



Fifty
Shades
of
Schwarz

A PARODY

Ed Harris

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Designed by Grace Maher
Edited by Lauren Cuthbert
Cover by Anne Harris and Annie O'Brien

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To Anne, as it is written:

Aishet chayil, mi yimtza?

A woman of valor, who can compare, for her price is far above rubies.

*Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother,
and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*

Genesis 2:24

Also by Ed Harris

Murphy's Bed
Put It On the House

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Chapter One

Sitting at the kitchen table in her Brooklyn apartment, Maya Stein closed her laptop and snorted in disgust. The Apple logo, projecting arrogance with its missing bite, silently mocked her. When would she finally feel like she had her life in order? When would her mother stop nagging her about finding a nice Jewish boy and settling down? Or reminding her that Adam Goldman, who had invited her to senior prom — only to be rebuffed because of his acne and social awkwardness — was now almost finished at Harvard Medical School and engaged to Mindy Horowitz? Maya thought of the old joke about the first Jewish president. At his inauguration, the president-elect's mother elbows the vice president in the ribs. Leaning over and pointing at her son, about to take the oath of office, she says, "See him? The one with his hand on the Bible? He's got a brother who's a doctor."

Mindy—of all people—whom Maya looked down on in middle school and hadn't even invited to her Bat Mitzvah. Maya always winced when she looked at old photographs from her teenage years. She remembered rocking to the beat of the "Macarena" at parties in the dens and rec rooms of Jewish youth groups. A Semitic tribe embracing the fertility rituals of pop music and furtive make out sessions. And now Adam's zits had cleared up and the braces had come off. Based on his Facebook profile picture, he was reasonably good-looking, and presumably the social awkwardness of high school had been replaced with the confidence of a doctor-in-training. Maya pictured a potential future filled with shopping, fancy cars and winter conferences at tropical resorts hosted by big pharmaceutical companies. The carefree life of a doctor's wife that she had forsaken, simply because Adam looked like he was suffering from a permanent outbreak of measles during their teenage years.

As Maya took a sip of her Diet Coke, she remembered how back in high school she thought she'd had everything planned out for a fulfilling life. She anticipated having fun at college, but not too much fun, with an appropriate mix of both partying and hitting the books. Maya had envisioned easy friendships forged over the social lubricant of alcohol—which turned out to be the case—deep, philosophical discussions, induced by the consciousness raising effects of marijuana—true as well—along with resolve to avoid mood-altering substances that came in pill form or were the

favored stimulants of hard-core druggies. That was more or less her experience at Brandeis, where she graduated with a major in art history and a minor in British literature, both equally useless as credentials in the job market, where people unaware of why “feeling badly” was poor grammar made the hiring decisions. She’d even spent a semester of her junior year abroad in Florence, where she ate cheap pasta, drank even cheaper wine and slept with a series of cute Italian boys who could not believe their good fortune to find themselves bedding a progression of horny American coeds with such ease.

According to plan, college was to be followed by entry into the work world, where, along the way, she would find the perfect boyfriend, who would then become the perfect fiancé and by logical progression the perfect husband. This would lead to the perfect marriage and perfect life in the suburbs, culminating with the eventual contribution of another generation of frizzy-haired, big-nosed, overly ambitious children to the Jewish gene pool.

And here she was, turning thirty on her next birthday, and still working as a staff-level employee at Yellow Bicycle. Maya, lacking the technical sophistication to know otherwise, believed her employer to be a decidedly mediocre Internet advertising agency. And she now found herself, as she looked back on her twenties, having wasted nearly a decade dating a series of males (Maya deigned to even refer to all of them as “men”) who didn’t come anywhere close to meeting her

standards for eventual husband material, not that any of them had shown any interest in committing to something as momentous as marriage anyway.

Maya was not one for self-delusion, and she had a good sense of the value of the merchandise she brought to the market: Well-endowed, with a bosom exerting a magnetic attraction that made airwaves shimmer with waves outside the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Just a faint hint of the Mediterranean mixed into her European heritage, a long-ago ancestor who came from a people of shepherds and fig merchants. Longer-limbed and with higher cheekbones, Maya might have graced magazine covers, but hers was a people short of stature, with Bar Rafaeli being the one-in-a-million exception that proved the rule. Girded with hips that carried the genetic promise of fruitfulness and a booty that brought forth visions of a split cantaloupe, instead she inspired the masturbatory fantasies and wet dreams of the Long Island Jewish youth of her teenage years, with their Shabbat sleepovers, their visits to the senior centers, their swim parties and their fevered groping on shag rugs, the aroma of dog urine and a passing joint mingling with the insistent rush of hormones.

For nearly the past year, Maya had been going out with Jeremy Goldberg, who she was dating but definitely did not consider her boyfriend. She met Jeremy at a party where both of them had had a little too much to drink, which turned into a hookup later that night, followed by another

hookup, this time while completely sober, three days hence. Coupling while drunk, Jeremy could have been any man, even Jimmy Smits, one of her teenage crushes. Without the benefit of alcohol in her system, she took in the bandy legs, the upper torso on which a small chest flowed downhill to a flabby belly—not fat, not even overweight, just unathletic, the condition, it seemed, of every Jewish boy she had ever slept with—and the diminishing circumference of what, according to photographic evidence, had been an impressive Jew-fro in his youth. The clothes just a little too worn and cheap, as if embarrassed to acknowledge, “This is what passes for hipster on a tight budget.”

The sex with Jeremy, if not breathtaking, was at least adequate, and they discovered they enjoyed each other’s company enough to not actively dislike one another, which was not something Maya could not say about most of the other guys she had found herself waking up next to in the morning after a night of drunken coupling. The majority of men she had been intimate with, once the sex was over, could expound for hours on their complicated feelings about LeBron James or whether Lance Armstrong had or had not taken performance-enhancing drugs, while Maya would drift in and out of bored consciousness. Or else they were into algorithms, trend lines and probabilities, the geeks from math class transformed in a cruel twist of fate to the top of the economic heap. Engineers and Internet specialists who wore the shoes of their grandfathers and would have been

unable to pick Edgar Allen Poe out of a police line-up. *Hey, who's that skinny dude on the far left with the mustache?*

Maya and Jeremy fell into a pattern of seeing each other about twice a week for sex, and kept going for the dual attraction of both carnal pleasure and the convenience of always having a ready date if they wanted to do regular relationship stuff like seeing a movie or taking a walk in the park. Jeremy clearly was content to have what in college would have been referred to as a “friend with benefits.” But for Maya, given that she was fast approaching thirty, Jeremy felt like a placeholder until a real boyfriend came along. Right at the start, they agreed that their relationship would be non-exclusive, so in theory they were free to date other people. But Maya suspected Jeremy was likely to be sufficiently satisfied having regular sex with an attractive girl, and probably felt a sense of relief that he no longer had to put significant effort into a relationship once she seen him naked, inventoried the limits of his cultural sophistication and lack of career prospects, and realized that he was dating above his pay grade.

Jeremy was an English major from Penn State who was pursuing an online Master's in Education while working as a waiter at a Greek restaurant and part-time yoga teacher, while also attempting to get a screenplay produced, a combination of attributes that might have better suited a gay man. But then she realized that her harsh assessment of his flaws was but a hint of the scrutiny he would have received

among men who dated men. A boyfriend would have long ago demanded Jeremy join a gym and either develop some pecs or hit the road.

Jeremy lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, not far from Maya. He owned a collection of mismatched furniture and dishes that gave his residence a thrift shop flavor. The pantry held a precarious tower of ramen noodles, a few boxes of dry pasta and a lackluster collection of spices: salt, pepper, garlic powder, paprika, oregano. His domicile proclaimed unambitious bachelor. Maya knew that even she could not persuade herself, let alone her mom or sister, that Jeremy was a catch. True, his dad was part of a family real estate business that owned several dozen highly profitable garden apartment complexes across the mid-Atlantic states, and as long as Jeremy didn't have an actual falling out with a set of relatives he displayed no visible affection for, he was at some point due for an inheritance large enough to make his ineffectual attempts to fashion an independent career irrelevant. Not stinking rich, like the son of a billionaire, but comfortable enough so that even someone as lackluster as Jeremy couldn't screw up supervising hardworking illegal immigrants mowing the lawns and maintaining the parking lots of properties that were throwing off a combined cash flow of over five million dollars annually, as Jeremy had told Maya on more than one occasion.

So why, then, wasn't she more hopeful that her relationship with Jeremy could grow into something more

serious? Sure, whoever hung around the hoop and was dating him when the relevant grandparent or uncle departed from the land of the quick would find herself going out with sort-of-moneyed guy. But what if he made her sign a prenup? Then what was the point? She pictured herself a few years in the future, sitting in a lawyer's office while a constipated-looking white man of middle height and age explained that a lump sum settlement of a hundred thousand dollars, in the event things didn't work out, was more than fair. After all, wasn't she bringing an income to the relationship?

So, growing frustrated that being with Jeremy was the equivalent of treading water, immediately prior to closing her laptop Maya had registered on JDate and filled out a profile of herself. Maya figured that worst case, like throwing a penny in a wishing well, it couldn't hurt, and who knows, maybe somebody better for her was out there.

Maya didn't know what she was going to do to get her life back on plan. And with this being Wednesday, and knowing that she was going out to Long Island to visit her mom on Sunday, Maya became anxious she was going to have to hear yet again about how she lost her shot at Adam Goldman because she was too stuck up to give him the time of day in high school, when he was still available.

Mom, I love you, but please don't bring up my dating life. We can talk about anything else. Just, please, no Adam Goldman this time.

Chapter Two

The next morning Maya was nearly an hour late to work. First she overslept her alarm after a night of tossing and turning from anxiousness over, as she dubbed it in her mind, “The Adam Goldman Situation.” She had had a dream in which Jeremy transformed into Adam, and then transformed back again.

Fighting against the opioid effect of sleep intoxication, Maya was glad to beat her roommate, Tiffany Hopkins, into the shower. Tiffany worked in Brooklyn, as marketing director for a collective of local Brooklyn food merchants, an enterprise eager to capitalize on the locavore movement so favored by the borough’s denizens. The world was being saved, one dead farm animal at a time, although no one seemed to be asking the livestock whether being slaughtered and butchered within one hundred miles of the humans who

would eventually consume them lifted *their* spirits.

Maya was grateful to find a dry towel in the bathroom. Hair lathered with fennel shampoo and body sudsy with Neutrogena, she sensed the distant rumble of a toilet being flushed and made sure to step away from the showerhead, knowing the water would reach a temperature suitable for steaming vegetables until the ancient plumbing in the apartment building wheezed itself back to equilibrium.

In order to economize on time, Maya skipped breakfast, figuring she could run down to the coffee shop in the building's lobby after getting into the office, choosing from the shrink-wrapped muffins straining to break free of their tight Saran Wrap body suits and breathe. But the subway from Brooklyn had stalled in the tunnel, and of course her boss, Andy Rosenberg, was inevitably going to give her a hard time about being late. Andy was a Princeton grad with an equally useless undergraduate major, anthropology, but his IQ was considerably higher than Maya's and his dad was a high ranking executive at Time Warner. Coming out of college, Andy spent two years as an analyst at Goldman Sachs, ultimately deciding not to go to business or law school, and moved laterally into a management role in technology. He liked showing off his intelligence and Ivy League education to Maya, regularly peppering his vocabulary with fancy words such as adumbrate and foreign terms like *schadenfreude* and *fin-de-siècle*. His view of schools like Brandeis and other colleges he regarded as comparable—Colgate, Hamilton,

Middlebury, Oberlin, Tufts and so on—was that they were for kids who liked to pretend they were smart enough to get into Yale but wanted to earn their degree in a less pretentious environment. Which Maya of course knew was completely true, and so disliked him even more for that.

“Maya, I realize that we are casual dress around here. But we aren’t casual about, you know, actually showing up to work. What’s the excuse this time?”

“Sorry, Andy. Subway problems.”

“And you couldn’t send me a text and let me know?”

Actually, Maya thought, *I could have*, but the embarrassment over once again seeming unable to master the simple task of showing up to work on time prevented her from doing so. And she had hoped Andy might be in a meeting or out of the office when she arrived, so she could have slipped in unnoticed. Unnoticed by the boss, that is. She wasn’t worried about her colleagues, most of whom she regarded with mild disdain because, like her, they also worked at Yellow Bicycle, and therefore, given Maya’s lack of technical sophistication and accompanying lack of appreciation for the potential value of the business, could also be regarded as underachievers.

“Sorry, Andy. We were stuck in a tunnel and there was no cell reception.” *Lame sounding even to me*, thought Maya, as the delay in the tunnel had only been five minutes.

“Well, please try to get your shit together a bit more the next time.”

“Sure, Andy.” Maya couldn’t believe she actually imagined he was cute her first few weeks on the job. Despite being Jewish, Andy’s two years in banking and life among the undergraduate snobs at Princeton allowed him to pass as a preppe, much in the same way blacks with a similar background would be regarded by their brethren of acting white. Andy shopped at J. Crew and was dating a tall, blond Episcopalian with horse teeth named Melody Chamberlain. Maya once made the mistake of picturing them naked, curing herself forever of any lingering interest in Andy, as if the third time in his presence his utterance of *après moi, le deluge*, in regard to the increasing popularity of Internet companies among his ex-banker friends, hadn’t been enough to remove any last remaining patina of appeal from him.

Maya made up for being late by eating lunch at her desk, not that that made her any more productive. Like her colleagues, indeed like cubicle dwellers across America and around the world, she viewed work as an opportunity to take advantage of the office’s high speed Internet to attend to her personal affairs, instead of waiting until the evening, when she was likely to be too exhausted or too busy socializing to engage in online shopping or to monitor her finances.

Most afternoons, Maya went out for coffee with Zoe Villanueva, who was a crackerjack programmer and also her one and only confidante at the office. Zoe had started her academic career, such as it was, at Brooklyn College, accumulating enough credits to get about halfway towards

a degree in multicultural studies before dropping out. Her departure was a result of a combination of lack of interest in academics on Zoe's part, as well as strained family finances. Zoe's parents had split up in a particularly acrimonious divorce whose excessive legal fees had drained the family balance sheet of any financial reserves, just as the recession kneecapped the revenues of Mr. Villanueva's pool cleaning business. Zoe, armed with a greater sense of economic focus, enrolled in a community college course, Introduction to HTML, and quickly discovered that the world of the Internet was a field she was well suited for. She was able to get an entry-level position with a medical software firm, and then, being a fast learner, she managed to maneuver from one employer to the next, each move resulting in a promotion, to the point where she now Director of Technology at Yellow Bicycle and one of the few genuine stars of the office. She had tried to persuade Maya that Yellow Bicycle had, under Zoe's leadership, made real progress on some interesting platform technology, but her words mostly fell on deaf ears.

Despite her career success, Zoe still was true to her outer borough blue-collar roots. She had an assortment of metal impaled throughout her face, a colorful array of tattoos visible on her arms, neck and shoulders, and the vocabulary of a sailor. Notwithstanding her Italian heritage and Catholic upbringing, Maya guessed, based on their many candid conversations, Zoe had slept with more than one hundred people, without apparent discrimination on the basis of

gender or sexual orientation. While her Catholic family may have frowned on gay sex, Zoe herself considered it just one more choice on the buffet line of earthly delights provided by a benevolent creator.

Maya and Zoe took their regular break at two-thirty and went to the Starbucks around the corner on West Fifty-Second Street. Once seated, Maya began to tell Zoe about her latest frustrations in the office with Andy, a topic she had a habit of returning to over and over again. Zoe took a sip of her latte and said, “Look, Maya, Andy just needs a good lay. Have you seen that uptight bitch that he calls his girlfriend?”

Maya knew she was referring to Melody.

“Omigod, with a name like Melody, what kind of girl do you expect? I bet when she goes down on him she treats it like she’s taking his temperature with an oral thermometer. Hold it still in your mouth for thirty seconds until you hear the beep.”

Zoe had a habit of talking loudly, which, given her Maori-warrior appearance and the set of topics she gave voice to, often led to stares, and in this case, from an older man reading the *New York Times*, an actual angry glare.

“Um, Zoe, I’d rather not —”

“Maya, you’d ‘rather not’ a lot of things. I think that may be your problem. You need to loosen up, girlfriend.”

Then, noticing Maya’s look of concern, Zoe added, “I don’t mean loosen up with *me*. Look, no offense, but I’m just not that into Jewish chicks with big boobs. I mean, I’ve slept with

a few of your type so trust me, I've learned my lesson the hard way. After sex, they always want to talk about whose Bat Mitzvah they did or didn't get invited to, or the summer camp where some loser named Jake or Adam"—*touché!*—"either French-kissed them, or didn't, or she got grossed out by his hard-on while slow dancing at the camp dance. Meanwhile, I just want to savor having gotten my rocks off, maybe smoke a cigarette and then just drift off to sleep. I don't want to come off as anti-Semitic, but why can't you Jews just shut up sometimes. Must it always be yak, yak, yak, even when my honeypot is dripping wet and the last thing I want to hear is why Obama isn't liberal enough?"

Maya took a sip of her latte (extra foamy, soy milk, 190 degrees). *Oh yeah, Zoe diagnosed the problem precisely. Some Jews just never know when to shut up. Like Maya's mom.*

Chapter Three

Jeremy paused between bites of tofu in green curry at Thai Lotus. (Maya often thought to herself how convenient it was for Jeremy that Thai food was also cheap food.)

Jeremy put down his fork and took a pause from his eating. “My dad is starting to make rumbles about cutting off, or at least cutting way back, on my allowance. I’m a little bit worried about it, to be honest with you.”

At age thirty-two, Jeremy, in addition to his getting his tuition for his master’s degree program paid for by his parents, was also getting an extra \$1,500 per month to subsidize his living expenses, so that he had enough time to devote to his screenplay, which was supposedly in some indeterminate stage of “development.” New York had always had an oversupply of aspiring artists, designers, writers and other creative types swirling through its populace of bankers,

lawyers, storeowners and corporate suits who kept the day-to-day economy humming. No different than LA, Maya often thought, except in Southern California the wannabies were usually much better looking.

As usual, besides concerns about money, Jeremy had something more grandiose to complain about. This time it was how humanity was so stupid and self-destructive for not doing something about global warming.

“I’m telling you, Maya, I just can’t get over how selfish some people are. They want to have their big cars and their big houses and their big carbon footprint, not realizing that they are just destroying the world for future generations. Do you realize that last year the average global temperature was the warmest on record, and there were more hurricanes and intense storms than ever? How can people be so obtuse as to deny the scientific consensus? It’s gotten to the point that arguing against global warming is like arguing against evolution.”

Maya was tempted to point out that Jeremy’s carbon footprint was about one hundred times larger than the Third World villagers whose more natural lifestyles, which included death by communicable diseases unknown in Western countries, he was quick to praise as worthy of imitation. Fortunately, just then the waitress came by to refill their water glasses (*cheapskate!*) and break Jeremy’s train of thought, or Maya would have had to hear for the ninth or tenth time about the shrinking of the polar icecaps.

And to think, Maya glumly pondered, if Jeremy picks up the check, he's not only going to expect to get laid, he's going to want to believe he's in charge tonight. Great, here comes doggie style. Why don't guys realize that when you are well endowed, making love with your breasts swinging all over the place is anything but sexy? For the girl at least.

Amid the artificial bamboos and cheap lighting, Jeremy's mood turned from fossil fuels to romance. "Hey, sweetie, enough about politics. You're looking exceptionally lovely tonight. Why don't we head over to my place, have a glass of wine and just see where the mood takes us?"

Chapter Four

“Take another bagel with a shmear, Maya.”

Maya was over at her mom’s for brunch, sitting with her at the dining room table. Mrs. Stein lived in Hempstead, the second owner of an early 1960s Levittown-style house. Channeling the spirit of Henry Ford—any color you want as long as it’s black—the Jewish developer of Rolling Meadows, Samuel Goldblatt, unaware of the irony that he was imitating the business model of one of the great anti-Semites in American history, and indifferent to the fact that no meadows, rolling or otherwise, were in sight, had constructed three hundred nearly identical residences. Armed with entrepreneurial gusto, and unafraid to mix cultural themes, Mr. Goldblatt added a touch of faux-Spanish-style to the community, and Maya’s parents had moved into one of the three-bedroom El Conquistador models, which featured an

extra powder room near the front door, thus justifying a price, when the community was first constructed, of \$15,500, instead of \$14,900 for the basic version, the Alhambra. It was there, in the El Conquistador, that Maya and her older sister Rachel had grown up, surrounded by Jewish neighbors, playing with other Jewish children and attending the same local Hebrew school.

Given the Jewish cocoon she grew up in, Maya remembered the surprise she felt when she learned that Christmas fell on the twenty-fifth of December every year, unlike Jewish holidays, which not only migrated based on the arcane record keeping of cycles of the moon, but with the added complexity of “days” beginning at sundown. Hence the vigorous discussions at the dinner table during childhood: if the first day of Hanukkah fell on December 13, according to synagogue newsletter, did that mean that they should light candles on the evening of the twelfth? Everything about the faith of her ancestors was complicated. Christian children, by contrast, could write letters to Santa with the confident knowledge that Christmas Eve was always on December 24, regardless of whether they had been naughty or nice.

Maya’s mom was alone because she and her dad had divorced when Maya was a freshman at Brandeis. At first Maya was shocked, but then as time went by, a bit less so. Looking back on her childhood, she recalled that her parents hadn’t fought all that much. In fact, she really could hardly remember them even raising their voices in anger.

Her freshman roommate, Shoshana Klein, said a lack of emotional engagement probably meant they didn't care about each other enough to even fight, which made sense to Maya at the time.

On the other hand, she was surprised to find herself being absolutely thrown for a loop emotionally when her dad, Elliot Stein, married a girl almost young enough to be Maya's sister. And a *shiksa*, to boot! Bailey Hamilton! Her name sounded like a law firm. She was a marketing executive for Proctor & Gamble, and was always talking about soaps and deodorant. She looked exactly like the kind of woman who could steal away a Jewish man and break up a happy Jewish family, "happy" being a relative term, since most Jews were generally anything but, as they had entered into a covenant with a god as temperamental and prone to fits of dyspepsia as his chosen people. Maya's dad and Bailey started dating almost immediately after her parents split up. The speed at which they so quickly found each other gave foundation to Maya's suspicion that there may have been an affair brewing beforehand. Her mom never said anything, but Maya wondered if that was the reason for the divorce, and not the lack of passion that Shoshana brought up. Apparently her dad could be passionate enough when dating a life-sized Barbie doll.

Elliot Stein was fifty-three and Bailey Hamilton was a mere thirty-four years old when they tied the knot. They were married by a non-denominational justice of the peace

at a civil ceremony—family and close friends only—and had their party at Fiore, an Italian restaurant on the West Side. Maya and Rachel had initially, in a show of feminine solidarity with Dottie Stein, promised their mom they wouldn't go to either the ceremony or the party afterwards. But after a personal plea to both of them by Elliot, they realized while they were angry with him, he was, after all, still their father. Neither of them had the desire to bear a permanent grudge, and besides, divorce was fairly common. And a wedding was still fun, even if you hated the bride, maybe even more so, as then you would be silently rooting for disaster. However, the event went off flawlessly, even though Mr. Stein looked more a friend of Bailey's mother and father than their son-in-law. After her parents had broken the news about the end of their marriage, when her dad packed up and left the house, Mr. Stein gave the girls the standard crap that while he and their mom had drifted apart, he would always love them exactly the same, no matter what, blah, blah, blah.

Mr. Stein was an orthodontist. Compared to the people with real money, like the hedge fund crowd they partied with at the hot clubs downtown, their dad's level of wealth was merely comfortably upper-middle-class. But he had raised a family, sent his kids to college and still owned a thriving orthodontic practice on Long Island that was profitable enough to allow him at this point to hire junior staff to do most of the actual work, and which required him to show up at the office a mere three days a week.

While her mom never shared the financial details of their breakup (or really any other type of details—God, was she stoic!), Maya got the sense that in addition to the regular house and the beach house, both with mortgages that were fully paid off, they probably split assets down the middle, and of course there was alimony on top of that. So her mom was doing okay financially. It was just her heart that was broken and her pride that was shattered, as the desire to end the marriage had clearly been one hundred percent her dad's. New sex kitten Bailey skied, took two-week business trips to China and lived in a luxury high-rise condo on the West Side overlooking the Hudson River, which her dad subsequently moved into. The Stein house in Hempstead, when Elliot and Dottie were newlyweds, was initially decorated with hand-me-down furniture and, as finances allowed, replaced with overstuffed sofas and chairs from Levitz and bedroom sets from Sears. Bailey's apartment was all clean lines and modernist decor. Klee prints on the wall. A table that came to mid-shin in the foyer, unable to decide if it was decorative or a place to set the mail and keys. Baily herself, tall, blond, poised, athletic and Christian, represented everything Mrs. Stein had been fighting against since childhood. Of course *shiksas* were better looking! This was their country, their universe. And now the gentiles had even stolen her ex-husband. If there was one thing that Dottie Stein, née Goldbaum, was going to do before she departed this life for the world to come, it was make sure that her only remaining

unmarried daughter married a Jewish boy. Rachel was already married to Jacob Frumkin, a Manhattan lawyer who looked like he was on partner track at a major corporate firm. Rachel had put her own brief career as a lawyer on hold to stay home full time with the kids, Max, now age four, and Ezra, two.

Maya's musings were interrupted by the sound of her mother's voice. Mrs. Stein had worked briefly for a linen manufacturer in the garment district while helping put Mr. Stein through dental school. Her impressions of the work world dated primarily from an era when women of any age were "girls" and men were their bosses. She had adjusted in gradual fits and starts to the modern world, but still was unclear exactly what Yellow Bicycle did, or why.

"So how's work, darling?"

"About the same. It's usually dull, but the pay isn't bad. My boss is an arrogant jerk and my best friend in the office is the world's biggest slut."

"Why do they keep her? I mean, not that it's any of my business, but I don't see how someone who has loose morals and is sloppy and undependable in her personal life could be a productive employee on the job."

"Mom, that may have been true in your day, when being well-dressed and well-mannered counted for something (Maya recalled shopping expeditions to Manhattan to buy new dresses at Lord & Taylor and Saks Fifth Avenue), but now in technology if you're really good, then it doesn't matter

what you look like. Zoe is a first rate programmer, which means no one cares about her tattoos or nose ring.”

“Which means exactly what, dear?”

“She good at understanding how to design and build websites. So she can sleep with an entire football team if she wants to and still be in demand in the job market.”

“Then why don’t you do that, Maya?”

“What, unleash my raging inner slut?”

“No, learn how to... what your friend does. Be a programmer.”

“You mean why did I waste my time as an art history major, instead of learning something useful?”

“Maya, that’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

“Ah, that must be Rabbi Teitelbaum.”

“Mom, why would a rabbi be coming over? Are you dating him?”

“No, my dear, he’s actually here to meet you. I took the liberty of setting it up without asking you first. I hope you won’t be upset with me. He’s about your age, single, and really sweet. I probably should have asked you in advance, but you know how mothers are. I hope you don’t mind.”

Dottie got up and went to open the front door. She opened it to reveal a man about six feet tall, standing on the front step and wearing a plain looking dark suit without a tie. He was wearing a small *kippah*, or Jewish prayer cap. He was not

sporting a gigantic fur mass that looked like in a prior life it was a large beaver that had spent its days damming a stream before being converted to a head covering, such as would be worn by a Hasidic Jew, a member of the ultra-Orthodox community. This *kippah* was a modest black-knitted affair about the size of coaster that blended in with his short hair. He was clean-shaven, height-weight proportionate (Maya couldn't help but think in the lingo of dating sites), tall-ish for a Jew and seemed to be in his early thirties. Most likely a Conservative rabbi. An Orthodox rabbi would have been married by now, and a Reform one probably wouldn't be as nicely dressed. Mind racing ahead, Maya wondered if the wife of a Conservative rabbi had to observe the archaic Jewish rituals regarding menstruation and the need to go into the *mikveh*, or ritual bath, after one's period ended, which allowed her to be restored to purity and once again engage in sex. If that wasn't necessary in the Conservative movement, who knows, marrying a rabbi might almost be acceptable. Okay, there'd be no driving or TV on Saturdays and she'd probably have to go to synagogue a lot. But for the fact that this was a setup by her mom, under less annoying circumstances, Maya would probably be at least curious. Not now, however. Being ambushed by her mom really was just a bit too much.

“Oh, Rabbi Teitelbaum, please do come in,” Mrs. Stein chirped.

“Please, call me David.”

“I’d like to, but I’m old-fashioned, so I’ll try but you’ll forgive me if I forget.”

“Of course,” Rabbi Teitelbaum said warmly. He hesitated at the front step, glancing at Maya, furtively noticing her rounded figure. A body that was designed to nourish infants, to envelop a young rabbi in mounds of delightful flesh, to allow his member, circumcised in honor of the covenant between Abraham and God, to engorge itself with blood and fulfill its Biblical destiny.

Rabbi, thought Maya to herself, continuing to turn the word over in her mind. Could she really be a *rebbitzin*, a rabbi’s wife? She pictured herself in the kitchen, wearing a skirt and with her hair under a scarf, a couple of small children underfoot, as she prepared matzoh ball soup and a fresh baked challah for the family’s Shabbat dinner, to be eaten when her husband returned home after leading Friday night services.

“Thank you,” the rabbi responded, entering the house.

Leading him the few steps from the foyer to the dining room, Mrs. Stein said, “Rabbi, I’d like to introduce you to my daughter. Maya, this is Rabbi David Teitelbaum. Rabbi, this is my daughter, Maya.” Mrs. Stein beamed with satisfaction, like someone who’d discovered she was on track to win the weekly mah-jongg game with the ladies.

“Rabbi,” Maya managed to wheeze out as she jumped to her feet, “I’m just leaving. I have an appointment in the city I have to rush back to. I won’t interrupt the two of you from your visit.”

Rabbi Teitelbaum maintained his polite smile, but his shoulders sagged on hearing this news.

“But Maya, “Mrs. Stein urged. “Rabbi Teitelbaum is here to visit with you.”

“Oh, what a surprise,” Maya said with fake sincerity. I don’t mean to be rude, but I have a yoga class this afternoon, and if I’m late, the instructor bends me into a position that leaves me knotted in pain for the next twenty-four hours. So you’ll forgive me if I have to run.”

“Ah, Maya,” the rabbi gently responded. “Your mom told me you had a good sense of humor.” He continued to smile weakly, clearly discouraged by the haste with which Maya exiting. Mrs. Stein appeared to be suppressing a frown, and Maya knew that her victory in this particular battle would be short-lived. Her mom always managed to get in the last word.

Chapter Five

It would have been bad enough if the email had come from her mom. But no, it had to come from perfect-sister Rachel.

From: Rachel Frumkin

To: Maya Stein

Subject: Would it hurt to be a little nicer to Mom?

Maya, I know that you feel manipulated by Mom. Look I was married and already had Max by your age. (*Did she have to rub it in?*) Mom's old-fashioned. She wants to see you eventually hitched as well, settled down and happy. Even though her own experience doesn't exactly prove that married = happy. So Mom decided to set you up with a rabbi. Big deal. And didn't tell you about it. Alright, maybe that's somewhat more of a big deal.

Okay, I'm back. Little Max had a splinter. I don't understand why Jake is so helpless around his own kids.

Anyway, where was I? So this is what Mom sees. A daughter who is attractive and intelligent working at a decent job, but not really getting anywhere with her life. (I'm not criticizing you—I'm just giving you what I think is Mom's perspective.) You're smart enough to be effective at work, but not really into technology, so it's likely the wrong field for you long-term. Sorry if that sounds harsh, but you've got to admit it's probably the truth. (Maya grimaced as she read. *It was the truth.*) And last time anyone checked, the art history industry wasn't going out on a big hiring binge for art history majors. Which means you either should go back to graduate school and study something more practical, or you should start dating a guy with better career prospects. I don't have anything against Jeremy personally. He seems like an awfully sweet guy from the couple of times I've met him. But he just doesn't seem substantial, if that's the right word. He's friendly enough, and certainly smart, but doesn't seem to combine those qualities in any way that inspires confidence that someday he can take care of a wife and family. Although I understand eventually inheriting some money may take care of that problem.

By the way, *entre nous*, someone should write a book about the decline of men. Oh wait a sec, I think that annoying columnist from the *New York Times* did a few years ago.

Anyway, I guess my point is not to judge mom too harshly. She loves you and seems very interested in your life, which is more than we can say about any other parents we might have.

Love, Rachel

From: Maya Stein

To: Rachel Frumkin

Subject: RE: Would it hurt to be a little nicer to Mom?

Rachel, I know Mom means well. And I realize that dad has been too busy running after his blonde plaything, er, I mean, wife, to give either of us much attention. So I appreciate that mom cares.

And while I realize it's pointless of me to defend Jeremy, I have been dating him for almost year, which if you think about it probably says more about me than him. Please don't tell anyone I said that. I know it makes me sound like a bitch.

Love, Maya

Chapter Six

Maya set the alarm clock on her iPhone to the loudest possible ring, determined to get to work on time. She had the good luck to make her subway connection smoothly and got to the office twenty minutes early. Entering with a smile and hoping to impress Andy, she found out from Zoe that he was at an industry conference in San Francisco that he had neglected to mention. She immediately decided to check her Gmail account, and found an email from JDate in her inbox. She had almost completely forgotten signing up with them a few days earlier.

To: Maya Stein
From: Aaron Schwarz
Subject: JDate

Maya, I saw your profile on JDate and would like to introduce

myself. My name is Aaron Schwarz. I am in my mid-thirties, I work in Manhattan, and I would like to invite you to meet for coffee. Assuming it works on your schedule, let's meet at the Starbucks on West 52nd Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenue tomorrow at 2 pm, which I believe is close to your office (I took the liberty of checking out your Facebook profile and then looked up Yellow Bicycle online).

I look like my photo (well, maybe I've put on about a couple of pounds and my hair has thinned a bit, but you should be able to recognize me easily). I hope I will be able to meet with you tomorrow.

Sincerely,

Aaron

Maya went online and checked out Aaron's profile on JDate and then took a look at his Facebook page. She thought it was flattering to be asked out, but it was also a good idea to be cautious. Aaron had twenty-seven Facebook friends and exactly two photographs posted, one of himself and another with an older woman she presumed was his mother. This compared to Maya's 473 Facebook friends and over two thousand photographs. Either Aaron was a socially isolated loner or, more likely, although only a few years older than Maya, the age gap was enough of a difference that he was not of the social media generation.

Maya reflected on the occasional media report regarding the lurid murder of someone who met their killer online,

inevitably a female victim and male assailant. Still, it was only coffee, in broad daylight, in midtown Manhattan. Even if Aaron Schwarz, if that was his real name, slipped a date rape drug into her latte, he'd have an awfully difficult time hoisting her inert body over his shoulder and carrying her out of the premises without attracting attention. Still, just to be on the safe side, she decided she'd bring Zoe as her wingman, albeit discreetly. Maya would ask Zoe to show up at Starbucks at about a quarter past two, and do some quick undercover reconnaissance to make sure Maya didn't look like she was at risk of being abducted and sold into the white slave trade.

To: Aaron Schwarz
From: Maya Stein
Subject: RE: JDate

Aaron,

I actually look exactly like my picture. I will see you tomorrow.

Thanks for the invitation.

Regards,

Maya

Chapter Seven

Getting dressed for work in the morning and thinking ahead to her coffee with Aaron scheduled for later that afternoon, Maya choose a simple outfit, dressy jeans with a patterned top. It was a warm spring day and the daytime high was forecasted to be near eighty. While making her clothing selection, she debated with herself how much of her assets she should put on display. The problem with being full-figured was that sometimes, without intending to, the wrong choice could make her look a bit slutty. When mistaken for being overly sensual, she often was tempted to quote Jessica Rabbit: “Don’t blame me because I’m drawn this way.”

In middle and high school, Maya figured that getting attention from boys because of her curves wasn’t so terrible, because it still meant she got a lot of attention from boys. By college, it became somewhat more demeaning, especially

when guys constantly hit on her, clearly impressed by her shapeliness and not bothering to investigate her intellect or personality. She always assumed that by the time she got out of school and entered the work world she'd find people to be more mature. Unfortunately, this was not the case—men stayed boys their entire lives, it seemed—and Maya developed a habit of avoiding clingy tops or showing a bit too much décolletage, unless it was intentional. She didn't mind using her ample endowment to her advantage at times of own choosing. But she hated it when that's all that men seemed to notice about her.

Maybe that's why she was still with Jeremy. He certainly played with her boobs with eager excitement the first few times they slept together, like a small child grabbing the largest present piled in a heap at his birthday party. But now her breasts were just part of the entire package, a package, Maya was certain, that was more well-constructed than any Jeremy had access to before, wide of bosom and with a seventy percent hips-to-waist ratio that, had she been African-American, she often speculated, would have given her as much status for her posterior as her bosom. Once, while she was getting dressed after lovemaking, he remarked that she reminded him of those tribal women in *National Geographic* he used to get a boner from in grade school. Who knows, if Jeremy really did fixate on her hooters like Glen Schechter from high school had, she might have ditched him a long time ago. Although in fairness to Glen, he

was dating her at a time in her young life when she had not yet yielded her virginity *or* deigned to give head, so between hand jobs and finding refuge for his swollen member between the recesses of her compressed breasts, working atop her like a runaway freight train until the steam whistle blew and he came screeching to a halt, he went for the breasts. Who knows, if she had been a guy, she might have done the same thing.

Walking into Starbucks, she saw Aaron right away, sitting a table in the back and keeping an eye on the entrance. From a distance, Maya noticed that while he wasn't exactly handsome, there was something about the combination of his features that projected strength and confidence. The hint of bicep underneath the shirtsleeve. A body filled with the promise of compressed energy, harnessed steam. Dark and square-jawed, with thoughtful, penetrating eyes. A stevedore on a loading dock, a woodsman with an axe against his hip, Ishmael in search of the Great White Whale.

Maya walked past a crowded table and as she got closer, Aaron rose to his feet. Lower torso welded to the upper. The construction complete, a body poised between motion and rest. Even though it was early afternoon and he was clean-shaven, his face sported a heavy five o'clock shadow. Stubble you could light a match against. He was wearing suit pants, charcoal gray, a white dress shirt and a blue tie patterned with whorls and curlicues capable of casting a hypnotic spell on wary onlookers. A suit jacket was slung casually over the back of his chair.

Taking in the measure of the man, Maya was mesmerized by the aura of physicality he projected, a heft of body that almost seemed a little bit menacing, as if his calm exterior was hiding something tightly wound inside. She felt a tiny crackle of electricity in the air, ions charging.

“Hi, you must be Maya. I’m Aaron.” He extended a hand. Powerful, hairy-knuckled. Extending her own in return, Maya responded. “Hi, I’m Maya.”

“Well, Maya, it’s so nice to meet you.” They shook, Maya’s hand disappearing into his. A real handshake, like two men might use at a business meeting.

“It’s nice to meet you as well.”

“I would have waited by the door, but I saw there was a table open in the corner by the window, and given how crowded a Starbucks can get, I thought it would be smart to grab it while I had the chance. Tell me what you’d like and I’ll go order.”

Maya worried that her regular drink might seem too fussy. So she decided to tone down her inner JAP and said, “I’ll have double soy latte. With one raw sugar.”

“Double soy latte with one raw sugar it is. Would you like anything to eat along with that?”

“No, just the latte is good.”

Aaron came back to the table a few minutes later, holding two cups. “What did you get for yourself?” Maya asked.

“Just a black drip coffee. I drink coffee for the caffeine, not the taste, so the extra money for a fancy drink is wasted

on someone like me.” Maya noticed that Aaron was holding a venti.

“So,” Aaron remarked as they sat down. “Tell me a bit about yourself, Maya. Beyond what was on JDate and Facebook, I mean. I hope you don’t mind that I checked you out online. That’s pretty standard these days, you know.”

Maya was still trying to find her bearings from the projection of power that Aaron had sent radiating in her direction. Sensing that she was taking an overly long time to respond, Maya directed her attention back to Aaron’s question.

“Well, there isn’t a lot to tell. I grew up on Long Island, went to a conservative *shul*, had my Bat Mitzvah, went to Jewish summer camps, graduated from Brandeis, moved to Brooklyn, bounced around a bit my first few years after college and am now working a few blocks away for an Internet advertising agency—oh, right, you already know that. Let’s see, what else? Okay, my sister, Rachel, who is three years older than me, is already married and with two small kids, and had a good career going as a lawyer before deciding to stay home as a full time mom. My parents got divorced—but whose haven’t?—and my mom is nagging me to settle down and find someone already. You’re on JDate, so I’m sure you know all about Jewish moms. I should tell you that there is someone I am seeing sort of semi-regularly, but we’ve agreed we’re allowed to date other people. (Maya had made it a point that neither she nor Jeremy should choose as their Facebook status “in a relationship.”) He’s a nice guy, but I’m not sure

where it's headed. Oh, and just a couple of days ago, my mom tried to set me up on a blind date with a single rabbi. I was visiting on Sunday when who should ring the doorbell? Um, that's about it, I guess."

Maya realized that she had probably rambled on a bit more than she had planned to. Why was she telling her entire life story to a man she had just met, someone who looked like he could have competed on the Czech Republic's national wrestling team? She glanced around and noticed that Zoe had just come in after finishing her cigarette on the sidewalk.

Aaron listened intently, taking sips of his coffee as Maya spoke.

"Well," Maya said, acutely aware of not wanting to monopolize the conversation, "how about you, Aaron? Tell me about yourself. For example, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a commercial real estate broker. That explains the suit and tie."

"Is it interesting work?"

"Oh, I don't know if you could call it interesting. Certainly not in the way your Internet company probably is, with I imagine all kinds of bright, young, energetic people. I specialize in Midtown South, which the area below the Empire State Building. We don't have the type of fancy clientele you find in your neighborhood, the major corporations or hot technology companies with big budgets. I tend to work with companies like Asian trading firms, which are looking for space that's cheap

and convenient. Sometimes it takes a lot of persuasion to close a deal.”

Maya noticed that Aaron’s eyes seemed to give off just a hint of a gleam when he said the word “persuasion.”

“Do you like, um, ‘persuading’ people, Aaron? I guess that’s another word for sales, right?”

“I don’t particularly like it or dislike it. For me, it’s really just part of the job. But I do find that I’m good at it, at least judging by the results. It only took me a few years to become the highest grossing broker at my old firm. I figured, why let somebody sit back and make a big profit on my hard work. So, a couple of years ago I decided to set up shop independently. We’re small, just me and a couple of young brokers still in their twenties, eager and hungry like I was a few years ago, plus an office manager who helps us stay organized. I’m doing okay money-wise. But what I especially like is the freedom and independence I get from owning my own firm. You see, I don’t like to follow orders. I like to be in charge.”

In charge. Another ripple of electricity. Maya sensed the Old World sensibilities of rug merchants, wholesalers, import firms. Ships laden with amphorae crossing the Mediterranean. A man like Aaron could be at home there, able to persuade, closing deals by force of personality, and if that was insufficient, then just by force alone.

“What about other stuff, like school and family?” Maya asked. “For example, where are you from, what’s your family like? You know, your personal life.”

“Well, it’s not much of a story to tell. I grew up in Shaker Heights. I went to Case Western for a couple of years, dropped out before finishing my degree and then started in retail at a local Macy’s. Crummy work, lots of hours standing on your feet. Plus, my personality was a bit too aggressive for shoppers at the mall. My attitude was, ‘C’mon, for Chrissakes, both suits look nice. Just pick one already.’ I had family in New York with some connections in commercial real estate. They thought I could be successful at it. It’s not rocket science. You tend to say things like, ‘That’s forty bucks per square foot, triple net.’ You work hard, you hustle, and things tend to work out. Sometimes you have to twist someone’s arm a bit to get a deal closed, but for some reason I don’t seem to mind that part of the job.”

Twist someone’s arm.

“And what about the Jewish part?” She asked. “You’re on JDate.”

“Right, Jewish, of course, what can I say? My dad was Orthodox as a kid and tried to keep us somewhat observant. We kept a kosher home but ate shrimp cocktails and Chinese barbecued pork outside of the house, same as everyone else we knew. I was Bar Mitzvah’ed, then like all of my friends dropped synagogue like a hot potato. Nowadays, I go to *shul* on the High Holidays, I give a little to charity, I light *yahrtzeit* candles.”

“Who do you light *yahrtzeit* candles for?”

“My dad. He passed away four years ago from a heart

attack at sixty-six. He and my mom had just moved to Deerfield Beach. They were all set for a comfortable retirement, and then whammo. Just like that, the universe deals you a blow you didn't see coming. Of course, my dad was overweight, and growing up on schmaltz and fatty pastrami wasn't exactly good for the arteries. Still, I feel sorry for him. And for my mom, of course. We didn't really have a great relationship, actually. My dad and me, that is. I get along fine with my mom."

Maya decided not to do inquire directly about what issues might have caused friction between Aaron and has dad, at least not yet, so shifting direction slightly, she asked, "What about the rest of the family?"

"Well, I think we all feel the same way about it. Everyone feels bad my dad passed away at such a relatively young age."

"No, I mean do you have any other family? Any siblings, for example?"

"I have two sisters, both older. They moved to California years ago. One has kids, teenagers now. The other is divorced, no kids. We're friendly, but I don't get a chance to see them very often."

Aaron paused and took a sip of his black coffee. Maya realized she didn't want this to sound like an interrogation. Plus, while she wasn't exactly sure she had found her potential soul mate, she wanted to let Zoe know that she didn't feel like her life was in danger. Sliding her chair back to stand up, she said, "Excuse me, but I just need to visit the little girl's room."

Aaron stood up as Maya did, impressing her with his old-fashioned manners. She pictured Jeremy shirtless in her kitchen after an evening of coupling, standing at an open refrigerator, drinking milk straight from the carton and absentmindedly scratching himself where the sun doesn't shine.

Zoe followed her to the bathroom after a few seconds. They went around a corner and out of view of Aaron.

"Hey, Zoe, thanks. I don't know if I'm going to marry this guy, or if this will even lead to a real date, but I think for now there probably is no need to worry about my physical safety."

"Holy shit, Maya, are you out of your mind? That guy has 'warning, danger ahead' written all over him. Whadya say we go back, you throw a cup of hot coffee in his face and I'll kick him the balls. Then we'll just run the hell out. It's how I end all of my bad dates."

"Zoe, what's wrong with you? He's obviously not my type, not even close, but by New York standards fairly normal. But dangerous?" Even as Maya was protesting, she knew that Zoe had sensed something intangible, but nonetheless real, from fifty feet away. Like a convenience storeowner in a rough neighborhood who keeps a sawed-off shotgun under the counter just in case, Zoe, given her colorful dating history, was attuned to subtle signs of potential trouble.

"Maya, how many guys have you been with in your life. Fifteen? Twelve? Am I getting warmer? Listen, when you've seen as much bad shit go down as I have, you either develop

a sixth sense or you end up in a back alley, dead if you're lucky, gang-raped and bleeding profusely from a massive skull fracture if you aren't. I must know at least five chicks that's happened to. This guy's face screams 'some bad shit is going down' from every pore. C'mon girlfriend, let's book on out of here."

"Zoe, thanks for the advice, but I think I will be fine."

"Okay, if you want to be that way, I can't stop you. You ask me to come down here to make sure you're safe, but then you refuse my help. By the way, what's the name of your dentist? Just in case you are so mangled when he gets done with you we have to identify you by dental records."

"Thanks, Zoe. You're a dear, really. Now go back to work."

As Maya got back to the table, Aaron asked, "Who was that girl you were talking to?"

"Oh, we were just both waiting for the bathroom. You know, at Starbucks it's just one person at a time."

Aaron looked at her intently, as if he doubted her explanation. His gaze was piercing, a bit uncomfortable. To break the silence, Maya quickly asked, "So were you seeing anyone on a steady basis before going on JDate? Not divorced or still married—ha ha—are you?"

"Oh no," Aaron responded with a chuckle. "Not even close. The New York dating scene has been a bit tough for me. Oh, I don't have any problem going out with someone a few times. But I've been told I have control issues. I was raised in a strict household and as a result I am a very

disciplined person. But not everyone thinks that being disciplined is a good thing.”

Shit, maybe Zoe was right after all.

AUTHOR ED HARRIS was born in the Bronx and lives in Seattle with his family. He has three children, of assorted genders, skin colors, sexual orientations and countries of origin, who are united in a shared belief that their father was born fully-formed as a grouchy adult. His long-suffering wife bears silent testimony to the saying that “behind every successful man is a surprised woman.”

He is regarded by friends and loved ones as a *nudge*, a Yiddish word that does not have a direct English language equivalent, and is used to characterize someone who is particularly annoying.



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