

Chillers

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On Thursday night, near the end of an hour-long Google Chat session, Rebecca finally said that she wanted to meet in person. We'd been flirting pretty heavily for a while now and the fact that she took the initiative to ask me out felt very promising sex-wise.

I told her that I would love to catch up and asked if we could make it that Saturday night. She said that she was sorry, but her only good 'going-out' night was Friday night, as she worked Sunday mornings. She knew that I was Jewish, but I hadn't told her that I was religious, so I didn't want to tell her about Shabbat being an issue. I figured that I could work around it anyway. I said that Friday would be awesome and sent her a smiley face. She replied with a winking emoticon and logged off straight after.

I didn't really sleep that night and ended up sleeping through morning prayers and arriving late to school. This wasn't much of an issue. The rabbi felt that I wasn't getting as much out of his Talmud classes as I could and had organised for me to have private study sessions with Yehudah in the mornings. My attendance wasn't checked and I rarely came on time.

I got to the synagogue at about 9.15 a.m. Yehudah was already there, learning on his own. He wasn't the smartest boy in the class, but he was one of the most religious. I was pretty sure the rabbi chose him to help me because he figured Yehudah wouldn't let me mess around. Which, for the most part, he didn't.

We said good morning to each other, chatted for a little bit and then started studying. The way we did it was that I would read out the Aramaic, Yehudah would

translate it to English and, at the end of each page, the two of us would discuss what was said. After just three paragraphs, though, I stopped reading, closed my Talmud and announced my news about Rebecca. Yehudah didn't say anything in response, but just squinted a bit and readjusted his skullcap. Then he closed his Talmud.

'It's pretty bloody cool, yeah?' I said.

'I guess.'

'Oh, come on,' I said, trying to prompt some enthusiasm. Rebecca was the first girl my age I'd ever spoken to who wasn't related to me and now there was a good chance I would lose my virginity to her. It was a huge deal.

'Fine, it's fantastic. Whatever you want.'

'Thank you.'

I took out my phone and unlocked it.

'Do you want to read the chat session?' I asked.

I often showed him my chat sessions with Rebecca. He was not allowed to have the internet at home and we were quite restricted on what we could look at in school, so he had never really chatted with anyone online. I enjoyed explaining to him some of the dirtier acronyms and the subtleties of flirting and, whether he would admit it or not, I knew he was interested in my online relationship. Probably a little jealous, too.

'Not today,' Yehudah said.

'All right, fine. What about photos?'

'Do you want me to?'

'Yeah.'

I didn't care if he wanted to look at the photos, I just really wanted to talk about Rebecca.

‘Fine,’ Yehudah said.

‘Cool.’

I set my phone down in the middle of the table. Yehudah sat up and leaned in close to the screen. There were only four photos in total and I flicked through each one slowly. They were all of Rebecca sitting cross-legged on the grass. For the first two photos she was smiling, the third she was pouting and the last she was looking pensively off-camera.

‘What’s her last name?’ Yehudah asked, without looking up from the screen.

‘Rubenstein,’ I said.

It was actually Jackson. I didn’t want to tell him she wasn’t Jewish.

‘She’s really kind of pudgy,’ he said.

‘Well... kind of. But, I don’t mind, to be honest.’

Yehudah picked up my phone and brought it up close to his face. It was obvious that he needed glasses, but I knew he would never admit it.

‘When are you meeting her?’

‘Saturday night,’ I said. I also didn’t want him knowing we were going out on Shabbat.

‘What are you gonna do?’

‘We’re going to a bar on Chapel Street.’

‘Chapel?’

‘Yeah.’

I put my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my chair.

‘Cool,’ Yehudah said. He then locked my phone and gave it to me. ‘I think we should start studying now.’

We weren't being tested on what we were learning, it was just Jewish law to study a certain amount every day. Normally, I would try to match Yehudah's self discipline, at least for our morning study sessions, but it just wasn't happening for me today. I also hated being in the synagogue. It always smelt of dust and whisky and there were kosher wafer crumbs all over the back tables.

'Can we just get a Slurpee first?' I asked.

'Do what you want.'

Yehudah opened his Talmud.

'All right, cool. I'll be back soon.'

I quickly left the synagogue, snuck across the road to the 7-Eleven, and bought two medium Slurpees. The only kosher flavours they had were strawberry and lime and I always liked to mix it half and half. I then snuck back onto the school grounds. When I got back into the synagogue I saw that Yehudah had closed his Talmud and was holding a small bullet in his hand. I sat down across from him and gave him his Slurpee.

'Did you get this from Ruvi?' I asked.

'Yeah. Thought you'd want to see it.'

He handed me the bullet. It was flat at the top and still warm from Yehudah's pocket. He had been collecting bullets from ex-Israeli soldiers for two years and had a serious collection.

'It's cool,' I said.

'Yeah, it is.'

'It's no girl, though,' I said jokingly, but Yehudah didn't laugh.

'I guess not,' he said. 'David...'

'What?'

‘Have you properly thought about this?’

‘Sex?’

‘Yeah, it’s a serious thing. It’s as bad as eating non-kosher.’

I held the bullet up in front of my face and flicked the tip.

‘Don’t—’

‘What?’

I had no idea what to say. I wanted to tell him that I did enough. I kept kosher and Shabbat, wore a skullcap and tzitzit, prayed three times a day, said a blessing on all my food, celebrated all the holidays. It was just this one thing.

‘Just stop making me feel guilty. Seriously.’

Yehudah twisted his side curls and pulled them back over his ears. ‘Fine, I’m sorry.’

I checked the time on my phone. It was 9.40 a.m. At eleven o’clock we had secular studies, and then Yehudah and I would be in different classes for the rest of the day. He was the only person I planned on telling about Rebecca and I suddenly wished I hadn’t. He was a bit of a gossip and I was afraid that it would get back to my mother.

‘We really should start learning,’ Yehudah said, opening his Talmud.

‘Fine.’

I gave him back his bullet.

‘Don’t tell anyone what I told you,’ I said.

‘I won’t.’

‘Seriously.’

‘I won’t!’

I took a sip of my Slurpee.

‘It’s against the Torah to lie.’

Yehudah rolled his eyes and looked down into his Talmud. I opened my own Talmud, found the place and started to read aloud.

Shabbat came in at 6 p.m., prayers were at 6.30 p.m., the meal was at 7.15 p.m. and my parents went to their rooms a little before eight o’clock. My two older brothers were both studying overseas in Yeshivahs, and with just me in the house, my mother liked to eat quickly and go to bed early.

As soon as my parents had closed their door I went to my room and changed out of my Shabbat suit. I put on a shirt, a pair of jeans and some runners, put a baseball cap over my skullcap and tucked the fringes of my tzitzit into my pants. I then walked quietly through the house, snuck out through the back door and headed onto Balaclava Road.

I didn’t want to get on a tram on Balaclava Road in case anyone from the community saw me, so I walked up to the falafel shop on Carlisle Street. I’d never walked this far from home on Shabbat and it was weird to see Carlisle Street without any Jews on it.

Because it was Shabbat, I was not allowed to hail a tram, as I would be causing someone else to use electricity on my behalf. But, I figured that I would be allowed to step on a tram as long as someone else caused it to stop. There were a few other people already at the tram stop. I sat down and stayed seated until the tram had arrived and the doors had opened, then I stood up and got on with the other passengers.

I walked through the tram until I found a forward-facing window seat that wasn’t dirty and sat down just across from an elderly man. He had a small hand radio

clipped to his belt and was serenading the back half of the tram with the live football coverage. It was the Pies (Collingwood) versus the Doggies (Western Bulldogs), Collingwood up by seventeen points, midway through the fourth quarter. I'd never heard the radio on Shabbat. Normally, we had to wait until Saturday morning, when the paper was delivered, to find out the match results. I felt strangely guilty knowing the scores on a Friday night. As the tram started moving, I leaned my head against the window and closed my eyes.

It wasn't a long ride to Chapel Street and, luckily, someone pulled the cord for my stop. As soon as the doors opened, I got off and crossed the road to wait for the joining Chapel Street tram.

There were two girls already waiting there. They were both blonde and wore tight and sparkly silver dresses. The blonder of the two smiled at me. I smiled back, adjusted my cap a bit and looked at the front window of the nearest shop. It was called 'Tobacco 'n' Stuff'. The window display was filled with knives and nudie pens. I stared at the shop window until the tram came ten minutes later and, as I'd done before, I waited for the tram to stop of its own accord.

It was an old-fashioned tram with leather seats and a small, encased part of the engine protruding out from the floor. I sat down on the nearest seat to the door and leaned my head against the window. Once we started moving, though, I had to sit up because the glass vibrated too much.

I was meeting Rebecca at Chillers. The club was positioned just across from the Jam Factory, three-quarters of the way down Chapel Street. I figured that somebody would pull the string for this stop, but nobody did. I ended up having to wait two more stops until the blonde girls pulled the cord. They walked out through

the front doors and I went out the back, so that they wouldn't think I was following them.

I'd only ever been on Chapel Street on a Sunday afternoon and it was weird to see it at full throttle. There were hundreds of cars on the street, all shiny, loud and primary-coloured, pounding out heavy beats. The people passing me on both sides were all beautiful and overly made up, and none of them made eye contact.

It wasn't a long walk to Chillers, as the tram stops weren't very far from each other. I got there in five minutes. There were smokers outside the front, but no line. I walked up to the security guard and took out my wallet. Just after I'd arrived home from school I'd taken all the notes and coins out of my wallet, as it was prohibited to handle money on Shabbat, and left only my ID, savings card and monthly tram ticket. I took out my ID now, but the guard waved his hand and told me not to worry and I stepped through the door without being carded.

The club was small, dark and over-packed. Most of the people were on the dance-floor and the rest were at the bar. I walked through the room with my hands in my jackets pockets and stepped up to the edge of the dance-floor. There was a small group of guys bobbing their heads awkwardly with their drinks held up their chest, watching the girls dance wildly in front of them.

I noticed Rebecca at the end of the dance floor. She was wearing black and holding a Coke-coloured drink. I waved at her and smiled, but she ignored me. It occurred to me then that I'd never sent her a photo of myself. I walked around the dance floor and stepped up to her slowly.

'Rebecca?'

She looked at me and gave a half-smile.

'David?'

‘Yeah.’

‘Oh, hey. How are you?’

‘Good, how are you?’

‘Excellent!’

She gave me a hug and held me to her for a good few seconds. I wrapped my arms just under her shoulder blades and made sure not to squeeze too hard. She smelled like strawberries and whisky.

‘I wasn’t sure you were going to show up. I tried calling your phone a few times.’

‘Sorry, I left it at home.’

‘Is it dead?’

It wasn’t, but I didn’t want to tell her I couldn’t use it on Shabbat.

‘Nah, I just forgot it, sorry.’

‘Oh, all right.’

Rebecca smiled and so did I. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I just stood quietly for a bit and pretended to be enjoying the music; it was fast, erratic and full of heavy beats, and I didn’t recognise it at all.

‘Do you want a drink?’ Rebecca finally asked.

‘Yeah, sure.’

She pointed towards the bar. I nodded and led the way. The bar was heavily congested and we had to push our way through to be able to see the drinks. All the spirits and beers were lined up on glass shelves behind the barman, but I was forced to lean forward and rest my elbows on the moist beer mat in order to see the beers. None of them were kosher.

‘What are you going to get?’ Rebecca asked me.

‘A vodka and orange,’ I said.

Rebecca waved at the barman and he came right over. Very few of the people at the bar were actually ordering drinks, they just seemed to like being near the alcohol. Rebecca ordered herself a whisky and Coke. The barman grabbed a whisky glass from a dish-rack behind him, filled it with a shot of Red Label and started adding the post-mix Coke. Before the glass was even full he turned to me and asked for my order.

‘A screwdriver!’ I yelled.

The barman nodded, gave Rebecca her drink and started on mine. A few seconds later he dropped the full glass in front of me and without looking at me screamed: ‘Sixteen!’

Rebecca reached into her bag, but I gestured for her to stop and took my savings card out of my wallet. The barman picked it from my fingers, swiped it through the Eftpos machine and handed me the keypad.

I was about to take it, but stopped short. I hadn’t predicted this problem. I stared blankly at it, desperately trying to think of a way that I could pay for the drinks without transgressing Shabbat. I was well aware of the hypocrisy of allowing myself to have sex, but not allowing myself to break Shabbat. But, I figured that it was *because* I was going to have sex that I should make sure not to transgress Shabbat. There was no reason to sin twice.

‘Mate!’ the barman yelled, ‘enter your PIN already.’

‘Can I tell you my PIN?’ I screamed back.

‘What?’

‘Can I—’

‘Can you pay for this drink, mate?’

‘What?’

‘Can you pay or not?’

I thought about leaving. I could have just apologised to Rebecca, said that I remembered I had no money in my account, and gone home.

‘I can pay,’ I said. ‘I can. I was just wondering if I could tell you my PIN and you put it in.’

‘What? No. You can’t do that, mate.’

‘Here, I’ll pay,’ Rebecca said, taking a twenty out of her wallet and giving it to the barman. The guy rolled his eyes, pressed some buttons on the Eftpos machine, cashed Rebecca’s money and gave her the change. She dropped two dollars in the tip jar, picked up her drink and gave me my own. I put my wallet away and said nothing.

‘What is it you say,’ Rebecca said. ‘L’chaim?’

I smiled.

‘Yep. That’s it. L’chaim.’

We clinked glasses. Rebecca drained her glass in one go and dropped it on the bar.

‘I kind of wanna dance,’ she said, ‘and I hate dancing with a drink in my hand.’

I laughed and skulled my own drink. It went down easily, but the orange juice was too sweet and I didn’t taste the vodka until the end. I put down my empty glass next to Rebecca’s and pointed to the dance floor.

We stayed at Chillers for a couple of hours, some of the time on the dance floor, but most of the time outside talking. I found that Rebecca was as easy to talk with in person as she was to chat with online.

We drank a fair amount, but neither of us got too plastered and at about eleven o'clock we went down to the 7-Eleven and Rebecca got us a couple of bottles of water.

The conversation became awkward at this point. I kept trying to say interesting things but Rebecca hardly responded. I ended up just speaking to make noise and kept cracking very bad and inappropriate jokes.

After a while, though, she saved me from my humiliation by putting her pinky on mine and stroking it gently. I stopped talking. She took my whole hand and put her face up to mine and kissed me.

It started off close-mouthed, but then elevated to a full-blown kissing session. I kept my eyes open at first, but then shut them when I saw that she was keeping hers closed. It was my first lesson in the etiquette of kissing.

We kept it up for a little while, at which point Rebecca broke away. We looked at each other in silence. I really wanted a drink of water, but I thought it might be rude to take one. Rebecca lifted my hat and ran her hand through my hair.

'Sooo curly.'

If she noticed my skullcap she didn't mention it.

'Listen,' she said, 'I don't want you to think I'm a slut or anything.'

'Okay,' I said.

'But, if you want to come to my place you can. It's really close.'

I didn't know if there was a special way I was meant to respond, so I just nodded. Rebecca laughed.

'All right, cool.'

She stood up and helped me to my feet.

'This way,' she said.

I took her hand and we started walking together. It only took ten minutes to get to her street. It was a surprisingly quiet and suburban-looking street, considering how close it was to Chapel Street. Rebecca's place was down the far end. It was a small terrace house with a mouldy couch on the porch and a few empty pot plants in the front window sill.

Rebecca opened the door and led me into a short hallway. There was a stained glass door with a dark orange glow in its centre at the end of the hall. I figured there was a fireplace behind it and I could hear a guy and a girl talking. Rebecca had mentioned once that she lived in a share-house and I expected her to take me through to meet her housemates, but she just pulled me into the first room off the side of the hallway and closed the door behind us. The light was off inside, but I could see enough to know that it was her bedroom.

She hugged me and ran the tip of her finger in figure eights across my palm. Then she kissed me and told me that she wanted to have sex by the laptop light. I said nothing. She sat me down on the bed, walked to her desk and opened her laptop, lighting the room with a gentle glow.

'Do you like the Mountain Goats?'

'I don't know who they are.'

'You'll love them.'

She put on the music and sat down next to me on the bed. I took her hand and squeezed it and we started kissing. After a little while she started rubbing the inside of my leg, then she stopped kissing and pulled her top up over her head. I looked at the ground while her face was covered and a few moments later I saw her shirt drop to the carpet.

I looked up. I'd only ever seen a woman's breasts in films and in pictures, and my chest tightened slightly when I realised that I could actually touch these ones. I wanted to be polite, though, so I didn't make a move. But then Rebecca took my hand and placed it on her right breast. I laughed nervously and so did she.

I just left my hand sitting there, without attempting to take any further action. After a little while of this pose Rebecca kissed me and pulled a light blue packet of condoms from under her mattress. She held it out for me. I lifted my hand off her breast and took the box.

I held it for a few seconds, studying the couple pictured on the front. I wanted to see if it had instructions, but I was too embarrassed to turn it over.

'You all right?' Rebecca asked.

'I'm fine.'

I slowly reached into the box and took out a condom packet. I pressed it between my forefinger and thumb; I could feel the rim of the condom through the thin plastic. I made a small tear with my teeth and some of the lubricant got on my fingers. I dried them on my pants. I then took the condom out and unravelled it.

Rebecca laughed. 'Oh shit, let's get a new one.' She picked the box from my hands and took out another condom packet. She held it out for me, but I didn't take it.

'You're shaking,' Rebecca said, taking my hand. I saw her eyes move down to my pants and I knew that she could see the wet spot near my zipper.

'It's fine,' she said, squeezing my hand and rubbing my cheek.

I couldn't even remember it happening.

'Please don't get all weird about this.'

I didn't say anything. I was feeling sick. I also realised that I was in no way attracted to Rebecca. I figured it was just because I had climaxed, but it was still something I hadn't expected.

'I'm going to go home.'

'No, don't. Just relax.'

I stood up without saying anything. Rebecca swore quietly and put on her top.

'Just let me walk you out.'

She got up, turned on the light and led me out into the hall. When we got to the front door she stopped.

'Don't make this the last time I see you, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.' I wasn't looking at her.

Rebecca opened the door. I stepped outside and onto the footpath. When I was out of view of her house I quickened my pace and then started to jog.

I saw Yehudah the next morning at Shabbat morning prayers. We always sat at the back of the synagogue and prayed quietly while the rest of the congregation sung in off-key unison to religious hymns.

When they brought out the Torah, midway through the prayers, Yehudah leaned over to me and asked if I was still seeing Rebecca that night. I told him I wasn't.

'Did you cancel?' he asked.

'No, she did.' I didn't want Yehudah thinking that I'd called it off because he'd managed to make me feel guilty.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know.’

I looked up at the second floor. The men and women were separated in the synagogue and the women sat on an upstairs balcony behind a thin white curtain. Once prayers were finished the men and women would meet up outside, but nobody who wasn’t related would talk in public.

‘I don’t really know much about girls,’ I said. ‘Everything I do know is from television, or stuff I’ve read on the net.’

Yehudah shrugged his shoulders and whispered in a somewhat gentle tone. ‘Still more than I know.’

I chuckled and opened my mouth to speak, but stopped. They’d just started reading from the Torah. It was prohibited to talk. I flipped my prayer book to the back pages, where the Torah portion was printed, and quietly followed along.