
Just Falafel

Matt Rosenbaum

Barry is Mom's new husband. His name starts with a B, just like Dad's. Their last names start differently, though. Dad's last name was Green.

Barry married Mom two years ago, when I was thirteen. He met her in a Jewish bereavement group at Kol Tikvah, the Orthodox synagogue near our house. Mom was there because she was Jewish, though she's not religious at all. She was also there because Dad got shot in lower Manhattan. He was a diamond dealer. But I don't really want to talk about that.

Barry was a surgeon at Columbia Presbyterian, and his wife died very young of a heart attack. They didn't have any kids. She had been dead for nine months, but Barry kept going to the bereavement group, like he was waiting for Mom to show up. Mom told me he liked to lead the psalms they would sing, and to say the Kaddish. Rabbi Gordon always said: "Only those with faith survive."

Six months after Dad died, Mom brought Barry home for dinner. Mom had made veal cutlets, but Barry wouldn't touch them. Jon looked at Barry like he hated him already.

"So, you're one of these PETA assholes, Barry?"

"Actually, Jon, I don't mind veal. It's just that this veal isn't kosher."

"Oh. So you're, like, one of these religious assholes, then?"

Mom ignored Jon. She put a plate of potatoes gently on the table. "Barry, you should've warned me," she said. "I could've made something vegetarian."

"It's really not a problem. I'm not even very hungry. I've just been

trying this out, the kosher thing. I've been learning with Rabbi Gordon twice a week."

Jon laughed. "So does he tell you to stone all the gays, or just burn them?"

"What?"

"In the Torah, you know, it says homosexuals are an abomination, and to stone them. Same thing for adulteresses, and idol worshippers. Do you believe in stoning, Barry?"

"No, Jon, I don't. I got stoned a few times in college, though."

I guess Jon didn't find that funny. "Then why do you believe in this kosher bullshit? You're offending my Mom."

"That's enough, Jon. Go to your room."

Jon pushed his chair back hard, and it squealed loudly against the wood floor. "Fine. I hope you enjoy sitting at my Dad's table with his wife, Barry."

I pushed my chair back, too.

"Ari, where are you going?"

"To Jon's room."

"Why?"

"Because. I'm not hungry."

I knocked on Jon's door.

"Stay the fuck out."

"Come on, Jon, it's me. Let me in."

I heard Jon rolling off his bed. He unlocked the door.

"Fine, you can chill in here. But the Dodgers are on, and Vin's on tonight, so you're going to have to shut up for once."

Vin is Vin Scully, the Dodgers announcer. Jon thought him and Vin were on a first-name basis ever since he'd met him when Dad took us to L.A., though Jon was dreaming, obviously. Vin had signed a ball for him:

“To Jon—a future Dodger.” So Jon had dropped the Mets for the Dodgers because of Vin, and I dropped the Mets because of Jon. Dad and us had another thing in common—he’d sat with my grandpa as a kid, falling in love with Ebbets Field and a Brooklyn team he’d never seen.

The ball was sitting on Jon’s shelf in a glass case, high enough that I couldn’t reach it without standing on a chair. Jon could reach it, though. He was already 6’1, and still growing. And he was Jewish, and smart. Girls loved him, obviously. Usually, he loved them back.

A coach from Columbia had come to watch him a few weeks ago, and told him he just needed to bulk up a little to have a shot at a scholarship. So Jon was sitting on a bench in the corner of his room, doing curls, watching Shawn Green at the plate. Their names rhymed, but they weren’t related.

“Jon, you gotta teach me how to work out.”

“Shh. I told you to keep quiet. And anyway, you’re too young. It’ll stunt your growth.”

“I’m fifteen.”

“Maybe. But you’re still a midget.”

He had a point there, so I let him lift in peace. As usual, Vin was telling a story worth listening to.

“You know, folks, Shawn told me he will likely be missing Game 2 of the Giants series to observe Yom Kippur. It’s a few weeks away, but it looks like that series might decide the season for the Dodgers. He’ll be sorely missed, I’m sure, like a certain Mr. Koufax was a long time ago.”

Jon hissed at the screen. “Fucking Shawn. He always lets us down.”

Vin kept talking. “And Franco looks in for a sign. He’s into the stretch, and the pitch is...swung on and missed. Down goes Green.”

Jon hissed again. “What a fucking night. Now get the hell out of my room.”

I was seven when Dad took Jon and me to L.A. to visit Grandpa. He

needed to go anyway, to meet a client. It was late August, and, if nothing else, we were going to escape the mosquitoes and humidity of New York.

Mom stayed behind. “I’ll give you boys some time for male bonding,” she said, laughing. Dad was short, Jewish, and wore oversized glasses and pressed dress shirts over his wiry frame. He didn’t exactly look like the “male bonding” type.

Mom took us to JFK, and when we got out of the car, Dad leaned in and kissed her. It was quick, but I noticed. They never really kissed in front of us, unless they were getting on a plane. Mom stroked Dad’s stubbly cheek for a moment, and then she hugged us goodbye. Dad had a moustache back then, which was a bad move on his part, obviously.

Grandpa lived in a retirement home in North Hollywood for people with Alzheimer’s. Dad had once tried to convince him to move east, but Grandpa wouldn’t budge. Now it was too much of a hassle to fly him out.

Grandpa didn’t recognize us. It took him a while to recognize Dad, and Dad didn’t want to stay there long. So he took us touring.

We went to Disneyland, Venice beach, Hollywood. We went all over, really. In the wax museum, Jon took a funny picture of Dad and me next to a statue of Marilyn Monroe. I took one of Jon and Dad outside. They posed with a guy in tights claiming to be Superman. He looked kind of homeless, though, and I thought that even with the big S on his chest, if he really *was* Clark Kent, the homeless look was the best disguise I’d ever seen. Superman asked for a tip, so Dad took us down the block and bought him a Subway sandwich.

Dad drove us around in a Mitsubishi Eclipse from Hertz, asking Jon which of the women outside our hotel were up to par. Jon would laugh and tell Dad he was a dirty old man. Jon didn’t really love girls, back then.

On the third night of our trip, Dad took us to a bookstore to hear Vin Scully speak. After the speech, Jon got his baseball signed, and he carried it on the plane, because he didn’t want the guys in the earmuffs to lose it

without realizing what they were losing. He wanted to keep it safe.

We flew back to New York, and Mom picked us up and took us home. A week later, the school year started, and then it was Yom Kippur.

We were standing in temple, all four of us, the only time we ever used to go besides Rosh Hashanah. During the Priest's Blessing, we huddled together under Dad's black and white tallit, his prayer shawl. It was warm, a little claustrophobic even, but I loved doing this every year. Dad smelled like the dab of good cologne he'd spray only on his wrists, and his shawl's fringes tickled the back of my neck.

Dad wouldn't let us look at the priests' hands, because Grandpa used to tell him anyone who peeks will go blind.

That year, Jon peeked. As we drove home after services, he said so.

"Dad, I looked at their hands, and nothing happened. See, Grandpa's wrong."

"Maybe, Jon. Or maybe you're a lucky kid. You shouldn't look, you know. It's tradition."

So Jon didn't peek anymore, even after Dad died, though of course, it's a lot easier not to peek when you're not in temple to begin with.

During my first week of high school, two days after Yom Kippur, Barry proposed. They got married, and he moved in.

He separated our meat and dairy dishes. He bought tefillin for me and Jon, but Jon never used them. Barry noticed.

"What's wrong with tefillin, Jon?"

"Well, for one thing, I don't believe in God. And for another thing, I don't wear leather."

"But you called me a 'PETA asshole' the minute I walked in here."

Barry was right, but we didn't care.

He built a hut for Sukkot in our backyard. We ate outside for two nights in forty degree weather. We talked about the weather a lot.

Sometimes, Barry would ask Jon about baseball. It usually went something like this:

“Itzuris made a great play last night, right Jon?”

“Do I ask you about your patients, Barry?”

“Jon, I’m just trying to...”

“The answer is no, no I don’t. I don’t ask you about what you do, so don’t ask me about what I do.”

Then Mom would tell Jon to give Barry a chance, and I would eat quietly.

Barry wasn’t so bad, really. Kind of a religious psycho, yeah, but Mom was getting that way too. And he manipulated Mom, maybe, but at least she wasn’t crying as much since he’d moved in.

One time, I walked in on Jon in the living room. I don’t mean walked in like he was with a girl. He was crying. The TV was on, but it was just Law & Order. I think he might’ve seen me from the corner of his eye. But we never really talked about that.

As Jon Green’s little brother, I thought sophomore year would come easy. Jon’s friends looked out for me, and at first, teachers did too. They knew about Dad, and if I decided not to do my homework, they let it slide, as if I was one assignment away from losing it. I took advantage of this more often than not.

Jon did the same, and he needed to, since he spent most of his time at the batting cages. But after the first quarter, Mom got our progress reports in the mail, and she was pissed, though she didn’t yell or anything. Jon had always pulled A’s, but this time he had three C’s. I wasn’t doing much better.

Jon and Barry had reached a wary truce: Jon would break Shabbat right in front of him, and Barry wouldn’t say anything. Barry would kiss Mom right in front of Jon, and Jon wouldn’t say anything.

The truce lasted for the entire academic year. We lived in silence.

But on Jon's ring day, the day when he was officially declared a senior, Barry and Mom broke the silence. Over Barry's special ravioli, they broke the truce.

"Guys, we have some big news. Barry got offered a one year fellowship at Hadassah Hospital, at Hebrew U. It's a huge honor."

I said, "What?"

Jon talked between bites. "As in, Hebrew University in Jerusalem?"

"That's the one," Barry said.

Jon looked down at his plate, and then over to Mom.

"Well, congratulations Barry. So you'll be gone for a whole year?"

Now Mom looked at her plate. She hadn't touched her food.

"No, Jon. We'll all be gone for a year."

Jon kind of laughed a little. "There's no way I'm going anywhere. What about baseball?"

"Barry looked into it. There's a new league that started this year near our new neighborhood. You could still play."

"We already have a *neighborhood*? And you're just springing this on us, just like that?"

"We're not springing anything on you. We're having a discussion."

"What about Columbia?"

"What about it? From what your teachers have been telling me, you don't seem to want to go there anymore."

"That's bullshit. Of course I want to go. I'm not going anywhere. I'll live with Coach Taylor."

"Jon, please. We all need a little change of pace. Ari needs it, and whether you think so or not, you need it." Mom picked up her glass to sip some wine. "And *I* need it, too."

"Bullshit. Why do you need it?" Jon said.

"I don't need to go anywhere, Mom," I said.

Then she put her glass down on to the table, but maybe her hand was

wobbly, because she knocked it over and the wine poured on to the tablecloth.

“*Damn it!* This is going to stain. Damn it.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. It won’t stain.”

“Yes, Ari, it will stain. It’s red wine, for God’s sake.”

The wine was still trickling across the table, beginning to make what looked like a deep purple map of Florida. It was quiet for a moment.

“Sorry, boys. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to use that language. Ari, can you please get me some seltzer for the table?”

Mom always put seltzer on things that stained, just like Grandma used to do, though it never seemed to help much. As I walked to the kitchen, I heard Mom talking again.

“Please, Jon. *Please*. It will be good for all of us. You’ll love it there. And I need you there. The family needs you there.”

When I got back to the table, Jon had already stormed out to his room. He didn’t talk to Mom for two weeks. Not a word.

After a while, we knew it was useless. I think we also knew that Mom needed us. I even helped her pack up the house. She was selling it. When we got back, Jon would be off to college, and Barry wanted an apartment in the city. So we packed, and we sold, and we moved to Jerusalem.

Before Barry moved in, before we left Long Island, there were two framed pictures on my Mom’s nightstand. She slept on her right side on the left side of the bed, so she faced the pictures every night as she fell asleep. I know, because whenever it thunder-stormed I used to go into their bedroom and sleep at the foot of their bed. Dad let me do this until I was ten.

One picture showed the whole family at the park after one of Jon’s Little League games. Everyone was smiling with their eyes open, which was a mini-miracle of sorts. Jon and I had eyes that looked stretched thin and half-closed, especially with the summer sun glaring down at us. Dad used to joke that Mom always had a crush on James, the Asian accountant who did our

taxes, and maybe we got our eyes from him. We always laughed, even though that really isn't funny, obviously.

The other picture showed Mom and Dad, dressed in formal wear on the cruise they took to Mexico for their tenth anniversary. Dad is wearing a double breasted suit, a little out of style even then, and these ridiculous glasses he lost the night the photo was taken. Mom always complained that Dad refused to take off his glasses for pictures—"You always date pictures, Ben," she said. "Take off the damn glasses." But he never budged.

Mom is wearing a black dress and black high heels that made her Dad's height. They're facing each other, looking into each other's eyes, smiling. There is a fake cruise ship in the background. It really is a corny picture, but they look perfect.

When I was packing boxes to store in Aunt Sarah's house before we moved to Jerusalem, I saw these pictures at the top of a box. I found Mom in the kitchen, packing up silverware to take to Israel.

"You're leaving these behind?"

"We don't have room for everything, Ari."

"Yeah, but you're taking the silverware."

"This is my grandmother's silverware. And I'm not throwing the pictures away. I'm leaving them with Aunt Sarah. She'll keep everything safe."

I glared at her. She looked away.

"Besides, I can't keep these in my bedroom anymore. It would be weird for Barry, you know."

But I didn't know.

Our house in Jerusalem was a three-bedroom in the German Colony, right off the main stretch of Emek Refaim. It was nice. We had a garden in the front, and Jon had set up a softball tee with a net to practice his swing. Sometimes he'd miss the net and the ball would slam into the Peugeot Barry

leased to drive to work. This accident happened a lot.

Me and Jon were different people in Jerusalem. I mean, really—even our names changed. Everyone called me Arik, like the Prime Minister. Jon became Yoni. I liked Arik, and I liked Dorit, the neighbor who caught the bus with us to school. We went to a school for English speakers, mostly for kids of American and British government workers. Dorit's school was down the block from ours. Her father was killed while on reserve duty in Lebanon. Her hair smelled like apples.

Jon hated Yoni, but Israelis can't say Jon, or at least don't like to, so he was Yoni. After school, we'd take the bus downtown. Mom wouldn't let us take the bus at first, but Barry told her to stop being so elitist, and anyway nothing had happened in two years. So we took the bus.

We didn't speak much Hebrew, but Jerusalem was all Americanized. There was a Pizza Hut right down the block from our house. They didn't have any pepperoni, though. Jon said he missed pepperoni, but I didn't really mind.

We'd sit in Kikar Zion eating falafel. I always had it just plain with hummus. Jon always had extra napkins to keep the salad and tehina from getting on his shirt.

"You know, Rik, falafel is the only good thing about this country."

He called me Rik now. I liked it.

"What about Maccabi Tel Aviv?"

"Come on now. Even the Knicks would beat them."

"What about Dorit?"

"Hot, but she doesn't put out like an American. And she'll have to go to the army in a few months anyway."

"So it's just falafel, then?"

"Yeah. It's just falafel."

Later that night, a bomb tore through the falafel shop on Emek Refaim. Mom heard the blast from her window, and we couldn't ride the bus

anymore.

The next day, there were gory pictures in the *Jerusalem Post* sitting next to my bowl of Cheerios, and I couldn't eat.

Barry drove us to school that morning, and every morning after that. When he was on call at the hospital and there was no car at home, Mom would give us cab money. Every now and then, Jon would take the bus anyway, and pocket the difference. He was smart like that, and Mom had no idea.

Sometimes when we'd pass the stoplight at the end of our block I'd catch a glimpse of Dorit waiting for the bus. I'd turn to wave to her through the back windshield, and she'd recognize our car and wave back. She was always waving at Jon, really, but I convinced myself she was looking at me. She'd keep waving and waving, and I'd smile and smile, until she was just a little dot of a person that we'd left behind.

On Thursday, May 6, I was eating pizza at home with Mom. Barry was on call, and Jon was downtown at Kraft Field, finishing baseball practice.

It was 9 P.M., and I was exhausted. My grade had gone on a hike near the Dead Sea that day. I said good night to Mom, and I passed out. I don't think I dreamed while I was sleeping. But I didn't sleep for very long.

Mom came in and woke me up at 10:23. I still remember looking at the clock.

"Wake up, Ari. Wake up. We need to go to the hospital."

"What? Why?"

"Something's happened. Come on, get out of bed. Please, hurry up." Her voice was cold, detached.

I threw on a pair of grey sweatpants and a Dodgers sweatshirt. "What do you mean, 'something's happened?'"

We had to walk two blocks to catch a cab. Mom was practically running, and I almost tripped trying to keep up with her. Emek Refaim was

quiet for a Thursday night.

When we got to Hadassah, Jon was in surgery. Barry was there, in the trauma center. All the doctors looked the same. Mom just sat there, staring at the wall. It was plain white, with a big painting of a palm tree. She wasn't crying. She was squeezing me too hard.

They stopped the bleeding, sure. And they removed most of the shrapnel and nails, except for one piece so close to a nerve that they couldn't risk touching it. But they had to amputate his right arm.

Jon was in shock, and he was comatose for two days. Dorit was dead. And I knew that when Jon woke up and saw that stub of an arm, severed at the elbow, he'd wish he was dead too.

Jon was on a bus. After practice, he'd met Dorit for ice cream. They got on the bus home, the number fourteen bus. A few dead, but he was alive. He was lucky, sitting in the back row. Just wounded.

We sat in Jon's room, Mom, me, and Barry, and we waited. Barry often had to run off to check on patients, but when he was free, he'd come back to Jon's room and wait with us. He'd keep checking the little machines to make sure they were beeping the right way, and he'd explain to us what the nurses were doing.

Saturday morning, Barry took me to the hospital synagogue for Shabbat services. Mom didn't feel like praying. I didn't really feel like it either, but I watched Barry wrap himself in his tallit, and I watched him struggle to say Jon's name during the prayer for the ill.

Afterward, we went back to Jon's room and waited. Jon woke up that afternoon. I saw it first, the way his eyes were twitching. Then Mom saw it, and Barry called in a nurse.

Jon saw me first, when he opened his eyes.

"Hey, Ari."

"Hey, Jon."

He was heavily medicated, and that was it. He fell right back asleep.

It was Barry's fault, that Jon was in the hospital. If it wasn't for him, we'd have never left New York. If it wasn't for him, Jon would have an arm.

That's what I thought when I saw Barry sit at Jon's bedside all night, wide awake, even after Mom and I would fall asleep on the small couch we'd moved in from the waiting room. He told Mom to let us take the bus. He convinced Mom to move us here in the first place.

It had been five days, and Jon was less medicated now, and fully conscious. He saw what was left of his bandaged arm, and he didn't talk much. At least not with me. Maybe he talked to Mom, though I was almost always in the room when she was. Or maybe he talked to Barry, after Mom and I went home for a few hours to sleep after the first week. I don't know, really.

One time when I came back from the vending machines, I heard Jon yelling at him. And through the door I heard Barry answering him in muffled tones. "You think I *wanted* this for you?"

Then a pause. "If I could switch places with you, I would. I'm not leaving here, whether you want me to or not. You're going to get better. I will help you get better."

Sometimes I'd stay with them all night, but Barry said Mom needed me at home too. Mom was kind of a wreck, obviously; she talked even less than Jon did. We ate sandwiches from the hospital cafeteria the whole time because Mom couldn't cook anything. She couldn't even buy the sandwiches. Barry always picked them up from the cafeteria on his breaks. I had falafel almost every day, and Barry convinced the nurse to let Jon have falafel instead of the oatmeal or cereal they tried to serve him in a plastic bowl. But Mom hated the hospital food, so Barry always ran outside to a food cart and bought her a subway sandwich. Jon could see the cart through the window from his bed, four stories below.

We were all in Jon's room around lunchtime, ten days after Jon got on the bus, when Mom decided to go out with Barry to pick up her food. Jon and I watched them through the window. I was standing behind his bed. Mom looked wobbly, and Barry was practically holding her upright.

Jon looked away, over to me. "Barry's good for Mom, isn't he, Ari?"
"Yeah. I guess so."

When they got back, we sat in a quiet little circle, Jon and me with the falafel, Mom with the sandwich, and Barry empty-handed. Like most days, he didn't have time to eat lunch. And I looked at Jon, and he looked at me, and for some reason we'd both bitten off more than we could chew, our mouths overflowing with chickpeas and hummus and salad, and we laughed.

"Thanks, Barry."

"Yeah. Thanks Barry."

Barry laughed back. "Of course, guys. I'm glad you like them."

Barry brought his laptop into Jon's room and got the nurse to set up a little computer stand next to his bed. Barry had purchased an online account to watch American baseball. We'd sit together at one or two in the morning, watching Dodgers games live on the tiny screen.

One night, Vin Scully talked me to sleep. When I woke up, I looked at Jon. Barry was sitting on his bed, just looking at him. It was pretty dark, but the laptop's glow illuminated the bed where they sat together. Barry's hand was resting on Jon's good shoulder. Jon's eyes were closed.

"Jon?"

Barry stood up and went back to his chair.

"Yeah, Ari?"

"Just wanted to make sure you're still awake. What's the score?"

"Dodgers are up, 5-1."

"What inning?"

"Bottom of the eighth. Go back to sleep. You're not missing

anything.”

The next night, Barry drove me and Mom home from the hospital. We ordered pizza, and we sat on the floor of the living room, watching basketball. Nobody said a word, obviously. I fell asleep to the flicker of the TV.

When I woke up the next morning, the house was silent. I was on the couch. Someone had carried me there, and spread two blankets over me to keep me warm.

Usually, I heard Mom and Barry talking, drinking coffee. But nobody was home. Maybe they were back at the hospital. I needed to call Mom.

I walked to the front door to get the paper. I wanted to see the score of the Maccabi game I'd slept through.

The front page was filled with more bloody pictures. Someone had blown up the number two bus while I was sleeping. It was filled with religious people, with haredim. I flipped through the pages. There was a black hat on the pavement, covered in blood. There was a picture of a ZAKA man, a guy who collects body parts for religious burial, running down King George Street.

On page 7, beneath all the headlines, there was a tiny article that is now hidden in my desk drawer. There were no photos. In three lines, the writer informed the public that Yoni Green, the son of a trauma surgeon at Haddasah-Ein-Kerem, had been upgraded to stable condition.

He wasn't Barry's son. But it didn't really matter anymore.

I dropped the paper. It separated into different pages that floated to the floor. The pictures of the dead were scattered in our living room. I had to pee.

I walked into Jon's bathroom and stared at the mirror. I looked the same as always. Everything looked the same as always. The shower curtain behind me was still bright yellow and blue, and Jon's Dodgers beach towel

hung on the door ready for action, and his retainer was still sitting in its case on the sink.

And I thought that maybe we could hop on a plane back to New York. Dad would know we were passing by Heaven, and I'd sneak him through the plane's backdoor, and the air pressure in the cabin wouldn't change because Dad knows how to make miracles.

And Jon and I would play poker for a while, and Dad would point out our tells, and Mom would laugh at us. And the flight attendant would think Jon was hot, and she'd smile and serve us wine even though she knew we were just kids. And Mom and Dad would get wine too, even though they never drank, and Jon would say "L'Chaim," and we'd clink our little plastic cups together even though they wouldn't really clink.

And we'd land at JFK and drive to Jon's game because Dad never missed those and because Jon had bulked up like the coaches told him to. And no cars would crash on the way, and the Dodgers would move back to Brooklyn, and they'd pay Jon a lot of money so he could always have extra money in his pocket, and he'd give away diamonds on the street so that Dad would have to find a new job.

And nobody would shoot Dad, because what kind of New Yorker would ever shoot Jon Green's dad, unless he was a Yankee fan, but those would no longer exist, obviously.

And we'd run on the grass at the new Ebbets Field, and we'd stop for a picture, and Barry would be there too, and he'd take the picture for us, and Mom would put it on her nightstand and stare it to sleep.

And Jon would run around the bases, and he'd wave to the crowd, and when he touched home plate the umpire who is always watching would swing his arms sideways in one smooth, fluid motion.

And we would be safe.

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