

# Breaking Kosher

One month into her year abroad in Buenos Aires, Rachel Fain had already fallen in love and been dumped. The whole ordeal might have been easier to get over, were the man in question not Rachel's host-brother, who lived with his grandmother, Abuela, a few blocks over from the house where Rachel lived with his mother, Susana. Jonas had moved into his grandmother's apartment years before Rachel's arrival to give the illusion of independence (a pretense which Rachel only later recognized as false) and yet he could not extricate himself so completely from his childhood home for he filled Susana's house with his presence whether he was there or not, the way sons of single mothers could only do.

To complicate matters, both Susana and Abuela thought Rachel his perfect match from the very first moment she arrived, though Rachel couldn't decide whether this was simply because she was the first straight female the program had ever sent Susana, who liked to describe herself as an open-minded liberal, or because she happened to be Jewish.

"She even *looks* Jewish," Rachel overheard Abuela say to Susana in the kitchen, as Rachel lugged her suitcase up the stairs.

Later that day, while browsing the family photographs on the wall, Rachel told Susana she had beautiful children.

"Which one?" Susana asked, her eyes shifting anxiously between the two portraits. "Laura or Jonas?"

"Well, both," said Rachel, though it was Jonas who had really caught her eye.

"Oh," said Susana.

In the kitchen, while they shared mate and crackers, Abuela said, “The program staff told us you eat kosher. Susana doesn’t normally but she will while you’re here, won’t you, *querida*?”

“Of course,” said Susana.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Rachel.

Susana explained that she wasn’t the type that housed foreign students for money, that she did it purely for the cultural exchange, for the chance to open herself to new ways of thinking. She took a miniature statue of Buddha off the top of the refrigerator as if to prove that this had happened. Abuela asked if Rachel went to temple and Rachel said that she did every Friday for Shabbat.

“A real Orthodox, no?” said Susana, more to her mother than to Rachel.

“*Perdón*,” said Rachel. “I’m not Orthodox.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” said Abuela.

“My mother survived the Holocaust,” Susana explained, “and she’s the social director of *El Refugio*, which is a very popular club out in *la pampa* for Jews. But she only goes to temple on holidays, like me.”

“Joni could take her,” Abuela suggested.

“If that’s what he wants,” said Rachel.

“Of course it’s what he wants,” said Susana. “He loves Shabbat.”

“And he’ll love you,” added Abuela.

Jonas did take Rachel places, but never to Shabbat. The first place they went was a café around the corner. The last was an underground club where midgets crowded the dance floor and weed saturated the air. With anyone else, the women in leather lingerie chasing each other with whips on stage might have unsettled her but

next to Jonas, she felt safe, even as he rolled Rachel her first joint. After the club, they went to a café for hot chocolate and *churros*, where they stayed until sunrise, when they became too exhausted to laugh.

It took five afternoons and three movies at Abuela's apartment with Abuela gone before he finally touched her. Like a gentleman, he had asked Rachel if she was sure it was what she wanted. When they pulled off his shirt, Rachel found "kosher" in Hebrew tattooed on his chest. For an instant, she considered asking whether he knew the Torah explicitly prohibited tattoos and every other method of disfiguring the body, but she let the thought go, watching her finger trace the letters instead, hearing herself suggest that she stay the night.

Jonas wasn't Rachel's type; he was what she thought of as a surface Jew, the kind that never went to services but claimed their Jewish heritage on the holidays anyway to get out of school. She could tell that he valued his Jewishness mainly for the way it made him feel exotic but, for reasons beyond her understanding, this did not turn her off. She couldn't deny what she felt and saying "I'm a virgin" in Spanish as they made love didn't seem nearly as weighty as it might have in English so she said them both as well-pronounced as she could manage and with pride. But Jonas was obviously startled. He didn't call the house to ask for her again.

A week after they slept together, Rachel came downstairs to find Susana sitting at the kitchen table in her bathrobe.

"Jonas says he's going to *la pampa*," she said, pointing to the post-it note that he had left on the front door. "What in God's name does he have to do in the country?"

"I don't know," said Rachel, honestly.

“Did you have a fight?”

“No,” said Rachel.

“He says he’s not sure when he’ll be back.”

Rachel said nothing.

“Aren’t you upset?” Susana asked. “You don’t look it.”

“Of course I’m upset but there’s nothing I can do,” said Rachel. “I’m not going to chase him out to *la pampa*.” She grabbed her pair of house keys off the hook on the wall. “I’m going out,” she said, giving Susana a hasty kiss on the cheek. “*Ciao*.”

For Rachel, it seemed easier to breathe outside on the street where cars belched exhaust into her personal space every breath. She let herself be distracted by the conversations of people she passed, trying to understand the expressions she had never been taught in Spanish class. *Che boludo, ¿Qué honda? ¿No me rompas las pelotas!* Hey, dude. What’s up? Quit breaking my balls! It did not offend her when some men whistled as she passed, the way she thought it should. There was something primitive in their catcalling, some basic, sexual instinct that appealed to her. “You’re beautiful. Be with me,” they called like birds in mating season. Occasionally, she returned their stares, daring them to objectify her, as if to prove she was free from them, and every man.

Three weeks after Jonas’ disappearance, Rachel was fully occupied by her classes in the public university where she was temporarily enrolled. She spent most of her time in cafes with classmates or studying alone. Her diet shifted from the kosher meat and salad that Susana left for her in the refrigerator to coffee and croissants,

standard café fare. Mostly, she did everything to avoid the house, where Susana would periodically erupt, claiming she was crying for both of them.

The day before Yom Kippur, Rachel came home early to help Susana clean the house for the holiday. They were in the middle of hanging the Star of David from the ceiling over the dining room table when Abuela called Susana to announce that Jonas was back.

“Why doesn’t he come here to say hello, then?” Susana demanded. “I think the poor girl gets the point.”

“Susana, *por favor*,” said Rachel.

“Fine,” said Susana into the phone. “I won’t ask him anything about his little vacation. Just make sure he comes tomorrow.”

The next day at the family gathering, Jonas treated Rachel as if they were old friends. She avoided him as much as possible, using the relatives she didn’t know as buffers, faking interest in the great-aunt’s eye disease and Laura’s latest art project to make it clear she had absolutely no concern for where he had been.

As they walked into the temple, though, the group jostled in such a way that left her standing at the end of a pew, next to him. His presence seemed surreal to her here, a place where she went regularly to meditate and transcend all thoughts of him. Now his body warmth and scent made that impossible. She wondered if he thought of Yom Kippur as a day of repentance, as she did, or just a familial obligation. What would he repent? she wondered. She prayed for help in renouncing her jealousy for anything unrelated to her.

Though it wasn’t part of this service, she also thought about the Lecha Dodi prayer she witnessed every Friday on Shabbat when everyone turned toward the back

of the temple to welcome God like a bride. One of Rachel's favorite parts of the service, the prayer never made her think of Jonas, but today, she couldn't help but envision herself walking down the aisle in a traditional Jewish wedding with him waiting for her at the end. The sound she imagined of him breaking the glass under his foot made her shudder a little, causing her arm to brush against his.

"*Perdón,*" she said.

But he clearly did not hear her over his words of prayer, which rang out as loudly and as steadily as anyone's.

Jonas' birthday came a week later. For the family dinner at Abuela's house, Rachel brought a bottle of Malbec with a label that said "*El Punto Final,*" or "The Final End." Nobody but Jonas found it funny.

"Why don't you take her to the party with your friends?" suggested Abuela.

"Would you like to come?" he asked.

"I don't think so," said Rachel. "I have a lot of homework."

"*Dale,*" he insisted. "It's small, just a couple of friends."

Rachel relented and went upstairs to change into a black dress that hung sensually off her shoulders, something she had been saving for a night out dancing with her friends from the university.

"You look nice," said Jonas, looking at her poised on the stair.

"You look beautiful," corrected Susana.

As she walked down the street next to Jonas, she couldn't help but enjoy that, out of respect for him, no other man called out to her.

It was a small place, blocks away from the normal flow of pedestrian traffic in Palermo, the city's restaurant hub. Like the underground bar, Rachel never would have found it on her own. Inside, there were just a handful of tables, each aglow with its own candle. Jonas found his two friends at a booth tucked in the corner, gazing into each other's eyes, arms intertwined. She recognized Cristobal, Jonas' best friend who had joined them at the underground club, but the girl he was with was different.

"What happened to what's-her-name?" Rachel asked Jonas as they walked up to the table.

"Nothing," said Jonas. "He just sees Paula on the side."

Cristobal seemed surprised but happy to see Rachel, rising to kiss her on both cheeks. "Isn't Luchi coming?" he asked, after they'd ordered drinks.

Before Jonas could answer, they were all on their feet again, greeting a blonde girl in a gold dress and alligator-skin boots.

"Rachel, this is Luchi," said Jonas.

"*Encantada*," said Luchi.

"Rachel lives with my mother," said Jonas, as if that explained her presence.

"I study here," said Rachel, grappling for a better reason. "I'm American."

"How nice," said Luchi. "How long will you be here?"

As they talked, Jonas went to find an extra chair, the fifth at a table for four. Everyone sat back down and Luchi gave Jonas his present: two wine glasses without stems, which Paula and Cristobal confirmed were very much in vogue.

"*Gracias*," said Jonas, taking them each out of the box and placing them on the table like trophies.

"How's work?" Cristobal asked Luchi. For Rachel's benefit, he added, "Luchi is a terrific make-up artist."

“You’ll take that back after you hear this,” said Luchi, recounting her latest folly when she’d accidentally mistaken an actress for a man. “*¡La pobrecita!* She was in such a rush that she didn’t have time to see what I’d done, and nobody noticed until she went on screen. I’m lucky I wasn’t fired.”

“You’re too good to be fired,” said Cristobal.

Paula took his hand and Cristobal gave her a long kiss on the lips.

“Are you still going to Sao Paolo this weekend for the movie shoot?” Jonas asked.

Luchi took her time to light a cigarette. “Yes,” she finally said after exhaling a long steady stream of smoke.

“For how long?” he asked.

“Four days,” she said.

“Yesterday you said two.”

Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” came on and Luchi began to sing. Jonas leaned back and lit the first cigarette that Rachel had ever seen him smoke.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh*  
*Ooh, baby*  
*Can't you hear my heart beat*  
*For the very first time?*

Cristobal insisted that Rachel must know the song better than Luchi, being American, but Rachel said she didn’t and excused herself to go to the bathroom. As she pushed herself away from the table, one of Jonas’ wineglasses tipped and fell to the floor, shattering with a faint crash.

“Oh my God,” said Rachel, in English.

“*¡No te preocupes!*” said Luchi. “Don’t worry!”

“I’ll buy you another one,” Rachel said.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Jonas. “It’s just a broken glass.”

But, of that, no one could convince her so she put back her chair and left.

Upon returning, Rachel found the house empty. As she passed through the dining room, she reached up, yanked the cardboard Star of David dangling from the ceiling and stuffed it in the trashcan under the sink. She took a coffee mug monogrammed with Jonas' name off the dish rack and threw it on the floor. The handle broke off and the mug rolled from one end of the kitchen to the other. Jonas, Jonas, Jonas, it mocked.

“¿*Qué del diablo haces?*” Susana stood in the entrance of the kitchen with her hands on her head.

Rachel ran to the bathroom and shut the door.

“What happened?” Susana demanded from the other side.

“Nothing! It has nothing to do with him!” Rachel said loudly to mask the quiver in her voice. “I was just trying to help get rid of a few things in there. You know, spring cleaning.”

Usually she could get away with uttering such nonsense – Argentines would accept it as a bad translation and change the subject – but this time she was not so lucky.

“Would you like to see my therapist?” Susana asked.

“What? No.”

“I know about Luchi,” said Susana. “She’s not for him.”

Rachel opened the door, her cheeks wet with tears. “Of course she is. She’s perfect.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” said Susana. “She’s an atheist.” Susana handed Rachel a towel. “You know what you need?”

“What?”

“A day at *El Refugio*.”

The retreat might have been pleasant if Abuela had not insisted that Jonas come along. It was a perfect spring day in October, which became more apparent the farther they drove outside the city as they passed through thick forests of blossoming trees. Rachel sat in the front seat with Susana, choosing to follow the landscape instead of the conversation.

“Mom says you’re sick,” Jonas said to her eventually. “¿*Qué tenés?*”

“It’s a throat infection, *querido*,” said Susana. “Don’t make her talk.”

At the club, Abuela secured a table under the veranda that looked over a massive swimming pool. People came up to them one after the other to exchange pleasantries and to insist on being introduced to the girl hidden behind the sunglasses and wrapped in a thick shawl. Some recognized Rachel from temple and wanted to know what she thought of services and the rabbi. Susana spoke for her every time, assuring them she was normally an absolute delight. A boy invited Jonas to play tennis and Jonas left with an eagerness that Rachel tried to ignore. A few minutes later, she announced that she was going for a walk.

“That’s fine, *querida*,” said Abuela. “You enjoy yourself.”

When she realized she was heading in the direction of the tennis courts, Rachel turned around and went the other way, passing the table again. Everyone waved.

“That’s wonderful,” she heard one man say. “For how long is she here?”

“A year, maybe more,” said Abuela. “The ones who fall in love sometimes never leave.”

Rachel walked off the grounds of *El Refugio* into the surrounding forest until the crack of tennis balls gave into the chirping of birds.

The following week, in her class on contemporary Argentine politics, the only other American student in the class challenged the professor after he'd made an anti-American remark. Rachel had been consciously avoiding the boy for the entire semester, not wanting to close herself off to any potential Argentine friends. But the way he bravely defended his point – that not all Americans were culturally vapid materialists – in measured but grammatically correct Spanish, impressed Rachel and she caught up with him after class to introduce herself. He stuck his hand out, then retracted it to kiss her on the cheek in the Argentine way. “I had no idea there were two of us,” he said. “I’m David.”

They went for coffee at a café around the corner. Rachel wondered if the depth of their conversation wasn't just an illusion that came from speaking in English for the first time in months, but she quickly rejected the idea. David obviously thought critically about most of what he learned and saw in Argentina and wanted to know Rachel's opinion on all of it. When she confessed she'd never been to the Recoleta cemetery, where only the richest and most famous Argentines were buried in elaborate, aboveground tombs, David suggested they go. As they made their way through the labyrinth of marble death, occasionally peering into the ones with glass doors for a glimpse of the netherworld, Rachel admitted that she would rather be buried six feet under.

“You might not have a choice if you become as famous as her,” said David, pointing to Evita's tomb, which was covered in fresh flowers and notes as if the woman had died only yesterday.

Rachel saw a different Buenos Aires with David over the course of the next month than she had with Jonas in the first few weeks. It was the Buenos Aires she'd come expecting to see, the one illustrated in the guidebooks, with world-renowned art museums, fusion restaurants, and vibrant tango *milongas*. Normally she would have preferred to go to these sorts of sites on her own or with Argentine friends who could give her the insider's perspective but nothing about David's company bothered her. It was as if he were an extension of herself. She was barely surprised when he mentioned that he was Jewish.

Since David was only in Buenos Aires for a semester and Rachel was staying for the year, she decided to treat him as a friend, nothing more. It was a matter of convenience, considering the fact that she wasn't really attracted to him. Of course, David seemed perfect to her in every other way and she predicted that he was, if not the one then at least the type she would marry. After attending their last Shabbat together three days before his return flight home, she invited him to stop by her house to meet her host-family.

Susana and Abuela were sitting at the kitchen table drinking mate when Rachel came in with David. When neither woman rose to greet him, he went over to give each woman a kiss on the cheek. Susana gave David a silent up-down, then asked Rachel where they'd been.

"Don't you realize, *hija*?" said Abuela, her eyes glued to David's face. "It's Friday. She's brought him from Shabbat."

"Are you Orthodox, too?" Susana asked.

Just then, Jonas appeared in the doorway in jeans and without a shirt, which left his kosher tattoo in plain view. In his hands he held two parts of a broken hand-

held radio. When Rachel introduced him to David, he didn't hesitate before leaning in to kiss the well-dressed stranger on the cheek. "You wouldn't know anything about radios, would you?" asked Jonas.

"*Claro,*" said David. "What's the problem?"

Jonas explained what needed fixing and when David diagnosed the problem, Jonas looked at Rachel and winked as if to say he approved. Rachel searched for the slightest sign of envy on his face but in vain.

Abuela snatched the broken radio out of David's hands and left the kitchen. "I'm leaving," she said.

"*¿Qué le pasa?*" Jonas asked Susana. "We're just fixing her radio."

Susana suggested that Jonas accompany Abuela home. Jonas started to object then stopped. "*Dale,* if that's what she wants," he said. Then he went for his jacket and kissed Rachel on the cheek. "Stay for as long as you want," he said to David, while shaking his hand. "My mother's very open-minded. Maybe she's already told you."

"Joni, please go!" cried Susana.

Abuela was standing at the front door, with her back to them. Jonas took her arm and opened the front door.

"See you tomorrow," said Rachel.

"No, not tomorrow," said Jonas. "I'll be out in *la pampa* with Luchi."

"But she doesn't believe in God!" cried Abuela. "Your children will be heathens!"

"*Basta, abuela,*" said Jonas. "Who said we're having kids?"

Susana didn't look Rachel in the eye when she said David was welcome to stay, but she went upstairs to her bedroom, leaving them alone in the living room to show that she really meant it. Rachel turned on the TV and flipped to *Son de Fierro*, the Argentine soap opera that both she and David liked to watch and make fun of. They entered it in the middle of the episode, when the daughter was screaming at the mother at a mile a minute.

"What did she say?" Rachel asked.

"No clue," said David. "I was going to ask you."

Rachel sat on the couch next to David and wondered why she couldn't grow to love this perfect Jewish boy who liked and respected her, aching instead for the one who eluded her and who had, when she thought about it, just acted like her pimp. "Stay for as long as you want," he'd said to David, as if lending her to him with a discount. When David put his arm around her shoulder, every muscle in her body tensed. When he leaned in to kiss her, she jumped off the couch so fast that she knocked off his glasses. "Out of respect for Susana," she said, lamely.

"I thought she was open-minded," said David. "Anyway, I'm Jewish," he added. "Shouldn't she approve?"

Rachel said it wasn't that simple and they watched the rest of *Son de Fierro* in silence from opposite ends of the couch. After David left, Rachel went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, but stopped in front of the refrigerator to notice a drawing that Jonas had made with crayons at age three hanging next to a note he'd left his mother yesterday. She studied both, captivated beyond her control by the evolvment of his handwriting and by the idea that, for one whole night between the two moments when he'd held the crayon and the pen, he had also held her.