

The Conversation

By Eli Greenbaum

The Shabbos dinner dishes had been cleared from the dining room table along with the candlesticks and replaced by a light blue plastic tablecloth and two decks of sealed Bicycle playing cards. There was a dessert plate, fork, spoon, coaster, and napkin at each place at the table. The aroma of roast chicken and potatoes was slowly displaced by the bouquet wafting from the freshly baked cinnamon–sour cream coffee cake and rugelach on the kitchen counter, which were patiently waiting to be part of a coffee-tea-cake–Crown Royal combo to be served later in the evening.

It was a ritual: every Friday night I had dinner at my parents' house. As soon as it was over, I'd kiss Mom and Dad goodbye and leave. Usually I left before the guests arrived but tonight I was hanging around, sipping a beer, killing time before meeting some pals.

I was in the den watching the Tigers take on the Yankees. It was a cool May evening, early in the season, the windows were open, and I could hear the cars pulling into the driveway. My parents' friends were arriving for Shabbos poker.

The players were Holocaust survivors. Four or five couples. My mother and father weren't concentration camp survivors, but they were of that vintage and lucky enough to have gotten out of Poland just before the war started. They made it to Palestine, and stayed there long enough for it to become Israel, then capitulated to relatives' pleas and came to the United States.

Their guests were all damaged one way or another. Each bore the emotional and physical scars of nightmares in the German concentration camps and postwar displaced persons' camps. And, as was the case with my parents, each had lost someone in the war, often more than one someone. Some had lost children. But now they were in America. Rebuilding families. Working. Making money, or trying to. And playing poker every Friday night at my parents' house, laughing, swearing, arguing until two or three in the morning. Sometimes they died playing. Like the night David Goldstein had a heart attack and collapsed in the kitchen after drawing a seven of spades for an inside straight. My mother scrubbed his chair at least three times with Clorox.

“Who’s winning, Hershel?” asked a thick accented voice.

I looked up. Joe Burton né Yosef Burstein was standing in the doorway, a half-empty shot glass in hand, and watching me watch Mickey Lolich strike out Thurman Munson.

“One-zip Tigers, second inning. I didn’t know you like baseball.”

“Sometimes. I don’t understand it too good, but I like to see it.”

I nodded.

As couples came in, they stopped in the den to say hello and make small talk. All of them were my clients. I did their wills, took care of their traffic tickets, incorporated their businesses—any

legal matter that reared its head. “How you doin’, Hershel?” “How’s the law business?” “I gotta call you to write a will.” “Any interesting cases, boychick? I maybe got something for you.” “You got a girlfriend, or are you still playing around? You know, my cousin’s daughter’s in town. A real *sheyneh meyd*. Interested?”

Soon enough they drifted to the dining room, greeting each other in Yiddish and broken English, with occasional smatterings of Polish, Russian, or German thrown in. They’d talk about their week. Their kids. Their *tsuris*. My mother taking orders for refreshments—“You’ll have some cake, cookies, rugelach? A coffee, maybe tea?” My father pouring shots for the men and even a couple of the women—“A schnapps for you maybe?” Everyone lighting up cigarettes, the occasional cigar. Soon the dining room would be in a haze. “Open another window,” someone would yell.

There were always too many people for poker, so one or two sat out every hand. They played for nickels and dimes. A quarter was a big bet. Apparently Burton was in no hurry to ante up. I smiled as he parked on the sofa next to me and settled in.

“So, what’s new, Hershel? Oh ho! Look on this—a homer! Who hit that?”

“Murcer. It’s tied up.”

I never knew what to talk about with my parents’ friends. Sure, we’d discuss any legal issues they had, and there were the routine how-are-yous and what’s-new probes, but even though I’d

known them my whole life, I found them difficult to talk to. The survivors were private. Most of them weren't really talkers. They didn't want to rehash their pasts, and conversation focused on their card games, what they were doing these days, and a little gossip. They didn't trust the future enough to talk about big plans. Almost everything was present tense.

"You're not playing tonight?" I asked.

"In a minute," he said. "Sonia's playing now, warming up my seat. I'll go in soon."

We sat quietly as the ball game continued. It was the bottom of the third inning when Burton turned to me and whispered, "I heard you're thinking about getting a German car, yes?"

"What?" I asked. "Who told you that?"

"Your father said you were looking at a Mercedes-Benz. You making so much money?"

"I'm just looking."

"But a German car, Hershel? Why? It's an embarrassment to your family."

"Whoa, Mr. Burton. Like I said, just looking."

"Don't do it. Your father is very upset with you."

“He hasn’t said a word to me.”

“Of course not, he wants you to be happy. And if buying a Mercedes-Benz from that bunch of Nazis will make you happy, then he’s not going to complain.”

I was stunned — surprised that my father had confided in Burton but not spoken to me.

“Look, Mr. Burton, I understand your point, but it’s not the same company it was during the war. It’s different people running the place, a different generation. I even called some of our family in Israel for their opinion. My uncle there, my dad’s age, said Germany is being very good to Israel these days, and it’s a good car. If you can afford it, he said, buy it.”

“So a generation with a guilty conscience for a shameful past makes nice with Israel and all is forgotten and forgiven? Hershey, *yungele*, you know better. A change of faces doesn’t mean a change of heart. An apology is not always sincere.”

“Mr. Burton—”

“So you give your money, the same money I gave you for writing my will and Sonia’s will, to the children of the Mercedes *chayas* that helped kill our families? The company used slave labor. Guess from where. The camps! The company forced them to build the weapons the Nazis used against Americans. Nice company, huh? And don’t forget, everyone in this house tonight is your

client. You think they would be happy to know that the money they received in reparations and gave you to pay for your work will now go back to Germany? You want to reward the Germans for their crimes? This is a betrayal. Listen to me, you're a fine lawyer, you got a little gelt, good for you! You're young and you want to show the world who you are — fine, why not? But choose a Cadillac, a Coupe de Ville. A Lincoln. A Chrysler. Don't be a schmuck. Be a *macher*, not a *schvitzer*."

I stared at him, astonished at how he'd worked himself up. I shouldn't have been. Unasked-for advice was a staple in my parents' world of friends. Everyone had an opinion, and was always ready to share it—forcefully. "I'll take that under advisement," I said, struggling to stay cool.

He nodded, assuming I'd take his advice. "Smart boy." Then he leaned over, changed gears, and whispered, "You heard about this movie, *Deep Throat*?"

What? My antenna went up. *Deep Throat*? What the hell? Talk about a change of subject, a major non-sequitur. Now he was being my buddy? Sure, I'd heard about it. Who hadn't? But why was he asking? Where did this come from? Was he finished with the car lecture? Could I breathe a sigh of relief?

"Uh, yeah, I've heard of it."

"What do you know about it?" he asked.

“Well, it’s X-rated, I know that.” Where was this going? I was curious, wary, and vaguely uncomfortable.

“Did you see it?”

My antenna went higher. Why was he asking? In fact, I had seen it. A group of us—guys and girls—had all seen *Deep Throat* when it was released. It was the emancipation of porn and we celebrated it.

But the survivors never talked about sex or anything coming close to it—at least not to me. In our family, we never talked about sex either. It might have been lurking in the household, in the air, waiting for an opportunity to pop up and become a subject of conversation. But it never did. Not when I was a kid. Not when I was an adult. I never had “the talk.” My mother did attempt it once, but I ran away. I was ten and clearly not ready or interested in having that conversation, least of all with my mother. I thought sex was something nice people didn’t do. Certainly my parents didn’t.

I never knew about puberty, the physical changes I would undergo, until they finally happened. I certainly knew nothing about the changes girls went through. Anything I finally learned, I learned on the streets. Or in Bobby Rubin’s garage—we would go there after Hebrew School—where he had a bunch of girlie magazines tucked away under paint cans and wood scraps, safely out of his mother’s sight. That’s what sex was—exciting but dirty. Hush, hush.

When I finally grew up a little and learned that sex was not a dirty thing, I had to wonder why my parents and their friends didn't talk about sex. Maybe because their parents had never talked about it with them? My father came from an ultra-Orthodox family, and I couldn't imagine my grandfather broaching the subject. My mother? She blushed when chorus girls in skimpy costumes appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Maybe my mother and father had higher priorities than talking about sex? They and their friends were hard-working immigrants who didn't always have time for their kids. We were left on our own. Sex in Yiddish or in heavily accented English? It didn't exist. But possibly it did. Maybe I just didn't know because I never asked. Maybe I thought my parents were so out of it that sex was beyond their ken. I was naive. But I did know about *Deep Throat*.

"Uh, yes, I did," I replied to Burton. But I was wary. For some reason, even though I was an independent working adult in my late twenties, I didn't want him to mention this to my parents. Did I think they shouldn't be exposed to the idea that their kid knew about sex? That their kid even practiced it when the opportunity arose? (Never as often as he would've liked, of course.)

"A full house!" I heard my mother scream from the dining room.

"Not good enough, I got four tens!" yelled Sonia.

Moans and groans from the other players.

"So did I," Burton said, his voice still hushed. "I saw it."

“Yeah?”

Now I was curious—and surprised. He had my full attention. Loliche would still be on the mound for a few more innings. Survivors going to *Deep Throat*? It was difficult to imagine. But then, why not? Burton was a carpenter. Strong, fit, a *shtarker*, and a good-looking man, who, as I thought about it, probably had as healthy a sexual appetite as anyone. Why shouldn't he be interested in sexual fun and games? His wife Sonia, in her mid-fifties — though cursed with hand tremors and a constant neck twitch that still persisted, courtesy of camp doctors and their experiments — was erotically *zaftig* and had incredibly sensual lips that suggested certain possibilities that had probably caused a few men to have their shorts tighten. I had to admit she had generated some fantasies in my own mind.

“When did you go?” I asked.

“A couple weeks ago. A few of us went, a Saturday night out—you know the Rosenblooms and Leo and Lena Bernstein? After dinner at the Chop House we decided to go to a movie.”

“My parents, too?”

“No, no. They wasn't interested. You remember, they walked out on Bette Midler. Too vulgar, they said. You think they would see *Deep Throat*?”

“No, I guess not,” I replied, relieved. For some reason, connecting sex and my parents still embarrassed and disconcerted me. A therapist’s dream.

“It was crowded at the show. A big line to get in. After all, it’s the seventies, everyone is liberated!”

Clearly he wanted to talk about it.

“We could hardly find seats together, finally we did. It felt funny to be in the movie house.”

“How?”

“We were all dressed up from dinner. All six of us. You know, Saturday night, a fancy restaurant, and then a dirty movie. We drove up in Leo’s purple Fleetwood, such an evening. Nobody else was dressed up.”

“So, what did you think?” I was trying hard to be nonchalant, but my curiosity was edging dangerously close to prying.

“Oh yes, very nice, very funny. Nice close-ups. Very nice close-ups, and very exciting.”

Oh, what the hell, I thought, I might as well ask. “Did Sonia like it?”

“Well, yes and no.” He hesitated. “You see, Hershel, the movie house was very warm, so when we sat down we took off our coats, let them slide off of us, and sat on them. We didn’t know the coat collars had draped over the back of the seats. Sonia got very excited by the movie. And so did the man sitting behind her.”

“Oh?” I took a swig of beer.

“Yes, when it was over and we were leaving, the man behind her hurried out. Right away we found out why he left so quickly. When I put my arm around Sonia to help her with her coat, I saw that the man had made love to her fur coat. Oy, messy.”

It was all I could do to keep from laughing and sending a mouthful of beer spraying across the room. I swallowed hard and tried to come up with a response.

“You know how much it costs to dry clean a mink?” Burton asked.

Not a good idea to take a fur to an X-rated movie, I thought. Especially when you can just wear a raincoat.

“I’ll know for next time,” Burton said as he got up and headed to the dining room. Then he winked, “They have a new movie starting this week.”

On television, Willie Horton had just smashed a three-run homer. The Tigers were in front but I was still focusing on Burton, flashing on his and Sonia's sex life and wondering if their passion rang out in English or Yiddish.

By then it was time for me to go. My friends would be waiting. As I said my good-nights and walked out, it occurred to me that I'd be back next Friday, and so would Burton. There might be another comment from him about the Mercedes, and possibly a review of another X-rated movie. Maybe he had a point about the Mercedes. I admired the way he had put me on edge about the car and then slipped into a dialogue about the movie. Since the survivors never talked about sex, I realized there was a whole side of my parents and their friends that I knew nothing about. Then I wondered if I really wanted to know about that side. No, not yet. If ever.