

STILLMAN'S FATHER

By Todd Pitock

Stillman's father, a well-known fornicator, blamed the misfortune of having excessive charm for his exile. It could be traced to an incident at his country club, where he was a unique figure, a single man among couples and families. No one ever thought of him as a widower because he never thought of himself as one. The simple truth was, after his wife went mad and hanged herself twenty years earlier, he'd forgotten about her and gotten on with his life. Tall and trim, with parted, smoke-coloured hair, elegantly manicured hands and cerulean eyes, he was the kind of man people looked at twice to figure out where they'd seen him before, some movie or on the news or somewhere. At fifty-four, he had had a busy social life because whatever people might have said about him, they gravitated to the cacophonous laughter that always ringed him.

He played golf several times a week and maintained a strategically inflated handicap of sixteen, shooting in the low to mid-eighties and occasionally in the high seventies, depending on the structure of the betting. His friends would have excoriated that kind of sandbagging if they hadn't been able to count on him to give his winnings back at gin rummy, where his decisions were a source of suppressed mirth, grimaces and winks. 'The Boys', as the men in the card room called themselves, were jocose and successful idiots who shouted at ball-players on television and agreed on one thing, that gambling was the greatest thing since hot food. They gave one another volumes of personal and business advice, and argued viciously about weighty subjects of which they knew just enough to be badly informed. They enjoyed one another's company.

Stillman's father had always managed to keep a partition between philandering and the club. But one night his judgement swayed under the influence of a third whiskey, and there he was, courting the wife of the club president, Artie Marks. It wasn't entirely his fault; Estelle virtually initiated it by telling him she'd never slept with anyone but her husband. Stillman's father was so touched by her innocence and fidelity he thought he was in love. She was guilt-ridden and went home and confessed everything.

Three days later, Stillman's father sauntered into the pro shop and found himself facing Artie, who unsheathed a three-iron from his golf-bag and chased Stillman's father past the putting green and into the half-way house, where he was wrestled to the floor and held while Stillman's father, indignant at having been assaulted, became spiteful. 'Artie, relax, Artie,' he said. 'The blood is going to make your temples pop. It's not worth it, Artie. All I did was poke your wife.' Artie was angry and frustrated that he couldn't get loose, and he finally stopped thrashing and broke down in the caddie's arms.

When the scene was related around the club, everyone sided with poor Artie, who didn't waste the public sympathy. He wept on the shoulders of other men's wives, who found his declarations of forgiveness towards Estelle so irresistible that Artie, for the first time in his life, began having a really good time. Stillman's father had no respect for Artie's charlatan method—the man was a mole. It galled him that while he was to blame for Artie's good time, Artie took credit for his social ruin. First, Artie led a campaign to kick him out of the club. Not content with that, he made calls to ensure that Stillman's father was turned down when he applied for admission elsewhere. All he did was poke the guy's wife! How much was he supposed to suffer? No longer able to find a foursome on a quality golf course, Stillman's father decided to go west.

It took him almost three full weeks to adjust to his new life. During that lonely, thoughtful period, he at last acknowledged that his sexual hunger was insatiable, like a glutton who couldn't stay away from the pantry. He went to a therapist.

'You lack control,' she told him.

He tried to explain that it wasn't the conquest that excited him, it was the chase. 'At my age, sex is almost anticlimactic,' he said.

'You lack control,' she repeated, sitting up on her couch and rolling up her stockings.

'It's not that,' he replied. 'My problem is that I don't want to feel I'm disappointing people.'

'That's deeply narcissistic.'

'What is?'

'To think other people's happiness depends

Todd Pitock's work has appeared in outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Jerusalem Report*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Tikkun*. This story forms the opening to a novel-in-progress entitled *Stillman's Infidelity*.

completely on your willingness to sleep with them. Don't you think that's evidence of narcissism?

'I'll certainly take some time to think about it.' Clever women turned him on even more than women who were not clever. To her credit, this therapist wasn't hung up on professional ethics. But all the sessions in therapy, at two bucks a minute, did no good, so he gave them up. He still felt ashamed and began to appreciate what made him a scandal. He repented and sought religious guidance.

Rabbi Eichhorn was nothing like the rabbis he knew in his youth. For one thing, he was about six foot one and built like a defensive back from Penn State. His rich black hair was brushed back with a blowdryer. He knew hardly a word of Hebrew or Yiddish, and he had dispensed with the *yarmulke*, which, he explained when Stillman's father asked, was an affectation initiated by Jews in the Middle Ages. He lit up when Stillman's father told him why he'd come.

'Moses was still having sex when he was a hundred and twenty,' Rabbi Eichhorn said. 'Solomon slept with a thousand maidens. The Talmud says, "A man shouldn't be alone." As a rabbi, I'd say don't worry about it.'

Stillman's father was at first cynical. He asked Rabbi Eichhorn where he'd been ordained. The rabbi named an institution. 'It's one of the top ten rabbinical correspondence seminaries in the world,' he declared.

'Did you say "correspondence seminaries"?'

'Yeah, you can do your coursework by correspondence. It saves time and money. Whereas it used to take years to become ordained, now you can do it in six months.'

'Never heard of it,' Stillman's father said.

'Tell me, Mr Stillman,' the rabbi asked, 'when clients came to you before you retired, did they ask where you went to law school?'

'Well, I take your point,' said Stillman's father. 'I just didn't realize tradition was so liberal.'

'And based on why you came to me, I hadn't realized you were so conservative.'

'Oh, well, I suppose I'm not, if you put it that way. I didn't really come here to argue with you, Rabbi.'

'No, of course not. Listen, your questioning is good. It's healthy. It's the beginning of *teshuvah*, the process by which a Jew comes into the fold of Torah. As a great and learned rabbi once said, that's why God gave us a mind and an opposing finger called the thumb. The most important thing is to question, to challenge, to change. It's part of every person's personal evolution.'

This little speech won Stillman's father's confidence and affection. He invited the rabbi to play a round of golf. Rabbi Eichhorn was delighted. 'When?' he asked.

'How is Saturday morning?'

'Well, it is the Sabbath, you remember?'

'Right, of course,' Stillman's father said. He was slightly embarrassed at his own ignorance.

'So why don't we do it at six-thirty, if that's not too early for you, so I have time to get ready and get to the synagogue before the service.'

Stillman's father had never played with a rabbi before. He didn't know what to expect.

'I think we're really of one mind,' Rabbi Eichhorn told him as they walked up the soft slope to the green on the fifth hole. 'Can I confide in you? I've slept with two hundred and twenty-two women.'

'How old did you say you were?'

'Thirty-six.'

'Well, I wouldn't worry about it. You're still young. There's time. And then, you are after all a rabbi. That can't help much.'

'Au contraire. Women come to rabbis all the time. I usually have a half-dozen outside my office waiting to see me.'

'Really?'

'Sure.'

'I often wondered what motivated men to make a career out of religion. How did you become a rabbi anyway?'

'I didn't have much interest in medicine or business. I tried law school but dropped out. Anyway, I'd always been kind of interested in Judaism, and I like being on a stage. Had I been more musical, I might have joined a rock group.'

'So women actually come to visit you?'

'Certainly. The other day, for example, I had to let one of my congregants bite my index finger so she didn't scream and give us away. If I didn't have such a high threshold of pain, I myself would have screamed. After she left, I let her friend, who was also having marital difficulties, bite my other index finger. By the end of the day I had welts and bandages on four fingers and one thumb. My secretary wanted me to go to the emergency room. How is it in the legal profession? I understand it can be good.'

Stillman's father lined up his putt, squatting over the ball and holding the putter like a divining rod to figure out the lay of the green. 'It's like anything else,' he said, tapping the ball and smiling at the delightful clicking sound it made as it disappeared into the hole. 'It's what you make of it. In my day I've certainly had my share of fingers bitten.'

Stillman's father decided that modern rabbis were far more useful than old-fashioned ones. It confirmed his belief in progress.

Rabbi Eichhorn himself knocked down a long putt, though his expression was as blank and unconcerned as if he'd missed it. 'How many women have you slept with?' he asked.

'Oh, I suppose eleven, twelve hundred. I'm not sure exactly. I counted up to a thousand but after that I lost track. I've found reaching long-term goals is often anticlimactic. My late thirties and early for-

ties were particularly good years in many respects. Of course, when I was your age, I also worried about the numbers. So you say you slept with two hundred?

'Two hundred and twenty-two,' Rabbi Eichhorn said. 'That's besides my two wives of course.'

'You're a bigamist?' asked Stillman's father, who was beginning to love Rabbi Eichhorn. In comparison, he felt like a saint.

'No, of course not! Twice divorced. I made youthful mistakes.' He mumbled something in Yiddish.

'What does that mean?'

'I'm not exactly sure. It's something my grandmother used to say. I always assumed it meant time heals all wounds. She said it the day she died, which happened to coincide with my separation from my second wife. I'm presently engaged. I'm hoping it'll be three times lucky.'

'Now that's something I don't understand, if you'll pardon my saying so. Why would someone who knows from experience that he isn't made for marriage keep going back in? You know, as a divorce attorney, I can tell you how expensive those kinds of decisions can become.'

'I know. Believe me, I know. The thing is, I love her. I'm crazy about her. Besides, it'll sit better with my congregants not to have a bachelor rabbi. Bad appearances can effect your chances of a long-term contract.'

'Well, I can understand that. I don't mean to pry, but do you intend to be faithful? Being a loyal husband is nothing to be ashamed of.'

'I hadn't really thought about it. I guess I'll see how it goes. I think people put too much pressure on themselves by anticipating goals and expecting too much of themselves. The Talmud warns against making overly ambitious goals, and it tells us that we can ask forgiveness for not living up to them.'

'That's very wise. I guess there are some things to be taken from the traditions. But the reason I ask is, is it going to look worse you being a bachelor or being an adulterer? Word gets around, you know.'

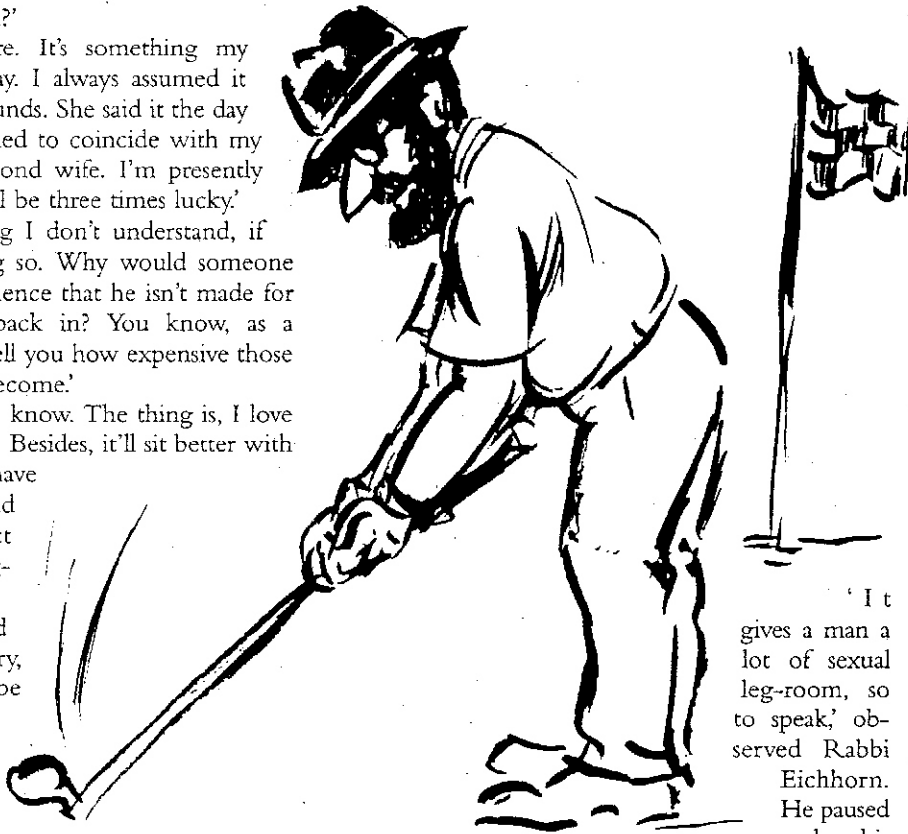
'Believe me, it's worse being a bachelor. All the grandmothers want to introduce you to their granddaughters visiting for the week from Long Island or San Diego. And of course if she happens to look like a horse or a cow or some other four-legged creature and you say no thank you, right away they suspect you're gay, and that's a hard one to live down.'

Stillman's father nodded at the twisted logic of it

all. He enjoyed hearing an insider view. Still, he wasn't completely convinced. 'But a scandal still has to hurt. I mean, adulter—'

'You know, according to Halakha, it's only adultery when a man sleeps with a married woman who is Jewish. It doesn't really matter if a man is married or not, nor if it's a shiksa.'

'No kidding!' Stillman's father thought how you learn something new every day. To think, he'd felt all that guilt and ninety-eight per cent of the time it wasn't even a sin!



Haya Vardy

'It gives a man a lot of sexual leg-room, so to speak,' observed Rabbi Eichhorn. He paused and his expression

became thoughtful—Talmudic, Stillman's father thought. The rabbi continued: 'I'll admit it's a bit patriarchal insofar as women do not have the same freedom. From an ethical point of view, I don't agree entirely with it.' He teed up the ball and hit a long straight shot on to the fairway. Following its course, he appeared to salute the Almighty. 'But of course we don't have to agree with the Law in order to obey it.'

It turned out Rabbi Eichhorn was being modest when he said he wasn't a good golfer. He birdied three holes, and Stillman's father ended up owing him four hundred and fifty dollars. He didn't mind, though he suspected Rabbi Eichhorn of hustling him. It was cheaper than the psychiatrist, his shame had been cured, his heart was light again.

Besides, he figured he'd have a chance to win the money back another time. ♦