The Phone Call

by

Renée Friedman

“Renée,” my mother, in her thick accent, pleads with me over the phone, “talk to him. Maybe he’ll listen to you. He looks like a mishugenah with all that long hair. God forbid your father, may he rest in peace, should have seen this!

And those tattoos. He looks like a walking billboard! I told him if he likes a picture to have someone draw it for him and hang it on the wall to look at. Now he’ll never be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Oy vey, Renée. I always thought you were the lunatic, but now I see I was wrong. It’s Steven. You haven’t seen your brother in a while – you wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley. And the other day when I was doing his laundry some pills fell out of his pocket. He tried to tell me they were only aspirin but I told him he can’t pull the wool over my eyes, I know aspirins have writing not numbers. There were numbers on them just like luudes have.”

This comment from a woman who, a few years ago, saw me drink a glass of sugary Maneshevitz Pesach wine at a seder and was worried that I would become a “gutter girl”.

“Mom, when I once brought home a stick of incense you thought it was a joint and I was a pothead. Now you know about luudes?”
“But now Kenny calls me.”
“Kenny? Who’s Kenny?”
“One of Steven’s band members.”
“Yes, so what does that have to do with anything?”
“Well, Kenny takes drugs. When he takes the heroin he called Steven to talk but Steven was at the fruit stand…. Oy! That’s another thing! Every day I have to nag him to go to work. He says he’s reached the apex of his fruit career. He says he knows all there is to know about fruit and doesn’t want to go anymore. I have to force him to go to work."
“But how do you know about luudes?”
”So, Renée, I told you, Kenny phoned Steven but when your brother wasn’t home Kenny talked to me. He calls me now every day. He likes to talk and he explains about all the different drugs. He tells me what they look like.”
“So one of Steven’s friends calls you every day just to have a little chat when he’s finished shooting up.”
“Yes, but Kenny only calls in the morning. He knows I don’t answer the phone between two and four because I’m watching my T.V. shows.”
“Yeah. You don’t have to watch them anymore. You could create your own soap opera-My Favourite. Junkie.”
“Renée, Steven is a nut. I don’t know what to do with him. He calls his fercockted band The Storm Troopers – the Metal Reich. When I ask him how he can be in a Nazi
band after all his parents have been through, he says they are not Nazis - they are all Irish."
I hear some noise in the background.
"Renee, I have to go. Steven wants a sandwich."
"Ma, talk to me. He can make his own sandwich. You spoil him. Let him learn to take care of himself."
"He’s in the kitchen with Lorraine."
"He’s still with Lorraine? Let her make him a sandwich."
"She doesn’t do anything. Oy, she’s been complaining every morning that my coffee is not good. It’s making her nauseous. But I know it’s not my coffee."
"Ma – Lorraine is a shiksa and she’s living with you? You wouldn’t even let me walk through the neighbourhood with a Catholic boy ‘cuz of what the neighbours might say.”
"She better not be pregnant. I don’t want any babies here to take care of. They better get rid of it."

This last comment of my mothers’ was too much for me to digest. The fact that she, a holocaust survivor, was more than obliquely implying that a grandchild of hers, albeit a non-Jewish one, be aborted I could not fully comprehend. I was vaguely, uncomfortably aware of the creeping realization that her longings – and she herself were imperceptible to me and – were not what I believed them to be…

Then the gravelly voice of my brother was close and clearly audible. “Ma, come on! I need a sandwich!”
There was a pause. Then my mother coughed out “Renée doesn’t want me to make you a sandwich.”
"She doesn’t even live in Brooklyn any more. Ignore her!"
"Ma, don’t do it!” I, the alter ego, beseech into her other ear.

“You don’t understand” my mom replies. “You’ll see when you have children. You won’t be able to refuse them. I have to go now. I’ll speak to you soon. Bye.”

There is a soft click, then the clear steady hum of the dial tone.

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