

The Jewish Goodbye

by Daniel Passamaneck

“Oy. / Oy.” Izzy and Sarah both laughed, but gently - not the bellybuckling roars they'd shared earlier in the evening. These were more like chuckles, their diaphragms bouncing softly on that splendid brisket and brussels sprouts and the second plate of tea cakes over which they'd all lingered for twenty minutes more than the twenty minutes they'd allotted themselves. Sam would have to open the store tomorrow, early-early, and Tessie would need to do a lot of work in the kitchen before it was clean enough for her to sleep well, despite the well-fed fog that had settled over her.

For the third time, conversation had come to a pause, but this time it didn't feel like it was the sort of pause that breaks up different trains of thought - rather, it was the kind of pause that signaled the end of conversation, the opening of closure. Glances bounced from husband to wife, and from friend to friend. An unspoken recognition took hold, that an evening of pleasantries was concluding. “Oy is right,” Leah agreed.

“Okay, then.” Sam placed his meaty palm on his knees, proffered a businesslike sigh, and pushed himself to his feet. As he reached verticality his knees cracked and he belched softly. “Pardon,” he mumbled into his lightly-clenched fist, as Izzy reflexively uttered a “Zeigesunt.” “I guess,” Sam continued, “it's time we said goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” replied Izzy, rising in response.

“Goodnight,” added Leah, staggering a little as she found her feet after a long relaxed evening of fatty foods. “It's been lovely. Thanks so much.”

“Certainly, certainly,” Tessie assured her. “Its always a pleasure.”

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Leah demurred: "With that brisket, the pleasure is ours." Tessie pantomimed a coy blush through her obvious pride, but then Leah continued, "Oh but yes, Tess, I wanted to ask you something."

"Oy. / Oy." Izzy and Sam spoke in unison.

"What? What? She can't ask me a question?," Tessie demanded of the men.

"Who's stopping her?," Sam remonstrated.

"That look on your faces, sour like lemons - that's what's stopping her. Leah, don't worry about it. Sam is always this way after he eats too much."

"I didn't eat too much! I'm fine, Tessie, it was delicious. If you must know, I'm just wondering why my wife had to wait till now to ask you her question. We've been here all night. She couldn't decide to ask until we're walking out the door?"

"No, in fact, I could not," Leah said defiantly. "I forgot that I wanted to ask her. Is it such a terrible thing? I ask, she tells, bing bing bing and it's done. You won't miss any of your precious sleep."

"First of all, you know I get up before dawn tomorrow. You'll be snoring when I leave the house. You want I should wake you up? I don't think so. And secondly, it's never bing bing bing with you. It's like, bing bang bongity bumbity bum yadda yadda bla bla bla." Sam stopped short and glanced down at his shoes. He knew he'd gone too far.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Leah's voice was carefully controlled, a carving knife pointed at Sam's heart. Sam paused before responding.

"I don't mean anything. Just ask your question and let's get going. I've got an early day tomorrow."

Leah was derisive. "Right, sure, it's all about you. And I just sit around making sure you've got a nice life to come back to. Just forget it, we're going."

Sam answered with irritation: "Damnit, no! Ask your goddamn question already!"

A tense hush fell over the sitting room; the tick of the belljar clock mocked their discomfort.

Leah spat a conclusory, "Forget it."

"Oh for God's sake, then let's go," Sam replied with disgust.

Tessie seemed affronted by this. "Samuel, don't snap at her like that. You're making her forget. Be nice."

Sam's anger erupted at this intercession. "Don't you tell me how to talk to my wife! If your husband likes taking orders from you, that's fine, but I will not have you speak to me like that! There's a reason I married Leah, not you!"

Izzy roused himself and focused on Sam. "Hold on there. What are you saying?"

Sam sought redemption. "I'm sorry, Izzy, I just - "

Izzy cut him off. "No you do not. You are a guest in my house and it is inappropriate for you to speak to me or my wife that way. She has fed you and cleaned up after you and you will treat her with respect, do you understand me? Yes, she can try a man's patience but be a

goddamn man about it and keep a civil tongue in your head when you speak to my wife in my home!"

Izzy's words echoed in the small room and were followed by a brief, shocked silence. The silence broke when Tessie and Sam simultaneously asked, "What? / What?"

Izzy inhaled, remorsefully. "Oy."

Leah stepped in, seeking reconciliation. "Okay, Sam, I think it's time to go."

Sam was having none of that. "No, no, my friend Isadore has raised an important point. We should get to the bottom of it. Isadore, what do you - "

Tessie, having found her tongue after a few moments of mute stammering, cut Sam off furiously. "Try a man's patience?! How dare you? And in front of guests!!!"

Izzy rose to his own defense. "Yes, guests! I invited them into my home, and I can speak my mind in front of them if I wish! Gevalt you can be a shrew when you've had your schnapps!"

Leah gathered her wits before chastising Izzy. "Isadore, that is inappropriate. Tessy had one small glass - but she poured you three and I have no idea how much more you had on your own. You should pay more attention. You should be ashamed, treating her like that. I've had enough. Samuel, we're leaving. Tessie, you can tell me tomorrow who's that young man spending so many afternoons at Mimi Cohen's house these days."

Attention was suddenly galvanized. Past slights evaporated at this news. Izzy was the first to ask, "Wait. What?"

Samuel further pursued the line of questioning: "Rabbi Cohen's wife? A male caller?"

Leah dismissively reminded him, "We don't have time to get into it. You have an early day tomorrow. Tessie, Isadore, goodnight."

Izzy, Tessie and Sam exchanged hungry glances and then Sam gently suggested, "Leah, I think we have time to discuss this one little thing... I mean, it's late, but it's not late-late...."

