

THE WAY THINGS OUGHT TO BE

In the early days of the twentieth century, in the city of Prague, lived a man named Laibl Goldenhirsch. He was a rabbi, an unassuming teacher who sought to understand the mysteries that surround us all. A daunting task, but he pursued it with heart and soul. He spent countless hours brooding over the Torah, the Talmud, the Tanakh, and other riveting reads. After years of learning and teaching, he slowly began to understand the way things are, but more importantly, the way they ought to be. There seemed to be some discrepancies between the shining glory of creation and the often baffling and rainy world in which we humans are forced to spend our lives. His students valued him, at least the ones who weren't fools. His words could light up the darkness like a candle.

He lived with his wife, Rifka, in a tiny apartment in a ramshackle tenement building near the banks of the Vltava River.

EMANUEL BERGMANN

Their home consisted of only one room. They didn't own much. A kitchen table, a woodburning stove, a sink, and, of course, a bed that creaked rhythmically during each Sabbath night, as it was written and decreed.

Between the floors of their building was a miracle of modernity, an indoor toilet. To their daily annoyance, they had to share it with their upstairs neighbor, Moshe the Locksmith, a noisy man, an oaf, who fought frequently and loudly with his unpleasant wife.

Rabbi Goldenhirsch lived in a time of great renewal, but for the most part he remained blissfully untouched by the momentous changes around him. Just a few years earlier, the gas lamps on the streets had been replaced by electric ones, which had people divided. Was it the work of Satan or was it socialism? Also, steel tracks had been laid by the banks of the river, and soon the carriages that used to rattle up and down the roads made way for a tram, its metal wheels screeching and emitting sparks of fire.

This is what it looked like, the everyday magic of a new age.

Laibl Goldenhirsch had little use for it. Trams or no trams, life was hard. He went about his daily work in much the same way that the Jews of Europe had done for centuries and would presumably do for centuries to come. He didn't ask for much, and as a result, he didn't receive much either.

His face was narrow and pale; he had a black beard. His eyes were deep and dark, and he peered out at the world with a certain amount of distrust. At night, after the hardships of the day, the rabbi rested his head on a pillow next to his beloved wife, Rifka, a strong and beautiful woman with rough hands, gentle

eyes, and flowing auburn hair, and he imagined that he could see the stars above the ceiling. His eyes wandered far into the heavens, then turned like a leaf in the breeze and looked back down to earth, this tiny spark in the universe. As exhausting as life could be, there was—behind the thin veil of the ordinary—a brilliance that mystified and exhilarated him. “The simple act of living,” he liked to say, “and living well, is in itself a prayer.”

Lately, however, he couldn't sleep. Night after night, he would lie in bed and stare into the darkness. In this new age of man-made wonders, was there no more room for real miracles? Rabbi Goldenhirsch was in need of one.

There was something missing in his life: a son. He spent his days teaching the sons of other men—idiots, the lot of them—and when he looked at them, he imagined that one day he would look into the face of his own child. So far, his prayers went unanswered. The sun rose for others, but not for Laibl and Rifka. Many a night, the rabbi toiled away on top of his wife, but it was fruitless. And so the bed creaked less and less.



The new century was still young when a war broke out. This was, in and of itself, nothing remarkable. Wars were always breaking out, like the flu. But this war was unlike others, even though Rabbi Goldenhirsch and his wife failed to notice it at first. This was the Great War. It would soon leave millions dead in its wake. It was no flu, it was the plague. His students asked him to explain what was going on, and for the first time in his life, he was confronted with

EMANUEL BERGMANN

something beyond his reach. Until now, he could simply blame God and His mysterious ways, but this new war was anything but divine. The rabbi was perplexed. He stood in front of his class, his mouth hanging open, stuttering helplessly. He knew the plain facts, of course. Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated in Sarajevo at the hands of a coward. But Sarajevo was far away from the center of the civilized world, deep in the Balkans: what did it matter if someone was shot there? The goyim were always shooting at one another. Was one archduke less really such a tragedy? He knew, of course, that human life was immeasurably precious, that each violent death was an act of blasphemy and so forth, and he understood why the emperor of Austria-Hungary—to whom he and the citizens of Prague had sworn their allegiance—was upset. But really, why should this concern him?

But it did, greatly. Within a few months, agitation spread through the streets of Prague. Old men paced around the cafés, shaking their fists and waving newspapers around. Everyone tried to make sense of the latest developments on the front. Women anxiously gathered at Wenceslas Square, trading information about their sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers, who had eagerly joined the war effort. Very few realized that most of their men would never return. Those who were too young to fight studied the lists of the wounded and fallen, published every day, like the results of a soccer match. How many of ours? How many of theirs? The young were anxious to fight, and they would soon get the chance. The war raged on for many years and, in the process, became less and less choosy: it devoured all.

Even the Jews.

And so it happened that, one sunny day, Laibl Goldenhirsch was conscripted into Emperor Franz Joseph's army. When Rifka came home from the market, she burst into tears. Her spindly-legged husband was standing uneasily in front of their only mirror, dressed—somewhat unusually—in a uniform. He seemed confused as he held out his bayonet.

“What do I do with this?” he asked her.

“You stick it in a Russian,” Rifka replied, fighting against tears, but in vain. She hid her face and turned away.

And so, Laibl Goldenhirsch marched off to a war he still didn't understand.

Rifka had to survive without her husband. Which, as it turned out, was remarkably easy. She realized that he really was rather useless around the house. She missed him anyway. Never before in her life had she missed something so useless with so much fervor.

Almost every day, Rifka left the city and went into the woods outside of Prague, carrying two buckets full of coal, which she traded for butter and bread at nearby farms. Better to be cold than hungry.

When summer approached and the days grew warmer, her endeavor became more difficult. She had to find other things to take to the country, and on the way back, she hid the butter under her skirt. Danger was everywhere. More than once, there was nothing left by the time she came home, especially when there was partisan fighting and she had to hide in the woods until it was over. Nothing left but a warm trail of molten butter running down her thighs.

EMANUEL BERGMANN

One evening in September, as she came home, she found Moshe the Locksmith from upstairs sitting on the staircase. He wore a ragged soldier's uniform, and he was weeping. It was odd to see this giant of a man crying, his heavy bulk wavering, his head bobbing up and down. Deep and sorrowful sobs emerged from his body. When she went up to him and asked him what was wrong, he told her that he had just returned from the front, on furlough, but no sooner had he entered his apartment than his wife had told him it was over between them. He hadn't heard from her in a while. No letters, nothing, he said between sobs. Rifka felt sorry for him. She had never cared much for the Locksmith's wife, and she wasn't terribly surprised that the cow had left the pasture.

She took him into her arms and comforted him. The butter was still sticking to her leg.



One bright Wednesday morning, Laibl Goldenhirsch returned from the front. He was limping, but otherwise in the best of spirits. Rifka was sewing a shirt when the door opened, and looked up to see his gaunt shape leaning against the doorframe. So bony! So thin! She dropped her needle and thread and flung herself into his weak arms. He held her, as best he could, and tears of joy streamed down her face.

“Good news,” said Laibl, holding up his bayonet. “The Russian was quicker—he stuck me first. They put me in a field hospital.”

Laibl's injuries were hardly dramatic. He showed Rifka a scar on his thigh. His commanding officer, he said, had spoken up for him, and he didn't have to go back to the front. He was allowed to recuperate at a sanitarium in Karlovy Vary. He had a limp, but Laibl was now officially a wounded veteran. He sat down. Rifka gave him bread and asked him to tell her about the war. But his smile froze, and he seemed to be looking straight through her. Taking her hands in his, he gently kissed her fingertips. She searched in his eyes and found nothing but darkness. He shook his head. They made an unspoken pact to not talk about the front.

Three weeks later, after years of war, peace finally came. The war to end all wars had ended, and people were celebrating in the streets. Peace, peace at last, only without the glorious victory that had been promised. At least the nightmare was over. The survivors drank and sang, happy to be alive. People were bellowing and dancing, a few windows were broken, why not? Despite all that, there was a tangible feeling of shame, a deep sense of exhaustion. The people of Europe had grown tired of fighting and dying. Revolutions had broken out in Russia and Germany. The czar and his family were slaughtered. The emperor of Germany went on vacation, opting not to return. The Kingdom of Bohemia became the Republic of Czechoslovakia. Good news, all in all. But not as good as the news that Rifka had for Laibl Goldenhirsch:

“I am pregnant.”

Rifka's husband was stunned. He could hardly believe it. How was this possible? All right, the bed had creaked for the first few

EMANUEL BERGMANN

nights after his return, but wasn't it too early for the pregnancy to show? Rifka's belly had already grown slightly larger underneath her dress.

Laibl was pacing up and down, his black overcoat flapping about like the wings of an agitated pigeon. And as Rifka looked out the window, she suddenly had an idea. What was it that the goyim believed? What was it that their alleged Virgin Mary had said to Joseph?

"It's a miracle," Rifka exclaimed.

"A what?" said Laibl.

"God has worked a miracle for us." As she said this, she cast her eyes downward in what she hoped was an appropriately virtuous manner. She managed to make her lips and hands tremble ever so slightly, because she seemed to remember that miracles were generally accompanied by trembling.

"A miracle?" the Rabbi asked. He was baffled. As a rabbi, he was something of an expert on the subject of miracles. And this one seemed suspicious.

"*Oy gevalt!*" he said.

"Look around you," Rifka said. "God makes everything happen. Everything! Why wouldn't he make a miracle happen for us? Surely he must know how much you wanted a son."

She felt certain that it would be a son. She walked over to Laibl and put her head on his shoulder. She whispered sweetly into his ear. "God has granted your wish."

Rabbi Goldenhirsch was still distrustful of the miracle. Also, his stomach was unwell.

"It was an immaculate conception," said Rifka.

“Nonsense,” said the rabbi. “Every conception is maculate. This one especially. Who is the father?”

“The father is God,” said Rifka stubbornly. “I was visited by an angel.”

The rabbi threw his hands up in the air and began pacing once more. As night fell, he was no closer to solving this mystery. He decided he needed a break. The growling in his stomach was getting thunderous.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. After removing the large toilet key from the hook by the door, he stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. He went up the staircase, where the miracle of modernity awaited him.

It was occupied.

He waited patiently, more or less, bouncing on the balls of his feet. A few minutes later, he was seized by restlessness. He knocked. He heard a gruff voice from inside, and some rustling. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity in the dark and cold staircase, the door opened.

His noisy oaf of an upstairs neighbor, Moshe the Locksmith, came out, grumbling something incoherent, perhaps a greeting, then quickly averted his eyes to the floor as he furtively hurried past the rabbi. He was a large man, clumsy in movement and mind, too big for his own body, his arms and legs barely covered in torn rags. Like a golem. The rabbi looked after him.

A thought occurred to him. “Moshe!” he called.

“Yes?”

The Locksmith stared at the rabbi. There had always been a strain of animosity between the two men. The rabbi considered

EMANUEL BERGMANN

the Locksmith a lowlife idiot, and the Locksmith thought of the rabbi as an arrogant fool. Laibl Goldenhirsch looked into Moshe's eyes, hoping to detect something, anything, a strain of guilt, perhaps.

"I meant to ask you something," the rabbi cautiously began.

Moshe simply nodded and continued to glare. If he felt any guilt, he certainly didn't show it.

"It's about . . ." Laibl didn't get any farther. His words ran out like water on sand.

"Yes?"

Another attempt: "It's about a lock."

"What about it?"

"I can't get it to open," the rabbi explained. "My key, I stick it in and wriggle, but . . ." He fell silent. Then he gathered his thoughts and said, "Nothing is happening."

"Must be the wrong key," said the Locksmith with the arrogance of an experienced tradesman talking to an amateur.

Laibl Goldenhirsch was left standing in the gloom of the staircase.

Suddenly, he heard Moshe call out to him from above, "Rabbi? Are you still there?"

"Yes," he said.

Silence. Then, after a few seconds, he could hear Moshe's voice. It was quavering. "Forgive me," said the Locksmith, barely audibly, as if his words had been swallowed by the darkness.

"For what?"

Another pause. Rabbi Goldenhirsch heard a single, desperate sob echo through the staircase.

“I miss her,” Moshe said. Then he trampled up the last few wooden steps and fled to his apartment, banging the door shut.

The rabbi was puzzled.

Glancing out the round window above the staircase, he observed the nearby snow-covered roofs glistening in the moonlight. The sight was so beautiful it bordered on the miraculous. A thought occurred to him: The truth of a miracle is measured by faith alone.

He saw a cloud drifting toward the pale brightness of the moon. The rabbi was thinking: if the cloud managed to hide the moon completely, he would take it as a sign from God. He would accept the birth as a miracle.

He watched, spellbound, as the cloud slowly floated across the night sky.

Then it covered the moon. For a moment, the rabbi stood in complete darkness, as if the world were yet unformed.

When the cloud moved on, the milky moonlight engulfed his face. Suddenly, his anxiety left him. He stood there, trembling in the cold, his feelings like the bottomless sea. Waves of gratitude and love rose to the surface and drove salty tears down his cheeks.

He took a deep breath and opened the toilet door. He went inside, closed the door, unbuttoned his trousers, lifted his overcoat, sat down, pressed his eyes shut, and chose to believe. Every child is a gift, and he decided to accept it as such. Why look a gift horse in the mouth?

THE END OF IT ALL

In the early days of the twenty-first century, in the City of Angels, lived a boy named Max Cohn. About three weeks before his eleventh birthday, his parents took him to a sushi place on Ventura Boulevard and told him they were getting a divorce. They didn't come out with it right away. For most of the evening, they pretended everything was normal. But Max had a suspicion that something was wrong. They were just too nice to him. He pretty much knew what was coming, right from the start. His best friend in school, Joey Shapiro, had the same thing happen to him a couple of months ago, making Joey something of a tragic hero in class, the object of much admiration and pity. Joey had tasted the bittersweet nectar of tragedy, and he was one step closer to adulthood than the rest of them.

Joey had given Max a piece of sage advice: "They'll take you out to dinner. And they'll ask you what you want to eat."

EMANUEL BERGMANN

He leaned in closer and whispered, “I made a mistake and said pizza.”

“So?” Max asked, thinking, What’s wrong with pizza?

“So we went to Mickey’s Pizza Palace.”

Ah, Mickey’s Pizza Palace! Max knew it well. A fast food chain for the very young. The pizzas were gigantic, and the place had lots of video games and other fun stuff. This is where he was hoping to celebrate the momentous occasion of his birthday.

“Yeah, so?”

“I ordered a medium pepperoni with extra cheese.”

“So? Go on!”

“Then they told me that there were getting divorced. And all I could do was sit there with my pizza. . . .”

At that point in the narrative, Joey made a weird choking noise and averted his head. “As long as I live, I’ll never eat pizza again,” he said.

This came as a shock to Max. Parents divorce, sure, whatever, but he’d always assumed that pizza was one of those things in life you could count on.

At first, Max had taken comfort in the fact that his own parents would never do anything like that to him. They loved him, they loved each other, they loved Bruno the Bunny—a charming animal who mostly sat in his cage and wiggled his pink nose—and that was that. Or so he thought. But then he began to notice small details that weren’t immediately apparent, hints of a larger picture. Mom wiping her eyes, her eye shadow smeared as if she’d been crying. Dad staying away from home a lot, having to “work late,” even on the weekends. Or sleeping on the downstairs sofa,

with the TV on, which Max was totally forbidden to do. Doors that had previously been open were now shut. Something was wrong, he could sense it.

One day, when he came home from school and left his bicycle on the front lawn, he found both Mom and Dad sitting rigidly on the sofa, giving him fake smiles.

“How about going out for dinner?” Dad said. His voice was too cheerful. Too loud. Alarm bells went off in Max’s head. “You choose,” Dad said.

“What do you mean?” Max said.

“Where would you like to eat?”

Max thought for a moment. And then he said, “How about sushi?”

His parents looked at him in bewilderment.

“Are you sure, honey?” Mom asked.

“Yeah,” Max said. He figured, so what if he never ate raw fish again in his life.

They went out for sushi. Max had tuna, swordfish, and sea urchin eggs, even though Dad said that sea urchin wasn’t kosher. Max ate it anyway, and it was so gross, he almost puked, and when his parents suddenly held hands and told him that they both loved him very much and that nothing would change for him, he turned red, fought against tears, and started shivering. His mouth was full of fish cum or whatever it was, and in his head, he kept repeating to himself, At least there’ll still be pizza.



EMANUEL BERGMANN

Up until this point, Max's life had been fairly normal. Max was a standard-issue ten-year-old, lanky, with pale skin and unruly red hair. He wore a pair of glasses that his mom had fixed with electrical tape after Dad had sat on them one day. He lived with his family in a one-story house in Atwater Village. His dad was a "music-licensing attorney," whatever that meant, and his mom owned a small boutique on Glendale Boulevard, where she sold Asian furniture and various knickknacks. His family also had the usual assortment of aunts, uncles, and cousins, the worst of which probably were Uncle Bernie and Aunt Heidi, who were always bickering. And then there was Grandma, a difficult, high-strung woman who lived on the other side of the mountains, somewhere in the wilderness of the San Fernando Valley, in a far-away place called Encino.

The news of Max's parents' impending divorce spread through his class like a wildfire. Joey Shapiro gave him a sympathetic hug, and the girls started looking at him differently. Even Myriam Hyung, with whom he'd had hardly any contact so far, found a few kind words to say.

"Sorry about your folks."

Yada yada, he thought. But realizing she was only a girl, not capable of really understanding, and not wanting to be completely dismissive of her feeble attempt at human kindness, he graciously accepted her condolences and replied, "Yeah, whatever."

Today he was a man. Your parents' divorce, Max realized, is your true bar mitzvah. It is a rite of passage separating boys from men. He began to realize how many of his classmates came from what Rabbi Hannah Grossman called "broken families."

At first, being from a broken family was awesome. Nothing changed much in the beginning, except that Mom now slept alone in the master bedroom and Dad had to make do on the foldout couch in the living room, which was annoying. Because that's where the TV set was, which Max had always regarded as his personal property. Now Dad took over, watching sports all the time. But there were advantages. Max relished playing the role of martyr. He was showered in an amount of attention and comic books previously unknown to man. His mom bought him the latest issue of *Spider-Man* as well as several *Batman* trade paperback collections. Used to be that Max had to choose: Marvel vs. DC. Dad always said that life is about the choices we make. Which, as it turned out, was a load of crap. You could, in fact, have everything—that's what being an adult meant. Without a doubt, his parents' separation was the best thing that had ever happened to his comic book collection.

But deep down, he was worried. He had a secret. He knew why his parents wanted a divorce: it was his fault. Sure, according to Mom, they had to split because Dad had not been able to keep his hands off that "slut of a yoga instructor." But Max knew the truth.

It had happened a few weeks before the fateful sushi night. Max had once again been forced to clean out the bunny cage. Mom had repeatedly pointed out to him that he was the one who had wanted the damn rabbit in the first place. Therefore, bunny duty fell entirely on him. But this time, he asked Dad to do it. Just this once. Pretty please, with sugar on top. Max wanted to go to the movies with Joey Shapiro. And Dad said no. This led

EMANUEL BERGMANN

to an argument; then Max lost his patience and grumbled at Dad, and Dad defended his point even more bitterly.

So instead of enjoying popcorn and ice cream in an air-conditioned movie theater, Max had to clean out bunny poo. So unfair! When he finally, with much protest, brought out the trash bag, Dad stood by the door and glared disapprovingly at him. “Watch your tone,” he said. “That’s not how this works, young man. One more peep from you, and we’ll give up Bruno for adoption.”

Max threw the trash out, like he was supposed to, but he could feel torrents of rage roiling inside him. Give up Bruno! How mean!

Then he saw a penny by the trash bin and remembered Grandma saying that if you find a penny, you can pick it up, close your eyes, and make a wish. You mustn’t tell anyone what you wished for. And it’ll come true.

He picked up the penny, squeezed his eyes shut as hard as he could, and wished that Dad was gone. Just like that. When he opened his fist, the penny was still in his hand. He heard the distant rumble of thunder in the San Gabriel Mountains. It would rain soon. Max suddenly felt bad. He looked around and immediately squelched his thought, but it was too late. Someone—God, maybe?—must have heard him thinking. A terrible chain of events was set in motion.

For the first few weeks, Max thought he’d gotten away with it. Until the night at the sushi place. That’s when Max knew that he had cursed his family. Except the bunny, who seemed okay.

Initially, Max tried not to think about his part in this tragedy

too much. Instead, he enjoyed the bounty that came with his parents' divorce. His mom started giving him plenty of gifts, presumably to outdo Dad.

"I'll get you anything you want for your birthday," Mom would say to him, in an attempt to purchase his feelings. Max was easily purchased.

"Anything?"

Every toy was proof that his parents still loved him. But the proof was fleeting. There was no more certainty in his life. Everything began to change, and Max didn't particularly appreciate change. Turned out it wasn't all that cool to come from a broken family. *Au contraire*, he realized there were consequences! There was a lesson to be learned, a lesson that his heroes—Spider-Man and Joey Shapiro—had learned the hard way.



Telling their son was one of the hardest things Harry and Deborah Cohn had ever done. Harry in particular dreaded that moment, since he usually tried to avoid confrontation. Deborah not so much. Though officially a Buddhist, she seemed to thrive on conflict. Harry always joked that she was a "Raging Buddhist," but she didn't find that funny. In fact, she found very little about her husband funny these days. Seeing him mope around the house, with that guilty look on his face! Traits that she used to find endearing were now nauseating to her. She could hardly wait for him to get out.

But, of course, there was Max. They even considered staying

EMANUEL BERGMANN

married for his sake. Or rather, Harry considered it. Deborah didn't.

"I want you out," she said firmly. She said it not just because she wanted to punish Harry, although that was certainly a factor. No, she said it because his affair had left her deeply wounded. She needed to be rid of him, and couldn't stand to look at him anymore. It was like tearing off a Band-Aid. You did it quickly.

"But what about Max?" Harry whined.

"Max," Deborah replied, "is better off without you."

And so it went. They tried to remain civil to each other, but almost every discussion ended in a heated argument.

"How are we going to tell him?" Harry asked Joey's mother when she stopped by their house one afternoon to pick up her son.

"Try to make it as easy on him as you can," said Mrs. Shapiro, who had some experience in these matters. "And do it on neutral ground, such as a restaurant."

Deborah nodded and typed some notes into her phone.

One sunny morning not long afterward, Deborah took the freeway to Woodland Hills. The law firm of Gutierrez & Partners was on the third floor of a vast glass monstrosity of an office building, a monument to bad taste. The inside wasn't any better. The waiting room was adorned with a painting of dogs playing poker. Who buys crap like that? Deborah wondered. Divorce attorneys, evidently. Then she was called into his office.

Mr. Gutierrez, the senior partner, stood up and shook her

hand limply. He was an unnaturally cheerful man, given the nature of his profession, a smiling, paunchy, and jolly executioner of love.

“What can I do for you?”

She explained the situation, and he listened, nodding silently. After some back-and-forth, Harry and Deborah had decided on an “uncontested divorce.” Deborah had found the term online. It simply meant that they weren’t going to court over their belongings, or to fight over custody. Mr. Gutierrez seemed a tad disappointed to hear that, having looked forward to many billable hours.

He explained that an uncontested divorce was simplicity itself. Deborah would file the papers and then they would be sent over to Harry, so he could look them over. Provided that both parties agreed on the terms, the petition would then be sent over to the LA Superior Court, where a judge would review it. If everything was deemed acceptable, both parties would sign the divorce decree and that would be that. They could be divorced within a matter of weeks and their life together would finally be over.

The wedding had been way more complicated, Deborah thought.

One thing was obvious to Harry and Deborah: they didn’t want to subject Max to prolonged court battles. They didn’t want him to have to choose between one parent and the other. They agreed on how to proceed once Harry moved out, which was taking way too long, in Deborah’s opinion. They decided that Deborah would have Max during the week, and Harry would keep him from Friday to Sunday. He would pick him up and

EMANUEL BERGMANN

drop him off at school, so that there'd be as little contact between Harry and Deborah as humanly possible.

These were trying days for them all. Harry started drinking again, and Deborah took up smoking, a habit that she thought she'd kicked. Both began having difficulties in their respective careers. Deborah began missing meetings with wholesalers and suppliers, despite her frantic use of modern technology, and Harry simply showed up to the office a little bit too late every day, frequently hungover. His coworkers were reasonably forgiving, at least for a while. Harry soon realized that getting divorced bought you a lot of points at the water cooler. The women in the office began doting on him. But he found it hard to concentrate, and his performance was beginning to suffer.

Both Deborah and Harry felt as if their lives were slipping through their fingers like sand.