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MR. KOPS

When I gazed up at my teacher's kind face from my desk in the front row, his bald head always reminded me of a leftover party balloon floating toward the ceiling. From his black silk *kipah* all the way to his toes, I thought he must have been at least seven feet tall even before he slipped into his thick-soled, tightly-laced walking shoes. They always seemed to need a shine. His name was Mr. Kops and he taught my third grade Hebrew School class at Congregation Beth El.

My father had once told me, "You can judge every man by the shoes he wears."

If that was true, I wondered why Mr. Kops didn't polish his shoes or seem to care about their weary condition. But even scuffed, his sturdy black footwear matched the dark nylon socks, extra-long suits, and knitted tie that floated back and forth across his chest as he wrote on or erased the green board that hung on the wall of that crowded classroom. I can still smell the chalk dust that salted the hem of his jackets and collected in small piles on the gray linoleum floor behind his

wooden chair.

Once, when he crossed his legs while reading to us, I noticed pale skin showing through a ragged hole on the outside of his left ankle. I tried to picture Mr. Kops darning that sock while he watched a Yankees' game, but that didn't seem realistic. I decided he'd probably turn his sock inside out, wash it, and just wear it that way hoping no one would see.

I can't recall his first name now, or if I'd ever known it, but the chalk dust, his elongated, Giacometti-like form, and the occasional piece of dandruff that drifted from his dry scalp onto his wire-rim glasses are things I'll always remember. Along with the history of Israel, the months of the Hebrew calendar, and the importance of having a synagogue in each town, these were the subjects Mr. Kops seared into my brain that year.

If encouraged, I think I could still recite an obligatory report I wrote about Golda Meir. At that age, my spelling wasn't perfect, hence the A-minus grade I received, but my teacher loved the drawings I did to illustrate some key moments in the Israeli prime minister's life. Golda and my father's father were both born in Kiev, so I added that crumb of family history on my final page.

Grandpa Saul was very proud of that fact so he kept a copy of my report about his famous neighbor tucked inside his tallis bag until the day he died. Both the bag and my report were buried with him, something my grandma told me that

he had requested himself.

One afternoon, when I ran back to get a sweater I'd left on the shelf beneath my seat, I found Mr. Kops leaning against the edge of his desk looking terribly sad.

“Yes, Abby?”

“Oh, I forgot my sweater.”

“Of course, come in.”

I stepped through the doorway, then hesitated. “I can get it on Monday, if you're busy.”

He shook his head slowly. “But what if you should need it this weekend? I wouldn't want you to catch a cold.”

I walked forward, reached for the pink, hand-knitted cardigan, and then my curiosity got the better of me. “Are you feeling sick, Mr. Kops?”

“Yes, but not the way you mean, Abby. I'm feeling somewhat sad today.”

“Did you lose *your* sweater?”

“No, Abby, not my sweater, but my wife. Today is her *yahrzeit*. Do you know what that means?”

“It means the day she died, doesn't it?”

“Yes, that's correct.”

I bit the inside of my cheek for a moment. “I didn't know, Mr. Kops. I'm sorry you lost her.”

He smiled. "Thank you, Abby. So am I."

I had no idea he'd been married because he never wore a wedding ring.

"What was her name?"

He rubbed his lengthy palms against his knees. "Her given name was Hilda Leah, but I called her Hildy."

"Was she tall like you are?"

"No, she was actually much shorter than I am." He smiled again. "Hildy was a little bit of a thing to look at, but her spirit... oh, her spirit was very tall."

"Did she shine your shoes, Mr. Kops?"

"My shoes?" he asked, raising one eyebrow. "What makes you ask such a question?"

The sun was beginning to set so I put down my backpack and slipped into my sweater. "Well, you wear the same shoes every day, but you don't polish them. Is that why? Did Mrs. Kops do it for you?"

He nodded. "Yes, Abby, my Hildy polished my shoes, cooked our meals, and so much more. I haven't had the heart to do it myself, not since she died. I really didn't think anyone even noticed."

"Well, I sit in the front row."

"And that's how you noticed?"

I nodded. "Mama calls me a noticer. She thinks I might be a writer

someday.”

“Your mother sounds like a wise woman, Abby. A good writer must be a good noticer. Good writing is all about details, you know.”

I felt I was blushing, but I followed my curiosity. “Can I... I mean, may I ask you a question, Mr. Kops?”

“You just did, Abby, but you may ask me another,” he replied, looking a little less sad.

“Do you ever wear sneakers, Mr. Kops?”

“When I take my evening walk in Prospect Park or elsewhere, and on Yom Kippur, yes, I do. Why so curious?”

“Well, I was thinking, if you wore your sneakers to class, then I could take your shoes home with me to polish them for you. Daddy says it’s important for shoes to have a good shine. He says when you have a shine on the outside you feel a shine on your inside, too. I can give your shoes a good shine, Mr. Kops. With brushes and paste wax just the way my father taught me.”

His eyes were blinking and then he nodded again. “Abby, I think my Hildy is looking down on you from heaven with her tallest spirit. My wife was a noticer like you, too. It’s all the things she used to notice that have overwhelmed me since she died.”

“So wouldn’t she be happy if I polished your shoes, Mr. Kops? I promise I’ll

do a very good job. My mother believes that helping others is the way people get to know how an angel feels.”

“And you believe in angels, Abby?”

“Of course I do, Mr. Kops. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. So did Hildy.”

I bent down to pick up my backpack. “So, you’ll let me polish your shoes?”

“Yes, Abby, I will. You can do Hildy’s job, just this once, and be like an angel for both of us.”

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