

NO. 4

kerning

A SPACE FOR WORDS



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Toad Hall *editions*

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Mikveh

JAIME LEVY PESSIN

At 12:20 p.m. on a Tuesday in July, phones around the South Florida diaspora started buzzing.

Carol Bering, watching the noon newscast while absentmindedly spooning pureed peas into her grandson's mouth, shouted for her daughter to come to the kitchen.

Alexis Silver pulled her phone out of her lab coat and found a series of texts from her aunt urging her to turn on the TV in the break room.

Jessie Lippman sat in her office, waiting for her assistant to deliver her daily spinach salad, when she saw her mom's photo pop up on her phone screen.

"Hi Mom!" Jessie hit the speakerphone button, but was greeted in return by the sounds of wheezing. "Are you alright?"

Elyse caught her breath. "I'm fine, I'm fine," she gasped. "But I could die of laughter after seeing Esti Gluck on the news."

Esti Gluck: We all knew her as an usher at our congregation's Shabbat services, responsible for shushing giggly teenagers more interested in flirting than listening to the rabbi's sermon. She had the shape and coloring of a matzo ball: short, round and spongy in the middle, drab sandy blonde hair, partial to creased slacks and cardigans in shades called putty and stone and camel.

And according to the local news at noon, she was a committed naturist.

"So what?" Jessie mouthed *thank you* to her assistant, unwrapped her utensils and poured the entire container of dressing-on-the-side ranch over the greens. "She goes outside a lot? Knows a lot about plants and animals? I don't get it."

"No, no, that's a naturalist. Esti Gluck goes to nude beaches."

Now Jessie choked on a crouton. "Wait. This was on the news?"

"Apparently there's a section of Key Biscayne that skinny dippers are using, and there's a fight about whether they can take out their ta-tas in public," Elyse reported with relish. "You could see Esti standing behind the reporter—her face was clear as day, but they put pixels over her privates!"

In the south suburbs and beyond, identical conversations pulsed through the otherwise languid waters of our lives. At our country club—built in the '70s so we

could golf and gossip outside the “no-blacks-no-Jews” policies of the more established venues—Esti’s eye doctor and her divorce lawyer noshed on turkey clubs when a familiar face popped onto the TV screens above the bar. At the nail salon, Susie Stern had a similar experience as Margarita, with whom she generally avoided eye contact, applied her acrylics. Henry Teitelbaum nearly spit out his tuna salad as he ate alone in front of the flat screen in his living room.

You see, Esti Gluck had always been an upstanding woman, a moral woman, a straight-down-the-middle *normal* woman—and she made sure we all knew it.

Esti grew up in Borough Park amid large families and modestly dressed housewives; she commuted to Brooklyn College in search of an accounting degree and a husband. She met Steven—an apprentice at his uncle’s Flatbush furniture wholesaler—at a friend’s Shabbat dinner, and they married just before 20-year-old Esti completed her studies. Though Esti’s parents weren’t thrilled that Steven was less observant than them, Esti kept the peace by promising to keep a kosher home, and she did.

Soon, Steven’s uncle sent them to the boom-boom Miami of the 1980s. It was smart business to set up shop in a Dixie Highway strip mall: Nowhere else on Earth, at no other time, could you sell such high volumes of curved leather sofas in confectionery pastels.

Esti bristled at having to start a new life away from her familiar Brooklyn, but she deferentially set up house as her own mother had taught her—two sinks, two sets of dishes, and, quickly, two daughters who became the center of her world. She rose an hour before the girls each morning, enjoyed a nice hunk of Entenmann’s coffee cake with her first mug of Lipton and set aside the teabag to re-use later in the day. Esti schlepped the girls to mommy-and-me music classes and library hours and birthday parties, never bothering to sit and gossip with the rest of us as we complained about our high-energy kids, our pushy mothers-in-law, our husbands’ golf schedules—the in-the-trenches stuff that bonds young mothers against common enemies. No, Esti always skeddadled off with some sanctimonious excuse: a volunteer shift at the shelter, some elaborate meal she was preparing in that pristine kitchen of hers. It wasn’t snobbish, exactly—Esti wasn’t stylish enough or skinny enough to be a true alpha mom—but it seemed clear that Esti set herself apart as a woman of valor, far too enamored by her own virtue to muddy herself on the battlefield with the rest of us.

Of course, we didn’t know Esti was fighting her own skirmish at home, with a husband who expected domestic perfection in all forms. Esti did the grocery shopping,

wiped the tushies, packed the lunches, cooked the dinners, drove the carpools, cleaned the toilets, ironed Steven's pants, hosted the holidays. Her hands cracked from washing dishes, her hair smelled like schmaltz, and her rear end widened from sitting in pediatricians' waiting rooms, dance studios' lobbies, after-school pickup lanes, drive-through bank windows, waiting, always waiting, for someone else's needs—hell, even their whims—to determine where she'd go next.

By the time the girls were toddlers, Esti's figure had gone from pinchably fun to just plain stout. She experimented with exercise routines and diets over the years—you couldn't miss her huffing and puffing around the local park with weights Velcro-ed around her wrists and ankles, or stumbling through a step class at the JCC, or browsing through South Beach Diet cookbooks at Borders—but none of them stuck. Steven's disdain became apparent, and calcified into cruelty. Esti couldn't seem to shrink, so she did her best to camouflage herself, taking on low-profile volunteer positions to avoid self-pity, dressing in muffled tones to avoid critical stares, sidestepping friendships to avoid—really, how could we have known?—the constant comparisons that Steven would throw at her like missiles seeking an easy target.

As expected, the kids grew up. The girls nailed their SATs and moved into dorms at mid-Atlantic colleges. Steven nailed a 26-year-old bank teller and moved into a condo in Delray. Esti wondered if there was a word that captured the feeling of being shocked but not really surprised. Eventually, though, the shock settled into tedium, and Esti realized that without a family requiring her ministrations, she had nothing to do.

Untethered to young children, unburdened of her husband, Esti tried to keep herself occupied. She signed up for a book club, she took a floral arrangements class, she sat alone in a movie theater watching weepy romances with a tub of popcorn between her knees and a Diet Coke in the armrest, but after so many years, so much effort spent catering to the children, trying to please Steven, bending herself into the shape of the model wife and mother, she had no real sense of what she, Esti, actually enjoyed.

She took to revisiting sites around town where she had taken the little girls on little adventures. We'd see her pretending to read a book in the playground while eavesdropping on young mothers guiding their children down slides; she'd toss an errant ball back to a kindergartner and hope for a gap-toothed smile in return. She meandered around the mall, thinking of how her toddler daughters would hide among

the Bloomingdale's clothing racks, and how as teenagers they'd demand to be dropped off on a Saturday night, with no interest in having Esti around until they needed a ride home. She took pictures and texted them to the girls, hungry for their dashed-off responses, some connection to the only endeavor she knew she'd executed impeccably.

On a blue-sky Tuesday in April, Esti remembered a field trip she'd chaperoned for each of the girls' third-grade classes. As part of the school's ocean study, they'd visited Key Biscayne, stopping in the nature center before taking a walk through a wildlife preserve teeming with googly-eyed iguanas and wild, feather-rattling peacocks. She recalled being charmed by a display of seashells from the 1940s: hundreds of specimens, striped and speckled and spiraled and slender, pink and orange and brown and ivory, the diversity of ocean life washed up onto shore, lifeless yet somehow lively in their colorful display. Esti, as usual, had no plans, so she decided to take a drive.

Esti spent some time with the shell exhibit before spotting a trail outside of the nature center; this must have been the one she'd visited with the girls. She stepped onto a sandy path littered with dried coconut husks and lined with a thin-slatted fence to hold the coastal wilderness at bay. She found a quiet rhythm as she lumbered along the trail, the sound of her sneakers absorbed by the sand, the sound of her breathing subsumed by the breeze rustling through the glossy cocoplum leaves. For a mile she hiked through a primordial world, all prehistoric ferns and spiked palmettos. Years ago, with nine-year-olds complaining of heat and mosquitos, squealing at every seagull that flew by, she had overlooked the luxuriant green enveloping the path.

A nearby splash burst through Esti's reverie. After nearly an hour of hearing nothing but the chittering of songbirds and the occasional plane buzzing overhead, the sound of low human conversation pushed its way into Esti's consciousness. Seeing no one around, she followed the noise, and spotted a gap in the fence leading to a narrow trail, where the shore trees began to cede their territory to patches of sea grapes and scrub oak.

At the end of the trail, she counted nine people on a tiny inlet beach, a mix of women and men, lounging on brightly patterned towels, drinking out of cans plucked from a red cooler, standing waist-deep in the ocean as they tossed a Nerf football back and forth. The scene would have been utterly unremarkable if the bathing party hadn't been stark naked.

Scandalized, Esti ducked behind a low cabbage palm and peered between the fronds. The group reminded her of a living version of the shells she had just observed: all shapes and all sizes, pink and orange and brown and ivory. But instead of being washed up on shore, mere victims of the tides, these specimens had chosen to be here, chosen to disrobe under the sky and feel the seafoam on their skin. Esti crawled away from her perch until she was out of eyesight.

On the 45-minute drive home, Esti processed what she saw—the exuberance and the friendship and the lack of self-consciousness. *A conch doesn't worry about how its shell looks to the outside world*, she thought. *Why should I?* She pulled into her garage, dropped her purse on the kitchen counter and began to shed her clothes as she made her way to the bathroom. She assessed herself in the full-length mirror: Cellulite dotted her legs and behind. A C-section scar underlined her ever-expanding midsection, and flabby skin hung from her arms like the pillowcases flapping on clotheslines in her Brooklyn memories.

To Steven, these had been character-defining flaws, proof of her lack of willpower, lack of effort, lack of interest in chasing her impossible youth. For years, Esti had not only absorbed his worldview, but taken it as fact. Today, though, her mirror told a different story. This C-section scar commemorated a difficult labor, hours of exhausted pushing before the doctors declared an emergency and surgically extracted a healthy first daughter. These flabby arms nestled the girls' trembling bodies against her chest while these cellulite-sprinkled legs paced around their bedrooms at 2 a.m., providing comfort during screaming ear infections and heart-pounding nightmares. This rounded belly bore the evidence of family dinners and holiday baking, time spent singing oldies in the car with her children instead of sweating endlessly on a treadmill. This body of hers, imperfect though it was, had served her well. Maybe she could—maybe she *should*—honor the work it had done.

A week later, Esti returned to Key Biscayne. With fluttering stomach, she found the opening in the fence, and clambered down the narrow path until she spied the same group. Instead of hiding in the brush, she proceeded onto the beach, inching nervously toward a woman about her age. The woman had sagging breasts, thighs that grazed each other, and a sunburned face that opened into a smile as she gestured for Esti to join the band of sunbathers.

Esti tilted her eyes downward as she undressed, folding her khaki petal-pushers, utilitarian bra, heavy-duty cotton undies and faded floral blouse into her straw beach bag. Esti thought back to the day before her wedding, when she had visited the mikveh near her parents' home. She had bathed, scrubbed her fingernails, combed out her hair, then descended into the sparkling pool, no barrier between her body and the purifying water as she submerged three times. The Key Biscayne shore required no such ablutions, yet as she immersed herself in the ocean's gentle waters, she felt the same stillness, calm—sanctity, even—that she had experienced back when she was 20 years old and her future expanded endlessly toward the horizon.

Through the spring and into the summer, Esti cherished her Tuesdays on the hidden beach. At first she didn't say much to her confederates; she was more comfortable simply stripping and swimming than engaging in conversations while exposed. But as she became a regular at the weekly meet-ups, Esti reveled in the embrace of a community who accepted her as she came, free of the judgment that she spent so many years dodging: those icy pellets of scorn from her husband, the waterfall of self-criticism babbling constantly in her head, and the eddy of swirling assumptions from those of us who mistook her preoccupation for arrogance.

Free, that is, until the day a 10-year-old boy stayed home from summer camp, avoiding swim lessons with complaints of a sore throat. On a walk with his grandmother, he broke loose from her papery hand, bolted through the gap in the fence, and shot down the scrubby side path, where he came upon a scene so mind-blowing to his pre-pubescent brain that he promptly froze in place. When Grandma finally caught up, ivory loafers full of sand, she shrieked, yanked the boy's arm, and shouted slurs over her shoulder as she dragged the little *pisher* away. The group laughed it off as a one-time encounter with a neighborhood prude, and went about their business.

But the next Tuesday, the camera crews showed up. Apparently Grandma viewed these skinny-dipping sessions as a grave danger to the young minds of Miami, a lewd public orgy that would corrupt the community's values—and she felt personally compelled to prevent such an atrocity. She called in Channel 7.

And that's what Carol and Alexis, and Jessie and Elyse, and Esti's eye doctor and her divorce lawyer, and Susan with the pointy nails and Henry Teitelbaum alone on his couch all saw at lunchtime that day: Esti on the news, facing eastward toward the ocean, toward the sun, toward Jerusalem—free, serene, holy.

At Shabbat services that weekend, Esti assumed her usual position at the entrance to the sanctuary, ready to silence the always-chattering teens with a well-timed glare and hiss. But she noticed that rolling whispers rose and fell around her: The closer she came, the quicker the spigot turned off. It wasn't just the kids. By Saturday morning, we had all seen the news clip of Esti—aloof, martyred Esti, too virtuous to roll around in the parenting dirt with rest of us—standing beachside in the buff.

Jessie and Elyse nudged each other as Esti passed their seats. The divorce lawyer reddened and the eye doctor looked away, neither of them able to shake the image of Esti as modern-day Eve, the beach a modern-day Eden, the pixels a modern-day fig leaf. Susie Stern placed her manicured hand over her mouth, trying to suppress a snort. Only Henry Teitelbaum offered a sympathetic nod.

Esti's sun-kissed face paled as she identified the pattern, that the murmurs in the pews had to do with her 15 minutes of televised fame. The truth was, she hadn't noticed the cameras at the beach until their work had been done; as they wrapped up, she told herself she'd be a mere blip on the screen, a fuzzy figure in the background. Her cheeks flamed as it dawned on her that she had, in fact, been recognized.

She crept toward the sanctuary's doors and scurried to the ladies' room, decorated by the bat mitzvah girl's family with a ribboned basket of toiletries—some pads, bobby pins, a fancy foaming hand sanitizer. Esti found a misting spray among the goodies; she closed her eyes and imagined the smell of salt water as she spritzed her face. As the drops dried on her skin, she opened her eyes, and stared directly into the mirror once again. In her reflection, she saw a conch, secure in her shell, unworried by the tides that ebbed and flowed around her.

Esti returned to the sanctuary during the silent *amidah*, the doors closing behind her with a resounding thump. As we turned toward the sound, we could see that something in her demeanor had changed. The look of worry had evaporated. To those of us watching, it became perfectly clear: Esti Gluck no longer gave a shit.

From the back of the sanctuary, Esti looked over our heads, raised her fingers to her lips, winked, and loudly shushed us all. She stayed through the end of services, loaded her plate at the *kiddush* buffet, and let out a shoulder-shaking laugh as she strolled out of the social hall, a new kind of future expanding endlessly toward the horizon.