

# God Bless You, Mr. Eichmann

*by* Peter Cherches

I was at my desk, proofreading the galleys for a book of criticism on Thomas Kyd, the Elizabethan playwright, when I heard the sound of a key turning in the lock of my door. Naturally, I was startled—the only people with keys to my apartment are myself and Eichmann, the landlord, and I knew that Eichmann would never use the key without knocking first. So I ran to the door, and when I opened it a guy with a crewcut led in a band of about fifteen blond-haired boys in wheelchairs and on crutches. The man looked like a Marine drill instructor and the boys were all frail and angelic—any one of them could have been a convincing Tiny Tim. "I think there's been a mistake," I said. "This is my apartment."

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man said. "I am Martin Jerrold, and these children are all my students at the Jerrold Academy for Disabled Waifs."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I can't give you any money. I'm a freelance proofreader, and I'm barely making ends meet."

"Oh no, no, no, we're not here to solicit funds," he said with a laugh, adding, "though gifts are always appreciated."

"Then why have you come here?" I asked.

"We're here to use the apartment," he replied. "I've rented it from Mr. Eichmann for my seminar."

"What are you talking about!" I fumed. "This is my apartment."

"I'm well aware of that. Eichmann told me to let you know that you can use 3A downstairs while we're here. It's empty."

3A was where Margaret Murphy, a very nice old lady, used to live. Mrs. Murphy had died about a week earlier, or at least that's what they estimated since nobody had known she was dead until the

day before, when the stink started to ooze out of her apartment.

"Why didn't Eichmann give you 3A?" I asked.

"We didn't think it was a good idea to bring the children to a place so recently visited by—need I say it?"

"Regardless, Eichmann can't just up and rent out my apartment while I'm still here."

"It'll only be for a couple of hours," Jerrold said.

"That's not the point. It's *my* apartment."

"I'm sorry about that," he said, "but I do have a receipt. You're going to have to take this up with Eichmann."

I was really pissed-off by this point, but I figured the only thing to do was to have it out with Eichmann. I *was* curious about something, though. "By the way," I asked, "how did all these kids get up here? After all, this *is* the fifth floor of a walkup."

"It wasn't easy," he said, "but these boys have stamina, determination. That's what my seminar is about today: The power of positive thinking. By the way, do you have any folding chairs for those who haven't got their own?"

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"Well boys, it looks like you're going to have to stand."

I ran down the four flights of stairs in a huff and knocked on Eichmann's door. A woman with curlers in her hair answered. It was not Eichmann's wife. "Yeah, whaddaya want?" she said.

"I have to talk to Mr. Eichmann," I said.

"Ike ain't here," she said. "He went to the track."

"Mrs. Eichmann, then."

"She ain't here either. She had to go to Milwaukee for a funeral."

"Well, who are you," I asked.

"I'm Ike's mistress," she said. "Are you the fella from 5C?" I nodded. "Ike told me to give you the keys for 3A."

"Listen, I don't know what's going on here, but you just can't rent out my apartment from under me," I protested.

"Oh yes we can," she said. "It's in your lease. The fine print. You shoulda read the fine print."

"What are you talking about? There's nothing like that in my lease."

"Listen, you don't have to take my word for it. Lemme get the lease." She went back inside and returned a minute later with the lease. "Let's see . . . Oh yeah, here it is, Section Fourteen. And here I quote: 'The landlord reserves the right, during the term of this lease, to rent out the apartment on a *per diem* basis, provided the tenant is compensated with similar accommodations.'"

"Let me see that," I said. She gave me the lease and I took a look at Section Fourteen. Everything she said was right there.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Well, I suppose there's nothing I can do about it now. But when Eichmann gets back, tell him I want to have a talk with him." I took the keys for 3A and headed back up the stairs. First I had to go back to my own apartment to pick up the Kyd galleys.

When I went in I saw Jerrold standing on my coffee table, frantically lecturing the children. "Yes, boys, you can do anything if you set your mind to it. Why, just the fact that you made it up those five flights of stairs should be proof enough. Sure, there are lots of folks who'll tell you that one day the meek shall inherit the Earth, but I say that's a crock of shit." At this the children broke out in wild applause. I picked up the galleys and left the apartment.

When I entered 3A I saw that I was not alone. There was a middle-aged woman looking in one of the closets. "Hello," I said.

The woman looked at me and said, "Jesus, these landlords are really something. They don't even let the stink clear out from the last tenant before they move someone else in."

"Well, I'm not really moving in," I said. "I just have to do some work here while they're using my apartment."

"Listen, I didn't mean to blow up at you," she said. "It's just that my mom just died and I'm a little upset."

"Oh, are you Mrs. Murphy's daughter?"

"Yeah, did you know her?"

"Not very well. But she seemed like a very nice lady."

"She was a saint, a saint. And stubborn too. Refused to go to a hospital. The tumor getting bigger every day, eating away at her like a termite on wood. And spasms like you wouldn't believe."

"How come it took them so long to discover she was dead?" I asked.

The woman shot me a dirty look. "You're sayin' I wasn't a good daughter, is that it? Well, let me tell you something. I work twelve, sometimes fourteen hours a day. Weekends too. I got six kids to support and no husband—the bum ran off years ago."

I felt embarrassed. "Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"I don't want no charity," she said.

"I'm sorry about your mother," I said.

"Yeah, well, I'm gettin' her personal effects together. I'll be out of your way in a minute."

"Take your time," I said.

I got back to the Kyd galleys. Mrs. Murphy's daughter left and I continued working until about a half-hour later, when I heard a knock on the door. I opened the door and saw one of Jerrold's kids, on his hands and knees.

"Are you Mr. Steinberg?" He asked.

"Yes."

"Mr. Jerrold sent me to get you."

"Did he make you walk all the way down here yourself?" I asked.

"No," the boy said. "I can't walk. I had to crawl."

"Did Mr. Jerrold say what he wanted me for?"

"No, but it sounded important."

I picked the boy up, left the apartment, and started walking up the stairs.

"Put me down! Put me down!" the boy screamed. "Let me crawl!"

"You don't want me to carry you?"

"Will you carry me when I'm an old man?"

"I don't think I could do that," I said.

"Then don't carry me now!"

I put him down and he started crawling up the stairs. Naturally, he began to lag behind me, so I stopped and looked back.

"Don't wait for me," he said. "I'll make it on my own."

I walked into my apartment. "You wanted me?" I said to Jerrold.

"Yes," Jerrold said. "I just got this call—it seems there's been some trouble at the school, and I've got to run right down there and take care of things. I need you to take care of my kids while I'm gone."

"But I wouldn't know what to do," I protested. "I'm not trained."

"These are good kids. They don't need much supervision," Jerrold said on his way out.

So there I was, left to take care of a bunch of handicapped children. I've never been very good with kids, so I wasn't keen on the idea of looking after this bunch. In fact, I was incensed. After all, I'd been kicked out of my own apartment because this guy Jerrold has to use it to lecture his kids, and then this same Jerrold calls me back to babysit for them when he has to go out. But what could I do? I couldn't throw those poor, defenseless children out of my apartment. Where would they go? So I was stuck with them. I did have a hell of a lot of work to do, though, so I said to them, "Listen, kids, Mr. Jerrold had to go out to take care of some important business, so I guess I'm elected to take care of you. But I have my work to do, and I'll be needing absolute peace and quiet, so I expect you guys to be on your best behavior."

"Yes, Sir," one of the children said, and was followed by the rest of the group saying, in unison, "Yes, Sir."

Well, maybe these kids won't be so much trouble after all, I thought, as I returned to work on the Kyd galleys.

Things were going as well as could be expected. I was making progress on the proofreading and the kids were being pretty quiet, until one of them hobbled over to me on his crutches and began to tug at my sleeves. "Mister, I'm thirsty," the boy said to me.

"All right," I said. "If you'll wait a second I'll get you a glass of water." I finished up a line, got up, and headed towards the kitchen. The boy followed. I took a glass out of the cabinet, one of the old *yahrzeit* candle glasses that my mother had given me as a house-warming gift, and began to fill it with water from the sink.

"I don't want water. I want Bosco," the boy whined.

"But I don't have any Bosco," I said. "I don't even have any milk."

The boy hobbled over to the refrigerator and opened it. "Then give me a beer," he said. "You have beer."

"I can't give you beer," I said. "Little boys aren't supposed to drink beer."

"I want beer! I want beer!" he began to yell, stamping one of his crutches on the floor.

"Listen," I said, "if you don't stop that I'm going to have to tell Mr. Jerrold on you."

The boy shut up when he heard that. "All right, give me water."

"Say, 'Please.'"

"Please," the boy said, and shot me a dirty look.

I gave him a glass of water and he left the kitchen. I stayed behind and popped a Valium.

When I returned to the living room I saw that two of the children were having a fight. It was a rather unfair pairing: the one I had just given the water to was battering a boy in a wheelchair with one of his crutches. I ran over and tried to pull the one with the crutches away, but as soon as I did that, several of the children rushed over and rammed their wheelchairs into me, bruising my legs, while one of the others started hitting me with a crutch. "Hey! What the hell are you doing?" I yelled.

"Leave us alone!" five or six of the kids yelled back in unison.

"I was only trying to break up the fight," I said.

"We can handle it ourselves," one of the boys said. "We don't need your help."

"But I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

"We can take care of ourselves," he said.

That was fine with me. I figured the less I had to do with those kids, the better. I just wanted to finish the Kyd job. So I returned to the table and got back to work. Then I heard the kid I had given the water to say, "He's got beer." A couple of the kids made their way into the kitchen and came out with the two cold six-packs I had in the fridge.

"It's called Kirin," a kid with one of the six-packs said. "I've never heard of that one before." He passed the bottles out to his friends.

I went over and wrested the bottles away from a couple of the kids, but then some of the others came and rammed their wheelchairs into me again, so hard this time that it knocked me to the floor. Two of the kids with the crutches came over and pinned me down. I couldn't believe how strong they were. "Get off of me!" I yelled.

"Hold him there," one of the boys yelled out.

"If you keep this up you'll be getting yourselves in a lot of trouble," I said.

"That's if you live to tell it," one of them said as he flashed a switchblade at me.

I couldn't believe it. There I was, being held down by a couple of handicapped kids, another one of them holding a switchblade over me, while the rest of their friends drank my imported beer.

"Listen, if you let me go I'll make believe nothing happened."

"Sure you will," the one with the switchblade said and poked me in the ribs with a crutch. One of the kids who had me pinned spit in my face.

"This beer tastes like piss," one of the kids said, poured the beer down my collar, and threw the bottle against the wall. The others followed suit. In no time my entire body was drenched, and there was broken glass all over the place. Some of the kids took my

glasses and dishes out of the kitchen and started hurling them against the walls. A few of them smashed my windows with their crutches. A bunch of the kids in wheelchairs had gotten hold of my suits and were cutting them to shreds with scissors. They were going wild, overturning all the furniture, emptying out all the drawers, breaking everything they could get their hands on. Then one of them picked up the Kyd galleys.

"Hey guys, listen to this: 'Shakespeare's debt to Kyd cannot be stressed enough. One need only consider the plots of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* to recognize this.' What a load of crap," he said and began to rip up the galleys.

"Hey, that's my work. Put that down!" I yelled, and tried again to get them off of me.

"I think we ought to cut this guy's balls off," the one with the switchblade said, and some of the others came over and started trying to pull my pants down.

I was resisting as best I could, but after a while they got my jeans down. They were working on my Jockey shorts when I heard the door open. I could see that it was Eichmann, the landlord.

"Eichmann! Save me!" I screamed.

"Let him go!" Eichmann yelled, and the kids all stopped dead in their tracks. "I want you all to go downstairs to my apartment. My mistress will give you milk and cookies."

"Hooray!" the children all cheered in unison and began to file out the door, in wheelchairs, on crutches, and as they left, each of them said, in turn, "God bless you, Mr. Eichmann."

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