

Minyan

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p 101-108

In the foyer she made a beeline for me. She was wearing an aubergine-coloured, ankle-length skirt that rustled softly when she moved. A short woman in light brown moccasins and flesh-coloured tights with a vertical seam down the calves. She said that her name was Esther Apfelbaum and asked if she could have a word with me in private.

There was still one unoccupied table: it had magazines spread all over it and was tucked away in a corner.

‘What would you like to drink?’ I asked her.

‘I’ll get you a drink. You’ve earned it. Please have a seat,’ she said.

‘No, let me get this,’ I said. ‘I get vouchers from the organisation, and I like to use them up. And it would feel good to stand up for a bit, I’ve spent too long sitting on an uncomfortable chair.’

She nodded. ‘Thank you. A cup of tea, please. It doesn’t matter what kind. Green, yellow, orange, black. No milk. With lemon if possible, and preferably even if it isn’t.’ Without glancing at their covers or content, she stacked the magazines together. She turned the top one upside down: a back-cover ad flashed the charms of a French car brand. She put her handbag down on the new five-door model, unhooked my handbag from the arm of my chair and planted it next to hers, within eyeshot.

After a reading, I like to drink a *Westmalle Tripel*. The strong ale takes the edge off the adrenaline, helps me unwind. For an instant I wondered whether I should skip the ritual today, in the presence of this Hasidic woman, and order a lemonade or a cup of tea like her.

I put the tea down in front of her, and slipped a beer mat under my *Westmalle*. She picked up the cup and saucer and hurried to the bar. A few minutes later she came back. With a glass teacup. And the same sachet of Earl Grey. The same silver-packaged biscuit. Perhaps even the same slice of lemon.

‘Porcelain is porous. And we’re not allowed to use porous receptacles.’

My eyes and mouth must have formed one big question mark.

‘The pores might contain traces of meat stock or milk. The Jewish dietary laws require us to separate meat and milk. So we can’t drink tea from porcelain cups. Because we might unwittingly drink remnants of meat or milk that had been dissolved in the tea water.’

At this Sunday afternoon book reading I’d just read out a passage about those complex laws. But it was the first time I’d heard about the tea rule.

‘Glass isn’t much less porous than porcelain, if at all,’ she went on. ‘But my father, who plans to live to be a hundred, refuses to eat or drink even out of Pyrex. He doesn’t trust it: he’ll only eat and drink from pre-war glass. I’m exaggerating slightly. But not really: my father would never accept food or drink from people he doesn’t know. Not even from Orthodox Jews, if he doesn’t know how strictly

they observe dietary rules. He won't touch the food or drink he's offered, because he can't trust their kitchens or the products they buy. I'm not as strict as my father, otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here. This Pyrex glass' – she taps it with a fingernail – 'which has minuscule pores, is absolutely fine as far as I'm concerned.'

We talked about Jewish schools.

She referred to some things I'd said during the conversation with the moderator. Things which, although she hadn't spoken out at the time, seemed wrong to her.

I'd voiced concerns about certain private Hasidic schools. I'd said that in my view, every child was entitled to a normal, secular educational curriculum. Entitled to science. Entitled to all non-divine truths and untruths. Entitled to a life aside from God. To me, those were human rights. I'd said something along those lines.

'I'm the product of that education system you criticise so much. My children went to a private, non-subsidised school like that. My grandchildren are at one now. We live as we wish to live and we don't hurt anyone. Since when has that been wrong?'

'As I said on the podium, there's more to life than God. I think *all* children need to know that. So that later they can make up their own minds about what to believe in.'

'Do you think that the education modern Orthodox children receive is better, or that it produces better children? Or that your own schools are better?'

Her gestures were calm. Her age – she must have been about sixty – and demeanour gave her impressive poise. I needn't be frightened about hurting her. She was no shrinking violet and made that clear right from the start. Her jacket was not a real Missoni, I saw now.

'Modern-Orthodox Jewish schools,' I answered, 'seem to me to have found a kind of balance between the modern and the traditional world. But I think they still lean too much to the religious side. They, too, censor all kinds of things out of respect for the Jewish religion, and cultivate certain taboos. Pupils don't receive any sex education, or if they do, it's hardly worthy of the name. There's no mention of contraceptives, homosexuality, transgenders or even eroticism.'

'Should there be, then?'

I took a big gulp of my golden *Westmalle* and licked the foam from my lips.

'The modern Orthodox schools offer all standard secular subjects,' I continued. 'The Jewish religious curriculum exists alongside the official curriculum, instead of replacing it, as in the schools you refer to. In moderate Orthodox schools you learn both about Adam and Eve and about the theory of evolution.'

'God created the world,' she answered.

'And how old is that world, according to you?'

'A few millennia.'

'No older than that?'

'Where is all this leading?'

'To where you're taking me. To the countless bones of dinosaurs that have been dug up. The world has existed for far longer than a few thousand years. The bones prove that.'

'Who's to say they don't prove that Hashem¹ buried them there on the day He created the world?'

We fell silent. I couldn't believe that she believed what she was implying.

'Children shouldn't have limitations imposed on them right from the start. That's basically what I mean,' I said, by way of unnecessary clarification. I didn't want this conversation to end so quickly.

'You think: the more points of view you present to a child, the less you limit them,' she said, summarising – concluding, almost.

'You have to do it judiciously, of course.'

¹ Hebrew term for God.

'Our children lead a protected life within our group and within our schools.'

'I know that. And such protection has its appeal, I won't deny that. But it's also suffocating. And morally wrong. You wall children off from impressions and insights that they're entitled to.'

'Who's the best judge of what our children are entitled to? Did that apply to your teachers? Do all those accounts of abuse in Catholic boarding schools make you want to send your children there? The welfare of our children is our greatest good. We want to give them a nice, innocent upbringing.'

Her intractability and pat responses were beginning to irritate me.

'I couldn't bear to think of our children having to grow up in a world without taboos,' she went on. 'Or live in it as adults. Suppose we were exposed to all the temptations of the modern world. How could we be good people if we were constantly distracted by trifles? We revere taboos. At home and at school and everywhere else, throughout our lives, I'm happy to say. Fortunately for us, we revere taboos.'

Her words surprised me. As did her candour. She didn't need to tell me all this. She didn't need to sit here with me. She was well aware that my world and hers were diametrically opposed in many respects, and certainly on this point. I'd never met someone who argued so fervently, openly and unashamedly for an existence full of taboos.

'Which educational taboo do you think is so important then?' I asked, perhaps a little too curiously. 'Which taboo, above all, should be preserved, in your view?'

'There are very many,' she answered. 'But I will mention one. Harry Potter.'

'Harry Potter?'

'You just can't escape that character. Potter is everywhere. Printed on T-shirts, stencilled on satchels, pencils, pens, erasers, exercise books... But our children will never read the books about Harry and his friends.'

'Why aren't they allowed to read J.K. Rowling?'

'Because her books are about superstition and witchcraft. Because in all these books, boys and girls interact freely and without constraint. All kinds of reasons.'

She pulled the tips of her foulard level and re-knotted them with pale, delicate fingers. Her nails were filed short and varnished in a soft, almost invisible tint of peach, and she wore a single narrow gold ring. Her wristwatch was plain: a white face and plastic strap.

'They're children's books.'

'They contain all kinds of things that are unsuitable for children and young people.'

'Girls and boys fall in love, if that's what you mean,' I smiled. 'Harry falls in love with Ginny.'

'There's no such thing as love before marriage. And those books – which, just to be clear, I *haven't* read and will never read – allegedly contain passages describing the attraction between boys and girls. Their physical development. That's terrible. Children shouldn't be exposed to such things. We reserve intimacy for marriage. For that one man or woman.'

'That's what I mean. There's no place for biology or sex education in your community.'

'After engagement there is. When children are about to marry. Before then it's unnecessary.'

'I'll never forget my first love. I was eight.'

'For us that's out of the question. Our girls do not come into contact with boys.'

'On the street they do.'

'An eye is kept on them. I have a friend. She was in the same class as me, an eternity ago. On a few occasions, a non-Jewish man turned up outside the building after school. I've no idea what he was doing there or who he was. He stared at her. He followed her. He tried to make contact. One day my friend – we were about fifteen at the time – struck up a conversation with him. Not that she really said much. But they exchanged a few sentences. Then she began to blush.'

'Exciting.'

‘A week later she was on a plane to Brooklyn. Someone had informed her parents about this “admirer”, someone had told them about the blushing. She lived with relatives in Brooklyn for a year. Such escapades must immediately be corrected.’

‘Unbelievable,’ I said. I took a deep breath. ‘And unbelievably pitiless.’

She shook her head. ‘My friend had a wonderful time in New York. And she never held it against her parents for taking that step. On the contrary, she was well aware that it was in her best interests, and she still maintains that today. She is happily married, has seven children and I don’t know how many grandchildren.’

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Annie and Andres want to talk about their next-door neighbours on the right of their two-storey, ground-floor apartment. The neighbours are a Hasidic Jewish family. They think so at least: the man has long locks of hair dangling from his temples and a beard, and always wears the same black suits and white shirts, and sometimes they hear him laughing really loudly, and then they can’t believe their ears, because if they run into him at the door or on the street, he looks severe, but never as severe – no, grumpy – as his wife. If they run into her unexpectedly she crosses over hurriedly, they reckon on purpose, but they could be wrong.

When Andres greets the man, he tends to nod back. But the woman never does. She makes a show of looking either at her children or at her dark grey, four-wheeled shopper which, despite being the biggest Annie’s ever seen, is usually filled to overflowing, with nappies and rolls of kitchen paper sticking out on top. The neighbours have lots of children, Andres and Annie don’t know how many. They’ve never asked. But they hear them every now and then. Not that the neighbours bother them, no, they really don’t, it would be over the top to say that, there’s a difference between hearing things and being annoyed by them. But the children don’t park their bikes properly sometimes, often, every day, they just throw them down against the house front, *their* house front, and they’ve have spoken to the children about it a few times, and the parents, and each time the bikes are parked away from the house front for a few days, but soon Annie and Andres are tripping over them again.

From the first floor of their apartment, Andres and Annie can see the small courtyard that belongs to the downstairs neighbours. As soon as the pandemic’s over, they tell us, we must come and see their whole apartment – this time we went straight from the front door to their garden.

The courtyard of the neighbours, whose front door is often open, is full of plastic toys. An inflatable swimming pool has been converted into a sandpit. Sometimes as many as ten children, boys and girls, play in it together. The children make such a noise that Andres and Annie can’t eat in their garden in peace, but hey, if you can’t put up with other people around you, you should move to the sticks, or emigrate to Canada or Arkansas.

When it rains, the sandpit turns into a swamp. In the three months that they’ve lived here, they’ve seen the mother, who’s called ‘Mummy, Mummy, Mummy’, clean the sandpit after heavy rain a few times. Helped by her children, she shovels the wet sand into bags that disappear elsewhere, wheeled on the shopper. A couple of days later she’s back in the courtyard, conjuring heavy bags of fresh sand out of her shopper with a strength you’d normally expect only from a man. Might they be taking it from a beach? The millions of white grains don’t come in sealed sacks like you might buy in a shop, but just loose, in supermarket and discount store carrier bags.

Andres and Annie never see the man in the courtyard. Or pulling a shopping trolley. The family doesn't have a car. She, the wife, does her errands on foot and by public transport, and they also often see her getting in a minibus, a kind of taxi you only see Jewish women sitting in, that's to say Orthodox Jewish women, perhaps Hasidic, but they're not sure, they don't look that closely, they're not experts. The man has a bicycle. *His* bicycle, unlike those of the children, is kept in the hallway, which is full to bursting with coats, shoes and satchels – it's a miracle that his wife can squeeze her trolley through such a packed space without breaking her neck.

Her sons and daughters, big and small and all sizes in between, help her in the home and look after each other. They're so smart and capable that Annie and Andres almost envy them, because when they think back, they can't recall being anything like as independent at that age.

One classic street scene from their childhood, which has disappeared from most Western cities, is still a common sight in this *shtetl*-like² corner of Antwerp, they tell us: you see very young children – infants, really – strolling nonchalantly hand-in-hand through the neighbourhood, unsupervised, chatting away to each other, so immersed in conversation that they overshoot their destination and, oblivious to the maelstrom of traffic, calmly turn round and retrace their steps. Sometimes Annie and Andres see two of the neighbour's little girls – the oldest can't be more than five – fetch chicken legs from the poulterer. They walk home swiftly with the see-through plastic carrier bag, carrying the fleshy, feathered drumsticks like a satchel.

Somebody in the family is a stiff drinker. It must be the father, because they couldn't imagine the mother enjoying a glass of wine, beer or vodka. In any case, one of the boys – he must be eight years old at most – regularly cycles to the bottle bank, Annie sometimes sees him on her walk to work. The lad, whom she recognises by his red locks, has to stand to reach the pedals of a rickety old bike that's much too big for him. A bag full of empty bottles dangles from each handlebar, and the glass, in carrier bags with Hebrew writing, clinks with every manoeuvre he makes, and he has to manoeuvre a lot, slaloming between cars and pedestrians and traffic lights, this boy who has chosen the most dangerously situated bottle bank in the country to deposit his bottles in: the bottle bank in the middle of the city's busiest traffic junction, where Plantin en Moretuslei crosses Quinten Matsijslei and the arteries of Brialmontlei, Charlottelei and Van Eycklei converge, and anyone in their right mind wonders what addled or malignant brain could have come up with the idea of sticking a bottle bank right *there*, on that little island marooned between all these busy, intersecting roads bristling with traffic signs and choked with exhaust fumes – but it doesn't seem to faze that little boy at all, he veers round every obstacle with dangling bags and dangling locks, and deposits the bottles in the right holes for coloured and transparent glass. Then off he goes again, waving at the soldiers who guard him from a different danger, unaware that Annie's heart is in her mouth.

Annie and Andres just can't get used to the presence of soldiers in these streets. In the neighbourhood where they used to live, more to the south of the city, security was taken for granted. Here, scarcely three kilometres from their old apartment, soldiers in camouflage stand in pairs outside schools, yeshivas and synagogues, legs spread wide, machine guns

² *Shtetl* was the name given to small towns with a large Jewish population in Central/ Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.

slung over their shoulders. A vehicle with caterpillar tracks rumbles past Mediaplein. The kind of tanks that only drive through Western streets in movies.

The neighbours' children are exactly like adults, according to Andres and Annie, just a few sizes smaller. And they're quite friendly, not that they really look at them as they pass, or greet them, but they're certainly not *unfriendly*, not like their mother, who never looks at Andres and Annie, or their father, who always looks absent-minded – though that could be because of his beard, men with straggly beards look either absent-minded or extremely religious.

Last week something really interesting happened.

The man came to fetch Andres. First he called up from the courtyard: 'Hallo, is anyone there?' and when Andres answered, 'Yes, we're here', the man said he'd come to the front door, and Annie and Andres were savvy enough to realise that it was Friday evening, *Shabbat*, the Jewish Day of Rest, and they also knew that observant Jews aren't allowed to ask for help on this day, at least explicitly – they're allowed to do so implicitly. Lots of things are allowed implicitly.

Andres opened the door, Annie joined him in the doorway. Andres, who's not keen on accompanying strangers to their cellars, blindly followed the man. He'd realised immediately what was expected of him: the power was out in the whole house, the fuses had blown, and although Orthodox Jews aren't allowed to activate electrical circuits on the Day of Rest, it isn't the idea that they be entirely deprived of electricity. Guided by the light of his smartphone, Andres descended into the cellar, which to his surprise didn't look at all messy, though it was full of metal racks piled high with all kinds of supplies – flour, sugar, kitchen paper and plastic tubs – arranged around two giant freezers that were also without power.

After Andres had checked all the fuses, switched them on and off a few times and fiddled a bit with the fuse box, the lights in the house suddenly flicked on again and the freezers sighed back to life. The man and the eldest son thanked him profusely and, through the open door of the living room, which was now bathed in bright white light, the woman – Mummy – gave Andres a friendly nod and thanked him, she looked at him, and some of the girls giggled, and behind all the giggling dresses and skirts Andres saw at least 20 chairs arranged round a long dining table and, if he wasn't mistaken, they had plastic covers on, as if they'd come straight from the supplier and had been pressed into service unpacked. The tiled floor was white and chilly and gleamed so brightly you could have skated on it.

That evening Andres also noticed that the double doors of the study, at the front of the house and separated only from view by thin net curtains, were fully opened on *Shabbat*. So that the dining room table – lengthened by leaves on both sides – extended into the front room, where countless Hebrew volumes were shelved, their dark spines decorated with golden curls, filling an entire wall.

A few days after his heroic intervention, which Andres felt had broken the ice, he ran into the woman on the street, near their door. He'd greeted her in a friendly way and asked if the electricity was still working all right. She had looked the other way – acted as if he hadn't existed, was beneath her notice. Which got up his nose, and Annie's too. And now Annie thinks they shouldn't put up with the bikes any longer. They've already picked them up a few times and leant them against the neighbours' house front, but that didn't really help matters because two women who worked in the offices above their neighbours started to complain about all the bikes cluttering up their entrance and Annie and Andres heard them lashing out at the woman and children, which upset them so much that they put the bikes back where they found them, against their own house front, which they plan to grow a wisteria against, perhaps, at some point, and what it boils down to is that relations are skewed, it's all too one-

sided – so that’s what they want to ask me, whether I perhaps know how they can make contact with their neighbours, because surely ultra-Orthodox Jews, who’ve distanced themselves from the majority since Abraham’s time, can’t pretend that evolution doesn’t exist – that’s to say, you can perhaps deny one theory of evolution, but not the other, the twenty-first century version, of people cohabiting in a city and in a street?

Luckily, their neighbours also provide unexpected still-lives that they enjoy.

Annie relates how, on Sundays, Mummy hangs out her husband’s undergarments on a washing line in the courtyard. Attached by coloured clothes pegs, alongside large and small *tallitot*³, a row of white underpants so enormous that Annie reckons the children could make a tent out of them flap above the swimming pool-cum-sandpit, and once, Andres’ and Annie’s neighbour, a widow who lives in the apartment above theirs, remarked about the big *tallitot* that these plain, square, white prayer shawls – which indeed look rather like sheets with a hole in the middle for the head – are at the root of the urban legend that Hasidic couples do it with a sheet between their naked bodies. If you don’t know they’re prayer garments, you make up a story to explain them, she reckons, and good stories spread like wildfire, stories featuring sex even more so, especially if they have to do with a hermetically sealed community everybody’s curious about.

When I shared this theory with Esther later, she was so delighted that, despite the cloud of a forced shutdown hanging over her kitchen installation firm, had she been able to hug me through the telephone she would have done so, coronavirus be damned. She herself hadn’t made the connection between the flapping *tallitot*, holed sheets and human flights of fancy. It had never occurred to her that a washing line might be the origin of the urban legend. ‘What a great explanation. And it took a *goyte*⁴ to point it out!’

³ Prayer shawls

⁴ Non-Jewish woman