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Doing a Mitzvah

IN LONG ISLAND, I prepared to do a mitzvah. My breakdancing crew didn't ask me about the bombing in Dallas yesterday—the news more front-page than the San Diego ICE raids or the Dominican kid shot in the Bronx last weekend. Just as I didn't ask which of my boys were undocumented. Maybe they were all citizens; maybe I was a racist. I was the token white boy in their b-boy crew—me and an Asian girl brought the diversity. Yet because I was Jewish I threatened the racial superiority of those Dallas skinheads, their bald heads crackling in the Texas heat like pork rinds. They threw homemade hand grenades and chanted rhythmically about not being replaced and the death of Jesus and backroom cabals where my people conspired to take over Hollywood. They couldn't be bothered to rhyme.

I didn't ask my boys' feelings on DACA, and they didn't say anything sentimental to me when Jews were killed somewhere on the other side of the country.

After Dallas, half of my Facebook feed blew up with righteous anger: Remember we'll never be at home here, anywhere, the German Jews thought they were integrated, too, have you heard what's been happening in France? These were kids I knew from Jewish day school, Jewish summer camp, mostly Jewish college. *This is why we need Israel*, they typed into their phones, *we'll need somewhere to hide one day, just wait, that's history for you*. I used to live as fully in the Jewish world as they do. Part of me still feels like I'm one of them, and part of me is very far away. A few times a month, I have this recurring dream where I'm wandering the streets of the Old City and there's a pious rabbi. I wash his feet and bake challah that I share with a beggar who has the face of a ram, and catch the faintest glimpse of God, shining red and blue and gold and purple. Then I wake up and remember that God probably doesn't exist.

The other half of my Facebook feed didn't react to the news beyond a few murmurs of sympathy. Then it was back to the usual blend of conspiracy theories—the Illuminati, the Flat Earth people—and

b-boy videos. Who's slated to win the Red Bull championship this year, Cloud's gotten really good, they're upgrading the livestream so viewers can watch the world breakdance championships in realtime, do you really think Neguin is going to compete again?

That Jewish community used to be my soul, both online and off, but now when a friend moved to a settlement in Israel to help stake a claim on contested land, I judged him. There were almost as many janky blog posts and unattributed sources on Jewish Facebook as on Breakdancing Facebook. I judged the guy in my crew who posted about Lizard People, too. I would've quit social media altogether if it weren't the main way my crew communicated. I didn't want corporations to know my innermost secrets. I hardly even knew them myself.

Stomps loved doing mitzvahs, posting Facebook videos of thronging teenage girls and barbecue lamb sliders, fifty-something women fanning themselves when he took off his shirt to do a freeze.

This Saturday we were planning the usual bit. We'd come out in black hats and glued-on sidecurls, mixing some Russian kickouts into the footwork, all of Eastern Europe blurring.

I felt bad accepting money—mitzvahs are repaid only in God's mercy, but were windmills a commandment?—partially because it was commerce on shabbat, but mostly because I didn't need it. Rich Jews. They knew I had a white-collar day job. They asked me to proof-read the crew's website, *hire us to dance your preteen into adulthood*, my college diction at a premium, but I couldn't find a way to say, keep your fifty bucks. Frenzy needs it for his two kids, Eclectik's saving for school, and for a few weeks Ricky got weird about coming to practice because he couldn't afford the five-dollar buy-in to rent our practice space. That sounded too much like, *I'm better than you*.

Frenzy commuted from the Bronx to Newark for work every day, trying to earn enough to support his two little girls while keeping his dad's fridge stocked with milk and bread and deli meat and Modelo Especial. The patriarch of the crew at thirty-four—I don't know if he realized I was only a year younger than he was—Frenzy advised me to work my ass off until I saved a thousand bucks. That it was worth it, for the kids I wanted to have someday. I told him I'd try. Thanks for the advice.

I have like ten thousand in the bank. They tell you to have six months of living expenses, Suze Orman and those people. I have a master's degree and actually stand a chance of repaying my student loans. I

know a b-boy with a Ph.D., but he's not in this crew. He's also a Jew.

Growing up, we used to think reform Jews like these were *off the derech*. Off the path. My bar mitzvah featured a special guest known as tuna casserole. None of this DJed, slow-dancing, reform Judaism. These days, I was so far from the *derech* that I wasn't even invited. I was the hired entertainment.

Frenzy's minivan rumbled over potholes and under bridges and across Saturday highways. I used to believe a literal Moses smashed literal tablets. In college, while other kids drank and tried shrooms and fucked for the first time, I spent hours in the library, learning. That's what we'd call it — not “studying Torah” or “learning about such and such,” just *learning*, as though this were the only knowledge worth acquiring. I wish I could still feel that glow of certainty.

We piled out in the Beth Elohim parking lot, congregated in the stained-glass vestibule. A security guard checked IDs, as though our dates of birth could protect this crowd from becoming another Dallas. People were already talking about it that way, twelve dead, two of them kids, a whole city becoming shorthand for existential fear, existential hatred.

Shabbat hadn't yet ended, not officially, but the DJ was already spinning and we were invited to gorge ourselves at the smorgasbord while we waited for the newly anointed man, barely a teenager, to make a lordly entrance to the beats of Pitbull.

Me and my boys milled in the back, gnawing at seared tuna and brisket from the carving station as the family performed a faux religious candle ceremony that involved embarrassing baby photos. “These Jews, bro,” Eklektik said over a mouthful of pastrami, “they know how to fucking party.”

Stomps led us backstage—yeah, there was a stage. Stomps arranged us in a row and reviewed our routine. He captained the crew, calling ahead to book practice space, answering the queries that came through the website, planning the mitvahs. He also founded a dance school for kids, teaching not just b-boying but popping, locking, whacking, vogueing, even some of the new styles like lightfoot. I felt like a douche for the times I doubted his ability to get shit done, just because his Facebook messages weren't grammatically correct, just because he didn't approach tasks in the same methodical way I would. He had big dreams about a supplement company he wanted to start for b-boys called Break-Enhance. He also had a plan for investing in

the cannabis industry if ever it became full-on legal in New York, and he wanted to organize a meditation retreat for dancers.

Stomps passed out our costumes. During my yeshiva year in Israel, I experimented with growing peyos, my sideburns itching in the Mediterranean summer. It felt like a costume back then, I didn't know Yiddish, my Hebrew had an American accent, wouldn't they find me out? But eventually my sidecurls came to feel like a secret nod to other religious people, hi, I'm like you, you're like me. They were also a sartorial shield between me and the world. Superman's cape didn't actually do anything for him other than separate him from others. It was something to hide behind, even though it made him stand out.

Part of me enjoyed my double life. My crew must've assumed things about me, but I never specifically mentioned that I put on a suit to go work behind a computer, how, except for them, I surrounded myself with erudite people who read *The New Yorker*. I'd studied nineties hip hop the way some people studied poetry, could talk about the classics, the OGs, but I hadn't listened when that shit was on the radio. As far as my parents were concerned, Madonna was the devil. I grew up in Flatbush. My dad wore a yarmulke, not a black hat, so it's not like I grew up speaking Yiddish or had to learn English as a second language. But he did manage a warehouse in Brooklyn where everyone was either a Jew or a low-paid immigrant worker. My mom stayed home. Real Hasids, the Williamsburg types, got weird about going to the gym or interacting with secular people or watching regular TV. We weren't like that. I got to watch Looney Tunes and play sports, but everyone in my softball league was more or less like me.

I enjoyed exposing my secret life to my coworkers or acquaintances at the farmer's market, too — *oh, you didn't know? I'm a b-boy*. I'd started after college, spurred by existential angst. For most of my life, my identity was simply *Jew*. But if I didn't believe anymore, if that didn't define me, then I could be anything. So I asked some b-boy in Union Square where I could learn and he told me about a class. As simple as that, I just showed up on Monday nights. Flash forward twelve years and I'd be nothing more than a marketing exec if not for b-boying. What do you do? *I market*. No. *I dance*. *I'm part of a club that you know nothing about*. If I became injured and couldn't dance anymore, could I keep the culture or would I revert to my innate featurelessness?

Frenzy helped me glue the synthetic twists of acrylic and polyester fibers to the edge of my cheek. He plunked a cheap *shtrimmel* on my

head. Not a *shtreimel*, I reminded myself. Just a furry hat. I couldn't be sure if I'd ever actually mentioned to these guys that I was Jewish, but now didn't seem like the right time.

We jogged out into the crowd, did the Russian kickouts. The guests hooted with laughter and clapped as Eklektik dropped to the floor for a bout of footwork, supporting his weight on his arms while his legs whipped around him. I top-rocked to Rihanna, dancing upright, my scalp overheating under the fake fur. We took turns in the center of our own little cypher, the crowd whooping as Ricky threw off his Hasidic gear to drop into a headspin. He was the baby of our crew, only seventeen. He'd been dancing since he was ten, and he made up for a lack of maturity, historicity—a lack of *style*—in his dance with sheer athletic enthusiasm. His parents took him to practice until he was old enough to ride the subway alone, and sometimes his mom still baked us empanadas.

On my turn, I threw down a few air flares, a ninety, and then held myself in a hollow-back for ten, twenty, thirty seconds, my *pièce de résistance*. It was a handstand, except instead of an arrow my torso curved outward into a taut bow, ready to be sprung, coring out a hole in myself, absorbing the inverted room, maybe *it* was upside down, not me, maybe this was my natural state, contorted between my boys and my people.

“They learn it on the street,” said an upside-down woman.

“It's a cultural thing,” said her spangled friend. “It comes from an old slave fighting dance.”

“No, no, that's that Brazilian thing. Where they twirl a lot. Jiu-jitsu or something.”

I let myself fall out of the freeze, the blood coursing through my limbs. I didn't want my crew to think all Jews were this ignorant. If people wanted to stereotype me as a Jew, they'd say I was probably smart, probably rich. Probably greedy and big-nosed, too. But my physical prowess was never seen as dangerous. Aside from some verses on Passover about the Exodus from Egypt, no one associated me with slavery.

My falling-out with God wasn't a watershed. Some people get sick or lose a loved one or see something cruel and ask, God, how can you do this? But not me. I'd seen plenty of unfair things, had done special lessons on the Holocaust since second grade. I'd gone for the pat answers—there must be something here that God wanted us to learn,

there's a greater purpose, maybe our people were being punished for not being kind enough to each other, we needed to believe in a higher plan. What finally got me was atrophy. I kept separating my dishes, milk and meat, dutifully set my lamps on a timer for the sabbath, while something rotted inside. I didn't notice it, like a worm chomping through an apple, until it was inedible.

One day I just thought, Maybe God didn't give Moses the Torah on Mount Sinai. Maybe there wasn't one specific guy named Abraham who started this whole thing. And if those bits weren't true, then why wasn't I eating bacon? Why was I holding myself apart from other people? Just to feel special, just to put on airs of being chosen? Why not breakdance on shabbat?

On the dance floor in this synagogue, I forced myself to concentrate on the beat, to notice the patterns of my muscle spindles, of my ligaments strumming in time with the thrumming music. Ricky pulled out a bunch of windmills and Stomps did a circle of turtles, hovering over the ground and supporting himself on one hand and then another, like jumping pushups. I joined them, rubbing myself against the dusty floor. I wasn't at a mitzvah anymore—these guys didn't know from bar or bat, just called it a mitzvah—but something about this felt like a commandment to move.

Breakdancing started in the Bronx in the late seventies and early eighties. It was born of a time and place. Of strife. My ancestors faced Eastern European pogroms in 1880 but skipped the gang warfare in 1980. Even though I was an interloper in someone else's culture, I felt proud to be dancing in New York, where it all began. I knew Rock Steady Crew, and had met the progenitors of the art form. They still came to battles. When I clothed myself in the raiment of urban dance—*urban* a euphemism for *black*, for *Hispanic*, and who was I, some guy who'd taken Spanish in high school—I had to fight not to forget the violence, the history, that underpinned these movements. Too often, the dance felt gymnastic to me, divorced from the music, more about physical feats and impressing my prowess upon others. I didn't own hip hop. I could only ever borrow it.

The beat took over my being and I fell into a trance as my heart-beat conformed to the rhythm. My boys seemed to share my joy at moving, at simply being alive. We lived somewhere outside of time, an ageless age that only we inhabited. Sweat trickled down my spine and I didn't mind. I didn't want to be anywhere else in the world or

with any other people. Everything converged on the five of us, on that time and place, on perfect movement and the elements of dance and a higher power.

The magic stopped when a handful of the guests started reading something on their phones. Then more than a handful, then the parents of the bar mitzvah boy, then the kid himself. Stomps took out his own phone, frowned, and handed it around. Los Angeles was the new Dallas. A gunman, this time. A Jewish day school. Six dead, two kindergarteners and four first-graders. Nineteen injured, seven critically. Through oversized speakers, Jay-Z continued rapping to an otherwise silent room.

Ricky crossed himself and kissed his fingers. Quietly, he whispered, “*Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo. Santificado sea tu nombre. Venga tu reino . . .*”