

# Joe the Waiter

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# 1.

## Joe Goes to See a Bride

You asked how things went for us on the evening of Yom Kippur, if only it could be said of the gentile restaurants. The Missis had prepared chickens and ducks, and wonderful kasha, and noodle pastry, and stuffed chicken neck, enough for a small army. I was expecting us to be busy - What a joke after all the preparations; in the end we only had twenty customers, and from them about half only ordered a glass tea and a strudel. It is heroic, impressive that men can fast a whole 24-hours and still not be hungry!

I saw how the Missis took it to heart: How is it possible?! She worked so hard during the whole day before the holiday, cooked, baked, and cleaned and all that done while fasting, and the result: Nada! It was as though no one had fasted at all. I said to the Missis, "Shoot! Mrs. Leven, don't worry yourself about it. If the customers don't come today, they will come tomorrow. They aren't all going to fall out from fits today, they can eat it tomorrow. It will save you cooking tomorrow morning." But the Missis has a noble nature and she said that she can not give our customers food on Sunday that was cooked on Friday. On Sunday she cooked dinner again. And what do you think happened Sunday? We had, perhaps, thirty customers, and a third of them asked for soft-boiled eggs with warm milk and they complained that they had wasted the morning. Now I am racking my brains and can not figure out how they can say that they have wasted the morning fasting? If a man doesn't eat, he gets hungry. You can even ask a doctor and he will tell you. But following a fast it ruins your morning – that I don't understand.

I came face to face with troubles last Sunday when a matchmaker came into the restaurant and wanted me to consider a marriage contract. I said to him, "So soon after the fasting? Who thinks of a bride at this moment?" He laughed, the matchmaker, and said that it goes well with the holidays, people have free time and families can sit at home and receive prospective bridegrooms who come to visit brides. I said to him, "...and what exactly are the essentials?" The matchmaker laughed again and asked me what I meant by 'essentials.'" I answered him, "The 'essential' is the magnitude in size, that is to say how much money does the young Miss have?" He said, "Five hundred." I thought to myself: Considering the usual exaggerations, there is probably about three hundred left, which is still enough to go into business and become independent." I asked him, "Nu, and what about the girl herself?" He answered with a casual air, "What difference does it make? The essential, according to you, is the dowry." I said, "See here, Mr. Matchmaker, I want to know what kind of a dish the bride is. Is she veal, chicken or is she perhaps only a duck? He said to me, "Well...she does have, maybe, a little flaw." I wanted to know what kind of flaw and he said I should go see the bride and make up my own mind. I said, "All right."

He took a little card out of his pocket and said, "On this card I have written the address. Go there tomorrow at eight o'clock, they will be expecting you. I will stop by there a little bit later. It is no longer fashionable for the groom and the matchmaker to arrive at the same time. Go there and introduce yourself. They will invite you in as a welcomed guest. The matchmaker left and I said to myself, "Nu, Joe, don't delay. Go out and get yourself a full dress suit, the way a young man should, who can crack nuts." Monday night I went to Canal Street to a man who rents full dress suits and wedding apparel. He put me in a black frock coat and cautioned me to be very careful not to bow too

low because if I did the coat might split. Then I went home and put on a white shirt with a blue tie and yellow shoes. I gave myself a look in the mirror – A complete dandy!

Shortly after, I took the streetcar to the address that the matchmaker had given me. When I arrived at the house I stopped dead in my tracks and stared up at the house in wonder. The house looked like someplace where aristocrats would live. By the door was a Negro servant in a uniform with brass buttons. He asked me who I came to see. “Does Mr. Lekech live here?” I asked the servant. He bowed to me and answered, “Yes Sir.” I wasn't sure if I should bow back to a Negro servant, then I remembered that the coat might split. The Negro servant led me into the hall. There I was met by another Negro servant who took me to an elevator and we rode up one floor. I said to the Negro servant, “Buddy, you are going to too much trouble, to go up one floor a person could climb on foot.” The Negro servant took me to a door and pressed a button by the door. The he left and left me alone, by myself, in the hall.

I stood and waited and wondered how such a man who would only give his daughter five hundred dollars for a dowry would be living in such a house with Negro servants. Then I remembered that among the aristocrats it was not at all fashionable to give dowries. So, why was he offering five hundred dollars as dowry? It must be because the girl has a flaw – what sort of flaw could it be? Perhaps the flaw was worth more than five hundred dollars. “Be a mensch, Joe,” I said to myself, “and don't let them make a fool of you.”

While I stood there thinking, another black servant came and opened the door for me. I thought to myself, “They are all blacks! In this house I have yet to see one white person. Perhaps the bride is also a black?” I told the servant that I had come to see Mr. Lekech. She asked me for my visiting card. I told her I did not have any cards with me. She asked if I had an appointment. She went away, but came back shortly and showed me into a beautiful room. As I entered the room I was met by a handsome gentleman with a white beard. He shook my hand and presented me to two pretty women. One was his wife, the other his daughter. Something wasn't right about the way they looked at me. There was something that did not please them; it was either my blue tie or my yellow shoes. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face – it was getting very warm in the room. We all sat down and the young lady sat right next to me. A maiden – I noted - who was like a pine tree, just as round and thick as one and healthy as a Cossack. I thought to myself, where is her flaw? Maybe she has a foot made out of wood, or a wooden hand, or a glass eye, or maybe she is stuffed with cotton, or she is bald and wears phony hair. Just try talking to young women today!! I think to myself, “Since I don't know how, I don't want to make a mistake. I was very attracted to the girl and ready to take her just as she was.”

I sat there and couldn't think of anything to say to start a conversation. She kept looking me over, first at my yellow shoes and then at my tie. In the middle of that she spoke to me in English, “We have fine weather.”

“Sure, I said, but it is bad for my business, for in good weather my customers go to Coney Island and I lose my tips.”

She stared at me with both eyes. I thought, “Aha, there is the flaw!! She is a little mixed up in the brain. With that kind of a look in the eye, she has to be a little crazy. That's where they wanted to pack me in a sack! Joe, be a mensch!”

“We thought you were an importer of woolens,” the father said.

“You are mistaken,” I said to him, “I am not an importer of woolens. I am Joe the Waiter from the intellectuals' restaurant on east Broadway.”

“Papa!” I heard the daughter say, “There must have been a misunderstanding. This is someone else.”

In the midst of this the Negro servant came back in with another visiting card. In a couple of minutes the matchmaker entered the room. He took me by the hand and began to usher me out of the room saying to the others, “A mistake! Excuse me all! I gave the young man the wrong address.”

The whole house irrupted in laughter, but at my expense. However, the householder came to me and stopped me, saying to the matchmaker that he was not a gentleman to drive a man from a stranger's house.

“It is a shame,” he said to him forcefully.

In short they bid me sit down again and the young girl spoke with me in the most friendly manner and with less hesitation. I thought that we were getting back on track and they wanted me to go through with a marriage contract. But in the middle of it, the matchmaker came back in and whispered in my ear, “They do not want to do business with you, but you must be a mensch and be the one to get up and leave. Don't forget to say goodbye to each one.”

I stood up and said, “Goodbye all, I must be going.” Each one shook hands with me and had parting words for me. The older man accompanied me into the hall and up to the elevator. I said “Goodbye” to the Negro servant by the elevator and to the Negro by the door, and then I was in the street.

The matchmaker came a little bit later and brought me the correct address, for the correct bride, but I didn't want to do any more business with him. I showed him the door.

## 2.

### When Joe Was an “Omnibus”

This happened five years ago. I was at that time an omnibus, that is to say, a helper to a waiter. Do you have any idea what problems an omnibus has before he becomes a waiter? An omnibus is a null. Alone, by himself, he is a nothing. Place him together with a waiter and then he is something. The waiter has to keep his eyes on the customers, and the omnibus has to keep his eyes on the waiter. He must support the waiter by carrying plates, spoons, knives and a glass of water. He has to run or jump at the right moment. However, he must not make himself too evident to the customers. And when it comes to the tip, the omnibus has to make 'skidoo' and run. He has to disappear like falling into the water, because all the tips belong to the waiter. So says the unwritten law. Everything falls on the omnibus, usually the most unpleasant things, like when a customer puts his hand in his pocket, the omnibus earns a kick from the waiter, but done in such a way that no one sees it, not even the omnibus. He just feels a sudden pain from the toe of a shoe in his behind. Button your lip, and don't say a word!!

During this terrible time, when I was living only with the hope of someday being a waiter, a simple headwaiter without a omnibus, an evil impulse told me to go to a dancing hall and learn to dance. You are probably asking yourself, why in the world would I need to learn to dance? Nu, a lot of waiters hang out in the dancing hall. Dancing can be very useful in our profession. A waiter must know how to dance, dance here, dance there, from one table to another and from there to the kitchen. All right, I'll get to the point, have a little patience. There in the dancing hall I met a young lady, not bad looking and made up like a baby doll. But she was a fool – a real block of wood.

She started talking to me and giving complements saying that I was a handsome boy. After that she asked me if I would be her 'feller.' It did not sit well with me. I said, “I hardly make enough to support myself. I don't make enough for a family, I can't even think about it.” She responded, “You big fool! Do you think I want you for a husband? I just want you to go out with me when I want to go out. Sometimes to the theater, sometimes to a ball, sometimes just for a walk. I will pay for everything with my own money. I work at a millinery shop and make good money. I will buy you a new suit also if you wish.”

In short, she continued to talk and talk and plead with me. I thought to myself, what a blockhead, what an idiot, but she convinced me. The customer who eats dairy noodles said that, indeed, deception and turning a man's head is something even the most foolish girl can do. When it comes to these types of things they all have smarts. So I went out with the girl, Mary was her name, like it was a steady job. My job was to go to her place a few times a week and take her on a visit to her girlfriends, once a week to the dance hall, sometimes to the theater or a ball, and sometimes just promenade down Grand Street. When walking down Grand Street she would meet female friends and introduce me to them as her friend. The word 'friend' she would take care to pronounce a little haltingly and lower her eyes as though she were being bashful.

I was very happy with this job. To begin with I got to go to the theater for free, suppers and snacks. Secondly, she gave me some money to dress myself. I stopped being afraid of her. She said she was thinking about getting a better man than I, more handsome and with a better income. She let me know that there was a suitor after her and followed her step for step, but she did not care for him. It was clear

she didn't want me either – she made a point of telling that to all of her acquaintances.

“I am not the only one who does this,” she would say, “in New York there are a lot of girls who have taken fiancées as rentals, just to have someone to go out with, and now and then they get one that turns out to be a catch.”

After we had been going out like this for about ten months she confided a secret to me:

“Listen, Joe, I already have a fiancée, a real fiancée, but that doesn't mean I am going to give you the sack, because I am still not completely sure about him. You young men! Can you really trust them? Now, Joe, you can be more useful to me than ever. You must pretend like you are jealous. When you meet my fiancée you mustn't let him see how things really are between you and I, but you must put on a show. No, you have to convince him that you are my real fiancée, and that you are very jealous that he is trying to make a match with me. That will really make him jealous and hurry him up.”

From that point on I came less often to see Mary. She began to split her free time between me and the other young man. But once I had the occasion to encounter him at Mary's house. Now I understand that it happened because she intentionally invited us both over at the same time.

The young man was clearly very jealous of me and gave me sharp looks with his eyes. I glared back at him to show him that I was even more jealous. Mary tried to appear good and attentive to us both. She, that foolish kid, played her role better than both of us! That made me angry at all the women of the world. I will stand by my opinion that any woman can act out any role she wants and the smartest man will not be able to figure out that it is a performance!

Yes, it is just like what the customer who eats dairy noodles said: “Bluffing, and turning a young man's head is something even the most stupid girl can do.”

“You know what?” Mary said to us both in a sweet tone, “We will all take a walk together down Grand Street. I will go into the next room and change my clothes.” At that point she gave me a wink, and a wink to him and she stepped into the next room.

As soon as she left the room, the young man asked me: “How long have you known this little flake?”

I was shocked when I heard him use such a word. Is this the way a prospective groom talks about his fiancée? I remembered that I was supposed to play my role, so I said to the young man:

“It is not nice to speak like that about a lady.”

“What?”, he asked, “are you really in love with her?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You're lying,” he said, “You are only here to put on a show, just like I am.”

“What do you mean, like you?” and at that point I awoke from my delusion. “You mean to say that you are not Mary's fiancée?”

“And you?” he asked.

“And you?” I asked.

We looked at each other like the two Kuni Lemels. The the young man smiled at me, slapped me on the back and said, “We are colleagues, Brother. Two bluffing fiancées at the same door!”

What happened after that I can tell you in a few words. Me and the other fellow continued to work at the same job, as rented fiancées for a couple of months more.

Word kept circulating among Mary's acquaintances and girlfriends that two young men were in love to die for her, they were crazy about her and followed her everywhere step for step. The end of the story is that Mary got married to an older fellow who had two rental girlfriends. As for that fellow, it is a story in itself. I will tell it to you some other time.

### 3.

## A Waiter is Smarter than a Lawyer

Grab a glass tea, close your mouth, open your ears and listen. Sunday the Missis said to me, “Joe, you can take a day for vacation.” Nu, can you guess where I went? Nu, I went to Coney Island. On Sunday the place is packed, but I had read in the newspapers that a judge had decided that the city could not charge more than five cents for the trip to Coney Island. I wanted to see how people could travel for a nickel and how Capitalists would obey a judge. In short, the first nickel I paid out while we were still on the bridge and thought that the conductor would not ask me for any more. When we got to the place where they demand the second nickel the conductor counted the passengers, then counted the fare box and said it was short and he had to collect two more nickels.

That unleashed a storm among the passengers because it was still a long way to the ocean. The conductor began to threaten everyone and said he would throw them off the car. A few people paid up then the rest gave in and did the same. When he came to me, I said to myself, “Joe, be a mensch and don't pay! Show him that you are a free citizen in America and teach the robber barons a lesson, they should think twice.” That is what I said to myself, and to the conductor I said, “No, I will not give you another nickel as sure as I live.” I heard a man sitting near me say, “Dat's right! I am not going to give another nickel either!” The conductor said to us, “I am going to throw both of you off the car.” The man next to me said, “I am a lawyer and anyone who lays a hand on me or on this young man will pay dearly for it.” That made me feel good. I smelled a little business. It is a good business, I thought to myself, and leaned over to the lawyer and whispered in his ear, “We will be partners, I am going to get damages and you will help.” The lawyer became a little angry, he was probably German, and he said to me, “Hey, you are a mensch with no sense of honor. You want to make a business from this. This man treads on the heads of free citizens, we are being robbed of our rights, and you get it in your head to make a business of the situation. You are going to let yourself get beat up just to get a few dollars.” That is just what he said to me. I looked at him like he was meshugge and said, “Today, why do we need lawyers if not to get damages?” He spit, angrily turned away from me and did not speak to me. I thought, get control of yourself, I will show you that even though you are a lawyer and I am a waiter, I will still out-argue the conductor.

In a moment the conductor had stopped the car and called for a special officer. He pointed out me and the lawyer. The special officer asked me to exit the car. I yelled out, “I want my change!” The conductor asked, “What change?” I said, “I gave you a dollar back on the bridge and you still haven't given me my change.” The conductor flew into a rage and screamed, “Liar!” I said, “You are a liar! Count your fare box and see how many fares you have collected.” I gave the conductor a wink, and I saw that he turned white. I continued, “We have here 80 passengers, so let's see how much money you have.” I heard the conductor say to the special officer, “All right!” He rang the bell and the car started off again toward Coney Island. As soon as the car started moving the conductor came to me and counted out 95 cents in my hand and gave me a look like he wanted to eat me alive. I thought to myself, the tough-guy has made a profit of forty nickels on this trip, he is not hurting. I cast a glance at the lawyer, and he looked at me. My look toward him said, “Aha,” he should see now who is smarter, a waiter or a lawyer. He looked at me as though he didn't know what to think about me. Finally, he opened his mouth and said to me, “You are a very common person, but you handled that very cleverly. I don't trust people like you. Are you a citizen?” “Sure, Mack!” I answered him, “I was a citizen three weeks after I arrived in America and in the first year I voted in the elections.”



He burst out laughing so hard I thought he would fall out of the car. That was a messhugener German! First he is angry, then he is laughing!

That is how I taught the Capitalists a lesson. I have long had the habit when I go to Coney Island to count the passengers and count the times the conductor sounds the bell on the fare box. That way I can calculate how much he is making each day, and when he will have enough money to quit his job and go into the real estate business.

I have tried on several occasions to get a job as a conductor. They get a lot more tips. But it never came to anything. I had an acquaintance, a landsman, who was a conductor for two months. Now he has a dairy store that he tends himself and a second that his wife manages. He has two houses listed for sale and he pedals jewelery on the side. Also, he is a Notary Public and a little bit of a lawyer, too. Not long ago he was arrested by an inspector from the Board of Health because he found a milk-can full of water. When he was brought before the judge he argued that the water cost him more than milk. The judge asked him how could water be more expensive? My landsman answered, "Your Honor! It wasn't water." The judge got very angry and yelled, "What, are you crazy? Just a moment ago you said that water cost you more than milk, and now you turn it around to say it isn't water. I am going to send you away for contempt of court!"

My landsman said, "Judge! Your Honor! Don't be angry. It wasn't water. The story is, I placed it among the milk for a long time to keep the milk cold and fresh. Nu, doesn't that make it ice water? When I put it in the case it was not water. Nu, and when the ice disappeared how could I make a profit on it? You know very well that nowadays ice costs more than milk!"

And what do you think? The judge wouldn't let him go? Sure the judge let him go!

## 4.

### He Buys Immortality.

Today, for an appetizer we have marinated fish! Aha, you are happy, I know that you like it. The best part, the middle piece, I have saved for you. You are going to be delighted.

There, now you have your piece of fish and I have the horseradish. And I have a story to tell you that will really please you. Starting today we are colleagues, associates, equals. I have been accepted as a writer. This is how it came to pass:

Yesterday a handsome Jew came in and said that he is an author [mechaber]. I did not hear him very well and I thought I heard him say he was a terrorist [mechabel]. I said to him, "Skidoo! I don't bluff, this isn't Coney Island." He repeated to me that he is an author, some one who makes books and he is the famous "Rabbi Sage." I asked him, "What kind of a sage are you?" He answered, "I write a book about the greatest people and the greatest writers in America and I add their photographs to my book." I asked, "How is that being a sage? Does it cost money?" He explained it very reasonably this way: "Each person who wants to be included in the book along with his picture pays me a few ducats. When the book is complete then I collect two ducats for each copy of the book they want." I said to him, "So, you get tips, big tips, and double them. You know, that is brilliant. Take me on as a partner."

Rabbi Sage laughed and answered, "I don't need a partner, because I don't need to put more money into the business." About then I noticed that the clock struck noon, and the customers would be coming in soon. I wanted to get done with him so I asked him, "What would you like to order today?" He responded like this, "Listen, Mister Joe! I have come to the conclusion that you are a great writer. Your biography and your picture should be in my book. Because, in what way are you any worse than the other writers? I should have as healthy a year as you write, better than the others, a thousand times better. I will write that in my book and print your picture so you can show it to your friends, your family and I am certain it will help you with a marriage contract."

I let myself be convinced and asked him if he could print my picture from a tintype. He said, "It is one in the same." I said, "But the tintype I had taken at Coney Island dressed in a bathing suit, and how can you stick me in the book in a bathing suit among the Rabbis, the brilliant personages and the writers?" He answered by saying that he can fix that: He will cut off my head, that is to say from the picture he will cut out the head and put it with another picture in a full-dress suit. That pleased me even more. And the more Rabbi Sage spoke to me the more I liked the plan. Finally I said to him, "How much? What do you want for that?"

"Five ducats to begin and two ducats when I bring you the completed book, and three ducats to make the picture."

My head began to spin when I heard that, so I gave the soup a little cold water, dug down for a little courage, and tried to think hard:

"Listen, Reb Sage," I said to him, "In America we don't use ducats. You mean, perhaps, a ten dollar bill. That is two weeks tips. I can't afford it because lately I have lost a lot of money to other sages just

like you. If you want to do a deal, it will have to be like this. When you bring me the completed book, I will give you five dollars.”

After a little back and forth he got the price up another dollar. Secondly, I only give him three dollars in advance and three when he gives me the finished book. On delivery I also give him a cup of coffee and three soft boiled eggs in the bargain. Now I am going to have my picture right after yours in the same book. I made him promise to put me in there right after you, because as far as I am concerned you are the best customer.

## 5.

### A Man with Two Faces

There, in the restaurant a customer came in, Mr. Bonder was his name. He is not a regular customer. He shows himself only a few days around the first of the month, and a few days around the fifteenth. I understand that he is a landlord who has a house downtown and he comes down here from uptown to collect rent. Whenever he comes to the restaurant he always orders the sour beef. If we don't have sour beef he orders baked herring. It doesn't matter if I try to interest him in other things. That is a big deal for me. My craft is to know what people will like to eat. Have I already told you his name? Yes, Mr. Bonder is his name and he likes to talk a little. Once we talked about the rent strike. It was during the time when the strike was really cooking. He told me that the strikers were right. It really surprised me to hear that from a man who was a landlord. But he explained to me that the truth was that even in his own case there were a good number of landlords who charged their tenants too much. "Even I, for example," explained Mr. Bonder, "am a tenant to another landlord and I give him 40 dollars a month rent. I learned, however, that the previous tenant only paid 35, and I tell you, Joe, if the tenants in the building want to strike, then I will go on strike with them even though I am a landlord."

Two days later Mr. Bonder came back in lively and full of good cheer. He gave me a slap on the back and said, "Joe, you will be showing me some respect, I am a striker!" The tenants in the house where I live have united and gone on strike. They are offering five dollars less for each apartment."

"That's fine," I said, "It is a good thing that you are standing with the tenants."

"Joe," he continued, "you want to hear what sort of a speech I made yesterday before the strikers. If you want to hear it you will have to be a rebel because I am a regular agitator. I damned high rents, damned landlords, the real estate agents, the police....everybody!"

Mr. Bonder was so pleased with himself that he left a tip for me of a whole dollar.

Ten days passed before Mr. Bonder came back to the restaurant again, but he was not at all as happy this time as before.

"It is terrible, Joe," he said to me, "it doesn't pay to let yourself be led by ideals!"

"What has happened," I asked, "Why are you speaking so pessimistically?"

"Oh," he explained, "When I was engaged in my battle against the landlords, my tenants downtown went on strike against me. They are striking now in three buildings where I am the landlord, and they are demanding more than I can give to them. I swear to you Joe, by my word of honor I swear, it does not pay to let yourself be led by ideals."

"So why are you letting this eat your heart out?", I asked him, "You will work it out with your tenants. You are a mensch with a conscience."

"But," he countered and took from his pocket two postal cards, "Look at what kind of trouble I am in!

Here I have an invitation to come to a meeting with the strikers where I am in the finance committee, and there I have a post card inviting me to a meeting of the landlords association where I have been appointed a member of the executive committee. And imagine, Joe, both meetings are on the same evening. This evening!

Well, would you like to know the end of the story with Mr. Bonder? The end was that the landlords association kicked him out for belonging to the strikers, and the strikers kicked him out for belonging to the landlords association. He lost on both sides. He had to give in to his landlord and he had to give in to his tenants. With one pair of feet you can't dance in two dance halls.