The Blind Emperor

By Michael Fine

Nothing is the way it used to be.

Once upon a time, Federal Hill was for Italians. The Episcopalians and the Quakers lived on College Hill. The Jews lived in South Providence and Smith Hill. Mount Hope was Black. Fox Point was Portuguese and Cape Verdeans, although to tell the truth, we thought the Cape Verdeans were Blacks who didn't get the part about Mount Hope. The French Canadians lived in Woonsocket, Central Falls and Pawtucket. The Polish lived in Central Falls. The Greeks lived in Cranston. The Irish lived everywhere else, and there were no Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Columbians, Guatemalans, Mexicans, Salvadorians, Nigerians, Liberians, Ghanaians, Sierra Leoneans, Hmong, Cambodians, Nepalese or Malians – nothing like that. Life was simpler then. You knew who was who and what was what. A man was a man. A woman was a woman. A kid was a kid. One plus one still equaled two. No new math. No finessing. You knew who you were and what you were and what to expect. Even when it sucked. Which it did sometimes, for some people. And for some people way more than others. But most of us, we took what we were given, loved who we loved, hated who we hated, and just sucked it up when shit happened. Which it did. Often. In the days before you could write and say curse words in public, before women even knew what they had was called a vagina and before men knew that they were supposed to think and feel, to be anything other than brutes.

Abe Klein inherited the place. It was the family business, a business that came to Abe when his father, the reigning Blind Emperor, had a stroke at 83. Abe never imagined he'd be back in Providence or ever have anything to do with the Blind Emperor again, but here he was.

The Blind Emperor was the inspiration and invention of Abe's great grandmother Sophie, a short, squat swarthy Yiddish speaking woman from Russia–Poland, who came steerage to the US with two infants in 1902. Sophie who had followed her husband of five years from Poland to Danzig, to Ellis Island, to the Lower East Side, and then to Providence, where she found that husband was living on Orms Street with a new wife and two new babies on the third floor of a triple-decker in a two room coldwater flat.

So Abe's great grandmother Sophie found her own coldwater flat. She took in piece-work jewelry and washing to survive, working for women who themselves had to work twelve or fourteen hours a day in retail or making jewelry or in one of Rhode Island's hundreds of mills, mills that made worsted wool, locomotives, screws, underwear or wire.

Before long the husband of some of the women Sophie washed for bought houses. Some of those houses had venetian blinds. Those blinds needed to be cleaned once or twice a year. Soon those women's husbands started to take down the venetian blinds in the spring and fall, carry them over to Sophie's house, and Sophie cleaned them. And thus a business was born.

The Blind Emperor. Sophie might have been short and squat. She might have worn dark European clothing in all the pictures Abe had of her. She might have had glasses with bottle thick lenses, but she also had a certain grandiose style – she wanted all her family and friends to know how successful she was in America, and how important she and her family had become, despite the disgrace of her abandonment by her husband. So it wasn't the Blind Store. Or Venetian Blind Shop. Or even Window Coverings International. No. It was The Blind Emperor. A name that made it clear Sophie was a woman to be reckoned with, and that Sophie was in control.

Abe never knew his great grandmother, of course. She died at 56 of stomach cancer, worn down by a life of toil, of stress and physical labor.

Sophie's son, Abe's grandfather Sol, worked in the Blind Emperor his whole life as well. Abe's father Manny went to Brown and almost escaped. He was a socialist, and for a brief period, a member of the Communist Party. His degree was in European History with a concentration in the revolutions of 1848. He went to law school in 1938. Then the Second World War broke out, Abe's father enlisted and was sent to the Pacific. When the war ended, Abe's grandfather couldn't find help in the shop and so Abe's father came home and worked in the store just to tide his father over. But one day led to the next and Abe's father stayed. He became the Blind Emperor himself, the man to come to, for blinds, on the East side of Providence, in Barrington and East Greenwich and even as far away as Newport and Fall River and the South Shore. The Emperor of all the blinds he could see.

Abe, on the other hand, was a different sort of human being. He was an intellectual, and esthete, a child of the sixties, and he wanted no part of the family business. He learned to read at four and read everything he could get his hands on. He went to Classical High School but almost flunked out. He frustrated his teachers because they could tell he knew the answers to their questions, and often knew more about the material they were teaching than they did, but he couldn't be bothered to hand in the assignments, take tests, talk in class, or write the papers.

Then he spent five years in a VW minibus as an anti-war deadhead, traveling around the US, stoned out of his mind. Five lost years. No memory at all of what had happened, of where

he'd been or what he'd done other then gauzy dreams and occasional flashbacks, all out of context.

And then suddenly, coherence. Abe awoke one day in the East Village as a clerk at the Strand bookstore, living on East 7th Street between Avenues C and D, shelving some books and taking others home to read. He read and he learned. One day he got to talking with a brilliant young woman in a tight black top about Walter Benjamin. She told him about the New School, which was just a few blocks away on 13th Street, and invited him to sit in on a course she was teaching. He learned that Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm and Hans Jonas taught at the New School. Then he started taking their courses, and before he knew it, Abe had become an unreconstructed European intellectual of the Frankfurt School, with a PhD in Philosophy and an interest in Epistemology and Critical Theory, teaching at NYU and the New School. He smoked like a fiend, gesticulated with his hands when he spoke, marched with the Socialist Internationale whenever they marched, and spent his evenings in obscure bars like the Frog Pond and the Ukraine National Home and Restaurant, discussing the fine points of the Hegelian roots of Marxist thought and the anarcho-syndicalist theory of science with colleagues and students from all over the country and the world.

He lived with a succession of women in those years, one more distracted and depressed than the next. Somehow, beautiful women were attracted to him, although Abe himself was nothing to look at - hunched over, bearded and bald, with bottle thick glasses like his grandmother's, beady eyes and pasty skin, part intellectual, part stevedore and part Talmudist. Women were pulled in by Abe's complete absorption in the world of ideas. He never saw them, not for one second. The more beautiful the woman, the more she couldn't resist the temptation to be seen, to be noticed and to be known by Abe. But to Abe, the women in his life were a

distraction from his real work, and he paid them no mind, even when one moved in for a few months and tried her best to make Abe look at her and see into her soul.

Except for one. Lily. Lily the Mexican poet in exile. They met one May in Tompkins Square Park, playing speed chess on the first warm day of spring, when the pigeons were everywhere, circling over the park. Lily was dark haired and dark complected with brilliant eyes that were more black than brown. She was a fierce chess player. She beat Abe five games in a row, with each successive victory taking her less time so that Abe was on his knees, from the perspective of chess, inside an hour, as Lilly quickly learned how his mind worked and used that knowledge to demolish his game.

Abe was mesmerized so he pursued Lily – the first time in his life Abe had put any effort at all into a relationship with a woman. He brought her flowers. He called her. He waited on the front stoop of her building on East Second Street until she came home at 4 AM, as the dawn was breaking over the East River. He took her out, once, on the Staten Island Ferry, to an Italian place on the Staten Island waterfront, and once, on the back of a motorcycle, out to the Delaware Water Gap, to the river between New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He drove all the way to Mexico City when she went home to stay for two months in the winter, when she got tired of the cold.

Truth be told, Abe and Lily were more alike than different. They were both the great grandchildren of immigrant Eastern European Jews. Both lived in a world distant from the world most people lived in, the world of ideas, abstractions, and unique vocabularies, and both believed the world we have is not the world they wanted to live in, that the world needed improvement, which they were somehow empowered to try to create.

But Abe, try as he might, failed to win Lily's heart. He spent so much time in his own head, and had so many distractions that, though he was given to grand gestures, he was never really present when he and Lily were together. What all those other women fell in love with when they fell in love with Abe was Abe's absence. What Lily wanted was his presence. Or perhaps a different kind of presence all together, a man who would make her knees shake whenever he walked into a room. And Abe was just not that kind of man.

One day, when he was out marching down Fifth Avenue protesting one invasion or another, Lily moved her things out of Abe's apartment, and he never saw her again. He wondered for a bit when she wasn't home when he got home. It took two days for him to figure out that she had gone.

The sixties became the seventies; the seventies became the eighties, and then the nineties and then Y2K. The city Abe knew transformed itself from a place of the heart and the mind to a place of steel and money, where graffiti was replaced by skyscrapers, where there were flowers in all the flowerbeds and the parks were clean and safe, instead of scruffy and real. US colonialism didn't disappear. It just faded away, replaced by a new kind of capitalism and a new kind of materialism. The global economy. Money and work, not ideas, justice, beauty, family, friends, and love. Technology driving the human experience, just like Marx said it would. No class consciousness. Not even any classes, not really. Just consumers. No life of the mind.

Then, out of this sad coherence, chaos again. Abe's father had a stroke. Someone needed to run the store until they could wind things down and sell the building. No one cleans venetian blinds any more. Yes, they had moved into window fashions. Yes, they had every size and color of mini-blinds imaginable -- custom awnings, drapery, awnings, canopies, motorized window coverings, quilted curtains to keep in the heat, tinted applications that let in only certain wave-lengths of sunlight – you name it, and the Blind Emperor had it or could get it over-night. Abe's father had done a bang-up job, keeping the Blind Emperor up to speed in the market, becoming the Blind Emperor in fact.

Abe would run the place for a week, not a month. Until Abe and sister could get Abe's parents situated. But not one day more than that, until they could figure out how much function Abe's father had lost and how much might come back.

A week turned into a month. A month turned into a year. One year turned into ten.

To his surprise Abe found he liked the work. He liked the challenge of keeping track of ten different things at once. He liked running numbers in his head. Abe worked in the store in high school, and knew how to run the business, almost instinctively, as though venetian blinds were his genome. He knew how to check inventory and order stock. How to keep your eye on your employees, because if you turn your back for one second even the good ones will steal from you. How to do payroll and make bank deposits, make sure payroll taxes are paid and the income tax filings are done on time.

He loved his employees and hearing about their lives which were sometimes chaotic but more often lives of hard work, family love and human decency. There were even some customers he liked, even though most were made-up young women from the suburbs who drove

him crazy. Their materialism was part of the problem. But their thousands of questions and constant negotiation – for a better price, a better color, about the time of day of delivery and so forth made Abe despair for the human condition, the same old despair that he used to think about abstractly when he read the newspaper in the morning, only now was a despair that was present close up and personal every single day. Reified. That was the word that Kant or Heidegger or even Habermas would have used. Abe's world was real now. In a way he never planned for or anticipated.

One day at noon, when Abe was in the store alone, a young woman came into the store alone. She had tan skin, deep brown eyes that were more black than brown, long pink and blue hair that had once been almost black and was much younger than most of the women who came into the store. Than all of the women who came into the store. Probably ever.

She came right to the counter. Pierced lips, nose, cheek, and eyebrow. Tattoos everywhere. Maybe she was after a handout. Lots of drug addicted people on the street now. The imminent collapse of capitalism. Better she ask than steal, at least from him. She could be anyone or anything. But more likely trouble than not.

Abe sat off to the side, reading The Monthly Review. He let the young woman stand at the counter while he finished an essay. It's a good idea to let customers stand and look for a few minutes, so they can decide what they are interested in. Although this young lady didn't look anything like a customer to Abe.

"Hey," she said at last.

Abe raised his eyebrows and looked at her over his glasses. Hey? Hey? This wasn't even a grownup. Abe had been to lots of places, but he couldn't recall ever being addressed as "Hey" in all his years of teaching and all those demonstrations. "Yo" perhaps, but never "Hey." On the other hand, he had been in the store for ten years, and was probably out of touch. But still.

"May I help you?" Abe said. He stood and walked to the counter.

"I'm with *Allidos*. We are a confederation of community organizations, providing support for new immigrants and victims of hate crimes and state-sponsored violence in Rhode Island and southern New England," the young woman said. Her tongue was pierced too. She had a hint of an accent, but not one Abe could place.

"Un huh," Abe said.

"We are doing a community picnic as a fundraiser to raise money for our anti-racist, anti-fascist work. Do you have any food or supplies you can donate? Either for the fundraiser or to help us care for undocumented families," the young woman said.

The young woman looked wild and crazy but she talked like a college kid. There was something vaguely familiar about her. That was strange. Abe hadn't been around college kids in ten years, and for the ten years before that it had been mostly graduate students. His graduate students tended to be scruffy and intense. The women were partial to light black tops and jeans, the men to leather jackets, and they all tried to look like they were working class. But not like this. And no piercings.

"You go to RISD?" Abe said.

"Brown," the young woman said.

"This is a window treatment store. We sell mini-blinds. Curtains. Motorized window treatments. Stuff like that. Nothing of much use to undocumented people. Or that will be of any help in the anti-racist work, I'm afraid."

When Abe said the work "anti-racist" the young woman looked at him suspiciously, as though she had never heard an adult use that word before. Was he yanking her chain?

"Would you consider being a sponsor for the fundraiser? We have different levels – platinum, gold, silver and bronze," the young woman said.

"Platinum, gold and silver. Pretty capitalist ideology for anti-capitalist folks. Hierarchal structure, like the class system. Kind of a contradiction, don't you think?" Abe said.

The young woman looked at Abe like he had just walked out of a lunar lander. Human perhaps, but definitely from outer space. He was coming from a way different place than she expected. This was a wall covering store.

"Huh. Brown. Where are you from? Bet you come from money yourself," Abe said. He had a sudden sense of deja'vu, as though this was a conversation he'd had once before, someplace in the distant past, or in a dream. The young woman had a certain mystery to her, a certain beauty that was seemed oriental, as though a part of her was from a distant culture and a part was intensely familiar. The pink and blue hair and the piercings were distractions from that beauty, but it was clearly there, despite the young woman's attempt to cover it up.

"And why do you think having picnics and fundraisers are going to get rid of racism? Do you really believe you can go to a place like Brown, which was founded by slave traders, by god, and not be completely co-opted? Don't you know that's what Ivy League colleges are for? To

take people with just a spark of intelligence, originality, and rebellion in them, and grind them down, burying them under volumes and volumes of academic claptrap and a zillion pages of distractionary rhetoric, to convince you that you are incapable of thinking for yourself," Abe said.

"Say what?" the young woman said. "I came here to ask for a donation, not to get a lecture. You don't know the first thing about me. I might as well not be in the room. Who do you think you are?"

Huh, Abe thought. There's a little fight in this young woman, despite how she looks.

And at the same time he thought, this feels familiar. I've had this argument before.

"What's your name, anyway? Where are you from?" Abe said.

"I'm Rose. Rose Levy. I'm from Cuernavaca. That's in Mexico," the young woman said. "And I come from culture, not from money. Full ride, if you must know. But my people are artists, potters and poets. And yes, I'm a Mexican Jew."

A door that had been closed suddenly opened.

She was Lily's granddaughter. Of all the little shops in America, of all the stores and restaurants and gas stations, Lily's granddaughter had walked into the stupid little store that Abe ran, almost fifty years after Lily had left him. And then she had the same fight with Abe that Abe and Lily used to have. Fifty years before.

Abe was too much of a materialist to think that there must be a god to make something like that happen, but he thought it anyway, at least for a moment, until he pushed that thought away. There is a great synchrony in human affairs. Structural isomorphism. We are made a certain way. What brings us together once sometimes brings us together again. We are one people and joined at the hip, however much our greed and jealousies pull us apart. That is all logical and explainable. But there is also a coherence to our lives that feels unexplainable, that is deep and mysterious, and very powerful all at the same time.

You could say Abe Klein took Rosie Levy under his wing, or you could say Rosie Levy brought Abe Klein back from the dead. Abe came to all Rosie's demonstrations. She wouldn't let him drive her places, but if they met at a demonstration, she would let him drive her home. And let him take her to Gregg's for coffee and dessert.

He sat down with her at the demonstration at the Wyatt and got Maced. She stood next to him while he sat on the grass next to the road and held his head as the medics washed his eyes with water and milk, until he could see again, and she drove him home that night in his car.

They talked. Or she talked and he listened. He was tempted to teach her a little philosophy, a little Plato, a little Kant, a little Hegel and a lot of Marx, but for once he kept his mouth shut.

She was young and full of dreams. There was nothing more Abe Klein wanted than to listen and feel her hope and energy, so he could dream again himself.

She told Abe all about her grandmother. Lily had never married. Her daughter Violetta was the child of a married gondolier Lily met in Venice, who had died 10 years before. Her life had been rich in family and in relationships, and she had never let herself be confined. Not to one man. One relationship. Or even one place or gender.

Soon Abe Face-timed with Lily, once, twice and then for a few minutes whenever he spent an hour or two with Rose. Lily hadn't changed. She had crow's feet around her eyes perhaps, but aside from that, she hadn't aged a day. Her eyes were still dark brown and almost black, and they seemed even more lustrous than ever, the door to a soul that was as deep as the sea and as glittering as the Milky-Way.

Yes, she would come to Providence, she said, and Abe thought he could hear some excitement, and even a little yearning in her voice when she said that. But that how she talked to everyone, to every man and woman she'd ever known. He'd be thrilled if she came, he said, and a part of him hoped she'd say, come to visit here. Come to Cuernavaca. But she didn't say that, and Abe was content to just see her and to hear her voice once again.

Abe was waiting for her first visit when Covid hit. He is still waiting patiently until people can travel again. He listens, sees the world as it is, and is still the Blind Emperor, but is also now seeing and listening to the world as it is, not the way it was or the way he thinks it should be.

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