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PART I

CHAPTER ONE

Israel Gets a Job, Loses a Job and Has an Idea

Six months after completing his associate's degree in geography from the College of Lake County, Israel Cruz was still at home, undecided about his future. This was evidently a family trait, as his brother, Judah, was also living at home, not having decided about his own academic options (which were admittedly limited) after graduating from high school, despite the coaxing from his parents to make up his mind.

Israel had found work as a remote temporary worker, manually digitizing objects from satellite images into a mapping database for the city of Waukegan. This was not the most thrilling of occupations, although it was related to his degree and involved converting geographic features into points, lines and polygons. The work reminded him of the tracing exercises he had done in kindergarten, such as "I can trace my name!" and "Let's trace shapes!" He knew there was more to the field of geography than this but wasn't able to find employment aligned to the more interesting courses he had taken at school, like Cultural Geography or the Great Mysteries of the Earth. Tracing and data entry seemed to be the in-demand field for his level of education and experience, and if he was being honest with himself, it wasn't particularly in demand.

He had only stumbled into the job because one of his college professors, Dr. Ritter, had taken pity on him after receiving several calls from Israel's mother pleading with him to intervene. After making a few inquiries to colleagues in and around the North Shore, he found Israel work as a contract GIS technician.

The job was good while it lasted, but his heart wasn't in it, and this showed up in the myriad of quality issues he introduced into the GIS database. He once corrupted multiple feature classes while distractedly watching TikTok videos, causing the city's GIS platform to go down for nearly a week and forcing the system administrator to work over the weekend.

"You need to double-check your work," his supervisor had said, but at that point, the damage had been done, and he was let go two weeks later.

The next three months were not his finest. He descended into his parent's unfinished basement, setting up a lair under the bare wooden stairs, cramming into it a small gaming desk, a gaming chair, a twenty-four-inch monitor, an Xbox console, assorted RGB lights and wires crisscrossing in various directions. Although he shared a room with his brother, he wanted more space to himself "to think about his next steps," he had told his parents. The family's nine-hundred-square-foot, two-bedroom cottage, a vintage Cape Cod (as described by his father), was the smallest and among the oldest houses in the neighborhood. Israel had always felt claustrophobic at home, which he believed contributed to his mediocre grades in high school, but it wasn't until this latest setback that he decided to take action and carve out his nook.

The basement afforded little more space than the bedroom he shared with his brother, as it was packed with storage bins stacked on top of each other, a washer, dryer, laundry bin and workbench covered with tools, screws and nails. It was a little more private than the bedroom. He secured a

Brazilian-style rainbow-colored cotton hammock to the wooden support posts under the stairs, which he slept in at night, along with a heavy wool blanket and wool socks, since the basement was not insulated. As the temperature dropped in the fall, he thought of placing sandwiches, fruits and other perishables next to the hammock, since the basement was effectively a cold cellar, but he decided against it after seeing mice scurrying under his feet.

Most of Israel's thinking about his future involved plotting weapons upgrades in Assassin's Creed, dodging hostile attacks and using Ikaros to scout enemy positions. When he needed a break from his combat exploits, he would scroll through social media on his cell phone, sometimes for hours, idly flicking through postings from various influencers about gaming, travel, music and sports.

Of particular interest to Israel was the celebrity influencer Maria Maia Coelho, also known as M&M, a Portuguese supermodel, reality star and supposed former love interest of none other than the soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo. Her social media postings consisted largely of video clips explaining her personal experiences with fashion and beauty brands. Although discussions about eyeliner and lip balm weren't generally top of mind to Israel, he couldn't take his eyes off M&M and developed what might be considered an obsession with her. The bikini-clad videos of her applying the newest sunscreens in the Algarve may have contributed to his fever.

The net effect of his extended periods of isolation in the dark, damp, subterranean, digitally enhanced setting was Israel's perpetual inebriated-like state when he emerged upstairs for food, bio breaks and the occasional package. He developed a gnarly, bushy black beard that blended into his curly, unkempt hair, and he could have readily been mistaken for a vagrant.

Israel was not an unattractive young man when he paid better attention to his hygiene and grooming, although he was not one to grace the covers of *GQ* or *People* magazines. He had a somewhat large Roman nose, dark olive skin (when exposed to sunlight) and large brown eyes. He was of above-average height and below-average weight and had a slightly bent gait, mainly because of bad posture and distracted thoughts. Most of all, he looked ordinary. His appearance was reminiscent of so many different peoples, it was nebulous. He had been mistaken for Italian, Assyrian, Arab, Cuban, Rajput, Persian, Bavarian, Brazilian, Albanian, Turkish, Spanish, French and Berber. People would come up to him on the street and speak to him in Hindi or Hungarian. People would stare at him and ask him where he was from. He would invariably reply that he was from Highland Park, even though he knew what they were really asking about, and he found the whole exercise taxing.

He once rode on the Metra next to an elderly Kazakh woman wearing a white *aq kiymeshek* who smiled at him knowingly but said nothing. He had become accustomed to that look, a look that suggested he was surely one of them, even though he was fuzzy at best about their culture and traditions.

These encounters had influenced his decision to study geography, which he insisted was a perfectly practical and employable discipline. Perhaps he was right about the career possibilities, but he had not advanced far enough in his studies or gained enough professional experience to corroborate his assumptions. Still, geography was inescapable, and for Israel, the question of his place in it was impossible to ignore. It slapped him in the face every time someone asked him about his origins, if he spoke Punjabi, if he followed the Argentine Primera División, if he knew where to find halal.

And then there was the matter of his name: Israel. A country. A place. The Holy Land. In the Levant. Part of the Fertile Crescent.

Ironically, it was his father who had lobbied for the name, even though he was Puerto Rican of the Evangelical persuasion. His mother, who had grown up in a conservative Jewish household, had preferred the name Richard, but she eventually agreed. His dad had his charms.

The more Israel thought about his origins, the more frustrated he became. *Everyone's always asking me where I'm from, but I never know what to say.* He wished he had the clarity of the Irish Catholics reveling during Saint Patrick's Day or the Indians celebrating Diwali.

His father insisted that Israel and Judah were a mixture of Jewish and Spanish origins. But when Israel pointed out that Abuelo and Abuela lived in Puerto Rico, his father agreed and said he was also Puerto Rican, but mostly Spanish.

"What are you saying?" Israel would ask. "Is your side Spanish or Puerto Rican?"

"Yes," his father would reply.

His mother would say that Israel and Judah were Jewish because she was Jewish. She was very proud of her heritage.

"But you converted to Christianity before I was born. How can I be Jewish?" he asked.

"It's part of Jewish law," she would reply.

Perhaps more confusing was his father's insistence that his mother was of Sephardic origins from Spain.

"I thought your grandparents spoke Yiddish," he said.

"That is true," his mother would say.

"I've never met a Spanish Jew," he would reply.

"We have a strong oral tradition on my side," she would add. "Knowledge of our origins has been passed down for generations."

What had *not* been passed down were any of the native tongues that someone of such distinct ethnic identities would be expected to know. He spoke no Spanish. His father refused to speak the language in the house and had encouraged him to study French in school, even though his last name was Cruz. So, Israel studied French and picked up a few swear words in Spanish over the years. His high school, being in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, did offer Hebrew, but he never went to Hebrew school or temple and felt at a disadvantage to his more authentic Jewish classmates, so he decided against it.

When he was twelve, his parents had hired a rabbi of questionable credentials who attempted to teach him Hebrew prayers and how to read the Torah. The lessons took place in their living room and required an upfront payment of a not-so-insignificant sum, but when the rabbi failed to show up after the third lesson despite the down payment, his parents became disenchanted with the idea, and he never had a bar mitzvah. This was of little concern to Israel, but as he got older, he sometimes regretted not having that rite of passage under his belt.

One afternoon, after his mother and father had returned from work, Israel lumbered up to the kitchen for basic sustenance. He was bleary-eyed and gaunt, not having eaten all day, and had a slight tremor in his right hand from holding the Xbox controller for several hours. As he made his way unsteadily past the dining room table to where his father Estephan, his mother Ida and Judah were seated, he did not greet them. This snub was not intentional. He was not in the right state of mind. The dampness and cold had stunned his brain. The virtual and physical worlds had coalesced further than he had intended. All he knew was that he needed water and any leftovers that might be in the refrigerator. It was a matter of survival, like surfacing from an underwater cavern.

His failure to acknowledge his family did not go over well with Estephan, who slammed his fork down on the table and glared at his son. Still unaware of his father's growing irritation, Israel bent down and placed his head in the refrigerator, scanning the contents of the shelves.

"For God's sake!" shouted Estephan, causing Israel to jump and bang his head against one of the refrigerator shelves. "We work all day, even your brother, Judah, and you can't acknowledge our presence?"

Israel turned toward his family, blinking and rubbing his head. He noticed Chinese takeout on the table and heard his stomach rumble.

"I thought if we gave you some space, you might figure out what to do with your life," Estephan continued. "But this has got to stop."

"Estephan, please don't do this now," said Ida, with bags under her eyes.

"When do you suggest we have this conversation?" asked Estephan. "When we find him collapsed unconscious on the basement floor? Look at him? He's a mess!"

Israel scratched his armpit and smacked his lips. The smell of chicken lo mein was intoxicating.

"All I'm saying is this can't go on," said Estephan. "You need to get a job. Or better yet, finish your application to transfer to Northern or U of I. I don't understand what you're waiting for."

Israel stepped slowly toward the rectangular laminate dining room table. He was ravenous now, and there was an unopened takeout box at the edge of the table, near Judah, who was closest to him. Estephan narrowed his eyes as Israel approached the table, then snatched the takeout box and put it in his lap. Israel's eyes bulged, and he shook his head in confusion.

“You’re not getting anything until we have a conversation,” growled his father. “You don’t work. You don’t pay the bills. You don’t study. You don’t help around the house. I have no idea what you actually do all day, but it doesn’t benefit the members of this household in any way. In fact, in all candor, you’re useless, wasting away. I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

This comment hit Israel in the gut and seemed to wake him from his stupor.

“Maybe it would be best if you just packed your things and left,” said his father.

“Estephan!” cried Ida in protest. “Enough!”

Ida glanced at Israel, who stood morosely in front of them, staring at his feet.

“I mean, you look awful, honey,” said his mother. “Your father is running out of patience. It’s been three months, and there’s been no progress with figuring out your next steps. You’ve missed the transfer deadline for the spring semester, and you haven’t even attempted to apply for a job.”

Ida reached for the box of *lo mein*, its contents half eaten, and raised it in the air. “Come on, now,” she said. “You need to eat something. And maybe when you’re done, you can take a shower.”

Later that evening, Israel was lying in the hammock in the basement, bundled in the wool blanket, staring at the amber colors projected onto the ceiling by his mood light. He was unsettled and, for once, was not on a device.

His father’s words *I don’t know who you are anymore* rang in his head. *Just who do you think you are?* Israel pursed his lips. *I never knew who I was*, he countered to himself. *It’s never been clear. How can I commit to a college degree or choose a career if I don’t know who I am and how I fit in? That’s the problem.*

He had to admit that he wasn't happy. He was irritable. He couldn't focus. He had lost weight and felt rudderless, drifting in a foggy sea, unable or perhaps afraid to right the ship. *Where am I to go? What am I to do?*

He heard the door squeak open, and the overhead stairwell lights flicked on. Someone cleared their throat. He felt his hammock shake from the impact of each heavy, plodding step, until his brother stood before him, Milky Way bar in hand.

"Whatcha up to?" asked Judah.

"Nothing. Just hanging out," said Israel, his left arm hanging limply over the side of the hammock.

"Cool," said Judah, doing a quick scan for another seat. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Actually, yes," said Israel, but it was too late, and Judah plopped down next to his hip, causing the hammock to sag in the middle.

Judah bore some resemblance to Israel. He had coarse black hair, dark olive skin and a small aquiline nose. He was several inches shorter than Israel, stockier, with noticeable love handles when wearing a tight-fitting shirt. His appearance did not belie his mild manners. He was passive and never did well in competitive situations.

He enjoyed cosplay and comic books. He owned an Avengers Endgame Captain America costume, medieval Viking vests, Jedi-style robes with oversize hoods, a Doctor Strange high-collared cloak, a red haori with faux leather buckles on the sleeves and premium waxed Austin Brown perforated leather motorcycle gloves. He owned mob psycho wigs, Afro-style wigs, mohawk wigs and butterscotch-blond-pigtails wigs. He had skull coin necklaces of varied plastic and cheap metal construction. He had always dreamed of attending Comic-Con and socialized with a tight circle of local cosplayers who shared his interest in embodying characters other than themselves.

Judah had a passing interest in cooking, and although he loved to eat, his job at the Pancake House had dampened his desire to attend culinary school. He knew he'd have to decide about his education. His mother wouldn't allow him to call it quits after high school, but he wasn't in a rush to figure things out.

"Been thinking about Comic-Con," said Judah. "It's taking place in July this year."

"Oh yeah?" replied Israel, uninterested.

"Might be able to save up enough money to go," he said. "It's in San Diego, you know."

Israel watched the amber hues change slightly on the ceiling.

"You should come with me. They have a gaming hall."

"I don't know," said Israel. "It's hard to plan that far in advance. So much going on."

Judah nodded his head in agreement. "Might be good to get out of the house. I mean, it's a bit ..." Judah paused to find the right words, "... isolated down here."

Israel said nothing.

"The first word that comes to mind is *forsaken*," Judah added.

"I find the accommodations suitable," said Israel.

"Right. Righto," said Judah, scratching his chin. "*God-forsaken* is probably the better descriptor."

The hammock groaned as Judah adjusted his position and looked at the ceiling.

"Anyway, Dad was a little animated at dinner," said Judah, changing the subject. "Hope you didn't take it the wrong way."

Israel crossed his arms and glanced at Judah. *Was there a correct way to react to his offensive remarks? Suggesting I leave? His firstborn son? The supposed apple of his eye? First in the line of succession?*

“I’m made of Teflon,” said Israel. “Those types of comments just bounce off of me.”

“It *is* ironic, though, that he questioned who you were,” Judah continued. “I mean, it’s pretty obvious you’re his son.”

“I’ve been aware of that for some time.”

“I’ve also been wondering lately ...”

“Don’t tell me you’re unsure of our parental origins,” said Israel.

“Not exactly. Just never seem to get a straight answer about our family tree. It’s been on my mind lately.”

This got Israel’s full attention. He sat up in the hammock, leaned on his elbows and looked directly at Judah. “You’ve been thinking about that too, huh?”

“I came across a 1974 edition of *Captain America* at Comics Planet and Gaming. It caught my attention because I never knew there was a story about him becoming disillusioned with the US government. He actually abandons his Captain America identity, feeling that he can’t serve the corrupted government when he learns it’s linked to global terrorism, and takes on a new superhero identity known as Nomad. A man without a country, with no patriotic markings on him at all. As I was skimming through the comic, I got into a conversation with Micah. We talked about how awesome it would be to cosplay Nomad, how unique it would be, and then Micah started talking about his own identity crisis, being adopted from South Korea by an Italian-American family. He said that after going to Comic-Con this summer, he might book a flight to Seoul so he can track down his real mother and father. That got me thinking a bit about our family and how there are a lot of questions about Mom and Dad’s ancestors.”

Israel leaned back in the hammock and placed his hands behind his head. He tried to visualize what the Nomad superhero looked like, and his thoughts drifted to Assassin’s

Creed. Images of ancient Greece. Being an outcast Spartan mercenary. Embarking on a journey of discovery to uncover truths about a mysterious past.

"I was thinking," continued Judah, "that maybe we should order DNA tests. We'd have to save up to buy them, but it might help reveal more about our family."

"I don't know ... the technology seems sketchy," said Israel.

"You think so?"

"Look," said Israel, "I think I've just about had it with this quest to discover our true identity. I mean, it drives me nuts that Mom and Dad keep on telling us we are Spanish this, Jewish that, when none of it adds up. We have like zero connection to any of it, other than our names. So, I've come to a logical conclusion."

"You'd like to meet Geraldo Rivera?"

"What? Why?"

"Because he's the only other person I know who has a Puerto Rican father and Jewish mother."

"Uh, no. Definitely not."

"He's got a great mustache."

"His mustache *is* rather stylish."

"Then what's your logical conclusion?"

"My logical conclusion is that I'm giving up our heritage and becoming Portuguese."

"You mean," said Judah, furrowing his brow, "that you'd like to become a Portuguese national?"

"Yes, in fact, I'm planning on moving to Portugal," said Israel. From now on, I'm one hundred percent Portuguese. No more half this, half that. I am Portuguese. Plus, Cruz sounds like a Portuguese name."

“What you’re saying is that you’re giving up being Puerto Rican and Jewish or whatever exactly we are?”

“Yes, *exactamundo*. I’m tired of the ambiguity. I hereby relinquish my ethnicity and proclaim that I am Portuguese.”