

JACOB M. APPEL

## THE SYNAGOGUE AT THE EDGE OF THE EARTH

IN HIS EXTENSIVE TRAVELS as an academic nephrologist, Muriel's husband had delivered lectures in more than eighty countries on six continents and, wherever he journeyed, he made a point of visiting both the local dialysis clinic and the synagogue. Harold Hager had toured the Paradesi in Kochi, India, where the congregants entered barefoot, and he'd strolled along the sand-swept aisles of Curaçao's Snoa, but he'd also explored far less striking houses of worship in Cuenca, Ecuador, and Heber Springs, Arkansas, and Kroonstad, high on the South African veldt. Once, a well-intentioned pharmaceutical sales rep had even driven him into the Nova Scotia countryside to view a "temple" that turned out to be a Masonic lodge. All of this, of course, during his first marriage. For Muriel, at fifty-four, who'd visited a synagogue exactly twice since her kid brother's *bar mitzvah* (once for another teacher's wedding, once for her Aunt Ida's funeral), the prospect of traipsing through the wilderness to glimpse remote tabernacles held as much appeal as trading in her bangs for a *sheitel*. Hence, their first serious argument—or, at least, their first serious argument since college.

"If you were a religious person, maybe I could understand. If you were a rabbi ... a Holocaust survivor." Muriel swept the air with her hand to encompass everyone whose indiscriminate visits to *shuls* might be justified. "But heavens, Harold. You're one notch above heathen. Why do you care whether some Podunk nowhere village has enough Jews for a *minyán*?"

Muriel had been sorting their mail at the kitchen table—still Carol's kitchen, not yet redone, its tacky baroque linoleum and floral-print wallpaper constant reminders of the first wife's constricted tastes. They'd just returned from a weeklong getaway on Guadeloupe, where Harold had wasted a full day riding the public bus from their resort to the drab stucco synagogue outside Pointe-à-Pitre. Still-packed suitcases stood in the entryway, as though to facilitate another quick escape.

“I can’t explain,” said Harold. “I find it reassuring.”

“Well, I find it divisive,” snapped Muriel. “That’s the part of Judaism I’ve never understood—that a person feels more connected to somebody because his ancestors were chased around the Russian Pale by Cossacks.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Then what *are* you saying?”

Muriel hadn’t intended her tone to sound so sharp. Harold’s face colored an angry pink and his breath grew heavy—as though his mind itself were struggling up a steep staircase. Suddenly, she found herself on the brink of laughter: Only three months had elapsed since their marriage—only nine months since the first date of their “second go-round”—and already they were bickering like it was 1979. How funny—funny and absurd—that he could bury a wife and she could divorce two husbands, yet they remained the same stubborn, screwed-up kids they’d been at NYU.

“Okay, maybe I *am* saying that,” said Harold.

He glowered at her—all paunch and pate these days, yet defiant as ever—and she registered that he was still on the topic of synagogues. “The fact is my ancestors *were*—what was your phrase?—‘chased around the Russian Pale by Cossacks.’ And if they hadn’t gotten lucky, they’d have been chased straight into Auschwitz. Yours too, by the way. So yes, that *does* connect me to people. I don’t see anything *divisive* about it.”

Harold clenched his fist as though he might pound the tabletop and, for a moment, he reminded Muriel of a photograph in her students’ history textbook: Khrushchev hammering his shoe at the United Nations.

“Well, we’ll have to agree to disagree,” she replied.

*That’s one thing we’re going to get good at,* she thought to herself—but she held her tongue, already tired of arguing.

The dispute might have ended there—with Muriel learning to tolerate Harold’s synagogue hopping as she’d endured her second husband’s cigar smoke—if not for the call they received that evening from Marty Brinkman. Marty had shared a railroad apartment with Harold during medical school and he’d witnessed firsthand the fireworks that accompanied their original breakup. Later, after twenty years in the Indian Health Service, as well as stints in Morocco and Nepal, he’d opened a pediatric office in Point Norman, Alaska (population 6,500). Harold’s friend had phoned to confirm the details of their upcoming trip to the Kuskokwim Valley, where Harold was

scheduled to deliver grand rounds at the community hospital—but to Muriel, Marty Brinkman forever remained the twenty-three-year-old prankster with the overgrown mustache who'd filled the medical school dean's office with live crickets.

"Harold's visiting his mother. Who'd ever have thought he'd turn out to be such a *mensch*? He should be back any second," said Muriel. "I know he's looking forward to seeing you. *We both are* .... Only please tell me you don't have a synagogue up there at the North Pole."

"We do—but just once a month," replied Marty. "Rabbi Sucram flies in from Fairbanks and runs a service in the library meeting room."

"Darn it. A library meeting room is good enough for my darling husband."

Muriel related the details of the synagogue dispute to Marty Brinkman. Even as she vented, she realized how petty she sounded. Harold was honest, loyal, charming. He never even raised his voice. What did it really matter if he squandered a few hours here or there following stooped *gabbais* through vacant sanctuaries? But then she recalled the chilly reception her parents had once afforded her gentile sister-in-law—a lovely, open-minded woman whose only sin had been to be born Lutheran—and she found her frustrations renewed.

"I have an idea," said Marty. "If your darling husband wants a synagogue, let's give him a synagogue. A synagogue he'll never forget."

"You're up to no good. I can hear it in your voice."

"Good is all relative," replied Marty. "Curing Harold of his synagogue fetish sound good to me. Not just good—virtuous! Noble!"

The notion crossed Muriel's thoughts that Harold's friend had been drinking. They did a lot of that in Alaska, she'd heard. Yet as Marty laid out his plan, she found herself persuaded with surprising ease. Why not a harmless—and instructive—joke at Harold's expense?

"This will serve the old boy right for that time he left his window open over Thanksgiving," said Marty. "Did he ever tell you about that? We came home from our holiday to a flock of pigeons nesting in the bathroom."

That must have been after their break-up, maybe after Harold had started dating mousy Carol Krinsky. *A long time ago*.

"Isn't there a statute of limitations on open windows?" asked Muriel.

"Here in Alaska, we serve our revenge cold, Mrs. Hager," answered Marty. "Along with everything else."

They flew out to Alaska the following Wednesday, pausing in Anchorage to change from a jet to an eighteen-seat turboprop. At Point Norman, they disembarked directly on the runway; a retrofitted school bus shuttled them to the terminal. The air smelled of tundra, sweet and crisp, but tempered with the aroma of fish. Soon enough, Muriel discovered that *everything* in Point Norman stank of fish. Chinook salmon, to be precise. Even at their hotel, a low-slung, metal-framed structure marooned opposite the King Farms cannery, she found complimentary packages of smoked and pickled seafood stacked inside their refrigerator.

The city's business district extended precisely two desolate blocks—from the one-storey hotel to the corrugated aluminum post office—so they had no trouble locating the restaurant where they were to meet Marty and Loretta Brinkman. A sign above "Rolleston's Oyst-r House" flashed in neon, flaunting its burnt-out bulb. "The food isn't bad," said Marty, steering them into the dim, cedar-paneled dining room. "It isn't particularly good, but it isn't bad." Point Norman boasted only two other restaurants, Harold's friend informed them. Both Chinese. Both equally abysmal.

Once they'd ordered—salmon, of course—Marty raised his wineglass. "Welcome to the edge of the earth."

"Should I worry about falling off?" asked Harold.

"Not falling," retorted Marty. "Getting pushed."

The pair of them jabbed playfully at each other through the meal, leaving Muriel to struggle at small talk with Marty's wife. Loretta Brinkman looked to be twenty years younger than her husband. She'd met Marty while working as a stenographer in Seattle, where she'd been assigned to transcribe depositions during his divorce proceedings. Between courses, she chewed nervously on her own hair.

"How are you surviving life in Point Norman?" asked Muriel.

Loretta smiled. "I grew up here."

"Did you really?"

Muriel hadn't intended to belittle Marty's wife—but as soon as the words left her lips, she registered how patronizing she'd sounded. So like her own mother! That had been one of Mama Steinhoff's favorite expressions—*Did you really?*—a versatile response for anyone who admitted to skinny-dipping, or to seeing a psychiatrist, or to having attended a public university. Muriel hoped the girl hadn't noticed.

"I *really* did," replied Loretta. "I know it's not New York City, but our igloo actually had indoor plumbing."

So she clearly *had* noticed. After that, their conversation lagged. Muriel found herself grateful when Harold ducked out to the restroom, affording her an opportunity to shift her attention to Marty.

“So, Mrs. Hager,” he asked—his eyes aglow with mischief and Chablis. “Are we still going to show your husband the Great Imperial Synagogue of the North?”

She’d nearly forgotten about his scheme.

“I guess so,” replied Muriel—wanting to please. “Why not?”

“Why not? My thoughts exactly. Why *the hell* not?” declared Marty. “I’ve lined up the perfect fellow for our venerable rabbi too. Now he’s a dentist, but he used to do standup in Chicago. The guy’s actually Jewish himself—I wouldn’t feel right doing this if he weren’t—but I swear the man looks like he stepped straight out of a *Wehrmacht* recruitment poster.”

“What kind of poster?” asked Loretta.

“German army,” replied Marty, as though all too accustomed to translating difficult words for his wife. “Joseph Goebbels looks more like a rabbi than this guy, Muriel. And I’ve talked the deputy manager down at the cannery into letting us borrow a few of his unused stockrooms. I cured his daughter’s scarlet fever. He owes me.” Marty took another swig of wine. “It’s a fucking brilliant plan, if I do say so myself.”

“You don’t think it will upset him, do you?” asked Muriel.

“Harold? Upset by a prank? Once you let him in on the joke, he’ll be laughing his ass off with the rest of us—and you’ll have made your point.”

They didn’t have an opportunity to discuss the matter further, because at that instant, Harold returned to the table. In the restroom, Muriel’s husband had apparently run a wet comb through what remained of his thinning hair and his scalp now glistened in the candlelight.

“Have I got a surprise for you,” announced Marty.

“Dancing girls?” inquired Harold.

“Better than dancing girls,” replied Marty. “A new synagogue.”

“At my age, a new synagogue *is* better than dancing girls.”

“I figured that would be right up your alley.”

Marty filled his own wine glass and topped off Harold’s. Loretta covered hers with her hand, so Muriel felt free to do the same.

“It’s not Temple Emanu-El,” explained Marty. “To be honest, it’s just some warehouse space we’ve rented from King Farms. But we’re proud of it.”

“Well, you should be,” agreed Harold. “A synagogue is a synagogue.”

“I tell you what. Meet me at your hotel after your lecture tomorrow. I’ll call Rabbi Pastarnack to see if I can arrange a guided tour. How does that sound?”

Marty’s offer sounded so casual—so genuinely unforced.

Harold glanced tentatively at Muriel. “If it’s okay with my better half....”

“Fine. Just this once,” said Muriel. “But don’t make a habit of it.”

“Don’t make a habit of it,” echoed Marty. “So said the nun to her lover.”

He laughed at his own joke. Perspiration bled through his shirt. Already, Muriel felt guilty.

“You should come along too, Mrs. Hager,” added Marty, winking at Muriel. When he addressed her by her full name—her new name—he made it sound sordid, as though she were a nineteenth-century actress. Or operating a bordello. “You’ll love Rabbi Pastarnack. He’s better than live comedy.”

“I suppose I *should* come,” said Muriel. “To keep you two in line.”

While Harold lectured the next morning, sharing his expertise on glomerular diseases with Point Norman’s nine licensed physicians, Muriel explored the city’s few commercial enterprises—taking care to stay on the wooden planks that served as makeshift sidewalks. She purchased a silver necklace at a jewelry stand in the supermarket, decided against an overpriced Chilkat blanket at a craft store. Most of the other shoppers were Yup’ik natives. They spoke their own language, but sported denim jeans and T-shirt with incongruous English slogans: “*Trophy husband*”; “*Property of the Detroit Tigers*”; “*Kiss Me, I’m Peruvian*.” Around noon, the sun gave way to an austere fog that rolled up the harbour. A light drizzle swelled into steady rain. By the time Muriel arrived back at their hotel, she sensed the damp inside her bones.

Harold and Marty Brinkman awaited her in the lobby, celebrating the success of her husband’s lecture with cocktails. Loretta had begged off the excursion, claiming morning sickness. “A first-time father at fifty-three,” said Marty. “Impressive, isn’t it? Or insane.”

“Assuming you are the father,” quipped Harold.

“Touché. Dr. Brinkman takes a fatal blow.” He clutched his chest—his artificial wince bursting into a smirk.

“You can’t die until I see my *shul*,” objected Harold.

“Fair enough. First *shul*, then exsanguination.” Marty glanced at his watch. “We’d better hurry. Rabbi Pastarnack is meeting us at one-thirty.”

They crossed the main street and veered down a narrow alley behind the cannery. At the intersection, some local wag had replaced the street signs with tin slabs painted “Champs-Élysées” and “Unter den Linden.” On one side of the alleyway rose the sheer brick facade of the King Farms facility. A low hum rose from the bowels of the structure, intermittently punctuated by loud, hostile rumbles. As they descended toward the harbour, the stench of fish grew overpowering.

“Is it like this on *shabbus* too?” asked Harold.

“Do you mean the noise or the stench?”

“Both.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Marty. “We used to have a cantor, but he lost his voice so often trying to chant over the machinery that he gave up and relocated to Kodiak.”

Muriel’s husband covered his nose with his handkerchief.

“There’s the man of the hour himself,” exclaimed Marty. “Rabbi Pastarnack.”

Pastarnack greeted them at the base on the slope. As Brinkman had promised, the comedian-turned-dentist looked like a poster-boy for Nazi recruitment: dirty-blond hair, an anvil jaw, shoulders squared to perfection. He wore a baseball cap that read: “*Jew talkin’ to me?*” On his lapel, a pin identified him as belonging to “*Jews for bacon.*”

The “rabbi” introduced himself and shook Harold’s hand with vigour. Then he removed a bottle of sanitizer from his pocket and sterilized his fingers. “Better safe than sorry,” he explained. “Nothing personal.” Once he’d satisfied himself that he was germ-free, he unlocked an iron door leading into the cannery and escorted them into the so-called synagogue.

At first glance, the chamber looked like any other storeroom. Crates labeled “fragile—glassware” lined the far wall; to their right, a stack of snow shovels and ice picks rested against a carpenter’s bench. Yet, as Muriel adjusted to the light, she noticed three rows of folding chairs facing a raised lectern. Someone had even draped purple velvet over the crates closest to the platform. A banner behind the podium read “Jewish Hall of Fame”; beneath the banner hung posters of Karl Marx and the Marx Brothers. Classic Marty Brinkman. Harold took the unlikely setup in stride. Muriel suspected that he’d see through their antics immediately, but if he had, he refused to let on.

“Well?” asked Marty. “What do you think?”

Harold glanced from the Marx posters to the Aryan rabbi. "I have to admire your resourcefulness."

"We Jews have always been resourceful," replied Pastarnack—deadpan. "That's why we made such good money changers during the Middle Ages."

Muriel sensed her own unease rising. She didn't particularly care that the comic dentist mocked Judaism—this was in good fun. Harmless, she grudgingly admitted to herself, *because* they were all "of the tribe." What worried her was that Harold might not see any humour in these shenanigans. Maybe Brinkman had been wrong and her husband *wouldn't* laugh his ass off. She considered intervening—exposing the hoax before it spiraled out of hand—but the situation *already* felt out of hand. Far better, she assured herself, to play along and get it over with.

"Can you form a *minyan*?" asked Harold.

Pastarnack grinned. "With some ingenuity."

"By counting women?"

Not that Harold had any problem with counting women. The synagogue he and Carol had belonged to in Manhattan—where he now insisted on paying dues for Muriel—had long ago embraced all adults for its prayer quorum. So if Pastarnack was hoping gender equality might rile up Harold, he'd bet wrong.

"Not just women," said Pastarnack. "Children. Infants. Last month, we were one person short, so I had Phil Serspinski run home for his St. Bernard."

Marty Brinkman flashed the rabbi a thumbs-up behind Harold's back.

"You're serious?" asked Muriel's husband.

"We're all God's creatures," said Pastarnack. "Why would God create dogs if he didn't want them in the *minyan*?"

The rabbi strolled to the raised platform and opened a gumwood cabinet. Inside rested what appeared to be a handful of small scrolls. "Obviously, we don't have a complete *Sefer Torah* out here," he observed. "So I held a 'design-your-own-Torah' contest for the kids. Best we could do." Pastarnack lifted one of the scrolls from the cabinet. "My nephew's. One hundred per cent papier-mâché .... Take a look."

"That won't be necessary," said Harold.

Muriel could hear the tension in her husband's voice.

"That's about it for props," continued Pastarnack. "But I like to remind myself that the Ancient Israelites didn't have much in the way of props either."

After all, the Torah began as an oral tradition.”

Harold frowned—but he scratched his ear, indication that he was lost in thought. “We could start a collection for you at our synagogue,” he finally proposed. “We could raise funds to commission you a *Sefer Torah*. A project for our Hebrew school. Like when I was a boy and we raised money to plant trees in Israel.”

“That would be very generous,” said Pastarnack. “And far more useful than planting a stand of trees in the Israeli desert.”

A strained silence followed. “Have you been to Israel?” asked Harold.

Pastarnack shrugged. “Why bother? What do I need Israel for? I have Alaska.”

“Oh,” said Harold. “I see ....”

“Not that I have anything *against* Israel,” added Pastarnack. “But is it really worth the hassle? I say give the Palestinians the entire thing and lets relocate the Jews to the Arctic Circle.”

At first, Muriel feared—and hoped—that the “rabbi” had overplayed his hand, that Harold would recognize the prank for what it was. Instead, Pastarnack’s words descended upon the room like a cloud of poison gas.

“I am speechless,” said Harold. “Truly speechless.”

Pastarnack beamed. “Hell of a lot easier to share with Eskimos than with Arabs.”

Muriel saw the colour flowing into her husband’s cheeks, into his temples, and she feared he might burst an aneurysm. She looked toward Marty in desperation. Even Brinkman appeared to sense that matters had gone too far.

Marty glanced pointedly at his watch. “Thank you, rabbi,” he said. Then he placed a hand on Harold’s shoulder and observed, “We should probably be going, if we’re going to get you two to the airport for your flight.”

“Yes,” concurred Muriel’s husband. “Our flight.”

“Travel safe,” chimed in the comedian-turned-dentist-turned-rabbi. “And make sure you buy sugar-free honey for Rosh Hashanah. Just because we’re Jews doesn’t mean our teeth need to rot.”

Marty led them out to the alleyway, into the toxic, salmon-scented breeze.

“Pastarnack was in rare form today, wasn’t he?” mused Marty. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell whether he’s joking.”

Harold nodded. He looked as though he might throw up.

They arrived back at JFK before daybreak the next morning. On the plane, Harold made no mention of their encounter with Point Norman's Jewish community. Muriel didn't dare broach the subject. *I'll tell him when we get home*, she promised herself—*once he's had a chance to calm down*. But Harold already appeared calm. Frightfully so. And when they reached their apartment, she lacked the courage to confess.

Muriel had nearly convinced herself that the entire episode rested safely behind them when, lying beside her in bed that night, Harold asked: "So? What did *you* think of Rabbi Pastarnack?"

He caught her off guard. "I don't know what to think ...."

A part of her still wanted to teach him his lesson, to say, *Even you can't possibly feel a connection to a man like that*. Yet she sensed that her husband was suffering—that the very notion of a rabbi like Pastarnack had knocked him off his moorings.

"I'll tell you what *I* think," said Harold. "I think I'm going to write that man a check. Tonight—before I forget." Muriel's husband sat up suddenly and switched on the bedside lamp. "*If* that guy really is counting dogs in his *minyan* and worshipping papier-mâché Torahs, he genuinely needs our support."

*If*, he'd said. *If* ....

And she knew that she'd be visiting synagogues every place they went.