

The Girls Next Door by Anthony Fagin

It was very upsetting for Mark Kaplan to hear, on stepping off the plane, that his sister was in hospital. Not a good omen, he thought, considering it was just a week before her wedding. Helping his son with the luggage, Mr Kaplan told Mark about the disturbing complications.

‘Poor girl,’ Mr Kaplan said, ‘she had to go into The Monastery last Wednesday suddenly.....’

‘What am I going to do if she isn’t better for the 16th? I’ve sent out a hundred-and-fifty invitations,’ Mrs Kaplan fretted.

The 16th of December was the date scheduled for the wedding. It also happened – by chance? – to be the date of Mark’s parents’ wedding anniversary. A mere glance at the course of his parents’ marriage would have convinced even the most tenacious rationalist that for his sister to marry on the same day of the year as his parents had thirty-two years ago did not augur well for her or her husband-to-be’s future. Also, the 16th of December is the anniversary of the Battle of Blood River, perhaps the fiercest battle in South African history. It was at that river in Natal, Mark had been taught in history lessons, that the beleaguered Boers had repulsed the Zulu impis. Mark had come to think of his parents’ marriage as the *second* fiercest battle in South African history.

‘What’s the matter with Rochelle?’ Mark was already formulating a psychosomatic diagnosis.

‘We don’t really know. The doctors say something internal, stomach, female trouble, who knows?’ Mr Kaplan shrugged despondently.

‘It’s *typical* of her to go and get seriously ill just a few days before her wedding.’ Mrs Kaplan sighed with exasperation; not at all the response of a sympathetic mother. The implication was that Rochelle had cooked up her complaint to sabotage the catering arrangements.

They were driving off Eastern Boulevard down through the centre of Cape Town. A few new shopping complexes and multi-storey carparks but otherwise little had changed since Mark had been out on holiday from London three years before.

Rochelle summoned up a sad smile when she saw Mark. Propped up against a mound of white pillows, she was surrounded by a riot of get-well-soon flowers.

As Mark bent to kiss his sister, she burst into tears: ‘I didn’t want this to happen. Just my luck. Who else has to go into hospital just before their wedding? Why does this sort of thing always happen to me?’ Mark tried to comfort her.

‘Rocky, it’ll be alright.’ Mr Kaplan knew how to reassure. ‘You’ll be okay for the day. On the 16th you’ll be under the *chuppa* and you’ll be a beautiful bride.’

'You'd better be,' Mrs Kaplan warned, leaning forward from her armchair under the crucifix on the wall. The Monastery Nursing Home was run by nuns. 'I have sent out a hundred-and-fifty invitations! What am I going to do if you're not up to it? How the hell do you expect me to ring everybody and postpone the affair?'

'Queenie! This isn't the time.....' Mr Kaplan tried to restrain his wife.

'You make me feel guilty.' Rochelle started sobbing again. 'As if I got ill on purpose!'

'You don't seem to appreciate, Rochelle, what has gone into arranging this do. I have had to do it all, single-handed. Do you think your father has so much as raised a finger to help

'Queenie!' Mr Kaplan threatened.

'Organizing this wedding, I will have you know, has almost killed me!'

'Well okay then, perhaps it'll be better if I die!' Rochelle howled. 'Then you won't have all the bother of a wedding!' Racked with sobs, she slumped into the pillows.

Mark had been looking forward to his sister's wedding. His unhappy sister who in her mid twenties had panicked that she was already on the shelf. He had been glad to hear she had found a man to marry. Any man. He had not thought at all about who his future brother-in-law might be. And he had not anticipated being immersed – certainly not so soon – in a family slanging match of the sort that, amongst other things, had driven him to leave home several years before.

As his father coaxed Rochelle to calm and his mother muttered morosely, Mark wished he were on a plane returning to London.

Whispering confidentially, Claude, Mark's brother-in-law-to-be, leaned close to him and even then, Mark could make out only the bare bones of what he was saying. Having just come from a visit to Rochelle at The Monastery, they were now sweltering in the heat of Fourth Beach. Their towels were laid unusually close together in a symbolic gesture made by two people about to be related by marriage and anxious to appear accepting of the other.

'I'm bugged if I'm going to hang around in this god-forsaken country. After Rocky and me get married, I'm gonna work moer-of-a-hard, save up, then pack our bags. The States, Toronto, Oz, Israel. No future here: the shvartzes are just waiting for their moment. I'm an electrician, a good profession, got a contract with the government at the nuclear power plant in Koeberg, big money. If you got a skill, you can go anywhere.'

Claude was short, with a sculpted body, well-proportioned face and dapper moustache. His blue eyes enticed you in but the urgent insistence in his voice warned you to stay back.

'Mom tells me you're on the shvartzes' side, that's why you left.'

'Hey, hang on,' Mark protested. 'Trust my mother to exaggerate. The set-up here is very difficult, not much room for the white liberal.....'

‘Anyway, you did the right thing, getting the hell out of here when you did,’ Claude hurtled on. ‘I tell you this place doesn’t have long to go. The shvartzes are just biding their time. I know. I’ve been up on the border, my army training, been a couple of hundred k’s into Angola, and I’ve seen some things, don’t wanna shock you with them. Look at all these people here sunbathing, blind, having a whale of a time in the lap of luxury. It won’t last; it can’t. How long can you hold the shvartzes down? And I tell you, man, *I’m* not gonna be the sucker left behind when the shit starts to hit the fan.’

‘Have you spoken to Rochelle about all this?’

‘Look, it’s early days yet. I’m telling *you* this, Mark, because you’re out of it all. You can see it more from a distance. Shit, you’re lucky being over there in London. How about a dip, man, I’m boiling hot.’

Round the dining-room table over lunch Mark was telling his father something of his life in London. Mr Kaplan nodded: there was a feeling of warmth between father and son which had grown with their being apart.

They had started on the cold borscht.

‘Victoria still knows how to make a good borscht.’ Mark spooned another dollop of soured cream into the pink soup.

‘Yes, I don’t know what we’d do without her,’ Mr Kaplan said. Victoria was the maid, an African woman who had been employed by the Kaplans for well over a decade. ‘The other day she said to me and your Mom: ‘Master and Madam, you are my father and mother now.’ Isn’t that amazing? I was very touched. She’s got great dignity, Victoria has. Always respectful. She’s been a great girl.....’

‘How can you call her a ‘girl’, Dad, when she’s an adult woman?’

‘Yes I know, I’m sorry, you’re right. It’s a hard life for them.....’

‘I am *not* having that Abromowitz bitch step into my home!’ Mark’s mother, still in her dressing-gown, suddenly appeared in the doorway and flapped in her slippers to her seat at the table.

‘Queenie!’ Mr Kaplan snapped at his wife.

‘Mom, who are you talking about?’

‘Claude’s mother: Phyllis Abromowitz. That bitch is not putting her foot in this flat, d’you hear me!’

‘Queenie, please calm down,’ Mr Kaplan groaned.

After a minor operation Mark’s sister Rochelle had returned home and the green light had been given for the wedding to go ahead.

‘Phyllis came down from Joburg yesterday. She’s staying with the Aronsons, Maish’s cousins.’ Maish Abromowitz was Phyllis’s late husband. ‘And would you believe she has the *chutzpa* to phone just now and ask if she can come over here on Sunday to change for the wedding.’

‘So, what’s wrong with that? We’re going to be *mishpocha* now.’

‘You don’t seem to remember, Mr Bridge-Builder, that we swore, we vowed never again to have that whore in this flat. Not after that disgraceful night last year when she came here for dinner with that trawler captain she seemed to have picked up and got completely *schickered* and went off to sleep here on the sofa.’

Mark sniggered.

It may seem funny to you, Mark, but you don’t know the half of it. You’re well out of it, over there in your swinging London.’

Swallowing down more borscht, Mark firmed his resolve not to be inveigled into the net of hysteria his mother was expert at meshing.

‘Queenie, you are being vindictive and petty.’ Mr Kaplan sighed.

‘No, Mr Forgive-and-Forget, I am not! I am *adamant* that Phyllis will not..... Ah, Victoria. Thank you, Victoria.’ Mrs Kaplan switched to polite – a minute’s amnesty for Phyllis Abromowitz – as Victoria was in the doorway bearing a large tray of curried fish and salads. A middle-aged woman, with glasses, quite formal in her starched white uniform, she went over to the sideboard and laid out the dishes.

After Victoria had left the room, Mark’s mother, with a twinkle in her eye, leaned across to him: ‘You know what Victoria said to me the other day?’

‘Shhh Queenie, she’ll hear you.’ Mr Kaplan was at the sideboard, ladling curried fish onto his plate.

‘Ach so what! Mark,’ Mrs Kaplan went on, ‘I asked her what will happen when The Revolution comes. Will she kill me and Dad, sleeping in our beds? ‘No madam,’ she replied, ‘I won’t do it. But the girl next door will.’ And of course, you realize what that means. While the girl next door is finishing off your Dad and me, Victoria will be next door carving up Sally and Herman van de Kar. Shame, poor old Herman and Sally, they’ve never hurt a fly.’ Mrs Kaplan was wobbling with laughter. Mark and his father couldn’t help joining her. As the tears gushed down Mrs Kaplan’s cheeks, she dabbed at them with her borscht-stained serviette. ‘My God, it’s a crazy world we live in!’

While they were busy spitting out watermelon pips, Claude whirled in to pick up Rochelle. His snug white slacks, blue-striped T-shirt moulded to his torso, and chrome-framed sunglasses twirling between his restless fingers, gave him the air of a Sea Point playboy. ‘So, where’s my beautiful bride-to-be?’ he swaggered cavalierly.

‘What d’you expect?’ Mrs Kaplan batted back. ‘*Poetsing* herself up in her boudoir. Hours she can spend just getting a hair into place.’

‘Well, meanwhile I’ll have to make do with my sexy mom-in-law.’ He was over Mrs Kaplan, cuddling her.

Ach Claude man, leave me alone,’ she giggled. ‘I’m too old for this sort of thing.’

‘Oh no you’re not.’ Addressing Mark and his father: ‘A real hot number this lady is, a sexpot.’

‘I’m not taken in by your gigolo charm, Claude. Buttering me up.....’ she chortled, trying to wriggle her way out of his leery embrace.

‘You ready?’ Rochelle was at the door, immaculate in her beach gear, sunglasses carefully inserted into her hair-do.

‘Ah-hah! my gorgeous bride.’ Claude detached himself from his mother-in-law-about-to-be.

‘Come, it’s already late, let’s go.’ Rochelle permitted him a peck on her cheek.

You wanna come with us, sport?’ Claude invited Mark.

‘No thanks. I’m already going out.’

‘When will you be back?’ Mrs Kaplan enquired.

‘Dunno,’ Rochelle snapped at her mother. ‘Don’t keep supper for us.’

‘I just asked and I get a mouthful.’

‘OK kids, have fun.’ Mr Kaplan crunched into another slab of watermelon.

As Rochelle and Claude made for the front door, Mark heard his sister taking Claude to task for something he had done, or not done.

‘Jesus, what a schizo that boy is!’ Mrs Kaplan let out as soon as the front door had shut.

Mark registered shock.

‘Well, he is. Phyllis tells me the boy was completely traumatised by Angola. He’s what they call a split personality. I’ve never come across anyone who has such extreme changes of mood. One minute he’s all sweetness, buttering you up, the next he’s a vicious viper, shouting, cursing, swearing, the foulest language you’ve ever heard. Harry, you tell Mark about that night we came home and found the two of them rolling about on the carpet.....’

‘Perhaps they were making love,’ Mark suggested facetiously.

‘No man!’ his mother cut at him, ‘he was beating Rocky and tugging at her hair. She was screaming and scratching him. You’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘Good God! So what did you do?’

‘Well of course I had to separate them,’ Mr Kaplan said.

‘Your Dad picked Claude up by the scruff of the neck – you know how strong your Dad is – and hurled him, literally hurled him against the wall. Claude’s such a little, two-foot-nothing pipsqueak.....’

‘.....and I told him,’ Mr Kaplan continued the story, ‘I said: ‘*if ever* I catch you treating my daughter like that again, you won’t know what’s hit you. I will break every bone in your miserable little body.’ ‘

‘Good heavens!’

‘And since then, I’ve never seen anyone treat your father with such respect. It’s ‘Yes Dad, this’ and ‘Certainly Dad, that’. You’ve got no idea, Mark, what’s been going on here.’

‘He sounds like he can be quite dangerous.’

‘There’s your sister about to be married, you’d think she’d be ecstatic. The other day she comes crying to me: ‘Mommy, what’s going to become of me? I’m marrying a psychopath.’ So I said to her ‘Well, break it off.’ But, poor kid, she feels she’s got to go through with it. Twenty-six already, she’s afraid no other man’ll be interested. She’s petrified of ending up like Rita Clouts, who convinced herself she was on the shelf and ended up in a padded cell in Valkenberg.’

Mark now fully realized that the happy, trouble-free family wedding that he, out of touch in London, had been looking forward to, was not to be.

‘What’s more, there’s a whole lot more..... Thanks Victoria. Yes, you can take out.’ Victoria was hovering in the doorway with the tray. Mrs Kaplan indicated to Mark that she would continue once Victoria had left the room with the remains of the lunch.

‘To cap everything,’ Mrs Kaplan went on, ‘would you believe that Claude is not even a Jew.’

‘Ach Queenie, not that again! Of course he is.’ Mr Kaplan was very irritated.

‘He is an electrician,’ Mrs Kaplan persisted.

‘So.....?’

‘How many Jewish electricians do you know?’

‘QUEENIE! Enough of your ridiculous jokes!’

‘OK, to be fair to him: he was *brought up* a Jew. Phyllis converted when she married Maish. Maish adopted the boy. He did have a barmitzvah.’

‘Nu?’

‘Phyllis is basically an Afrikaans *meisie* from Vereeniging. Her father used to be private secretary to Strijdom. Claude is her son by her first husband, who was a Frenchman. I despair at the genes we’re taking into the family. And then there is Maish himself who went *mechulla* and blew his brains out. Oy! So Mark, you mustn’t believe all that big-Jew-from-Joburg bullshit Claude gives you because basically he is not a Jew.’ She had gathered herself up and was heading for the door. As her QED, she tossed over her shoulder: ‘Only a *yock* would beat up the girl he is about to marry.’

Mark and his father couldn’t help chuckling. Mr Kaplan rolled his eyes upward: ‘That’s your mother.’

With his coffee Mark followed his father over to the sofa in the living-room. Mr Kaplan stroked his son’s arm: ‘It’s really good, boy, to have you home. I’ve missed you a lot.’

‘Me too, Dad. I’ve missed you.’

His father had aged considerably since Mark’s last visit three years ago.

‘Mom hasn’t changed.’

‘Ach, you must take everything she says with a pinch of salt. She overdramatizes; the smallest thing she makes a meal of. Between you and me, she’s the one who often stirs things up. She provokes Rocky.....’

‘She seems to enjoy it.’ Mark sipped at his coffee.

Mr Kaplan sagged wearily into the sofa. ‘What else has she got to do? She’s got very few interests. That’s your mother, what can you do? She’s also got her good points though.’

Professor Solomon Rubin, who always wore a tie, perched on the frilly stool at Rochelle’s dressing-table with notebook and Parker pen poised to jot down notes for his toast to ‘The Bride’s Parents’, Queenie and Harry Kaplan, at the wedding reception that Sunday. He was Queenie’s eldest brother and, being Professor of Gastro-Intestinal Medicine at the University of Cape Town Medical School, was treasured as the family’s most prestigious member. Whenever one phoned his home in Bishopscourt, the maid – trained by Solomon’s wife, Rojean – answered with ‘This is the residence of Professor Rubin, who may I ask is calling?’ or ‘You have reached Professor Rubin’s residence, may I help you?’, or an admixture of both.

But to Rochelle and Mark, sitting on Rochelle’s bed, their backs against the wall, he had always been ‘Uncle Solly’.

‘Well, don’t have much time.’ Uncle Solly scratched his head through his mane of greying hair. ‘Let’s hear from you about Mom and Dad.’

A pause during which Claude, pacing up and down, cracked his knuckles.

Both Rochelle and Mark opened their mouths at the same time and said: ‘Dad.....’ They laughed. ‘Dad is fun, he’s very warm and encouraging, he’s got a great sense of humour, he’s terrific.’

Uncle Solly jotted all this down and when his pen came to a halt, he looked up: ‘And what about Mom?’ Rochelle and Mark looked at each other and smiled with embarrassment.

Mark was anxious lest they offend Uncle Solly; after all, Mom was Uncle Solly’s only sister. ‘Mom is.....direct. You always know where you stand with her. But she’s difficult. She’s very difficult.’

‘Yes,’ Uncle Solly agreed, ‘she is difficult, but Mark you must remember she’s had a hard life and – don’t take this amiss; and in strictest confidence – it hasn’t been all roses with your Dad. Financially speaking.’

Claude came in with: ‘She’s got a good sense of humour, Queenie has, I’ll say that for her. A bit on the wacky side. But she can laugh at herself. Of course, she’s got her *meshugguses* – who hasn’t? – but she’s been very warm and accepting to me, I must admit.’

As Uncle Solly’s pen gratefully scratched on, Mark marvelled to himself at how his mother had turned two-facedness into an art form.

‘Right,’ Uncle Solly declared, neatly capping his pen. ‘I think I’ve got about as much as I need, thanks to all three of you. Thanks again.’ He rose and returned to his sister and brother-in-law in the living-room.

After all the hoo-ha that had led up to it, the wedding itself went off surprisingly smoothly. The ceremony was held at Temple Israel, where, going on twenty years before, Mark had been barmitzvah-ed by the same Rabbi Greenberg.

At the reception afterwards, held in the ballroom of the Arthur’s Seat Hotel, Mark danced with, among others, his sister Rochelle (the beautiful bride); his mother (stiffly); his aunt Melissa (‘Mark my darling, this time we really must get together for a good heart-to-heart catch-up.’); Debbie Golombik, one of his mother’s best friends (‘Mark, I can’t tell you what a lovely, handsome young man you’ve grown into.’); Phyllis Abromowitz, Claude’s mother (who was quite *schickered*); and his first cousin Suzanna, the younger daughter of his Uncle Solly (‘Oh, you’re a c-c-counsellor’ – she had an agonizing stutter – ‘that’s fascinating, I’m t-training to be a c-c-clinical psych-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ologist.’)

And just three weeks after his arrival Mark was again at DF Malan Airport with his family, awaiting the final call for his flight back to London. The mood was tense because Rochelle, a married woman now, was grizzling about whether to return to Johannesburg or stay on in Cape Town for a further week. Claude had gone up a few days before and Rochelle was missing him.

‘Go!’ Mrs Kaplan exhorted her daughter, struggling to keep her anger within rein for the sake of the passengers nearby, who’d already begun to take note of Mark’s incipiently traumatic leave-taking. ‘For God’s sake, go! And stop this whining. If you’re missing the boy, why don’t you get on a plane tomorrow?’

‘But it’s a bit pathetic,’ Rochelle pouted. ‘I don’t want him to know I can’t go a day without him.’

‘Ach, you’re utterly exasperating!’ Mrs Kaplan flapped an irritated wrist at her. ‘You’re so indecisive. One minute it’s *this*, the next moment it’s *that*. It was the same with the wedding. Thank *God* that’s over!’ Mark checked his hand luggage for his ticket and passport. A vain hope that his boarding time might be brought forward.

‘Queenie, please cool it,’ Mr Kaplan interceded. ‘We’re saying goodbye to Mark. Going on like this isn’t very pleasant for him.’

Yes Mark, I’m sorry about all this, but your sister has been niggling at me ever since Claude left. You haven’t been at home, you’ve been at Barry’s. You don’t know the half of what’s been going on.....’

‘Mom please.....’

But his mother was unstoppable: ‘Would you believe that your sister – the nerve! I can’t get over it – has been trying to persuade Victoria, my maid, to go up with her to Joburg!’

‘Don’t start on all that again, I can’t stand it!’ Rochelle shouted, tears welling.

‘Please, *both* of you,’ Mark entreated his mother and sister, conscious of those nearby craning their necks in puzzled disapproval of the escalating scene. ‘I get very nervous before flying’, and the row quietened for a moment.

Rochelle had turned away to bury her face in her handkerchief. Every few seconds her sniffing would heave up into a convulsive shudder of misery.

‘The *chutzpa*,’ Mrs Kaplan muttered, ‘I cannot believe the *chutzpa* of it.....’

‘Queenie,’ Mr Kaplan warned.

But Mark’s mother was bursting to get her indignation across to him: ‘Would you *believe* it, Mark, after all I’ve done, organizing that wedding – and I will have you know it was paid for out of *my* pocket, do you think your father paid for it?, he hasn’t got two pennies saved up to his name – would you BELIEVE that your sister has the *nerve*, the *audacity* to try to snatch Victoria from under my nose and take her up to Joburg to work for her!’

A ding-dong announced that boarding for Mark’s flight had commenced.

‘Got all your things?’ Mr Kaplan enveloped his son in a bear-hug.

‘Yup.’ Mark picked up his hand luggage.

‘Keep writing, boy.’

‘I will, Dad.’

Mrs Kaplan proffered her cheek for a farewell kiss and mumbled an apology that Mark’s leave-taking had been blighted by ‘such a scene’.

All Mark could think of to say was: 'Mom, you & Rocky, relax more.'

He looked around – Rochelle was nowhere to be seen.

A last wave and then he was swallowed up by some security device, which scanned him for concealed weapons.

With a heavy rubber-stamp a grim official thudded his passport.

Among his fellow passengers in the departure lounge Mark immersed himself in his book of crosswords to attempt to still his simmer of feelings: sadness at leaving his father; rage at his mother and sister for the spectacle they'd just staged; good times with Barry and Rivka, the friends he'd stayed with in Camps Bay; the troubled state of South Africa; going back to winter in London. But his predominant feeling was relief at leaving.

Wedge into his seat high over Africa, Mark was hoping to get some sleep. The cabin lights were off and the soft music from his earphones together with the whisky he'd had with dinner were helping him doze.....

Victoria, his parents' African maid, had been at the wedding ceremony at Temple Israel. Mark had noticed her, smartly dressed, poised and alert, watching Rochelle being married. On either side of Victoria had been two African women: a phalanx.

At the wedding reception in the ballroom of the Arthur's Seat Hotel, Victoria and these four women had been seated at a table of their own. Mark had wondered who these women were. Friends of Victoria's? Probably maids, like her, in the same block of flats: the girls next door.....

No madam I won't do it but the girl next door will

No madam, *I won't do it, but the girl next door*

No madam, *I won't do it, but the girl next door WILL!*

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