

STAINER

A Novel of the “Me” Decade

Iolanthe Woulff

CHAPTER ONE

“Princeling”

It is a poignant truth of our heedless youthful years, that the events and encounters of a single night can so alter the course of a young person’s life that it will be changed forever.

On a balmy May evening in 1975, nine months after Gerald R. Ford’s unprecedented ascension to the Oval Office, a lanky Columbia University undergraduate named Benjamin Steiner sauntered through the marble lobby of the Fifth Avenue apartment building where he’d lived since infancy, determined to experience life at a more exhilarating level. It was Benjamin’s twenty-first birthday, and although an outside observer might reasonably have concluded that he lacked for nothing, Ben thought that his current existence, while tolerable enough, nonetheless left room for considerable improvement. Having completed three years of college study, he felt that some excitement was definitely overdue, although the precise nature of such excitement remained unclear in his mind.

Above all else, he wanted –no, he *needed*– to find a new girlfriend. Being a virgin was mortifying enough, but getting dumped by the faithless beauty Rona Orlofsky had been even worse, and Benjamin was growing ever more impatient to repair his punctured heart with a fresh sweet female face. Unluckily for him, available pretty girls were scarce at Columbia and altogether non-existent in the off-campus Jewish communal residence where he lived. Even more maddening, everywhere he looked he saw beautiful women. New York City was famously home to countless thousands of the most stunning young ladies on the planet, but they were *shikses*, Gentile heavenly bodies far outside the orbit of a nice Jewish boy like Ben.

Patting the back of his head to make sure his knitted blue-and-white *kipah* was securely pinned, Ben walked out under the fringed green canopy. Nice Jewish boy or not, he intended to make sure that a lot of things changed before his twenty-second birthday rolled around. No more college kid stuff; it was time to start living life as a *man*.

“Evenin’, Mr. Ben.”

Burnell, the ageless grey-haired doorman, flipped Ben a salute. He added, with the astute look of someone who’d seen everything in a lifetime of opening doors for wealthy whites: “Whoa, don’t you look sharp tonight. Dressed to kill. Ladies best be watchin’ out. Yes, *sir*.”

“What ladies?” Benjamin straightened the French cuffs peeking from the sleeves of his natty blue blazer. With a roll of clear hazel eyes: “At Columbia? You’ve got to be kidding. Did Mom and Dad get off okay?”

“Airport limo picked ‘em up ‘bout ten minutes ago. They gone early this year, seem like.”

“Yep.” For as long as he could remember, Ben’s parents had spent their summers in the cool air of Colorado Springs. “Mom’s psyched about decorating their new condo, so she convinced Dad to head out a month early. I’m really broken up about it,” he laughed, “but hey, I’ll live.”

Burnell smiled, betraying no sign that he thought handsome Steiner the Younger had grown into one of the more wet-behind-the-ears young scamps in the entire city. “Got the whole summer to y’self now, huh?”

“Damn straight, Boo.” Benjamin set great store by the fact that he was permitted to address the venerable doorman by his street nickname. Boo was black, which automatically made him cool, if a generationally different sort of cool from Don Cornelius or Clarence Williams III. Being cool was a high priority in Ben’s life, albeit very challenging for an observant Jew who went to Columbia, neither of which was remotely cool.

“Bye the way,” said Burnell, “your folks told me it’s your birthday.” He held out his hand. “Got to say congratulations.”

Ben clasped the doorman’s proffered palm. “Thanks.”

“Y’know, I remember the night your folks brought you home from the hospital... How many years ago?”

Benjamin answered, his voice deepened with the weight of years, “Twenty-one, Boo.”

“Twenty-one. Mm-mm. Imagine that.”

“Yeah, I know. Hey, do you remember what I looked like?” An only child, Benjamin found all details of his life fascinating.

The doorman thought it over with pursed lips. “You looked like a chicken got its feathers boiled off.”

“*What?*”

“Didn’t bother your Ma none. Nope. Never saw a prouder lady, even with you squawkin’ an’ spittin’ up stuff—”

“Never *mind*,” frowned Ben. “Geez, I’m sorry I asked. Anyway I gotta split, going to a party tonight.” As the doorman raised his whistle: “Don’t need a taxi, I’m gonna walk across to Columbus Circle and catch the subway. Seeya.”

“All right, Mr. Ben. You have a good time now.” The doorman winked and laughed. “Twenty-*one*, don’t that beat all.”

Benjamin made a left and strode south on Fifth Avenue, muttering to himself. Chicken with its feathers boiled off... old Boo didn’t lack for *chutzpah*. Still, it was a cool insult, especially coming from a black guy. He filed it away for possible future use.

Automatically sidestepping a mound of dog droppings with the practiced ease of a lifelong Manhattanite, Ben turned west and crossed to Central Park South. Cars, buses, taxis and trucks honked along the famed thoroughfare in a typical vehicular crush. Like most New Yorkers, Benjamin took fierce pride in the unsurpassed hustle and bustle of his beloved metropolis, which he didn’t doubt was the greatest place on earth. He walked past the ever-present horse-drawn carriages lined up across from the Plaza Hotel, drivers and animals waiting to take tourists or lovers on romantic rides through the city. Ben reveled in the familiarity of the street vendors, the well-dressed pedestrians, the wide-eyed out-of-towners gawking up at the towering Essex House, and the sidewalks glistening under the lamplights. Flush with *joie de vivre*, he swung his arms, snapped his fingers and bounced a bit on his heels. Maybe it was the fact of his twenty-first birthday, or the successful completion of his junior year, or the departure of his parents for the summer; but for whatever reasons, Ben had a hunch that his life was about to shift into a more interesting gear, and he could hardly wait. Tonight’s party at the Rabbi Yitzhak Teller Memorial Residence Hall, where Benjamin lived, was hardly a high-end affair; nonetheless, any party was better than none, and who knew what might happen? It was even possible—in theory, anyway—that a pretty girl could show up.

“Don’t hold your breath,” Ben snorted to himself as he jaywalked across the Seventh Avenue entrance into Central Park. He glanced over at the rounded glass tower where his

wealthy widowed grandmother lived in high style, pinching pennies and organizing extravagant opera benefits for Hebrew University. He loved Bubbie Etta, as she was known throughout the Jewish community; but Bubbie, being the absolute antithesis of cool, never ceased trying to shanghai him into sundry black-tie affairs for assorted Zionist causes: immigrant social services, tree-planting drives, Holocaust memorials, yeshiva fundraisers and so forth. Like most of the people he knew, Benjamin stoutly supported Israel, even though he himself hadn't yet traveled there. He was proud of his ability to converse in simple Hebrew, and of course he'd admired Israel's miraculous turnaround victory in the recent Yom Kippur War. Still, there was something unsettlingly *genuine* about the tough little Jewish homeland and its doughty citizens, who, Ben suspected, seldom if ever worried about whether or not they were cool. A country where even eighteen-year-old girls went straight into the armed services... thinking about it made Benjamin feel distressingly inconsequential, so he tended to not dwell on the subject, preferring to keep his approbation at arm's length. Besides, unlike some of his more fervid contemporaries –especially those who'd visited the Holy Land– he thought of himself as more American than Semitic.

Arriving at the southwest corner of the park, Benjamin crossed into Columbus Circle and was heading for the subway entrance when a pallid young man wearing a rumpled white shirt and a plain black tie approached him and said, "Excuse me, sir?"

Benjamin's instincts immediately recognized the fellow as a street evangelist. Bothersome but harmless, these zealots roamed the city distributing little garishly-illustrated booklets warning of decadence, doom, and the Apocalypse. Ordinarily Benjamin brushed them aside without a second thought, but tonight, feeling in an impish mood, he stopped. "What can I do for you?"

Sure enough, the man immediately handed Ben a compact pamphlet barely bigger than a matchbook. "It's what our Lord can do for *you*."

Benjamin studied the cover in the glare of a streetlamp. Under a crude drawing of a lightning bolt descending from a cloud was printed in red capital letters: WHATSOEVER A MAN SOWETH, THAT SHALL HE ALSO REAP. *Galatians 6:7*

"Hmm. Sorry, guy. I haven't sowed anything lately. Not even any wild oats." Ben added, solemnly flourishing the booklet, "I'm sure trying, though."

"Do you believe in God's word?"

"Oh, you bet. See?" Benjamin turned his head and saw the other's eyes widen at the

sight of the small knitted skullcap pinned to the back of Ben's blow-dried razor-cut hair. "You wouldn't *believe* some of the things I believe. And I know it's all true, 'cause I learned it in the *Torah*. In Hebrew, of course. We Jews really have it down."

"Jesus was Jewish," said the man, with a nonplussed look. "He taught us that God loves every—"

"His name wasn't really Jesus, y'know. It was *Yeshua*. This Jesus stuff..." Ben shook his head. "See, the thing is, if J.C. came walking down Columbus Avenue right now and you said, 'Hey Jesus!' he'd keep right on going. But if *I* said 'Nu, *Yeshua*, *mah nishma?*' we could talk and hang out and it'd be way cool."

Frustrated, the evangelist tried again: "The Bible says we—"

"Never mind the Bible. I can read Babylonian legal treatises in Aramaic. The *Talmud*, okay? You'd think girls would be impressed, but they're not." Ben rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Why *is* that?"

As the realization sank in that he was being played, the young man's expression went flat, and he retreated a step. "*Pride goeth before destruction*," he recited, "*and a haughty spirit before a fall*. Proverbs, sixteen eighteen."

Ben grinned. "Yep, ol' King Solomon, halfway between *Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes*. He was already starting to get seriously bummed. Man, with a thousand wives, who wouldn't? Me, I'm only looking for one good lady... hey, don't you want this?" Ben waved the little booklet as the other backed away.

"No." With a final admonition, "Heed God's counsel and be saved," the evangelist hastened off and lost himself in the foot traffic.

"Me, saved? From what?" Ben thrust the pamphlet into the breast pocket of his blazer. "The only thing *I* need saving from is boredom."

Then, chuckling, he skipped down the steps of the subway, certain as only a freshly-minted twenty-one-year-old can be, that no pride-induced falls lay in *his* future.

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On a side street several blocks from the Columbia University campus stood an unprepossessing brownstone with timeworn steps leading up to a pair of reinforced glass doors. Two dingy globes hung on blackened chains over the entrance. Although it looked

like the sort of place which might appeal to an arsonist, in fact this was the Rabbi Yitzhak Teller Memorial Residence Hall, also known as *Beit Yitzhak*, or most familiarly to its occupants, the 'B'.

Named after an eminent rabbinic sage who'd perished in the Holocaust, *Beit Yitzhak* had spontaneously generated into existence several years earlier when a group of Jewish Columbia students, galvanized with newly-fashionable identity awareness, decided to establish their own communal dwelling where they could eat kosher food, conduct prayer services and live with other Jews in a state of collegial ethnic homogeny.

Backed by a philanthropic Columbia alumnus, they hustled a bank loan and rehabilitated the vacant building which, according to neighborhood legend, had once housed a flourishing brothel. In short order it was populated by an assortment of Jewish scholars: undergraduates, doctoral candidates, medical and law students. Despite a wide spectrum of lifestyles, ages, and levels of piety, the three dozen men and women managed to peacefully co-exist while developing close bonds to each other and to their home-away-from home, *Beit Yitzhak*. In the years since its founding there had only been trouble once, when a disgruntled member decided to thumb his nose at the rules, insult everybody, and upset the general order. The renegade was unanimously voted out, a freshman named Benjamin Steiner moved into the vacant room, and peace reigned again.

Ben enjoyed living there from the start. He made new friends, and like everyone else cultivated a fondly derisive loyalty to the shabby 'B', with its handy proximity to Columbia, inexpensive private rooms, familiar Jewish ambience, and excellent kosher meals churned out by the irascible cook, Mrs. Frankfurter.

A tradition had developed that each year after final exams the residents threw themselves a springtime party, complete with liquor, music, and dancing. Since it was the sole secular festivity of the year, uncomplicated by any religious holiday observances, even the more straight-laced members were inclined to let their hair down a bit. People were free to invite whomever they wished, with the result that *Beit Yitzhak* usually overflowed with current and former members, potential residents, freeloading relatives, and a sprinkling of complete strangers.

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The glass inner doors slammed shut behind Benjamin Steiner. He stood for a moment in the dingy foyer, gazing with displeasure at the overstuffed mail slots on the wall, the magazines and message slips littering the hall table, the rickety old coat wardrobe. Even on party night, *Beit Yitzhak* couldn't pretend to be anything but hopelessly seedy.

Ben strode around a bend into a high-ceilinged sitting room irreverently known as 'Fifi's Lounge' in deference to the building's alleged past. Gazing about at the half-dozen people there, he curled his lip and sniffed with consummate Bette Davis disgust: "What a *dump*."

"Gosh, that's original." Daniel Bock, whose twin brother Joe was Ben's best friend, squinted across a stained old bumper-pool table: "What's the big idea, coming here dressed like an Episcopalian? This is a Jewish slum. Get lost."

"Now, Danny. You're just jealous because you've got a hooked nose instead of a sense of style."

"Such arrogance." Marcus Fine, a fanatical pre-med who wore odd pagoda-shaped *yarmulkes* and bore a striking resemblance to Rasputin, flourished a volume of the *Ethics of the Fathers*. "Listen: 'Be exceedingly humble, since the hope of man is worms.'"

"I *am* humble," smiled Benjamin. "Can't you tell?" He snapped his fingers and sang, "He's so *Fine*, Do-lang, do-lang, do-lang."

Danny Bock groaned. "Cruisin' for a bruisin', Steiner. One of these days the K.B.H. is gonna take you down a peg." 'K.B.H.' was a *Beit Yitzhak* acronym for *Kadosh Baruch Hu*: Holy One, blessed be He.

"Not a chance." Admiring himself in an antique wall mirror, Ben patted his hair and re-pinned his knitted *kipah*. "The K.B.H. knows what a nice upstanding Jewish boy I am, even if you don't. Meantime, check this out."

Ben drew up his sleeve to reveal a brand-new stainless-steel Pulsar L.E.D. watch. He pressed a tiny button and vivid red numerals flashed: 7:22:55. "Isn't this the all-time coolest thing you've ever seen?" He proudly exhibited the timepiece around. "James Bond wore it in *Live and Let Die*. I had to have one, so Mom got it for my birthday."

Mark Fine repeated, "Birthday? Since when?"

"Since today. Twenty-one, as a matter of fact."

"Really? How come you don't act it?" Laurie Schwartz, a heavy-boned third-year law student obsessed with the thorny task of reconciling Orthodox Judaism and radical

feminism, never missed an opportunity to needle him. “Twenty-one, huh? Such an *adult* is our Princeling.”

It was a condescending nickname Benjamin loathed, but he returned Laurie a dazzling grin –Ben had the perfect teeth of a toothpaste ad– and airily replied, “What a charming compliment, especially coming from an *older* lady.”

Laurie rolled her eyes. “Oy. I take it back.”

“Too late.” Benjamin threw her a cocky wink and went out past the elevator and stairwell to a large communal area which served alternately as *Beit Yitzhak’s* dining room and synagogue. Gazing about with a critical eye, he decided it looked tolerable, if undistinguished. The white walls sported a recent coat of fresh paint, as did the blue window frames and moldings. The Holy Ark, chastely veiled with its embroidered blue-and-white curtain, had been rolled into a hidden nook beside the Coke machine. Large colored EL AL posters depicting various scenes in Israel hung about the room.

A beefy dark-haired figure emerging from the opposite kitchen entrance called a greeting to him in thick Brooklyn tones: “Ey, Steinhuh.”

Arnold Cohen served as *Beit Yitzhak’s* elected House Administrator. One of the ‘B’s original founders, he continued to live there as a post-graduate student. Non-religious himself, yet tolerant of those who were, Arnie possessed the rare ability to get things done when others threw up their hands. Furthermore, he seemed to be personally acquainted with every Jew in New York.

The House Administrator blinked at Ben’s blue blazer, grey slacks, pinstriped shirt, collar-pin, and Weejuns: “I don’t get it. Why’re you tryin’ to look like a *goy* in a magazine?”

“Someone has to have some class around here.” Benjamin wrinkled his nose at Arnie, who wore a pair of threadbare pea-green corduroy pants and a frayed Columbia sweatshirt. “Look at you, for God’s sake. I’ve seen better-looking bums passed out under the Williamsburg Bridge.”

“Riiight, I forgot. You’re the prince.” Cohen shook his head. “Listen, Your Highness, could you help me out and fix up the bar? We’re running late, party’s supposed to start soon. Joe Bock said he’d take care of it, but I don’t know where he is.”

“No sweat,” said Ben. He went behind a long table and started lining up precise rows of plastic cups and various liquors: vodka, rum, bourbon, Southern Comfort. He held up a tall brown bottle, regarding it with disgust. “What’s this? Who on earth likes Kahlua?”

“I do,” said Arnie, intent on screwing some audio wires into place on the back of a loudspeaker. “You got a problem with that?”

“Cohen, did anyone ever tell you you’re an irredeemable Philistine?” Ben rolled his eyes. “Anyway, everything’s set. I’m going up to my room. See you in a bit.”

After riding the creaky elevator to the fifth floor, Benjamin walked down a narrow corridor to a door marked ‘503’, unlocked it and pushed through. The overhead fluorescents blinked on at the flip of a wall switch and illuminated Ben’s small room, cramped and familiar after nearly three years: the sturdy wooden bed loft he had designed and erected himself, the cigarette-scarred desk under overloaded hanging shelves, the red vinyl chair repaired with black electrical tape, the worn bookcase containing fifty volumes of the Harvard Classics which he’d bought at an auction for thirty bucks.

Benjamin dropped into his taped chair, lit a Kool, and wondered if anything promising lay ahead this evening with regards to female companionship. He supposed that lightning could strike, but didn’t hold out much hope. Puffing his cigarette, he indulged in a moment of self-pity. What a cursed fate, to be twenty-one and without a steady girl! Not that there weren’t opportunities. A couple of the *Beit Yitzhak* ladies would have been perfectly willing, he knew. But although Ben liked them as friends, that was it. No doubt he was being excessively picky, but he’d been permanently spoiled for beauty by that gorgeous traitor Rona Orlofsky, with her peaches-and-cream skin and limpid brown eyes and fantastic bosom... God!

His ruminations were interrupted by a rhythmic deep thumping reverberating through the wall. Ben jumped up, went next door and pounded his fist on ‘502’. A shout came from within: “Yeah, s’open!”

Daniel Bock’s twin brother Joseph lay on the floor, stripped to the waist, fine-tuning his bulging pectorals by doing military pushups in time to ‘The Temptations’ *Beauty Is Only Skin-Deep*. Joe, a cheerful irreligious jock who’d lost his virginity at sixteen, possessed the kind of boyish good looks that curled women’s toes. Since his favorite pastime was seducing *shikses*, Joe was forever pushing, pulling, and weightlifting himself into ever- more-irresistible shape.

Ben, who frowned upon the screwing of *shikses* –not that any had yet offered themselves to him, or any Jewesses either– stepped over his grunting neighbor and turned the thundering music down to a whisper.

“Hey, I’m not through,” huffed Joe, maintaining his rhythm. “Turn it back up!”

“I will not,” said Benjamin. “Bonehead, where’ve you been? I had to set up the bar downstairs when you didn’t show up like you promised. Cohen was ticked.”

“He’s always ticked,” replied Joe, springing to his feet. “Not my fault the subway was late again. I think the uptown express ran over a wino.” He sat on the edge of his bed and began untying his shoes. “Anyway, thanks for covering for me. I owe you. Say,” he grinned, “You’re looking pretty smooth tonight, Steinfish.” It was an idiosyncrasy of Joe’s to somehow graft the word ‘fish’ onto everyone’s last name. “Perfect for chasing skirts. They really go for that suave and debonair shit, y’know.”

“Except that there’s never any skirts worth chasing around here.”

“Yeah, they’re all over at Manhattanville,” affirmed Joe, referring to one of his favorite hunting grounds, a nearby Catholic women’s college. “Oh hey, I saw Rothfish downstairs, and she’s looking for you.”

“Myra? Why?”

“How should I know?” Joe flexed one grapefruit-sized bicep, eyed it fondly. “But she seemed kinda psyched.” He relaxed the arm. “Ms. Rothfish actually looks pretty cute tonight. I never really noticed before, but she’s got a decent set of—”

“Shut up, you animal. Don’t even think about it. Myra’s much too good a person for you. Go mess around with some more Catholic *shiksas*. They’ll dork anybody, even a muscle-headed moron like you...”

Joe advanced on Benjamin with crossed eyes, pawing the air and slobbering, “Tell me about da rabbits, Jawge!”

Ben recoiled. “Damn it, Bock, if you even *touch* this jacket, I... I’ll tell Dov Feldman you want to join his *Talmud* class!”

The twin wilted and backed away in horror. “Jesus, no, Steinfish. Don’t do that, please.”

“Fine, but you just leave Myra alone.” Ben centered his tie. “Check y’later.”

“Yeah, okay.” Joe dropped to the floor again, and Benjamin heard the stereo blare anew as he walked out. What, he wondered, could possibly be on Myra Rothfish’s mind?

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