

The Things a Brother Knows

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BOOKS

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Summary: Although they have never gotten along well, seventeen-year-old Levi follows his older brother Boaz, an ex-Marine, on a walking trip from Boston to Washington, D.C. in hopes of learning why Boaz is completely withdrawn.

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Boaz didn't have the smarts to understand a simple sentence. "You. Should. Know. A. Different. Way. Of. Life."

They went around and around like that for weeks.

We'd been to Israel twice already, in the psychotic heat of summer. We took the obligatory outings to the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall. We hiked to the top of Masada and floated in the Dead Sea. But mostly we stayed in a little apartment, drinking lemonade that tasted strange, playing cards with Mom while Abba caught up with old friends in Hebrew.

A different sort of Abba took over on those visits. He bear-hugged men twice his size. Filled the tiny rooms of our apartment with his laughter. He was breathless, suddenly, with more to say than there was time to say it.

I figure Boaz must have been drawn to the adventure in the idea of spending his summer on Abba's kibbutz, because if he really didn't want to go, he would have found some way out of it. Boaz was like that even then. He had convictions you couldn't talk him down from.

Off he went. He loved it, and Abba was pleased. Boaz had gone and learned another way of life. He'd come back tan and lean, more serious, with a Hebrew vocabulary that far surpassed anything either of us ever picked up at Temple Beth Torah.

But he also came back with something else.

Some inkling in him of what he needed to do to become the person he wanted to be, what his responsibilities to the world might involve, and even though this was part of Abba's plan, Boaz took it further than Abba ever imagined.

After several more minutes of shuffling, and bridges that are much harder to make look cool when two decks of cards are involved, I'm ready to deal.

"Let's go."

"Wait."

"What?"

"We need a wager," he says. "Something has to be at stake, or else what's the point?"

"Okay . . ."

"Your Red Sox hat."

"That's my lucky hat! Plus, it keeps the sun off my face and I'm trying to preserve my boyish good looks."

"Good. That means it's worth something to you."

He gave me that hat for my birthday five years ago. He probably doesn't remember. He probably doesn't even know it came from him. I'm guessing Mom bought it for me and slapped his name on the card. But anyway, I love that hat. So yes, it's most definitely worth something to me.

"So what do I get if I win?" I ask.

"You get to keep it another day."

We're talking, so I'm hesitant to actually start dealing the cards. Or to point out his lopsided rules.

Bo rubs his palms together. "Game on."

One round in and we realize our plan doesn't work. We need chips. Amounts to bet with hand by hand.

There's a bag of mixed nuts in Bo's backpack. We assign them value: ten points for cashews, five for almonds, one for peanuts. At the end of the night, whoever's got the most points gets the hat. Brilliant.

I ask them to meet us on the Mall. Three mornings from now. So that he can see for himself that no matter how he feels in the darkness of his static-filled room, he is not alone.

On our last night before we reach DC I finally beat Bo at blackjack.

He throws my hat to me Frisbee style and I catch it one-handed and do a bow. At long last. My moment of victory. I put it on my head but it doesn't feel right. The shape of it has changed.

I fling it back. It belongs to him now.

He throws it back at me.

"You won it. You deserve it."

"No, it's yours."

"No, Levi. It's your hat. I bought it for you for your birthday."

"You did?" So Mom had nothing to do with it.

"Yeah. I remember we were leaving a game with Abba, the Sox won big that day, and outside Fenway you stopped to look in the window of one of those shops, and I saw you staring at the hat. And I said I had to go to the bathroom, that I'd meet you at the car, and I went into the store and bought it and hung on to it until your birthday. I think you were turning twelve."

"I was turning thirteen."

"Right."

I put on the hat.

"And that was not one of my worst birthdays ever. It was definitely one of the better ones."