

Tamar Yellin

TALES  
*of the*  
TEN LOST TRIBES

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# Contents

Reuben, *1*

Simeon, *19*

Dan, *37*

Naphtali, *51*

Gad, *67*

Asher, *81*

Issachar, *99*

Zebulun, *113*

Ephraim, *127*

Manasseh, *141*

Acknowledgments, *155*

Reuben

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only.

*Kings II 17:18*

And the king of Assyria did carry away Israel unto Assyria, and put them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

*Kings II 18:11*

W

hen I was nine years old, my Uncle Esdras came to visit. He was a traveller, and a handsome man. Though short, he had the body of an acrobat, and with his shock of fair hair looked much like my father had in earlier life. Both wore glasses, and both possessed the family characteristics: sobriety, generosity, intellect and bad temper, the wealth of too many talents, and an obsessive nature.

There are birds, the albatross for example, that spend their entire lives in the air. My uncle was like that. He set down only occasionally, and when he did so, it was never for long. His visits were rare and always unexpected, for he was always en route, and the fact that we lay on his route was just a happy accident. He was a bird of passage, and we were his way station.

My father did not share his wanderlust. He was a man of books, an earnest autodidact, whom travelling invariably made ill. He preferred to cover distances on paper, and to read about those faraway places he did not have the stamina to reach. To him there was something faintly reprehensible in Esdras, clicking his heels across the continents.

I still remember the day of his arrival. He wore a pale suit,

and carried a small brown valise. This, from the state of its broken corners and the numerous labels pasted onto it, must have travelled with him for many years. He smelt strongly of nicotine, and when he bent down to greet me I was struck by a strange sense of recognition. It would be unfair to say that he was my father made handsome, for my father, too, had once been a handsome man. Truer to say he was my father turned hero: a swashbuckler version bronzed by the desert sun.

My mother must have recognised it also, for her embrace of welcome was a little longer and tighter than was strictly necessary. She had squeezed into her black dress, puffed up her hair, and sprayed herself with the perfume she saved for special occasions. The house was a glade of sunshine and fluttering chintz, and she had set the table with angel cake and flowers.

Into this haven of suburban peace Uncle Esdras entered like a light aircraft, battered and bleached, footsore and world-weary, wanting only an oil change and a wash. But he was not a man to insult hospitality; he had, after all, accepted it the world over. And really it only took a few moments for him to adjust himself. He sat down to tea and promptly turned the table into a map as he proceeded to describe, with cartographic exactness, the route he had lately followed to bring him to us. It was a typical act of conquest. He would never, in all the time he spent there, seem natural in our house, but would become a kind of resident anomaly, like the bizarre carving he had brought us from Africa, which sat on the mantelpiece next to the eight-day clock.

Later I found he had taken over my room, and turned it, in a few moves, into his own, a sort of explorer's base hut. Strange objects were scattered among my childish possessions, dark, worn, heavy things, whose presence made everything else unfamiliar: a pair of thick boots, a leather-covered camera, a canvas knapsack fastened with giant buckles. I did not see how they could all have emerged from that one modest suitcase, but my uncle, along with his many other talents, was an expert and indefatigable packer.

On the bedside table a black sticky volume was lying, bound round with an ancient elastic band and decorated with stains and

squashed mosquitoes: my uncle's travel journal. I opened it. It was written in purple ink, in a strange spidery code. Here and there it was splashed with a crude drawing: a temple, a tree, a tremulous smoking mountain.

I do not know, to this day, what precisely it was my uncle did. I thought of him then as a kind of scholar-adventurer, performing in actuality what my father only read about in books: leaping crevasses, discovering hidden cities, recording the dialects of distant clans. I imagined him living a life more dangerous and romantic than that of anyone else I had ever met.

He did not take much notice of me at first. Apparently he valued his privacy, for as soon as he entered the room I was dismissed with a clap of the hands. Later I peeped in to find him lying back on the bed with his boots on, blowing smoke meditatively at the ceiling. This struck me as entirely an adventurer's thing to do.

Afterwards I found that by standing on a flowerpot beneath the window I could satisfactorily spy on him, although there wasn't much to see. However restless his lifestyle, he had the capacity to lie still for long periods. His expression was neither troubled nor entirely peaceful: from the depth of the grooves on his forehead he seemed to be calculating the solution to a particularly difficult sum.

I managed to sit quietly through dinner while my parents and uncle talked, but found it impossible to follow the conversation studded with foreign and exotic words. During dessert I nodded off to sleep, and was ignominiously sent to bed. Three hours later I was up again: creeping down in my pyjamas, I found them, like mountaineers in a tent, playing kitchen-roulette on the tablecloth. My uncle had set up a circle of condiments, my father with skill and dexterity spun the knife; my mother had got out an heirloom bottle of brandy. The stakes, it seemed, were more spiritual than monetary. They all smoked cigarettes, and I felt I had stumbled on something adult, sinister and exclusive, an intimate threesome where I was an unwanted fourth.

This was my first introduction to Uncle Esdras. Next morning I discovered him, a dawn riser, sitting in the lounge with his inevitable cigarette and a line of curious objects ranged on the coffee table in

front of him. He did not glance at me, but raised a finger. I stopped at a deferential distance of about three feet and looked at the objects. There was a ball of patterned metal, a fragment of red coral and a string of beads. A tooth, a gourd, a coin, and what I knew later to be a lemur's foot.

Uncle Esdras contemplated this booty, and while wielding his cigarette in one hand, adjusted their positions relative to one another as though playing an odd kind of solitaire. There seemed to be great deliberation in the way he did this, and if I had known better I would have said he was trying to pique my interest.

After a while, having arranged them to his satisfaction, he sat back with a sigh, and finally deigned to turn his eyes on me. I suppose you would like to take a closer look, he said, and patting the cushion, invited me to sit down next to him. I hesitated at first. There was something of the predator in Esdras which I instinctively recognised, but I let my curiosity get the better of me and slid in beside him onto the green sofa.

Then he proceeded to explain the origins of his seven objects. He asked me if I knew the meaning of the word *talisman*. Each of these was a kind of talisman and very necessary to the traveller. The coin, for instance, which was decorated with a curly script, if kept in a pocket guaranteed you would always have two coins to rub together. He had found it by chance in an Arabian market. The coral he had won from an old sailor in Calcutta, who in turn had obtained it from a great fakir. It had the power of calming bad weather when thrown into the sea.

As he described their powers and provenance he threw me quick glances every so often, as if to check whether I believed his tales. My expression must have been suitably wonderstruck, for he continued to tell even more fantastic stories. The gourd, for example, was a magical source of water which had saved his life once when crossing the Sahara. The tooth had mystical healing properties.

I picked up the coffee-coloured beads which hung limply on a dirty piece of string. Uncle Esdras frowned.

Oh, they are just worry beads, he said.



I would have liked to have them for my father, who worried a great deal; but all my acquisitiveness, which Uncle Esdras had so successfully stimulated, seemed hopeless in the face of such valuable items. I laid the beads down and extended my lower lip.

You may handle them if you wish, Uncle Esdras said with formality, and feeling obliged, I rolled the ball of metal embossed with symbols which, apparently, brought its possessor genuine good luck. Of course, he continued, they are only useful to the person who rightfully owns them. If you were to steal that, for instance, it wouldn't work for you.

Indignantly, I denied any such intention. I put down the charm, and one by one he plopped the items into a canvas bag, including, last of all, the lemur's foot, which I had longed but didn't dare to touch, and for which he had still provided no explanation.

And what about that? I asked, pointing.

That, he answered, is a lemur's foot. If you throw it down on the ground when you are lost, its toes will point you in the right direction.

Of course, a compass might have done the same; but this tool dealt in destiny rather than magnetism, and I watched him place it in the bag with envy.

After that, Uncle Esdras ignored me again. At breakfast he spoke to my mother and forgot my presence. When we went for a walk he strolled arm-in-arm with her and indulged in a tensely murmured conversation. Skipping close, I caught a few mysterious fragments.

But why not? my mother purred into his ear. You should settle down. Waiting for you somewhere is a nice woman—

Later I went up to him, where he sat reading the newspaper on the patio.

Those talismans, I said. Do you often use them?

Now and then, he answered.

I thought for a moment. I asked: And a traveller—someone who wanted to be a traveller. Would they need to have talismans like those?

Esdras replied that they were more or less essential. Seeing my crestfallen look, he modified this by saying that they were certainly a great help.

I wandered off, and resorting to my room (which at the moment hardly seemed to be mine), spent the afternoon going through a certain drawer, which my mother habitually referred to as my 'mess drawer,' but which to me was full of irreplaceable treasures. There was my school badge for good conduct, the peacock feather my father had given me and a war-scarred, tournament-winning bouncy ball. A plastic ruby which had fallen out of a piece of cheap costume jewellery and a glass drop from a vanished chandelier. Every one of these objects carried for me a kind of magical and irrational power, quite out of proportion to their actual value; the ball, for example, I regarded as almost human. They had been endowed with the significance which belongs only to children's playthings and ritual artefacts.

As I sorted through them I wondered if I could convince Uncle Esdras of their special qualities. But I doubted whether I would succeed in persuading him to exchange even one of them for a genuine talisman.

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Of the three main family traits—short sight, a bad stomach and an anxious temperament—my father had more than his fair measure. It was not surprising that he should take refuge in an increasing bibliomania.

For as long as I could remember he had enclosed himself, evening after evening, in his small windowless study lined with tottering books: rabbinic treatises, kabbalistic novels, anthropological surveys of the Jewish nose; histories of seventy generations, lists of innumerable dead. Here, surrounded by wreaths of his own breath (he believed in cold), he would study the art of biblical numerology, trace his ancestry to the house of Solomon or follow the spurious trail of the ten lost tribes. Or, turning the pages of an enormous picture book, he would sate himself with images: with one hundred and one representations of Jerusalem. Jerusalem in woodcuts, Jerusalem

in gilt with glittering minarets, Jerusalem as a chessboard with the temple in the middle; mosaic maps, archaeological plans, mediaeval diagrams with Jerusalem as the navel of the world, the world peeled and quartered like an orange with Jerusalem at its centre.

In his youth he had dreamed of becoming an engineer. His first ambition had been to design bridges. He filled his sketchbooks with flying arcs of steel, all of them unviable and unstable, hanging perilously in empty air. He had a supernatural affinity with numbers, and no idea what he might do with it.

Instead he went into business, worked himself to exhaustion and left his other ambitions to lie and rust. Time slipped through his fingers. He knew he should have done something exceptional in the world, and at his worst moments, could at least comfort himself with that knowledge.

Sometimes on an evening I would sit with him and, perched on his skinny knee, turn the pages of some enigmatic text: a poem in gothic script, a plan of the universe embellished with dragons. He would tell me stories of the ten lost tribes, who were carried away and shut up beyond the Sambatyon, a river of rocks and stones which flowed six days and was peaceful on the Sabbath; of the Black Jews of Malabar and their red Pentateuch; of the Jews of Yemen, who refused to return until the Messiah came. For this they were cursed, and their messiah, when he did come, was a disappointment. He challenged the king to chop off his head and watch him rise again; and the king did, and he didn't.

As I grew older I would read aloud while my father sat, his eyes closed, smoking an endless chain of Consulates; and while my father played a game of chess with himself in which neither side ever seemed to win, I would browse through fantastic chronicles of how the Children of Israel were led by Moses through the wilderness of Russia, across the Red Sea at the Bering Strait, and down to the promised land of America.

I asked my father once why he never spoke about my Uncle Esdras. There was nothing to be said, my father replied, placing a hand to his forehead, as though the very mention of it gave him a headache. The brothers had not been close for many years. Esdras

never wrote or telephoned. Long ago they had quarreled, but that was unimportant: the crust had long since cooled on that altercation. Most of all, my father was disappointed. Esdras could have done anything; whatever he turned his hand to, he would have excelled. Yet he became nothing; became this wanderer, this will-o'-the-wisp, this drifter. A man of wasted talents and broken dreams.

Now I had seen my uncle, I could not prevent myself from making comparisons: my father the businessman, Esdras the adventurer; Esdras tanned and dynamic, my father sedentary and pale. I could not understand my father's hostility, and thought his reserve must stem from some deep-seated jealousy of his more youthful and enterprising brother.

I thought I detected, too, a certain disdain in my uncle's attitude. He spoke to my father with one corner of his mouth always cynically turned up, and never, I noticed, looked him in the eye. While my father was out at work he went into his room and sat on the corner of his desk, finished his chess game and flicked through his precious books, with the half-smile of one who had no need of them. Yet communication between the two cannot have been entirely frozen, given that once, when I came home from school, I caught sight of them closeted together in the study, and my father, with an air of profound gloom, handing a significant envelope to his brother.

For my part, I was dazzled by the romance of my Uncle Esdras, which was made all the more tantalizing by his habit of ignoring me for long periods, and only speaking to me when he chose. He took up his place in our house with the suave negligence of a visiting dignitary, and was waited on hand and foot by my mother, with whom he held urgent, whispered conversations behind the kitchen door.

It took me a little while, therefore, to pluck up sufficient courage and present him with my first proposal: the exchange of his worry beads for my champion ball, plus the accumulated savings in my piggy bank. I had chosen the worry beads for our first transaction, not because they were what I most wanted, but because I thought that of all the talismans in the bag, they were probably of the least value. In any event, I didn't think Uncle Esdras was likely to need them much. He was cutting his toenails in the bedroom at

the time; at first I thought he was going to say nothing, but then to my surprise he laid the scissors down and handed me the cuttings on a small piece of paper. Throw these in the stove for me, will you, he said. And don't drop any. You'd be surprised what a witch can get up to with your toenails. I did as he asked, and returned. Well then, he said, let me have a look at this ball. I brought it out, and we proceeded to go into detail about its tournament record.

To this day I cannot fathom the motivations of my Uncle Esdras: whether he was moved by spite or mischievousness or pure casual greed, or, as seems likely, by a combination of all three, he took up my offer and pocketed both ball and cash. There is, of course, another possibility: that he really believed in the value of his talismans, and only took what he considered fair payment.

As a result of this successful first deal I was both heartened and dismayed. Heartened because the other items now looked attainable; dismayed because I had already parted with all my money. I had a lot to learn, I realised, on the subject of bargaining.

I went off to regroup my strategies, and this required some considerable thought, because I saw that if I was to make the most of my remaining assets I would need to invest them with greater properties than they really had. I did not feel this would be lying exactly. It was more a kind of psychic discovery. By concentrating hard enough I would discover the true powers of these seemingly worthless objects.

So it was that I found myself presenting the plastic jewel for inspection as the seed of a great treasure, which, if planted in a certain spot in China, would produce in due time an actual treasure tree. The jewels, I explained, grew as stones inside the fruit. Uncle Esdras examined it carefully and threw me a curious look, half-sceptical and half-impressed, raising one eyebrow and turning up the corner of his mouth. He wondered what he would do with a treasure tree, and speculated that it might be more of a liability than a benefit. And then, perhaps he didn't have any plans to go to China. He was a difficult customer, but I was ready to fight back. I said it would be a terrible waste not to go to China, and think of all the good he could do with the money; and if the tree were a nuisance he could always chop it

down. We argued like this for a while, but the final result was that he took the jewel and I got the lucky charm in exchange for it.

I could see that this game of swaps was going to be hard work, not least because Uncle Esdras was such a moody chap. There were times when he refused to acknowledge my existence, and others when he positively snarled at me. I learned to recognise the signs, however. We were entangled now in a peculiar conspiracy, and when the moment was right he was as eager as I to negotiate.

It wasn't all business though. My uncle had other things to teach me, too. Lying on his back under the moon (since for nine weeks he had not slept in a bed, his body gave him no choice at first but to sleep in the garden), he taught me the names of the stars and the constellations, and described, in his detailed, National Geographic manner, the nights he had passed under a desert sky. He recalled nights in the mountains with stars as big as snowflakes, and low tropical moons the colour of brass. He invoked the cry of the jackal and the song of the bulbul, the call of the cicada and the howl of the wolf.

Why did he travel so much? He started out as a species of shady salesman; invested his money, spent nothing, had no home of his own: not one chair leg, he liked to say with a smile. This was how he afforded his airline tickets, and an endless succession of rooms in cheap hotels. More and more he had gone for the gypsy life, joining a series of ill-planned expeditions: crossing the desert with a flotsam of outcasts, climbing mountains on the bootstraps of lunatics and dragging through jungles in the wake of gangsters. For years now he had preferred to travel alone, and showed no mercy to tagalongs and companions.

It was easy for him to undergo privations. Nothing clung to him: even his clothes were borrowed. He described his sufferings with obvious pleasure, and showed off his forearm, ripped by an angry scar. Every few minutes his face contracted with pain. Sciatica, he told me, adding, with a wry smile, that pain, too, was a kind of companionship.

I begged him to tell me more stories, and he obliged with tall ones: how he had sailed by raft down the Orinoco and visited

the Bermuda Triangle. How he had survived snakebite and caught malaria, and escaped an erupting volcano by the skin of his teeth. He told his tales always with a twinkle in his eye, as though silently acknowledging their spuriousness. But I longed to believe him, and while I did so, I think he even believed himself.

I asked him once if he had ever encountered any of the ten lost tribes. He paused and drew breath, as though about to spin another yarn. Then he frowned, and seemed to change his mind.

There was an old junk seller he had met, once, in the backstreets of Shanghai, who claimed to belong to the missing tribe of Reuben, and who had tried to sell him some ancient biblical parchments. But he hadn't been taken in: the man was a charlatan.

The story was obviously true; and this seemed an appropriate moment for us to engage in a little business transaction of our own. I reached into a pocket for my latest offering: one of the onyx eggs from the mantelpiece. It wasn't, strictly speaking, mine to exchange, but I was beyond caring about such minor details. I told him it was the egg of a phoenix. I wanted the lemur's foot desperately, and so far nothing I could offer would persuade my uncle to part with it.

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Night after night, my father and mother and uncle played the knife game in a welter of cigarette smoke and brandy and an increasingly portentous atmosphere. I would come down to find them gathered round the table, watching the knife spin with the faces of hardened gamblers.

My mother would be gazing at my Uncle Esdras. My father would be gazing at my mother. Esdras, calm and detached, spun the knife with the deftness of long practice. As the blade turned, the mood intensified, so that when it finally slowed and came to rest, it seemed to point with prophetic significance.

And then, one night: You spin it, said Esdras, pulling me onto his knee; and as he did so my father's head jerked up, like a horse's does when it senses danger. For the stakes were now immeasurably higher. His eyes met those of his brother; my mother observed them

both; all three watched my small hand spin the knife. Quickly at first, then slower, the blade flashed round. It was as though my whole future depended on it.

My father said to him: It's not your place.

My uncle replied: It isn't your place either.

You've no business to interfere, my father said.

None of us can prevent it, my uncle answered.

Then the knife slowed down, and came to a halt, and pointed at neither my uncle nor my father. It pointed away, through a gap in the condiments: out of the circle, into the distance; nowhere.

\*

What did my uncle do on his long wanderings? He looked at the landscape. He gazed at and examined the faces of people. He listened to language, traffic, music, banter. He smelled rot and incense; he tried all sorts of food. He slept under rocks and on benches, in trains and in boats, his cheek against granite, metal, sawdust, velvet.

It was, all in all, an intensely physical life. A life in which thought was consumed by practical matters, and long hours of travel by uninterrupted thought. A life of consulting maps and haggling for tickets, of planning the next destination and bartering clothes; of riding the dragon of the imagination all across Asia.

At least, said my uncle Esdras, his eyes on the stars, that was the way it appeared to him just now. Just now, with his eyes on the stars and his body in stasis, the friendly pain of sciatica streaking his leg, he really believed his travels to be romantic. It was an illusion, of course, and one he fell victim to every time he resolved to end his journey.

I'll let you into a secret, my uncle said. This time I'd really decided to call it a day. But I knew as soon as I got here that that was impossible. Why? I asked him. Well, he said vaguely, I'd already bought my ticket. And he held up an airline ticket against the moon.

Then Esdras told me the truth about his existence. How life was reduced to the merely physical. How slow and tedious were the



long void hours of travel. How cold the nights spent sleeping under the heavens. How sordid the far-flung places of the world.

The truth of it is, I am shattered, said Uncle Esdras, and turned on me a pair of exhausted eyes. At that moment I felt a strange presentiment. He turned his face away and looked at the sky.

That was the price of freedom, said my uncle: always to be counting the miles from nowhere; always to travel hopefully, never to arrive. Never to go home, never to be at peace.

But he was depressed just now, he immediately added. Whenever he stopped he got into this mood. As soon as he moved on he would feel better. That was why he never lingered long.

You see, he explained, fixing his gaze on the stars (and I wondered how he could see them without his glasses): my mother and father thought he was always unhappy. But when he visited them, he always was.

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Night after night my uncle spun the knife; and as it went round it wound a spring tighter and tighter inside my father, tighter and tighter inside my uncle too, so that one night as I lay in bed I heard a glass break and my father shouting. Then my mother's voice, querulous and distressed. The deep, impassive tones of my Uncle Esdras.

This time I didn't dare to venture downstairs.

Next morning I found him seated as usual, his bag packed and waiting in the hall; phlegmatic as ever, he turned the pages of the newspaper with a leisurely air. My mother was red-eyed in the kitchen. My father, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Uncle Esdras was leaving as suddenly as he had come, and I still had not bargained successfully for the lemur's foot.

Nor had I begun to broach the possibility of my coming with him, if not this time, then when I was old enough. We simply hadn't had the opportunity to discuss it. But he was sour and distant this morning, and shook out the paper violently when I approached; so I went off in desperation to hunt through the contents of my mother's dressing table.

His taxi was coming at twelve, and while my mother packed sandwiches and my father sat dourly among his books, Uncle Esdras paced the garden and I made my last reckless offer. Fortunately he was in a mood to negotiate. He wore a sardonic smile; I wondered whether to trust him. But it was his ability to play seriously which was at once so disconcerting and so irresistible.

Transaction completed, he smiled and ruffled my hair. Poor kid, he said. Looks like you're going to take after your worthless uncle.

It was the best compliment I had ever had. We walked down the driveway together, hand in hand. And there was an aura then about Uncle Esdras: a radiance of utter happiness. He had the ecstatic air of a man beginning, all over again, the great undiscovered adventure of his life.

As my mother and I saw him off at the gate (I with a handshake, she with an epic embrace) I felt a sudden pang, not only of disappointment at being left behind, but of guilt at sending him into the world so bare, so unprotected and without talismans: with only a false jewel, a badge for good conduct, a peacock's feather and a bouncy ball.

Returning indoors, I took out my frustrations on my father, who listened incredulously while I told him it was all his fault, that I was going to the Sahara with Uncle Esdras, that I loved Uncle Esdras more than I did him. Slowly, with a pained face, he rose to his feet.

He's a bum! he shouted, and the word sounded all the uglier flying from his unaccustomed mouth. He's never even been to the Sahara. Don't you know he only came here to borrow money?

It was a lie and I said so, running off then to shut myself in my room. My room was tidy, and bore no trace of Uncle Esdras, whose sheets, even, my mother had hastened to remove. It was as though he had never visited. And yet it was not. The dawn of some unpleasant change was breaking in me. For the rest of that day I valiantly held it off, while my mother hunted and inquired after her diamond ring. But after all, I told myself, she didn't realise that it could summon a genie. A fair exchange is no robbery, I told myself over and over, as I rearranged my seven talismans, and ran my acquisitive fingers along the knuckles of the lemur's foot.