Undercover With the Weird Religious Divorce Rules Unit

by Con Chapman

An undercover agent posed as an Orthodox Jewish woman in a sting operation that led to the arrest of two rabbis for kidnapping men who refused to grant divorces to their wives.

The New York Times

"Cover me—I'm going in."

It was getting late and I was tired, but I resisted the temptation to have another cup of coffee even though I still had two hours left on my shift. I needed my sleep later so's I could be back at it with eyes bright and coat shiny tomorrow. I tell ya, there's never a dull moment with the Weird Religious Divorce Rules Swat Team.

Take the Mormons, fer instance. If they have a temple marriage the husband and wife are together forever, for time *and all eternity.*

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How you gonna put asunder somethin' like that? Only way is with a temple sealing cancellation, which sounds like a contractor calling you up to say he can't be there today, he's too busy, but it's not.

That's why they created the Weird Religious Divorce Rules Swat Team, to straighten out the kinda knotty problem you run into when a simple civil ceremony ain't enough. There's nothin' that complicates a simple cut-and-dried domestic dispute like an esoteric sub-clause that requires a ten-day waiting period with two Anglican archbishops or a witness to the signature of a left-handed Greek Orthodox notary public.

When I heard they was creatin' the WRDR unit, I jumped at the chance to sign up. You wanna be the best, you gotta play the best, in police work just like in sports. I figured if I cracked some phony-baloney Catholic annulment where a guy was fakin' antecendent and perpetual impotence, I might have a shot at bein' captain some day.

Instead of coffee, I settled for a Yoo-Hoo Chocolate Drink out of the machine. I eased back in my chair to enjoy the smooth, silky

texture and the watered-down flavor when my phone rang. It was the Chief—I could tell from our state-of-the-art, interoffice caller ID.

“Schuckter here,” I said with a tone that I hoped conveyed both a sense of urgency, *and* the calm, deliberative mind of a seasoned veteran.

“It's the Chief,” he said. He knew that I knew who was calling, and I knew that he knew that I knew, but we both backed out of the hall-of-mirrors that our mutual self-consciousness had led us into before we got lost. “I got a new one for you.”

“Baha'is?”

“No. Say, why do that put that apostrophe right in the middle of the word.” The chief was a world-class orthographer, and he never missed an opportunity to bust my chops over some quaint and curious punctuation mark he found lying around.

“I dunno. Rastafarian?”

“If only. You could mellow them out with a little medicinal marijuana—provided they had a note from the family doctor.”

“Or a copy of I-Roy's ‘Musical Shark Attack' album.” It was my turn to show off; I went underground with the Rastas in the mid-70′s to learn their divorce techniques, folklore and strategems. There apparently aren't any, but you don't want to leave something that important to chance.

I-Roy

“Is that the album the guy told you to buy that time you went to Bermuda with your girlfriend who didn't want to get married?”

“On the nosey,” I replied. “It was probably for the best.” I had to admit I was stumped, so I tried one last time, the obvious choice for weird divorce rules that for some reason I'd overlooked. “Muslim?”

“Nope, but good guess,” the Chief said. “I could never figure out when you had to go ‘Talaq!' three times, and when once was enough.”

“Yeah, it's like prunes,” I said.

“And the whole thing about waiting through three menstrual periods—what's the point of that?”

“You got me—on both counts. Come on—what's the sect, cult, denomination or creed in question.”

There was silence for a moment. “You ready for this?” the Chief said with a dramatic tone.

“Hit me with your best shot.”

“Orthodox . . . Judaism.”

“Get . . . outta . . . town!”

"McKelvey—Weird Religious Divorce Rules Unit."

"Nope. Right here in town—Brooklyn."

You coulda knocked me over with a yamukah. "Since when did the Chosen People start having divorce problems?"

I heard the Chief snort. "Since the Old Testament, bingo brain. Remember, Moses gave it to 'em . . ."

". . . out of the hardness of their hearts, I know. So what's the problem?"

"Among the Orthodox, divorce requires a husband's permission, a 'get.'"

"Oh, I get it."

"Some guys are real jerks about it and refuse to consent, which created a unique business opportunity."

"Which was?"

"A kosher kidnapping and torture ring."

I was . . . speechless. "That doesn't sound very religious."

"You know what they say: 'Oh religion—what crimes are committed in thy name?'"

"Yeah, that's a great quote. Who said it?"

"It's actually apocryphyal. It's a variation on a wisecrack that Marie-Jeanne Phillipo Roland made on her way to be beheaded—'O Liberty! What crimes are committed in thy name!'"

"Huh. I thought it was Yogi Berra."

“Anyway, for $10,000 bucks the guy who's running this thing, Rabbi Moishe Mendelsohn will give the gal a decree permitting the use of violence, and for $50,000 he'll hired somebody to do the deed.”

MADAME ROLAND.
From a painting by Gough.

Madame Roland: “Will the guillotine mess up my curls?”

It was, even to my case-hardened stomach, sickening. “So what's the assignment?”

The Chief gave me a steely-eyed look. “I need somebody to go undercover and bust this thing.”

“Undercover—like how?”

He looked me over like a deli pan of chopped liver. “Like a middle-aged Orthodox Jewish woman.”

I tried not to flinch, but I'm sure I did. I'd handled a lot of tough cross-dressing religious jobs; there was the time I posed as “Polly Endicott” to crack a Presbyterian coffee hour embezzlement ring; I'd nabbed a minor Kennedy scion trying to wriggle out of a validly contracted marriage performed by a conductor on the MBTA's Red Line between a downtown Boston nightclub and his bachelor pad in

Cambridge; I'd broken up a nefarious love triangle of Jehovah's Witnesses going door-to-door selling The Watchtower.

Presbyterian coffee hour crew: That's me, front row, second from right.

“Would you knock off the interior monologue and listen to me?” the chief snapped, recalling me harshly from my reverie. “Frankly, I'm not sure you're the guy for this caper,” he said, one eyebrow arching upwards with skepticism.

I bristled at the very suggestion. “Are you kidding? There's nobody on the force who's got the chops for this job but me.”

Annulment: “You know that wedding we went through? I had my fingers crossed behind my back.”

“How you figure?”

“I've been to a seder where they served nothing but Chinese food. I lived in two Jewish neighborhoods in Chicago and Boston for 6 years. I had two long-term Jewish girlfriends, and I knew more Yiddish than the both of them put together!”

“How about Hebrew?”

I hod ta loff, as we say here in Boston. “Mekka lekka hi mekka hiney ho,” I said with *blase* self-assurance.

Pee-wee Herman and Jambi

“That ain't Hebrew, those are the magic words of Jambi the Genie on Pee-wee's Playhouse.”

“Oh, right. I meant ‘Mene, mene, tekel upharsin,'” I said, quoting the words from the Book of Daniel, the handwriting on the wall that warned the banquet guests who profaned the sacred vessels pillaged from the Temple of Jerusalem. The first one, not the second one.

The chief wasn't completely convinced, but due to budget cuts from having to pay the pensions of guys who retired before us, I was all he had. “All right, I'll give you first shot,” he said after a moment. “But if you screw this up, I'll bust you down to liberal arts major cult deprogrammer.”

“Don't worry,” I said, happy to have won his confidence. “I'm gonna make the best damn *yakhne* you've ever seen!”

I went down to the supply room and started rummaging through the disguises. There was an unused *sari*—divorce being forbidden for Hindus, although Lord Rama abandoned Sita in the epic *Ramayana* on the mere suspicion of infidelity—tough break, lady! There was an Anne Boleyn costume—plunging neckline, I must say. Ah—here we go! A nice skirt ‘n sweater combo that will cover me from the neckline to the knee, and a kerchief—a *tichel*—to cover my hair. Mike Clumley, the aging sergeant, helps me get dressed after first affixing my “wire”—a concealed tape recorder—around my shoulder.

“What kinda deodorant you use?” Mike asks—everybody's a comic.

“Old Spice Classic Scent,” I say with mock defensiveness. “I'm a cop fer Christ sake!”

They put me in a squad car and take me over to Borough Park, where they drop me off at a nondescript apartment building. “We'll be right outside in case you need us.”

“Don't worry,” I say. “I was listening to Shelley Berman albums when I was 10.”

I make my way up the stairs and press the buzzer. It doesn't take the *rebbe* long to appear—business must be slow.

“Hello,” he says, giving me the once-over, then the twice-over. I shaved before I came over, so my cheeks are as smooth as a baby's bottom. “What can I do for you?”

“I need to get a get,” I say.

“Ah—come in!” At his prices, he'd better roll out the red carpet for a potential customer.

We go into his study and he sits me down. “Here's my price list,” he says, but I slow him down. I need to get him on tape.

“I don't understand the menu,” I say, all innocent-like. “What is *geveyntlekh* service?”

“That's regular. We rough the guy up a bit, tell him he'd better cooperate with his long-suffering wife. Ten thousand.”

“And *gut*?”

“That's one step up. We kidnap him, take him for a ride in a van. He gets the message. Twenty-five thousand.”

“And *vunderlekh*?”

His face clouds over. “You feel that strongly?” he asks ominously.

“He has mistreated me so!”

“Okay, well, for fifty thousand we apply electric shocks to his genitals.”

“Is it guaranteed to work?”

“You get our standard manufacturer's warranty. If you're not totally satisfied, we Tase him again.”

He was beginning to scare me more than a little, so I figured it was time to call in backup. I leaned over into my armpit and “Now!” I said with quiet urgency.

“Now what?” the rabbi said.

I waited for a second to see if reinforcements would arrive on the scene in time to make it unnecessary for me to answer his question. One Mississippi, two Mississippi—nothing.

"Now, uh, is the time for all quick brown foxes to . . . come to the aid of their party," I said sheepishly, then leaned down to my armpit mic and snapped "Hurry!"

"Hurry what?" the rabbi asked.

"Hurry up and wait," I said, "because . . . uh, haste makes waste." I was talking nonsense, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

He looked at me with a gimlet eye, and shook his head. "You know, I never turn down a customer, but in your case I'm going to make an exception."

"Why?"

"Because as bad as your husband's been, he deserves a wife as ugly and *meshuggina* as you."