

Nothing But Love?

By Bryan Schwartzman

“How would it feel to drive an ax through my boss’s skull?” Tony said to the rabbi after a forgettable conversation. “That single violent thought has expelled nearly all other thoughts.”

Tony, an unfashionably bearded, heavy-set man in his 50s, paced the rabbi’s windowless study with a slight limp. He felt like a lame elephant pacing a zoo enclosure. He’d torn his calf along the [Schuylkill](#) River in an ill-fated attempt to take up running. Months of physical therapy hadn’t given him back his natural gait.

“I imagine the murder happening, over and over,” continued Tony.

Despite his relatively recent transition to the world of public relations, he still dressed like a frazzled cub reporter, with a visible coffee stain on his breast pocket.

What he doesn’t tell his ex-wife’s rabbi: in this macabre vision, his boss is wearing a white blouse, her rower’s legs emphasized by a tight skirt and black nylon stockings. She’s eroticized kneeling before him, her hands raised, whimpering and pleading. He takes satisfaction that he finally has the upper hand on the museum director, has control over the woman who holds sway over his waking hours, and gives more orders than his

sergeant at basic training. Then he drives the ax downward, the blunt instrument breaks the surface of her cranium, defiling one of God's creations, releasing membrane and splatter.

The rabbi leaned back in her rolling chair behind her paper-strewn desk, far enough to make Tony feel like a leper. She wore dark-ink jeans and a beige sweater, looking more like a marginally hip English professor than a member of the clergy. It seemed she had nothing in her rabbinic education or experience to draw upon. He knew he'd made a mistake, but saw no way to take back what he'd said.

"Why, are you telling *me* this?" said the first and only Korean-American rabbi Tony had ever met. (She'd been adopted and raised by a Jewish doctor and music teacher and had become something of a darling to the Anglo-Jewish media. A symbol of Jewish diversity.). In a way, they were both outsiders in this synagogue space, though he much more than her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I am happy to meet with you. You are still a member of our temple family, but shouldn't you be talking to a therapist? Look, I don't mind telling you, I've seen a therapist. I've had crippling anxiety and my spiritual practice isn't always enough to help me face it all. It was hard to talk my way into rabbinical school with my history. There's no shame in seeing a therapist. That just might be the best thing for your, umm, problem. I know someone who could really help you identify the source of your frustrations and anxiety. Maybe, and I hope I am not out of line for suggesting this, but maybe medication might help."

His shirt unevenly tucked, his eyes searched the study for something to anchor him in the space. He looked away from her and scanned her somber collection of holy, unfamiliar books. Photos of the rabbi with her bearded husband in locales like Machu Picchu and Angkor Wat did little to lighten or calm his stomach-compressing anxiety. She was no priest, but he might as well have been in the confession booth.

He had first met her a few years earlier when she'd officiated at the Bat Mitzvah his ex-wife had insisted upon for their daughter. At the time, the rabbi had looked to him like a college student, over-eager about meeting all of life's possibilities. But now, her body language, the hint of impatience in her voice, the general weariness in her eyes, projected the impression she was not as excited about being a congregational rabbi as she'd once been.

"I went to a therapist once, a marriage counselor," he said in an amused tone. "Dr. Leahy, a middle-aged woman with this high-pitched nasally voice. The last place I wanted to be after I'd learned Dianne had been fucking her jeweler for three years. But we had Annabelle to think about, and Dianne begs me to go, says we owe it to our daughter to give our marriage a try, says she knows there is still love between us, the possibility for forgiveness. Now, I don't know what I needed forgiveness for, but, you know, I was once a good Catholic boy. Attitudes about divorce die hard, and I didn't know what I wanted yet. I was stunned. And what does the therapist say? *Now Tony, what did you do, or what did you withhold, that led your wife to seek companionship in someone else, to have her needs fulfilled by someone else?* And Dianne chimes in, *yes, Tony, let's talk about all you*

withheld, all the weeks and months that went by when you didn't look at me, all the diapers you didn't change, how you failed to appreciate me in every conceivable way. Let's talk about that, shall we?"

The rabbi twirled her hair and took a nanosecond peak at her smartphone.

“Okay, so I am going to sound like a therapist right now and ask, how did that make you feel? How did you respond?”

“Respond?” Tony said, waving his arms like a baseball manager arguing a call. “Walked out, that’s how I responded. I knew I could never forgive her.”

Strands of black hair descended into her eyes and face and she tossed them aside with the grace of a shot putter. Their eyes met for a few seconds before she broke the gaze.

“You were brought up Catholic, right? Why not go to a priest?” she said. “A priest’s language might have more resonance, might speak to some part of your soul with spiritual yearnings.”

“Did I ever tell you that when I was in high school I’d thought about becoming a priest?” he asked.

“What happened?”

“One day I just stopped believing in it all, just like that,” he said. “I haven’t believed in any of it for years, haven’t gone to confession, taken communion, nothing. It would be the apex of hypocrisy for me to seek solace in the church now.”

Again, what he didn’t say: His moment of atheistic clarity came at 17, minutes after he’d taken the virginity of a 15-year-old Dominican girl who lived a few blocks away in South Philly. It was a kind of anti-epiphany, there’d be no divine punishment for his sin of the flesh. Everything was finite, he realized, human life amounted to little more than microbiology and any meaning or purpose that one could possibly hope to find was relegated to the natural world.

Instead of joining the priesthood, he’d become a reporter; another way of getting people to confess all kinds of things. Early in his career, he covered a case in which a husband murdered his wife in her sleep with an ax. The husband discovered his wife had slept with his own brother, who’d lost the use of his legs, but not of his sexual functions, in the Tet Offensive. Tony had been working the night shift and heard the police call come over the scanner. He’d gotten a detective to let him into the house to see the crime scene and study the ax. Nineteen years later and he still hadn’t gotten that ax out of his head.

“OK, but I just don’t understand, why me?” the rabbi said, imploringly, swiveling in her chair. “Is it just a process of elimination? I mean, to state the obvious, you’re not even Jewish!”

He stroked his beard as if he, too, were a rabbi considering a fine point of Jewish law.

“You know, Dianne insisted that we raise Annabelle Jewish. I didn’t much care one way or the other. Your predecessor, Rabbi Eisenstadt, I met him a few times and he just looked at me as if I had clubbed a member of the tribe and taken her back to my cave. But you, you treated me like a human being, no more and no less. A human being with questions, concerns, fears. You just made me feel at home here. You explained everything. I just felt like I could talk to you.”

He nervously wrung his hands together. He told himself to get up, to walk out of the synagogue back out into the rain coming down on Spruce Street. He’d find some other way to take back control of his thoughts, to banish the desire to maim, not to kill the head of a respected nonprofit organization who also happened to be his boss. But his body didn’t obey his neural commands. So, after a silent standoff that seemed to last the length of a World War I trench offensive, he resumed talking.

“I just had to pick somebody. I just had to tell somebody. So, I choose you.”

He stuck out his hand like a crossing guard as a way of apologizing.

“I’m sorry. Clearly my mistake. A bad idea to involve you,” he tried to say in a tone without malice or irony.

For the first time, Tony noticed her studying him closely, as if she’d only just looked at him with her whole being.

“No, I am sorry. You came to me for help. The worst thing you can hear when you approach someone for help is ‘why did you come to me?’ It’s like a patient wrestles with

whether to go to a doctor, finally goes, and the doctor tells them to just tough it out. I don't need to wait for the High Holidays to ask for your forgiveness. I ask it now. Forgive me, pardon me," she said. "I know that the Talmud doesn't offer all the answers to all the world's problems. But let me try and help. Whatever you say here is confidential. Can you tell me a little bit more about your boss? Let's see if we can't identify the root of the problem."

Before describing Sharon Greenberg, director of the Penn Museum where he worked as assistant vice president of communications, he talked about his 20 years at the *Inquirer*, starting with the graveyard police and fire beat, before moving to the business desk, and, ultimately, onto the nonprofit, philanthropy beat, with a specialization in both the Philadelphia Orchestra and the University of Pennsylvania. He'd written about the intersection of money and culture and the challenges of converting resources into social good, or even defining what the good is.

Then, like an act of God, came the human folly of the economic meltdown. The newspaper underwent five ownership changes in six years, losing 45 percent of its print circulation. Then came rounds of buyouts and layoffs. First, Tony's mentors left the newsroom. Then those who he had taught and nurtured moved on. Some left journalism for more lucrative careers in communications; others didn't land nearly so well. After the divorce, he told the rabbi he still had to work many nights when he was supposed to have Annabelle. He had to either hire a sitter or, worse, give up his time to his ex. Dianne never volunteered to adjust to his work schedule, sticking by the strict custody schedule

set in the divorce agreement. He missed dance recitals, parent-teacher conferences, helping her with homework, and nursing her through illnesses. Now that she was a teenager, he didn't want to miss what little time was left before she began her own life in earnest.

He explained to the rabbi that he'd interviewed Sharon for the paper when she was chosen by the board to run the university's stale museum. He was impressed with her vision to incorporate new technology, to make the museum accessible to lower income individuals and those who usually don't visit museums. When Sharon asked him to come aboard, it seemed as if she were asking him to leave a sinking tugboat for a luxury yacht.

"But from the beginning, I knew I'd neutered myself, given up my place in the world," he'd said, breathlessly. "And if I try to describe Sharon to you she's not going to sound *that* bad. She's just going to seem like a demanding boss with a bit of an ego. She could even be almost nice, asking about my daughter, my weekend."

The rabbi, listening as if in a meditative trance.

"We torture ourselves with unrealistic expectations, that is when I seek God's love. When I think about God's love, I can accept myself as fallible, as human. You know, the rabbinate is not all I expected it to be," she offered. "I thought it was going to be all about helping people make their lives meaningful, connect to the beauty and wisdom of Judaism, all that stuff, and it is sometimes. But so often it is about budgets, management, figuring out how we increase membership, how we get bodies to programs so we can justify our existence, how we can please this member or avoid offending that member.

There are board members and certain individuals who seem to be involved not because they love our community, not because they want to make a difference in the world, but just to make my life miserable.”

He offered a slight nod, as if they understood one another somewhat, but he could see he wasn't getting his point across. If only he kept talking, maybe she'd see the injustice of his situation, the depth of his despair.

Sharon was often on the road, raising money, but she was a constant presence, in texts and emails, he said. *What are we doing to promote the Mali exhibit on social media and in the press? Donors would really like to see an interview with the curator of Egypt gallery. Make it happen.*

She had no children, had mentioned no significant other, and appeared to have no outside interests beyond the museum and promoting herself, he relayed.

Why wasn't I mentioned in that story? Can you get the New Yorker to profile me? Have you lined up any interviews for me at the conference? What are they saying about me on the blogosphere?

“And she *still* likes that word. Blogosphere,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“Does anyone even use it anymore? It sounds like a layer of gas surrounding the Earth.”

Why didn't you think of that? She had once asked him in a senior staff meeting. *It's your job to think of that.* Another time, in the conference room, she said, *I didn't think I hired a tactician, I thought I hired a damned strategist. Where is the strategy?”*

His mental list of slights, of perceived slights, was like a full inbox.

“Tony, she sounds like a demanding boss, somebody who doesn’t know boundaries, who doesn’t have a rich emotional life outside of work. But I just don’t understand your hostility,” she said.

“I know,” he said, unsure what to do with his arms, his whole body. “I had newsroom editors scream at me, lots of profanity, and it just seemed like part of the game. This feels like I am being aimed at with loaded weapons, like my soul is being scraped.”

“Have you considered quitting?” she asked, leaning forward on her desk, her chin resting against her clasped hands. “When you are in a bad environment, leaving that environment is not an unreasonable solution.”

“Quitting? Annabelle is at the Friends Select School. Do you know how much private school tuition costs? I can’t send her to a catchment school; it’s like the Wild West there,” he said. “I still help out my-ex with the mortgage on her place. I want Annabelle staying in a decent place and don’t want my ex living in a dump like I do. I can’t see a job out there that would pay as much as this one -- and I can’t take a pay cut.”

He had grown more visibly upset: voice cracking, like a pugilist who has taken the beating of a lifetime for no discernable good.

“I should have options. I should have a choice. I won 11 Society of Professional Journalists awards. I deserve a choice. I should have a fucking choice.”

Neither spoke for what seemed like many minutes. The rabbi's desk created a chasm between them. Perhaps recognizing this, she dragged her chair from behind the desk and sat directly across from him. She reached and gently touched his hand. He didn't mind.

“Tony, the ancient rabbis – men who spent an inordinate amount of time discussing women's menstrual cycles – they talked about the *Yetzer hara* and the *Yetzer hatov*. The impulse to do evil and the impulse to do good. The way they talked about it, it is like the two forces are warring inside you.”

He wished he had a notebook to scribble in. Taking notes during interviews has always given an outlet to process information.

“Catholics, we call it concupiscence: Desire overriding reason,” he said. “Please help me, please make it stop.”

He exhaled intermittent, audible sobs. She stood and slowly paced around to the back of her desk. She looked at something in her drawer. A piece of paper? She put her hand on her desk phone but didn't pick up the receiver. Even her slightest movements appeared carefully considered.

“There's got to be a spiritual answer, right? There's got to be a spiritual path for me that I just can't see,” he pleaded. “I'd stopped believing in God so long ago. But, now, I don't know. I want to believe. There's got to be enlightenment at the end of this quest. There's got to be some plan, right?”

“Tony, I wish you hadn’t put me in this position,” she said.

He looked at her, eyes reddened. His facial muscles drooped, plunged really, as a wave of realization came over him. Another person would fail him. Another woman. How did he appear in the rabbi’s eyes, he wondered? Like a friend? An equal? A kind soul in need of help? He knew how he came across and felt the alarm rise out of her. He sounded like a madman: A pathetic, dangerous, madman that had to be stopped.

“I’ve got to be honest. What worries me is that your talk seems so specific,” she said. “I mean what if something did happen and I did nothing?”

“I came looking for your help,” he said.

“I know, I know,” she said, with her hand on the telephone resting on her desk. “But I have to alert the university police.”

He lurched toward the desk and banged the wood with his fist, thinking he must have resembled Khrushchev at the United Nations.

“What about confidentiality? You said everything was confidential. You promised.”

“About the past, yes, I am bound by confidentiality. But not about the future, not if I think a life may be in danger,” she said. “I can take out my Rabbinical Assembly handbook and show you the guidelines.”

They stood facing off like two hockey players waiting for the puck to drop.

“If you really thought I intended to follow through, why would you tell me? Wouldn’t you be afraid of me? Wouldn’t you think I might do something desperate?” he asked.

She picked up the receiver.

“What are you doing?” he barked.

“Calling security.”

How had this all gone wrong? He thought they’d developed a rapport, that he’d found a confidante he could trust. Or was it that his life had been a slow-motion crash and impact was finally upon him?

“Please, you don’t have to be afraid of me,” he said. “I just want your help. I just want the thoughts to stop.”

“Juan, can you come to my office right now,” she said to the receiver.

He’d lose his job for sure, right? Would he ever be able to work again? He was ruined.

He’d come looking for help and was ruined.

He stared at this woman, another woman, another Jewish woman, standing in his way, making him feel less like a man. Anger was the only emotion that made any sense. He could give in to the *yetzer hara* right now. Bigtime *yetzer hara*. Enough malice to make the rabbi and Jesus shudder. He could channel all the physical anger, all the violent images and what? Shove the rabbi to the floor? Punch her in the face? Take the phone and bash her head in? What about blood? Blood would be good to see.

He stepped around the desk and grabbed her, staring into her terrified eyes. She did nothing to resist, just pleaded with those same eyes. If he read them right, what he saw wasn’t terror, but sympathy, worry, and perhaps even pity for him. What would it feel like

for one moment to give into this evil impulse, to hurt this woman in all the ways he knew he could? Would this one act of savagery cancel out all his other acts? Was this the moment that would define his entire life? Would the father, husband, son and writer he'd been be erased?

As suddenly as he'd given up Catholicism he found within himself an eternal, natural law kind of certainty that told him he would never hurt the rabbi. It wasn't that he thought of his daughter or all the tractates on morality he'd ever read or, God forbid, saw the divine spark within her. He just knew he wouldn't do it. His relief met with a hint of disappointment; there were some places he'd never go, some things he'd never experienced, some lines he'd never cross. Maybe that was the scariest thing of all, the idea that there was nothing left to discover about himself.

"Stop. Don't move," a male voice screamed in his ear. "It's Okay, rabbi."

Tony didn't move, but the blow to his back came nonetheless. Quick and sharp. He felt weight upon his body, felt himself falling slowly to the floor. He felt the force of slamming into the floor with another man on top of him, gravity and flesh and a thousand electrical impulses all at once. Perhaps it was shock or adrenaline, but being tackled was the closest he'd ever felt to sublime, complete. Delirious, a profound sense of love came over him, love for his daughter, love for the rabbi, love for the man who'd tackled him, perhaps even love for Sharon. For the briefest moment, before falling into unconsciousness, he felt nothing but love.

Bryan Schwartzman is an award-winning journalist whose reporting, criticism and essays have appeared in numerous outlets including The Forward and the Jerusalem Post. His fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He lives with his family in Upper Dublin.

Some years ago, a colleague was particularly upset about something our supervisor had done, I don't remember what. "I want to kill her," I remember my co-worker saying. It's the kind of thing people say when they are upset and I thought, what if somebody really did want to kill their boss. This story was born from that what-if question. In the end, the boss doesn't even appear directly in the story and it is as much about the crumbling walls around the Jewish community and questions about faith as it is a tale of longed-for crime and punishment.