



Source: Rory McCarthy, 'The ultra-Orthodox Jews on a mission to save Jerusalem from secularism', *Guardian Unlimited*, 03/08/07.

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A little way down Ben Yehuda street, Masha found a coffee shop and took a seat at a table beneath a parasol. She needed a moment for the flustered feeling to pass. She would smoke a cigarette and then call her son and tell him that she was lost. She had been sitting a minute, no more, when a man approached and asked if she was alright. This was a sign of how flustered she was: she did not register that he was speaking Russian. When she realised, she caught her breath. It was true that she looked Russian, but even so: why had he presumed? A terrible thought: he wasn't following her, was he? Masha's voice trembled as she asked, 'Do I know you?'

But, of course, she had her magazine with her, the one with the romantic stories and the Russian satellite television listings. Even though it was rolled into a tube, the Cyrillic letters were visible all the way around it. The man tapped the cover and explained that he did not want to intrude but she seemed distressed.

'My name is Grisha.'

'My son is also Grisha,' she said.

Now she was at her ease; though it was so common for two Russians to be called Grisha, it barely counted as a coincidence.

Masha was thin and rather beautiful, though she looked her age. She was no longer blonde, but ash grey. Recently, it had become difficult to buy the clothes she liked, but she made the most of her old suits; the short, Chanel-style jackets with padded shoulders and gold buttons. Today, a pink checkered jacket paired with a skirt. Grisha was practically the same age, bespectacled and portly, his hair combed into a side-parting that had evolved, over the years, into a device to hide his bald patch. A device that no longer worked. Yet he had something: a twinkle. He was capable of humour even when he was being cantankerous. He complained that he had been walking all day, his feet must be smoking. He could not believe how much the city had changed.

'And can you believe,' he said, 'There's nothing to buy? Nothing.'

So, that was it: Grisha must be a tourist.

'When did you last visit?' she asked.

'Jerusalem? I don't remember. Who wants to visit, anyway? It's full of frummers, only.'

This was a new word to Masha.

'Frummers? It's what they say in America,' he explained. 'It means religious. This is a city for the religious.'

'Are you American, then?'

'No. I have family in the States, but I live here. Who knows, though? I'm about to retire. Maybe I'll try America.'

As he said it, he shook his head, knowing he never would. He had cousins in America, but as long as his grandchildren lived in Haifa, he would remain in Israel.

'You haven't told me your name,' he said. 'Is it a secret? Must I guess?'

She laughed, which came with a fluttering cough. She

waved away the cigarette smoke as it left her mouth.

'Masha.'

She was a widow. He was a widower. Both born in Moscow though they admitted that it was a big city. They came from different ends of the metro, almost two hours apart.

At last, he said, 'So, what was the problem, Masha? Earlier?'

'It was silly. A panic attack is all that it was. I was supposed to meet my son in the cafe of the department store up there,' she pointed to the imposing tower block at the top of the hill, 'but there is no cafe any more. The whole floor is closed down. So I was anxious he wouldn't find me. I don't recognise the city any more.'

'Isn't that what I was saying? Didn't I say the same thing? And why is Jerusalem changed so much, after all? All the streets are the same as always. There are no new buildings, not since I last visited, maybe eight years ago. When were you last here?'

Masha cast her eyes up and counted. '2002. Five years ago.'

'Five years, and you feel as though you are lost, and the department store is closing down, floor-by-floor. You know, Jerusalem is the poorest city in Israel. What can you do, in a city filled with the ultra-Orthodox and Arabs, content that they need never do a day's work, while they have social security? Tell me, why should Jerusalem live on our hand-outs? It needs to look to its tax base, that is what it needs to do.'

He said the words 'tax base' with a flourish. He had learnt such words the hard way since arriving in Israel. Even now, many Russians of his generation did not understand them. There had never been any income tax in Russia, nor fuel bills, mortgage payments, credit or interest. But Grisha had swallowed the indignities, and eventually he had found a good job as a floor manager on Channel Nine, the Russian language station.

Masha watched the tele-novellas on Channel Nine. But forgetting herself, she told Grisha that she never listened to the news because it was full of scare stories about terrorism and threats from the Arabs.

Grisha missed her real concern. Instead, he shrugged and said, 'These are uncertain times.'

Her cell rang, flashing her son's number, and Masha answered in Arabic, 'La, habibi,' before going on to explain that their café no longer existed.

As she spoke, Grisha stared. It had never crossed his mind that Masha's late husband was a Palestinian from the territories, not an Israeli citizen. Masha was visiting Jerusalem illegally, from across the wall. This was why she had stayed away for five years. She was scared to visit the city because she might be found out and thrown in prison. It had nothing to do with the Frummers or the poverty, or the poor shopping. Two ordinary Russians, with their ordinary Russian names. This was how far apart they had become.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nicholas Blincoe.*