

Blessed are the Merciful, For They Shall Obtain Mercy

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Once, in winter, on the teak dresser from Berlin that had not been oiled for a long time, there stood a bottle and a cup.

She said the moisture would crack the antique veneer and moved the bottle and cup to the desk.

He told her to leave him alone.

She said it was time he started behaving like a human being.

He shouted at her to go to hell.

She said: "You're jealous of me because I'm happy."

Maybe it really was jealousy that burned in his stomach and brought a bad taste to his mouth, or maybe it was the Israeli-made whiskey in a chipped porcelain cup.

He said her happiness was stupidity, and that the more they stupefied her the happier she got.

A few months earlier, in Jerusalem, she had met a group of people who called themselves "Jews for a Kingdom of Heaven." They gave her a colorful brochure and spoke with her on the phone, and after she went to a lecture she decided to join the weekly Kingdom of Heaven meetings, where they learned the teachings of Jesus and sang songs. They gave her a little book whose cover was illustrated with a map of the Holy Land and she marked the verses she liked to quote. In December they invited her to spend Christmas with them.

He suggested she might stay there a while longer, maybe even forever.

She called him 'evil' and waved the little book at him.

He said: "You know where you can shove your book."

She said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

He told her she was brainwashed and really did need some divine mercy. Then he yelled at her to go to hell.

She packed her red travel bag, took her car keys and slammed the door.

After she left, Yoram Kootz sat down in front of the thirty-five exams from the second section of the eleventh grade, which were loitering on his desk in two piles. He hated the second section. Actually, he hated all the classes he had ever taught and perhaps the ones he was yet to teach in the next three years—until his retirement—too. The only thing the second section of the eleventh grade needed to remember was that time equals distance divided by rate. That was it. It was easy. It was nothing. It was just time and rate and distance.

Yoram Kootz scored red, violent lines on the pages until he grew tired. He had another drink. The nausea slid down his throat and climbed back up.

He pulled the desk drawer open into his gut, took out a gun, and removed it from its yellow cloth. Then he dug through the recesses of the drawer until his fingers found the cartridge.

He stuck the magazine into the butt and placed the gun opposite him at an angle on top of the pile of exams. Time equals distance divided by rate. That's all. He rested his chin on his fist and looked at the gun. The barrel pointed at his chest. The trigger smiled at him.

Suddenly the doorbell rang. "Who's there?" Kootz shouted. He wrapped the loaded gun and put it back in the drawer. His heart beat readily as if the person who would find his body had come early, but he stayed at his desk. The doorbell rang again.

It was almost midnight.

Perhaps his wife had given up on Jesus' birthday and come back without her keys? Perhaps a new neighbor had the wrong door? Perhaps the beautiful young woman from across the hallway had come home in a cab and didn't have twenty shekels again?

Kootz lit a cigarette and walked to the door with little steps.

In the doorway a tall young man wearing jeans and an army coat stood smiling at him. His sleeves were too short, exposing his hairy wrists.

"Yes?" asked Yoram Kootz.

The guy giggled awkwardly. The gap between his teeth aroused affection in Kootz.

"It's the middle of the night," said Yoram Kootz. He dug through his memory for this sun-burned face, with eyes sunken into a broad forehead that glistened with sweat, and a boxer's nose. It could have been one of his students.

"What, did I wake you?" asked the guy.

"Yes, actually," Kootz lied. He turned to the living room to find an ashtray.

The guy followed him. As he walked past the desk he glanced at the pile of exams. "The really important things aren't taught in school," he said in a friendly conversational tone. He pulled his shirt up to his forehead and wiped the sweat.

"They don't pay me to teach important things," said Kootz.

"Is it worth it?" asked the guy.

"No," said Kootz. "Can I help you with something, or did you just come by in the middle of the night to interview me?"

The guy's lips twisted into an exaggerated, childish expression of insult. He asked, "Are you alone?"

“What are you, a thief?” Kootz barked. “I have nothing except a wedding ring. You can have it.” The slight excitement aroused in him by the unexpected visit had turned to impatience.

“I didn’t come to rob you,” said the guy. A switchblade suddenly snapped out of his fist.

Kootz moved back, terrified.

“I came to cut off your dick,” said the guy. “That’s what I came to do.” He stroked the blade like a *shochet* examining his butcher’s knife.

“I sincerely hope you don’t mean what you say,” said Kootz, “because it’s not funny.” Dryness filled his throat. He clutched the telephone.

“Drop the phone,” said the guy. He grabbed Kootz by the arm and held the knife up to his neck.

“Okay, okay, calm down,” Kootz whispered and put the receiver down.

The guy’s thick arm encircled Kootz’s neck. He tried to defend himself with a weak elbow jab, but the guy twisted him until he fell to the ground and then sat on him, took out a pair of plastic handcuffs from the pocket of his army jacket and fastened Kootz’s hands behind his back.

He said: “I figured you’d resist.”

“You’re going to murder me now,” Kootz whispered into the floor-tiles.

“Not at all,” said the guy, short of breath. “I want you to keep living, I want you to live for many more years. Just without your dick. That’s what I want.”

“Listen,” said Kootz, “you don’t look like a psycho.” His proper voice, the grumbling teacher’s voice, came back to him for a moment. “You look like a reasonable man. Let me go now, we’ll bid one another farewell and forget this whole embarrassing incident.”

“Why don’t you shut up,” the guy mumbled. “I can’t concentrate.”

Kootz suddenly felt the blade cutting into his pants and ripping the seams.

He screamed as loud as he could.

The guy's hands ripped his pant leg all the way down. He said: "You won't be needing pants anymore anyway, from tomorrow you start wearing dresses."

Kootz screamed again. Someone outside should have heard him and called the police by now.

"Enough, enough," said the guy. "I haven't even done anything yet."

Kootz was out of breath. His face was hot like after a long run.

The guy stood up and looked down at Kootz. Then he pulled a chair over, sat down comfortably and played with the knife. His broad forehead was strained with contemplation.

From the cold floor, underneath Kootz's burning ear, voices echoed. The television announcer said it would snow on the Hermon tomorrow. A door opened. A woman said: "What's the weather tomorrow? What did they say?" A man answered: "I fell asleep just as the news started." The woman said: "I asked you to pay attention." The man said: "Why do you always want them to tell you what'll happen tomorrow? Can't you wait and see for yourself?"

The guy got up and went into the kitchen. Kootz heard him opening cabinets.

The guy shouted from the kitchen: "Aren't there any clean glasses?"

"In the cabinet over the sink, left door," said Kootz. He heard the guy rattling a glass and opening the fridge.

"Don't you have any grape juice?" the guy yelled.

"No."

A tap was turned on.

Kootz turned over on his back, and managed, to his great surprise, to sit up and start dragging himself over to the front door. He thought about banging his head against the door to try and wake the neighbor across the hallway. But the man came back from the kitchen and met Kootz halfway.

“What are you doing?” asked the guy.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

The guy put his glass down on the antique dresser, near the phone, took hold of Kootz under his arms and dragged him back to the living room.

“Please, not on the dresser,” said Kootz feebly, “it’s not good for the veneer.”

“Sorry,” said the guy, “I didn’t know.” He moved the glass to the little coffee table that was covered in weekend papers and remote controls. “It’s amazing,” he said, “after your yelling I was sure the police would come, but nothing. No one cares—what kind of people live here?”

He pushed Kootz’s head back and knocked him down on his back. “Good,” he said, “now you’re ready for surgery.”

“I have money,” Kootz said. “I’ll give you money.” His voice trembled.

“I don’t want money.”

“Then what do you want?” Kootz asked. The ceiling light blinded him. He closed his eyes.

“Revenge,” said the guy.

“Revenge?” Kootz asked tiredly. “Revenge? For what?”

“For what you did to Dana.”

“Dana?” said Kootz. “Who’s Dana?”

“Your student, from eleven-two.”

“Dana? From the eleventh? Section two?” Kootz tried hard to put a face to the name. Dana from eleven-two? He was like a drowning man whose feet were being tickled by the ground he would step on any minute. “Oh yes,” he finally remembered. “Avrahami. Dana Avrahami.”

He suddenly realized that he was within a logical system, albeit one originating in a mistake, but a solvable equation. He squirmed and dragged himself to the couch, which was low enough so that he could rest his handcuffed arms on it. The guy did not stop him when he got up to sit down on the sagging cushions. He shook his pants off from around his ankles and crossed his legs. “That red-head with the ass. She sent you to get me to give her a better grade?” A mocking grin came over his bitter face. He was back to being the teacher again.

“I don’t like your style,” said the guy. “You’re being rude to me, talking all superior.” He sat down on the couch next to Kootz and put the knife on his bare thigh.

“Sorry,” Kootz laughed nervously. “It’s not easy being a candidate for amputation.”

“You see what I mean?” said the guy bitterly. “That’s probably what Dana liked, that arrogance of yours. Because other than that you look like a used rag. And I’ll tell you something else, you have bad breath. You must have a rotten tooth or something.”

“I still don’t understand what you want from me,” said Kootz. The tip of the blade pointed at his gray, worn underwear. He really did feel like a rag. When the fear died down the nausea came back to climb over his tongue.

“You dirty old man,” said the guy, and his mouth twisted in a tormented expression. “You’ve dirtied her for me, you took her from me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Kootz, whose eyes roamed the room searching for his pack of cigarettes.

“I’ve never loved anyone in my life like I loved Dana,” said the guy.

“Why don’t you calm down and tell me what happened?”

“You know very well what happened.”

“No. I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“What happened between you and Dana,” the guy mumbled in a choked up voice. Tears hung on his eyelashes.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Kootz.

“She said you offered to help her with algebra after school, but instead of algebra you taught her other things. She said you seduced her. That you took her to the Bell Hotel and taught her you know what.”

Kootz was amazed. His eyes darted around and his tongue searched for words. “She was lying,” he said finally.

“Why should I believe you and not the woman I love?”

Kootz put his face close to the guy’s until they were nose-to-nose. He said: “Because only an idiot would risk a thirty-year pension three years before the end. Okay?” Then he stood up, turned his back to the guy and held out his handcuffed hands. “Untie!” he commanded.

The guy cut the plastic handcuffs and Yoram Kootz shook out his freed hands. The blood came back to his fingers.

“This is not the first time Avrahami’s lied,” Kootz said. “Did you know that for a whole term she didn’t do her homework and told me it was because her mother died?”

The guy snapped the switchblade shut. Quiet streams ran down his cheeks.

Kootz shuffled the papers on his desk and found a crushed pack of cigarettes. He stuck one in his mouth and sat down next to the guy again.

“I was crazy about her,” said the guy. “I was absolutely crazy about her. But she wouldn’t sleep with me. I didn’t mind waiting, because I loved her so much. I was patient. One day I told her, it’s time we sleep together. It’s natural. That’s how it’s supposed to be. So she promised me that on her seventeenth birthday we’d go to the Kinneret together and sleep together on the beach. I waited patiently and kept loving her like a crazy man.”

Kootz’s eyes were closed. The cigarette in the corner of his mouth had turned to a stick of ash.

“Are you listening?” asked the guy.

“Yes,” said Kootz.

“I thought you fell asleep,” said the guy. He went on: “Finally the day arrived. There was a security alert on my base, I had to pay the medic two hundred shekels to get me a sick pass and send me to an orthopedist in Tel Aviv. My friend lent me his car. We took sleeping bags, and in the middle of the night we drove to the Kinneret. You have no idea how excited I was. Dana fell asleep on the way and I couldn’t understand how she wasn’t as excited as I was. When we finally got to the Kinneret, I fell on her. I could feel myself burning up. I went crazy. But she kept smiling. No excitement. As if nothing, she even helped me, if you know what I mean. It was too easy. D’you understand? D’you understand?”

“I understand,” said Kootz.

“But I didn’t understand anything.” The guy grimaced in pain as if suffering from heartburn. “I only understood in the morning. Only in the morning I realized that she wasn’t a virgin. That someone had already, you know, someone had already handled her before me. So I asked her. So she said, as innocent as could be, as if nothing, ‘I

never told you I was a virgin, if you'd asked me I would have told you.' 'What would you have told me?' I asked her. 'That I have some experience. Not much, but yeah, what can you do, I wasn't a virgin like you thought. Anyway what difference does it make? Yesterday you couldn't stop telling me that you loved me, so why should you love me any less now? I'm still the same Dana from yesterday.' But for me she wasn't the same Dana anymore, because all at once my love turned into hatred. She'd cheated me. She'd betrayed me. I started hitting her. I hit and I sobbed. She ran away, I grabbed her. I said I was sorry. But I couldn't forgive her. She said I was crazy. I really was crazy. First love –now hate. I started interrogating her about who it was. She didn't want to tell me. She said it wasn't relevant. But I wouldn't stop. I told her if she didn't tell me I would kill her. Finally she told me. She wanted to hurt me even more, that's why she told me." The guy swallowed and looked down with his damp eyes. "She said, I had a thing with Yoram Kootz the math teacher."

"And you believe her?" said Kootz.

"I don't know," said the guy, "I don't know."

Kootz patted him on his shoulder and said, "Come, I want to show you something."

The guy followed him.

The bedroom was almost completely taken up by a bed and wardrobe. Kootz opened the wardrobe door that had a mirror set in it.

"Take a good look," said Kootz. In the mirror was a stubby man in a sweater and grey underwear whose thinning hair was unkempt and whose mouth was frozen in a bitter smile. Beside him stood a young, tall, muscular man, with red eyes sunken in his broad forehead, and a boxer's nose sniffing back the rest of his tears.

"You're right," said the guy. "It really doesn't make any sense this story. There's no way you and she...doesn't make sense."

“Okay, so now leave before I call the police,” said Kootz. He took his sweater off and got into bed. “If you don’t mind, just leave and close the door.”

“But what am I supposed to do with Dana?” asked the guy.

“Forgive her,” said Kootz. He pulled the covers up and sank his head back in the pillow. “And please turn the light off when you go.”

“Okay,” said the guy. He left with cautious steps. The light in the hallway went off. The door shut with a soft click.

A train leaves Tel Aviv at seventeen minutes after ten, going one hundred and fifteen kilometers an hour. A second train leaves Nahariya at exactly eleven, at a speed one-and-a-half times greater than the first train. The distance between Nahariya and Tel Aviv is one hundred and forty kilometers. At what time will the trains meet?

The bed sailed away in the dark. The numbers on the alarm clock flashed like a lighthouse. Yoram Kootz got out of bed and went to the desk. He took the gun out of the drawer and put the barrel in his mouth. The cold metal burned his tongue. It tasted like a new filling.

The phone rang.

Kootz put the receiver to his ear. His lips kept grasping the barrel.

“It’s me,” said his wife.

Kootz spat the gun out to smile. “What’s up with Jesus?” he asked.

“Stop being mean for a minute, if it’s not too difficult for you,” said his wife. “I’m stuck near the Ben Shemen junction, it’s raining and I have a flat in the back tire.”

“Wait for someone to stop and help you change it,” said Kootz.

“That’s the whole thing, Yoram,” said his wife. She sneezed three times and blew her nose. “That’s the whole thing, that someone already did stop and he took out the spare. Turns out the spare’s flat too.”

Kootz heard the rain hitting the roof of the car. He heard the windshield wipers creaking.

“Wait for me in the car,” he said. “I’ll come in a taxi and take you home.”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy,” said his wife.

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