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# TUESDAY



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THE RABBI  
SAW RED**

**Harry Kemelman**

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**To my grandsons,  
Jonathon Dor Kemelman  
and  
Jared Daniel Rooks**



**Tuesday  
the Rabbi  
Saw Red**





"What do you mean you're not interested?" George Chernow, short, square, and now choleric, glared his indignation at his daughter. "I've been selling Lubovnik the Caterers insurance for years. The least you can do is let them bid on the job." In a voice loud enough to penetrate to his wife, who had retreated to the kitchen and intended to remain there, he continued. "One hand washes the other, don't it? I sell insurance and they sell catering. All right, you don't buy catering every year, but if I'm marrying off a daughter, so the next time I see Morris Lubovnik about his coverage and he asks me about the wedding, I'm supposed to say we didn't ask you to bid on account my daughter wasn't interested? And don't try to tell me I don't have to tell him," he added, and then answered: "A wedding is something you can keep secret?"

"Because I know the stuff he does, and I can't stand it." His daughter, Edie, turned her head aside and gave a stylized shudder. "Yech! The greasy chicken soup, the oily knishes, the chopped liver mold—"

"So pick something else. Talk it over with him. Let him show you some sample menus. At least he'll know we're not ignoring him."

"All right! All right! So I'll talk to him already," said Edie. "But I'm warning you, here and now, if he can't come up with the type food I want I'm not having him no matter how much insurance he buys from you. I didn't want this kind of wedding in the first place, and I can still go off somewhere and marry Roger quietly without all this fuss."

This last was the tactic she had employed from the

beginning to bring her parents to heel. When she had first told them she was marrying Roger Fine, she said she wanted just a little party, "you people and his folks and some of our personal friends, and that's it. None of this big shmeer with the wedding cake and the ringbearer and the ushers and the maids of honor."

But the little party had grown as they discussed it. "How can I marry off my daughter without inviting my Uncle Joshua who was practically a father to me after my own father died?"

"Then that means I'll have to invite my Aunt Rose who is as close to me as Joshua is to you," Mrs. Chernow pointed out. "And that means I'll have to invite the girls too, because they live in the same apartment house."

"But the girls are only second cousins to you."

"But I've been close to them all my life. Besides, Rose would drive down, so there'll be plenty of room in the car and the girls can help out with the driving. New York is a long way for Rose to drive alone."

Before they knew it, the guest list had swelled from Edie's original dozen to over a hundred. And with that many people you couldn't have just a quiet little dinner in a restaurant. It had to be in a hall, and catered. Which meant, of course, an orchestra and dancing because you couldn't have a hundred people, most of them strangers to each other, just wandering around until it was time to eat. And afterward you couldn't just send them home. Besides, what kind of wedding is it without dancing? And that meant a proper gown for the bride. "Everybody will come all dressed up, and you'll wear a tweed suit?"

So Edie went to New York because, as she explained it to Selma Rosencranz, her best friend, "There isn't a thing to be had in Boston, not one single solitary thing that is halfway decent."

This, her father at least, had difficulty in believing, especially after he got the bill. "In the whole city of Boston she couldn't find a dress?"

"You want her to look nice, don't you?" Mrs. Chernow demanded fiercely. "You got one child, and she's getting married. A once-in-a-lifetime thing, and you want to scrimp on it? She'll get up to dance with the groom, alone in the middle of the floor, everybody looking, and you want her to be wearing some old hand-me-down?"

"They'll dance? He can dance?" asked Mr. Chernow with feigned incredulity, thereby renewing the argument he had been having with his wife—never in the presence of their daughter, of course—ever since he learned he was about to acquire Roger Fine as a son-in-law: for the young man was slightly lame and walked with a cane. "I have one daughter, a good-looking girl, and young, and the best she can get is damaged goods?"

"He's a little incapacitated. So what? And it's from the war."

"It's not from the war. He got it *during* the war. It's a kind of arthritis. He told me so himself. He had a desk job in Saigon his whole duty."

"So what? Does it interfere with his work?"

Which touched still another sensitive spot with Chernow: Roger Fine was a teacher, and what kind of living can a teacher make?

"He's not just a teacher," Mrs. Chernow insisted. "He's a professor. Of English. In a college."

"Assistant professor."

"So assistant professor. What do you expect? He's a young man. It's his first job."

It wasn't only the young man's profession that irritated Chernow, however; it was his whole style and manner. He was so sure of himself, so positive in his opinions; and his opinions were not those of Chernow. He listened, when Chernow talked of politics, for example, as he might listen to the barber who was cutting his hair or the cab driver who was driving him to the airport—politely but without interest. Chernow suspected he was a radical. Who knows, maybe even a Communist.

Because his catering business was strictly kosher, Morris Lubovnik of "Lubovnik the Caterers—We Catered Your Mother's Wedding" kept his hat on as he perched on the edge of the sofa, his menus and price lists spread out on the large square coffee table before him. Edie Chernow, her round little rump encased in tight black satin pants, sat at the other end of the sofa, one leg crossed under her, the other dangling over the edge of the sofa, pretending to listen. She had made up her mind as soon as he entered, the minute she saw the shapeless felt hat with the greasy headband, the beads of sweat on the forehead, the blue jowls, the hoarse rasping voice. Lubovnik glanced down at the floor as he talked, or at his papers on the table, careful never to look directly at her lest he appear to be staring at the skintight pants or at her breasts clearly outlined under her lowcut white nylon blouse. He cleared his throat. "It's not just a matter of business with me, Miss Chernow. I want only my customers should be satisfied. I want that weeks later they should be able to close their eyes and taste again the deliciousness of the knishes and the meatballs." He closed his eyes and smacked his lips.

"Now you can have either the roast beef or the roast chicken for the same price. With our customers we got two types: those who swear Lubovnik's roast beef is the best thing they ever tasted and those who say it's the roast chicken." He smiled broadly to indicate it was his little joke. "Now here," he dived into the suitcase resting on the floor and brought forth a small card, "here is something that's been very popular with our patrons the last few years. You send it out with the invitations and it lets the guest pick out ahead of time which he wants, the chicken dinner or the roast beef. In that way everybody is satisfied. Now here's a picture of a sweet table we catered a couple of months ago."

Edie finally managed to get rid of him, promising to study the sample menus he left with her. But even as she

edged him to the door, he stopped several times to search in his brief case for photographs, letters from satisfied customers. "That reminds me, only last week . . ."

Totally different was the man from "Stillman's of Boston. Founded 1890." He was young for one thing, not more than thirty, and dressed modishly in gray flannel slacks with a slight flare and a tattersall-check sports jacket. And he was not pushy; quite the opposite in fact, he seemed reserved and somewhat doubtful. "We don't go in for ethnic foods, Miss Chernow. Those knishes and that stuffed derma are quite tasty, although a little on the heavy side for me, but we don't do them, I'm afraid. We favor bland hors d'oeuvres: tiny sandwiches of cucumber, salmon, or crabmeat salad, with perhaps fried shrimp with the drinks. We feel that the appetizer should stimulate and arouse the appetite, not kill it. You don't want the meal itself to be an anticlimax, do you?"

Eddie agreed with him.

"As for the main dish, I think we offer greater latitude than most houses. In addition to the usual roast chicken and roast beef, we do a lot with fish and lobster, but the market is so uncertain these days that we've had to withdraw the lobster. Then we have beef stroganoff . . ."

Eddie just loved beef stroganoff.

"We served it at a wedding at the big Reform temple in Boston, B'nai Jacob. They received all sorts of compliments on it."

Eddie absolutely adored compliments.

Rabbi David Small opened the door and then stood aside for Eddie and Mrs. Chernow to enter. Although the Chernows had been living in Barnard's Crossing for several years, it was the first time Eddie had been close to the rabbi. On the rare occasions that she had gone to the temple, for half an hour or so on the High Holydays, he had been slouched in one of the thronelike chairs that flanked the Holy Ark or in the pulpit making a short

announcement—she had never remained through the sermon—and she had been unimpressed. Nor did she see any reason for changing her opinion now. He was of medium height, but thin and pale. He held his head forward in a scholarly stoop and peered near-sightedly through thick-lensed glasses. She had also noted when they entered, because she had an eye for such things, that his shoes were dusty and that his tie, inexpertly knotted, was slightly askew.

"Isn't the groom coming?" the rabbi asked.

"Oh, Roger couldn't get away," said Edie.

"He's a professor in a college in Boston," explained her mother. "He has classes."

"Ah well, it's no great matter," said the rabbi. "Once the principals are gathered together under the *chupah*, the canopy, that is, I will give you the necessary instructions."

"Is there any special rule about who goes up first?" asked Mrs. Chernow.

"No, Mrs. Chernow, you can arrange that pretty much as you like, as long as the bride comes last, usually on the arm of her father. Sometimes the groom enters from the side, either alone or with his parents; but he can walk down the center aisle if you prefer it that way. You can arrange a procession of the groom, his parents, the best man, perhaps with the maid of honor, then the mother of the bride, and finally the bride on her father's arm. In general, the tendency is to keep the bride's party separate from the groom's until they meet under the canopy, and even there I usually arrange them on either side with the bride's people on her side and the groom's on his." He smiled. "How you get there isn't as important as what happens after you arrive. I read the *ketubah*, that is the marriage contract, which the groom has signed previously, and of course the license as well. I recite the blessings, or you may have the cantor chant them. Then the bride and the groom sip from the same cup of wine. If you are

going to wear a long veil, Miss Chernow, your maid of honor usually lifts it so that you can drink. Then the groom repeats after me, word by word, a short statement in Hebrew to the effect that you sanctify him by the ring which he places on your finger in accordance with the laws of Moses and Israel. The wine is sipped once again, and then the groom breaks a glass which is placed under his foot."

"Is that necessary, breaking the glass?" asked Edie.

The rabbi looked his surprise. "Do you object to it?"

"Well, it seems so silly, so—so primitive."

He nodded. "It's a tradition that may very well go back to primitive times. It's certainly an ancient tradition, so old in fact that the reason for it is lost in antiquity. Of course, there are conjectures, the most common being that it reminds us of the destruction of the temple. Or that it suggests that even in the midst of happiness and joy there is sadness. Frankly, I find neither explanation particularly convincing. I prefer to regard it as symbolizing that just as the glass out of which the bride and groom have drunk together is now broken, so can no one partake of the new unit thus formed. Let's just say it's a tradition, as sensible as wearing the wedding ring on the left hand rather than the right. But it's a tradition that has characterized Jewish weddings for centuries, so we keep it up." He turned to Mrs. Chernow. "I can tell you one purpose it serves, and that very nicely: it's a dramatic climax for the ceremony. The groom breaks the glass and everyone says *Mazel Tov*, Good Luck, and the groom kisses the bride and it's over. You're married."

"It's only that the boy is lame," said Mrs. Chernow.

"Oh?" said the rabbi. "And you think he might be unable to crush the glass with his foot?"

"Oh Ma! Of course he can," Edie snapped crossly.

"Well, then," said the rabbi hastily, "there's no problem." He hurried on. "Then everyone goes downstairs to the vestry, this time bride and groom first, of course,



followed by the rest of the *chupah* group. I suppose you'll have snacks and drinks before dinner, and you can set up a receiving line there. By the time everyone has passed through, the Lubovnik people will have everything in order and open the doors of the larger vestry room, which serves as a signal that dinner is served. You can rely on them to coordinate the times properly. They're quite adept at it. They've had a lot of experience."

"Oh, but we're not using Lubovnik Caterers," said Edie.

"No?"

"We're using Stillman's of Boston."

"I don't believe I've heard of them. Are they new?"

Edie laughed gaily. "Hardly, Rabbi. They've been in business for a long time. Surely you know Stillman's restaurant in Boston?"

"Oh yes, I've heard of *them*. But I was under the impression that it was not a Jewish restaurant, certainly not a kosher restaurant."

"Well, of course they're not, Rabbi—"

"Then they can't serve in our temple, Miss Chernow. Our kitchen is kosher."

"But that's ridiculous," cried Edie. "I've already arranged it."

"Then you'll have to unarrange it," said the rabbi quietly.

"And lose the money we paid on deposit?" demanded Mrs. Chernow indignantly.

The rabbi's fingers tapped a quiet tattoo on the desk. Then he said, "It's no worse than the money you've lost on your temple dues the last few years."

"Temple dues? What do you mean?"

"Because if in the several years you've been here you haven't found out the principles on which our temple operates, I'd say all the money you paid in annual dues was wasted."