

Sometimes violence is the answer.

One scorching hot day in 1986, Punk came to Jerusalem, and into my life. It happened downtown, on Ben Yehuda street, and as I stepped off the bus I could smell the falafel and shawarma, the familiar scents carried further on the summer air. The sun had already set behind the buildings, but the sky was still light; a very pale blue. The street vendors were set up, with their boards and tables full of jewelry, and small bags and pouches. The performers had not yet arrived and the only music I could hear was coming from the cafes and restaurants, a mix of middle eastern music and 80s pop. Early evening. Jerusalem's heat is a dry heat, the scorching air hurting your trachea when you breathe, much like those early drags off my dad's cigarettes. Many shops close in the afternoon, and mothers call their children in; the streets quiet and the very air seems to stand still. The streets come alive once more when the sun goes down and stay active late.

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On this particular 1986 summer evening I walked up slowly, feeling no reason to hurry, How would tonight be any different from the countless other nights. But as I got closer, I stopped dead in my tracks. Instead of the familiar people with long hair and flowing clothes, sitting on the ground were three guys, all with short hair sticking up in all directions, bleached and dyed to various shades of faded colors, blue, green, orange. They wore torn blue jeans, and their legs, stretched out before them on the paving stones, ended in two pairs of Converse Allstars, and one of combat boots.

Punk had come to town.

Thanks to Jenny's comic from two years before, I recognized the hair, and boots. And now here, in front of me, on my familiar spot on Ben Yehuda, were three punks, hair, boots, and all. It was unmistakable. Who were they? Where had they come from? Were they from Jerusalem? What were they doing on Ben Yehuda? At my usual spot? So many questions. I had to get some of them answered; I didn't know the answers would change my life.

As I approached them, they looked up, and one of them, booted, with splotchy bleached hair, nodded. It was merely a recognition, but it was not hostile in any way, and I was encouraged to nod back.

“Hi”

“Hi”

“Are you from here? You live in Jerusalem?”

“I do. You?”

“No. We just got here today.”

“Where from?”

“Tel Aviv.”

Tel Aviv, though less than 50 miles away, was like another world to me then. I had been there only a small handful of times, with my best friend. And it was always a big deal, with lots of planning, and pleading with my parents, mostly for spending money, or stealing it somehow. The few times we’d gone, Rani, my best friend, and I, it had been an all day affair, with the bus rides alone taking upwards of two hours each way. And here were these guys, from this other world, here in MY spot. I had more questions.

“Want to sit?”

The Chutzpah on this guy!

Of course I wanted to sit.

His name was Benny; his friends were Gil and Moran. They lived in Tel Aviv, but had to leave the day before

“The mayor told us to go,” Benny said, though he didn’t tell me why.

He was eighteen, and they were seventeen. They had hitched a ride to Jerusalem earlier that day and here they were. They didn’t know anyone, and did not have a place to stay.

“Do you have any ideas for us?”

The only place I could suggest was Independence Park, or the little park at the top of the street. One was bigger, but the other closer. One had more hiding places, but the other had a cleaner bathroom.

As the rest of the local group slowly trickled in, Benny and his friends didn't leave the spot and so my friends had to sit elsewhere; they chose the tree in front of the next store down, which had a stone bench all around it. Some attempts at conversation happened, but not many, and most of the people there that night kept a wary distance from the strangers.

Benny and I, on the ground in front of the pharmacy, talked, meandering from politics, to education, to societal and familial expectations, and back again. A few months before, through a convoluted process, I had found the French Philosophers, Sartre, Decartes, Voltaire, and was really taken with their ideas about existence, and existentialism., and was hungry to discuss these, but didn't know anybody else who'd read them. Benny had. The hours simultaneously flew by, and lasted eons, sitting there, while people around us came and went, barely noticed or acknowledged, like vapor, or breezes, which make a sound, or carry a scent, and are then gone. Next thing I knew, it was almost midnight, and I had to run to catch the last bus home. Benny and his friends stayed there; where would they need to catch the bus to?

The next evening, still hot and dry, Benny was there, though alone, sitting in the same spot, doing up his hair with a bottle of water and a bar of soap. His friends were trying to get enough money from strangers to buy some food. That night's meandering went from socio-philosophy, we moved to socio-politics, and Benny told me about anarchism, the overlaps and distinctions between social anarchism and political anarchism, and his enthusiasm about the topic was infectious. I listened, chain-smoking and drinking a coke, making it last for hours.