The Book

by Gerry Schramm

The second thing Elza noticed about Harold's living room (after the lack of window coverings) was the book on the coffee table. “What's this?” she asked. She picked up the book; her free hand found her hip. She was ready for a fight.
“It's a book,” he said.

“I know it's a book.”

“Then that was a stupid question, yes?”

“What I meant was what is *this* book doing on *your* coffee table?”

“I'm reading it.”

“You're reading it?”

“Yes. Reading? Perhaps you have heard of it?”

“I've heard of reading, Harold.”

“Then that's two stupid questions in a row.”

She shook the book at him. “Why are you reading *Mein Kampf*?”

“Well, it's a book, isn't it?”

“But it's *Mein Kampf*!”

“Are you going to deny me the freedom to read a book? Maybe you'd like to burn it instead?”

“Not just any book, Harold, *Mein Kampf*! It should be burned!”

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“Must you yell?”

“*Mein Kampf!* Is there a way to say *Mein Kampf* without yelling? *Mein Kampf! Mein Kampf!*”

“What's wrong with reading *Mein Kampf*?”

“What's right about it?”

“It's just a book.”

“By this century's most evil mind, that's all.”

“Last century's. And I'm not reading it because I love Hitler. It's interesting.”

“Interesting? It's Hitler!”

“What? Do you mean to tell me that *Mein Kampf* can't be interesting in any way? Not even historically?”

Elza opened the book to a random page. “Do you find this interesting: ‘In the business world the situation was even worse. Here the Jews had actually become “indispensable.” Like leeches, they were slowly sucking the blood from the pores of the national body. By means of newly floated War Companies an instrument had been discovered whereby all national trade was throttled so that no business could be carried on freely.' That's interesting?”

“It's a just a book, Elza.”

“I want you to stop reading it.”

“I will not.”

“I will not date someone who reads Hitler.”

“ ‘Reading,' not ‘reads.' It is not my habit to read Hitler.”

“And yet you are reading it.”

Harold checked the orzo. “Don't you have a copy of *The Communist Manifesto*? A Liberal Arts major like you must have a copy somewhere.”

“Sure, but that was college.”

“So as long as someone with a few letters after his name tells you to read it you're absolved?”

“Are you comparing the communists with Hitler?”

“Are you telling me there is no comparison? All I'm saying is that *Mein Kampf* is a book, and I'm reading it.”

“Would you read it on the bus?”

Harold switched his attention from the orzo to the peas.

“Did you hear me? Would you read *Mein Kampf* on the bus? Or in the park? Or anywhere in public?”

Harold sucked his bottom lip. “No.”

“And why not, Harold?”

“You know why.”

“I want you to tell me why.”

“Because people might think I was a skinhead or something.”

“Precisely.”

“But the willingness to do something in public can't be the only measure of whether that thing should be done at all. I wouldn't read *Penthouse Letters* in public but I'd still read it at home. I'm allowed to do that, right?”

“You read pornography?”

Harold checked the orzo again.

“Some first date so far, eh?” he said.