstrative Jimmy Stewart for the boys and avuncular and gentlemanly Edward Hardwicke for the girls — were not insincere. If they had been insincere, they would not have elicited a positive response. The first few days I had adopted the new mannerisms, there had been a learning curve period and my speech and body language seemed forced. Once I got used to speaking and moving in new ways — and the other students became accustomed to my more cheery, confident, and carefree demeanor — I transitioned almost magically from playing the part of “a fun person to be around” to becoming a genuinely fun person to be around. It was only when I had a particularly appalling day or abominable bit of news that my attempts to put a brave face on things and bury my basest impulses backfired. During the moments when I was at my saddest and most nervous, I often came off as trying too hard. Under those circumstances, people who were well-inclined towards me were more likely to worry about me and ask me how I was really doing than castigate me for masking my true feelings. Those who were the best at seeing through my jokey demeanor during tough times — who could spot the tracks of my tears — always wound up being my favorite people.

I knew something in my heart was changing for the better when I walked through a department store and noted, absently, that two petite septuagenarians were reaching in vain for items on the top shelf that they would never reach in a million years. They stood on the tips of their toes. They extended their arms and swiped wildly. The items remained out of reach. *Someone should help them*, I thought. I walked to the next aisle, intent on finding whatever it was I was there to find, when I brought myself up short. *Wait a minute. I should help them. If those women had been young and gorgeous, I would have sprinted to help them. Every other guy in this store would have done the same. But*

*they're old now, so to hell with them? No, way, no how. Those are people in trouble, and I'm going to help them.* And I did. I reached up, plucked what they wanted from the top shelf with ease, and lowered it into their waiting hands. They were more grateful for the gesture than I expected them to be. I needed to start being helpful to people, not because I expected something out of them in return — and not because they were *sexy* — but because people often need help. End of story. Why was coming to such a conclusion so hard?

My second opportunity to be a functioning member of society instead of a misanthropic recluse came on a Friday night when a neighbor knocked on our front door instead of using the doorbell. I opened it to our friendly-but-over-earnest neighbor, Anne Birnbaum, who looked even graver than usual. “I’m so sorry to bother you,” she said quickly, “but my husband has a high fever. It is really worrying me. We have a prescription from the doctor, but we can’t fill it because we aren’t allowed to use or discuss money on Shabbos.” She held a doctor’s script aloft. “Would you be willing to use your money to pick up this prescription at the CVS on Victory? You can bring us the medicine tonight if you knock on our door and don’t ring the doorbell. We can pay you back tomorrow night, after dark. Would you mind helping us?”

*Oh, no! Larry is sick?* Honestly, I thought Larry was the coolest guy on the block. I loved watching the badass truck driver tinker with his Triumph TR65 Thunderbird on his driveway in his white muscle shirt, faded jeans, glasses, goatee, and yarmulke. He was one of my models of masculinity growing up: a husband and father, working-man, religious Jew, and brawny biker all-in-one. Larry was the total package. Also, I was grateful to him for not stringing me up by my testicles when I dented the fender of his car backing out of my driveway while I was still learning to drive. Because no paint from his car transferred to mine and no paint from mine transferred to his, I had been briefly tempted to pretend I had nothing to do with the dent, and no knowledge of how it happened. *No, that would be a dick move.* I rang his doorbell and confessed to being responsible for the dent. He came out, looked it over, and shrugged fatalistically. “No big deal, really. Don’t worry about it. That’s what life is all about.”

I laughed. “Well, I hope there’s more to life than *that*!”

“Not really.” He chuckled.

*Thank you for being nice to me when I didn’t deserve it. If somebody dents my car, I’ll forgive them in your honor. Pay it forward.*

I wanted to respond to Anne right away, but I had to figure out if I could get access to Mom’s car and if I had enough cash on hand to lay out the money in advance. Fortunately, I’d just gotten my twenty-dollar weekly allowance and had yet to spend it all on books, VHS films, CDs, or comic books. “Would twenty dollars cover the cost?” I asked.

Anne tried to come up with a way of answering me without violating the rules of Shabbos. “My instinct is you shouldn’t have trouble picking up the medicine for us.”

After taking the script from Anne, I “forgot” to tell my parents I was making this CVS run. At times like these, they seemed a bit too nervous and reclusive by half. They probably wouldn’t try to stop me helping Larry, but you never knew with them. They were weird. I snuck out, filled the prescription at CVS, and drove the medicine back home. I knocked on the Birnbaum’s door, and Anne opened it. Over her shoulder, I saw a glass display case filled with die cast model cars, motorcycles, and trucks. It was an impressive home exhibit I hadn’t seen before. It made perfect sense that Larry would have a cool collection of model vehicles.

“Thank you so much!” Anne exclaimed. “I’ll pay you back tomorrow night.”

“No rush. I’m only gonna spend it on French *Barbarella* comics.”

Leo caught me sneaking back in the house. “Okay, what are you up to?”

Raising both eyebrows, I feigned an innocent expression. “What could I be up to?”

“Yeah, you look even more suspicious now that you’re trying to look innocent.”

I told him the full story. He looked sad when I finished. I asked him what was wrong. “You always have these heartwarming interactions with people. When do I get to have a heartwarming interaction with someone?”

“Do I?” I asked. “I thought most of my stories were pretty hair-raising.”

“Well, they’re more heartwarming than my stories, let me tell you!”

“Christ. I hope that isn’t true, because my encounters with people are usually the pits. But I’ve always wanted my shot at being a ‘Shabbos goy,’ and help one of our neighbors out of a tight spot. It finally happened.” I picked up the terminology reading Will Eisner’s graphic novel *A Life Force*, about a wealthy Christian businessman who loses all his money in the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and is forced to move into a tenement building populated by Italian immigrants and Orthodox Jews. He is asked to do the same sorts of favors I was just asked to do and became affectionately known as the tenement’s “Shabbos goy.”

“Okay, but Larry better stop revving his motorcycle every morning at six,” Leo declared.

The most promising consequence of my self-improvement campaign was that my number of friends at Grace Coolidge High School quadrupled in the final three months of my senior year. Acting more like Mitchell than myself was paying dividends. As much as I had felt ignored and put upon by so many of my fellow students ever since kindergarten, the lesson was that a great many of them were quite fine people, but I had been too introverted to get to know them. I had been angry at them for not reaching out to me, but I had not reached out to them, either. To this day, I have a yearbook filled with signatures and a photo album filled with photos of friends I had made the last semester of school, who I had missed out on knowing for all the years before. I had wanted to end high school on a positive note and had. Even though I was only truly friends with them for a few weeks, I was very grateful for those few weeks we had together.

The one person I did not try to interact with in any way, shape, or form was Arwen. I was cordial to her when seeing her was unavoidable. Luckily, we crossed paths on surprisingly few occasions in the final months of school. On graduation day, as the crowd broke up and I headed towards the football field seats in search of my parents, I almost walked right into Arwen, her stepsister, stepmother, and father. Keeping my head down, I looped around them in a wide arc. Arwen called out

to me. I froze. She called me again. Nervous, I turned around and approached the Pokatny family. Arwen and her stepsister were dressed in their electric blue graduation gowns but had taken their caps off to liberate their long, wavy black hair. Their nondescript, suburban, middle-aged parents had the usual greying hair, khaki clothes, and excess weight about the midsection. They didn't look like candy factory moguls today, but typical, middle-class, Staten Island public school parents. *Spider-Man meets his archenemies, the Green Goblin and Doctor Octopus, in person, for the very first time, and finds them surprisingly innocuous. Maybe it is a good thing Tolkien kept Sauron in shadows, and Jane Austen never showed her readers Frank Churchill's aunt at Enscombe.*

"Congratulations," I said.

Arwen threw her arms around me and gave me a fierce hug. "You, too!"

"I didn't want to muscle in on your family celebration," I whispered, mid hug.

She smiled up at me. "You're not interrupting." Arwen released me and waved her dad over. "Dad! Can you get a picture of us?" Her father clearly had no idea who I was supposed to be. Her stepmother appeared in my line of vision. "Who's this, Arwen?"

Arwen slipped her arm into mine. "The nicest gentleman you'll ever meet. And I need a graduation photo with him."

"Really?" I was so surprised and moved it was all I could do not to burst into tears.

"Yes, really, dummy."

Without asking for more clarification about my identity, Arwen's father took a photo of the two of us. I hoped desperately it would not be blurry, that our heads wouldn't be chopped off, and that I didn't have sunken-looking allergy eyes, obvious pimples, or camera flash redeye.

*Dear God, let this photo be good.*

"I'll mail you a 5 x 7," Arwen assured me.

For some time, I had felt as if most of my life experiences had resulted in the weight of a new invisible boulder being placed upon my back — a back already weighed down under a dozen or so other invisible boulders. My insomnia and photographic memory would conspire to ensure that I would always remember these boulders



were there, and that I would ever feel their full weight. Arwen's kind, affectionate gestures — giving me a positive introduction to her parents, asking for the photo, offering me a copy — had an instantaneous, nearly magical effect. One of the biggest boulders on my back — my collective regrets about my relationship with Arwen — disappeared, never to return. Feeling taller, I straightened my back. From now on, I'd sleep easier and walk with a more carefree step. I couldn't think of a better graduation present.

Arwen and I wished each other luck in college. She would be going to Binghamton.

"Give him his present, Mom," Arwen said.

"Oh? The gift is for him?" Looking more concerned, Arwen's stepmother fished a handmade, leather-bound travel journal out of her purse and handed it to me. She must have been holding it for Arwen because graduation gowns don't have pockets. Obviously, Arwen hadn't warned her that the graduation present was for a boy.

I opened the brass snap and flipped through the blank pages inside. "A diary?"

"It doesn't have to be a diary," Arwen said. "It could be. I could also see you using it for poems, prayers, plays, and Harvey-Pekar-style autobiographical comic strips."

I unzipped the pen pouch on the inside cover. It contained an elegant fountain pen. "I can imagine using this pen to fill these pages with all of the above," I said. "Not that I'm much of a poetry guy. I've never really understood why so much depends upon red wheelbarrows. There isn't much call to use them on Staten Island. And how an apology for eating plums is a poem is beyond me."

"I like the idea of you trying to write a poem." Arwen touched a finger to my chest, just above my cigarette-burn scar. "We need to get the pain out of the inside of you and put it here." She tapped the cover of the journal with the same finger.

I nodded. "Each man hides a secret pain. It must be exposed and reckoned with. It must be dragged from the darkness and forced into the light."

Arwen laughed brightly. "Okay, Sybok! Stop quoting *Star Trek V* to make fun of me when you know I'm right." Her voice turned sad.

"I just heard about Mitchell. And I'm sorry."

"Yeah. I don't believe it's real. I'm pretending it didn't happen."

"You're pretending you're not gutted, but you are. You need to bleed onto these pages."

I stared down at the blank pages of the journal. "I'm not ready to write about him yet."

"Mitchell deserves at least one short story or poem, right?" Arwen asked. "Failing that, you can badmouth me. I'd make a Golden-Globe-award-worthy villain!"

"I'd hope whatever I wrote about you would make you look good."

"Phew!" Arwen wiped invisible sweat from her brow. "I was afraid you hated me."

I flinched at the suggestion. "Hate you? Never! How could I possibly hate you?"

Arwen eased forward, slowly moving her arm around my waist. "Happy graduation."

I took a half-step back and lowered my arms, looking down into her silver eyes.

Arwen stood up on her tip toes and kissed me twice on the lips.

"Uh-oh," I heard Arwen's stepmother say.

"Happy graduation." I slipped my arms around her waist. Arwen reach up, grabbed me by the back of the head, and pulled me down towards her. She gave me another small peck on the lips. I opened my mouth to say something, and she slid her tongue into it.