Making Amends

Tom Walker

FOR FORTY YEARS, MOST OF HIS ADULT LIFE, Milton Kooze had brooded over every insult he'd received. He nursed grudges, picked at scabs, flayed his psyche like a medieval flagellant. He tormented himself by lusting for verbal payback the way other men lusted for women, power, gold, and fame. He lay awake nights sharpening rapier-like rejoinders that had failed to materialize when he'd needed them.

But now, for reasons mysterious, Milton found himself brooding over the insults he'd meted out. They had cost him friends, neighbors, acquaintances, lovers, colleagues, students, even enemies he'd cherished who'd refused to have anything more to do with him. They had cost him his first wife, too, though he could not complain about that, because Brenda was a shrew, a virago, a ball-buster.

This nursing of guilt was worse than nursing grudges. What was happening to him? Was he hearing some long-stifled voice of conscience? Milton had no use for cowards, the sort of *pachdanim* who suddenly get religion in the top of the ninth because they fear what awaits them when the game is over. He liked to think of himself as a "mean old Jew" you aggravated at your peril. Yet he suspected that he deserved his new torment. And that frightened him, because his putdowns had broken bones, drawn blood, left scars, and now he was being punished for them. Milton did not believe in God, but he did believe in the Law of the Deed. You reaped what you sowed.

During one virtually sleepless night, Milton reviewed the insults he'd been proudest of rendering, the barbed zingers, the knockout punches, the *zowies*! As that montage of ugly scenes unspooled in his memory, he was shamed and appalled and scarcely recognized himself. Once again, with family

members present and to her face, he was calling his obese hyperthyroid Aunt Louise "a battleship with nipples" and "The Countess of Monte Crisco." At a wedding party he was calling an overdressed matron he barely knew a "walking garage sale of a certain age." In a Letter to the Editor of the *Times*, he was calling a locally beloved but recently deceased rabbi he hadn't liked, "a bad Henny Youngman joke that finally has a punch line."

At his mother-in-law's ninetieth birthday, which was not meant to be a roast, he heard his unkind toast again: "Dear Nitchka, you will never get old. You are already older than dirt, God, and George Burns. You don't have an enemy in the world because you've outlived your enemies and their children and their children's children. Even your whole life insurance policy has expired. Happy ninetieth, Nitch. By the way, you don't look a day over eighty-eight."

No one but Milton laughed, and the crone was not amused. Not even on her deathbed, when he confessed to her he'd stolen the insults from a coffee table bestseller, *Playful Putdowns for People You Love*, had his mother-in-law spoken to him again.

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Why had he said those things to people? Milton wondered. And why was he only now feeling remorse about them? The guilt had begun three weeks ago with a dream. In it he was insulting a freshman, unfamiliar to him, in one of his English classes at City College — a gum-chewing "Goth" in black leather whose network of body piercings probably extended to her clitoris. To Milton she apotheosized everything he hated about the Millennial Generation. She had asked why "Shakespeare wrote his plays in prose."

He was livid. First he told her to stand up. Then he commenced to dress her down. He heard himself call her a "blackhead," a "pustule," a "slattern." "How," he asked the class, "can I explain blank verse to a blank brain?" His barking grew deafening — each word exploded like a firecracker in his inner ear. But he was in top form, his metaphors apt, his turns of phrase deft, his litany of insults worth anthologizing. He had never felt so powerful.

As he menacingly approached the girl, who slouched beside her desk wearing a brave smirk, she seemed to shrink, to grow smaller, younger, until she was a baby-faced child, five or six, in a schoolgirl uniform. His harangue grew thunderous, his insults crueler, and he could sense that the other students,

small children also, were terrified. The little girl's mouth formed a horizontal figure eight. She edged back. She shut her eyes tight, a tear squirted out of each, and Milton saw that she was standing in a puddle of dripping urine.

That woke him. He lay bathed in sweat, feeling a self-revulsion he'd never known before. Even though the ugly scene had never happened, it *could* have, and that shamed him. He longed to go back to sleep, resume the dream, reassure the child — the whole roomful of children — that he wasn't really a monster, an ogre, or a brute. But he couldn't.

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Milton told his best friend about his late-life crisis. She was his only friend.

This was his second wife, Ruth, whom he called Baby Ruth. (He didn't tell her about the dream — he was afraid to tell anyone about that.) "Baby Ruth, it's costing me sleep," he whined. "I keep seeing their faces when I insulted them. They all look like Christ. Or some scared little kid. Am I going bonkers? *Meshuga*?"

She shook her head. "Milton, it's normal to feel some remorse at our age. We've gained wisdom and maturity and objectivity. We realize we've sinned as much as we've been sinned against."

That sounded reasonable, but then she had to go and ruin it by saying, "You can't do that when you're young. They say youth is wasted on the young."

Milton groaned. Her fondness for clichés was the only thing he disliked about Baby Ruth other than her habit of saying "at this point in time" and pronouncing the word "interesting" with four syllables. He was, after all, an English teacher.

"But I've been sinned against *more* than I've sinned," he kvetched. "I've insulted maybe a hundred people. A thousand have insulted me."

"You know what they say: 'What goes around comes around.'"

"Who says that? They should be shot."

"Life is a mirror, Milton. It shows us a mean face when we scowl at it in a mean way."

Milton winced. He hated mangled clichés even worse than those precisely worded. But he was willing to let Baby Ruth mangle hers. He would not hurt her feelings for one very simple reason: he could not afford to lose another wife. He would need Baby Ruth to care for him in his dotage, which

apparently had begun. He could not afford to lose another friend, either. He was down to his last one.

“Think of this as an opportunity,” she suggested. “A moral awakening after a long sleep.”

“Now I’m Rip Van Winkle? Tell me what to do.”

“Will you do it?”

“No. Tell me anyway.”

“Make amends to the people you’ve insulted the worst. Tell them you’re sorry. Ask them to forgive you.”

He thought about it.

“No way,” he said. “It sounds like Alcoholics Anonymous. I’m not some goddamn alcoholic.” Actually, he was a borderline alcoholic and they both knew it.

“Think of this as an opportunity,” she suggested.
“A moral awakening after a long sleep.”

In a gentler tone he added, “I’m more like a child molester. They become molesters because they were molested. I became insolent because I was insulted.”

“Well,” Baby Ruth sighed. “You know what they say.”

“I do, so don’t say it.”

“It’s the Golden Rule. Do unto others the things you want them to do unto you.”

“But my sexual preferences might not be the same as theirs.”

“Cruelty is a double-edged dagger.”

“Stop, already. Tell me what to do.”

Baby Ruth drew a deep breath. “We’ll hold a lottery of insults. We’ll write the initials of people you’ve insulted on little white balls and jumble them in a bingo blower. For a start, you’ll draw five balls and make amends to each person.”

Milton was surprised that Baby Ruth would suggest such a thing. Had she forgotten that the women he’d insulted worst — verbally skewered and barbecued — were his old girlfriends and his first wife? She was still jealous of those harpies. (“True love never dies,” she had told him. “Even false love seldom

dies.") Didn't she realize this making-amends might reconnect him with women he'd once loved? Women who, heaven forbid, might still love him?

"Baby Ruth, what if the people I apologize to won't forgive me?"

"Doesn't matter. Forgiveness would be a bonus, but don't expect it."

"I can't face them."

"You won't have to. Call them."

"I'll e-mail them."

"Too impersonal. You have to *say* you're sorry, not write it."

"A lottery," he grumbled. "What am I, the NBA draft? I won't do this."

"You should, Milton. Ask Moey. Moey's a full professor. He'll tell you I'm right."

"Moey? That pedantic pipsqueak? That pompous little *shmendrick*? I can't stand him."

Moey was Milton's younger brother. They telephoned each other once a year. Milton's annual call to Moey was now overdue.

"See what Moey says, Milton. If he says yes, then think yes."

"Well, maybe." Milton knew he'd end up going along with Baby Ruth no matter what Moey said. He was desperate: in pain. Besides, he was curious as to what his brother's advice would be. Moey was almost always right about things. It was one of many reason Milton disliked him so much. But often it was good to know what was right.

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Moey Kooze was a full professor of situational ethics in the philosophy department at Columbia. He had been their mother's favorite. He had been their father's favorite. With Milton as competition, Moey had been everyone's favorite. Milton had not seen him in years. When they talked on the phone, it ended up in an argument, but he'd always been careful not to insult his brother. You never knew when you might need him.

When Milton finally telephoned, Moey seemed even more eager than usual to get rid of him. "Of *course* your wife is right, Milton," he groused. "It's all about forgiveness. That's the central question our lives come down to. Are we forgiven? Do we forgive? Forgiveness means salvation. Reinhold Niebuhr tells us this."

"Reinhold Niebuhr is a theologian. I don't believe in God."

"I'm surprised you even know who Reinhold Niebuhr is."

"You're getting smart with me now, Moey? I know you think you're smarter than I am because I teach freshman English at City College and you teach Plato and Aristotle at Columbia."

"I don't teach the Greeks. They're absolutists. Stick with the subject, please. You asked me what you should do and I told you. Make amends! You're the poor man's Don Rickles, for God's sake! Only you're not funny. Your only gift is for insulting people."

"Not true. Very few of my insults are original. I plagiarize them."

"Which makes you a thief, too. Remember the night you insulted your mother-in-law? It may have been what killed her."

"Old age killed her. She was born during the Grover Cleveland administration."

"She was born during the so-called Great War. You have a terrible personality, Milton. You're a misanthrope."

"I'll deny that."

"Heidegger would call you inauthentic."

"Heidegger was an authentic Nazi."

Moey sighed. "Make those phone calls. And don't bother calling me to make amends if my name should pop up in your lottery. I forgive you in advance."

"Forgive me for what? I've never insulted you, Moey."

"When we were kids you never stopped picking on me. It's all right. You're my brother, so I forgive you. I could have done worse. You could've been Cain. I could've been Jeb Bush. Go make your calls. Make amends, you poor sad schlemiel."

"Hey, Moey? One more thing. Go fuck yourself."

Milton rang off. Telling someone to go fuck himself was not the same as insulting him. The conversation had gone fairly well.

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"Moey says I should do what you suggest," Milton told Baby Ruth that evening. "But he wasn't nice about it."

"So what? The important thing is that you make the calls."

Milton didn't want her to think he gave in easily. "I'm not sure I can,"

he lied. "It's like a blanket amnesty. I don't like blanket amnesties."

"Do you want a divorce?"

"I'll do it, but just for five people. Five lottery balls and that's it."

"Good. Because you know what they say."

"Please don't say it —"

"A journey of thousands of miles starts with just two steps."

Milton made a joke: "At least it's not twelve steps like the alcoholics."

She really knew how to intimidate him, he reflected. Threatening divorce was something she did for fun, yet it always chilled him. He was terrified of being alone. If he lost Baby Ruth, how could he replace her? Who else would put up with him? There were days when he thought of his wife as a wise woman; there were days when he thought of her as an idiot savant; there were days when he thought of her as just an idiot. But there was never a day when he thought of her as someone he could live without.

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On Saturday Baby Ruth bought a bingo blower at a yard sale. She and Milton put thirty ping-pong balls in it. On each ball he'd scribbled the initials of an ex-wife or ex-lover or ex-acquaintance or ex-friend he'd grievously insulted and never seen again. Enemies he'd secretly cherished were included as well.

"I should get a ball too," she said when they finished. "At this point in time I deserve one."

"Baby Ruth, why? I've never insulted you."

"There's a first time for everything."

"No. There will never be a first time for two plus two to equal nine or for a Republican to take a humane position on a political issue. Or for me to insult you. Now, may we proceed with this humiliating ordeal?"

"We may. This should be in-ter-es-ting."

He made a face, jumbled the balls in the blower, and drew one marked "J. K."

"Judy Kolodzney," Baby Ruth muttered. "Don't look so happy."

"Are you joking? I'm terrified."

Judy Kolodzney was a vegetarian feminist pothead he'd lived with years ago but lost track of after she'd kicked him out for insulting her because she was going to marry another man. (Milton insulted the man, too, but not

to his face.) Other than cook a mean broccoli fondue and give inspired head, Judy's only talent had been to roll the tightest joints of the nineteen-seventies. Yet Milton had asked her to marry him. Declining, she'd reminded him that marriage and a nuclear family were not part of her feminist agenda. Three weeks later, she announced that she was marrying a waiter — a struggling actor Milton heard was bisexual. Later he had learned that Judy and her waiter had managed to produce a son.

He had not even known she was seeing someone else. On his way out, he fired a parting shot: "I always knew you'd end up in bed with a girl." It was a variation on Ava Gardner's slam at Frank Sinatra when he married Mia Farrow, but he followed it with, "You and your limp-wristed waiter provide the operative definition of the mutual mercy fuck." Not as good, but it had made her cry. She'd lit a joint, refused to share it, called him a homophobe, and shown him the door. She needn't have shown him the door — he was packed anyway.

"Be careful with Judy," Baby Ruth warned now. "Don't fall in love with her all over again."

"I never loved her the first time. I was in lust with her."

"You wanted to marry her."

"I was bewitched. What a fellatrix that *nafka* was."

"That's more information than I want. I wish you didn't have to call her."

"I don't. We'll toss that ball and do another."

"No. Be strong, Milton."

Baby Ruth's jealousy flattered him because it was unwarranted. No woman had given him a second look since his hair had commenced to thin and his belly to bulge years ago. Few women had given him a first look. People took him for Baby Ruth's father even though he was two years younger than she. His wife maintained her youthful figure with diet and exercise, disciplines Milton dismissed as vain and narcissistic and trendy.

Dutifully, after several false leads, he managed to track down Judy's phone number in Teaneck, New Jersey. Before dialing, he drank two wineglasses full of Mouton Cadet. It wouldn't do for his voice to shake. Then he sent Baby Ruth out of the room.

The young man who answered sounded like Tommy Chong on one of his seventies albums. This would be the son, Milton thought. Like mother, like son: a stoner. Milton had not smoked pot in years.

"May I please speak to Judy? I'm an old friend."

"Judy? Oh, wow, man…she's gone…we buried my mother like six months ago."

"O my God!" Milton gasped. "You buried her? I can't believe it."

"Why not? She was dead, man."

Wise punk, Milton thought. No respect for your late mother. He wondered if the boy could be his son. No, the math didn't compute.

"Young man," he said sincerely, "I loved your mother. I wanted to marry her, but she wouldn't have me. I am so sorry for your loss. May I ask how she died?"

"It was like…I don't know. Some kind of cancer."

A moron, he thought. "Did she ever mention me? Milton Kooze?"

The boy laughed. "I don't think so. Jeez, is that really your name?"

"Have a good day, *you little asshole*." Milton hung up.

He was short of breath and his mouth was dry. Now he had to finish off the bottle of Mouton Cadet to settle his nerves. The irony of the conversation did not escape him. He had called to apologize for one insult and ended up delivering another. To a total stranger.

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In bed with Baby Ruth that night, he was surprised by the force of his grief. He almost cried. He hadn't cried since the first Kennedy assassination. He'd forgotten how to cry.

He blubbered: "I missed atoning to Judy by just six months."

"Was the boy the son of the man she left you for?"

"How should I know? I couldn't ask the little shit if his father was a bisexual waiter."

"You shouldn't have called the boy an asshole."

"He was being a wise guy."

"Maybe that's how he deals with grief. We each deal with death our own way, Milton. They say death is —"

"Just a part of life?"

"I was going to say like taxes. They're the only things we can depend on. I didn't mean to sound callous about Judy. Maybe I'm jealous."

"Why be jealous of a dead pothead?"

"Well, you've never grieved over *me*."

"You're not dead."

"That's the only point in time when you cry about someone? When they die?"

"I almost cried when the Supreme Court stole the election from Gore."

"We'll draw another ball tomorrow. This time, don't drink wine. Be clear and sober when you call these people."

"Can I have a beer?"

"No, Milton. Be brave. Because you know what they say."

He steeled himself.

"You're never sorry for having said you're sorry. I think that's from *Love Story*."

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The second ping-pong ball to pop out of the blower read "P. J. S." Years ago, Milton Kooze and Peter John Spaulding had been best friends. One night, in a moment of drunken candor at McSorley's Old Ale House in the East Village, Peter had divulged that he'd been unfaithful to his wife, Deirdre, with not one woman but five.

"We had sort of an open marriage," Peter explained.

Milton was incensed. To him marital infidelity was unpardonable: an abomination. He'd always thought of Peter as faithful as a St. Bernard. Peter looked like a St. Bernard. Big sad eyes, droopy eyelids, overweight…Why had he never shared that he had an open marriage? What kind of best friend was that?

Milton was angry for another reason. Secretly he'd lusted after Deirdre, a raven-haired, green-eyed colleen with breasts like inflated balloons. (Baby Ruth was buxom too, nice and *zaftig*, but not like Deirdre.) Only his friendship with Peter had kept him from making a play for Deirdre, even if he did regard adultery as an abomination. And now, learning that Peter's marriage had been "open," he realized that if he'd come on to Deirdre he might have been allowed to bury his face in those titties.

It was all he could do to keep from flinging his mug of beer into Peter's St. Bernard dog face.

"Deirdre doesn't know about the five women," Peter was saying. "She

thinks there were just three."

That was too much. "Philanderer!" Milton shouted across the table. "Faithless oyster of phlegm! Don't you know marriage vows are sacred?"

"*Be quiet*, Milton. People are staring. What's wrong with you?"

"You are lower than whale shit. Leave this bar. Now."

"What?"

"Get out of here. Take the check with you, I'm broke."

Peter grabbed the check and stormed out. Their friendship would never be the same. They stopped drinking together. They stopped seeing each other. When Milton called to demand that they stop speaking, Peter agreed even though they hadn't spoken since that night at McSorley's.

The irony of the conversation did not escape him. He had called to apologize for one insult and ended up delivering another.

When Milton called Peter, he was as nervous as he'd been calling Judy Kolodzney. But his old friend sounded glad to hear from him. He and Deirdre were fine, Peter reported. He'd lost his hair and some of his hearing. And Deirdre had had a mastectomy, lost a breast, and their daughter, Judith, had been run over and killed on Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn by a Yemeni cab driver. Otherwise life wasn't bad, and he was doing well in the market with his Apple stock.

Milton hated to hear the part about Deirdre's breast. But reconnecting with his ex-best friend lifted his spirits, and soon he was happy he'd called. After more catching up, he said, "Peter, I want to apologize for that night at McSorley's."

"Say again? I didn't hear."

"I want to APOLOGIZE."

"Oh, me too. Let me go first. I guess Baby Ruth told you."

A wary pause.

"Told me what," Milton said.

"You know. That I made a pass at her."

Milton felt his blood freeze, his testicles contract. "You what?"

"Is your hearing bad like mine? I made a pass at her. Nothing happened, but I shouldn't have tried it."

"God damn you," Milton hissed. "You're still an oyster of phlegm!"

"Oysters what?"

"I shouldn't have called you."

"Why did you?"

"I don't know. I despise you, you faithless son of a bitch. Adulterer! I never liked you. Get out of my life."

"Say again?"

Milton slammed the receiver into the cradle. The call had not gone well at all.

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This making amends, Milton realized, was causing more problems than it solved. He began to formulate a theory — or perhaps an axiom: *Whatever chemistry made you fight with someone in the first place will reactivate itself and start another fight if you crawl back and try to make up*. It was why marital reconciliations never worked. After he'd polished it up a little they could call it Kooze's Law and put it in textbooks.

"Ridiculous," Baby Ruth dismissed Kooze's Law.

"How so?"

"You're not asking to move in with them. You're having a five-minute conversation. Can't you be civil to someone for five minutes without starting a fight?"

"Why didn't you tell me Peter tried to shtup you?"

"I didn't want to ruin your friendship."

"It's been ruined for years!"

"He only tried to kiss me. I called him a Silly Willy and pushed him away. We laughed about it later."

"You saw him again *later*? All this time you've been living a lie?"

"I did you a favor. They say what you don't know won't hurt you. I can't imagine why he told you about it."

"The next time a friend of mine sexually harasses you, mention it. All right?"

"You don't have any friends, Milton. But I promise to tell you if someone even looks at me. Ha-ha, I should be so lucky. Did you have a thing for Deirdre?"

"What?"

"You heard me. Did you?"

"Again you're jealous? First Judy, now Deirdre? What's wrong with you, woman? You're consumed with jealousy."

"Did you have a thing for Deirdre?"

"Of course not. I swear it on my sweet mother's grave."

"You hated your mother. Deirdre had big breasts. You love big breasts."

"I found Deirdre's breasts grotesque. They were like basketballs. And now she has just one. That's really grotesque."

"Why don't I believe you, Milton? I want to."

"I never gave Deirdre a second thought."

Baby Ruth's mouth trembled. She knew when he was lying.

* * *

"M. A.," the initials on the third ping-pong ball, belonged to another of Milton's ex-best friends. Years ago, as struggling writers in the East Village, Morris Abraham and Milton Kooze had bet five dollars — a half-day's wages — on who'd get published first. Milton won. At a party he'd thrown to celebrate his sale (a one-page short-short story to *Cavalier*), a drunken Milton lorded his triumph over his unpublished friend before ten dinner guests.

"You too have some talent for writing, Morris," he had slurred, waving his glass of wine. "What a pity you weren't given a full measure. God shouldn't play jokes like that on people."

An embarrassed hush fell. The normally ruddy Morris turned pale.

"Robert Frost," Milton continued, "wrote a poem that goes '*Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee / And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me*.' The Lord played a great big joke on you, Morris."

"Getting into *Cavalier* has given you the fat head, Milton. It's really not much of a magazine. You can shut your mouth. I will still outwrite you."

"I've read your stories," Milton persisted. "They run the entire gamut of human emotion from A to B."

"And you," Morris countered, "are the first person I've known who can strut while sitting on his fat behind. You sound like a writer who's sold one story his whole life."

"How many have you sold? Your technical equipment is superb. You're superbly equipped to fail."

"Will both of you *stop*?" pleaded Brenda, Milton's first wife.

"Your writing," Milton went on, "isn't writing. It's just typing."

"That line worked better when Capote said it about Jack Kerouac." Morris rose, flung his napkin onto the table, and stormed out.

Within five minutes, the other guests had left too. "For God's sake, Milton, why did you do that?" Brenda scolded him. "You ruined everyone's evening."

"Morris voted for Nixon. Twice. He told me earlier."

Brenda blinked. "He did? So what?"

"So he's a Republican! A *Jewis*h Republican! A *shandeh*! A disgrace!"

"Milton, why did I marry you? You're a schmuck. First you can't handle failure and now you can't handle success."

"Sure, take his side against your husband, why don't you."

Actually, Milton's outburst had multiple roots. Not only did Morris vote Republican, he'd confessed to being a New York Yankee fan who secretly hated the Mets. He thought Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow were greater than Bob Dylan. He revered Ayn Rand's novels. He was guilty of other unpardonable transgressions. He didn't deserve to be anyone's best friend.

Later Milton learned that Morris had moved to Los Angeles and become a chauffeur. (Morris was an excellent driver — he would give him that.) He had taken perverse pride in his friend's evident abandonment of his dream. But soon he learned from Morris's mother, a yammering old yenta, that Morris was living next door to Jack Nicholson in Beverly Hills. Could that be true? Were even the chauffeurs out there rich? Morris probably rented a garage apartment behind Nicholson's mansion.

The old yenta gave him Morris's telephone number. "Oh, he'd love to hear from you, Milton," she cawed. "Our Morris is quite the big shot now…"

Milton didn't like the sound of that, but he telephoned Morris anyway. He had to. Things got off to a bad start. First, Morris could not remember the dinner party in question.

"Sure you can," Milton prompted. "Our gang of twelve was there. Brenda made salmon latkes. For dessert, we had hamantaschen cookies and kosher ice cream."

"I don't remember evenings in terms of what I ate."

"You left before dessert. You must remember. I can quote you some terrible things I said to you."

"Don't bother. What difference could it make now?" Morris chuckled. "It's water under the bridge, Milton. Sure, I forgive you. Let's talk about the present. Did you read my novel?"

Milton hesitated. "Your what? I thought you became a chauffeur."

"I did that for research, dummy. I wrote a novel under the name Sean Pawnee about chauffeuring movie stars. Hollywood adapted it for the movie *Driving Julia Roberts*. Did you see it?"

"Never heard of it." Milton had seen the movie twice.

"Doubleday didn't like my real name," Morris explained. "Morris Abraham was too Jewish. They said it sounded like a Talmudic scholar. They wanted a Native American name for their fiction list. They came up with Sean Pawnee. Can you believe?"

Milton was feeling queasy.

"That's the publishing world for you! The liberals and their politically correct quotas. They've offered me a six-figure contract for a second book. A *film noir* about the same chauffeur."

"Morris, I have to go now."

"Wait, Milton, my man. *Vi gaits*? What about you?"

"I'm teaching at City College."

"And your novels?"

"Unpublished. I don't write fiction anymore."

"Oops. Sorry."

"Listen, I only called to apologize for insulting you that night. Whether you remember it or not."

Morris laughed. "You assume too much, old friend. But then you always had delusions of grandeur. *You* could never insult *me*…"

* * *

Batting oh for three, Milton was more despondent than ever. How naïve he had been to hope that apologizing to five victims could earn him forgiveness for a lifetime of victimizing! His hope had been dashed; for him, evidently, there could be no forgiveness. He was damned. Unforgivable. He wanted to abort the mission.

But Baby Ruth wouldn't let him. "You're due," she encouraged. "Nobody loses all the time. Besides —"

"It's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Winners never quit and quitters never win?"

"Get the bingo blower."

The fourth ball to pop out was one he'd prayed to God not to draw even though he was an atheist. The initials "B. K." belonged to his first wife, Brenda Kooze, nee Kaufmann. Brenda the castrator, Brenda the barracuda. He had barely escaped her with all his vital parts intact. "No, no," Milton grumbled. "Her I can't call. I won't."

"You have to. But be careful. She still loves you. She hates you, but she still loves you."

"How would you know?"

"Woman's intuition. I don't know, they say women have a sixth sense about such things."

He'd last seen Brenda five years ago, or five years after their divorce. She had put on weight (though her face was gaunt) and started smoking. It was her fiftieth birthday, and they'd met for a "no-hard-feelings" drink on the assumption that there were no hard feelings. But there were. After a second drink, they'd picked up where they'd left off in the office of Brenda's shyster divorce attorney, her brother-in-law Murray Friedlander. Halfway through a third drink, Milton had begun to insult her.

Now he had to atone for it. This time he made Baby Ruth leave the house.

He made the call. To his relief, Brenda sounded calm and civil, so he got straight to the point: "I want to take back the insult that caused our divorce and ask your forgiveness, Brenda. I know I don't deserve it, but I ask for it anyway."

A silence, as though she were expecting a punch line.

Finally she laughed. "What a putz you still are, Milton. A thousand things you should apologize for and you apologize for one insult?"

"What else would you like me to apologize for? I will."

"Hah!" she cackled. "Apologize for wrecking my life! Giving me a nervous breakdown! I tried to kill myself, Milton. A whole bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol I swallowed. I got fat. I started smoking even though both my parents died from lung cancer. I gave up on men and tried women. Women were worse, I hate women. Ten years later I'm still in therapy. You could start with those things."

"All right. I apologize for those things, too."

She was silent again.

"What's this about, anyway?" she asked. "Are you in A. A.?"

"Of course not."

"You should be. What a mean drunk you were, Milton. I remember the insult you're talking about. You took a long sympathetic look at me, like I had cancer, and then you said, 'Tell me, *when did you die*?'"

"Yes, that's it. I apologize."

"Do you know why that still hurts? Because I found out it was a line from one of Norman Mailer's movies. You were never original, Milton. Even your insults you stole. But a recycled insult from a *Norman Mailer* movie?"

"Mailer was a great writer."

"His movies were dreck."

"The man won two Pulitzers and should have won the Nobel."

"He stabbed his wife!"

"It was just a pen knife."

"You think that didn't *hurt*?"

"It was fifty years ago. Even the wife laughs about it now."

"He had six wives! He was a polygamist!"

"He wasn't. Mailer is dead. Show some respect."

"You haven't changed, Milton. You've intensified. You're worse than ever."

"I have to go now, Brenda."

"Why did you call me? Do you want to get together?"

"I told you why. To make amends."

"If you want to see me again, you can't."

"Say good-bye, Brenda.

"So you called me to reject me? You should burn in hell, you son of a bitch. And you're *not* forgiven."

Afterwards, he tried to give the call a positive spin. It could've gone worse, he told himself. At least he hadn't agreed to see her again. He didn't believe she'd tried to kill herself. She might try to kill *him*, but never herself. What a sicko that woman was. A real basket case who blamed him for her sickness. Pathetic. Why had he married such a creature?

He gave himself an E for effort. Four attempts to atone had failed, yet he was actually feeling better about himself. He had learned invaluable

lessons. Insults were irrevocable: You can take them back, but you can't have them back. What's been said can't be unsaid. People may forgive, but they don't forget, which means they don't really forgive, either. And if you asked them, "Was it something I said?" it usually was.

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which means they don't really forgive, either.

He vowed never to insult another human being for as long as he lived. Better to strike real blows into flesh — the wounds healed faster than those caused by psychic blows. Norman Mailer had said that. But Milton vowed not to strike anyone, either. He was through hurting people forever.

* * *

"You're in a good mood," Baby Ruth observed that night. "How come?"

"I'm happy you're my wife and not Brenda."

"She was an easy act to follow. I'm still jealous, by the way."

"Oh, Baby, why?"

"I don't know. I feel left out. Am I being silly?"

"Left out of what? Stop envying these people. They're dead to me. They belong in a bone yard. One of them is there already."

On the morning he was to draw the fifth and final ball, the bingo blower somehow looked fuller. Replenished. Watching him, Baby Ruth seemed nervous. Milton figured that his imagination was working overtime. On the ball that popped forth he read the initials "R. K."

"Who is R. K.?" he asked. "This ball I don't remember."

"It's me," Baby Ruth said. "I put it in during the night. And twenty others like it. I wanted to maximize my chances."

Milton shook his head and tossed the ball aside. "I told you before I've never insulted you."

"That's what bothers me. You're nothing if not brutally honest, Milton Kooze. The fact that you've never insulted me tells me you haven't been honest with me."

"You're not a player in this game."

"I am now. Give me my insult and make amends."

He didn't like the look on her face. It inspired the dread he'd felt while being pulled over by a traffic cop. All of a sudden he didn't recognize the wife with whom he'd lived with such ease all these years. This woman was a stranger to him.

"Okay," he said. "I apologize for *not* insulting you. Are you satisfied?"

"No. I want an insult and I want you to make amends."

"That's insane. Nobody wants to be insulted."

"I do. You always zero in on a person's worst fault when you insult them. I want to know mine. And don't make one up."

Milton felt trapped. He would need to be careful. Cornered, put to a test he knew he must not fail, he tried to beg his way out. "I don't want to play this game any more, Baby Ruth. Let's stop. Please."

"I am not joking, Milton. God damn it, you drew a ball with my name on it. You can call me later on my cell phone and make amends. Just give me my insult."

"I made a vow to God," he pleaded. "I vowed I would never insult another person."

"Break the vow. We both know you're an atheist."

He felt like a child being forced into a fight he has no chance of winning. His knees buckled — he needed to sit down.

"Insult me!" she demanded. "Or do you want a divorce?"

Now he had to chance it. He thought for a moment, drew a deep breath, and hoped for the best.

He laid a hand on each of her shoulders and gazed into her eyes: "All right, Baby Ruth. For practice God created a thousand mindless twats who spout nothing but clichés and aphorisms and adages and bromides and platitudes and can't even get the damned words right. Then He created His ultimate majestic masterpiece. *You*."

Baby Ruth seemed puzzled. Her lips moved as if she were replaying, word for word, the insult in her head. Milton held his breath.

Then she shrugged and laughed. "Jeez, Milton. That's all you got?"

His whole body went limp with relief. He'd been afraid he'd gone too far and he hadn't. "Baby," he said, sweeping her into his arms, "you're the greatest." He gave her a long kiss, the kind that fat bus driver Ralph Cramden gave his Alice at the end of each *Honeymooners* segment. What a perfect ending to a potentially disastrous situation, he thought.

But this wasn't the end. Baby Ruth had her lips pressed together. Her body was as stiff as a mannequin's. She wasn't satisfied. She wanted more — an insult on the scale of those his other victims had merited. Or a more passionate kiss. Or a better marriage, a more loving husband. She squinched up her face and, eyes shut tight, turned it away from him.

He freed her from the embrace and stepped back. He was desperate to make amends for the insult. But how, he wondered with a flash of lucidity he might never recover from, would he make amends for all the things she wanted and he couldn't give her? As in a dream he saw himself: an old man running to catch a bus that pulled away as he reached its open door. The door closed. He cried out for the bus to stop, but the driver, big fat Ralph Cramden, didn't hear. Milton had missed the bus. There would not be another.

He began to whimper — now, after all these years, he remembered how to cry. His legs gave way and he sank to his knees. "I'm sorry," he blubbered. "I'm sorry for insulting you."

"Oh, Milton," his wife gently comforted. From deep in her ample bosom she plucked a handkerchief, patted his wet cheeks, and cradled his head against her waist. "There, there…don't cry…I forgive you…" With an enigmatic smile she added, "In life we have to take the bitter with the bittersweet."

Milton shuddered. "Oh, we do," he wept. "We do."

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