

By Choice

by Mel Konner

Rabbi Feivel N. Feivlovitch did not do conversions.

He had made an exception once in Baltimore, when the daughter of a cousin would, God forbid, have married out of the faith. But since being posted to this town it had not crossed his mind. Jews did not proselytize. He was here to shepherd a hundred or so, and the last thing he needed was for his gentile neighbors, who were very cordial, to think he aimed to divert them from the faith of their fathers. Rabbi Hillel said, "Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you."

But then no one had asked him, until today.

A thirtyish woman with stringy red hair, a round face, freckles, and a body like a boy's came into his office without knocking. True, she had an appointment. But.

She had called and he had given her this hour; thus her bold appearance in his world. She needed counseling about how to prepare for Passover. There was not much time for him, God willing, to do this good deed, so he expedited the meeting.

"Please, Missus. Sit." She took the chair on the other side of his broad second-hand gunmetal desk.

"Not Mrs., Rabbi." She fidgeted intensely. "Well, technically. Divorced."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"Children?"

"Fortunately, no." Now she looked distressed. "I meant fortunately with him. Not with him!" She composed herself, sat up straight, and spoke very seriously. "I definitely want children."

"God willing."

"God willing."

"Passover is ten days away. What have you done so far?"

"I bought matza. The bread of affliction, right?"

He looked at her. "Which branch of Judaism do you come from?"

She looked, if possible, uncomfortable. "I'm not Jewish."

"What are you doing here?"

"Preparing for Passover. Isn't there a lot to do? I can look it up."

"I have heard about Christian Passover."

"I don't want Christian Passover. I want Jewish Passover."

"Why?"

"To help me become Jewish."

The Rabbi balanced himself on his broken swivel chair. "Missus, I don't do conversions."

“I know that you are required to refuse me three times.”

“Please Missus, we have nothing to discuss.” He looked pointedly toward the door.

She stood. She was wearing a gray blouse that covered her arms and chest, black pants that covered her legs, and flat shoes. She slung a leather bag over her shoulder. “I will come back three times. I will come five, seven, ten times. Refuse me and refuse me, I will come back.”

“I won’t give you an appointment.”

“Thank you, Rabbi. I won’t need an appointment.” She waved slightly as she closed the door behind her.

Two days later she came back around the same time on a dreary morning. This time she knocked.

“Missus, I told you—“

“You don’t do conversions. That’s two.” She was already sitting and thrust toward him a paper filled with neat, tiny writing. “My list of things I have to do for Passover. See how many are checked off?”

“Missus...”

“It can’t hurt you to look at my list.”

It was a thorough and creditable list. He handed it back to her, nodding. “Very nice, but you’re not Jewish.”

“You keep saying that.” She got up. “I will see you soon.”

“Don’t bother.”

“It’s no bother.” As she left he noticed that she was wearing a modest blue dress and blue shoes with low heels. Her calves were bare and looked thin and strong. Was she wearing makeup? He couldn’t remember.

The third time, although it was later in the day, he knew her knock. Two double raps. Yes, she wore make-up. Her dress was similar, but pale orange. Her red hair looked nicer.

“Good afternoon Rabbi.”

“Good afternoon Missus.”

“Shouldn’t you ask my name? This is our third meeting.”

“Missus please... All right. What is your name?”

“Nellie.”

“Missus Nellie...”

“No. No Missus.”

“What is your second name?”

“My husband’s name that I don’t want.”

“Your father’s name.”

“I don’t want that either. Can’t you call me Nellie?”

“It is not right, but if you insist, Missus, I will call you that.”

“Say my name.”

“Nellie.”

“Thank you.”

“Nellie, I cannot convert you.”

“Your people don’t welcome others.”

“We fear them.”

“You fear me?” He was silent. “Are you refusing me a third time?”

He answered both questions: “Yes!”

“I do not accept it.” She stood. “Rabbi Feivlovitch.”

“Yes...Nellie.”

“What does the “N” stand for?”

“What are you talking about?”

She pointed at the ordination certificate that hung lopsided in a frame on his wall. She tilted her head to match the angle of the certificate.

“It stands for Norman.”

“Norman.”

“It was not my choice.”

“I like it. It reminds me of my ancestors who conquered England.” Despite her make-up, her freckles spread with her grin.

“I do not stem, as you do, from those Normans.”

“Thank God for that! I don’t want us to be relatives.”

“What do you mean?”

“A good Passover to you, Rabbi Feivlovitch,” and she was gone.

The beginning of Passover was two days away. It would be eight days long. Would that mean he would not see her again for ten days?

He was busy. First he had to choose two Passover seders from among the six he was offered. Also, he had a stream of women in his office concerned about following the Passover laws.

But after he took his sweet first bite of bread on the ninth night he thought of his pupil. No! He had not accepted her as his pupil.

On the tenth night, he thought of her many questions about Passover. By the third visit, these were good questions.

On the eleventh night, he thought of her red hair and the freckles that spread with her grin. These trifled with his sleep.

On the twelfth night, he thought of her narrow body and thin muscular calves. His own body betrayed him with the grossest signs, for which he begged God to forgive him.

The next day he was not busy enough, and his mind strayed to her. It was after four o’clock, with the sun low outside his window and the Sabbath coming on, that he heard: rap-rap; rap-rap. Then, silence.

“Please. Come in.”

She cracked the door. “Please who?”

“Please... Nellie.”

She was resplendent in a black gown studded with black sequins, but one that did not hug her slender form and covered her elbows and her knees.

“What are you dressed for?”

“The Sabbath, Rabbi.”

“What are you?”

She bared her eyes, glaring, pursed her lips, and hissed. “I am an evil spirit.”

He heard himself gasp.

“Norman. I was kidding. We must laugh at ourselves.”

“Rabbi Feivlovitch, if you are my pupil.”

“Rabbi Feivlovitch. So you accept me as a conversion student.”

“I did not say that.”

“You have refused me three times.”

“We will see how you do.” He took out a book. “This is an Aleph. A. This is a Beys. B.”

“Do you think that you still have to teach me the alphabet?” Her freckles spread and her eyes twinkled.

“What then?”

“*Nashim. Women.*”

“You think you are ready to study a tractate of the Talmud?”

“Not any tractate. That one.”

He took a yellowed, tall volume down from a high shelf, his grandfather’s Talmud—*May his memory be for a blessing*. She struggled but eked out the text. The tutelage absorbed him. He was shocked to look out the window and realize the time was near to light Sabbath candles.

She followed his gaze to the sun on the horizon. “Shall I light them?”

“You are not Jewish.”

“Men can light them?”

“If there is no other choice.”

She rose and nodded, turning to go.

His eyes filled with black sequins. “You are going someplace?”

“Yes, of course, Rabbi. I am going home to light the candles. I must hurry.”

The sight of the skirt of her long gown almost caught in his office door lingered through the Sabbath, and once again he begged God’s forgiveness.

By Wednesday, he had suffered. He came to the office early. As he let himself in, his eye caught something red across the street by the tailor shop. He was barely behind his desk when the door opened to a flared crimson skirt and a crimson turtleneck. She turned as she closed the door, her skirt twirling a little.

“Good morning, Rabbi Feivlovitch. Did you miss me?”

Must he lie? “I missed our studies.”

“I am an apt pupil?”

“Yes. You learn. And you show respect. For the texts.”

“This compliment is music to me.” Her crimsoned lips grinned and showed white teeth.

“What are you?” He feared that dressed in red she would transform herself as Lilith, the seductress God mistakenly made before he made Eve. Eve assuaged Adam’s loneliness and bore him children. Lilith roamed the world milking fluids from men in the night, then bearing demons from their seed.

“I am Nellie.”

“I mean what religion are you?—were you?”

“I am nothing.”

“Your parents.”

“They did not believe in anything, including me.”

“Where are they?”

“Far away, in urns in my uncle’s home. They were killed in a crash.”

“I am sorry.”

“It was God’s sign that I must change my life.”

“You know God’s thoughts?”

“Only when He thinks of me. May we study now, Rabbi? We were up to the honeymoon passage.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“*Rabbi Meir said...*”

His grandfather’s Talmud was before him, open to the page. He turned it toward her across the institutional desk. He was again unsteady in his broken swivel chair. When he let go of the book his hand trembled.

She read the Hebrew haltingly, with errors, yet she read.

She turned the book back to him. He looked down at the passage and felt his cheeks blush even to his ears. But he forced himself. He read the Hebrew and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Now say what it means.”

The heat again suffused from his throat up through his sparse beard up to the roots of his hair. “*Rabbi Meir says, Why does the Torah forbid the menstruating woman from her husband for seven days? Because if they did it all the time boredom would come. The end would come. Therefore the Torah decrees seven impure days, so that when she is pure again, she is as dear as when she met him under the canopy.*”

“If they did what all the time?”

“I think you know.”

“I think I know.” She smiled demurely now, standing up, and walked modestly to the door. She turned and clasped her hands together, gazing at the worn, chipped floorboards. She looked up and met his gaze, her clasped hands now below her waist against the crimson.

“When we are married, I will call you Norman.”

He was too stunned to answer at once. He raised his voice. “When we are married? Are you mad?”

But she was already out in the hallway.

There was another painful period of waiting. We need not dwell on the details. He lost his peace of mind.

As on the first day, she entered without knocking in late morning. A gray light filled the window. She was dressed in jeans and a man’s blue work shirt that was not tucked in. Her freckled face was not made up, and red her hair was stringy in a way that touched him. On this gray day she appeared like the sun.

“Happy Birthday, Rabbi!” She grinned broadly.

He found he needed to glance at the calendar on the desk. He tore off one, two, three pages from the past and laid them face down. “You are right. How did you know?”

She lowered her head and looked at him from under her slight brows, with a mocking smile, then looked at his computer on the other end of the desk, beyond the open volume.

He looked. The screen was blank, but the engine hummed, also mockingly. “Are there no more secrets?”

“Very few. I must confess...”

Her pause was unnerving. “Y-yes?”

“I am one year older than you. One year and one week.”

“You should live and be well, Missu—“ He shifted in his chair as she waited. “Nellie.”

“You must respect your elders.”

“You came to me for instruction.”

“Yes, let us begin. But remember: I will also teach you.”

His dazed look was broken by her next declaration. “I want to start studying the Sabbath.”

“From the Talmud?”

“It is the fountain. It rises from the Torah.”

Reluctantly, but knowing the right thing, he closed the volume on women and returned it to the shelf. He took down the volume with the tractate on The Sabbath.

She looked up at the long shelf. “Your grandfather’s Talmud?”

“Yes. Rabbi Jacob Aaron Feivlovitch of blessed memory.”

“Now he is my grandfather too.”

They studied. She had practiced and was gaining skill. When she said, “This is a good stopping place,” he was not ready. She rose to leave.

“You did not dress up today.”

“It’s not the Sabbath.” She shouldered her leather bag. “Do you mean for your birthday? I gave you a gift: to see me as I am.” She turned, but with her hand on the door knob, turned back.

“All Jews by Choice also stood before God at Mount Sinai and accepted God’s Torah.”

“That is one interpretation.”

“I remember it.”

“You remember standing before Sinai?”

“Also, I was not among the idolaters who worshipped the Golden Calf. Were you?”

“God forbid!”

“God forbid. Happy Birthday.”

The next time she did not make him wait many days, but they did seem long. One night he woke to hear himself pray: “Almighty God, absolve me; Lady, Missus, Nellie, have mercy.”

The next noon he heard her double rapping. A cloud passed and sunlight filled the window. She was businesslike: gray slacks and blue sweater under a gray jacket.

She sat primly without being invited. She crossed her legs. “The Sages say, *The evil tongue is like murder in that you can’t take it back*. But I must tell you: Your congregants gossip about why you are not married.”

“How do you know this?”

“I come to services. The boy in the back of the men’s rows with the knit cap pulled down over his ears. I hear your sermons. I see you glow with faith.”

“This is a gross violation!”

“It was the last row. Even you didn’t see me. I will sit with the women now.”

“It will be a scandal.”

“I will just be the one studying for conversion. This is our seventh meeting. Will you punish me for my ancestors until the seventh generation?”

“What do you want from me?”

“I said. Make me Jewish, and make me Mrs. Feivel Norman Feivlovitch. You must go to the Board of Rabbis.”

“The *Beit Din*? The House of Judgment? in the city? a hundred miles away?”

“Only those three rabbis can approve my conversion. Ask them. Today.”

“They will test you.”

“Do you think I will not pass?”

That thought was absurd.

“I can’t be the one who prepares you.”

“I will have no other. We are beginning a lifetime of study.”

At the meeting, she disposed of the usual questions—the Sabbath laws, keeping a Kosher home, the obligations of women—so quickly that the three elders looked at their watches. She suggested they question her on the tractate on The Sabbath. They looked at each other. One got down the book. Her insights caused a dispute among the gray-bearded men.

One night, after their third child’s first birthday, he was studying in the dusk when he sensed her behind him, and thrilled as her finger grazed the back of his neck.

“Norman.” Not Feivel. It meant she had been to the ritual bath and was pure.

Later he came to her. Since she bore their eldest she had had small breasts that he loved to touch, although he drew his hand away when they leaked milk, making her laugh.

“You can lick your finger. It’s kosher.”

Afterward, she laid her head on his chest. Only he was allowed to see her red hair now. He stroked it. In the bounds of the Law, she had fulfilled his wildest dreams.

“You saved me from Lilith. I might have fathered demons more numerous than the stars.”

“You did not make it easy. It was the second Norman Conquest.”

He knew she did not mean that he had conquered her.

She sprang out of bed like a sprite, wriggled into her modest nightgown, and hurried barefoot down the hall, transforming herself into something preternaturally maternal.

He had not heard the baby cry. He heard the cry now, and heard it stop. He drifted. In moments, alone in his bed, he was sleeping the sleep of the blessed.