

An extract from

Disobedience

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It's difficult to work out the meaning of life in Hendon. I mean, it's difficult to work it out for yourself, rather than allowing other people to tell you. Because in Hendon there are plenty of people just dying to explain the meaning of life to you. I guess that's true in New York too, but in New York everyone seems to disagree with everyone else about what the meaning of life *is*. In Hendon, at least the Hendon I grew up in, everything faced in one direction, there was nowhere to get a grip. You need that disagreement, we all do, so that we can realize that the world isn't smooth and even, not everyone agrees with everyone else. You need a window into another world to work out what you think of your own.

For me, growing up, it was magazines. I used to sneak into WH Smith on my way home from the Sara Rifka Hartog Memorial Day School and read magazines. It didn't much matter what. I'd pick something at random off the shelf and read it. I didn't properly understand the differences between them. I couldn't have told you about their target audiences or demographics. I read *Loaded* and *Vogue*, *Woman's Own* and the *NME*, *PC World* and *The Tablet*. In my mind, they became jumbled, those scraps of other lives. There seemed to be so many different things to know about: music, films, TV, fashion, celebrities and sex.

These days, I buy magazines all the time; I go into Barnes and Noble, choose one I want and take it home. There are stacks of them all over the

house, covering half the surfaces, and yeah, I know I'm proving something to myself, but it's something worth proving, so I go on accumulating piles of glossy paper.

Strangely, though, I find there's no magazine called *Death*. You'd think one of them would at least run an article. Some helpful household magazine could do a feature: 'Homemade coffins: a cheaper alternative'. *Cosmo* could do 'Grieving: do it better, faster and more often'. Even a *Vogue* special on funeral outfits would be some help. But no, nothing. It's like this essential feature of human beings simply doesn't exist in the full-colour magazine world.

So, there's always therapy. I thought of calling Dr Feingold, but I didn't want to listen to her answers masquerading as questions. Not then anyway.

I thought of saying OK, he's dead, but I never liked the old sod anyway. I'll call some friends, go dancing, get drunk.

And then I thought of the garments that they would be dressing my father in: white linen with closed arms and legs. Every human being, whoever you are, whoever you had been, gets the same. And I thought: in my father's house, they would know what to do. In my father's house, they wouldn't need any magazine to tell them.

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So, this is what you do, this is what I ought to be doing: the Jewish mourning ritual for close relatives – parents, children, siblings, husband or wife. In the first week, you tear your clothes, you don't cut your hair or wash in hot water and you cover your mirrors. (Because this is no time for vanity.) You sit on a low stool and you don't leave the house, unless you really have to. (Because grief needs space and time.) And you don't listen to music. (Because music will remind you that, somewhere in the world, someone is happy.)

That's the first week. Then in the first thirty days, you can leave your house and wash, but you don't listen to music or buy new clothes or attend parties. Then after the first thirty days, but still in the first year, you don't buy new clothes.

And at the end of the first year, they set the tombstone at the grave and you go, and you pray. And every year from then on, you light a candle on the anniversary of the death. It's very orderly, very precise. I could map out the whole of my next year, or next month. It's supposed to make everything simpler.

Except that, for me, now, it makes nothing simpler. Because this stuff only works if everyone else knows what you're doing. It works if you're sitting on your low stool, in your torn clothes, and your friends and family come to visit. They bring food, they talk in low voices, they pray. But I'm here, and I'm not that any more. And somehow it wouldn't work to call up a friend and say, 'I would now like to participate in the ancient Jewish grieving ritual. For this, I will need some volunteers.'

I sat for a while. I thought about what would be happening now, in England. I thought about the end of the world, and what's supposed to come after. I thought about eternal life in the next world. I couldn't bear that any more. I fished a pair of nail scissors out of my make-up bag and sawed through the hem of the jogging top I was wearing. It ripped with a fairly satisfying noise, scattering little grey fibres in the air. It felt good, I'll admit it. It felt like I was *doing* something, which I suppose is the point. And then it felt like nothing again, like I'd ruined a perfectly useful item of clothing.

So I called Scott. Late at night, but hey, he did always say, 'Call me any time.' 'If you really need to,' he'd add. 'If you have to.'

I called him, not because I need him, or want him back, or any of that bullshit, but because I knew, I just knew, that he'd understand. While the phone was ringing, I almost convinced myself to hang up, because maybe even calling made me weak, when I should be trying to be strong. And then he answered.

I said, 'Hi, it's me.'

He said, 'Oh. OK.'

'Scott, I wouldn't call, only . . .'

I paused for dramatic effect. I did. I admit it. I paused so he'd think I was going to tell him I loved him, or wanted him back. So that he'd feel

really lousy, really small-minded and petty when I said, 'I've just heard, my father's died.'

An intake of breath.

'I'm so sorry.' He sounded sorry. A pause, then, 'I'll come over.'

'No. No, you shouldn't. I'll be fine.'

'I'll come.'

'Are you sure? Can you get away?'

'Yes,' he said loudly, 'yes, I'll come now and take that conference call.'

I remember one drunken evening in some bar downtown. It was a team-building night, so it was the six of us: Anna, the trainee, big eyes, short skirts; Martin, account manager, hoping Scott would go home, so he'd be alpha male; Bernice, quiet, husband calls at least twice a day; Carla, the boss, wool suit, wanting to be generous, but looking nervously at the menu every time one of us ordered a drink; and Scott, the big boss, fraternizing with the troops. And me.

Martin, as usual, was trying to put his arm round Anna and talking too loudly. He stabbed the table with his finger and said, 'You know what the problem with this country is?'

We shook our heads. Bernice and I exchanged a look.

'Too. Much. Religion. That's the problem. It's the religious rednecks, in Iowa, who are destroying this country. With censorship. That's what's ripping this country apart: censorship. You know, Ronit, you guys have got the right idea in Europe.' He pronounced my name wrong, as usual, putting the stress on the first syllable, Ronit, instead of the second, Ronit.

'Oh yes?' I said.

'Yeah. God. Is. Dead. I mean, what's the point, right? Am I right?'

I kept silent.

Martin looked around the group and repeated, 'Am I right, guys?'

Carla glanced at Scott. He gave her an encouraging smile. It was his I'm-here-for-you-as-a-mentor-but-you-have-to-deal-with-your-own-team smile. She said, 'Well, I guess it does seem kind of irrelevant . . .'

'Yeah!' said Martin. 'Yeah! I mean who the hell remembers the

catechism, or the twelve apostles, or . . .’

‘Or the Ten Commandments,’ Carla chimed in.

‘Yeah, who the hell knows what the Ten Commandments are anyway? Aren’t they like, don’t litter, don’t smoke and Buy American, or something?’

Everyone round the table laughed. Even quiet little Bernice giggled silently, shoulders shaking. Except Scott, I remember.

Anna, finally catching up to the conversation, said, ‘Yeah, I bet not a person in this room knows the Ten Commandments.’

I could have laughed then. I could have faked a little mirth. Martin would have gone on to some other rant. But I said, ‘I do.’

Silence. They looked at me. It wasn’t *absolutely* the best thing to say in a downtown bar on a Friday night.

Carla said, ‘Bet you don’t.’

I held up my fingers to count as I said, ‘1. I am the Lord your God, 2. You shall have no other God before me, 3. Do not take the Lord’s name in vain, 4. Honour your father and your mother, 5. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, 6. Don’t murder, 7. Don’t commit adultery, 8. Don’t steal, 9. Don’t bear false witness, 10. Don’t covet.’

They looked at me, open-mouthed. Scott’s eyes met mine, a good blue, a bright, good look of respect, and I thought: I should have done it in Hebrew.

Martin said, ‘Yeah, well, who keeps them anyway?’

And, I must admit, he had a point. Because it was that night that Scott offered to share a cab home with me.

I looked around the apartment, trying to remember if any of the things belonged to him, or to the time we were together. And would it be better or worse if I put them away? Better that he shouldn’t think I was keeping reminders of him around. Worse that he might notice their absence and realize I’d put them away. Crap.

I stood, holding a wooden cat he’d bought me, wondering what to do with it. It had been a make-up gift. He’d made one of his irritating remarks

about how women shouldn't live alone. I'd said something like, oh yeah? And he said, yeah, specially not Jewish women. You guys get mean. You should at least have a cat or something. And I said, we get *mean*? I told him he was a self-hating Jew, and he said, show me a Jew who isn't, and then I threw him out.

A couple of nights later I came home late from the gym to find him skulking in the lobby of my building, holding a cat-shaped parcel. That was the first time he stayed all night. I asked him how he could, and he said his wife had taken the kids to her parents in Connecticut; they visit her family, go to church, country stuff, he said. I hit him and said, church! You married a shiksa?! And he said, you can talk. And I said, I am a completely different situation. And he said, oh really, and he leaned in, and I could smell his skin: cedarwood, linen and lemons, filling my nostrils.

Afterwards, I told him that my father would want me to try to win him, Scott, back for the faith. He said, wouldn't he want me to win *you* back? I didn't answer that.

I was thinking about this, and about the smell of his skin, and the size of his hands, which were far too big, ludicrously large, clown-hands, when the buzzer sounded, and it seemed like only half a second at most before he came through the door, and I realized I was still holding the stupid wooden cat.

I put it down on the hall table and said, 'Hi.'

And he said, 'Hi. Should I be wishing you a long life, or something?'

'You can if you like. But I kind of thought you wished I was dead.'

He ran his hand through his hair, looking tired and irritated.

'I don't wish you were dead. Christ, Ronit, why are you always so . . .'

'Annoying?'

'Defensive.'

I don't know, I nearly said, I can't *think* why I'd need to defend myself from you.

Instead I dug my nails into the palm of my hand – hard, really hard – and said, 'I'm glad you came.'

He opened his arms wide and hugged me. I didn't do anything. We

stood like that, in the hallway, him with his arms round me, for a long time.

'How long can you stay?'

He took a breath and let it out. He bit his bottom lip; that thing he always does when deciding whether or not to tell the truth. He said, 'I told Cheryl I'd be gone a while. I'm on a conference call with Tokyo. I guess I should be back before dawn. Say, two a.m.?'

'Can you make it four?'

He looked at me, calculating probabilities. How angry would I be if he said no? What might I do? Would Cheryl be asleep by two anyway? How much sleep did he need before tomorrow?

'Why?' he said.

'It's just, the funeral will be over in England by four, our time.

That's all.'

I'm pathetic, I thought, just pathetic.

'OK,' he said, 'four.'

It was awkward. We stood in silence for such a long time that I seriously considered saying, hey, how 'bout them Yankees? Or talking about politics or even about work, because we never had a problem when there were things to talk about. Or things to do. The problem was when we were both quiet and he started to get that look on his face like he was thinking about his wife.

We sat on the couch, almost touching but not quite, and after a little while that started to get to me because I noticed how we were sitting in exactly the same posture. So I offered to make some coffee, except I realized as he was accepting that I knew how he took his coffee and the idea of making it how I knew he liked it seemed so intensely personal that I thought I'd rather open a vein and bleed into the cup.

So I said something lame like, I'm not sure I have any coffee, I'll check.

He gave me this really weird smile and said, 'You? Not have coffee? Things have changed around here.'

He said it like he was offering me a gift.

I didn't say anything. I walked into the kitchen. And that was the point when I thought, what the hell am I doing? I held on to the enamel of the sink and looked around at the food that I know isn't kosher and the dishes that haven't been kept separate and the appliances that I use on Shabbat. And I had a sudden dizzy sensation that none of these things belonged to me. I felt like I'd marched in off the street into the wrong apartment and I'd never met that man sitting on the couch before. It was all like something I'd read in a magazine a long time ago: alien, unfamiliar and terrifying. And a little voice tickled in my ear, saying, well, this is what you get.

I knew that voice.

It said it again: this is what you get, Ronit. All you have for comfort is a married man. All you have for strength is a job. What did you think was going to happen?

And I gripped the sink tighter, drew a breath and said, I'm not listening.

I didn't realize I'd said anything out loud until Scott said, 'What was that?'

I said, 'What d'you think about my going back to England?'

'What d'you mean, what do I think?'

'I mean, do you think I should go?'

'Why the hell not? You've got the German project under control, haven't you?'

I'd forgotten this about him; the tendency to relate all life decisions back to work. I wanted to shout, you idiot, that's not what I meant, and the anger snapped me back into focus and I remembered that I was here, now, in the middle of my own life.

I said, 'Yes, it's under control. That's not the point.'

I think he said something then, but the kettle started to boil, so I didn't hear it.

As I walked out with the coffee I said, 'Look, I don't have to go.

I mean, what's there for me?'

He looked at me.

I said, 'It's not like I have family there. No one's really expecting me.'

'Ronit, your father's dead. You have to go back to England.'

'I don't have to do anything. There's nothing I want . . .'

And I stopped then, because I realized there was one thing, just one actual thing, that I did still want from England. The candlesticks: my mother's tall silver candlesticks, sinuous, wreathed in flowers and foliage. The candlesticks I never could have asked my father for all these years, because he wouldn't have wanted them to reside in my heathen home. It would be good, somehow, to have them here.

I almost said that to Scott, but then I thought, actually, why do you deserve to know this? The time's past now for you to know this sort of thing about me, so I stopped talking and looked down. Scott took my hand, because clearly he thought he'd understood something, and said, 'Ronit, will she be there, that girl who you . . .'

I smiled, because he couldn't have been more wrong, and said, 'Esti? No, I don't think so. She'll be long gone by now. She was worse than me, back in the day.'

He smiled. I smiled. We sat and drank coffee, just like old friends.

Later on, we talked. About England, about my dad. I tried to explain how different Jews are in Britain to America. I didn't get very far, but it was good to be talking like that, like it was business. That's one thing about Scott – he makes everything seem simple, because in his mind everything *is*.

He said, 'he was some big-deal Rabbi, your dad? Wrote a book, founded a synagogue. I guess all that'll be closing down now, huh?'

I shook my head. 'Absolutely not. If I know that community –' I looked at my watch – 'they'll already be talking about who's going to replace my father.'

'Now? When he's not even buried?'

'Oh yes, especially now. This is the crucial moment. They'll want it easy and smooth. You see –' I leaned back in my chair, relaxing now that I had some lecturing to do – 'the dynamics of synagogues are really very simple,

like the dynamics of monarchies. It's all about succession. The simpler the succession, the happier everyone is.'

'So will they have chosen a successor already?'

'Probably. Or at least the board, which means the money, will have someone in mind.' I looked at the ceiling for a moment, thinking back. 'My knowledge isn't as current as it used to be, of course, but I'm guessing my cousin Dovid's a frontrunner. Although . . . he's not that confident. Doesn't really have the va va voom for the job.'

'A *Rabbi* needs va va voom?'

I smiled. 'You know what I mean. Charisma. People skills. Good speaking voice. That sort of thing.' I took another gulp of coffee.

He looked at me. He said, 'Well, you have charisma, people skills, a good speaking voice. Why can't *you* be the new Rabbi?'

I rolled my eyes. 'I'm a woman. It's that simple.'

He looked at me with a sort of smile, half-sympathetic, half-amused. Suddenly, I didn't want to talk about this any more. And after all, what had I called him for in the middle of the night? It wasn't to grieve with, it wasn't to talk over memories of my father or sit on a low stool.

I said, 'Look, do you know what I need right now?'

'What?'

I put my hand at that place at the back of his neck where his hair is short soft bristles and pulled him towards me. And because it was easy, I guess, or familiar or just because it put an end to the awkwardness, he kissed me back. He smelled exactly like I remembered, maybe even better. And we fell to doing other easy, familiar, forbidden things.