When We Were Bad

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Extract

Prologue

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The Rubin family, everybody agrees, seems doomed to happiness.

Today is the wedding day of Leo, the first-born. He is thirty-four; he has not hurried, but now he is to marry and the next instalment of family history has been ensured. There is, in the jokes of his many ushers, his parents' smiling efficiency, the kisses and handshakes of his older relatives, a sense of relief.

The wedding will begin in fourteen minutes. Grandchildren frolic in the bright sunlight. Elderly and difficult cousins, naphthalene-scented in ancient Marks and Spencer's good winter coats, raise their chins and ignore each other, their cheeks wet with wind-tears. Despite the intense cold of this February day, nobody wants to go inside. It is much more fun to circulate, speculate, pretend to ignore the onlookers, wait for the photographers to look your way.

But they will not. No one is interested in you. There is one star of this show: tall and distractingly voluptuous in sea-green silk devoré. With her in their midst, this brilliant schtuppable pioneer, who could not be happy? Every one of the three professionals' cameras, the eighty-one amateur Nikons and Canons, points at that bone structure, that smile. Lean handsome old men, short dark sharp-suited young men, shrunken great-aunts with lizard eyes watch each other, watch

the celebrities, but most of all watch her. Even the passers-by are unable to pass by. Whether or not they recognize her, their eyes are drawn in one direction, in her direction: at Rabbi Claudia Rubin, mother of the groom.

It is time to go in, but no one can quite break free. She shines amongst them, caramel-skinned, narrow-eyed, with a brain women envy and an opulent, maternal, fuckable body which makes men weak. Those guests who do not know her well mill cautiously in her direction, hoping for their moment. Those who do remain nearby, reluctant to release their hold.

Almost forgotten, the bride, Naomi Grossman, and her parents are approaching the synagogue in a car from Woodside Park. They are mute with excitement. Rabbi Rubin has been so good to them, letting their own rabbi lead the service, insisting on paying for the reception and flowers and photographers, for all that catering. What could they do but stand back and let her take charge?

'Nearly time,' murmurs Claudia's husband, Norman.

'Mm,' says Leo.

'Hooray!' says Claudia to one guest, then another. Her dress is tight: not unseemly, but it shows her at her confusing best. 'All the way from Newcastle with your sore leg! Thank God you've come. I have the most *unbelievable* blisters. You smell amazing. If it rains, we're screwed.' Even her youngest children are attentive, affectionate, as close as a family can be: tall handsome Simeon at her left shoulder, lovely Emily at her right. If this, the few minutes before the wedding, could be frozen and kept unsullied by the future – the Rubins in their heyday – their happiness would be complete. But it cannot be frozen. Things happen.

Part One

One

It is beginning.

'Come in!' says Claudia, waving her guests through. 'Sweetheart, how gorgeous you look. Hello! No, it's not me, couldn't possibly do it today – it's Naomi's rabbi, Nicky Baum, you'll know him. Oh, you hero – you made it! Hello, gorgeous, how are *you*?' They are all smiling as they approach. Her warm brown hand on their arms sustains them. The Rubins can be relied on. This will be a memorable wedding.

Beyond the railings the onlookers, dressed in their ordinary weekend clothes, begin to move away. Those who recognize Claudia or one of her friends will report their sighting later, proprietorially. Those who do not will ask themselves the same uneasy question as their day progresses: who *were* those people? The old women with their foreign accents, the young men with their suits: they make them think of the Mafia, of rich foreign families with their secrets and their power. Look at those expensive handbags, the sunglasses on a cold Sunday afternoon. Who do they think they are?

A few others, the most observant – a financial journalist, a French lawyer, an osteopath – notice details: the clip on a skullcap glinting in the sun; the discreet brass sign beside the gates. They start to look more carefully at the hair, the faces. And, as they move on, one thought unites them: 'Bloody Jews.'

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'Are you ready?' asks Leo's father, his sisters, his brother, as if he weren't the famously steady son, the memory-machine. They ask him anxiously, and so he reassures them.

'Yes,' he says, touching his pocket, his heart. 'Of course I am.' Out of the corner of his eye he watches his mother speaking to her buffoonish stand-in, Rabbi Nicholas Baum of West Finchley Liberal, his slender wife by his side.

Beneath the wedding canopy, Frances, the elder of Leo's two sisters, is trying to feel moved. This is, after all, an occasion. Her favourite sibling, after a life of diligent hard work and gentle correctness, has earned a clever moley wife who loves his mother almost as much as he does. She is his reward, as Frances's reward for instructing him in the ways of normal people is an embarrassing place of honour under the chuppah where, in a few moments, his married life will begin.

Look at him now, bending down from the bimah to correct the angle of his one goyisher usher's skullcap: at that stocky barrel-chested nervousness and extraordinarily square jaw and furry-eyebrowed frown. If anyone can be relied upon to make the cousins happy, to do his duty, he is the one. And he and Naomi, his bride, will be perfect together, testing each other on legal precedents, teaching their fortunate children to argue Talmudic niceties, very politely. He has found the only woman in the world willing to spend her honeymoon visiting the observatory at Salamanca. Truly, Frances is glad for them.

But, oh God, the future. She loves her brother, of course she does, but the thought of the obligatory Friday nights ahead, the unabridged prayers and poached chicken and bathroom full of peach hand towels, fills her with a strange disloyal heaviness. Besides, her imagination is wringing every

last possibility for tragedy from the joyous scene before her: heart attacks during the service, car crashes en route to the airport; even a sudden fatal flaw in the synagogue's foundations.

Relax, she tells herself, fiddling with the official pen for the signing of the Ketubah, but the truth is that she does not know how to. These huge family occasions are worse than shul. Everyone knows you, everyone wants to pinch your cheeks, remind you of the time you wet yourself at cheder, ask why you won't grow your hair or go to ophthalmology school like your uncle. There is no escape.

And, as several of them have helpfully mentioned as they pressed her to their bosoms, today of all days she does not look good. The dress her mother had offered to lend her, clinging, patterned, size fourteen, made her look like a flagpole in a sack. When she was summoned to the bathroom this morning to model her own choice, Claudia's face, framed in bubbles, made the scale of her error plain.

'Oh Lord, darling,' she had said.

It is, admittedly, only creased green cotton but she has always thought it a relatively successful student purchase, concealing her lack of bosom with an interestingly forties-style tie at the side. She had planned to wear it with a new blue silk cardigan and a pair of silver earrings from the Moroccan stall at Camden Lock: Land Girl with a touch of the Orient. Through the steam, however, it looked very different: a housecoat, a hospital garment for the insane. Her fifty-five-year-old mother, naked, looked better dressed than she.

Claudia had sat up, slick dark hair like an otter, breasts and shoulders shining: too monumental to be beautiful but beautiful all the same. 'Couldn't you,' she asked, 'at least have had a haircut?'

The truth is that no haircut could possibly help. After an

unlovely doughy girlhood the wrong bones poked through and now she is like a Victorian spinster, a tall thin unbeautiful woman, with pale wrists like light bulbs, a skinny breastbone, long cold feet. Even on her own wedding day she had fallen short of prettiness, as if the dressmaker had drawn the outline and then cut a centimetre outside it. When she had moved towards her perfect husband-to-be, the fabric seemed to hang back.

The others compensate. Not Leo, of course; he is a lawyer. No one expects them to be handsome. But look at her mother; even her father, with his brainy forehead and eagle's eyebrows, his mighty nose, is growing into his face. Look at her little sister, Emily, plump-skinned and shining-haired as a French king's mistress, not a modern girl at all. Or her younger brother, Simeon, thick-lashed as a baby, his dark dreadlocks tied in a topknot for the occasion like a bandit prince pretending to be tame. The older guests can't stop kissing them: so charming, so naughty, so wonderfully talented, so prone to drama although, dear God, please not today. And, of course, their unwed state adds interest because marriage, apparently, is always a good thing.

'Never forget,' her mother reminded her only this morning, 'what you and now Leo have is the greatest gift of all. You're the lucky ones. Think of your brother and poor Emily. It's very hard for them.'

Frances knows she is lucky. It is emotion, purely, which makes her put down the glass she has been wrapping carefully in a double layer of napkin – how many stamping grooms have severed an artery? – and claw a fragment of tissue from her sleeve. Crying at weddings is normal. In the front row her mother's sisters, Rose whose husband left her and poor fat virgin Ruth, are already passing a handkerchief

between them, their faces unbecomingly flushed. Or rather she assumes that this is normal. Every wedding she has ever attended, as a helper, as Claudia's proxy or, in the case of her friend Tamar, who married a Syrian ballet dancer, as a bolster, has featured broiguses, reconciliations and weeping long before the choir began to sing. But perhaps this is Jews. Perhaps, Frances thinks wistfully, in other parts of England, people marry their love-matches perfectly calmly.

Four minutes to go. She smiles nervously into the middle distance, catching no one's eye. Anything could happen, despite her seating plans and schedules. She has tried to brief the younger Rubins on their duties but Em is simply gazing picturesquely into space, while her brother is failing to direct guests to their seats, preferring to concentrate on their more attractive wives and daughters. Sim has never been reliable, with his ropy money-making schemes and murky little habits. She was a fool to count on him, she thinks, and sees that she has shredded her tissue to feathers.

She tries to straighten the Ketubah but it is difficult to see. Cold sunlight is blazing through the western windows into her eyes. The makeup she attempted this morning, under instructions from her mother in the bath, will be creeping down her face already: vanity misplaced. This is not the time, she reminds herself, for angry worrying about lost rings and straying pensioners and her siblings' carelessness. She should enjoy being here, in this temple to her mother, surrounded by the prayer-books she helped to revolutionize, the new seats paid for by her fund-raising. Everyone wants to join New Belsize Liberal, where famous authors come to Chanukkah parties and the congregation seems to grow by the hour. As its senior rabbi herself has said, community, family, is the answer. Aren't they all so lucky to be part of hers?

And look how happy they seem: unfavoured relatives from her father's side; mysterious debonair old men from her mother's; Leo's hideous childhood friends from Parliament Hill and summer Kadimah at Tring, whose film options and accountancy promotions the other guests know by heart. Here, right on time, comes Naomi's mother, a poem in pleated fuchsia, taking her rightful place under the chuppah. The junior rabbis will make the day run smoothly, as they are used to doing, and so, of course, will Claudia, gazing down upon her people. She looks edible, a fertility symbol made of praline. With her in charge, how could it not all be fine? Today is a wonderful day.

In the front row Frances's husband, stoically managing the children alone, is beaming. He is in his element. He gives her a merry little wave. She smiles at him with her lips, as if someone is pulling levers. She cannot make her face engage.

As she turns her head she notices an elderly cousin, whose powdery embrace she has been evading all morning, raise her eyebrows. They are watching her, the beady old ladies. She will have to be careful now.

The ushers have their hands full. The bride will appear at any moment and the guests will not sit still. They crane and shout and embrace each other, jumping up from their seats like toddlers at a matinée. Each of them seems to be on kissing terms with at least half the others: history, community, gastronomy unite them all. Only the goys are behaving, obediently taking their white satin skullcaps from a box by the door; turning the prayer-book pages left to right in polite confusion; or simply sitting, a little self-consciously, while around them roar the sounds of Jews at play.

The children grow more excited. The adults call louder

and louder. There is so much to discuss. Claudia's new book will be published in April, they inform each other importantly. Didn't you see her on *Question Time*? It'll be all over the papers. She'll be touring America in the summer, and there's a big-shot lecture in Cambridge, very prestigious. Brenda told me. Hadn't you heard? Our boys are very close. When were you last there for dinner?

Together they sit, in the centre of everything, watching the Rubins, delighted with it all. Their fears are numerous and no quantity of bomb-proof glass or burly cousins on security at the door can reassure them entirely. Nevertheless, a fragrant tide of flowers and good feeling envelops them now. It is cold outside but in here they are warm and jubilant. Today even the Jews are blessed.

At the front of Landau Hall, his back to the chuppah, the best man shuffles the orders of service with shaking fingers. Why, precisely, is he nervous? Is it the presence of a few distinctly famous guests: an old left-wing politician, a vice-chancellor, two still-beautiful actresses, several very familiar writerly faces whose exact names now escape him? Is it the Rubins themselves, in whose company he always feels the same mixture of excitement and heartache, welcome and faint exclusion, as if he were thirteen again? Is it Rabbi Rubin, that alarming brain, that photogenic face and tightly packed compelling body, before which he always feels rumpled and ashamed? Or is it memories of the previous Rubin wedding, the lovely jumpy Frances's, when the whirling-round of the happy couple in their chairs and the demented stamping music set him adrift and he almost kissed one of them, any of them but most of all the bride, before remembering his place?

'We're on.'

An usher is beside him, nodding at the choir. On the far side of the room another taps Leo on the shoulder. The congregation's tone has altered, like a car changing gears.

The great wooden doors at the back of the hall are opening. Nervous but happy in unflattering ivory velvet, the bride-to-be, led by her father, is about to begin the slow walk towards her future.

Leo stands on the bimah with his family, his back to the hall. Everyone is smiling, their hopes heavy upon him: all those wedding-hungry relatives behind him, all his mother's friends. He knows precisely what is expected, has always done everything that they have asked: until now. Now his mind is full of his beloved: not, unfortunately, his bride-to-be, but the officiating rabbi's wife.

The doors swing closed behind Naomi. The choir begins its joyful song. As the guests fall reluctantly silent, Leo's mind sweeps clear. For almost a year, since he began to accompany his betrothed to Rabbi Nicky Baum's Saturday morning service – since he first came face to face with Helen Baum – he has been another man. Order, hard work, punctiliousness: all of these have evaporated, to be replaced by longing. And nobody has noticed. Any amount of short-tempered unreliability, it seems, is excused in the soon-to-be-wed.

And she, too, loves him. She is an older married woman, graceful, subtle, transfixingly clever, and she loves him. For the last six months they have met on Tuesday evenings, each claiming a lengthy evening class, and have gone to a park or a square on the fringes of London or sat in his car on a side street, and kissed.

In less than a minute, his bride, the wrong bride, will be at his side.

He turns to his sister, Frances. She will help him.

'Listen to me,' he says.