

## Acts of Kindness

In the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, the intersection of Kingston and Eastern Parkway is rarely without congestion; there is always heavy traffic, people rushing about their business, and commuters hurrying to and from the #3 subway. This is especially true in the summer when people can linger on the street and catch up with friends and neighbors. At this point, Eastern Parkway has double lanes in each direction for through traffic, wide pedestrian islands on both sides with benches and trees, and then single lanes for local traffic with parking at the curb. Apartment buildings and stores are stepped back from the sidewalk, many with small plots of grass. For several blocks in either direction the Parkway separates an essentially Jewish side of Lubavitch Hassidim from a mix of minorities on the other side.

One afternoon at four o'clock an old man with a long white beard carefully crosses the local service lane to the pedestrian island. He's leaning on his cane and crumpled plastic bags are lodged under his free hand. He threads his way to the main intersection and waits for the traffic lights to recycle before attempting to cross the four main lanes. By the time he reaches the pedestrian strip on the other side, the light has changed again. A few cars finish turning left from Kingston but he patiently waits once again for the lights to recycle before crossing, refraining from joining the others who pass him on either side.

Arturo drops his cigarette, grinding the butt in front of him, points at the old man, and says to Porto, "What's he doing coming over here. He should crawl back into 770 where all them Jews crawl out like ants. Man's going to get hurt coming on this side of the Parkway. Hey, when Hoso and Rami get here, we can take bets if a car clips him crossing back over."

Porto pats his belly. "Sure, loser buys some donuts as soon as you figure out what we're betting on." He thinks for a while. "Does it count if I trip him?"

They both lean back against the apartment building as if to keep it from moving across to the Jewish side of the street.

The old man smiles as he approaches the entrance of the building, turns, and bends over to pick up two loose fliers and a sheet of newsprint. He straightens up with difficulty and leans his cane against his hip, retrieving a plastic bag from under his arm. He flaps it open and pushes the litter in.

Arturo scratches his head, opens his mouth, and then watches as the man picks up candy wrappers and a discarded can stuck under a fence.

Arturo looks at Porto. "You seeing this? The guy's crazy. All bets off."

The tail from his faded white shirt has come free along with the ritual undergarment. The fringes reach below his knees and the black stripes running from side to side look like asphalt streets bleached by the summer sun.

Hoso and Rami come around the corner; knuckles are tapped. Rami asks, "What's happening?" Arturo answers, "*Nada*, just this old guy picking up papers."

Hoso takes a dirty tissue out of his pocket, blows his nose, whistles, and throws it in the direction of the old man. "Hey, man, here's another for you."

The next afternoon, it's Hoso and Rami slouching at the corner, watching traffic and people going about their business. Rami elbows Hoso. "Looks like it's that crazy old man again, must not be 'nuf garbage on his side of Eastern."

Eventually the man makes his way across and when he starts down the street, they step in front of him. Hoso says. "You back again? Maybe spying; you some kind of narc?"

Rami adds, “No garbage on your side?”

He looks up his eyes straining through cataracts, and answers, “Yes, but this is also part of the neighborhood. Be nice if both sides were clean.”

Rami and Hoso turn and watch as he picks up the papers blown against the side of the building. They spot Arturo and Porto further down the block. Porto is chewing on a candy bar and hesitates before throwing the wrapper in front of the Jew.

The late-comers stand at the corner of the building. Arturo nods. “The old guy got a problem.” Porto concurs. “Less a problem now. Tossed him a warm piece.” Rama jokes, “He’s too old for any piece.” Hoso adds, “Nah, never too old to shoot someone, they get in the way.”

A few days later all four are on the corner and watch as the old man crosses with a young boy. The boy is holding his hand, carrying the bags.

Arturo steps away from the building and asks, “Hey, ain’t the kid too young to learn your business?”

Rami moves onto Kingston, steps in front of them. “Why you bring him here?”

The old man smiles. “Good questions. It’s never too young to learn kindness. And kindness is everyone’s business.” Rami moves aside and the old man and boy move on to the next building where they begin picking up litter.

Next week, midweek, it’s Hoso who approaches the old man; this time he is alone. “Hey, your kindness, ain’t that for dogs?”

The old man looks up, and up again. Hoso’s 6’2” and his hair is coiled on top of his head in a bun. “Yes, but we also learn that the *essence* is in the doing.”

Porto joins the conversation. “That some kind of perfume?”

“No, it’s not that kind of essence. Essence is what makes a man, on the inside. Cleaning up makes for a better place, and I hope it helps me.”

“Really?”

Arturo remembers one of their previous conversations. “Hey, bet the dude’s got a piece at home, knocked off the competition and comes to this side of Eastern to work off the bad karma.”

Porto looks at Arturo and says, “You going with that karma shit it!” He turns to the old man. “OK. What’s the going rate for stiff’s – fill three bags?”

They step aside and the old man walks halfway down the street before they see him bend over.

On his way back, Hoso straightens up and asks, “You getting paid for this, man – by the hour or by the bag, maybe? Got enuf crap on this street to make you rich, you think? That why you do it?”

“No, a better place is reward enough.”

Rami, short and skinny with a faint moustache across his lip, shoulders past Hoso. “You’re really one crazy fucker. You learn that from a book?”

“Books and from the Rebbe.”

The old man steps aside so as not to block the foot traffic. Arturo, still leaning against the building, observes, “That dude been dead for years – who’re you kidding? You got him on ice in that basement across the street?”

“No, he’s buried in Montefiore Cemetery in Queens. You can visit his grave if you wish to pray or ask a question.”

Rami’s incredulous. “You just hit your head or something?”

“Or you can come visit across the street, at 770. You don’t have to be Jewish. Sometimes I study there.”

The four young men look at each other. Arturo answers for them, “Nah, don’t think so.”

Porto adds, “That kindness could be contagious!” He pauses, “Hey, kindness: I kinda like that. Maybe you got a Jackson you can loan me?”

The man transfers the full bags to the hand holding the cane, laughs as he scratches his head, looks up to the sky, and says in a solemn tone. “Next time, I bring more bags.”

Hoso’s the first to laugh. “Man got you good.” The others join in, Porto makes a face and smiles, then reaches out and shakes his hand. “That’s good, old man, that’s a good burn.”

The next time the boy comes along. He’s carrying the bags except for a white one under the old man’s arm. When they’re finally across the street, the old man smiles and approaches Porto. “I want to apologize for the other day. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I’m sorry. We learn that embarrassing someone in public is like killing him.” He gives Porto the white bag. “There’s a twenty-dollar bill inside.”

Porto takes the bag and finds the Jackson inside. Meanwhile the boy and old man have continued down the street.

The young men wait against the building and an hour later watch the man and the boy struggle against the rush hour flow of pedestrians. Arturo steps in front of them. “Nuts – you Jews are nuts, that’s why you get your asses kicked all the time.” Then he thinks for a moment and says, “Here, you give me them bags. I got us a dumpster in back of this building. Keep our non-Jewish junk where it belongs.”

Weeks go by, sometimes the old man comes alone, sometimes with the young boy, always with the bags.

Hoso asks, “Where you get all those bags?”

“There’re not that many. I empty them in the dumpsters and reuse them. Some have become my good friends, been with me for weeks.”

One time when it had started to drizzle, Arturo found the old man a block away. “It’s going to pour, old man. Why don’t you come back later?”

“There’s still a lot of litter and the bags aren’t full.”

Arturo looks around, doesn’t see any of his friends. “Why don’t you give them to me, I’ll finish; wouldn’t want you to get sick because of me. And don’t worry, I’ll empty them and have them ready next time you cross the street; Hoso told me.”

It doesn’t take long for Arturo to fill the bags. He’s emptying them in the dumpster behind the corner building and is spotted by Hoso. “Hey, Arto – you nuts? Old man put you on the payroll?”

“Nah, it started to rain, didn’t want him to get sick. No big deal.”

The next day they’re hanging at the corner, talking, Hoso giving Arturo grief.

Arturo lets him run on for five minutes before holding up his hand. “Not saying nothing, but I slept solid last night. In the morning there were strange dreams, I was back in school, learning something. I rolled over, smelled coffee, must have been my mom but then I was back asleep. Dreamt I came down stairs, muttering I was late for work and there was Angie, my kid on her hip, handing me a cup of coffee. Then I woke up when some jerks started banging on the dumpsters.”

Porto says, “Always told you they’ve been cutting drugs into the weed. Legalize the shit. Going to get me one of them t-shirts.”

Two days later, Rami and Hosho see the old man on the far island. They push off the building, Rami making a loud whistle. Hosho holds up his hand and they both thread their way through traffic to the island where the old man remains standing.

Rami announces, “We decided to help you on the Jew-side, gonna see if your garbage is circumscribed.” Hosho laughs. “Nah, didn’t want any of the bros see us working with an old Jew.”

“I understand. Don’t worry. People are people and we’ve plenty of garbage here, both the circumcised and circumscribed kind. Thank you both for helping. And you know, it’s even more important that we’re all working together.”

The next day Rami and Hosho get to their corner early. “Hoz, maybe there’s a kind of drug in those bags. Had crazy dreams last night like Arturo – going to art school, making some beautiful pictures. Fuck that graffiti shit! Maybe big murals, like we saw in the library that one trip.

“Hey, you have dreams?”

Hosho squeezes him against the wall and grunts, “I ain’t saying.”

The next time the old man crosses the street, the four young men approach him and ask if they could look inside 770. Porto jokes, “Just to see there’s no body, you know.”

The old man looks into their eyes before answering. “Yes, to start understanding each other there should be fewer secrets. The litter can wait.”

When they cross the parkway, the young men feel as if they’re floating on air. They walk down the steps and enter the basement, surprised by the chaos inside. Boys, young men, middle-aged men, old men, all grabbing prayer books from lockers or shelves and forming groups to pray. The old man points to a curtain and a chair in the corner. “That’s where we keep the Torah

Scrolls and that's where Rabbi Schneerson used to pray." The four men step further into the large room and look around.

Arturo leads them back to the old man and they go back outside. "It's just a big basement with a lot of benches and narrow tables. Enough noise so you can barely hear each other."

The old man smiles. "I think when they pray, they hope more that God hears them. But, you're right. There's probably too much talking. When the Rebbe was there, then it was quiet. And sometimes, on special occasions he would talk for hours, about the kindness I was telling you about. And after, perhaps he would give little cakes to everyone, hand them over himself. Or other times he would give a dollar bill, again to each person, one at a time, and ask people to do charity. The dollar, it should be multiplied."

As they cross Eastern Parkway the old man begins to sing, *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar me'od – gesher tsar me'od*. The four of them stare at him, no one else seems to notice. The old man's eyes are closed. They continue across the wide boulevard. *Veha'ikar, veha'ikar – lo lefached klal*.

When they're all standing in front of the corner building, he sings the song in English. *The whole world is like a very narrow bridge, a very narrow bridge, and the main thing, the main thing, is to never be afraid. The whole world is like a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is to never be afraid.*

He explains. "Life is difficult for everyone. There are always new challenges, like crossing Eastern Parkway – not such a narrow bridge, and going into 770. We shouldn't worry. Life is tough; it's hard to do the right thing, to show a little kindness. We should not be afraid."



The next time he sees them he says. “My young grandson says you can hear the song on Youtube, whatever that is. He wrote it down.” He starts to give a slip of paper to Arturo and a wind comes up and blows it out of his hands down Eastern Parkway.

The last week of August and the first week of September set record temperatures in the city. The four men find cooler places to meet and don’t know if the old man is still picking up litter and filling his plastic bags.

Eventually, Arturo and Rami return to school, earning their GED. They continue in apprenticeship programs. Hosoo moves to Chicago and works with an uncle painting commercial buildings. Occasionally, while walking they bend down and pick up a piece of litter and think of the old man. Unfortunately, Porto got involved in dealing drugs and eventually disappeared.