

**Sex,  
Skyscrapers,  
and  
Standard  
Yiddish**

Stories by  
**Norman Rawin**

***pb***

*paperplates  
books*

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Often I heard tales of which I said,  
“Now this is a thing that cannot happen.”  
But before a year had elapsed  
I heard that it actually had come to pass.

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

*A Story with*

## Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish

**T**HE TEMPTATION was terrible. Norman Flax sat at his desk overlooking Seventh Avenue. The night behind the window turned the glass into a mirror in which he saw himself, along with Lola who stood naked behind him, holding in each hand a newly peeled lichee nut, two wet ivory balls like tantalizing pearls in her palms. A Flaxian simile if there ever was one! But Flax did not want to write about the lichee nuts. Lola called them professional aids. She said they were the most sensual objects in the entire city, and she had peeled each one carefully, using her big square front teeth, then licking them clean, to help him get in the mood to work on the sex scene he'd been starting and failing to write all week. Lola insisted that Flax — who worked by day as a Yiddish typewriter salesman — would never sell his fiction and become a famous writer if he could not write about sex.

But Flax wanted to write about skyscrapers and clouds. He'd gotten an idea from a recent accident in which the Empire State Building was hit by a private plane. One of the secretaries interviewed in the aftermath said that clouds wafted into the offices on the eightieth floor. Little wisps floated in through open windows, hovered by a vice-president as he tried to gather his flying papers, then went out the door looking for more interesting company. But the skyscraper and cloud story was not to be. Not tonight.

Lola stood close behind Flax, who rested his hands on the

keys of his typewriter — a Smith Corona English model. He felt her hips against his back. Her breasts rested on his shoulders. Then each of her palms passed before his face and offered him the moist lichee nuts. He bent to take one out of her hand with his lips. The other she dropped as he kissed her palm, her wrist, the underside of her arm. He turned on his stool to face her and Lola began working his pants and underwear off so he could step out of them. She brought him up hard and sat, straddling his lap, raising and lowering herself. He felt himself disappear into their lovemaking. In his last thoughts he wondered what her hands were doing behind his back: were they resting on the desk so she could better lift and lower herself, or were they tapping out the words of their sex, the keys of his machine sticking to each slick finger?

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FLAX WAS FLUSH. It was only the middle of the month, but the coming weeks were paid for, along with the next month and the one after that. He'd already made his season's sales quota, having struck gold at the big Hollywood-style synagogue at the top of Central Park. A thief had gone through their offices, taking all kinds of things that would be useless to anyone who wasn't running a synagogue: letterhead blessed by the-one-above, prayer books dedicated to philanthropic members, prayer shawls, and even the long plush blue-tasselled cushions that lined the benches before the ark. Of course, the thief had taken the typewriters — English and Yiddish models alike. Flax had read about the theft in the newspaper and got directly into a cab, which took him uptown. He managed to sell eleven machines: five standard Yiddish models and six English, which he arranged to be sent by a wholesaler he relied on in a pinch.

So Flax had time for his writing work. A panorama of days

and weeks opened up before him. Most of the world was at war, but Flax was at his leisure. Lola had finished the story he'd begun about skyscrapers and clouds. She'd sat down at the typewriter one afternoon, read what he'd left half-finished in a pile on the desk, and promptly completed it. When she suggested he send the story out under his own name, Flax felt insulted. It was as if she were patronizing him, suggesting that without her he was hopeless. He refused to claim something that was really hers, so the story lay in the bottom drawer of his desk. He thought of it as a distant relative, prematurely buried.

Flax sat down to work and found, propped on the keys of his typewriter, a business card. The card read:

SAM FAIRWEATHER  
CURATOR'S AIDE  
SPECIALIZING IN LEGENDS  
OF THE CANADIAN NORTHWEST COAST

He supposed this was another of Lola's professional aids, but what it had to do with sex Flax could not guess. He turned the card over. On the back Lola had printed:

*43rd Street Automat. 11:30.*

The message was cryptic. Had she made the appointment for him or for herself? Flax didn't care. He had work to do. He had an idea for a story that was to be called "The Organ Grinder's Parrot Draws Lucky Tickets." The bird was something he remembered his father telling him about, a real spectacle back in the Russian town where his father was born. The man who owned the bird arrived whenever the circus was nearby. He was some kind of hanger-on, but no one knew what

the organ grinder and his bird had to do with the other circus performers. He brought the bird to town along with a wooden box full of tickets, and stood in the market, yelling, "My parrot draws lucky tickets," tempting the townspeople to wager that the bird would reach into the box with his beak and pull out a ticket entitling one of the locals to a wonderful prize: a barrelful of Turkish tobacco, a set of spoons engraved with the image of Emperor Franz Joseph II, dinner for two at the Royal Hotel in Minsk.

Norman Flax sat at his desk, his chin in his palm, watching the rain roll down his window. He tried to decide where to begin. With the bird? Or the circus more broadly? Or the prizes? Minsk?

Just then, the front door slammed and Flax heard Lola come in. Her shoes were noisy in the front hall. He began to type, to signal that he was working and should not be disturbed. The letters gathering on the page looked like a crossword puzzle filled in by a child. As he rolled the sheet out of the machine, he looked up and saw himself reflected in the darkened window beyond his desk — not himself sitting, but another Norman Flax standing in the centre of the room, wearing his fedora and ancient rain coat, both of these a little darker than usual because they were completely soaked. He started, but as he looked more carefully at the reflection in the glass he realized he was not having an out-of-body experience; there was no spirit playing games with him. It was Lola who stood behind him, dressed in his clothes, her hair tucked into the collar of the coat.

He watched as her reflection came toward him, growing larger in the darkened window, her heels loud on the wood floor. She reached over his shoulder to remove his glasses, setting them down on the desk, and then took his hand. Everything was blurry before his unaided eyes as the figure dressed as himself directed him to the bed, pushed him softly so that he lay down,



and slowly undressed him, the wet sleeves and lapels of his coat brushing his face and chest. He smelled the years of rain and city in the fabric. His rain. His city. Then the figure wearing his clothes got on top of him and began to undress, so that Lola's body appeared from under his unbuttoned shirt, and her hips slipped from a pair of his wool pants. He shut his eyes as the image of himself — so much more tantalizing and elegant half-undressed than he would ever look — began to make love to him. The last thing he glimpsed was fleeting, there and gone, a form conjured by the movement of Lola's hand and the flap of a lapel. As she rose and fell he thought he spied the parrot his father had known in Russia disappearing into a dark fold of skin and cloth. He listened, hoping to hear the number it drew, but there was no sound in the room except the noises their bodies made and the rain.

—3—

NORMAN FLAX SAT at his desk, clipping his nails. Paring his nails. Doing them — whatever it was he was up to, it wasn't writing. Lola had gone out before he woke. She had taken his hat and coat. It appeared she'd put on a pair of his shoes and the shirt he'd worn the previous day. Since the rain had blown through, there was no reason to get dressed up, but Flax didn't concern himself with this. He drank his morning coffee and read the paper. Milt Schmidt of the Boston Bruins had broken his thumb, while in Poland the war they were calling a *Sitzkrieg* was still sitting still. On his desk beside the typewriter, Flax found a sheaf of paper, tightly rolled and fastened by a black shoelace taken from one of his shoes. Flattening the papers on his desk, he read a letter addressed to him accepting a story entitled "Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish." Paper-clipped to it was the version Lola had completed, with a few