

## INSIDE THE INSIDE LOOKING OUTSIDE

Jeanne and her niece Tzippi are gazing into the fish tank in the Dubin House library, watching the silver and gold with translucent tails drift and chase, Jeanne's eyes all the while following the blackie as it weaves in and out through the castle's archways. Now and again, it swims over to the glass to stare back at Jeanne, then with a flutter of its gauzy fins and tail, sweeps around and returns to its home.

That's when Jeanne says what she says about fish and their worries, a remark that Tzippi probably doesn't appreciate, but Jeanne doesn't care. Tzippi has spent the last hour talking; listening, too, but she doesn't *hear* a damn thing, never does. No one does. 'Course the whole time, Tzippi keeps sounding like a know-it-all. Jeanne remembers how the afternoon began, remembers herself saying . . .

“Don't grow old.”

“The alternative isn't so good,” from Tzippi. “You're still the same person as when you were young.”

Jeanne gazes directly at Tzippi, seated beside her, trying to fathom the meaning of her words, then silently looks down at her hands and strokes one with the fingertips of the other.

“I dree-am of Jeannie with the light bro-own hair’,” Tzippi sings softly.

Jeanne nods, recalling how everyone used to say the song was written just for her. She turns her face to the sun coursing through the windows of Dubin House Geriatric. She likes that name, Jeannie, but people mostly call her Jenny — which she hates — or sometimes *Shayndeleh* — the pretty one. She knows she’s pretty, she can *see*, can’t she? Pictures of when she was young are proof — a princess, everyone said: her skin so unblemished and blushing, her eyes so clear; green, sometimes blue, like ice water. Her hair’s white now, and the nurses tell her it’s beautiful. Striking, is what they say, and ask, who does the colour? — which amuses her no end.

She was slender too. Her father, “Pops” — a tailor in the *shmatteh* business — sewed clothes for her that looked like she came from money. Her eyes spark with humour just remembering it, but that quickly fades. She’s *fat*, short and fat, 4’11” and size 14, she berates herself, and when she puts her down jacket on to go out — when . . . *if* . . . her sister thinks to come for her . . . she feels like a bloated lump in a wheelchair.

Unseeing, she peers out at the grassy courtyard. Actually, she’s staring further on, at the low-rise apartment building a short distance beyond.

“The alternative is not to be around at all,” Tzippi says.

Jeanne shakes her head side-to-side. She doesn’t understand what’s so difficult for people to get.

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Tzippi tries.

What does *Tzippi* know? Jeanne thinks. “You’re young. You shouldn’t talk, Tzippi, until you’re wearin’ *my* moccasins. It’s one thing if you grow old inside, but what about when you’re old *outside*?”

She thinks *that* may have gotten to Tzippi.

“Do you recognize that building over there?” Tzippi asks, ignoring her question. She points to the low-rise with its defining turquoise balconies. “It’s where you lived before you moved in here, remember?”

“No.”

“You lived there when Maury was alive . . . ? Remember when all your brothers and sisters and all the kids used to crowd into your tiny apartment and laughed and talked so loud . . . ”

“No, I don’t remember nothin’, I said.”

“Your brother Lou — Lou and Etta — lived down the hall . . . ? And Maxine — your sister Maxine and Sam — on the floor below . . . ? Everybody in and out; then Maury died and . . . ”

Jeanne nods her head slowly.

“Remember how we’d walk into the building and meet two or three Gersteins hanging about the lobby, standing around that fountain with the fake palm tree. Why, we even called the whole *building* Gerstein Towers!” Tzippi laughs.

Jeanne turns a blank stare to her niece, thinking how she used to have such nice dark hair, the colour of chestnuts. She used to be attractive and dress nice. Then she married one a the orthodox and now she’s kosher an’ nuts. What Jeanne considers *over-*

Jewish. Calls herself Tzipporah instead of Sarah and wears dresses like for an old lady. Still, she's young, forty-somethin'.

“Okay then, let's talk about *now*,” Tzippi tries.

Jeanne thinks Tzippi must be stupid. There *is* no now.

She casts her eye around the area looking out onto the courtyard. Tzippi's gaze follows. A few residents are outside chatting, some seated on benches, some standing, supported by walkers; inside, most slump down in wheelchairs, dozing, their chins to their chests, their bodies listless and overweight from too many starchy foods and deserts. Grey-heads, all; women. The few men able enough to stand on their own are each surrounded by two or three equally able, unmistakably admiring women.

“Do *you* see anything to talk about?” Jeanne puts to her niece.

“Well, there must be shopping trips. Or Bingo,” Tzippi says, turning back to her, her voice upbeat. “Don't you play Bingo? Gin Rummy . . . ? *You* like cards. I know *something's* going on.”

“With those crazy people? Why am *I* here? My mind is good. I told them.”

Confusion registers across her face, in her eyes.

She'll leave this place. She can do it. She doesn't need anybody's help, not her son Arnie's, not Tzippi's, and not her brother Lou's. The fingers of one hand tight together, she draws tiny circling motions on her thigh with her fingertips.

“I'm so angry!” she exclaims abruptly; her eyes flash. “I'm . . . Just a minute, I'll tell you. Yesterday I . . .”

She knows this feeling of anger; it's familiar, intimate and warm; the sensation sits in her bones, her chest and shoulders, tingles at the bridge of her nose and back of her

neck, pushes behind her eyes. The anger charges forward, on automatic, if only she could find the memory.

Her gaze drifts to a place beyond Tzippi's shoulder. "Oh, *this* one's crazy," she mutters as a thin, neatly dressed woman in culottes and white runners comes up and stands beside Tzippi.

"Excuse me, mister," the woman says — though no misters are there — "Will you show me how to do this?" She holds out a bright yellow piece of knitted yarn with wide green trim, suspended from crocheting needles. "It's a hat" . . . touching her fingers to salt and pepper hair.

"Sorry," Tzippi answers.

"Do you want me to show you?" the woman offers. "There, you see?" she says, completing several stitches, then stops. "Will you help me?" she asks, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Jenny knows how. Show her, Jen."

Jeanne winces, but takes the crocheting in her hand, finishes the row. "There," giving it back to the woman.

"I can't. Will you show me?" Worried, dark eyes implore.

Overhearing, a nurse strolls over, grasps her by the arm. "Come, Anna, let's leave these nice women alone."

"Will you show me?"

"Anna!" the nurse says sharply, and firmly begins edging her away. "Will we see you for Bingo tonight, Jeanne?" she calls back over her shoulder.

She shakes her head no.

“For Mah Jong tomorrow then?”

Jeanne looks away. Gradually, her focus shifts to a plastic toiletries holder on her lap. With a slight tremor, her fingers pull at its zipper. She peers inside, sifts through the contents, eventually withdraws a small silver compact, opens it and, fumbling with the catch, examines herself critically in its mirror: she takes the powder puff, pats her chin, nose and cheeks, and replaces the puff. Now she knows exactly what she’s after. She retrieves a gold lipstick tube. Drawing her upper lip tight to her teeth, with deliberate movements, she strokes the rouge onto it — right, centre, left —sweeps the lipstick across the lower, presses the lips together; rechecks herself in the mirror. Satisfied, she closes the compact and puts it back.

“Mr. Lieberman told me at breakfast I look pretty,” she says, brightening.

“And so you do,” Tzippi answers.

“But they didn’t let me have any breakfast,” Jeanne says, her eyes suddenly teary, her expression turned childlike. “I didn’t eat *anything*. A bit of cereal, a little coffee . . . Nothin’.”

“I know what. Why don’t I do your nails? You have a file and some polish in your bag?” Tzippi asks. Taking the plastic holder from her, Tzippi finds both and begins filing the nails of her aunt’s right hand. “Such fine nails; so well-shaped. There! Now let’s have your other hand.”

Jeanne inspects Tzippi’s work and nods approval. She likes having her nails done, likes Tzippi’s full attention. She doesn’t get it from her son or daughter. They live far away. They *say* they come to see her, but they don’t; say they were just here, but they weren’t; she doesn’t remember any such thing. She leans in to watch Tzippi brush polish

onto her fingernails. It's a nice colour. Delicate pink, like Jeanne's blush. When Tzippi has finished polishing, Jeanne holds both hands up for view.

"That's better. A lot better than the lousy job the young kid in *this* place does. Even better than the *shvartze* at Penny's used to. I'm tellin' you, I only wish the girl here'd get *blacker!*" Jeanne laughs.

"You look *so* relaxed and lovely when you smile, *Shayndeleh,*" Tzippi says, capping the polish, putting it and the file back in the case; ignoring the Yiddish slur.

Jeanne *knows* she was being funny, and her eyes still laugh at the absurdity of what she said. She throws a sideways glance at her niece, hoping for a smile at least — or a rise. Well, what would you expect? All of a sudden Tzippi's so *over-correct*, ever since she got over-Jewish. All of a sudden she's got a "responsibility to fix the world" — uses Hebrew words that sound to Jeanne like *\*tickin' along*. Personally, she thinks Tzippi's tryin' to show off. Why not Yiddish, something Jeanne could understand? No, Tzipporah (and why not *Sarah?*) has got to be smarter — more good — than the rest of us. In Jeanne's opinion, she just got more humourless.

As far as looking "lovely" when she smiles, people tell her that all the time, so Tzippi's just bein' . . . how do you say it? . . . *patronizing*. Does she think she's a child?

"I need to go upstairs and get washed up now, company's coming."

"Who?"

"Company. I need to get dressed. Get the box of candy, Rachel, you know, where

*\* tikkun-olam: A Hebrew phrase meaning "repairing, or perfecting, the world." In Judaism, performing mitzvot (good deeds), is a requirement, to help make the world a better place.*

I always keep it, in the china closet.”

“Jeanne, I’m Tzippi, and . . .”

“I don’t want to be late. Where’s Maury?”

“He’s . . . downstairs,” Tzippi lies.

“He’s never around when I need him. The table needs to be set and I want him to check the roast. I need to go get dressed.”

“You’re thinking about a long time ago, the house on Raritan, remember? Where you lived before moving into that building — see, there? With the turquoise balconies . . . ?” pointing in its direction. “That’s when Maury worked at the Towers Theatre; when Maxine and Sam lived down the street from you and Lou and Etta at the other end . . . ?”

Jeanne settles a level look on Tzippi, but seems mildly puzzled, as if she’d slipped off somewhere and is surprised to find herself here, in this place. Yeah, she thinks. Maury brought back bagel and whitefish from Fagie’s Deli on Sunday mornings, and she’d make coffee and Maxine and Sam and their kids would drop in, an’ maybe some of the others. Everybody in and out.

“You raised your children in that house,” Tzippi persists. “Rachel was taking dance and cello, and Arnie . . . “

“Yeah, a lot happening. Maury and I . . .” Her brow creases and she lapses into quiet, trying to follow the thought; once again her attention drifts to the toiletries holder on her lap, and once again quivering fingers struggle with the zipper. This time, she opens the holder, takes out an envelope and riffles through the papers inside. “I must take care of this. If I don’t get to the bank the day these cheques come, it doesn’t get done. If I had my car . . . ”

“I think they’re cancelled cheques, Jen.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, putting the envelope back in the case, and continues searching; finally settles on an address book. Still delicate, she thinks, seeing her hands leaf through it — she always had nice hands, the nails well groomed, like now. She feels Tzippi watching her every move. Several loose papers with notes scrawled on them wedge between the pages. Jeanne reads one, forming the words with her lips; shakes her head side-to-side, trying to fathom its message, when it was written.

“I don’t need them,” she says after examining each, then hands the papers to Tzippi and returns to flipping through the book. “Aaron Aronowitz, Helen and Marty Taub, Sylvia Ratner, Helen Patterson . . .” She doesn’t see those people anymore. Why don’t they call? Did they die?

Seconds go by as she continues turning the pages, reading the lists.

Where did it all go, and how did this happen? Did the years shrink down to a plastic “purse” housing scraps from her life? Names in an old address book?

“What I’m looking for isn’t here,” she says at last and puts it back into the case.

“Mm. You’ll find it another time, don’t worry,” Tzippi comforts. “Aunt Jenny, I’m going to have to get going . . .”

“Where’re you runnin’ off to?” Jeanne asks, anxiety springing to her eyes as she sees Tzippi check her watch. She’s always runnin’ off. So’re Jeanne’s daughter Rachel and son Arnie. Sure, Arnie stops in — on his way to New York. Always runnin’ — Jeanne’s sisters and brothers too.

“I can stay a few more minutes, but I’m afraid I’ll have to be on my way. I’ll be back,” she reassures. “Besides, it’s almost time for your dinner. Come, I’ll walk with you to your room,” reaching for her jacket and handbag.

“They have lousy food here,” Jeanne complains — for the umpteenth time, she thinks, but it does no good, nobody listens. She allows Tzippi to help her out of her seat and to her walker, then hangs the straps of the plastic case around the handle and takes tentative steps forward. They make their way to the lobby, stopping to gaze into a large tank set on a pedestal in the library. Silent for the longest time, Jeanne stares at the fish, orange and black and silver, her mind slipping back to how Tzippi tried to convince her she was still the same person as when she was young. What does *she* know? Pretending there was something going on here that was worth a life, worth talking about.

Jeanne keeps her attention on the fish. Back and forth they swim, as if going somewhere, their gauzy tails fanning out, gently disturbing the clear water. They slalom in and around leafy plants swaying gently with the flow, nuzzle cobalt blue and emerald rocks at the bottom of the tank and chase after champagne bubbles burbling to the top. Jeanne’s gaze follows the black one as it floats in and out through the portal of a sand-coloured castle, along its parapet, around its turrets, through its doorway once again; again, and again. She can’t take her eyes off the blackie. Every so often it swims over to the glass, hovers there, its dark eyes staring back at Jeanne, its mouth making tiny puck-puck movements, as if asking what’s she’s doing on the outside, looking in; then sweeps around and goes back to surveying its castle.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Tzippi offers. “It’s all so calm and peaceful, don’t you think, Aunt Jenny?”

Seconds of silence go by like minutes, weighted with a lifetime of pleasures made bittersweet with present sorrows.

“Jenny?”

“Yeah,” she murmurs at last. “Yeah, the fish have no worries. Nobody pushed *them* outa *their* home.”

She allows that thought to suspend in air. See what Tzippi has to say about *that* one. Finally Tzippi breaks the stillness.

“I must leave now. I’ll come visit again, I promise.”

Pulling her glance away from the tank, Jeanne grasps tightly onto the handlebar of her walker and settles a flat emotionless look onto her niece. Oh, she’s angry with her, but the lingering image of the silver and gold fish, especially the blackie, the way she asserted her claim to her castle, stayed close, a homeowner protecting her property — stared down Jeanne, like she was an intruder — the whole powerful impression, has diffused the anger, now part resentment, part resolve, part self-pity; hope, sadness and despair, wistfulness. Fantasy . . .

She’ll leave this place. This isn’t the first time she’s thought about it; it’s been on her mind the whole time Tzippi’s been here, talking nonsense. Though she did do her nails good; and she *is* kind, that much Jeanne will grant. But now she’s resolved to quit this Home that will never be home. All she’ll need will be a small bag with a nightgown, underwear, a few tops and a couple pair of slacks, her plastic holder with some toiletries, medicines, tweezers, her small mirror and compact, lipstick, comb and her address book. She thinks she’ll take her cane and leave the walker behind, like useless baggage. She’ll

take off right after breakfast and, once outside, board the van to . . . she's not sure. But she'll get herself to the station and buy a one-way ticket.

Next time Tzippi comes to visit — or Rachel or Arnie, or *Shayndeleh's* sisters or brothers — she won't be here. She'll be on a bus to Somewhere.

She doesn't know where. She'll just ride.

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