To Karen, Mirusha, and Taniusha
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Yom Kippur in Amsterdam is Shrayer’s first collection of stories and first book of fiction.
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The Disappearance of Zalman

Mark Kagan met Sarah at a poetry festival held annually in New Haven. In the packed auditorium their seats were next to each other, but they didn’t start talking until the end of the reading. A scandal brought them together—not a scandal in which they took part, but one that both of them observed from their seats. Toward the end of the program, a famous critic was supposed to be reminiscing about Robert Penn Warren and then reciting his poem about goose hunting. Drunk and crab-legged, wearing a wide-brim hat and a soiled corduroy jacket, the professor fell off the stage in the middle of the poem, with the words “path of logic, path of folly” stuck between his teeth.

“This guy’s a riot,” Sarah said, turning to Mark. “Do you know him?”

“Had him for a seminar,” Mark replied, following the curve of her honey-freckled neck, and a few minutes later they were stomping on wet November maple leaves, laughing at each other’s impressions of the drunk critic’s reading and fall. They headed downtown to Mark’s favorite bar and played darts while drinking beer and waiting for their food. After downing a plate of spicy fried squid with two more beers, they walked to Mark’s apartment, where the bed hadn’t been made and the pillows and sheets smelled of the ocean.

They had been together for a year and a half when Sarah completed her master’s in political science and took a job on Capitol Hill. She moved to Washington in August, after the two of them had gone
on a biking trip to Prince Edward Island. Mark stayed behind in New Haven to finish up his dissertation and look for a teaching job.

On a wind-flappy, late afternoon in September, Mark was sitting by the window of the bar he frequented. His pint was dark, bitter, and bottomless, the kind that cleanses a drunken soul of its illusions and false hopes. Licking Lethean froth off his lips, his temple pressed to the dusty window between the letters R and A, and his eyes fixated on a neighborhood idiot feeding challah to shameless New Haven pigeons, Mark realized that compromise was just a convenient verbal prop, that of course Sarah wasn’t going to become Jewish, or he cease to be it, and they’d better take themselves in hand and face the imminence of separation.

The first few weeks after that were the hardest for Mark. When he wasn’t writing, Sarah came into his thoughts, and he revisited their many unresolved discussions about marriage and family. He hoped to find justification for ending the whole thing. Sarah had told him they should let the kids choose their religion. She believed she was meeting him halfway, and a part of him agreed: yes, it looked as if neither one would have to give up their ancestral faith. But when Mark reminded himself that after almost two years together Sarah still hadn’t figured out that for a Jewish man the prospect of having to bargain for the identity of his future children was terrifying, he became so angry that he wanted to run away and forget her. As he was soon to discover, though, the rehearsed drama of parting had to play out in his head in order to come to a close in the third act. Only then would it end, when he performed all the parts, including Sarah’s, his own, and those of his immigrant parents, Sarah’s widowed mother, and even the spectral presence of Sarah’s father. Their relationship stubbornly refused to exit the stage, the spectacle of life continued without letting up, Mark kept forgetting their lines and mumbling something about “working it out,” coughing and improvising as they went along. It was already the end of October, a feverish Indian summer after a week of cold rain and the first streaks of
silver on the ground, but the old double-barreled gun still hadn't shot their love dead.

Mark didn't know how to explain to anyone that despite the certainty of it all, despite his knowledge that his time together with Sarah was nearing its ending, despite the clenched-teeth endorsement of all fifty-seven centuries of Jewish history, he still felt that he would be betraying something so precious that no words could describe it. The Jew in him—the Russian Jew—rejected that which the lover in him still ached for. He was torn; he needed other people's approval. Having concluded that no one, Jew or Gentile, who wasn't equipped to be his perfect double, could justify the decision to break up with Sarah, he resolved to seek a cleric's advice.

It was a foggy morning in early November, almost exactly two years after Mark and Sarah had first met, when Mark went to see the university rabbi. His spacious office, with Chagall's lovers on the walls, was on the third floor of a renovated blue frame house, just steps from the Center for European Art. The rabbi had a barrel chest, short legs, and a clean-shaven face with a hooked nose. He wore a handsomely tailored olive-brown sport coat and sand-colored cords. Sitting in a deep armchair across a glass table from Mark, he listened, chewing the air with his full waxy lips. When Mark finished his story of loving Sarah and trying to leave her, the rabbi took out a pipe, stuffed and lit it, and spoke only after taking a few hungry puffs.

"I think I know how you feel," said the rabbi. "I dated a Catholic girl in college. You must feel like you're in hell, my friend."

"More or less," Mark replied. "More."

"I may as well be direct," the rabbi continued. "You've got two options: either she converts, or you two split up."

Mark sat silently, staring at the rabbi's cognac tassel loafers through the glass table.

"Buy you a cup of coffee?" the rabbi offered, deflating a long pause. He put on a checkered brown derby and wrapped a cashmere
scarf around his wiry neck. They went to a nearby bookstore café. One of the block’s regular panhandlers greeted them on the way, shaking his paper cup and asking for “a quarter, maybe a buck.” The rabbi handed him a crisp dollar bill.

“This guy could be me,” the rabbi said under his breath.

Over cappuccino with almond biscotti, the rabbi gave Mark a crash course on conversion and marriage. Unsentimental and prudent, he treated Mark the way an experienced guide treats a testy traveler. Ford the mountain river where I tell you or the swirling waters will swallow you. Don’t experiment. Take care! He spoke about the letter of the law. He didn’t once mention beauty, desire, longing—all the nimble things that make you love someone or else stop loving her. The rabbi didn’t try to persuade Mark. He just laid down his facts and even put some frothy statistics on top. Then he stopped, drank up the last dregs of his cappuccino, and glanced at his wristwatch.

“I have to pick up my daughter from school,” he said, getting up. Mark didn’t know what to say.

“Were your parents refuseniks in Russia?” the rabbi asked, leaning over the table.

“Actually, no,” Mark replied, feeling guilty for something he hadn’t done. “They were rank-and-file engineers. We got permission to leave right away, in ’77. I was three; I can barely remember Moscow.”

Mark slowly walked home, studying the firmament through the cracks in the asphalt. As he passed the art museum, a voice roused him from a stupor. The voice that said “excuse me” belonged to a tall young man standing on the sidewalk, a stack of yellow leaflets in his left hand. He wore a black coat, black pants, and a white shirt. Wavy blond hair streamed from under his black fedora. Long eyelashes fluttered under his thick glasses like two translucent moths. Thin, reddish vegetation lined his cheeks and upper lip. Something quixotic about him, Mark thought. Now that the young man had Mark’s attention, he looked him in the eye and asked: “Are you Jewish?” All the while a myopic smile flickered on his face.
Young men from a local yeshiva showed up on campus about every two months. They parked their rented yellow truck—covered with messianic slogans—on a busy campus street. There they would stand, eyeing and sifting the student crowd, trying to separate the Jew from the chaff. Mark’s reactions to these hunters after lost Jewish souls varied from answering “yes” but waving them off with his hand to an occasional visit to the yellow truck, where he repeated a vaguely familiar prayer after one of the yeshiva boys. And that November afternoon he followed the young man from another century inside the yellow truck.

“Mark Kagan,” he introduced himself.

The young man smiled and offered him a hand with long fingers that were made to caress a musical instrument.

“I’m Zalman, Zalman Kun.”

“Are you related to the Hungarian revolutionary?” Mark asked.

“My grandfather came from Hungary. How do you know about that Kun?”

“Jewish trivia.”

After Zalman had released Mark from a double harness of phylacteries, he put his hand on Mark’s wrist.

“Tell me, do you know Hebrew?”

“Barely,” Mark answered retreating toward the back of the truck. “Sunday school was a total disaster.”

“What about now?”

“I’ve tried. Don’t have the patience. In any case, I should be going.” Mark shook the young Hasid’s hand and turned to exit.

“Wait,” Zalman sang out. “You know, you can come to my yeshiva and learn Hebrew. If you want, I can be your tutor. Free of charge.”

From his chest pocket he removed a yellow flyer with a picture of a smiling old man with a round beard. Folding the flyer in half, he scribbled a phone number on it and placed it in Mark’s hand.

Two days later, under the influence of some fatidic gravity, Mark found himself turning his old Subaru wagon into a side street and
driving up to Zalman's yeshiva. The yeshiva was about a mile west of the university campus, and Mark had never been to that part of town before. Neon signs offered to cash his checks, to sell him liquor or barbecued wings and ribs. Parking outside the yeshiva, he felt like a traveler nearing an Israeliite enclave amid the land of Egyptians.

Three skinny boys in velvet yarmulkes stood on the front steps of a yellow Victorian. Their faces looked phosphorescent in the streetlamp's light.

"Who're you looking for?" asked one of them, a kid with circles under squirrel eyes.

"Zalman, he's one of the students here," Mark replied.

"Zalman?"

With both hands the boy pulled at the ornate knob of the heavy front door and led Mark to a room with dark wood paneling. Young men in black-and-white garb were sitting at the tables, bent over their books. Several of them were swaying and burbling some words.

Zalman saw Mark and got up to shake his hand. "You came for your first lesson, that's very good."

He put his hand on the little kid's shoulder and said something to him in Yiddish. The kid giggled and ran out of the study hall.

Zalman pointed to a chair. "Sit down. Please. I have a little practice book for you."

Mark sat down across the table from Zalman. Opening a yellow booklet with the Hebrew alphabet on the last page, Zalman put his index finger next to a character.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Gimmel," Mark answered.

"And this?"

"Kof. No, Chof."

"Very good," Zalman said, stressing the "very" part. "Very good. And what's this?"

"Hmm . . . either Vov or Zayen. I always get them confused. Both look like little cripplets."
Zalman sighed and laid out his aristocratic hands on the table.

"I want you to know the entire alphabet next time." He closed the yellow booklet and passed it to Mark. "And now let me ask you a question."

"You probably think I'm hopeless."

"No, no, no. I just wanted to ask you what sort of things you learn at your university." Zalman said "learn" instead of "study."

"I study literature."

"Literature?" Zalman repeated, tasting the word with his lips and tongue.

"I'm writing a dissertation about modern Jewish writers who wrote in European languages. That's basically my area."

"Why do you call them Jewish writers?"

"They were Jews, and many of them wrote about Jews."

"Did they write good or bad things about Jewish people?"

"It's not as simple as that. Some good, some bad."

"I understand," said Zalman, in whose gray eyes centuries of sorrow were now reflected.

"Haven't you read any books by Jewish writers?" Mark asked. "Kafka? Joseph Roth? Malamud? Philip Roth?"

"Roth? I've heard about him. He wrote bad things about Jewish people."

"Not bad. Sometimes brutally honest."

"We have our own stories. Beautiful." Zalman lifted up a stack of volumes in crimson bindings.

It was raining when Mark left the yeshiva. He lit a cigarette and stood on the porch for a while, inhaling tobacco smoke and the rotten breath of Long Island Sound.

DURING THAT WHOLE AUTUMN Sarah came to see Mark in New Haven only twice. She usually had to work on Saturdays. As the one with a flexible schedule—those were Sarah's words—Mark would
drive or take the train to Washington on many weekends. Instead of the dissertation he was trying to finish, he could have written one about the exalted sense of expectation, the railroad conspiracies, the devilish traffic jams and sardonic state troopers, and the late Friday night arrivals when he and Sarah both pattered in the car like impatient children.

Unfinished conversations thrived amid such weekends of packing a life without each other into thirty-six hours. Saturdays often ended dissonantly as Mark and Sarah were cross with each other for having to part the next day. They would sleep late on Sunday, read the paper, and hurry to brunch. On Monday, when Mark woke up alone in his own bed, the sinewy calendar would wink at him from a half-open door. Add to that two more chapters to go in his dissertation and the bleakness of the job market, and the story of his last autumn in graduate school would be near complete (save for the vertiginous transparency of the New England sky on a crisp December morning, which words refuse to capture).

Without Sarah his life would have been all work laced with brooding and procrastination. But in this life a niche had been carved out for his tutor, Zalman, whom Mark went to see at the yeshiva on Wednesday nights. He didn’t make much progress in Hebrew. Zalman turned out to be a great storyteller, and instead of tutoring Mark in language, he told him wondrous tales about tzaddiks from Galicia and Volhynia who in their sleep visited with the Almighty. Mark, in turn, would retell his favorite short stories or even summarize entire novels. “Levin, that’s a Jewish name!” Zalman cried out when they got to Anna Karenina, and happiness glinted in his gray eyes.

Sarah hadn’t been to New Haven since Labor Day weekend. She finally visited in December, arriving by plane on a Friday night. In the small and shabby terminal, her navy raincoat, pinstripe suit, firebird scarf, and pearls clashed with Mark’s faded jeans and old suede jacket.
“Hey, yeshiva boy,” she said, clinging to him and kissing him on a scruffy cheek. She said it almost too loudly and merrily, and several passengers from Sarah’s flight looked at them over their shoulders. Mark cringed, just slightly, at the new nickname Sarah had for him. She used to call him “Russian boy,” and he wasn’t crazy about that nickname either. He didn’t think of himself as “Russian,” although he still spoke some Russian with his parents and poured white vinegar over the meat dumplings he bought frozen at the Russian store when he visited his parents in Boston—and cooked for himself at home.

“I’d like to shower and change before we eat,” Sarah said as they were pulling out of the airport, her hand climbing over the collar of his shirt. “I’ve missed you, yeshiva boy. How’s the diss?”

Mark drove silently, whistling and pretending that he didn’t want to talk about his dissertation. He didn’t want to talk about anything at all.

“How’s the congressman?” he finally asked about Sarah’s boss.

“He’s good. He had to go to Oakland this weekend for his nephew’s christening.”

Sarah’s lacy, bottle green underwear made her look taller and slenderer in the bedroom’s semidarkness. As she undressed, Mark was thinking that his desire for her had become a separate creature living outside his mind. Afterward, their bodies disentangled, they lay on his futon, smoking and touching the rims of each other hands. Purple dusk draped the windows from the outside. Upstairs, Mark’s Brazilian neighbor was playing something jazzy and tropical—unwinding after her long shift at the city hospital. Mark turned on the bedside lamp, and they looked at the pictures from their summer vacation, which he had finally developed six months later.

“So, how’s the yeshiva?” Sarah asked.

“It’s good.”

“What do you talk about, you and your tutor?”


“Do you talk about women?”
“Not really.”
“Never?”
“I guess we do,” Mark replied hesitantly. “We talk about marriage. And he tells stories.”
“Stories? What about?”
“This week he told me about this rabbi whose wife died. But then she visited him every year on a hot July night and took him for a stroll around the small town. The rabbi’s second wife was growing mad with jealousy.”
“Doesn’t your tutor ask after me?”
“He knows you exist.”
“Interesting,” Sarah drew out. “I just can’t picture you going there.”
“Well, I can picture you going to mass,” he snapped.
A couple of weeks earlier Mark had mentioned to Zalman that he was driving to Washington for the weekend.
“What are you going?” Zalman asked.
“To see my girlfriend.”
“Girlfriend? What’s her name?”
“Sarah.”
“Sarah—that’s nice. And what does she do?”
With a few strokes of embellishment Mark created a Jewish version of Sarah Flaherty. She and Mark had met in graduate school. Her family lived in California. Her father was an ophthalmologist, her mother a social worker. (Before his death of liver cirrhosis, Sarah’s father had operated a truck-leasing company in Sacramento; her mother still worked as a bank teller.) She played the cello (at college the Catholic Sarah had sung in an a capella group). The Jewish Sarah was working as a legislative assistant to a senator from San Francisco (the real Sarah actually worked for a congressman from Bakersfield). She had long copper hair and turquoise blue eyes (she did!). Zalman nodded in satisfaction as Mark described this other Sarah.