

The Man
in the Mink Hat

by

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There is no public train or bus between Manhattan and Springview, a transplanted religious Jewish community north of the city. In its absence, a privately-run company provides transportation.

After a day of ordering merchandise in the city for my hat business in Maryland, I needed to take this special bus to visit my ultra-observant daughter, Anna, and her husband, Raphi. We had made plans for me to stay at their home in Springview for the weekend. Anna had also invited, she told me on the phone, a young man she wanted to introduce to her single girlfriend to make a *shidduch*, a match.

“Where do I catch this Springview bus?” I had asked her. The answer to this question seemed to be a Kabbalistic secret, revealed only to Springview residents or those from foreign countries such as Maryland.

“Corner of 40th and 7th Avenue,” she had answered.

"Which corner? There are four."

"I don't know. I *drive* to Manhattan. You'll see other people waiting. Just be there at 4:03 p.m."

Now I stood shivering on dirty snow in the vicinity of 40th and 7th. There were no bus signs around and no passengers waiting. It was almost 4 p.m. The only way to be sure of being at the right corner was to watch for the appearance of someone who looked like a resident of Springview. The town's deeply pious Jews, a mix of *haredim*—literally, those who tremble in awe of God—are easily identifiable. Many of the men wear beards and some grow long *peyote*, glossy side-curls. Each wears a special black hat, the shape of which identifies the rabbi they follow: *Chassidim*, pious ones, wear black hats on weekdays and on holy days they wear a *streimel*, the Chassidic fur hat styled according to their rabbi. Then there are the “plain, moderate black hatters,” who wear black hats with a brim up to three-and-a-half-inches. Finally, some men wear only *kipot srugot*, small, round, hand-crocheted caplets. Although one can usually judge a Springview man's religious affiliation by his hat, my son-in-law Raphi is an exception. Weekdays, at his job in the profane, secular world, he sports a horrid baseball cap. But on the Sabbath, he joins the other “moderates” and wears the good black Borsalino I sent him.

Standing on one corner of 40th and 7th Avenue where the Springview bus *might* stop, I anxiously watched passersby, hoping to spot a beard, *peyote*, a black hat, or a *kipah*; or among the women, a *sheitel*, wig, or headscarf. Springview women usually wear long-skirted dresses and floor-length coats, and their faces are innocent of makeup. If I saw such a man or woman, it would be a Sign. But no such Sign appeared. This would be the last bus before the Sabbath eve began, after which no more would come. If I missed it, I'd be stranded alone in New York for twenty-four hours.

Suddenly a cheerful young man of about thirty-five materialized. Gleaming on his head was a tall, glossy mink hat, shaped like an inverted rowboat, a Russian Cossack hat, *not* a round Chassidic-style fur hat. His handsome hat seemed stitched into his sleek head. A faultlessly tailored camel overcoat and shiny brown boots completed his outfit. Although he had no side curls, he sported a rich reddish-brown beard. Finally, my Springview bus Sign! But this Sign did not stop. "Is this the stop for Springview?" I shouted as he ran by.

“Yes,” he called back, still running. “Wait there. It’ll be along soon.”

A few minutes later the man in the mink hat reappeared. My hot breath streamed out in relief. He apparently had run a quick errand; he was a *maven*, a man who knew how things worked and that the 4:03 p.m. bus would arrive late.

Since we’d already met, so to speak, I grumbled, “You’d think there’d be a bus sign.”

“Then people would know,” he laughed, showing white, even teeth, made whiter by the reddish glint of his beard and mustache. Agate eyes frankly assessed me from head to toe.

“I’m admiring your hat,” I said, to explain staring back at him. “I’m a hatter myself. It’s mink, isn’t it?” I quickly pulled out a silver business card and handed it to him. The card was necessary to show that my ego, if not my id, was business-like.

“Thanks, yes, it’s mink. My favorite hat.”

He looked at my card. “Aha,” he said, “you also serve the theater. I suppose you have silk top hats for stage people.”

“Yes,” I said, “but my customers are also Inaugural, diplomatic, New Year’s Eve Ball guests, chiefs of Masonic Rites, heads of Nigerian tribes, bridegrooms, musicians, actors, and magicians.” Was this man a magician?

“How much is a silk top hat?” he asked.

After answering his question, I mentally kicked myself. This man was asking me to reveal too much about my business and myself, but he was not offering anything personal in return.

"You really ought not to leave your bags so far away. This *is* Manhattan," he said, gallantly leaping forward six feet to retrieve my small suitcase and zebra hatbox.

I smiled, a flicker of my younger flirtatiousness spurting from heart to eyes. "That's very kind of you."

"My pleasure."

During this exchange, many black hats and *sheitels* had gathered around us, final proof that I stood at the right invisible stop at the right time for the right bus. "Ah, here's the bus," said the man, as its hulk shuddered to a halt.

I scrambled over snow and ice to dive into the bus's warm womb. Although I'd arrived first, the man in the mink hat had distracted me, and other passengers had surged ahead. Now I was almost last in line. The man, however, had waited to enter until I mounted the bus steps, and he now stood behind me on the lower step.

"Six dollars or seven?" I asked him, turning round.

"It's six, but the driver will take seven," he grinned.

I clambered up three steep steps, lugging my suitcase and the zebra hatbox that held my son-in-law's new Borsalino hat; my laptop was strapped around my neck, almost strangling me. Standing before the bearded, bear-like bus driver, I handed him my six-dollars. "Will you please tell me when I get to Springview?" I asked.

"If I remember," he replied gruffly.

"Should I remind you?"

"Move away," he snapped.

The man in the mink hat paid and disappeared to the left, behind a long yellow curtain. This curtain hung from a rod in the ceiling, splitting the bus down the middle, separating the men on the left from the women on the right. There were two seats on each side of the curtain, leaving a pencil-thin walkway on either side. The curtain was yellow, the symbolic color used by ancient Persians, Muslims, Christians, and Nazis to identify Jews. But why yellow on this bus? Ironically, like most captors in history, the Springview bus separated its "prisoners" by sex. However, on this bus it was not to disorient them but to insure that no man would illicitly, irresistibly be drawn to a forbidden woman. Vice versa hardly occurred to them.

The bus zoomed off, careening round corners of Manhattan. Standing right behind the driver, I clutched a metal pole for fear of hurtling headfirst to the back of the bus. From this position I was able to watch the feast of men on the left in various degrees of curliness and beardedness. Some had removed coats and jackets, setting them neatly on overhead racks; their \$200 Borsalino hats sat beside their jackets like docile wives. These men now wore only white shirts, silky ties, and small velvet *kipot* on their heads. Some sat in shirts and waistcoats, the sexy little buttons of which invited undoing from top to bottom.

The bus hurtled forward without my daring to move for a few minutes. But once I became used to the motion, I entered the women's side, staggering along the tiny aisle toward the rear, clutching at every seat back. Because the yellow curtain blocked all sight on the left, I felt trapped in detestable *purdah*.

As a modern Orthodox woman, I could accept the *mechitsah*, the separation of men and women in the synagogue during prayer. I enjoyed sitting in the women's balcony and loftily viewing the men below as if from a good opera seat. But why separate us on a bus when not praying? As a feminist in most matters, I'd been spoiling for an argument about this for a long time. But I didn't dare protest on this bus. Any "inappropriate"

action by me would get back to Anna, who would roundly criticize me for my anti-sex-segregation-in-secular-situations outlook. Castigation used to be an elder's domain, but now it belonged to the younger generation.

Jerking along the aisle, I searched for a window seat where I could relax and gaze at the passing landscape. The seats were filled with married Springview women who had shopped for family food during their lunch breaks from work in the city. Their bulging plastic bags sat on the seats beside them, and their exhausted eyes dared me to ask them to put them on the floor. Intimidated, I didn't feel like tangling with these women; this ride was their only rest.

Finally, in the very last row on the right in the women's section, I spied an empty window seat with an empty seat next to it. Tired and irritable, I edged toward it. But a lump jutted out of the yellow curtain from behind the men's side, impeding my passage. A delicious temptation flooded through me, and I happily gave the lump a sharp, hard jab.

"Madam, I didn't mean to get in your way. Did you have to poke me like that?" an injured voice came from behind the yellow curtain.

I grinned guiltily, finally glad of the curtain. I hadn't had the chance to be bad for ages.

The bus swooped around a corner and skidded to a stop at a red light. As I continued to sway toward my seat, I noticed with mounting indignation that a man stood beside it, his back toward me. This *chutzpernick* from the men's side, where women dared not tread, was about to make himself comfortable in *my* woman's space. Wearing only a small velvet *kipah* on the back of his head, he was folding a coat on *my* seat and patting his jacket with a satisfied, proprietary air. Even his tush looked smug.

"Aha," I thought, "You can't have it both ways, kiddo." Here was a wonderful, perfectly legitimate call to battle that even my daughter couldn't condemn. If women couldn't sit on the men's side, then men couldn't sit on the women's side. Right?

Inching closer to the man's waistcoat, I spoke clearly, in my best BBC voice: "Excuse me. I'd like to sit there." If he refused to comply, I would dive into the seat, justified by Jewish law since he couldn't touch any woman except his wife or mother.

The man turned around and our eyes met. He showed dismay, pain, resentment, shame, and guilt. "It's you!" said the man.

"It's you!" I exclaimed to the man who had removed his mink hat.

"I'm *terribly* sorry," he said, snatching up his coat and hat. "*Please* forgive me."

"Tell me when we get to Springview, okay?" I replied severely.

He nodded and dove behind the yellow curtain. I took my window seat, feeling as righteous as Queen Victoria. Mercifully, I fell asleep.

"Springview," called out the man in the mink hat. Predictably, the driver had forgotten me.

Dismounting, I spied Raphi waiting for me, wearing his funky baseball hat. A cursed cell phone hung from his jeans. He waved to me and to someone behind me. The man in the mink hat stepped out of the bus looking as neat, dapper, and glossy as when he'd boarded. To my horror, he and Raphi slapped each other on the back.

"Hey, man," the man in the mink hat said to Raphi. "Good to see you again."

“You, too.” The two men joked for a few moments, then Raphi turned his attention to me. “Ma, welcome. This is my friend, Marty Portnoy. He'll be staying with us over the weekend.”

"Delighted to meet you," said the man in the mink hat smoothly.

"Nice hat," I answered faintly.

The front seat of Raphi's Volvo was jammed with boxes, and he apologized. I slid into the back seat of the car, and the man in the mink hat climbed in, sitting a little distance from me. He stared tauntingly into my eyes, and I into his for a moment. Now who was tempting whom?

However, Raphi's warning gray eyes met mine in his rear view mirror, reminding me that while a handsome young man and I could still be attracted to each other, I must, when in Springview, behave like a respectable mother-in-law. I would have to demurely watch the man in the mink hat and Anna's single friend flirt during the next few days. Even though I also was single, *my* still youthful flirtatiousness was forbidden, especially while in Springview.

In this town I was a mother and a mother-in-law, condemned to a quiet weekend.