

SHALOM CAMENIETZKI

The Transformation of Harvey Klein

WEEKS AFTER HARVEY KLEIN TURNED seventy-six, his wife Sarah leaned across the dinner table. With her swollen fingers she combed her short, silvery hair and stared Harvey in the eye. “What I need,” her veined hand fondled the air as if outlining small waves, “are spiritual, heart-wrenching, *meaningful* experiences. That Rabbi Feldman lives in his head.”

Harvey raised his bald pate and extended the palms of his thin, gnarled hands. “But the Rabbi is a scholar, Sarah. He isn’t big on feelings.”

“C’mon, Harvey. From the pulpit, he talks down to the congregation as if we were kids. And the services at his Beth Shalom?” she rolled her eyes in mock despair; “just opportunities for women to show off their latest dresses, hats, and jewellery. I’m sick and tired of Rabbi Feldman.”

Harvey straightened his spine. Whenever his wife of forty-seven years declared she was “sick and tired,” changes became inevitable. Recently, she trumpeted that she was sick and tired of toiling in the garden and scraping the snow off the car without Harvey’s help. Lo and behold, three months later they were installed in a condo with a heated garage.

He stopped standing up to her years ago, when his premature ejaculation began. In the beginning he read books, saw sex therapists, tried herbs and medications—all to no avail. For a couple of seconds, the damned thing sputtered like a leaky faucet even before penetration. Sarah got angry, called him selfish, and no amount of apologies appeased her. She refused to give it a go, and their love life consisted of brief, loose hugs and dry kisses on the lips. “I won’t get aroused in vain,” she said, and he stopped protesting. Over the years he turned meek, shy, crestfallen, and

unassertive. When feeling down he called himself king of the hen-pecked Jews.

While in pursuit of meaningful experiences, Sarah called the Toronto Jewish Information Hotline, talked to friends, read brochures. Finally, she decided to try Yedidei Shabbat, friends of Sabbath, a spiritual group that met on Friday evenings in the home of Aaron Weiss, its founder.

"All I'm asking," she said, "is for you to accompany me to the first meeting. If you don't like it, you can always go back to your Rabbi Feldman and his Shul."

"Friday is fine. I don't go to the office." He still worked several hours a week as a chartered accountant for technophobic old Jews who preferred handwritten summaries of their businesses to computerized reports. After going over their returns at a leisurely pace, he spent time schmoozing over cups of coffee about their children's accomplishments and the prodigious talents of their grandchildren.

Since Harvey knew nothing about the customs of Yedidei Shabbat, he played it safe in a long-sleeved white shirt and a tie; it was, anyhow, too warm to wear a jacket. Sarah looked smart in trim black pants and a silky red blouse.

Aaron Weiss greeted them at the door, dressed in a short-sleeved plaid shirt, scruffy jeans, and Birkenstock sandals. He was a stocky, paunchy man with a thick, scraggly moustache, about forty-five, Harvey estimated from his grey, untrimmed beard. After giving them tight hugs and moist kisses on both cheeks, Aaron led the way to the basement. On the way down, Harvey took off his tie and buried it in his pocket, already feeling embarrassed by the effusiveness of a total stranger.

By the entrance to the basement stood a nearly closed door. Inside the brightly lit room he saw pink tiles on the wall and a green towel on a white rack. He exhaled, reassured. It felt good to know where the washroom was: his enlarged prostate drove him to pee frequently. It would have embarrassed him to ask an obvious, revealing question in the middle of the ceremony. People might think he was irredeemably old, a decrepit coot.

They entered a basement lit only by candles. It smelled of sweet incense and coffee. Despite the near darkness, he saw a

dozen men and women sitting on the carpeted floor, their heads covered. He and Sarah were by far the oldest in the room. He had a bad back, and the thought of sitting on the floor for a couple of hours troubled him. He visualized physiotherapy, lying once again on a narrow bed covered with white paper, his ankles attached to a traction machine. He prayed the spiritual ceremony would be reasonably short and cause no spasms.

After introductions to the group members, another round of moist kisses followed. He and Sarah sat on the floor, surrounded by a sea of legs in jeans, and feet in sandals. He thanked God for finding a spot where he could lean his back against the wall.

Aaron Weiss passed around stapled pages with texts in English and Hebrew. Harvey subtly weighed the bundle on his palm and ruefully concluded that it would be a long, long evening. How many times would he wobble to his feet to go pee?

The Friends sang blessings in Hebrew. A young woman with fleshy, glimmering cheeks and a bulbous nose—probably in her thirties—read poems about love between friends, community life, spring in Israel. In his heart he thanked her for reading in English—his command of Hebrew consisted of dozens of phrases he remembered from his Bar-Mitzvah. They helped him to navigate the oceans of the Sidur, the prayer book. “But,” he pondered, “what in God’s name has this kind of poetry to do with Friday services?”

As if on cue, the group sang animatedly a string of Hebrew songs he couldn’t identify. Occasionally, a song was sprightly, and they clapped hands to the rhythm. Sarah, to his surprise, joined them with the fervour of an old-timer enjoying herself. He, on the other hand, missed the hymns he had known since childhood. He longed for his chair in the Shul. The upholstery there was thin, he couldn’t plunk his bum into it, but the back provided firm support. Moreover, from time to time the congregation rose and then sat down, good opportunities to stretch his legs. Now he worried that he would come across as gawky and ungainly when he rose to his feet to go to the washroom.

Aaron Weiss dissolved his reveries when he introduced that evening’s speaker, a skinny, intense-looking girl with a thick brown braid resting on her shoulder and pita-flat chest. She could easily be my granddaughter, thought Harvey, who was not particularly curious about her topic, Kabbalah and Feminism. He tweaked his nose, thanking God that as far as he remembered, feminism had

been around only since the sixties; it was scary to think that the girl might attempt to survey over a thousand years of Kabbalah.

He half listened, knowing that Sarah, once at home, would insist on a rehash of the evening; he'd be expected to say something intelligent about the program. He cupped his chin in one hand and, to combat his boredom, looked closely at each group member. One of the women sitting across the room, near the table with the coffee urn, surprised him: she had a very attractive face. How come he hadn't noticed her before? Had she come late and sat down while he was engrossed in his back and bladder?

He stared, rapt. The pretty woman listened to the speech spellbound, as if drinking every word. Despite the poor lighting, he concluded that the belle had chestnut, if not black, eyes. Her ginger-coloured, frizzy, thick mane brushed her shoulders. She sat with her legs gracefully under her. He couldn't tell her age from a distance.

He gazed, mesmerized and already enamoured, breathing shallowly, his heart filling his chest. It startled him to think that his persistent stare might lead the woman to perceive him as childish, intrusive, sacrilegious. She'd recoil. Fearful of rejection, he turned his head the other way: Sarah was absorbed in the presentation, unaware of the storm inside him.

When the young woman ended her speech, he too clapped hands, then wobbled to his feet. His buttocks and low back felt sore and frozen. He wended his way to the washroom, making efforts not to dodder or waddle. When he re-entered the dimly lit room, the group was happily singing how blissful it was for sisters to sing on Shabbat, a song unknown to him.

He sat down again. Now the members stretched out their arms and embraced one another. Sarah enthusiastically joined the fold. Without asking Harvey's permission, two over-eager youngsters grabbed his shoulders. Yedidei Shabbat, he concluded, obviously enjoyed physical affection. But their hippie rituals didn't move him. He'd rather welcome the Sabbath sitting at the head of a table with a white linen cloth, fine china, and two tall, glimmering silver candleholders. His two daughters, their husbands, and four grandchildren would listen attentively to his blessings. They all would sing traditional Ashkenazi songs welcoming queen Shabbes—not some Sephardi-Israeli "Shabbat."

After more singing and readings, Aaron Weis blessed the wine and passed around the silver cup. In a few moments, the entire group stood up and together broke a challeh, a braided white bread. At long last, Harvey thought, the ceremony was over.

The pretty woman was standing by the coffee urn and cakes, waiting for her turn to pour herself a cup. Excited, he stood behind her. After filling his cup, he introduced himself.

"Michele Halperin," she said, "but all my friends call me Mickey." She put forth her delicate, elongated hand with no bulging veins. Her fingernails were unpainted, lovely. Her papery cheeks and loose jowl suggested she might be sixty or a bit more.

"I've been attending Yedidei Shabbat for two years," she said. "I get a good feeling of spirituality here."

He had difficulties listening. His heart now pounded, and he wondered whether it was too familiar to place his good ear, the one with no hearing aid, so close to her mouth.

He told her he found his first encounter with the group very interesting. He bent forward and whispered in her ear, "I'm glad to find out there are some mature people at the meeting, not only youngsters in their twenties and thirties."

She smiled, amused. Her beautiful eyes, he determined, were cocoa-brown, not black.

Once at home, Sarah processed the evening. "A wonderful experience! So meaningful! Wonderful people! I noticed you talked to Mickey. She told me she's divorced, has two married boys and two grandchildren. Is still doing supply teaching in high school."

"Is that right?" He feigned indifference, but took in every word.

"Are you going back next week?"

He pictured Mickey's thick mane and dark brown eyes. "Sure," he said, "why not?"

Next Monday the Kleins took the subway downtown and bought Birkenstock sandals and brand new, already washed-out jeans, the dress code of the Yedidei Shabbat. On Friday, Harvey urged Sarah to go early to the meeting so that they could get good spots to sit, perhaps even on floor pillows. In his heart he longed for a strategic place to gaze at Mickey.

She arrived shortly after them. During the meeting, he stared at her on and off, and she smiled whenever their eyes met. He interpreted her smiles as evidence that he was being cautious after all, neither intrusive nor insolent. She didn't come across to him as ravishing as he remembered. On the first Friday, he told himself, he had been infatuated, a teenager. Now he felt invigorated, mature. Mickey was just an attractive woman, not a goddess.

That evening's program seemed less long, even tolerable. His buttocks and low back hurt less. During coffee he talked to Mickey about his old Shul and how intrigued Sarah and he were with Yedidei Shabbat.

"Do you think you'll be back next week?" she asked. "Or are you still shopping around for a congregation?"

He furrowed his brows. Shopping around? Going for services somewhere else would be abdicating something he couldn't yet define. "As far as I'm concerned, I'll be here." Three other words tickled the tip of his tongue, "to see you," but it would have felt terrible to utter them. Perhaps he'd never tell her anything like that—a mute, pent up passion.

The week after, a girl of about twelve sat close to Mickey, and throughout the ceremony they held hands. A granddaughter, a jealous Harvey inferred. He gazed at both of them and saw little or no physical similarities between them. The girl's eyes, for example, were doe-like, and her cheekbones too high. In this case, he concluded, beauty hadn't been transmitted to a third generation. The girl's age reinforced his initial hunch that Mickey must be in her early sixties.

He didn't talk to her that Friday, and he didn't mind it. Instead, he chatted with other members. He admitted to himself, for the first time ever, that every week he enjoyed the Friday services a bit more. He now found their songs quite appealing and their presentations reasonably stimulating. Was he falling in love with Mickey?

All his life he had been a rational believer. He thought of God as the creator of all things human and non-human and couldn't even conceive of a world without Him. Many times Harvey had heard of embittered Jews who questioned the relevance of the spirit in a world that included, among others, Hitler and Auschwitz. But he wasn't a deep thinker; he delegated painful questions to sharper, more profound, more committed minds. He was content

to sing hymns and pray, as he had done since he was a child. He was, he felt, a musical Jew.

He wasn't kidding himself, he insisted. Slowly he was growing fond of Yedidei Shabbat. This, he knew, was taking place primarily because every week he basked in the beauty of Mickey's pretty face. He was so in love with his own consuming attraction that he never questioned the appropriateness of his prolonged gazing in a community of worshippers. By averting his eyes whenever he felt his staring was becoming excessive, he made sure he wouldn't be rejected. He harboured the fear that Mickey might tell him to cut out the gazing, or tell Sarah about him being childish and inappropriate.

Weeks later, Friday afternoon was so hot that Sarah considered not attending the gathering. Harvey, however, replied that the basement at Aaron's was well air-conditioned, and they ought to go. "Our friends are waiting for us," he said, praying that Mickey would be at the meeting. "Let's not disappoint them. Skipping sessions is like the domino theory. You skip one, and it might become a habit."

Sarah extended her arm across the table and held his hand. "Maz'l tov, Harvey. You're becoming a spiritual Jew!"

He shuddered, feeling guilty and ashamed. His so-called spirituality consisted of an irresistible compulsion to gaze at a beautiful woman. His relationship with Mickey, he felt, was a pure fantasy; nothing real, carnal, would ever come out of it. It embarrassed him that at his age he lived for optical sex. Deep down, he remembered fondly the services at their Shul and wished he had met Mickey there, long ago.

Only seven people showed up that Friday. Mickey sat by his side, for the first time ever. He didn't cherish that arrangement, as he'd gaze at her profile, see only her mane, cheek, and an eye. The whole evening he'd miss the lively expression stirring her face. Feeling disappointed, he peered at the floor, and a pleasant surprise electrified him: Mickey was wearing white sandals with thin leather strips. Her pretty feet were small and tanned. They had no traces of bunions or of dry, rough skin. The toes were long and thin—spiritual, he told himself. The unpainted, pinkish toenails curved gracefully, beautifully.

He became so absorbed in gazing at Mickey's feet that he tuned out the blessings, the singing, and that night's presentation. The world came to a halt; his mind focused on the sexy sandals and what they enclosed. Unadulterated beauty, he felt, and wished he could perpetuate his excitement and awe in a poem.

"But this is sacrilege," a little voice inside him piped. Still, this awareness of sin didn't stop him from admiring the pristine, girl-like feet, so different from his own bunioned monsters with twisted, overlapping toes and discoloured nails.

At night, he tossed and twisted in bed, in the dark hallucinating spiritual toes, elegant arches, and soft heels. He woke up early and over breakfast announced that he had to attend to an urgent matter at his office.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Sarah. "I'm surprised. Can't you wait till Sunday? Why let your business spoil the spirit of Shabbat?"

He agreed to wait. The entire Saturday he felt anxious, a born-again, young tiger aching to be released from its cage. On Sunday he woke up before dawn. It was torture to wait for breakfast and feign it was just an urgent matter at the office.

Once at work, he locked the door to his office, so as not to be disturbed by workaholic colleagues coming in early on Sunday. Also, he wanted to concentrate better and to conceal what he was doing. He fished out a pencil and on blank pages of printer paper drew picture after picture of Mickey's beloved feet. Only after furious, ecstatic work and a basket full of balls of crumpled paper, a satisfying drawing sat on his desk. As if driven by demons, he bent over and frantically kissed it, again and again. Heart pounding, he stood up, unzipped his fly, and fondled his erect penis with the picture.

"Mickey, oh Mickey!" he murmured. "Love in the winter of my life!"

Following that Sunday, he made up a clever excuse: he had new and demanding clients that necessitated going to the office every morning. Sarah didn't mind his absences, as in the mornings she worked on her correspondence course on Jewish mysticism, and her afternoons were crammed with alternative therapies for her bad knee. Also, she held money in contempt—all their married life Harvey had brought home the brisket and amassed plenty. She never asked if his increased workload led to a higher income.

Often, it occurred to Harvey to hurry to his office without breakfast. But that might have aroused Sarah's suspicions, as he habitually read the *Report on Business* in the morning, before venturing out. These days, he held the newspaper in his hands, but couldn't concentrate on the news. His mind was fixated on Mickey's feet.

At last, when he felt he had done enough time, he gave Sarah a peck on her cheek and rushed to relieve himself from the added anguish of waiting so long. Once at the office, he engaged in the sweet routine of locking the door, closing the blinds, and turning on the lamp on his desk. He unearthed the drawing from its hiding place. Holding this one-page passport to the lands of fantasy, excitement, and sheer pleasure, with his other hand he masturbated.

Daily he turned on a private movie of Mickey draped in an elegant black dress to her ankles. Invariably, she came to his office barefoot, and her irresistible feet glowed, two Byzantine icons. Without removing her panties, he fondled her juicy buttocks and thick thighs. Kneeling down, first he kissed and licked her feet. Ever so slowly she sat on his desk, then lay down. His ravenous, steely penis adored his idols for a very long time.

His experiences in sex therapy came in handy. Feverish and breathless, he'd masturbate almost to the "point of inevitability," then abruptly stop. He'd start and stop, postponing orgasm until he ached for relief. Despite repeated efforts, he had miserably failed to transpose his self-control to lovemaking with his wife; but now, with Mickey's feet on his desk, he felt young, confident, potent. He lasted and lasted. He didn't have to put up with angry complaints and demands.

With few variations, every day he returned to the same scenario. In the back of his mind he felt guilty. First, he was using his wife by pretending he was a budding spiritual Jew. How selfish and deceitful could one get? How long would this delirious game last? Then, he felt guilty and ashamed of abusing Mickey's beauty. He barely knew her, beside the basic facts that she was a divorced spiritual believer and taught in high school. He rarely talked to her. Perhaps he didn't need to. Fantasy was sufficient. Their few conversations consisted of small talk related to the Friday services. How little he knew her! This realization contrasted with the passionate, elaborate fantasies about her face and feet.

In his moments of lucidity, his excitement struck him as a perversion, a hopeless infatuation, the work of an ageing, disturbed mind. Indeed, he was an old Don Quixote, dreaming in the winter of his life about love without intercourse. What would Mickey think of being the target of his fantasies of foreplay? He smiled wistfully, thinking he wasn't serving main courses, just appetizers.

He considered himself off-track, a neurotic, and felt impotent to control his passions. While in the grip of lust, he saw nothing wrong with what was happening to him. Every weekday he looked forward to his sweet rituals and his share of delights.

"Harvey," said Sarah one Saturday morning, "Mickey will be calling you at the office."

His back went up. He anticipated punishment for illicit pleasures. "What does she want?" He strove to conceal his excitement.

"She's thinking of opening a private school and is worried about tax problems. I said you'd be glad to help."

"I am," he said, heart racing.

He agreed with Mickey to meet him at his office. As usual for work, he wore a blue blazer, white shirt, a sedate tie. She came wearing a smart cream-coloured blouse and a green skirt. He saw her legs for the first time: they were thick and flabby, but it didn't matter. She was wearing the beloved white sandals. He felt like exclaiming Hallelujah. His fantasies had come true.

Though painfully aroused, he managed to understand her issues. In a few moments he explained to her the tax rules and their business implications. He wanted to be helpful and wrote his recommendations on a lined page. A simple matter, he could focus on it even when his heart pounded and his desire reigned supreme. He wondered what they would talk about once they finished with the accounting.

An awkward silence ensued. He drew in a deep breath. Without considering the consequences he said, "I want to show you something." He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and fished out the guide to his fantasy trips. He surprised himself. Never in his long life had he been so forthcoming, so revealing. Intoxicated, he told himself to let the unavoidable take its course.

She put on thick reading glasses and appeared old and professorial. "What's that?" she asked, perplexed. "I don't understand." She removed her glasses and eyed him, suspicious.

He stood up. "Your feet. I love them." She knitted her brow, and he hurried to add, "I love you."

Before she could reply he strode around the desk to her seat. "I'm crazy about you, crazy," he whispered as he knelt down, grabbed her feet by the ankles, kissed and licked them.

She pushed back her chair, and struggled to step backwards out of his embrace of her feet. "What's the matter with you, Harvey? Are you mad? What will Sarah say?"

He remained on his knees, staring at her feet. "I love them ... and you You're on my mind ... all the time."

"For God's sake!" she raised her voice. "Stand up! Compose yourself!"

He looked up. "Please, Mickey. Let me kiss you ... there."

She looked at him, her face red with anger. "You thought you could get away with this filth because I'm a single woman. Is that it?" Before he could reply, she turned on her heels, reached for the door handle, and left his office.

Shocked, he remained on his knees, eyes closed. He feared she'd taken the drawing with her. He opened his eyes, wobbled to his feet, and peered at his desk. The drawing lay flat on his desk. He walked over and stuffed it into the drawer.

Panic overcame him. Would Mickey ever talk to him again? What if she dropped out of Yedidei Shabbat? When would she tell Sarah? How could he explain his conduct? He called himself a jerk, a juvenile, a bastard. He knew he would hear all these and more. Stunned and ashamed, he anticipated a momentous punishment, but couldn't name it. It felt like a foul mixture of doom and disgrace, like the time his mother shrieked when she caught him masturbating. At this moment, he was so fearful of Sarah's anger that he decided to have lunch downtown and see a movie in the afternoon. At dinnertime he would face the music.

When he entered the condo, Sarah was in the kitchen, preparing dinner. "How was your day?" she asked flatly.

"Fine." He had expected a hurricane and now felt puzzled by her cool reception. Could it be that Mickey had kept quiet about the incident at the office? He sighed in relief, praying that nothing would happen, at least not that night.

They ate in silence. Harvey felt anxious, waiting for a storm to be unleashed any moment. He wouldn't go to bed unpunished. At any moment Sarah would attack him. He would disintegrate into single cells, a child terrified by his angry mother.

"Mickey called me this morning," Sarah said while they were having coffee. "She was crying. She said you showed her a dirty picture, then assaulted her. What's your version?" She gave him a cold, distant, cutting look.

He put down his cup and cleared his throat. "You could say she was right. I find it hard to explain."

"For me, what's very hard to accept is that you fooled me the entire summer. You pretended to be interested in spiritual matters, when all you cared about was her pretty face. I don't understand the business of kissing her feet."

He didn't answer.

"Another thing," she spoke softly, and that scared him more than if she yelled and cried. "For years you were dysfunctional with me, but turned into a tiger with a younger woman. What am I supposed to make out of that? Answer me, be a man!"

"Give me some time," he begged. "I'm sure we can work it out, go back to where we were before Mickey."

She looked at her watch. "At eight Rachel will pick me up."

He leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "I don't know why you're involving our daughter."

"I'm staying with her until you straighten yourself out."

"Please, Sarah, please, don't. I—"

"Call Aaron Weiss," she lowered her voice. "Ask him to recommend a Jewish psychiatrist for you. I'm not coming back until the therapist tells me you're making progress."

"But Sarah, why not go into counselling together? There's no need for us to split up. Please, Sarah, please!"

She stood up. "No, Harvey. You hurt me enough. Sort out your filth, then we'll see." She doddered to the door of their bedroom.

After Sarah left, he sat on the couch in the living-room, feeling empty, lonely, and devastated. In one day he had alienated the two women he cared about. One was forever out of his life, he was sure, while the other demanded that he go into treatment. He

smoothed his bald pate with his palm, sceptical that he'd change a great deal at his age. Sex therapies hadn't helped much, and he doubted that psychiatry would turn him around.

Sure, he regretted he had hurt both women, but he cherished that rejuvenating summer of magic. It had been full of excitement and passionate hours. No matter how hard he and the shrink worked in this new therapy, it would be impossible to dissolve his fond memories.

No doubt, he wanted Sarah back. He'd co-operate with the shrink and talk his heart out until the doctor announced he was making progress. In two-and-a-half years Sarah and he would celebrate their golden anniversary. He looked forward to it. In his eyes, his relationship with her was a thick, steel cable, his passion for Mickey a thin, glittering gold chain. He had a wealth of memories with Sarah, some good, some bad, but she was his swan, a life mate. Mickey, he sighed mournfully, was a flitting dream.

He stood up and looked out the pane. The windows in the high rise across the street were fully lit. Perhaps he hadn't turned into a spiritual Jew, but the glimmering lights against the inky sky brought a flicker of peace to his conflicted soul.

