

SYDNEY TAYLOR HONOR BOOK
NEXT GENERATION INDIE BOOK AWARD FINALIST

I'm Talia Schumacher and I'm a 'one and only'. It's not easy being an only child in a community where all my friends come from big families. You'd think I'd get some peace and quiet, but my parents think our house is a hotel, and it's always full of guests. I never know who I'll bump into in the kitchen. All too often I'm bumping into Gabrielle, a twenty-three-year-old, soul-searching ballet dancer. I'd love to know what she's doing here, when she's leaving, and what her secret is.

And I'm starting to wonder...

is one a lonely number?

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I wake up Saturday morning to the sound of someone humming outside my bedroom door. I check the clock. It's 8:00 AM. Good morning, lucky number. I lie in bed listening to the humming. Oh my gosh, I think it's her! *Ohhhmmmm, ohhhmmmm*. What in the world?

I get out of bed, open the door, and peek out across the hall. The guest room door is shut, but I can hear the *ohhhhhmmmm* coming from inside. Then I hear steps on the floor and a few deep breaths. Then it sounds like she's trying to blow out a bunch of candles. *Who, who, who!* I tiptoe across the hall. I know I shouldn't be eavesdropping, but it almost sounds like she's having an asthma attack. What is she doing?

Then comes a crash. Yikes.

I tap lightly on her door. "Gabrielle?" Now it's quiet. Maybe she fell or something. Or fainted!

"Uh, just a minute." Her voice sounds strained.

"Are you okay?" I ask, more out of curiosity than compassion.

"Yeah... just had a little spill. You can come in."

I open the door and find Gabrielle on her knees, picking up pieces of broken blue glass. "I can't believe I did this," she cries. "Tell me it wasn't an antique, or a family heirloom."

"I think it came from Target, actually."

"Thank God," she says. "I am so embarrassed."

I'm not sure if she means breaking the vase or being seen in

Winnie the Pooh pajamas.

“You’re not the first guest to break something.”

“Thanks, but that doesn’t make me feel better.” Her face is all flushed.

I wonder what Doris would do. “Let me get something to clean it up with.”

I go to the hallway closet where Doris keeps supplies. Sure enough, there is everything we could need for any kind of cleaning catastrophe. I return with a garbage bag, a rag, and a broom.

“Here you go. Be careful with the glass.”

“Right,” she says. “I don’t want to bleed all over your floor, too.” I can tell she feels bad. I stand there feeling kind of stupid. Should I offer to help?

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her. “We can vacuum it after Shabbat.”

“I was just doing my usual morning headstand,” she says, as if this is the most normal thing in the world.

“Headstand?”

“Yeah. After my yoga and meditative breathing. It helps me to wake up.”

I don’t tell her that it woke me up, too. “Well, good morning. There’s coffee cake and tea in the kitchen. Shul services start at nine if you’re interested. There’s a Bar Mitzvah today. You can probably walk over with my mom, but she usually doesn’t leave until ten.”

This information seems to brighten her mood. “Great. Thanks for the info. Oh, is the shul nearby?”

“Three blocks.”

“Nice.” She sweeps up the last of the glass pieces. “I lived a mile from the shul in New York. Well, at least the one I liked going to. Have you heard of the Lincoln Square synagogue?”

I shake my head.

“Wonderful rabbi. And they have this beginner service for people who don’t know how to read Hebrew, or haven’t been in a synagogue since who-knows-when. Anyway, that’s the one I went to.” Gabrielle ties up the garbage bag. “It’s also a great place to meet a potential match, if you know what I mean. Of course that’s probably the last

thing on your mind. Huh?"

I just smile, but I have a feeling she is not going to stop talking unless I say something. "Yeah. Well, if you don't need anything else, I think I'll get dressed now."

"Thanks for your help!" she says, but her eyes don't quite match the cheerfulness of her voice.

"See you later," I say.

I go back to my room to wash up. When I look in the mirror, I see two zits on my cheek and my brown hair a frizzy disaster. Ugh. Time for the messy bun. While I put up my hair I start thinking about Gabrielle. There is something funny about her, but I can't quite put my finger on it. My friend Shifra says that people's body language sends all sorts of unconscious signals that other people pick up without even realizing. Shifra's really into analyzing people. I bet she'd be able to tell me something about Gabrielle after just one introduction.

I find my purple skirt hung up in the closet. (Thanks, Doris.) I match it with my new ivory sweater. I think I'll wear black tights since I'll be wearing my black Shabbat boots. I put on my silver hoop earrings and the Jewish star necklace my grandmother brought me from Israel.

Downstairs, I join my mom in the kitchen. She's reading *The Jewish Journal* and sipping tea. She sits smack in the morning sunlight, which she loves. Shabbat morning is the only time she lets herself relax a little.

"My, you're up early."

I decide not to tell her why. "I think I'll get to shul on time for a change."

"Oh, really?" Mom smiles. Guess she doesn't quite buy my reason.

I pour myself a glass of orange juice. "Mom? How do you know Gabrielle?"

She looks toward the entryway. "Shh. Now is not the time."

I sit down at the table. This is an answer I have heard many times before.

"Have some rugelach," she offers, pushing a plate of tempting pastries. "They're from the new bakery."

"Yum. Thanks." I lower my voice to a whisper. "I told her she

could walk to shul with you.”

Mom folds the newspaper. “Want to join us?”

I look at the wall clock. “Uh, I’ll pass on that one. Ruthie’s waiting for me. Oh, by the way, who are we having for lunch?”

Mom rattles off the guests. “The Selegmans, the Reingolds, and Gabrielle.”

At least they’re people I know, and the Selegmans have a daughter a couple years older than me.

“You can invite Ruthie if you’d like,” Mom adds.

“Hmm. Maybe.”

“Is there a Shabbat group this afternoon?”

“At Shifra’s. Three o’clock.”

Mom takes a sip of her tea. “You haven’t hosted the group for a while.”

“That’s because you’ve been hosting a ton of people every week,” I reply a bit too quickly.

Mom raises an eyebrow. “What does that have to do with having a Shabbat group here?”

I shrug. “I just thought you wouldn’t want me to invite a bunch of girls over on top of all the other guests. It’s kind of been like a hotel here, Mom.”

“There is only one guest staying over this Shabbat, Talia,” she says firmly.

“Okay. This Shabbat. But, I didn’t even know that. Maybe you could give me some warning.”

“Fair enough, but you know that I don’t always know who is going to show up until the last minute.”

I am tempted to say, *Well, why is that, Mom?* But I don’t. I can’t remember a time when we didn’t have guests in our house, but only recently has it begun to bug me, and I don’t quite know how to tell that to my parents.

“And,” Mom continues, “it doesn’t matter to me how many guests are here. Your friends are always welcome.”

But it matters to me! “Thanks,” I mutter. And speaking of guests... Gabrielle walks in wearing that tie skirt again with the same orange turtleneck. She has a beige fringed shawl draped around her shoulders.

“Shabbat Shalom!” she says, sounding like a morning news reporter. “Ah, I love a sunny kitchen. My New York kitchen didn’t even have a window.”

“That was my first requirement before we bought the house,” Mom asks, getting up to set a plate for Gabrielle. “Did you sleep well?”

Gabrielle looks at me for a second. “Very well, thanks.”

I stare at her purple feather earrings. Mom smiles. “Wonderful. We recently put in a new mattress.”

“Sure beats the pull-out couch I slept on the past year,” Gabrielle says, walking over to the window.

“Come have something to eat,” Mom says, setting out a tea tray. “What a lovely skirt.”

“Thanks,” Gabrielle says, surveying our back yard. “I found it in a Greenwich Village shop.”

I wonder if she’s going to confess about the vase.

“Do you use your pool a lot?” she asks me.

“Sure, like around June through September.”

Mom turns to our guest. “Now, do you want us to call you Gabby or Gabrielle?”

She squints like we asked her a hard math problem. “You know, I’ve always gone by Gabby, that is, with my friends, but now that I’m off to a fresh start, I think I’ll return to Gabrielle.”

Fresh start?

“It’s a beautiful name,” Mom replies, pouring Gabrielle some tea. “Did you know it had Hebrew origins? It means ‘God is my strength.’”

“Hey, I like that!” Gabrielle says. “Why didn’t anyone tell me that?” She sips her tea, then winks.

I get up and put my plate in the dishwasher. “Gotta go,” I say. “See ya in shul.”

“Lookin’ forward to it!” Gabrielle calls as I head for the door.

Outside, the sun is bright and it’s a surprisingly mild morning for November in Boston. I barely need my coat. There are still piles of red maple leaves scattered around the neighborhood. On a day like this, I wish our synagogue was further away. I wouldn’t mind walking a mile. (That would be 5,280 feet.)

Since I am early for a change, I decide to walk to Ruthie's house. I doubt she has left for shul yet. Ruthie lives five blocks from my house. I've known her since kindergarten, when her family moved from Baltimore. Since then, her mom had three more kids. We've had our ups and downs, but Ruthie and I have been best friends since third grade. I guess you could say we're opposites, but that just makes our friendship more interesting. Even though I'm kind of shy, Ruthie is loud and outgoing. She keeps me laughing. I think it would be boring if my best friend was as quiet as I am. (I recently took a personality test in a Jewish girls' magazine. I turned out to be introverted and a logical thinker. No surprises there.)

One thing I wouldn't mind would be having a good friend who also loved math. Our school is co-ed until fourth grade. When I was younger, I was the only girl in the highest math level. I hated the boys in my group. They had dirty fingernails and were always pulling each other's yarmulkes off. I was the only kid who could sit still and didn't feel the need to shout out the answers. One boy, Levy Rashinsky, who never combed his hair, would scribble over my math problems when the teacher wasn't looking. Now I am in honors math, and even that is pretty easy, but none of my good friends are in my class. But at least it's just girls now.

Ruthie's house is the blue one on the corner. It's not very big, and they jam pack a lot in there. It is overflowing with boy energy which can be kind of fun—that is, for about ten minutes.

I knock on the door, and a few seconds later, little Avi appears.

"Hi. Bye!" he says, still in his Batman pajamas.

"Hi, Avi. How come you're not in shul?"

He gives me one of his devilish looks. "I'm building a Lego spaceship."

"Oh, I see. I heard you had a birthday."

He holds up his little hand. "I'm five."

"Wow. Five is alive!"

Avi jumps up and down. "Yeah!" He runs away.

"Wait—" I poke my head in the door. "Hello?"

I hear Mrs. Braitman calling from upstairs. "Good Shabbos! Come on in, Talia."

I walk in the tiny entryway. There are boys' sneakers and Shabbos shoes piled near the front door. I overhear Sammy and Noam arguing about something in another room.

"Boo!" Avi jumps out from the family room. "Did I scare you?"

"Absolutely!" I feign.

"Come see my spaceship!"

I step into the family room. The first thing I notice is that the couch has been taken apart. All the pillows are on the floor and Avi is jumping from one to another.

"I know how to make the best spaceships. Better than Noam," he says.

"Hmm. I'm sure." I can't ever remember a time our family room was even half this messy. There are blocks scattered everywhere, books all over the coffee table, and I notice smashed Cheerios in the carpet. The Braitman family needs Doris.

I hear Ruthie bounding down the stairs. "Hi, Tal. I wasn't expecting you! Great, you wore the skirt."

She's wearing her purple skirt, too, but it looks much better on her than on me. In fact, everything looks good on Ruthie. She is five-foot-six, model thin, with mile-long legs. "Wasn't sure if you'd be up yet," I comment.

"That's because Avi pounced on me this morning. Sooo, I managed to get up after all. What are you doing so early?"

"Tell you later. Are you ready to go?"

"Sure. We'll get our choice of seats." Ruthie peeks in on her brother, but doesn't seem fazed by the mess. "Avi, go get dressed. Imma will take you to Shabbat playgroup," she says in her sisterly voice.

"No! I don't want to go to playgroup." He starts bouncing on the pillows. "I want to go with you."

Ruthie rolls her eyes. "Sorry, buddy. I'm going now and you are still in your pajamas. Do you want to go to shul in your PJs?"

"Wait for me!" he wails.

"Imma?" Ruthie calls upstairs. "I'm going now. Okay?"

"Can you wait for Avi?" she calls back.

"Imma! I'm going with Talia. We're all ready."

“Okay,” Mrs. Braitman says. “Send him up.”

Ruthie pats Avi’s head. “Go, Avi. Imma wants you. I’ll give you a lollipop in shul if you listen.”

Avi crosses his arms. “Fine.”

“See ya later,” Ruthie calls as she heads for the door. She grabs my arm. “Let’s get out of here!”

As Ruthie and I walk up Oak Street, I give her the guest report.

“He plays the accordion?” she asks incredulously when I tell her about Mr. Miller. “I’ve never heard of an accordion in shul.”

“Me neither. It’s not an Orthodox shul, obviously. They probably do a lot of things differently than we do.”

“That just seems... weird.”

I shrug. “It wouldn’t seem weird if that’s what we were used to.”

“I guess.”

Ruthie cracks up when I tell her about Gabrielle’s headstand. “That is too funny. I mean, my brothers break things in our house practically every day, but somehow in your house that would really stand out. Imagine doing that after just meeting your hosts. So is she a klutz?” Ruthie asks.

“No! She’s a ballerina. That’s what makes it so funny.”

“Cool. I always wanted to do ballet.”

I give Ruthie a look. “Are you kidding?”

“You know I like to dance.”

“Yeah, but not ballet.”

“It’s probably too late for me,” she says, and then leaps over a pile of leaves. Ruthie starts walking backwards so she can face me. “So, do I get to meet her?”

“If you want. But, I’m telling you, there is definitely something odd about her.”

“All the more interesting. Maybe she is a case for Shifra.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking!”

We head up Grove Street and run into a pack of women and kids walking toward the shul. They must be going to the Bar Mitzvah.

“I heard Jeremy has a ton of cousins and out-of-town relatives coming,” Ruthie says. “Good thing we got here early.”

“I wish I had tons of cousins,” I reply. “I mean, six is nice, but

twelve would be even better. A dozen cousins.”

“Don’t start with your numbers,” Ruthie jokes.

When we get to the shul, there is already a mass of strollers parked in front. A bunch of moms are talking while their little kids jump in leaves under the oak tree. I’ve been going to Young Israel of Greensborough all my life. I had my baby-naming there, which of course I don’t remember, and my Bat Mitzvah. It’s the biggest Orthodox shul (there are two other ones) in town. Greensborough also has one Reform and two Conservative synagogues, three churches, and a mosque, so besides being very Jewish, I guess you could say it’s a pretty religious town.

Ruthie and I enter the lobby, which is filled with kids fooling around. You’d think it would be all hush-hush, but it’s not. Never has been, and the rabbi is forever trying to solve this problem. Just outside the entrance to the women’s section, Ruthie and I stop to look at a huge photo collage of Jeremy. Ruthie points to the picture of him getting his first haircut. “Oh, he was so cute!”

“Was?” I tease.

Ruthie elbows me. “Ha. Ha.”

We both take a siddur from the bookshelf and go inside. The women’s section is much more crowded than usual. Jeremy’s family members fill the front row. Ruthie and I take a seat in the back where most of the teen girls like to sit. As talkative as Ruthie is, she’s very good about davening and not talking (too much) during shul. I wish I could say that was true about most of the other girls. My mom would kill me if she saw me having a conversation during the service. When I was little, I always had to sit with my mom or go to a supervised playgroup. Even when all the other kids left during the rabbi’s speech, Mom expected me to stay in. That’s when I would open the siddur to a random page and do mental calculations with the page numbers. Yeah, I know it’s nerdy, but it passes the time.

Just before the Torah reading, Mom and Gabrielle show up. That’s one thing about our shul, people drop in throughout the service, which lasts a whopping two-and-a-half hours. I give Ruthie an ‘over-there’ look.

“Is that her?” Ruthie whispers. I nod. “Cool skirt. Are those

neckties?”

“I think so,” I whisper back.

Fortunately, Mom chooses a seat in the middle next to Mrs. Selegman, and Gabrielle joins her. Just then, I hear a deep voice chanting the blessings over the Torah. It’s Jeremy. He used to be the smallest kid in my first grade class. Now he’s as tall as his father standing at the bimah.

Jeremy starts the reading in a smooth, sing-song voice. He sounds a lot better than those Bar Mitzvah boys with squeaky voices. The shul is packed, but it is real quiet now. As Jeremy reads, I follow along in the Chumash. His Torah portion is *Chayei Sarah*, ‘the Life of Sarah,’ whose story really takes place after her death, but as my teacher Rabbi Weiss says, an influential woman lives on after death, so the emphasis is on how she lived. I like that idea.

This Torah portion has a lot of numbers in it. Sarah lived to 127, her husband Abraham lived to 175, and his son Ishmael to 135. Gosh, imagine living that long! This part of the Torah is also about finding a wife for Abraham and Sarah’s son, Isaac, who ends up marrying the lovely and kind Rebecca. I guess you could call this the first romance in the Torah. There’s even a matchmaker in the story. (When Ruthie and I were little, we used to act the whole thing out with Barbie dolls.) My parents met through a matchmaker right out of college. It’s a pretty ordinary story. My mother always tells it so matter-of-factly. I kind of hoped for a little more drama.

By the time Jeremy finishes chanting the Torah portion and the additional Haftorah reading, says his speech (the typical Bar Mitzvah type), and begins Musaf, my stomach is growling. I hate to admit it, but this is the point when I usually show up. As I finish saying the silent *Shmoneh Esrei* prayer, I catch a glimpse of Gabrielle. She has the siddur close to her face and she is praying very intently. Then, with one hand, she pulls her shawl over her head! She sways back and forth, side to side. What in the world is she doing? Is that supposed to be her tallit? I’ve heard in Conservative synagogues some women wear prayer shawls like the men, but not here. A few of the ladies are staring at Gabrielle. My mother pretends not to notice. Again, I feel embarrassed for her. What next?

I look at Ruthie. She looks at Gabrielle, then at me. We are both trying not to crack up. She sits down and whispers, “I think you’d look great in one of those shawls!”