

DON'T TELL THE RABBI

A Comedy of Religious Proportions

Book I

THREE FRIENDS AND
AN OLD LADY

SIGRID FOWLER



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DON'T TELL THE RABBI: A COMEDY OF RELIGIOUS PROPORTIONS
Three Friends and an Old Lady—Book I

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*For RJ with thanks for that assignment and for צפרה,
whose photo gave me שירלי.*

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CHAPTER ONE

A Small Crisis

SO, WHAT YOU'VE GOT IS ME, BABY. JUST ME TO TELL YOU what happened in Beulah, SC, the year the rabbi found out. But before I get into all that, I should tell you who you're lookin' at. I'm not very big for a pastor's wife and I have red hair. The church won't let me do anything—it's Baptist—so I mainly get into trouble and try not to. When I say "red," that's a euphemism. My hair looks more like some random October maple—and I don't allow "ginger." That has overtones. I'm the one describin' it so humor me. It's my hair.

Somethin' else you're not allowed to do is tell me there should be a comma before "so." I go by the no comma unless you've got more than five words in the second independent clause. That rule's as firm as South Carolina pink granite.

Enough of the fine points. Well, maybe not quite enough. I better level this bazooka-loaded *caveat* right from the git go. My college boyfriend, a farmer who later died when his beard caught on fire as he was passin' out funnel cakes at the Tyrone county fair and not payin' attention . . . well, this estimable and good lookin' son of central PA once called me a *wunderkind*. What he was sayin' was that I'm Super Woman. Maybe you don't know that word *wunderkind*. Well, you can look it up. I'm not explainin' words—that's another thing you need to know. The third thing is this: I'm not a cornpone. But I'll let you find that out for yourself . . . on your own time.

Right now, we're visitin' an EMS vehicle that's haulin' with some difficulty and tryin' to get Miz Faber to the emergency room before she breaks every window in the vehicle, all the gauges, every shot needle that isn't plastic, all eight of the

eardrums present, and the stereo speakers, as well, with her opera-career voice, pore ole thing. She's already broken her arm. Miz Faber's more of a *wunderkind* than me—and yes, the italics are intentional, thank you very much. It's a foreign word, isn't it?

Anyway, here we are in the ambulance. How do I know all this? I know it because I know it. You figure it out, baby. I'll just say one thing: I have a respectable imagination, and I put it to work gettin' into heads and seein' what's to see. This too: one day Joe Paul needed a listenin' ear. He's some kind of cousin and mine were available. Speakin' of ears, he thought he'd be deaf for life, pore ole baby.

The fourth thing is this: I enjoy makin' you think I'm a cornpone.

The ambulance pulls out—lights, no siren. Inside, an unhappy Miz Faber chokes down her sobs and tries that stubborn young man one more time.

“It's not right to kidnap people!”

No luck. He can't hear at all, she tells herself. He's deaf! Deaf . . . and I'm a prisoner! Somebody's tied me down. These young people! Pay no attention, none at all. He's deaf as . . . as a pirate. One eye and that patch. Must be one ear too. That's it, a deaf pirate . . . big mustache and a pirate ship.

“This is a pirate ship!”

Joe Paul's lookin' up, studyin' the old lady. She's glarin' at the ceiling. Launchin' into a line from Gilbert and Sullivan, she searches her memory about pirate ships. Not much there, but singin' helps. No need to open up yet.

She's turnin' her head, lookin' around. Where's the audience and cast? The pirates? That low ceilin's all she can see. Shouldn't be a low ceilin'. Maybe on pirate ships . . .

Ditherin' pain. She shuts her eyes. I should pity him if he can't hear, she's thinkin', tryin' to take her mind off.

Can't concentrate. Col. Mitchell could deal with a pirate. I'll say, “I forgive you for the roses, Col. Mitchell. You just take out your sword and deal with 'em!” Definitely pirates around here, right—uh, right here . . . here, wherever this is.

The medic's watchin' as her questions give way to the pain of a broken arm. He reconnizes the tangled thought processes. They'll curl themselves into knots—

certainty-uncertainty, recollection-discovery, familiar-unfamiliar. All she knows is the pain.

Joe Paul Martin adjusts his EMS cap and smiles, patten' her thin white hair.

Right there with you, ma'am, he thinks. When that metal filin' flew into my eye, it was me bein' hauled off to the ER. Patch comes off tomorrow, but I won't be forgettin' the pain any time soon. Be awful not to see—even in one eye. The singin' is a bit unusual.

Fine with me if it makes you feel better, he thinks. Musical like Nana. An ooze of blood has marked the old lady's fall; he bends for a closer look.

Scraped her head, looks like, he tells himself. Amazin' how scalp wounds bleed. This one's not too bad. Hurt if she moves that arm though.

Joe Paul gets an antiseptic wipe to clean the cut and looks at the patient. Older version of his grandmama, the person he loves best in the world. Lucy Jenkins raised him two towns over, and she's a real woman, a real woman in a man's world.

"Lucy Jenkins, present" is always in the secretary's notes for the Council minutes, and that's longer than Joe Paul's been livin'. Plays the organ at the Main Street Methodist Church, and the whole church relies on her. Preachers come and go, but not his Nana. She's the one and only church musician, everybody's advice giver. You can hear the respect when they say, "Miss Lucy." She's "Nana" to him. "Nana" is a lot of things—mama and grandma, confidante, coach. Friend's in there too. Nobody says "Nana" but him.

On top of it, Nana changes her own car oil. He knows because he taught her. She likes the way it saves her money, and she doesn't care a bit if it gets her hands dirty. When he was little, she taught him how to pat his head and rub his stomach. Took him a while to get it goin'. The exact minute's clear as yesterday. Like playin' the organ, she said. She knew what she was talkin' about.

Jugglin's that way too, Joe Paul thinks, smiling at the old lady. How many organists in the whole wide Methodist church can juggle?

This old lady favors his Nana. Cousins maybe. Nana will know. She carries all the county families around in her head, the kinfolk and connections—everybody down to the cousins once or twice removed, even three times or whatever, plus

the ones married in. He can't figure it out, but she can. She has it all straight and she can explain it.

"You just lie still, Miz . . . uh, Miz Faber," he says, scanning the clipboard. "That arm won't hurt you so much if you just be still there. We'll be pullin' into the hospital pretty soon now. Dr. Welhelm says he'll be waitin'."

He pauses, wonderin' if she heard. He can't do anything about a hearin' problem.

"You sure do have some nice flowers in your yard, ma'am. I was on your street the other day, and I told my Nana about 'em. They're real nice. 'Course I don't know one from another, but yours're real nice. You must of put a lot a work into 'em."

To encourage the old lady's brain onto a sidetrack, Joe Paul smiles into the faded blue eyes peerin' up at him. One of 'em looks different. Funny thing. He's sure the eye wasn't what got hurt when she fell. Almost missed that cut though.

The eyes are wide open. Joe Paul meets the stiletto stare and waits.

"Young man! They're prize roses from the . . . uh, the gardens. What's . . . what's their name? I'll think of the name directly. Prizes! They got prizes for the fragrance. When my Frank was alive—he was the president of the State Rose—uh . . . group, some kind of group. He got rewards for the best smelling roses in South Carolina. That was after we came back from New York.

"Now—well, *now* . . ."

Her eyes narrow and she's whisperin'. The pain has moved to another universe.

"*Now* Col. Mitchell won't leave 'em alone! Col. Mitchell? Died at the Battle of Malvern Hill in Virginia . . . died fighting the Yankees. It's not right what people say around here! People think the Yankees hanged him from a tree in my yard, but that's not right. He wasn't a spy at all. He died in Virginia in that battle. He was not caught and hanged for a spy! Not the correct history. No, he died at the Battle of Mulberry Hill . . . died! Think that makes a difference to him? No, not a whit of difference! He came home like the rest, and now he can't stay away from my roses! He just loves them."

There's a pause while she catches her breath. Joe Paul watches as she gulps the air. He needs to breathe too.

"Young man, did you know Lunita Murray?"

“No, ma’am. I’m afraid not.”

“Well, Col. Mitchell was in love with Lunita Murray, and she was my great aunt or was it great great? I don’t know right now . . . can’t remember.

“Anyway, she said she’d marry him when he came back from the fighting. She’d be waiting with roses in her hair—you know, waiting for him to come back. Well, when he did, she was dead too. Didn’t matter. What he needs is roses; mine are the best in town! He wanders around looking for her, and she wanders around looking for him. They just wander around looking for roses, and they can’t find each other or . . . or anything! He comes around every night looking. He smells ‘em and smells ‘em. Can’t get even one. He smells the fragrance right out, and *nobody* can do anything at all about it.”

Joe Paul takes off his cap and scratches his head. Interesting story, but the details aren’t real clear.

“Being a ghost, he’s can’t deal with those stout canes. Even with his cavalry gloves, he can’t grasp the thorns. They just poke right through ‘im. All he can do is smell ‘em and grieve, smell ‘em and grieve. That he does, night after night. Nobody can do *a thing*, not even the maestro of the Metropolitan Opera!”

She tries to pull herself up and hollers out in pain as the elbow shifts inside the strap across her body. Humming a little tune, Joe Paul reaches over to quiet her. It’ll be calmin’ for a patient who doesn’t seem to understand every little thing happenin’ to ‘er. He likes this old lady.

“Now you just lie still, Miz Faber, ma’am. We’ll be there in about two seconds. You tell me some more about Col. Mitchell, please ma’am. I heard he was a real hero in that war. You say he likes your roses? I sure wouldn’t blame him. They are pretty.”

“Young man, are you on the Council?”

She sniffs. The question replaces a groan forming in her throat. The urgency of her tone says she’s forgotten the pain.

“No ma’am, ‘fraid I’m not.”

“Well, I’m glad you said that because I want you to make me an appointment with the Council. I have to report that crowd of ghosts smelling the fragrance out of my roses. The other night I went out to check. Couldn’t find one, not a lily either. Now that they’ve sucked up all my rose . . .

“What do you call it? My rose . . . what is it? I can't think of the word. You know, the nice smell. The ghosts suck it right out, and I can't do anything at all about it. Now it's the lilies! They did something to the lilies! Not one of them left!

“But I was talking about Col. Mitchell. Col. Mitchell would obey a town. . . a town, you know—a town *ordinance*! He's a law-abiding man. He carried the flag when they drilled. Cadet at the Citadel before they shut it down for the War. As everybody knows, it was flag and sword, sword and flag. He would mind that, and I wouldn't have to keep after him. You be sure to tell the Council I want an ordinance. No, tell 'em to put me on the agenda. I'll talk to them myself—next meeting!”

She stops to gulp in another breath and glares at the friendly face bending over her. The eye patch gives Joe Paul a rakish air he likes. It's not much help on the job though.

“But . . . but wait, I forget! You're not the one on the Council! You're a pirate, and you're wrong to be kidnapping an old woman! You should know it's not respectful and it's not nice. The sheriff will be at your door! I'll see to it, young man—in New York, a policeman on a horse! Maybe they have those around here now. He'll come to your door, count on it! It's wrong to be a pirate . . . the wrong thing to do in this world! God will be the judge. **GODWILLBEEEEEEEE—**”

Her voice rises to unknown decibels. “The glass-crackin' range,” Joe Paul called it. His scalp prickles, and every hair stirs to attention as the ambulance swerves, careens inches from a ditch on the wrong side of the road. Jerkin' the wheel to straighten his wild compensation, the driver struggles to regain control, swingin' 'em clear of oncomin' traffic and just missin' a good-sized bread truck comin' in from Wesley.

“Oh Lawd!”

The voice from the front seat expresses Joe Paul's feelings exactly, though it's been a while since prayer presented itself as the thing to do at times like this. The old black lady knows all about this patient, but the shatterin' screech tilts even her rock-solid steadiness. Maybe just nervous about the driver.

The ambulance slows, rounding the corner into the medical campus as the ER ramp comes into view. Joe Paul's moppin' his forehead and talkin' to himself.

No need to worry about being heard. The wailin' cry covers all sounds, even the squealin' brakes and the driver's vivid blue language.

"This isn't bullets, but I'm sure sweating," he mutters. "Have to change my shirt and it's not even noon!"

The joltin' decibels stop, and Joe Paul looks up as the ambulance inches toward the ramp with fine precision, backup beeps soundin' softly as they move in. Not a bit too soon. It's clear to this EMS medic that he's runnin' out of options. One thing for sure . . . nobody can say what might happen next in this vehicle.

Yeah, he tells himself, I may be competent and compassionate, but I'd rather not be dead! And this too—I better call her pastor to come visit. Maybe Nana, on top of it. They'll know what to do for this little lady. She sure does need somethin'.

It's me again. Here's the next thing that happened—this phone call, I mean.

I can deliver the verbatim because I have my pastor husband's phone video-bugged and Shirley does the same at their house. She's lookin' for the best time to talk to Moish about what's on her mind, and monitorin' his study may help her find out.

When Miz Hamilton committed suicide, I saw like lightenin' from on high that my Ricky needed backup. He's not a woman . . . let me tell you what, baby, Rick is not a woman! Anyway, sometimes, a woman needs another woman to talk to. Men don't know how. I could've helped Miz Hamilton, and I determined with every ounce of grit I could sharpen my teeth on that what was needed was a listenin' ear on the pastor's telephone. (The church still has a land line.) If I knew what was goin' on, I could help.

So far, it works pretty well. I don't know what will happen if Ricky finds out. If Moish knows, Shirley'll have a worse problem than me, you can be sure! She's a kind person though and agrees with me about the proactive. She's placed the bug so well I get to hear the rabbi's breathin' even. Learned that from a Mossad buddy. She got the video bug from her Shin Bet brother-in-law. They're smart over there and they don't like suicide.

Because of our little intervention, this conversation was just like here. Personally, I think my husband shouldn't be so hard on his childhood friend the rabbi, but sometimes Moish asks for it. Ricky still has his two old buddies, but Quentin's another matter—for Moish, 'specially.

This is what's goin' on: The sun is streamin' in the rabbi's study window, and he's just made a call to my baby, the Rev. Richard Parker Apricot III, pastor of the Union Street Baptist Church of Beulah, SC. It's the late '90s, and we all live in this little South Carolina town—well, everybody but Quentin. And the T-shirt fella. More about that later and the rabbi too. I know 'im like I know my own hand because his wife's a close friend of mine. Believe you me, he's as worried as he looks and that's all the time.

“What must I do to be saved?” Moish says. I hear his long fingers tappin' the big Hebrew Bible. He's smilin', but worry lines furrow the forehead.

“You know very well, you son of an Egyptian.”

The voice on the phone is somewhere between a growl and a welcome. “Open up that *Stuttgartensia* and read Isaiah 53. You know you won't do it.”

“I'd rather be the adopted son of an Egyptian than the son of a pagan!”

Levy takes a breath, congratlatin' himself on the neat dodge. But Rick's in-your-face assurance gets under his skin. This is just today's version. The two of 'em carry on a theological scrap they regularly escalate.

“Love and hate, twin brothers,” he's mutterin'. “No, not hate. I don't hate him.”

He's talkin' to himself, the phone on mute as he looks around for a pencil to sharpen. Shirley says he does that when he's frustrated.

“The Isaiah thing took me by surprise,” he's mutterin', “but it was crude to say ‘pagan.’ Rick knows what he's doing . . . loves to slip in Isaiah. He's usually not so obvious.” Moish is thinkin', next time, Richard. This won't be the last round! He's got his pencil and goes back to mutterin'. “You more than deserve it, Rev, whatever I come up with. But maybe it's just fishing . . . looking to be thanked for this Hebrew Bible?”

“So, Moses, you want to talk about adoption—?”

“Listen, Rick. Never mind all that. I have a question.”

Levy's cuttin' in before the aggravatin' voice can quote Paul and all that Romans stuff about grafted-in gentiles, and the “rich olive stock.” He's reachin' for any brake available to jolt to a stop the old debate my Ricky's ready to drive forward with his usual energy. Baptists just don't know when to stop jokin'

around, he's thinkin'. Adoption, Isaiah 53? The prophet's name is grabbin' at his composure, chokin' that famous ability to deliver the perfect comeback.

"I promise to answer with a question," Rick's sayin'.

"Stop. I'm needing to be . . ." Here, the rabbi sharpens the knife-edge of his tone instead of the pencil. He's pitchin' his voice in a lower register, talkin' more softly. The change is s'posed to be noticed. As far as my Ricky's concerned, he shouldn't start off with a theological salvo . . . and yeah, he deserves what he gets. Rick loves this man . . . like a blood brother.

"Okay . . ."

"You know the Feinemanns," Moishe says.

"Sure. I bought my wife's last birthday present there. Diamond earrings, in case Felix didn't tell you."

"Well, never mind that, though I concur . . . That was better taste than you usually show up with."

"All right. Serious or not? I'm busy."

"*Mea culpa*, Father Apricot. Listen. You know how depressed Miriam's been."

"Sure. She didn't do it, did she?"

"No. Well . . . but I don't know what kind of danger she's still in. Give me your take on something."

"Shoot."

"Please. Try to rein in the humor. It's never been that good. Black doesn't suit you anyway. Leave that to the papists."

Bringing out the pulpit voice, my Ricky lowers his decibels by half. "Go on," he says.

"What do you know about laughing? I mean, in your experience, does it fit in with anxiety and . . . well, anxiety linked with depression? You know . . . all the things chasing themselves around in Miriam's head this spring."

Here my husband, the Union Street pastor, angles his frame comfortably beyond the desk and unclenches his right hand. It's takin' him some effort not to bust out laughin'. What he's thinkin' is this:

Moish is going on, I'm in the dark, and he's scoldin' me for black humor! Now what's this about laughing?