



by Benjamin J. Stein

Hello, Larry

A Saturday breakthrough day in the life of Tommy Stein and his Dad.

Off to the soccer semifinals in Rancho Park, a large park near Twentieth Century Fox studios. Tommy is playing center defense man and he is playing brilliantly. He is rushing up to the ball, kicking it really far, roaming the field to see what he can do to help, playing like a champ. Over and over he has blocked the other side's advance and sent the ball flying back toward their goal. As a result, our team is ahead by one goal and the other side is demoralized.

I am standing on the sidelines looking at him, shouting encouragement. Never a discouraging word, and he looks like a little god of soccer out there. I can't believe that little deity is my son. He is so big and brave and strong and I love him so much. Thank you, God, for giving me this angel. I actually fell to my knees on the sidelines, pretending I was tying my shoes, to thank God for my little star. This is as good as it gets.

But then, disaster: as the fourth quarter begins, our coach, a difficult personality at best, takes Tommy out of the game and sends in the worst player we have.

Tommy is in shock and almost in tears. "What are you doing?" I ask our coach, an emergency-room physician who fancies himself a sort of Hebrew version of The Terminator.

"What are you? The new coach?" he asks.

In short order, the other side breezes right by the new center man, and they win and our team is out of the running. Amazingly, our coach is happier when

BENJAMIN J. STEIN is a writer, actor, economist, and lawyer living in Hollywood and Malibu.

we're losing than when we're winning—at least so it appears to little me.

After the game, trophies are handed out. The coach also gives a highly accented little speech praising every player. When he comes to Tommy, who was a giant star this season, he says, "And Tommy, who didn't show up a lot, but came back with a lot of spirit."

Now, this is because Tommy missed three practices when it was raining and he had a cold. He also missed a game when he was traveling to Philadelphia with my wife. The coach does not like games to be missed. Then he shows his real philosophy. He gives special kudos to two players. "And little Jimmy played one day with a 103-degree fever and little Billy played with a broken collarbone. That's the way to do it."

This is a doctor telling kids to play when sick. He is a major danger. A doctor telling kids to endanger their health for AYSO soccer?

The old Ben Stein would have yelled at him and sued him. But the new Ben Stein just took Tommy, rubbed his tousled head, and said, "You played so well that I am going to buy you a really high-end paint-ball gun."

He was ecstatic. "But," I said, "we have to go biking first so Daddy can get some exercise."

This put him into a big tailspin. I think he was tired and dispirited from the game and the dopey coach, but he just refused to go biking. When we got to the beach, he sulked and protested. I

told him he could just sit there and read. "But," I said, "you are being very selfish not keeping your old Dad company. That means I am not getting you the paint-ball gun after all."

He nodded and sat down and read. I rode my bike a long, long way, and then I picked up a big bag of hot, juicy french fries and brought them to Tommy. He ate them right away, and his mood picked up. Not a lot, but it picked up. A hungry, tired boy is not the best boy to have around. I was tempted to relent and get his \$200 paint-ball gun, but then I thought that I would be harming him more than helping him if I gave way.

We drove home with him sulking and not speaking. When we got home I noticed an immense tree limb had blown over from my neighbor's yard onto the street in front of our house. But it was still attached to the tree by a cord of thick bark and integument (or whatever the inside of a tree is called). "I'm going to get a saw and cut that down," Tommy said.

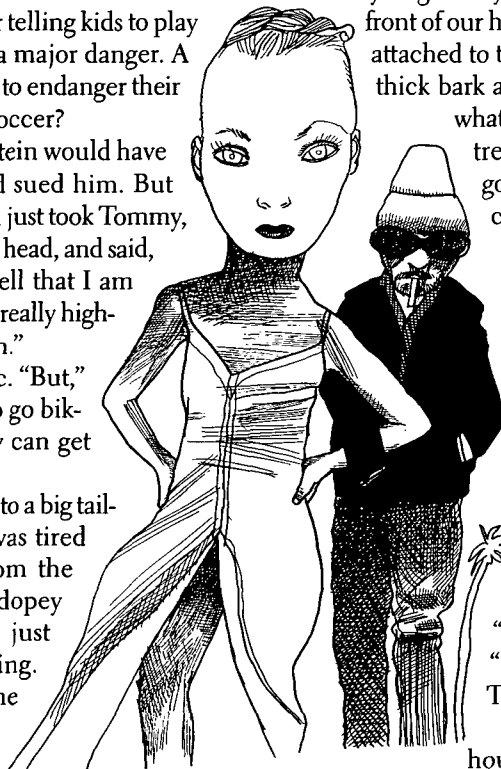
"No," I said. "It's cold and you're tired. Plus it's much too hard a job for a ten-year-old boy to do."

"I want to do it," Tommy said. "I can do it."

"No, you cannot do it," I said. "No way."

"I want to try," Tommy said.

He ran into the house, got a little saw



and came running out and attacked the tree. I watched for a while and then went inside and lay down. It's exhausting dealing with a recalcitrant, sulking child for a day. I fell asleep and in an hour a beaming, exultant Tommy stood next to me poking my chest. "Daddy, come see," he said. "I did it."

Sure enough, there on the pavement was a large chunk of the tree limb. Tommy had determinedly sawed right through the damned thing and cut it down.

"I'm floored," I said. "That's great." This was by far the biggest display of determination I had ever seen from my little doll. He had stuck to a hard, tiring, cold job that his father told him could not be done and he had triumphed at it. There was sawdust all over his hair and even in his delicate, perfect little eyelashes, but he was not done yet.

The rest of the limb was next to a fence. "Lift me up there," he said, "and I'll saw down the rest."

"Oh, you've done enough," I said.

But with a little help from me and a lot of clambering by him, he was soon up there on top of the fence, perched precariously, but sawing away like a madman. He never flagged and soon that tree was clean shaven and there was a pile of sawed off tree limbs next to the Caddy.

"I am so proud of you," I said. "I am so, so proud."

He hefted his saw, carried it inside, set it down and went to work reading Garfield. He did not ask for a bribe or a reward. He genuinely seemed to believe that having done it right was reward enough. He stayed at his task until he finished it even though I had told him he was not required to do so. (Maybe that's the key.)

"I just want you to know that when you go to college, my boy, I'm going with you," I said.

"I know, Daddy," Tommy said. "You've told me that about a thousand times."

Daddy is the best job there is.

Sunday

Traveler is not the best job there is. Off to LAX in my glorious Caddy to fly to Washington to see my old Dad. He is far less lonely than he was, quite cheerful, and it's a pleasure to see him. If Tommy enjoys seeing me half as

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much as I enjoy visiting with my father, we'll all be in great shape.

The airport was mobbed with pre-Christmas travelers. I got my boarding pass in the super-jammed Admirals' Club, and then went down to the gate. As I stood there along with the other impatient passengers, up strolled a man of about 70 with a tormented look on his face. He was with a pretty but also sad looking woman and a porter pushing luggage on a cart. The man looked like Larry King, only really, really sad and distracted and as if he had a million terrible thoughts revolving in his head. Wow, did he look unhappy.

As he got closer I saw that in fact it was Larry King. He looked as if he were trying to keep up a brave front but inwardly he was twisted by some deep and irreconcilable conflict.

He went up to a flight attendant at the gate and spoke to her. A slight argument ensued. After some consultation, Larry, his wife, and his luggage were allowed on the plane ahead of everyone else. I think this is called VIP boarding and it was obvious that Larry had insisted on it.

For some reason, the rest of us were not allowed to board for about a half hour after that. I asked a flight attendant what the problem was. "Mr. King insisted on VIP boarding," she said, "and that threw off the cleaning schedule."

"Is he that much of a VIP?"

"He thinks he is," said the flight attendant grimly.

When we got on, by chance, the King was sitting two rows ahead of me. He greeted various wealthy-looking men and women who got on and into the first-class

cabin. The flight was delayed about a half hour pushing back from the gate. I asked a flight attendant what the problem was. "When we had our VIP boarding problem, that threw off our scheduled departure," she said.

I do not like this.

I went to the toilet located next to the cockpit. As I did, I heard a loud, booming voice from Brooklyn and Miami standing next to the cockpit. He asked about the weather in D.C. The pilots, obviously not happy to be talking to the problem, answered him.

When I tried to open the door, I could feel that someone was standing there blocking its opening. "Excuse me," I said.

No response.

"Excuse me, but I have to get out."

No response. I pushed at the door. No response. I gave a big push to the door. Larry King gave ground a few inches, showed absolutely no sign of noticing that he was blocking me in, and kept talking to the pilots.

In my life, I can only recall one man so totally oblivious to everything but what he felt like noticing or doing. Henry Kissinger. And by the way, the Doctor Appeaser looks a lot like Larry King and they are pals. Hmmm.

The rest of the flight was fine. I sat next to a truly nice guy from Australia. On that flight there are often folks from Australia because it's the continuation of a Qantas flight. Invariably they are polite, self-effacing, with good senses of humor. Australia must be a great place. Across the aisle from me was a very famous *Washington Post* columnist, thin and cerebral looking. He smiled at me and I smiled at him and we talked about how thin he is. "I just inherited it from my father," he said, "and you look just like your father."

When we landed, our plane was met by a mobile lounge, as usual. Guess who was the first person off the plane. Guess who took a handicapped seat. I had had enough. "Are you handicapped?" I asked.

"I'm 64," he said. "That's handicapped enough."

Well, he's part right. I guess when you're that famous it's a handicap all by itself. Is he 64? I wonder how I would find out.

In the mobile lounge, I sat next to the famous columnist. "Is Larry King really that much of a celebrity that he gets all this special treatment?" I asked.

"Either that or he's an ass----," he said pleasantly.

Well, as I thought about it, maybe I am being unfair to Larry King. I think he just had by-pass surgery and I know that's an amazingly serious procedure. Never mind. I love the guy.

At any event, Avis did not have the reservation I had made for my little Oldsmobile. But they sprang into fabulous action anyway. The man who drove the bus called by radio to the desk. They quickly found me a car. By the time the bus reached the Avis lot, they had found me a lovely Oldsmobile, one of my favorite cars. It was washed, ready to roll and gleaming in the bright night lights. The woman who handed it off to me smiled broadly and would not accept a tip. Avis as a company works unbelievably well.

However, a nightmare awaited me at my hotel. The usually fine River Inn had no nice rooms available. All the rooms they showed me were evil smoking rooms even if they had up big signs saying no smoking. It took going to five rooms to find one that was decent. I am their best customer. I should not be treated that way.

My father was fine, though, full of his usual brilliance. In this instance we talked about the crisis in Asian markets. "The reports in the daily papers make it seem as if the skies are falling," he said. "They don't place any of it in context. They make it look as if huge magnitudes were involved. The real magnitudes compared with the size of the U.S. economy are very small. The people who write the stories know very little and don't bother to learn. They just call up someone who also doesn't know much and the story goes in and scares people."

This reminds me that two summers ago, when I was writing a column for *Los Angeles Magazine*, I wrote a piece rating the financial magazines. The conclusion I came to was that you were far better off not reading any of them for investment advice, although all of them have interesting profiles, personal

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Willie Nelson opened the evening. He was truly great. I could make out every word.

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finance tips, and humor items. Plus *Baron's* has great articles exposing scams. But the idea that you would be better off investing by tips from underpaid, totally ignorant writers who rely on self-interested tipsters is a nightmare. No smart person relies on magazines, newsletters, or newspapers for investment advice.

Tuesday

Off to see *Boogie Nights* again. That's a movie about people in the porn business. It's amazingly well done and depressing. Yes, it's about pornography and has a lot of sex.

But—and this is a big but—it's also the most powerful sermon I have ever seen preaching avoidance of pornography, staying home with your family, living a small, simple life away from anything to do with sex and commerce. The Christian Coalition would endorse the message of this movie as strongly as a message can be endorsed. This movie, without the most graphic sex scenes, could be and should be required viewing. I mean, it is really hellfire and damnation.

As I left it, I passed the funeral home where my mother had been prepared not long ago. April 22 and 23, to be exact. I wanted to take out my cell phone and call my mother. I just can't get over the fact that she's not here any more. I talked to her every day for so many years. Now she's in eternity. She made my life very difficult when I was young, but in the last decade we got along great, and I truly miss her desperately. There is no substitute for a Mom. No one else will ever watch after my car until I am out of sight,

standing out in the cold and rain. No one else will ever walk me to the elevator and just look at me.

Saturday

You will never guess where I am. I am at the old El Rey theater on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. I am about to see a concert by my hero, Bob Dylan. This is one of The Jester's long run of road trips at "small" clubs and "intimate" venues. As you know, I have been a fan, a devout fan, of The Bobster since 1962. I got violently sick at the last Dylan concert I attended in 1978 when someone blew PCP smoke at me. But I am trying again.

First, I waited in line with a number of men like me. Gray-haired Jewish men with wire rimmed glasses. They were all wearing leather jackets though and I was not. Then I met up with my pal Al Burton, who had "scored" the tickets, as he so quaintly described the process. We went through the gate. There we found, to our dismay, that there was a VIP room where we would not have to stand to watch the concert. But we were not allowed into the VIP room. We would have to stand in the main room. Along with 800 other fans. Many of whom smoked. Many of whom smoked pot. Many of whom smoked worse than pot, namely cigars. Many of whom wore large hats that blocked my view.

Willie Nelson opened the evening. He was truly talented and great. I could make out every word. As I watched, an eerie, tortured face floated through the crowd towards me. The face with a mixed leer, grin, and look of premature rictus. Yep, it was my successful rival for the love of the nutty nutritionist, Mary Muff Maguire—Jack Nicholson. He nodded at me as if he might know me, or maybe to ask if he could please send Mary Muff back.

Then there was a long wait. I saw several people I knew including John Mankiewicz. Many people asked how they could win my money. Then Bob came on.

His voice was strong and nasal. But where did these songs come from? They were obviously from new albums that I knew nothing or next to nothing about.

Plus they were played far, far, far too loud. Plus, in front of me men and women bobbed and grooved and tried to dance in place to music that was never meant for dancing. (Imagine trying to dance to "Tangled Up in Blue" and you get the idea.)

More and more smoke. More and more unrecognizable lyrics. I was starting to get pretty upset. Then a kind soul behind me offered me his binoculars to see the distant Bobman. He looked old and lined. The man took his binoculars back and said, "My friends think you're a jerk but I love your show." Why am I here with crazy people?

Two pretty girls—both named Staci—came up to Al and me. They were music biz gals who knew me slightly from my show. They were young, smiling, friendly. But even they were not enough. About half an hour before the end of the show I threw in the towel. I walked out of the concert, out onto the street, into the parking lot and into my best friend, my brother, my Cadillac.

I think Bob was mean to me tonight.

Sunday

I wish President Bill Clinton could see this day. Tommy refused to go biking with me. This is his new individuation thing. If I want to do it, he doesn't want to do it. Unless it's something involving spending lots of Mom and Dad's money. So, after much negotiation, we agreed to play basketball at a nearby park.

Plummer Park, while nearby, is not really in a great neighborhood, to put it mildly. It's lower-middle class, I would say, largely filled with Russian Jewish immigrants. There are also a number of blacks and some Hispanics and some Asians.

When you enter Plummer Park from Fountain, as we did, you first see a vast swath of Russians playing chess. They are smoking with abandon and playing chess with grim seriousness. But really, really serious looks on their Kazakh faces. Fully intense looks and I mean intense. We walked by and came to some other Russians playing tennis. Also looking pretty serious. Then we came to the basketball court and here was a true miracle.

You deserve a factual look at...

A Demilitarized Palestinian State Should Israel, should the world, rely on it?

Even those most sanguine about the current peace negotiations are agreed that the Palestinian entity to be founded should be demilitarized. A demilitarized "West Bank" and Gaza Strip, it is believed, would do away with any military threat to the state of Israel.

What are the facts?

Israel threatened by enemies.

Israel is at peace with Egypt and with Jordan. But Israel is confronted by deadly enemies. Other Arab states are still in a declared or undeclared state of war with Israel. Iran, Moslem though not Arab, lurks in the background, its foremost military and political objective being the destruction of the state of Israel.

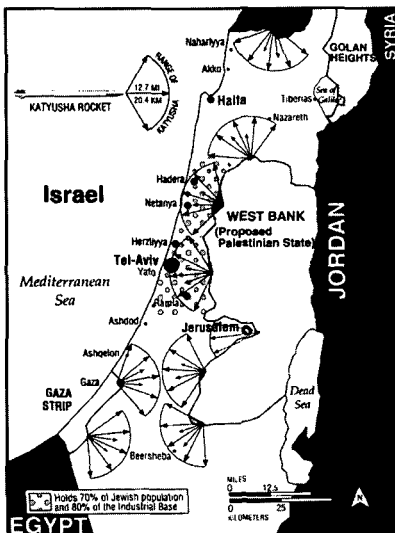
The PLO is a terror organization that

has only one purpose: to kill Jews and to destroy the state of Israel. While the latter objective is beyond its reach, it has been most successful in the former. It seems almost incomprehensible that a group as supposedly level-headed as the previous government of Israel would have entered into a "peace agreement" with them. Not surprisingly, events since the famous "handshake" confirm such skepticism. Despite statements to the contrary, the PLO has still not complied with Israel's main requirement, namely that it forswear the clauses in its "covenant" that call for the destruction of

Israel. Arafat and his lieutenants continue to make blood-curdling speeches to the Arab public, in which they re-assert their old goal of destroying Israel in "stages."

The myth of demilitarization. The assumption that "Palestine" would be demilitarized is not tenable. The Arab nations would not allow it. But mobilization of the "demilitarized" Palestine wouldn't really be required. The weapons of preference of Arab terrorists are the Soviet-made

Katyusha rockets, highly effective missiles, truck-mounted and mobile, ideal for hit-and-run raids against Israel. A look at the map makes clear that these rockets, short-range though they may be, would literally dominate the heartland of Israel. Easily moved and hidden along Israel's new eastern borders, which would be increased from 40 miles in length to over 200 miles, they would rain destruction over most of Israel. They would cover in their entirety Israel's narrow waist that holds 70% of the Jewish population of the country, 80% of its industrial base, its only international airport, and its most important military installations.



A Palestinian state—demilitarized?

The Arabs danced on the roofs of their homes when Iraqi Scud missiles fell on Tel Aviv during the Gulf War. Since the signing of the "peace agreement" they have continued in unrestrained terror and murder against the Jews. Only incurable optimists can believe that an "autonomous" Palestine would wish to become a peaceful neighbor of Israel. If Israel ceded the Gaza Strip—the invasion route since before biblical times—and Judea/Samaria (the "West Bank") to its sworn enemies it would make the country indefensible. Tanks, warplanes, and missiles would only be needed for the final mopping-up process. In the meantime, mortars and Katyushas located on the Judean ridges—Israel's proposed new borders—would suffice to neutralize life and industrial and military activity in Israel. But one can expect that the new leaders of Israel clearly understand this danger and that they will not make concessions that will endanger the security of their country.

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young Russians. But there were also blacks, a couple of Asians, and a Hispanic. The young men played with several balls. There was no arguing about who should have the ball. Whoever got the rebound just got the shot. Whoever got the next rebound got the next shot. There was intense pride in making difficult shots, but no arguing about who should have the ball.

Most of all, there was absolute cheerful interplay among the young men of all races. On the sidelines, watchful parents and grandparents from Russia who had probably seen the worst horrors of life stood edgily. They might have been awaiting trouble. But there was none. However Bill Clinton and his Race-Hatred Generation Commission might see America, here at Plummer Park, people just played and got along.

Friday

Moviegoing is worse than ever. To begin at the beginning, I am entering the parking lot of the Laemmle 5 theaters in West Hollywood. They are in a fairly good-sized but not huge shopping center near a bar called the Coconut Teazer. You have to wind around and around level after level to find parking places. Tonight, I notice that the other drivers are copping major macho attitudes, zooming up to the car in front of them, slamming on the brakes, screeching take-offs, sharp turns. It's like they're all on speed.

I quickly found out why. One of the theaters here is showing the new Quentin Tarantino movie, and it's filled with violence, tough-guy attitudes, and a seething contempt for anyone but oneself. Tarantino, world's biggest bedwetter, has made the perfect fantasy film for others like himself, and the magic of film has rubbed off on all the other nerds in black leather pretending to be tough guys. As I walked up the stairs to the theater, I could see a whole line of losers in black striking poses, curling their hair, playing with their nose rings, waiting to get in for their fix of non-loserliness.

My friend and I bought our tickets for *The Sweet Hereafter*. We took our seats in the tiny theater. In front of us, a man with huge hair slouched. I could

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**Behind me two lovers
were necking and
kicking my seat
in their passion.**
”

see over his hair, but just barely. Then, a few rows down, three college girls were giggling hysterically. Like madwomen on drugs.

I went to the lobby and bought some popcorn and a bottle of water. The “small” popcorn was as big as three “large” popcorn had been when I was a lad. And people wonder why Americans are so fat. Portions are far bigger everywhere, stupid.

Anyway, when I went back to the theater, all of the aisle seats were filled except mine. The trailers began, starting with an amazingly poor-quality one for the *Los Angeles Times*. The audience booed as they always do. Then four trailers for other movies, all seemingly about women with bad teeth but a lot of money falling in love with gay men pretending not to be.

The man in front of me sat up straight. His hair was overwhelming. I had to sit up super straight to get a glimpse over him.

The movie was fabulously good. Painfully thought provoking. But at a certain point I remembered I had to call my wife about her plane tickets. I went out to the lobby. I went to a phone. Broken. To another phone. It worked.

A hugely fat woman with lank hair and filthy clothes came next to me. She tried the other phone. It didn't work. She stared at me. “I'll be off in a few minutes,” I said.

“You're a selfish bastard,” she said.

“What did you say?” I asked her.

“You're a selfish bastard,” she said.

Then she added, “Meanwhile, I'm missing the movie.”

“You're crazy and I'm missing the movie, too,” I said weakly.

“Shut up and buy some new shoes,” she said, looking at my ultra-cool Simplex,

bought under the tutelage of the long absent (mercifully) Mary Muff Maguire.

I thought about punching her, or calling the cops. Instead I thought I did not want to have any more to do with her. So I just walked away. A young olive-skinned girl who worked at the theater came up to me. “Is there a problem?” she asked.

“That crazy woman just started cursing at me for no reason,” I said.

“I know. She's a problem,” the girl said sweetly. “Do you want me to tell the manager?”

“I'll tell the manager,” I said. “Where is he?”

“He's not here tonight,” she said with a smile.

I went back into the theater. By standing on my seat I could see over the man with the hair. The movie was really terrific. When I left, I asked at the popcorn counter if I needed to get my parking ticket stamped. “Not as long as you have your stub,” a young man said blithely.

At the parking gate, I cheerfully showed my stub. “Five dollars,” said the attendant.

“But I have my stub,” I said.

“Look, I don't make the rules,” the attendant said. Behind me, people started to honk their horns.

I am not sure when I'll be back there, to tell the truth.

Five nights before, I had gone to see the new James Bond movie, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, at the Galaxy Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. The previews and ads for the *Los Angeles Times* and the sound system took twenty agonizing loud minutes. Then the movie began. It was a great movie. But behind me were two lovers who were necking with each other. They were kicking my seat in their passion. That bothered me. I moved a few rows down. Behind me were a half-dozen college kids making belching noises and kicking the seats. All of the other aisle seats were full. The popcorn was stale and at a brand new theater the men's room was so vile that it made me gag.

As I poked through the parking lot of the Laemmle to leave I recalled that I had not seen a single usher in either theater at any time. No one had bothered to look in and see if bad, evil vandals were disrupting the viewing experience for nice,

n and see if bad, evil vandals were disrupting the viewing experience for nice, kind people like me. The sociopaths in both the lobby and the theater were simply given free rein to torture the rest of us. The management's only function seemingly was to serve tasteless and very expensive popcorn and make sure the video games in the lobby worked.

Friday

A highly unusual day and night as between Tommy and yours truly. It rained like mad today. I felt a flu coming on, so I stayed home and wrote an essay for a movie magazine about what it's like being a celebrity. I had lunch at home (my new lunch favorite, crisp bacon and an egg), slept, and then went to Tommy's school to pick him up. By a missed communication (or a miscommunication), our beautiful assistant, Dana, arrived to pick Tommy up at just the moment I did. I picked him up in my arms, which is getting just about impossible. "Well, my boy," I asked him, "would you like to come play Ping Pong with me in the condo I bought specifically for us to play Ping Pong in?"

"No," he said, "I want to go home and read. I'll go with Dana."

Hmm. Just as I thought about this, his two teachers came over and said, "This kid. He can't stop reading. All he does is read. He reads as fast as any adult."

The other teacher said, "A regular Yeshiva bucher."

The little Yeshiva bucher, who looks like James Dean wished he looked, ran gleefully to Dana's car and disappeared.

I went to my apartment, wrote, felt tired, and then took a nap. A little later, Dana appeared with groceries to stock my apartment so I can eat while writing. "Is Tommy with you?" I asked cheerfully.

"He wanted to stay in the car," she said. "What?"

"Yes, he wanted to read in the car."

I don't like this.

Later, we had dinner at home. I brought Tommy a huge Subway sandwich and Mommy and I had sushi. He refused to eat at the table with us and neglected to thank me for bringing his food.

Later, he got in bed and said, "Mommy, I want to have you tuck me in."

"I'll do it, my boy," I said, "because Mommy is not feeling too well."

Truth to tell, neither did I. But when I got to Tommy's bedside, he said, "No, I only want Mommy. I don't want the likes of you to tuck me in."

"You have hurt my feelings, my boy," I said. "You'll pay for this."

I left his room and felt truly furious. I know kids are supposed to have moods and to be able to pick and choose between their parents, but the kid had been a little creep all day.

I lay in bed for a time but I was so angry I could not sleep. I went to his room. He was lying there listening to a tape with the incredible headphones I had bought him.

I gently removed them so that I could have a little talk with him about rudeness.

He snarled at me, "WHAT IS IT?!!!!?" as if he were Caligula interrupted by a slave.

I just lost my mind. I grabbed him, sat him up in the bed, and really let him have it.

"What on earth do you think you are doing? How dare you talk to me as if you were the Roman emperor and I were a slave? How dare you treat your father with this contempt? What entitles you to this kind of rude, surly contempt for your father? I don't treat valet parkers or skycaps the way you talk to me. What do you think you're doing? Do you think you can get away with this?"

He started to cry great loud sobs.

"You are not going to grow up with this kind of arrogance towards those who are good to you," I said. "It is just not allowed. Not allowed at all. How many kids do you think have it as good as you do in this whole country? How many ten-year-olds get their own motor boats and trips to Idaho to snowboard? And in return you talk to me as if I were a stray dog? Are you insane?"

He sobbed and sobbed and tried to blame Dana for not having come up to my apartment and tried to say he was making a joke about not wanting me to tuck him in.

"What about it was a joke? What was funny about it?" I asked him.

I really hate to yell at him and I almost never do. But today he was just pushing

the limits too much. "We should do this more often," Alex said later. "He gets away with too much."

Still, I could not sleep for hours afterwards. I hate to yell at him. I hate to startle him. But I cannot let him grow up with that contemptuous attitude. It's not fair to him. But it really hurts to rein him in. I know what parents mean when they say, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." Happily, I think it helps the kid more than it helps me. ❄

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by Matthew Stevenson

To Baku and Back

The Great Game—in the pursuit of expensive oil.

Like Charlie Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*, I recently joined the list of those panning for oil in the murky waters of the Caspian Sea. In the company of other prospectors, some lined with fur and others whispering into portable phones, I flew Lufthansa from Frankfurt to Baku and checked into a frontier hotel, which, although managed by Hyatt International, had its share of Black Larsons huddled near the bar.

On the western shore of the Caspian, Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan, one of the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union. Set on hills that roll down to the sea, the city mixes metaphors of a bazaar, socialist provincialism, and the oil patch of east Texas. Down the alleys of the old city it is still possible to sip mint tea and haggle for carpets while the waterfront evokes Red Square and the sea is awash with drilling rigs if not Yukon dreams.

Unlike either Belarus or Latvia, Azerbaijan had the good fortune to depart the Soviet Union with large reservoirs of oil and gas. Azeri crude oil production predates the discoveries of Col. Edwin Drake in western Pennsylvania. Hitler invaded Russia with the dream of fueling the Thousand Year Reich with oil from the fields around Baku, which in early days collected in puddles on the ground. Recent off-shore discoveries in the Caspian have prompted a more subtle invasion in which the assault troops come armed with lawyers and production-sharing contracts.

"More than one billion tons of oil are in the entrails of Azerbaijan," read one of the

briefing memos in my briefcase. Even at today's market price of \$15 per barrel, that would be worth more than \$100 trillion. Other reports allude to subterranean oceans of natural gas. The so-called "contract of the century" that includes companies like BP, Exxon, and Statoil in an off-shore field calls for \$8 billion in development costs and dreams of 500 million tons, for which the street value runs to the trillions.

Were Azerbaijan in Scandinavia or on the North Slope of Alaska, it would be hailed as the antidote to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and lavished with export insurance and unsecured bank loans. Unfortunately, it straddles the fault line not just between the West and Islam, but also the seismic plates that shift between the United States, Russia, and Iran, without belonging to any one camp. With coordinates inside Rudyard Kipling's Great Game, it recalls his:

*But there is neither East nor West, Border,
nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face
to face, though they come
from ends of the
earth!*

Azerbaijan shares borders with Armenia, Georgia, Iran, and Russia, all of which have fought regional ethnic or religious wars in recent times. Across the gray waters of the Caspian are the khanates of Turkmen and Kazakhs whose untested political institutions are

struggling to franchise the gas stations opening along the Silk Road. The fractured republics that surround the Caspian could well become the Balkans of the twenty-first century.

Little about the borders of Azerbaijan relates to the Azeri nation. The country has a population of 8 million, of whom a large minority are Russian and Armenian. Most Azeris are Muslims, and a diaspora of 20 million Azeris make them the largest minority in Iran. Although the government of Azerbaijan banned a political party devoted to Islamic fundamentalism, it coexists with minarets on its skyline much as it once lived with the stern faces of Lenin and Stalin calling their faithful to prayer.

Between meetings I walked through a park overlooking both the city and the shores of the Caspian Sea. Snow and a biting wind swirled off the sea, making it feel like Cleveland in January.

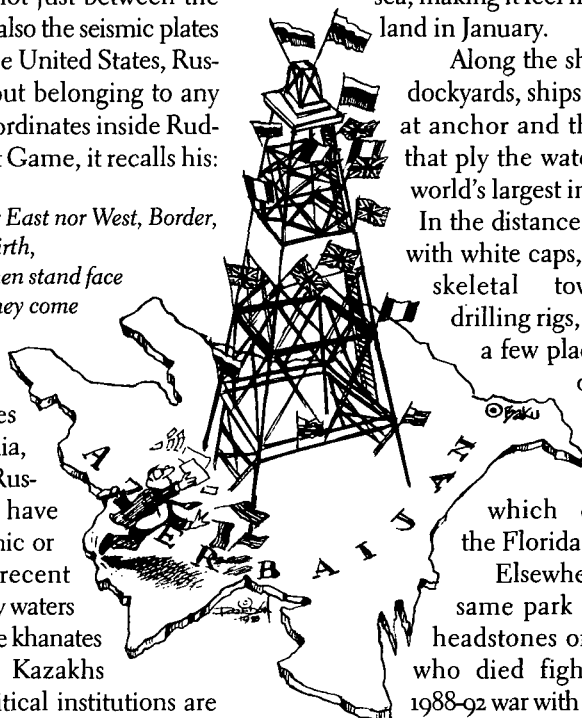
Along the shore were dockyards, ships swinging at anchor and the ferries that ply the waters of the world's largest inland sea.

In the distance, brushed with white caps, were the skeletal towers of drilling rigs, linked in a few places by an offshore highway

like that

which connects the Florida Keys.

Elsewhere in the same park were the headstones of soldiers who died fighting the 1988-92 war with Armenia.



MATTHEW STEVENSON is a Geneva-based banker.