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On Herring Cove Road: Mr. Jew and the Goy Boy

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Chapter 1

CHAPTER 1

Thursday Morning, June 10, 1976

He was comfortable. The first hour of the morning was always his most comfortable time of the day. It was not that he was a morning person, he wasn't. Nor was he a day or evening person. He simply appreciated his morning routine. At six-thirty, with his full head of black, wavy hair lightly greased back, dressed in black dress pants, white dress shirt and a loose black tie flung over his shoulder, Mr. Rosen descended the stairs. He always dressed in black and white, but he did not always dress the same. No, sometimes he might be wild and wear a short-sleeved, white dress shirt. From the stairs, he passed the dining room, entered the kitchen and after kissing and hugging his wife of thirty-nine years, the two sat across from each other at the small but heavy oak table. He always sat in the same wooden chair. His chair of twenty-eight years with its right side of the seat badly scratched up from the small set of keys that for over the last thirty years he has habitually kept secure in his back pocket. Though the keys have changed over time, the scratching had continued and by this time, had carved out a shallow pocket of their own in the seat of his chair.

Compared to Mr. Rosen's chair, his wife's was immaculate. Every morning it was polished by one of her many green nightgowns, some solid and others floral. This morning it was floral. She would neither change her clothes nor fix her disorderly, medium, white hair until after her husband had eaten and left for work. Until then they listened to the news from the living room radio as they ate their breakfast of porridge and toast.

While his wife stirred her porridge before taking a spoonful, Mr. Rosen mechanically dipped his spoon in the bowl, watching the level of porridge drop with each mouthful. Mrs. Rosen ate at her usual slow speed, but Mr. Rosen ate slowly out of boredom. He was satisfied with his breakfast but this morning, he would have preferred bacon and eggs. It has been over a year since his wife had made that occasional breakfast and only once since then had she offered him eggs without the bacon; he turned it down since that would be like eating dry toast. He could eat bacon alone but not eggs alone; eggs needed bacon, not the other way around.

His wife's sudden anti-bacon position was the first sign and six months later, came the second; she decided that they would attend synagogue on the high holidays. Mrs. Rosen was transforming into a practising Jew and Mr. Rosen was expecting that she would soon be suggesting they attend weekly synagogue.

Mr. Rosen said nothing about the change in his wife's religious attitude. Even though it worried him, he went along with it, just as he went along with everything else that she had decided. He worried not because he had no desire to be among a group of people, having to be always on his guard against someone's attempt to start a conversation before or after the service, but because of the reason or reasons for her change. He had heard of seniors, who after becoming bored, and / or lonely, and / or began fearing the closeness of death, turning or returning to religion, but he had

never expected this change in his wife, especially since he thought it was only for Christians.

Finishing his porridge, Mr. Rosen put down his spoon and with the white cloth napkin, wiped his mouth and brushed his black chevron moustache that appeared to support his large hawk nose. With his habitual stone face and his refined British accent, the sort expected from a Cambridge graduate, he said, "Thank you, Ruthy. That was splendid."

"Av, you'd be welcome if you'd eat that last piece of toast there," his wife said in her just as refined accent, sliding the small plate with the half piece of toast a couple inches closer to her husband.

Mr. Rosen was not sure if his wife had ended her request with *there* or *dear*. If she had said *there*, she was teasing him, but if she had said *dear*, she was serious. Both had grown slightly deaf over the years and if he asked for clarification, it might turn into a sort of comedy routine. He decided that she had said *there* and replied, "Ruthy, I think the birds would appreciate it. I am more than full."

His wife smiled. "All that butter for the little birds? It'll give them tiny heart attacks."

"Ok, I shall place it in the napkin...and eat it on my way to work."

Mrs. Rosen dropped her spoon in her bowl and wiped her mouth with her napkin. From Mr. Rosen's angle, the napkin removed her smile too. "No, you shall not, Avriel Rosen. I know you'll not eat it, and I know I'll never see that napkin again," she said and then pulled the small plate back towards her. "Perhaps, I'll try to persuade the squirrels to take it. Heaven knows some of those little critters could use heart attacks. Have you seen the numbers raiding the bird feeders? They're out of control! If any of those furry-tailed rats get rabies, this street is done for!"

Mr. Rosen sat perplexed, before he cracked a slight smile reserved exclusively for his wife and followed it up with a low, reserved belly laugh.

"Avriel Rosen, the squirrel situation is no laughing matter!"

Mr. Rosen checked his laugh. "Ruthy, I was not laughing at you. I was laughing at myself. I thought I heard you say that if the squirrels get rabies, this street is done."

Mrs. Rosen's dark grey eyebrows tilted inward and she stared at her husband for a second, before starting to laugh, or *glaugh* as her husband liked to call it, since it was as loud as a laugh but sounded more like a giggle. Glaughing, she reached across the table and squeezed her husband's long hand.

He returned her squeeze, broke a rare full smile and added, "I wonder what our neighbour would do if the squirrels converted."

His wife glaughed again.

Proud of his joke, Mr. Rosen forced his eyes from his wife and glanced up towards the wooden framed clock on the kitchen wall behind her. He would have looked at his leather-strapped watch but without his reading glasses, its thin arms were useless. He wore it more out of habit than practicality. His smile dropped. He released his wife's hand and said, "Well, it is time."

He stood up from the table, rinsed his plate and coffee cup under tap water and placed them neatly in the sink. Walking into the adjacent dining room, he asked, "Ruthy, are you finished with all the stores?"

"Yes, dear," his wife answered, clanging the remaining dishes as she cleared the table.

Mr. Rosen picked up the five-inch pile of manila file folders from off the dining room table, packed them in his thick, black briefcase and using some force, closed it. He knew the giant, electronic calculator, the small box of pens and pencils and the even smaller box of pins (his wife never trusted paper clips) sitting on the table would soon disappear to a location he had yet to discover, though he had never had a reason to search for them.

As he did almost every morning, he walked to the front entrance closet, placed the briefcase on the floor, took out his black blazer and put it on. With his briefcase in hand, he opened the front door and bent down to pick up the *Chronicle Herald* newspaper. He turned around to find his wife slightly out of breath with a small, paper lunch bag in her hand.

Exchanging the bag for the newspaper, Mrs. Rosen struggled to catch her breath. "Now...now don't forget...about tonight. It's...Thursday."

"I will remember. I should be here by four-thirty."

Mrs. Rosen pulled her husband's tie out from between his shoulder and blazer, adjusted it and patted his thin chest at just about her head height. "Ok, dear...just to remind you, I...I'll call you at four."

She stood on her toes while her husband bent down and with both hands full, swung his long arms around her, giving her a soft hug. They quickly kissed.

With her breathing almost back to normal, Mrs. Rosen wished her husband a good day and closed the door behind him.

Mr. Rosen never brought attention to his wife's struggle for air, but it worried him. He worried about her constant struggle after exerting herself, worried about the decline in her quality of life, which she always downplayed, and he worried over her attempts to hide or ignore her struggles, so that he wouldn't worry. He worried that one day he would see his wife confined to the bed with an oxygen mask strapped to her face and oxygen tanks standing permanently beside it. He almost never worried about what would come after that, because he refused to think about it. The few times he had found himself doing so, he was only able to stop by looking back to their shared past.

The Rosen's never discussed death. To them, it was as taboo a subject as sex, though more inevitable. Up until the discovery of his wife's heart problem, Mr. Rosen was comfortable with the high probability of him passing away before her. She could function without him. She had always been an independent, outgoing people-person who could make friends easily if she tried, and he was the only reason she didn't try. He, on the other hand, could not live without her. He was not a people-person, kept himself securely protected behind a shell of introversion, and had become mentally and perhaps even physically dependent on his wife. So dependent, that if one were to ask him where in their new home his wife kept the cutlery, he would have to think about it and might guess the top kitchen drawer. He would be wrong. The cutlery was in the second drawer. Since Mrs. Rosen spent the greater majority of her time at home and had more time to cook elaborate meals, she had found it more convenient to keep her cooking utensils in the top drawer.

For the last twenty-two months, the deterioration of his wife's heart (their doctor called it cardiomyopathy) had been slowly progressing.

When first informed of his wife's condition, Mr. Rosen hid his panic well but insisted that she stay home and from there do only, if she felt she must, the bookkeeping. He had surprised both her and himself with his insistence; it may have been the first time that he had ever insisted on her doing anything, ever.

After eight months of staying home, Mrs. Rosen decided that they needed a smaller home. Mr. Rosen reluctantly agreed and suggested that they avoid a house with stairs by purchasing a bungalow, but his wife felt that a house that small would be inadequate for all their things. Then Mr. Rosen suggested that they get a house cleaner, but his wife said that she could still use the exercise of cleaning and doing some gardening, but on a smaller scale of both. In the end, they sold their much larger home and moved to the smaller two-story, three-bedroom and one-and-a-half-bath house on Gilmore Street, which his wife took upon herself to pick out.

Mr. Rosen did not immediately question his wife's decisions. He had learnt to wait and after he had given it some thought, he would find that she was right.

His wife was his paragon. In the past, when she had decided that they would make a dramatic change in their life, which was not often, she had never been wrong. When he returned from the war as a noticeably broken man, his wife suggested, as a needed change, they move to Canada. She was right. When they had the means and the opportunity presented itself to purchase an established drugstore, she pushed her husband to do it. She was right. When their first store was doing well, she suggested they open another. She was right again. Moreover, when after the seventh location was operating smoothly and making a profit, Mr. Rosen tried beating his wife to the punch by suggesting that they open another location, his wife surprised him by disagreeing and telling him that they had had enough locations. Once again, she was right; though, he did not know it at the time.

The only decision that Mr. Rosen was not confident with was the one to move to Gilmore Street, not so much the house but the location. On Jubilee Road, where they had lived for almost twenty years, the couple never saw their neighbours. The houses were secluded from one another by almost three-hundred and sixty degrees of trees, *almost* because the tree lines were broken only by the long driveways. Gilmore was dramatically different from Jubilee. There was no isolation. The houses lining it were literally a spitting distance from one another, and Mr. Rosen did not have to do a survey to be confident that in that lower-middle-class neighbourhood, his wife and he were the only Jews. With their last name and his stereotypical Jewish face, he was certain that his neighbours had realized it and, even with the lack of space between the homes, kept their distance because of it. That was fine with him, but he knew his wife would like more contact with them and believed that the main reason she had picked that neighbourhood was to make friends.

Mr. and Mrs. Rosen had differing opinions of the neighbours. Mrs. Rosen did not believe that the neighbours were bigots, except perhaps those on their immediate right, but thought the problems were that they had no children, were old enough to be the parents of most of the those on the street and their accents made them appear as foreigners and perhaps even snobbish. Having little to nothing in common with the other families made for distant relations, at least initially.

Mr. Rosen fought to get his keys from his back pocket, unlocked and got into the oversized, four-door Cadillac, placed his briefcase down flat on the passenger side of the bench seat and sat his lunch on his lap.

He yawned and rubbed his hands over his face. He had not yet adjusted to his earlier schedule of leaving at seven-thirty instead of nine. That early in the morning was only necessary because he had

little chance of coming across and exchanging insincere salutations with his bigoted next-door neighbour or his blond-haired, blue-eyed son who had recently started summer vacation and had several times in the morning, greeted him as Mr. Jew. After being surprised the first time it happened, Mr. Rosen learnt to expect the greeting and retaliated by calling the child a *goy boy*, but only in his mind because his wife did not appreciate that sort of talk.

Mr. Rosen picked up the lunch bag and searched inside for the small piece of coloured paper containing a note with writing so small that he kept a pair of reading glasses in the glove box for just that. Since confining herself to the home, each morning Mrs. Rosen added small messages to her husband's lunch. Sometimes they were romantic, sometimes reminders and sometimes amusing. This morning, Mr. Rosen found the usual roast beef sandwich wrapped in wax paper and instead of finding a note, found that morning's remaining half piece of buttered toast. He cracked a slight smile, closed the bag and squeezed it between the briefcase and the backrest.

Putting the engine in reverse, he looked over his right shoulder and cautiously backed out of the driveway.

Mr. Rosen had never liked driving, but with his wife no longer working with him in their main office within their seventh and final drugstore, he had learnt to appreciate its sanctuary. It had become the perfect place for his mental adjustment between home and work and vice versa. His car essentially became his acclimatizer; it compressed him on the way to work and decompressed him on the way back, every day except for Thursday afternoons.

...excerpt...

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