



HARRY KEMELMAN

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THE DAY THE RABBI RESIGNED

Rabbi Small Mystery

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THE EVENING AT THE BERGSONS' HAD BEEN PLEASANT, even gay at times. But as Rabbi David Small, both hands clutching the wheel, drove the short distance home, he was aware that his wife Miriam was annoyed with him. It was not that she did not speak—she was always careful not to distract him with casual conversation when he was driving—but he could detect it in the set of her chin and in the way she sat upright, her back barely touching the back of the seat. As always when he reached their house, he let her out and then drove into the driveway to park the car in the garage. Normally, she would wait for him to rejoin her and they would walk up the steps together and he would unlock and open the door. But tonight, when he let her out at the curb, she used her own key and entered the house alone.

“Something bothering you?” he asked when he came in a couple of minutes later. Although of average height, he looked shorter because of the scholarly stoop of a man who had spent his life poring over books, an effect heightened by his tendency to thrust his head

forward as he peered at the world nearsightedly through thick-lensed, wire-rimmed glasses.

She was slim, with the figure of a young girl, but there were fine lines at the corners of her eyes. Her heart-shaped face, though youthful, showed its maturity in the set of her firm chin. Her blond hair, now occasionally tinted, or as she would say, "touched up" at the hairdresser's, was piled on top of her head as though to get it out of the way. She stood very straight and looked at him accusingly.

"You weren't very sociable tonight," she said coldly. "In fact, you were positively hostile."

"Only to that idiot Ben Clayman," he said. "And maybe to his friend, Myron Levitt, the G.E. fellow who came from Rochester a couple of years ago."

"But why? What did Ben Clayman say or do?"

"He asked me if I had visited Morris Fisher at the hospital. I told him I hadn't got 'round to it yet, and when he looked disapproving, I asked him if he had been. He admitted he hadn't, and then added, 'But I'm not his rabbi,' and that really annoyed me. So I explained to him that visiting the sick was enjoined on all Jews, and was not a special rabbinic function."

"You lectured him."

The rabbi smiled. "Yes, I suppose I did."

"I heard you," she said, and then added, "from the other side of the room."

"I guess I did raise my voice a little. Several others had joined us, and Arnold Robbins kept bleating, 'But you're our spiritual leader.' Now that really ticked me off, and I told him if it was a spiritual leader the congregation wanted, they should have got a Protestant minister or a Catholic priest rather than a rabbi."

"You didn't!" She was shocked, but she couldn't help smiling.

"I certainly did." He nodded in smug satisfaction.

"And then this Levitt person said his rabbi in Rochester, who had married him, was a veritable saint, and he was sure it was responsible for the success of his marriage. Now, how do you respond to that kind of idiocy? So I said that no doubt it was the reason for the low divorce rate in the Jewish community of Rochester."

"Oh, David, you didn't."

"I did, and I don't think he even realized I was being sarcastic. When I asked Clayman if he had any complaints about *his* marriage—at which I had officiated, if you remember—someone said he wouldn't dare say so if he did, and that broke it up."

"Ben Clayman is one of your most loyal supporters. I don't know why you'd want to antagonize him."

"Oh, I didn't antagonize him, just kidded him a little."

"Well, then, Arnold Robbins. You know, David, it seems to me that lately you've been awfully short-tempered with a lot of members of the congregation."

He grinned at her. "You think they might fire me?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Because as you know very well, the Board of Directors has tried to fire me a dozen times. They tried the very first year I was here. I had to fight to keep my job. Each time I justified it on the grounds that the congregation as a whole wanted me, and that it was only the board that was hostile. But maybe that was only a rationalization for what was actually plain stubbornness on my part."

"That was then, but now the board is behind you, a hundred percent. You've won them over. Now they like you, and you're presuming on it."

He shook his head. "No such thing. It's just that I got older and they got younger."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I came here I was under thirty and the board members were in their forties and fifties, even a couple in their sixties. When I disagreed with them on something, they regarded it almost as an impertinence because in their eyes I was a youngster, a kid. But now I'm fifty-three, and I'm older than most of the members of the board. The older ones either died off or moved to Florida, out of the area anyway. I've officiated at the weddings of most of the present members of the board, anyway, all those who married local girls. One or two of them I even prepared for the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Ben Clayman for one. So now I'm the old man, and they, even those who are about my age, are the youngsters. I suspect that even when I appear harsh and unyielding, they take a kind of pride in my being a crusty, irascible old curmudgeon who won't compromise the least bit on principles." He grinned. "If you're worried about my antagonizing Ben Clayman, I overheard him later explaining to his G.E. friend that it was my modesty and humility that led me to deny my spiritual leadership."

"And if they do think of you as their spiritual leader, is it so bad?"

"Miriam!" He sounded shocked. "It's not our line of work at all. We make no pretensions to having an inside track to the Almighty. A rabbi, unlike a Protestant minister or a Catholic priest, has not received a call from God. I got my call from Jake Wasserman, the chairman of the Ritual Committee at the time. I studied for the rabbinate as I might have for any other profession, the law or medicine. I chose the rabbinate because of my fascination with the Talmud. As a rabbi, my function is to sit in judgment on disputes that are brought before me, to advise on all matters relating to our tradition, to teach our tradition and

guide the congregation in it, and to be the resident subsidized scholar of the community. I don't bless people or things, and I have no special role in our service. I don't know what spiritual leadership involves, but it suggests trying to be more than human. And I suspect that trying to be more than human, you are apt to end up being less than human." He chuckled as a thought occurred to him. "Do you suppose the children of ministers are frequently on the wild side because they've been disillusioned by seeing their fathers as they really are, as ordinary human beings who are annoyed when the toast is burned, and downright angry when their wives scratch the fender of the car backing out of the garage, rather than the unworldly, spiritual beings seen in the pulpit by the congregation?"

"All right, so you're not a spiritual leader, but you give sermons."

"Yes, because the congregation expects it, perhaps to relieve the tedium of our long services, or maybe"—he grinned—"to assure them that I'm doing something to justify my salary. Traditionally, the rabbi's contract called for him to deliver only two discourses during the year, and the discourse was not a sermon, not an exhortation, but rather a scholarly dissertation."

"You do a lot of counseling."

"Only because I'm available. They come to my study at the temple because I'm usually there during the day. They tell me what's troubling them and I listen. I suppose just unburdening themselves helps some of them. To some I give commonsense advice, and maybe that helps. And I know about various social agencies that they can apply to for help, say, for the care of an elderly parent. But I have no special expertise in the field."

"You want to know what I think, David? I think you need a vacation."

"The trouble with a vacation is that what you leave is no different from what you have to come back to."

"Yes, but *you're* apt to be different. Would it be any different in another congregation?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? This was a new congregation when I came to it. Maybe an older congregation, in a city, perhaps, where they were more knowledgeable about their religion, might be different. Or maybe it was because I got off on the wrong foot with this one and there's been a sort of tradition of doubt and suspicion about me ever since." He canted his head to one side and eyed her speculatively. "You know, Miriam, thinking back, the most enjoyable time I had in the years that I've been here is the year I taught the class in Judaic Thought at Windermere. I wouldn't have got the chance to give the course if I hadn't been the rabbi here."

"Are you saying you wish you had gone into teaching instead of the rabbinate? That you'd rather be a teacher than a rabbi?"

"Well, as a rabbi I *am* a teacher. It's just that the class I've been given to teach, these youngish, successful, professionals and executives who by and large make up the Jewish community of Barnard's Crossing, don't seem to profit by my teaching. I was far more successful with the younger people in college, and it was more satisfying."

"David," she said accusingly, "this isn't something that just popped into your head because of what Ben Clayman said tonight."

"No," he admitted, "I've been thinking about it for some time."

"How long?"

"Ever since my birthday."

"But—but why then?"

"Because I'm fifty-three, and it occurred to me that in a few years I'd be too old to be considered for a teaching job. Maybe I'm too old now, but I'd like to give it a shot."

"And have you done anything about it?" she asked quietly.

"Well, I've written to my cousin Simcha."

"Simcha the Apicorus? You wrote to him because you thought as an atheist he would approve of your leaving the rabbinate?"

"I wrote to him because he's been a professor at Chicago for over forty years, and I thought he might be able to help me. And an Apicorus is not necessarily an atheist. We use the term very loosely and are apt to apply it to anyone who doesn't observe some regulation we do." He looked at her curiously. "You don't appear to be particularly upset at my wanting to leave the rabbinate."

"I'm not," she said flatly. "Do you think it's easy being a rabbi's wife?"

"Why? What do you have to do? Oh, you mean you feel you have to go to all the Sisterhood meetings and the Hadassah meetings."

"Oh, I don't mind going to those. I'd probably go even if I weren't the rabbi's wife. I mean, I have to be nice to everyone. The Bergsons are good friends of ours, but would I ever say to Rachel that I thought Janice Slobodkin used too much makeup? Or that Nancy Bersin spoils her kids rotten? Or that I didn't think the other Nancy, Nancy Goldstein, was much of a housekeeper?"

"You mean Rachel Bergson would tell them?"

"Of course not, but in talking to her good friend Debbie Cohen she might mention it. And Debbie Co-

hen is friendly with both Nancys, and *she* might mention it to them.”

“I don’t hesitate to tell Al Bergson what I think of various members of the congregation.”

“Of course not. You’ve been fighting with one segment of the congregation or another ever since we came here. Sometimes you’ve opposed the entire Board of Directors. Besides, men don’t talk.”

“How do you mean we don’t talk?”

“I mean that a man doesn’t call another man on the telephone unless he has something specific he wants to tell him, but women talk on the phone for hours even when they’ve got nothing to say to each other. It’s a form of visiting, of keeping in touch. So things get said that you hadn’t planned on saying. I’ve got to smile and be friendly all the time, and it’s a strain. Janice Slobodkin calls me ‘Mimi.’ I hate the nickname. But if I ask her to call me Miriam, she’s apt to think I’m stuck-up, or that I want her to keep her distance. Let’s get out, David. Find another job in teaching or editing—”

“But it’s not easy for a man of fifty-three to get a job, especially in an entirely new field. I can’t very well give up this job until I get another.”

“But you can, David. There’ll be just the two of us. Jonathon goes into that big law firm at the end of the year, and Hepsibah is getting married in September.”

“That’s going to cost a pretty penny.”

“But we’ve saved for it.”

“We have?”

“I have.”

“Still, we’ve got to live. What if a job doesn’t come along? Do you expect me to ask our children to support us?”

“Heaven forbid! But we’ll manage. In a couple or three weeks, in June, you will have been here twenty-

five years. And you are eligible for your pension, which pays seventy-five percent of your present salary. And there's a cost of living increase included. Seventy-five percent of your salary for just the two of us. We'll be rich, David. Even if you don't get a job right away, we won't suffer. We can travel. We can go to Israel without having to worry about getting back in time for the High Holy Days, or because you have to officiate at someone's wedding."

A slow grin spread across his face. But then he shook his head. "No, I've got to have a job, even if it's just one to come back to."

"Why?"

"Because I've got to have something to do. I have to know that something has to be done, to give structure to my life. It's different for a woman. She always has a job—preparing meals, running a household. But if a man has nothing to do, he disintegrates. You know what happens to men who retire, men who have nothing to do? They're with their wives all the time. They go shopping with them and carry their bundles. The big decision of the day is where they'll go for lunch or what to prepare for dinner. No, thank you. I won't give up this job until I get another."

Later, as they were preparing for bed, she asked curiously, "Why didn't you see Morris Fisher, David? Didn't you make your regular visit to the hospital? And don't you see every one of the congregants when you go?"

"And any other Jew who happens to be there at the time," he said. "As a matter of fact, I did go Tuesday. That's my regular day at the Salem Hospital. I asked about him, and the nurse said he was down in X-ray, so I didn't bother to stop in at his room. I'll catch him

next Tuesday, if he's still there." He sighed. "And if he's not, I'll stop in and see him at his house."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic. Don't you like him?"

"Well . . . he's not a very cheerful fellow; seems to be in a perpetual state of mourning."

"But that's because he's lost his wife."

"That was five or six years ago, before he came to Barnard's Crossing. And I've heard from those who know him that he's always been that way."

"Well, maybe your visit will cheer him up."

"What do you suggest, that I tickle him with a feather?"

"Oh, you. Go to bed."

2

WHENEVER MARK LEVINE, SHORT, STOCKY, AND balding, came up to Boston from his home base in Dallas, he always made a point of seeing his old friend Donald Macomber. They had been classmates in college, and in their senior year they had roomed together. After college, Mark Levine had gone to work in an insurance office in Dallas, had branched out for himself after a year or two, had made some shrewd

investments, or as he would say, had been extremely lucky, and was now a very, very rich man.

Donald Macomber, tall and slim, with piercing blue eyes and silvery gray hair, had gone on to take a doctorate in history, to a professorship in a good university, to a deanship where he had shown considerable administrative skill, and finally to the presidency of Windermere Christian College in Boston. When informed of the appointment, Mark Levine had written facetiously, "It was only a question of time; people who look like you are bound to become college presidents."

They had maintained contact over the years by an occasional letter or phone call, and on the occasion when business brought Mark to Boston, he always made a point of leaving one night free so that he could have dinner with his friend.

It was after such a dinner that Macomber had asked, "How about joining our Board of Trustees, Mark?"

"You want me on the Board of Trustees of Windermere Christian College? You must be joking. Just what denomination is it?"

"I'm not joking, Mark. And it's no denomination."

"I mean originally."

"It was never denominational. It started out as a ladies' seminary back in the middle of the last century. You know what those places were: a place for girls to mark time for a couple of years after high school until they managed to get married. They couldn't go out to work because in those days the only acceptable job for women of good family was teaching school. So the wealthy girls were sent to finishing schools with large campuses out in the country, with tennis courts and horses, where girls learned the things that aristocratic gentlewomen were supposed to know.

But Windermere was for girls of the middle class. It was in the city, so the girls could live at home. It was called the Windermere Ladies' Christian Seminary, not because it was religious in any sense of the word, but to convey the idea that it was a moral place, strictly supervised, and that no high jinks were permitted.

"Then at the turn of the century, it became Windermere Christian College for Women because ladies' seminaries and finishing schools were going out of fashion. It became a four-year college of liberal arts because—because, I suppose, things were beginning to open up for women and there were other things they could do besides teach school."

"Or perhaps because two years was not enough time in which to catch a husband," Levine suggested.

Macomber chuckled. "You may have something there," he conceded. "In any case, they kept the Christian in the name, maybe with even a little more justification since the four-year girls' colleges were a lot less supervised than the two-year seminaries had been. I don't think anyone thought of it as a school with any religious orientation. In going over the names of some of the graduating classes, I noted a number of names that were almost certainly Jewish."

"It doesn't prove anything," said Levine. "In Catholic countries like Ireland and Poland, I understand Jewish youngsters are enrolled in the religious schools with a dispensation from attending the religious services."

"I suppose so, but I would think that after the school had been in existence for so many years, its general orientation would be pretty well-known, at least in the area."

"All right."

"Then after World War Two, with the G.I. bill

enabling large numbers of veterans to go to college, it became coeducational, the way many schools did. Women's Lib had something to do with it, I imagine."

"But you still kept Christian in the name," Levine insisted.

"Yes, it became Windermere Christian College of Liberal Arts. As I understand it, they kept the Christian in the name because it had always been referred to as Windermere Christian. It's not easy to give up a name. The company is still called American Express even though it hasn't engaged in the business of delivering parcels for years. And then, too, it was argued that there were a number of scholarships and gifts of one sort or another that had been made out to Windermere Christian, and that these might have to be given back if they changed the name. At least, that was one of the arguments that was offered me when I took over as president. I didn't push it because I sensed that the board wouldn't go along with me. But I did do something to indicate that the school was nondenominational. I hired a Rabbi Lamden to give a three-hour course in Judaica. He is the rabbi of a Reform congregation in Cambridge. He's not much of a scholar, but he's popular because it's a snap course and anyone taking it is sure of an A. You see, the school had become a fall-back school—"

"Fall-back?"

"Yes, you know, as it got harder and harder for kids to get into the prestigious colleges like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, they'd apply to those and then to some less prestigious school, like Windermere, to fall back on if they were refused admission to their first choices. Well, because Windermere had become a fall-back school, it had begun to get students from outside the Boston area, especially from New York and New Jer-

sey. The student body had been pretty much local until then. Quite a few from the New York and New Jersey area were Jewish, and I thought the Judaica course might allay whatever suspicions their parents might have of the name.”

“I see, and you think my name on the Board of Trustees would add to the effect?”

“No, believe me, Mark, that’s not what I had in mind.”

“What then? An endowment, perhaps?”

Macomber smiled. “A college can always use some extra money. But that’s not what I was thinking of either. Look, the board meets only four times a year, and the agenda is set beforehand. If you can’t make it to one of the meetings, there’s no harm done. Many of the out-of-state trustees come only once or twice a year, although the college picks up the tab for the trip. There are twenty on the board. When a vacancy occurs, I nominate the replacement, and although they vote on it, my nomination is tantamount to election. There’s a vacancy right now, and I’d like to put your name up. And by the way, it’s for life.”

“Really? So someone has to die before—”

“Well, there are resignations, and once one of the trustees was involved in a rather smelly bankruptcy. The board called for his resignation, and it was understood he would be voted out if he did not offer it. But that was before my time.”

“Well, I’m clean, but why do you want me?”

“Because I want people on the board I can be sure of.”

“But if you’re the president, don’t you automatically get the backing of the board?”

“It’s not like taking over a corporation where your people hold the majority of the stock. In a nonprofit institution like a college, the members of the board