

Rabinowitz

Watching Liz lying on her side, facing away, breathing rhythmically, Ed wants to wake her, but only if she's rousing which isn't clear. Her bedtime through 5 a.m. throttling signifies deep relaxation, that she's getting the rest she needs for her 10 a.m. Paul Bronson Ballet audition for which she perhaps is too calm, suggesting just going through the motions, enthusiasm sapped by rejection, ambition riddled with resignation.

Snuggling against her, he waits for a sign, a hand reaching back around him, a subtle, supine stretch and twist, a low anticipatory moan, something saying that, though it's early, Ed can slide himself down and inside her before he rises, dresses, takes the subway to the pool, swims away his hangover, arrives at work in the dark, driving himself with the futile hope of an early return to this, their love nest, the apartment he's just bought.

"Honey," she says. "I'm still sore."

Sore again? It interferes with their sex life, and yet there never seems to be a "right time" to press Liz to see a doctor. He tells himself that she has other things to focus on and, anyway, this relationship might not be "it," this problem one day not his.

"Take a coat," Liz say, but Ed leaves without one, practicing conquering with mind power the December cold that penetrates his suit during the short walks from their building on the Upper West Side to the No. 1 train, from the Rector Street stop

to the Downtown Athletic Club and, head wet, to Moses & Metcalf's office in a Lower Broadway, Depression-era skyscraper, the bus headlamps at this early hour, the halogens illuminating the buildings, creating an overexposed, prison-at-night glare.

"Remember lunch. Rainbow Room. 30 Rockefeller Plaza," she calls.

Oh shit, he thinks. He forgot the celebration of his admission to the bar organized by Liz's parents, his first meeting with them, theirs with his mother.

* * *

Ed enters the elevator that rises exclusively to the firm's floors. He remembers this impressing him when he interviewed for his summer job. The honeymoon over, the elevator is now a liability, a place where new attorneys are exposed to partners dispensing evening-killing assignments, exhausting, career-advancing work. The early hour, 7:30 a.m., protects Ed from all but his immediate boss, Gabriel Montcrief who arrives early, his prominent jaw now moving marionette-like in the center of the elevator.

"Ed. How goes it?"

"Fine, Mr. Montcrief," Ed says, ignoring Montcrief's directive to call him Gabriel; a patrician leveling himself with a Rabinowitz seeming disingenuous, particularly since yesterday's client lunch after which Montcrief chastised Ed for using the wrong bread plate and eating Montcrief's rolls.

"Didn't think you were going to make it," Montcrief says, winking, referring to Ed's recent swearing in as an attorney, Montcrief reminding Ed of Montcrief's

considerable influence with the Character Committee, the group that judges a prospective attorney's moral fiber. Montcrief prevailed, destigmatizing Ed's antiwar arrests, plus one for theft of services for the ten-cent slug he inserted in a subway turnstile in his not-too-distant youth.

Approaching the thirtieth floor, Ed lifts his briefcase, readying his exit.

"How are your wife's auditions going?" Montcrief asks as the doors opens. Striding, Ed mutters something about "the competition being tough," his left turn halted by Montcrief's hand clasping his shoulder.

"Karen Klausner's on the Joffrey Ballet's board. Let's catch her before she leaves home," Montcrief says, conveying Ed towards his office.

Ed sees litigation papers from opposing lawyers lying on his chair as they pass his office, their nighttime delivery suggested nefarious intent. The light on his phone is blinking too, perhaps a message from the illegal Haitian immigrant he represents *pro bono* whose deportation is imminent. It's always like this, no control no matter how early he arrives, how late he works. These three months already feel like the three years he intended staying, long enough to be trained, to be able to hit the ground running when he found meaningful, civil liberties work at a pay-cut he could still afford.

Montcrief's secretary, a six-foot, ball-busting 50-ish gatekeeper who'd already told an impatient Ed that she'd "seen um come and seen um go," hands coffee and

messages to Montcrief, mouthing “Paul Kalistern’s waiting.” Montcrief hurries, motioning for Ed to follow.

“Paul,” Montcrief says, extending his hand. “Great to . . .”

“You were wrong Gabriel. They sued first.” The man throws down papers.

“Let’s just look at this,” Montcrief says, not reacting to Kalistern’s disparaging tone. Ed settles on the couch to watch Montcrief kow tow.

“You said to wait,” Montcrief says to Ed who, realizing he isn’t going to be a bystander, prepares to fall on his Boy Scout knife.

“I ordered a Montcrief and you sent my work to a Rabinowitz?” Kalistern demands. “That’s how it’s going to be?”

Ed had suggested waiting, working something out with Waltz Maintenance, the company that, for two decades, spanning the Kalistern father and now the son, cleaned their 17 New York buildings. Waltz’s misdeed was having the temerity to expect Kalistern’s wife to pay its \$35,000 invoice for cleaning the marble at her Connecticut estate. To apply pressure, Kalistern’s wife froze all Waltz payments. The family-run business, Peter Waltzakis said weeping during a settlement meeting, now strangled for cash, is free-falling into bankruptcy. Yet the man’s too proud to walk away from his invoice, from work freely bought, properly done.

For Kalistern’s legal position, which was utterly defenseless, Montcrief designed a “nuclear option.” As instructed, Ed had prepared a couple of hundred baseless lawsuits, one for each building for each year Waltz worked, each alleging,

though there was no evidence to support it, that Waltz hadn't done its job, justifying its firing, allowing Kalistern to withhold payment, subjecting Waltz to Kalistern's claims for unspecified, "untold" amounts.

"They've sued you in Federal court," Montcrief says. "What a blunder. His lawyer probably thinks he'll get a quick turnaround in Federal court. Doesn't understand they need 'complete diversity.' Nobody from the same State on either side of the caption. Paul, your tax returns are filed at your New York address?"

"Yes."

"So you and your wife, on one side, and Waltz on the other, are both from New York. Their basis for suing in Federal court is that you reside in Connecticut."

"So what?"

"So we'll go ahead and file our, what is it, 220 cases, in the State court here, get their case thrown out of Federal court for lack of jurisdiction and then, because all our cases are pre-existing and involve the same issues, bog theirs down in our 220-case quagmire."

"But they're not suing about the buildings," Ed says, skimming the complaint.

"We'll mix it all up. Paul, I guarantee their claim won't see the light of day. Rabinowitz, get me a draft remand motion by noon."

"But . . ."

"Go," Montcrief says, pointing out.

* * *

Ed lifts the pile from his chair and sits, thinking about Waltzakis. A poor immigrant who won't let extortion resurface in this, his new realm. On top of the stack, a message from Liz. Ed's stomach tightens; he hasn't called to wish her luck. Wondering where he'll find remand papers to crib from, a sudden thought shocks him: If, as Kalistern's wife contends, Waltz was cleaning her marble for free, she still had to pay tax on the value of those services. Not paying that tax, and Ed was almost certain she hadn't, was the Federal crime of tax evasion, what got Al Capone.

Heading to warn Montcrief and Kalistern, Ed stops, realizing that this problem is so obvious that he'll be telling them what they already know. Returning to his chair, he wonders whether something equally obvious is true: that Montcrief and Kalistern are conspiring to get Kalistern's wife indicted, incarcerated, a jailed wife being more compliant, perhaps even easier to divorce, than a free one.

He sneaks past Montcrief's office several times. After Montcrief and Kalistern leave, he shoves the draft remand papers into the center of the loaf sitting in Montcrief's "in" box.

Hitting the street late, Ed opts for the "R" train. A quick ride, then a short jog through flurries over to 30 Rock just inside Fifth Avenue and 50th. Alighting from the elevator, with no outerwear to be relieved of, he steps through those checking coats and spots Liz. She's sitting at the bar, back to him, smoking what he hopes is a bummed cigarette, talking to a young tall guy.

“Hi honey,” Ed says from behind. As his mouth passes her ear, he whispers
“How did it go?”

“This is Scott. Scott, Ed. Scott’s a lawyer too,” Liz says, squeezing Ed’s arm to draw his attention to Scott. Ed surmises from the fact that he already is looking at Scott, and her near empty wine glass, that she’s a bit buzzed.

He orders a double Stoly gimlet. Sucking up chilled vodka, trying to ignore Scott’s story, something about representing CBS records, he whispers “So?” to Liz.

“There’s my girl! Always with the good-looking guys.”

Liz swivels and then parries, successfully redirecting her father’s lips from her mouth to her cheek, docking confirmed with her resounding “mmmwah.”

With Scott turning his attention elsewhere, Liz introduces Ed to her mother Esther Teitel, a diminutive woman wearing pale, slightly off shades of purple rouge and lipstick. Her clothing looks confused. Layers of translucent green and purple, a wrap somewhere between a scarf and a sarong.

“Ed, this is my father, Harry,” Liz says, introducing a man only slightly taller than Ed with a bristly head of black hair mowed like a lawn.

“We just came from a Jewish funeral,” Esther says. “You’re Jewish, right Ed?”

“Yes . . .”

“They cremated the body and buried an urn!”

“Aren’t urns supposed to be, well, on shelves?” Ed says.

“That’s not the point. You really don’t know much about Jewish law Ed. Jews aren’t allowed to be cremated. Daddy, you’ll look it up in the Jewish Encyclopedia,” she tells Harry.

“What about *Judaism for Dummies?*” a voice chimes.

“Mom,” Ed says, turning, noticing that his mother’s fifty year-old face has sagged significantly in the more than a year since he last saw her, particularly the skin around her mouth and by the corners of her eyes. Apparently her plastic surgeon did all he could; better luck wresting creases from crumpled paper.

“Ed. I’m so proud of you,” Eva says, squeezing in front to kiss Ed. “And this must be Liz.” Eva shadows Liz’s lips with her own until, Liz relenting, their mouths brush.

“Harry, Esther. My mother Eva.”

The Teitels greet Eva and order drinks. As everyone heads towards the table, Ed slips next to Liz, lightly rubbing her neck.

“So?” he whispers, slowing Liz as they pass a flotilla of manned chafing dishes amidst wicker horns of plenty spilling food.

“If I had longer legs, straighter hair, thinner neck, higher cheekbones, rounder ass, smaller breasts . . .”

“You’re a gazelle, honey. They have no taste. They’re looking for giraffes.”

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The waiter pours champagne into fluted glasses. Harry Teitel, his filled glass aloft, motions for Liz and Ed to sit beside him. Eva, opposite Harry, clinks her glass with a spoon and, pre-empting Harry, says “To my son Ed whose finally found his way.”

“Here, here,” everyone says, Eva throwing Ed a kiss while Ed watches Harry stare Eva down.

“So you bought a coop?” Harry asks Ed.

“One bedroom. On West End.”

“You have to be careful with those coops?”

“I . . .”

“Does it have an underlying mortgage?”

“I don’t . . .”

“You bought without knowing about underlying financing? Could be a balloon they’ll have to refinance, maybe at 18%. Maintenance could go through the roof. What about a ground lease?”

“Ground . . .”

“Some coop’s lease the land for 99 years. You checked deferred maintenance?”

“I’m not a real estate lawyer. Someone at the firm. . . .”

“I thought all lawyers know the basics,” Harry says, turning his attention to the wine list.

The waiter invites them to the smorgasbord. Harry catches up with Liz at the line. He speaks with her briefly. Liz then marches off towards the bar.

“What’s going on?” Ed asks, catching up with Liz. “Did he ask about the audition?”

“And whether we’re living together. When I’m getting a real job.”

“And you said?”

“Didn’t.”

“Are you?”

“I want to keep dancing.”

“I mean moving in?”

“Is that an invitation?” she asks, her shoulders perking up, scrunching in, her body rocking coyly. Ed, about to have his silence misconstrued, says “It’d make me very happy.”

“Let’s tell them,” Liz says, loosely weaving her fingers into his.

“It’s not like announcing a marriage,” Ed says. Liz pulls away her hand which Ed tracks down, reweaving their fingers.

Returning to the banquet table, Liz takes some bits of fruit, Ed filling his plate.

“So tell me all about dance,” Eva asks Liz. “It’s wonderful to be an artist, do something so beautiful. You’ll have to let me know when I can see you.”

“Liz tells me you’re with a big Wall Street firm,” Harry asks Ed, his words muffled by chewing seafood salad.

“For now.”

“You make good money there.”

“There’s a price.”

“That being?”

“Your soul,” Ed says.

“I don’t get that.”

“None of the work’s socially redeeming. Just companies using lawyers to screw with each other.”

“No company does anything worthwhile?” Harry asks, glancing around the table.

“The other day, I was thinking that, if a psychiatrist analyzed an American company by the standards applied to people, it’d be involuntarily committed. They’re all dangers to themselves and others. Think about it. They have no morals; they’ll do anything except what the law prohibits, if they respect that. They pollute communities with impunity, inundating them with toxins and garbage, destroying the environment, consuming scarce resources like fresh water, showing that, like most psycho’s, they’re totally self-centered, don’t give a hoot about anyone other than themselves. They don’t value caring, generosity, being fair, treating others honestly. They don’t care about inflicting pain, about long term consequences. They’ll break any commitment when it no longer suits them. They take as much advantage of others as they can, particularly their employees, the very people who help them, if it

helps make a buck. And they never feel guilt, show remorse, unless, of course, they're trying to convince a judge to lower their fine. They fit the diagnostic profile of a miscreant to a tee."

"Everything you have is by the grace of companies."

"That Milton Friedman, trickle-down Reaganomics stuff?" Ed glances at Liz, emboldened by her lack of reaction.

"We could do so much better with another system, one that helps people according to their needs."

"Red your favorite color?" Harry says.

"I'm not a Republican."

"I was thinking of the flag the communists wave around."

"I'll let that pass," Ed says, smiling. "Actually, I'm a socialist."

"I'll bet you think that Israel. . ."

"Sometimes I'm embarrassed to be Jewish."

"You're a self-loather," Harry says. "People would die for what you have."

"They are dying."

"So give it up."

"You're right about that. I'm a hypocrite."

"Talk about no convictions."

"At least I know what I am."

"I'm done," Harry says, throwing down his napkin and getting up.

“Where are you going, Daddy?” Esther calls.

* * *

Finally getting Liz on the phone, Ed fills the silence following his “hi honey” with *mea culpas* about how wrong he was, his nervousness meeting her parents, his head swimming about them living together, worry about her career, booze taking things from there. She finally says something about not giving up her family for him, a threatening statement, the simple act of speaking, though, raising hopes. He says he doesn’t want to drive wedges, that he’d never want her family to split over him. He begs her to ask them for a chance to change their impression.

Detecting a sigh, he ventures something mildly in his defense, intimating that he wasn’t prepared for her father, assiduously avoiding phrases like “advance warning” in reference to a vitriolic man who he now knows baits people, luring them out to be put down. Liz takes his minced words exactly as the criticism he meant. Sensing he might lose her, desperate, Ed reminds her of his impending trip to Los Angeles. He implores her to meet before he leaves, adding that he knows how dicey things are.

* * *

Ed adds the par-boiled broccoli to the flash-cooked chicken in the wok, turning the heat high, blending it with the already stir-fried garlic mashed with fermented black beans out of which he’d soaked much of the salt that she didn’t like. Her key turns in the cylinder as he stirs corn starch into cold water, adding the mixture to the

wok to give the sauce some adhesion, then a few chili flakes for the bite they both like.

“I was thinking. . . ,” he says, glancing sideways, Liz stepping up to the raised kitchen, halting a splatter-safe distance from Ed at the stove. She tilts back from the waist at what Ed hopes is a whimsical, lighter-than-expected slant. Her crossed arms and unaffected stare belie his initial assessment.

“I really didn’t want to fight with your father.”

“I don’t know how you can say that.”

“‘Red’s my favorite color?’ He was baiting me.”

“You call him a hypocrite?”

“I’m a ‘self-loather?’ If you’d warned me maybe I wouldn’t have drunk.”

“Maybe drinking’s who you are? Look, this isn’t working,” she says.

“I’ll bet he’s done this to you a thousand times.”

“Don’t analyze me. If that’s what you think, we’ve got nothing to talk about.”

“Not even a kick under the table?”

As Liz stands, he draws his own line, clearing their untouched plates, muttering “fuck” as he goes. “Yes it would’ve been best for me to eat shit with your father. I didn’t handle it. Okay? Won’t happen again.”

She’s by the door, her back to him. But she’s not leaving, which he takes to mean that she’s relieved that he’s taking responsibility, but her stiffness suggests that he isn’t out of the woods yet. She turns, her narrowed eyes softening, her thin, tight

lips rounding. The speed of the change suggests that she was bothered, at least in part, by something besides him, perhaps her father's truculence. She draws his hand to her breast and he stops worrying.

* * *

The next morning he tells her that sometime before his afternoon flight to LA he's going to call her father to apologize.

"No need," she said, unfolding from under the comforter, puffy and mussed, naked against the sheets.

"Have to."

"Done," she says.

"I don't understand."

"Taken care of," she says, disappearing into the bathroom. "I already talked to them. You're invited for Passover" she yells over the sound of the sink running.

Laying back in bed, Ed struggles to control the upset that, trapped with Liz in that tiny bathroom, might lead him to say things he'll regret. Last night he'd conceded, exonerated her, said he wasn't as ready to give up this relationship as she was, admitted extraordinary needs that now didn't seem his alone. All this to convince her, as it now appears, of something she'd already decided. He visualizes Liz going to the mat with her parents, daring them not to allow him around, to try preventing her from seeing him, possibly calling their bluff about cutting her off.

“Aren’t you coming,” she insists affectionately, as if he was still tuned to the night’s sweetness. “You’ll want to hear this.”

He enters the bathroom warily, trying not to look at her, hoping not to indelibly associate his thoughts about being dragged over the coals unnecessarily, having his leash yanked, with her adorable face. She moves closer to the mirror above the sink, eyes flitting between the reflection of flossing and looking at him. At least she pled for him, Ed thinks, doing so on the strength of his telephonic apology, risking that he was just trying to get by. With them imminently moving in together, certainly she was entitled to revalidate, avoiding having to explain to her parents later, if he turned out bad, why she’d defended him, admit her poor judgment, a humbling, uneasy act for her.

“I’m doing something about that problem of ours,” she says. “I’m seeing a gynecologist. Your mother’s.”

* * *

At the airport waiting for his flight back to New York, Ed realizes that he hasn’t called to find out what the gynecologist said.

“Heh.”

“Hi.”

“So?”

“Where are you?”

“The airport. I only have a minute. What’d he say?”

“She.”

“Okay.”

“She’s doing some tests. Says it could be physical or hormonal or whatever.”

“Whatever?”

“You know.”

“But . . . you don’t have any real signs, right?”

“Apparently not required.”

“You don’t have any or . . .”

“I don’t think *you* should be quizzing me,” she snaps.

“What?”

“Don’t miss your plane.”

“But . . .”

“Call me when you get in.”

* * *

Ed settles into his wide leather seat, grabbing a few little bottles of vodka. Although there isn’t a diagnosis yet, he can’t relieve himself of the gnawing feeling that maybe he’s marred Liz. Watching the latest set of bottles being cleared, he yearns for some nicotine, for something to buzz through his booze head like a breath of fresh air, cutting away the fear for her future that’s grating on him.

“Hi. I’m glad I caught you,” he says from the first phone he finds at JFK.

“Sorry I ruined your trip.” she says.

“Listen. I have something to ask you.”

“Okay.”

“Are you busy? Is this an okay time?”

“It’s fine Ed. What is it?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. You know how I feel about you and, well, it would make me so happy. I mean, Liz, honey, would you marry me?”