



FLEISHMAN IS IN TROUBLE

a novel

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Seth's eyes softened when he talked about Vanessa again. "You guys should meet her," Seth said. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going home to my children," I said.

"I have a date *and* I have the kids," Toby said. "Rachel dropped them off in the middle of the night. An entire day early. Because that's how peaceful co-parenting works."

"That's fucked up," Seth said.

"Well, that's how she is," Toby said. "It's fine. I actually enjoy my kids."

The conversation was starting to get a little grim for Seth, whose great skill was at throwing parties and knowing when the vibe needed adjusting via, say, swapping out different music or bringing out dessert. "I know," he said. "We should think of a curse for Rachel."

Toby laughed. "A curse!"

A curse. We had met the Beggar Woman in November of our year in Israel, when I'd gone to their dorm to have an American Thanksgiving. After dinner, we took a long, drunk walk and ended up in the Old City. We zigzagged down the streets, and right before the Western Wall became visible, we saw an old woman sitting on a milk crate, her hands and face wrinkled and brown and scaled from the sun. As we walked by her, she bellowed at us in Hebrew for money. Toby felt around in his pocket and found a five-shekel piece; Seth had two agorot, which counted as less than an American penny. I had only a hundred-shekel bill that I'd just had changed from my weekly allowance.

Toby approached the woman and gave her the money. The woman nodded vigorously and began making a dramatic sobbing sound, lifting her hands to the heavens and beseeching God himself, "Blessed are you who keeps me vital and safe! Blessed are your true believers, who allow me to serve you! Blessed is this small man, who will heal the world with his kindness! May he stand taller than those around him, above his jealousy!"

Toby gave her a half bow and moved back toward us again. Seth

wanted some of that action, too, so he moved in to give her the agorot. The woman stared with disgust at the nothing coin he placed in her hands. But Seth did not read her disgust, and so he waited to see if she would thank God for his existence, if she would bless him, but instead when she looked up at him, she hissed through a wrinkled nose and aggressively squinted eyes, "May you never marry. May your hair fall out before you find a woman able to tolerate your snoring and farting. May your true self always be a lie."

"Yikes," Seth said.

Toby and I stepped forward to pull Seth back and keep walking, and the woman, realizing I was never going to give her anything—I couldn't! I only had a large bill!—said, "May you never dance at your daughter's wedding, for her name will be so spoiled throughout the town from her promiscuity that when she dares to leave her home to go to the market to buy fresh food for the Sabbath, the spiritual leaders of her community will congregate to throw rotten fruit at her head. May you never know satisfaction. May the Lord who watches over you give you a long life with no contentment. May you drink and drink and always find yourself thirsty." We broke into a run then, tripping on the cobblestones and getting dirty looks from people who were out late on pilgrimage to pray at the Western Wall.

Later, we told this story to everyone, but no one else found it funny, so we just kept telling it to each other. Then we began to make up curses for each other. We made up curses for our teachers. We made up curses for our exes and our roommates. We made up curses about the people who didn't understand us or love us the way we felt we deserved to be loved.

At the diner, Seth cleared his throat. "Okay, me first," he said. "May she find in her next routine visit to a toilet that her pubic hair has turned to dust. May the next man to visit her undercarriage sneeze so hard from the dust that an air bubble fills her torso, forcing an embolism."

"That's not how embolisms work," Toby said.

"I didn't ask for fact-checking," Seth said. He looked at me. "Your turn."

"Oh God," I said. "Okay. May she finally make her way home from work on the subway after a long day only to discover that the pustule she'd dismissed as a simple zit had become infected when she collided with the turnstile she was walking through."

"Wait, where was the zit?" Toby asked.

"Like on her pelvis," I said.

"You get zits there?"

"You can get zits anywhere you have skin!"

"That's so gross," Seth said.

"Too much," Toby said. "Also, too convoluted. Were we on the subway or were we at home at the point of impact?" But he was laughing.

I walked back to the train alone. The last two actors I'd profiled before I left the magazine were in their early fifties. Two of them had had first marriages to actresses when they were younger and had had children with those women before they'd gotten divorced. The actresses' careers were ruined. Their bodies had changed and they were on the ground for the daily life of child-rearing, and they had to make hard choices about how much they worked, knowing that women in certain professions have expiration dates. The men went off and had wild lives, which resulted in their divorces, and a decade later married their much younger co-star and much younger makeup artist, respectively, and then had two more children. Now they'd be able to do it all over with two entirely new kids, knowing now what it meant to regret how much time you didn't devote to your children. Another chance. Another chance at life. Another chance at youth. A way to obliterate regret. And here was Seth, who would fuck every single person in every single orifice and only once he got tired of it (if he ever did) would he find someone young and take *her* life away by finally having children.

I was never wild. I never stayed out late or got way too extremely drunk more than five or six times in my whole life. I didn't sleep

around. I had such conservative desires. I liked going to the movies late at night—all the movies, even the bad ones, even the ones I'd seen. I liked eating too much. I liked smoking pot and cigarettes alone in my apartment. That was maybe the worst insult of adulthood, that even your silly, non-life-threatening, nonbase desires got swallowed up by routine and maturity and edged out of your life for good. I got to Penn Station and I walked past it, till I found myself downtown at the Angelika, sending a text to my babysitter that I'd be home very late.

That night, Toby took the children to synagogue like he'd done every Friday night before the separation. The problem with Rachel taking any Friday nights was that she never took them to synagogue, and so it began to creep into their heads that maybe Friday night services and dinner and family time were optional, a whim of Toby's that was subject to debate. They had never liked synagogue (no one does), but they especially didn't like it after camp, where they had to change clothes and go stand with their father under and astride his tallis while he listened and prayed, more out of muscle memory than anything else but still. Hannah now sat reading a book, not in her lap but up against her face, belligerently. Solly just ran up and down the aisles with whatever other nine-year-old he could find.

When Toby brought Rachel to meet his parents for the first time, their plane landed in Los Angeles in the late afternoon and they arrived at Toby's house in Sherman Oaks right in time for Friday night dinner. Toby had grown up in a fairly traditional Jewish home, and Friday night, no matter what, everyone was home. Everyone gathered. Everyone sat. His exhausted sister sat down with her two children, her head wrapped in a scarf. His anemic brother-in-law stood and waited for silence while he blessed the wine and the challah that Toby no longer went near. ("Just have some challah," his mother said. "Everyone has *some*." But Toby wouldn't, in perpetual punishment to her for how often she told him to not eat

the challah when he was a chubby kid.) Toby's aunt and uncle had come, along with the synagogue's cantor and his wife. Rachel sat in awe of it: The harmony with which they passed chicken to each other, the banter at each other's expense, the review of the week. How they all gathered, how they sat down, how there was a basic rhythm and ease to it. They had all been gathering like this for so long that they knew how to do it; it was, Rachel later said, almost arrogant the way they all flaunted their comfort and ease.

"They just knew how to sit there and *be*," she said. "Like it was their birthright to be there."

"But why does that annoy you?" Toby asked.

She couldn't explain it. Only later would he see that when something created annoyance in her as a result of envy, that was how she knew she wanted it. Rachel had grown up barely aware of her religion in a house where her parents were divorced and her father had fled before she could form a cohesive memory of him, and then her mother died when she was three. She was raised by her mother's mother, who treated her like a houseguest and encouraged her independence. Rachel's grandmother had no tradition or ceremony in her, just a combination of pity and annoyance that she was stuck with her daughter's orphan in something that resembled a Dickens novel.

"So this happens every *week*?" she asked Toby.

"Without fail," he said.

"What if you were away?"

"Where would we be?"

"What if your father was at work? What if he had a patient emergency?"

"He'd let someone else take care of it."

Rachel could barely get her head around this. "I want to do this."

"Me, too," he answered. They had been dating for eight months by then. He proposed to her formally four months later, but he always felt like on that night, she had proposed to him first.

When they first married, Rachel made sure that whenever she got home from work on Fridays, sometimes earlier and sometimes later, they would do the thing Toby had grown up doing: lighting the candles, blessing the wine and challah. By the time the kids were born, though, she was already on what she called her "trajectory," and Fridays became the nights that Toby played a game of chicken with Rachel. She'd miraculously become available when the Rothbergs or the Leffers or the Hertzes invited them over for a Friday night dinner. But otherwise, she'd call and say that she "needed" to stay at work because she "needed" to get things done, knowing (she had to know) that she was being outright dishonest in her use of this word—that it was actually her resistance to spending time with her children and to some notion of a traditional role as a mother that made her *want* to work that much. Rachel knew how to work. She liked working. It made sense to her. It bent to her will and her sense of logic. Motherhood was too hard. The kids were not deferential to her like her employees. They didn't brook her temper with the desperation and co-dependence that, say, Simone, her assistant, did. That was the big difference between them, Rachel. He didn't see their children as a burden, Rachel. He didn't see them as endless pits of need, Rachel. He *liked* them, Rachel.

In June, the first Friday night that Rachel had them alone, he'd called her at work to ask if they shouldn't maybe all have dinner together, just to show the kids how much of a family they still were. She'd told him that she'd had to get Mona, their nanny, to stay with them because her client, the playwright Alejandra Lopez, had some kind of negotiation problem and she had planned an emergency dinner to make sure she was happy. "Please," she'd said. "Before you persecute me for working again, I am trying to manage. I have more expenses than ever. Do you know how much mediation cost me?" Unspoken: You idiot. Can't you read? We're not a family anymore. What do you think all this paperwork is about if not a formal dismantling of our family?

Outside the synagogue that night it had begun to rain. Toby

didn't have an umbrella, which was fine because the rain wasn't so bad and certainly it wouldn't kill him, but then some dipshit with a golf umbrella that took up the sidewalk because what would happen if even a drop of rain got onto his asshole Tom Ford suit nearly knocked him into the street.

"Can I go to sleepaway camp the whole summer next year?" Hannah asked.

"Sure."

Solly was silent. He didn't like talking about sleepaway camp. Rachel had spent much of the early spring lobbying hard for him to go for the month, "like all your friends, Solly," but he kept saying that he enjoyed being with his parents—"You're my friends, too"—which made Toby want to weep.

"Next year," Solly said, "I want to come back to the Y but I also want to go to golf camp."

"We'll make it happen," Toby said, though he then wondered if he was raising a golf douche. His mother had always told him to look at his neighbors and ask himself if he wanted his children to turn out like them, because they would. Neighbors, she'd said, were a far more powerful force than parents. Neighbors were how you voted for a child's future. But Toby hadn't taken that seriously, because how could his children be like his neighbors when his neighbors, who were all WASPs of sparkling genetics and crystal-line breeding, were wholly unfamiliar, and his children still spoke and sang in the echo of his voice?

They returned home and had dinner—Toby had ordered soup and chicken from the deli, which he hated doing; he knew how much takeout they had with their mother. They ate, and Toby listened to Solly's report of the day, and how many kids were not returning to day camp after next week but were leaving for sleepaway. Then he let them leave the table and flee to their rooms to do whatever they wanted to until Mona arrived. He cleaned up the dinner and took a shower and began to prepare his body and mind for this woman whose crotch he was now very familiar with. He sat on his

bed, a towel around his waist, searching his phone to make sure he knew what her actual face would look like from her Hr avatar, so that he could return her, briefly, to personhood.

At first, he told the kids he was on "appointments" when he had a date that was coinciding with their night with him. But Hannah began asking questions about what kind of appointments kept happening on Saturday nights, and why he had to change his clothes for them.

"Are you going to get married again?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Once might have been enough for me."

He always told Solly and her the same thing: "I go on playdates sometimes, just like you do. I will tell you when there is someone you should know. That person will be someone you like. I am lonely and I am making new friends, and not all of them will be my girlfriends, but some may be girls who are friends."

"Your mom will eventually have playdates, too," he told them.

"Will they be with doctors?" Solly asked.

"No, they'll be with people who are different from me. They'll be with a man named Brad who has a Porsche and wears boat shoes and really wants to come to your soccer game." The kids laughed. "Now: Who am I going to date?"

And they responded in unison, as he'd trained them to over the course of the many times this question came up: "Someone we will like!"

"And who will Mom date?" he asked.

Again, in unison: "A man named Brad who has a Porsche and wears boat shoes and really wants to come to my soccer game." Solly could never finish that last part because he was always laughing too hard by then. It even got a smile out of Hannah.

"You'll like him, too, when it happens," Toby said, though he didn't think that was true. If he was honest, he didn't even know that Rachel would ever date again, so disgusted was she by the confines of marriage, so ruined had she been by the compromises of

another person trying to have an equal say or even just an opinion in her life.

Toby's usual dating outfit was a pair of gray twill flat-front pants and a tailored light blue button-down shirt. He was still wearing the clothing Rachel had insisted on dressing him in, materials finer than you could find at the Banana Republic he liked on Third Avenue. She liked for him to look like a rich person. ("You *are* a rich person," I'd say. "Yeah, but not for long," he'd say. I meant that he was richer than most people on this earth; he meant that he made \$285,000 annually, and that was on the extremely low end for the neighborhood.) But he noticed that his shirts were starting to fray. It was time for new ones, but he kept punting the decision. How do you go back to Banana Republic now, after all that time spent being measured for a shirt by the Italian tailor on Sixty-fifth Street who made clothing just for you? He could afford it, that was the truth; maybe he'd continue to do it, but now it was a choice. If he wanted to take the kids on vacation for winter break, if he wanted to think about buying an apartment eventually. There were decisions to make. "I left a lot of money on the table," he liked to say to people who knew the situation, to show that peace was more important to him than money.

He was set to meet Tess at Dorrian's, a bar on Second Avenue he never went to and only thought of as the hangout for prep school kids in the eighties before one of them murdered another one of them. Dorrian's was Tess's idea. Something felt distinctly noir about this, a woman in a wrap dress and mega-cleavage at a bar, dyed blond hair in a twist, him walking in to find her there already with a drink—a martini with *six* olives—tonguing the cocktail straw, which was a new choice for a martini but he tried not to judge.

The moment stretched out for what seemed like a month as he waited to see if she found him acceptable. There was nothing glaring about him that would make a woman walk out on him; his only