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**Free Fruit for Young Widows**

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When the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser took control of the Suez Canal, threatening Western access to that vital route, an agitated France shifted allegiances, joining forces with Britain and Israel against Egypt. This is a fact neither here nor there, except that during the 1956 Sinai Campaign there were soldiers in the Israeli Army and soldiers in the Egyptian Army who ended up wearing identical French-supplied uniforms to battle.

Not long into the fighting, an Israeli platoon came to rest at a captured Egyptian camp to the east of Bir Gafgafa, in the Sinai Desert. There Private Shimmy Gezer (formerly Shimon Bibberblat, of Warsaw, Poland) sat down to eat at a makeshift outdoor mess. Four armed commandos sat down with him. He grunted. They grunted. Shimmy dug into his lunch.

A squad-mate of Shimmy’s came over to join them. Professor Tendler (who was then only Private Tendler, not yet a professor, and not yet even in possession of a high-school degree) placed the tin cup that he was carrying on the edge of the table, taking care not to spill his tea. Then he took up his gun and shot each of the commandos in the head.

They fell quite neatly. The first two, who had been facing Professor Tendler, tipped back off the bench into the sand. The second pair, who had their backs to the Professor and were still staring open-mouthed at their dead friends, fell face down, the sound of their skulls hitting the table somehow more violent than the report of the gun.

Shocked by the murder of four fellow-soldiers, Shimmy Gezer tackled his friend. To Professor Tendler, who was much bigger than Shimmy, the attack was more startling than threatening. Tendler grabbed hold of Shimmy’s hands while screaming, “Egyptians! Egyptians!” in Hebrew. He was using the same word about the same people in the same desert that had been used thousands of years before. The main difference, if the old stories are to be believed, was that God no longer raised His own fist in the fight.

Professor Tendler quickly managed to contain Shimmy in a bear hug. “Egyptian commandos—confused,” Tendler said, switching to Yiddish. “The enemy. The enemy joined you for lunch.”

Shimmy listened. Shimmy calmed down.

Professor Tendler, thinking the matter was settled, let Shimmy go. As soon as he did, Shimmy swung wildly. He continued attacking, because who cared who those four men were? They were people. They were human beings who had sat down at the wrong table for lunch. They were dead people who had not had to die.

“You could have taken them prisoner,” Shimmy yelled. “Halt!” he screamed in German. “That’s all—halt!” Then, with tears streaming and fists flying, Shimmy said, “You didn’t have to shoot.”

By then Professor Tendler had had enough. He proceeded to beat Shimmy Gezer. He didn’t just defend himself. He didn’t subdue his friend. He flipped Shimmy over, straddled his body, and pounded it down until it was level with the sand. He beat his friend until his friend couldn’t take any more beating, and then he beat him some more. Finally, he climbed off his friend, looked up into the hot sun, and pushed through the crowd of soldiers who had assembled in the minutes since the Egyptians sat down to their fate. Tendler went off to have a smoke.

For those who had come running at the sound of gunfire to find five bodies in the sand, it was the consensus that a pummelled Shimmy Gezer looked to be in the worst condition of the bunch.

At the fruit-and-vegetable stand that Shimmy Gezer eventually opened in Jerusalem’s Mahane Yehuda market, his son, little Etgar, asked about the story of Professor Tendler again and again. From the time he was six, Etgar had worked the *duchan* at his father’s side whenever he wasn’t in school. At that age, knowing only a child’s version of the story—that Tendler had done something in one of the wars that upset Etgar’s father, and Etgar’s father had jumped on the man, and the man had (his father never hesitated to admit) beat him up very badly—Etgar couldn’t understand why his father was so nice to the Professor now. Reared, as he was, on the laws of the small family business, Etgar couldn’t grasp why he was forbidden to accept a single lira from Tendler. The Professor got his vegetables free.

After Etgar weighed the tomatoes and the cucumbers, his father would take up the bag, stick in a nice fat eggplant, unasked, and pass it over to Professor Tendler.

“*Kach*,” his father would say. “Take it. And wish your wife well.”

As Etgar turned nine and ten and eleven, the story began to fill out. He was told about the commandos and the uniforms, about shipping routes and the Suez, and the Americans and the British and the French. He learned about the shots to the head. He learned about all the wars his father had fought in—’73, ’67, ’56, ’48—though Shimmy Gezer still stopped short of the one he’d first been swept up in, the war that ran from 1939 to 1945.

Etgar’s father explained the hazy morality of combat, the split-second decisions, the assessment of threat and response, the nature of percentages and absolutes. Shimmy did his best to make clear to his son that Israelis—in their nation of unfinished borders and unwritten constitution—were trapped in a gray space that was called real life.

In this gray space, he explained, even absolutes could maintain more than one position, reflect more than one truth. “You, too,” he said to his son, “may someday face a decision such as Professor Tendler’s—may you never know from it.” He pointed at the bloody stall across from theirs, pointed at a fish below the mallet, flopping on the block. “God forbid you should have to live with the consequences of decisions, permanent, eternal, that will chase you in your head, turning from this side to that, tossing between wrong and right.”

But Etgar still couldn’t comprehend how his father saw the story to be that of a fish flip-flopping, when it was, in his eyes, only ever about that mallet coming down.

Etgar wasn’t one for the gray. He was a tiny, thoughtful, bucktoothed boy of certainties. And, every Friday when Tendler came by the stand, Etgar would pack up the man’s produce and then run through the story again, searching for black-and-white.

This man had saved his father’s life, but maybe he hadn’t. He’d done what was necessary, but maybe he could have done it another way. And even if the basic schoolyard rule applied in adult life—that a beating delivered earns a beating in return—did it ever justify one as fierce as the beating his father had described? A pummelling so severe that Shimmy, while telling the story, would run Etgar’s fingers along his left cheek, to show him where Professor Tendler had flattened the bone.

Even if the violence had been justified, even if his father didn’t always say, “You must risk your friend’s life, your family’s, your own, you must be willing to die—even to save the life of your enemy—if ever, of two deeds, the humane one may be done,” it was not his father’s act of forgiveness but his kindness that baffled Etgar.

Shimmy would send him running across Agrippas Street to bring back two cups of coffee or two glasses of tea to welcome Professor Tendler, telling Etgar to snatch a good-sized handful of pistachios from Eizenberg’s cart along the way. This treatment his father reserved only for his oldest friends.

And absolutely no one but the war widows got their produce free. Quietly and with dignity, so as to cause these women no shame, Etgar’s father would send them off with fresh fruit and big bags of vegetables, sometimes for years after their losses. He always took care of the young widows. When they protested, he’d say, “You sacrifice, I sacrifice. All in all, what’s a bag of apples?”

“It’s all for one country,” he’d say.

When it came to Professor Tendler, so clear an answer never came.

When Etgar was twelve, his father acknowledged the complexities of Tendler’s tale.

“Do you want to know why I can care for a man who once beat me? Because to a story there is context. There is always context in life.”

“That’s it?” Etgar asked.

“That’s it.”

At thirteen, he was told a different story. Because at thirteen Etgar was a man.

“You know I was in the war,” Shimmy said to his son. The way he said it Etgar knew that he didn’t mean ’48 or ’56, ’67 or ’73. He did not mean the Jewish wars, in all of which he had fought. He meant the big one. The war that no one in his family but Shimmy had survived, which was also the case for Etgar’s mother. This was why they had taken a new name, Shimmy explained. In the whole world, the Gezers were three.

“Yes,” Etgar said. “I know.”

“Professor Tendler was also in that war,” Shimmy said.

“Yes,” Etgar said.

“It was hard on him,” Shimmy said. “And that is why, why I am always nice.”

Etgar thought. Etgar spoke.

“But you were there, too. You’ve had the same life as him. And you’d never have shot four men, even the enemy, if you could have taken them prisoner, if you could have spared a life. Even if you were in danger, you’d risk—” Etgar’s father smiled, and stopped him.



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“*Kodem kol*,” he said, “a similar life is not a same life. There is a difference.” Here Shimmy’s face turned serious, the lightness gone. “In that first war, in that big war, I was the lucky one,” he said. “In the Shoah, I survived.”

“But he’s here,” Etgar said. “He survived, just the same as you.”

“No,” Etgar’s father said. “He made it through the camps. He walks, he breathes, and he was very close to making it out of Europe alive. But they killed him. After the war, we still lost people. They killed what was left of him in the end.”

For the first time, without Professor Tendler there, without one of Shimmy’s friends from the ghetto who stopped by to talk in Yiddish, without one of the soldier buddies from his unit in the reserves, or one of the kibbutzniks from whom he bought his fruits and his vegetables, Etgar’s father sent Etgar across Agrippas Street to get two glasses of tea. One for Etgar and one for him.

“Hurry,” Shimmy said, sending Etgar off with a slap on his behind. Before Etgar had taken a step, his father grabbed his collar and popped open the register, handing him a brand-new ten-shekel bill. “And buy us a nice big bag of seeds from Eizenberg. Tell him to keep the change. You and I, we are going to sit awhile.”

Shimmy took out the second folding chair from behind the register. It would also be the first time that father and son had ever sat down in the store together. Another rule of good business: a customer should always find you standing. Always there’s something you can be doing—sweeping, stacking, polishing apples. The customers will come to a place where there is pride.

This is why Professor Tendler got his tomatoes free, why the sight of the man who beat Shimmy made his gaze go soft with kindness in the way that it did when one of the *miskenot* came by—why it took on what Etgar called his father’s Free-Fruit-for-Young-Widows eyes. This is the story that Shimmy told Etgar when he felt that his boy was a man:

The first thing Professor Tendler saw when his death camp was liberated was two big, tough American soldiers fainting dead away. The pair (presumably war-hardened) stood before the immense, heretofore unimaginable brutality of modern extermination, frozen, slack-jawed before a mountain of putrid, naked corpses, a hill of men.

And from this pile of broken bodies that had been—prior to the American invasion—set to be burned, a rickety skeletal Tendler stared back. Professor Tendler stared and studied, and when he was sure that those soldiers were not Nazi soldiers he crawled out from his hiding place among the corpses, pushing and shoving those balsa-wood arms and legs aside.

It was this hill of bodies that had protected Tendler day after day. The poor Sonderkommando who dumped the bodies, as well as those who came to cart them to the ovens, knew that the boy was inside. They brought him the crumbs of their crumbs to keep him going. And though it was certain death for these prisoners to protect him, it allowed them a sliver of humanity in their inhuman jobs. This was what Shimmy was trying to explain to his son—that these palest shadows of kindness were enough to keep a dead man alive.

When Tendler finally got to his feet, straightening his body out, when the corpse that was Professor Tendler at age thirteen—“your age”—came crawling from that nightmare, he looked at the two Yankee soldiers, who looked at him and then hit the ground with a thud.

Professor Tendler had already seen so much in life that this was not worth even a pause, and so he walked on. He walked on naked through the gates of the camp, walked on until he got some food and some clothes, walked on until he had shoes and then a coat. He walked on until he had a little bread and a potato in his pocket—a surplus.

Soon there was also in that pocket a cigarette and then a second; a coin and then a second. Surviving in this way, Tendler walked across borders until he was able to stand straight and tall, until he showed up in his childhood town in a matching suit of clothes, with a few bills in his pocket and, in his waistband, a six-shooter with five bullets chambered, in order to protect himself during the nights that he slept by the side of the road.

Professor Tendler was expecting no surprises, no reunions. He’d seen his mother killed in front of him, his father, his three sisters, his grandparents, and, after some months in the camp, the two boys that he knew from back home.

But home—that was the thing he held on to. Maybe his house was still there, and his bed. Maybe the cow was still giving milk, and the goats still chewing garbage, and his dog still barking at the chickens as before. And maybe his other family—the nurse at whose breast he had become strong (before weakened), her husband who had farmed his father’s field, and their son (his age), and another (two years younger), boys with whom he had played like a brother—maybe this family was still there waiting. Waiting for him to come home.

Tendler could make a new family in that house. He could call every child he might one day have by his dead loved ones’ names.

The town looked as it had when he’d left. The streets were his streets, the linden trees in the square taller but laid out as before. And, when Tendler turned down the dirt road that led to his gate, he fought to keep himself from running, and he fought to keep himself from crying, because, after what he had seen, he knew that to survive in this world he must always act like a man.

So Tendler buttoned his coat and walked quietly toward the fence, wishing that he had a hat to take off as he passed through the gate—just the way the man of the house would when coming home to what was his.

But when he saw her in the yard—when he saw Fanushka his nurse, their maid—the tears came anyway. Tendler popped a precious button from his coat as he ran to her and threw himself into her arms, and he cried for the first time since the trains.

With her husband at her side, Fanushka said to him, “Welcome home, son,” and “Welcome home, child,” and “We prayed,” “We lit candles,” “We dreamed of your return.”

When they asked, “Are your parents also coming? Are your sisters and your grandparents far behind?,” when they asked after all the old neighbors, house by house, Tendler answered, not by metaphor, and not by insinuation. When he knew the fate, he stated it as it was: beaten or starved, shot, cut in half, the front of the head caved in. All this he related without feeling—matters, each, of fact. All this he shared before venturing a step through his front door.

Looking through that open door, Tendler decided that he would live with these people as family until he had a family of his own. He would grow old in this house. Free to be free, he would gate himself up again. But it would be his gate, his lock, his world.

A hand on his hand pulled him from his reverie. It was Fanushka talking, a sad smile on her face. “Time to fatten you up,” she said. “A feast for first dinner.” And she grabbed the chicken at her feet and twisted its neck right there in the yard. “Come in,” she said, while the animal twitched. “The master of the house has returned.”

“Just as you left it,” she said. “Only a few of our things.”

Tendler stepped inside.

It was exactly as he remembered it: the table, the chairs, except that all that was personal was gone.

Fanushka’s two sons came in, and Tendler understood what time had done. These boys, fed and housed, warmed and loved, were fully twice his size. He felt, then, something he had never known in the camps, a civilized emotion that would have served no use. Tendler felt ashamed. He turned red, clenched his jaw tight, and felt his gums bleeding into his mouth.

“You have to understand,” Etgar’s father said to his son. “These boys, his brothers, they were now twice his size and strangers to him.”

The boys, prodded, shook hands with Tendler. They did not know him anymore.

“Still, it is a nice story,” Etgar said. “Sad. But also happy. He makes it home to a home. It’s what you always say. Survival, that’s what matters. Surviving to start again.”

Etgar’s father held up a sunflower seed, thinking about this. He cracked it between his front teeth.

“So they are all making a dinner for Professor Tendler,” he said. “And he is sitting on the kitchen floor, legs crossed, as he did when he was a boy, and he is watching. Watching happily, drinking a glass of goat’s milk, still warm. And then the father goes out to slaughter that goat. ‘A feast for dinner,’ he says. ‘A chicken’s not enough.’ Professor Tendler, who has not had meat in years, looks at him, and the father, running a nail along his knife, says, ‘I remember the kosher way.’ ”

Tendler was so happy that he could not bear it. So happy and so sad. And, with the cup of warm milk and the warm feeling, Tendler had to pee. But he didn’t want to move now that he was there with his other mother and, resting on her shoulder, a baby sister. A year and a half old and one curl on the head. A little girl, fat and happy. Fat in the ankle, fat in the wrist.

*“Tell me about your last accounting job.”*

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Professor Tendler rushed out at the last second, out of the warm kitchen, out from under his roof. Professor Tendler, a man whom other men had tried to turn into an animal, did not race to the outhouse. It didn’t cross his mind. He stood right under the kitchen window to smell the kitchen smells, to stay close. And he took a piss. Over the sound of the stream, he heard his nurse lamenting.

He knew what she must be lamenting—the Tendler family destroyed.

He listened to what she was saying. And he heard.

“He will take everything” is what she said. “He will take it all from us—our house, our field. He’ll snatch away all we’ve built and protected, everything that has been—for so long—ours.”

There outside the window, pissing and listening, and also “disassociating,” as Professor Tendler would call it (though he did not then have the word), he knew only that he was watching himself from above, that he could see himself feeling all the disappointment as he felt it, until he was keenly and wildly aware that he had felt nothing all those years, felt nothing when his father and mother were shot, felt nothing while in the camps, nothing, in fact, from the moment he was driven from his home to the moment he returned.

In that instant, Tendler’s guilt was sharper than any sensation he had ever known.

And here, in response to his precocious son, Shimmy said, “Yes, yes, of course it was about survival—Tendler’s way of coping. Of course he’d been feeling all along.” But Tendler—a boy who had stepped over his mother’s body and kept walking—had, for those peasants, opened up.

It was right then, Professor Tendler later told Shimmy, that he became a philosopher.

“He will steal it all away,” Fanushka said. “Everything. He has come for our lives.”

And her son, whom Tendler had considered a brother, said, “No.” And Tendler’s other almost-brother said, “No.”

“We will eat,” Fanushka said. “We will celebrate. And when he sleeps we will kill him.” To one of the sons she said, “Go. Tell your father to keep that knife sharp.” To the other she said, “You get to sleep early, and you get up early, and before you grab the first tit on that cow I want his throat slit. Ours. Ours, not to be taken away.”

Tendler ran. Not toward the street but back toward the outhouse in time to turn around as the kitchen door flew open, in time to smile at the younger brother on his way to find his father, in time for Tendler to be heading back the right way.

“Do you want to hear what was shared at such a dinner?” Shimmy asked his son. “The memories roused and oaths sworn? There was wine, I know. ‘Drink, drink,’ the mother said. There was the chicken and a pot of goat stew. And, in a time of great deprivation, there was also sugar for the tea.” At this, Shimmy pointed at the bounty of their stand. “And, as if nothing, next to the baby’s basket on the kitchen floor sat a basket of apples. Tendler hadn’t had an apple in who knows how long.”

Tendler brought the basket to the table. The family laughed as he peeled the apples with a knife, first eating the peels, then the flesh, and savoring even the seeds and the cores. It was a celebration, a joyous night. So much so that Professor Tendler could not by its end, belly distended, eyes crossed with drink, believe what he knew to have been said.

There were hugs and there were kisses, and Tendler—the master of the house—was given his parents’ bedroom upstairs, the two boys across the hall, and below, in the kitchen (“It will be warmest”), slept the mother and the father and the fat-ankled girl.

“Sleep well,” Fanushka said. “Welcome home, my son.” And, sweetly, she kissed Tendler on both eyes.

Tendler climbed the stairs. He took off his suit and went to bed. And that was where he was when Fanushka popped through the door and asked him if he was warm enough, if he needed a lamp by which to read.

“No, thank you,” he said.

“So formal? No thanks necessary,” Fanushka said. “Only ‘Yes, Mother,’ or ‘No, Mother,’ my poor reclaimed orphan son.”

“No light, Mother,” Tendler said, and Fanushka closed the door.

Tendler got out of bed. He put on his suit. Once again without any shame to his actions, Tendler searched the room for anything of value, robbing his own home.

Then he waited. He waited until the house had settled into itself, the last creak slipping from the floorboards as the walls pushed back against the wind. He waited until his mother, his Fanushka, must surely sleep, until a brother intent on staying up for the night—a brother who had never once fought for his life—convinced himself that it would be all right to close his eyes.

Tendler waited until he, too, had to sleep, and that’s when he tied the laces of his shoes together and hung them over his shoulder. That’s when he took his pillow with one hand and, with the other, quietly cocked his gun.

Then, with goose feathers flying, Tendler moved through the house. A bullet for each brother, one for the father and one for the mother. Tendler fired until he found himself standing in the warmth of the kitchen, one bullet left to protect him on the nights when he would sleep by the side of the road.

That last bullet Tendler left in the fat baby girl, because he did not know from mercy, and did not need to leave another of that family to grow to kill him at some future time.

“He murdered them,” Etgar said. “A murderer.”

“No,” his father told him. “There was no such notion at the time.”

“Even so, it is murder,” Etgar said.

“If it is, then it’s only fair. They killed him first. It was his right.”

“But you always say—”

“Context.”

“But the baby. The girl.”

“The baby is hardest, I admit. But these are questions for the philosopher. These are the theoretical instances put into flesh and blood.”

“But it’s not a question. These people, they are not the ones who murdered his family.”

“They were coming for him that night.”

“He could have escaped. He could have run for the gate when he overheard. He didn’t need to race back toward the outhouse, race to face the brother as he came the other way.”

“Maybe there was no more running in him. Anyway, do you understand ‘an eye for an eye’? Can you imagine a broader meaning of ‘self-defense’?”

“You always forgive him,” Etgar said. “You suffered the same things—but you aren’t that way. You would not have done what he did.”

“It is hard to know what a person would and wouldn’t do in any specific instance. And you, spoiled child, apply the rules of civilization to a boy who had seen only its opposite. Maybe the fault for those deaths lies in a system designed for the killing of Tendlers that failed to do its job. An error, a slip that allowed a Tendler, no longer fit, back loose in the world.”

“Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I ask. And I ask you, my Etgar, what you would have done if you were Tendler that night?”

“Not kill.”

“Then you die.”

“Only the grownups.”

“But it was a boy who was sent to cut Tendler’s throat.”

“How about killing only those who would do harm?”

“Still it’s murder. Still it is killing people who have yet to act, murdering them in their sleep.”

“I guess,” Etgar said. “I can see how they deserved it, the four. How I might, if I were him, have killed them.”

Shimmy shook his head, looking sad.

“And whoever are we, my son, to decide who should die?”

It was on that day that Etgar Gezer became a philosopher himself. Not in the manner of Professor Tendler, who taught theories up at the university on the mountain, but, like his father, practical and concrete. Etgar would not finish high school or go to college, and, except for his three years in the Army, he would spend his life—happily—working the stand in the *shuk*. He’d stack the fruit into pyramids and contemplate weighty questions with a seriousness of thought. And when there were answers Etgar would try employing them to make for himself and others, in whatever small way, a better life.

It was on that day, too, that Etgar decided Professor Tendler was both a murderer and, at the same time, a *misken*. He believed he understood how and why Professor Tendler had come to kill that peasant family, and how men sent to battle in uniform—even in the same uniform—would find no mercy at his hand. Etgar also came to see how Tendler’s story could just as easily have ended for the Professor that first night, back in his parents’ room, in his parents’ bed, a gun with four bullets held in a suicide’s hand—how the first bullet Tendler ever fired might have been into his own head.

Still, every Friday Etgar packed up Tendler’s fruit and vegetables. And in that bag Etgar would add, when he had them, a pineapple or a few fat mangos dripping honey. Handing it to Tendler, Etgar would say, “*Kach*, Professor. Take it.” This, even after his father had died. ♦