

Running

Before it happened, the day was bucolic. I stood on the dewy September lawn in back of the synagogue drinking cream soda and eating a bagel shmeared with cream cheese. Michael, who was three years old, was sandwiched between Jim and me. Jim was in a neck brace, still recovering from an accident. A month earlier, he, Nathan, Sean, and Joedy had been in a roll-over on 1-25, while driving home from a day at Water World; at the time, I was at home with Michael and Edie. After the accident, the kids were black-and-blue from seat-belt bruises, and Jim was left with a compression fracture of his fourth vertebrae. They were still achy and sore, but on that September day, they were happy to be alive, in the sun, on the grass, at the Temple.

Between noshes on my bagel, Jim, Michael, and I waved goodbye to my four oldest children as they trotted off to their indoor classrooms for the first day of Hebrew school, to learn their *alef-bet*, how to *daven* (pray), and the meaning of *tzedakah* (charity), so that dropping their allowance quarters in a charity box every *Shabbat* and each Sunday would make sense. The Rabbi stood in the middle of a swaying circle of parents and sang a lilting prayer, blessing the arrival of such a lovely morning and celebrating the future of the Jewish people, our children. A few mothers actually stopped gossiping, listened, and wiped a tear from their eyes. At any minute it would not have been impossible for all the men around me, their heads covered in a rainbow of yarmulkes,

and women whose bare toes peeked out from Birkenstocks, to ask me to join hands and sing *Kumbaya*; actually, more likely, someone would start humming *Hava Negila* and pull me into a reeling *hora* (dance). Like I said, it was bucolic. Honestly, if the great *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator Norman Rockwell had a Jewish sensibility and painted *shtetls* and *yeshivas* instead of baseball fields and turkey dinners, the scene would have been a worthy muse.

Anyway, my hand perpetually rested upon the nape of Michael's neck; Jim's hand lay continually on his shoulder. I remember thinking how the next week, our youngest boy, this child we both touched, was set to begin secular pre-school in a small, family setting. Life was good. And then the unthinkable happened. I don't remember why my hand moved from Michael's neck—perhaps it was to dab at my own eyes with a tissue. And Jim can't remember why his hand simultaneously slipped from Michael's shoulder. But one second Michael was glued to us, and the next he was gone.

"Jim," I sputtered, pointing to the now empty space between my hip and Jim's thigh, "Where's Michael?" Our eyes met, glazed with shock.

"I'll go out!" Jim squawked already in motion.

"I'll go in!" I blared over my shoulder,

I raced through the synagogue, pushing aside my fellow Jews with less-than-holy shoves, as Jim bolted through the outside gate and around the hexagonal building; we met in the front parking lot. There, we watched Michael's black head-of-hair bob up and down, weaving in and out among parked cars as he headed, in a full tear, toward Drake Road, a major street congested with traffic. I wished there had been time to call out to our beloved Rabbi (who by now was walking toward us to see what was the matter), and beseech him, "*Rebbe*, please say a blessing for our dear child, to protect him from the evil eye and the Chevy Suburbans," but all that spewed forth from my mouth was "Oh, fuck!" and "G-d dammit to Hell!" Even Jim, a tender man who, when perturbed, actually says things like "good-gravy," "egad," and

"dog-gone-it," was yelling his worse cuss phrase—the ones he saves for tragic situations—as a horrified, "*Oh, crap!*" exuded from his lips.

Though gentle, Jim is neither small nor weak. He stands six-feet, two inches and, on a good day, he's a solid two hundred pounds of muscle and brawn. Thank G-d for that. Had he been less of an athlete, his broken neck might have been an impediment to his speed. He's always been a powerful sprinter, and that day he probably set an Olympic record as he tore, yarmulke flying, after our baby boy. Two steps into Drake Road, Jim grabbed Michael by the shirt, heaved him back to safe ground, swung him up over his shoulder, and headed to our car. I was right behind, but if I had been alone, or if Jim had not been so fast, there would not have been an adequate prayer to save Michael.

Jim and I agreed, practically with blood and spit, with G-d as our witness, even before our children arrived, that we would never, not for any reason on Heaven or Earth, spank our children. But, as I watched Jim smack Michael's chubby, diapered *tuchus* when he reached the car door, I let go of that vow. I apologized to G-d, but if the sting of a whack on the buns would be memorable and keep Michael from attempting such a trick again, so be it. Jim swung open the door to our station wagon, tossed a sobbing Michael in his car seat, belted him in, and screamed, "You have a timeout, mister!" And then, we both collapsed on a small, grassy slope, crying, shaking and nauseated.

"I . . . almost . . . tripped," Jim spewed between gasps for breath.

"Well. . . fuck the whole pre-school thing," I choked out.

I have a knack for being inappropriately funny at inapt times. It was strange to sit on the damp grass with Jim, both of us laughing at my joke, crying from fear, and feeling shame for losing track of Michael all in one terrifying moment. Michael sat in the car and sobbed, his bottom sore for the first time in his life. But at the same time, I could sense Michael's little brain ominously registering the peculiar excitement of escape. It was portentous. I felt ill.