

Neggiah

Eli Glasman

The Prednisolone caused me to act slightly manic. On my first day back at school from hospital, while on a high dose of the steroid, I went around class and asked each of my friends if they masturbated. It was against Jewish law to masturbate, but I knew we all secretly did it.

Nobody admitted to it, but many of my friends dropped their eyes to the ground. I pointed this out to them and said that this was proof of their guilt and insisted that they admit it. My best friend, Shimon, took me aside and told me to calm down. I said that I wouldn't until he admitted that he did it as well. I'd become obsessed with getting as many confessions as I could. He caved and said that, yes, he had masturbated a few times and that, yes, he felt guilty about it. I asked him how many times exactly. He said that he hadn't counted. I admitted to him that I did it all the time. It was just something I couldn't deprive myself of, especially while on the Prednisolone, as one of the side effects was a heightened libido.

I went back home after that and only returned to school near the end of semester when I was off the steroids and level headed enough to study.

That Friday, Shimon and I snuck off after prayers and went to Carlisle Street. Nearly everyone in my community was out buying food for Shabbat, walking among hipsters and beach bums while wearing the full religious outfits— hats, beards, suits, wigs— like those character actors in the Ballarat gold mining places who pretend they're in another century. After making sure nobody was watching, we went behind

Glick's Bakery to have a spliff. When we were two drags into the joint, I told Shimon about Talya.

We'd been talking online for nearly a month and last night she finally said that she wanted to come over to my place. She also added, out of the blue, that she didn't adhere to Neggiah- a Jewish law that prohibits two people of the opposite sex from touching before marriage. No religious Jew would admit to not adhering to it, especially not girls. So, the fact that she told me she was cool with touching guys seemed very promising kiss-wise.

'Talya's a slut,' Shimon said, before passing me the joint.

I received the spliff and sucked in a lungful, letting the smoke rest in my chest until it hurt too much to hold.

'You'd kiss her if you weren't scared it'd get back to your mum,' I said, the words coming out as smoke.

Shimon smoothed down his orange beard fluff.

'No. No, I wouldn't,' he shot back. 'She just wants to get her first kiss and you're the only guy in our grade irreligious enough to do it.'

I rolled my eyes and flicked ash.

'I'm as religious as you are.'

'Bullshit, I'm much more religious than you. You wear sneakers on Shabbat.'

'You're allowed to wear sneakers.'

'Technically. But you shouldn't. It doesn't look good. You also told everyone you masturbate.'

'You admitted to it too!'

'Yeah, but I didn't brag about it.'

I shook my head, butted out the joint and put it in my pocket.

‘You should be careful tonight,’ Shimon added. ‘Just because we’ve done it, doesn’t mean we should do it again. Wasting sperm’s as bad as killing someone.’

At that moment, I felt an intense cramp in my gut. I wrapped my arms around my stomach and clenched my teeth. The cramps were always followed by a rush of gas, like thunder catching up to lightning. I knew what was coming.

‘I’ll try not to get carried away,’ I said. ‘I’ve got to go to the toilet.’

‘You don’t need my permission,’ Shimon replied. ‘Just go.’

I jogged out from behind the bakery and went into the toilet in Glick’s. Once inside, I slammed the cubicle door closed, dropped my pants, fell hard onto the toilet seat, curled my toes and waited. My bowel cramped up and emptied itself. The watery output burned as it passed, as if I was being flushed out with acid.

I sat, hunched over and breathing heavily, until the pain in my bowel eased away. I stood up and looked down. The toilet was spattered with descending lines of blood and fecal matter, which seemed to leak out from the walls of the bowl, as if the porcelain itself was bleeding.

I took a deep breath in to stop myself from crying. I then got some eye drops from my pocket, put them in so I wouldn’t look stoned, cleaned the rim of the toilet bowl, flushed the spliff and left the bakery.

Shimon was waiting for me outside.

‘Girls are fine, you know,’ he said, as I reached him. ‘You can’t waste a chick’s orgasm. They can cum as much as they want.’

I shook my head and started walking with him towards synagogue.

‘Would you give Talya head?’ he asked.

I looked down and felt myself go red.

‘If she wants me to.’

I ate Shabbat dinner at my Aunt's place, as my parent's were away, and only got back home at 9. Talya arrived at 9:30. I ran straight to the back door as soon as I heard the knock, but still waited a few seconds before I opened it, so I wouldn't look desperate.

'Hi, Yitzy. How are you?' Talya asked, once I'd opened the door.

She wore a loosely hanging green dress and way too much make up. Women always applied their make up too heavily on Friday afternoons, as they weren't allowed to touch it up until after Shabbat.

'Yeah, I'm good. Come in.'

Talya crossed her arms over her chest and stepped inside.

'You're a lot taller than I pictured you while we were chatting online,' she said, inflecting each syllable with a high-pitched whine.

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah, I pictured you as kind of short and anxious.'

I brought my hand up to my mouth and bit at the skin around my thumbnail.

'Oh, ok.'

Talya touched the nape of her neck.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be a bitch.'

'It's fine,' I said.

'I just say stupid shit when I'm nervous.'

'It's ok.'

'You're tall.'

'Cheers.'

'And laid back.'

'Thanks.'

Talya swallowed. So did I.

‘Do you want a drink?’

‘Love one.’

We got a bottle of wine and some glasses and went to the lounge. As soon as we were seated and our glasses were full, we toasted to good health and being young and started drinking.

We spent the next half an hour cracking bad jokes and gossiping about other members of the community. Talya was downing her wine quite quickly and I tried hard to keep up with her. I really shouldn’t have been drinking because of my bowel condition, but if I let her get too much drunker than me I would’ve felt guilty kissing her.

Midway through her third drink, Talya fell silent and started swiveling her glass.

‘You’re not going to tell anyone I came over here, are you? It’s just that if it got back to my mum, I’d be kind of screwed.’

I put my glass down on the coffee table. Talya did the same. I wanted to take her hand, but my palms were too sweaty.

‘Of course not,’ I said.

I suddenly felt guilty having her over. Her family was known to be ultra orthodox, much more religious than mine. I felt like I was corrupting her.

I thought of saying that she didn’t need to feel obliged to stay, but I was cut short when all the lights in the house suddenly switched off.

‘Damn,’ I muttered.

‘Why do your lights go out so early?’ Talya asked.

‘I...don’t know.’

This was definitely my mum's doing. Since it was prohibited to use electricity on Shabbat, all our household electrical items were set to timers. She'd clearly set the automatic lights to go off early. Accidentally, she'd claim, no doubt. But I knew it was her way of getting me into bed at a reasonable hour.

'I'll have to go next door. Do you want to take the wine to my room? It's the only light that isn't on the automated circuit.'

Talya didn't answer.

'It's only because of, the- the lights. None of the others will switch on...you know?'

Still nothing. I quickly started to think of a way to apologise, but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness I saw that Talya was smiling.

'Alright,' she whispered.

Without saying anything, I got up, jogged out the front door and went over to my neighbour's house. I knocked quickly. Moments later, Mr Jackson opened the door, dragging back a heavy, ornate lion he was using as a doorstopper. His front room smelled like a hospital and with a littering of flowerpots and porcelain cats, looked like the stock room of an op shop.

'Hey, Mr Jackson.'

'The scores are up,' he said, as he rested his hand on his lower back and arched himself up.

Every Jewish kid on the street would go to his house on Shabbat to find out the footy scores. He'd gotten so tired of being harassed that he started writing the scores on some cardboard and putting it up in his front window.

'Yeah, I know,' I said. 'I was just wondering if you could come over to my place. I need to show you something.'

Mr Jackson squinted at me.

‘What?’

‘It’s just a thing.’

It was against Jewish law for me to have a non-Jewish person use electricity on my behalf, so I had to hint my needs to him as vaguely as possible.

‘Nothing suss.’

Mr Jackson furrowed his eyebrows and touched his right bicep, as if checking if there was still muscle enough to punch me out.

‘Alright,’ he muttered.

He stepped cautiously out, settling his mouldy slippers onto the wood of his front porch, and followed me down his driveway and out onto the pavement. He kept close behind me as we walked the fifty meters to my place. When we got inside, I led him through the dark house and into my room.

Talya was already inside sitting quietly on my bed.

‘Hey,’ she whispered.

‘Hey,’ I whispered back.

Mr Jackson stepped up next to me.

‘It’s kind of dark in here, isn’t it?’ I asked.

‘Yeah,’ he said.

I picked up the closest book I could find.

‘Here,’ I said, opening the first page. ‘It’s a bit *dark* for me to read this, could you tell me what it says?’

‘No, the light’s off.’

‘Yeah, it is. It’s really dark.’

‘I can tell.’

I coughed and pushed up on to my tiptoes.

‘It’d be great to be able to see.’

Mr Jackson swore quietly, reached over and switched on the light.

‘This is that hinting business, isn’t it? Your father gets me over here all the time.’

The old man squinted around the room, taking in Talya on my bed and the glass of kosher dessert wine she’d left on my bedside table.

‘You’ve got Crohn’s, don’t ya?’ Mr Jackson asked.

I widened my eyes and looked at Talya. She was staring at the carpet.

‘Should you be drinking with your condition?’

‘I’m...not...’

I suddenly thought back to what my doctor had said the last time I’d seen him: if the Crohn’s flared again up it was likely I’d need to get a colostomy bag. I felt a soft cramp, as if my bowel knew we were talking about it. I wrapped my arms around my stomach.

‘I’m fine,’ I whispered.

‘Alright, alright. I won’t press it,’ Mr Jackson said.

He buried his hands in his pockets and sighed.

‘I guess I’ll leave you two alone, then.’

I continued to look at the ground and said nothing.

‘Okay, well,’ Mr Jackson muttered, ‘good night.’

The old man stepped out of the room and shuffled his way down the hallway.

‘I’ll show myself out, then,’ came his voice a few moments later, followed by the sound of a slamming door.

I looked at Talya. She had her eyes still trained on the carpet. Fuck. The old man had blown it for me. Now she knew I was a sick, desperate, needy, horny loser with no idea what he was doing. I wanted her to get out. I opened my mouth and was about to ask her to leave, when she whispered quietly: ‘This’ll be better with the light on.’

I closed my mouth and swallowed. Sweet.

I went over to the bed and sat down next to her. Talya shifted in closer to me. She leaned in, so that I could smell herring and red wine on her breath. She nuzzled her nose against mine and we started kissing.

I kept my mouth open and she kept hers closed, so that I covered her lips with saliva. I pulled back and apologised.

‘It’s ok,’ Talya said, before wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

We started kissing again. I felt the need to go to the toilet, but I ignored it, becoming suddenly stubborn. I couldn’t always be obsessively listening to my body. I was tired and enjoying myself and I didn’t want to leave the moment to go to the bathroom.

‘Thank you,’ I said, when we finally stopped.

Talya smiled and looked down.

My stomach rumbled quite loudly and I felt a heavy pressure in the bottom of my gut. I suddenly realised how stupid I’d been. I took a deep breath in and waited tensely.

‘You don’t have to thank me, you moron,’ she said. ‘It was nice.’

I said nothing. My lower back was starting to hurt and the pressure was building quickly. I went rigid and clenched as tightly as I could. Standing up would

only make it harder to keep in. I shut my eyes as I felt the warmth escape the hold my sphincter.

‘Can...can you please go?’ I whispered.

Talya didn’t respond. I opened my eyes and looked at her. Her face was slightly red. I could tell she was holding her breath.

‘Ok,’ she said. ‘If you want me to.’

She stood up and walked away from the bed. She hesitated at the door.

‘That old guy won’t say anything to your parents about me being here will he?’

I didn’t answer. The wetness on the back of my legs was started to sting the skin and I could feel another rush coming.

‘It...doesn’t matter,’ Talya said.

She then walked out. I closed my eyes and listened to her move through the dark house, until finally I heard the sound of the back door close.

Shimon arrived at the hospital late on Friday afternoon. He was dressed for Shabbat and had with him a small pile of film magazines. I was already hooked to the IV and was just waiting for them to wheel me into surgery.

‘To get you through Shabbat,’ he said, putting the magazines down on the bedside table. ‘I’ll try and visit, but there aren’t any other doors except the electric sliding ones.’

He looked around the room, spotted the crucifix on the back wall, took it down and slipped it in the top drawer of my bedside table.

‘I’ll have to hang around outside till a non-Jew walks through the doors and then follow them in.’

I didn't say anything. I felt numb and tired and trapped. I'd gone to see my doctor the Monday after my night with Talya. He'd told me that I really shouldn't have waited so long to see him and that I had to be more vocal about my symptoms. Nobody was going to take care of my health but me.

I'd kept my illness hidden for two years before I first came forth about my symptoms. And after that, whenever I saw my doctor, I always lied about how sick I was, as though, if I managed to convince him I was fine, then maybe I would be.

After doing a colonoscopy, the doctor told me that the inflammation had eaten away a fair amount of my large bowel and sphincter muscle. He said that the stoma would need to be permanent. I asked him if I would have needed to have a stoma if I hadn't kept my illness hidden for so long. He didn't respond.

'When do your parents get back?' Shimon asked, sitting down in the chair next to me.

'Tomorrow,' I whispered. My voice was hoarse. I hadn't spoken to anyone since I'd been checked in a few days earlier.

All I wanted was for Shimon to leave. I hadn't wanted to tell him I was having the operation, but he wouldn't stop ringing me until I answered my phone.

'I spoke with my sister,' Shimon said, taking off his hat and resting it in his lap. 'She said that Talya's been talking about you. You've got a reputation now.'

Suddenly, the door opened and a stocky blonde orderly came in with a wheelchair.

'All ready?' he asked.

I nodded. Shimon sat quietly.

The orderly walked over, put his arm around me and gently helped me up. I hadn't eaten in twenty hours and was too tired to get out of bed on my own. I looked

back at the bed. There was a stain left from where I'd been lying. Without saying anything, Shimon pulled the blanket over it.

‘Apparently, you’re a good kisser,’ he said, winking at me.

I smiled despite myself. The orderly walked me over to the wheelchair and lowered me in. Nobody said anything as I was wheeled out into the hallway.