

Kaddish for the Disappeared

Nathan Englander

The Ministry of Special Cases

Alfred A. Knopf, 2007,

339 pages.

Reviewed by Marla Braverman

Early in *The Ministry of Special Cases*, the long-awaited first novel from Nathan Englander, the protagonist Kaddish Poznan drags his resentful son Pato along on a job effacing the tombstones of Buenos Aires' more unsavory Jewish ancestors. When Pato refuses to wield the chisel himself, Kaddish tries to force his hand. In the ensuing struggle, Kaddish accidentally chops off the tip of one of Pato's fingers. On the way home from the hospital, Pato, overcome with bitterness and humiliation, unleashes a tirade against his father. This verbal assault, "in the grand Jewish tradition of the *dayeinu*," is a list of Kaddish's deficiencies, the implication being that if each had been the only one,

it would have been enough: "You're lazy. You're a failure. You've kept us down. You embarrass us. You cut off my finger. You ruined my life." It is this kind of writing—a near-seamless blend of tragedy and comedy, and the infusion, even into the narrative's darkest and most emotion-laden moments, of an air of farce—for which Englander is famous, and for which he has rightfully been compared to such Jewish literary giants as Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Franz Kafka. In *The Ministry of Special Cases*, however, it proves to be a mixed blessing, turning a tale of devastation and loss into an undeniably entertaining read, even as that very entertainment threatens to overwhelm the profound message the book seeks to impart.

This style proved far less problematic in Englander's acclaimed short-story collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, which propelled him to literary stardom nearly eight years ago. There, Englander presented characters who struggle to reconcile

inner turmoil—their vanity, their sexual urges, their hatred of a spouse or desire for domestic bliss—with an external world defined by the strictures of faith. In the unending battle between the two, Englander’s characters learn, disappointment always emerges victorious. True, their stories were not without humor, but it was invariably humor of the darkest kind, heightening rather than detracting from their suffering. In “Reb Kringle,” for example, a Hasid is forced by his pragmatic, domineering wife to support his family as a mall Santa, only to blow his cover when a child admits that what he’d really like for Christmas is for his non-Jewish stepfather to let him celebrate Hanuka again. In “The Wig,” a married woman forced by the dictates of modesty to cover her head yearns for the beauty—and singularity—her hair once granted her, and bullies a delivery man into selling her his locks for use in a most immodest wig. And in the titular story, a man whose wife refuses to make love to him receives a special dispensation from his rabbi to visit a prostitute in order to save their marriage, only to find that the ensuing guilt renders him unable to respond to his wife’s advances when her love returns. In Englander’s ritual-bound world, deliverance from spiritual or emotional anguish is not merely distant; it is, quite simply, never

going to arrive. Nor, for that matter, is it even the point. Rather, Englander sought to explore the consequences of a life lived amidst a war of competing desires for which there is, ultimately, no resolution.

In *The Ministry of Special Cases*, it is not inner turmoil that threatens to overwhelm the book’s main characters, driving them to the brink of madness and despair. It is, instead, the horrific acts of a totalitarian regime determined to shore up its authority at any price. The setting is Argentina’s “Dirty War,” the state-sponsored campaign of violent repression carried out between 1976 and 1983 under dictator Jorge Videla’s military junta. Kaddish and Lillian Poznan, working-class inhabitants of Buenos Aires’ Jewish ghetto, suddenly find themselves thrust into a living nightmare when their teenage son Pato becomes one of the state’s *desaparecidos*, citizens—overwhelmingly youth—“disappeared” by the government on account of their alleged subversion. The bulk of the novel follows the Poznan’s agonizing attempt, in chapter after excruciating chapter, to save their son by navigating a Kafkaesque maze of impregnable bureaucratic offices, all of which deny that their son was ever taken—deny, in fact, that he ever existed at all.

Indeed, attempts to erase the past run like a leitmotif through *The*

Ministry of Special Cases—Kaddish himself makes a living chiseling names off tombstones for a Jewish community determined to deny its past; Kaddish and Lillian accept nose jobs as payment for one of Kaddish's assignments, altering their faces and "erasing" their old appearances; and Pato continually finds himself without his ID card, without which he is deemed "non-existent" by the state, foreshadowing his eventual disappearance at its hands. Yet, as with the stories in *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, the point of this tragic tale is not to provide a satisfying outcome to the Poznans' desperate search for answers. It is, instead, to explore the question: What is the cost of attempting to erase a past? If the Poznans' story is any testament, Englander's answer is surely: Always too high.

The pariah of the Buenos Aires Jewish community, Kaddish Poznan nonetheless provides its members with a valuable service in their moment of need. In 1976 Argentina, when chaos threatened and uncertainty reigned, and "there was terror from all quarters and murder on the rise," it was no time, Englander explains, "to stand out, not for Gentile or Jew. And the Jews, almost to a person, felt that being Jewish was already plenty different enough." Thus, the community's respectable

members, the "ones who had what to lose," seek out Kaddish's help in erasing the evidence of a shameful past in the family line: Members of the Society of the Benevolent Self, a group of Jewish pimps and whores. Only Kaddish, an *hijo de puta*, or son of a whore, refuses to disavow his disreputable origins. It is, in fact, on account of his mother—or rather, her profession—that he received his distinctive name. A sickly child, Kaddish was just a week old when his mother summoned the rabbi to save his life. Refusing even to cross the threshold of her home, the rabbi peers in at the child and grants him a name that is both a trick and a blessing: "Let his name be Kaddish to ward off the angel of death.... Let this child be the mourner instead of the mourned." In the future, Kaddish will have ample opportunity to live up to his name.

Lillian, his long-suffering wife, fell in love with his big dreams, high hopes, and oversized optimism—in short, "with what he'll become," and not with what he was. She continues to stand by him, despite his having become not much at all. It is his son Pato, however, a sullen, pot-smoking, mildly revolutionary university student, with whom Kaddish has never made peace. In the great literary tradition of fathers and sons, their relationship is defined by the differences between generations, by

pride perpetually wounded and admiration perpetually unexpressed. The scene in which the uneducated Kaddish searches through his son's shelves for potentially incriminating books thus provides one of the most touching insights into his character: "He pulled a Marcuse off the shelf. He was embarrassed and quickly turned as if Pato was right there behind him. Only Pato could make him feel inadequate in this way. When Pato shook his head at the holes in his father's knowledge, Kaddish felt sorry for himself and felt stupid before his son." Nonetheless, the books make Kaddish proud, although he would never admit as much. "He loved that Pato was educated. It was Pato's educated attitude," Englander concludes, "that made Kaddish want to wring his neck." Thus does Kaddish insist that his son accompany him on his work in the cemetery, although Pato openly reviles his father's profession. Kaddish is as determined to maintain his authority as Pato is to deny it—as determined, in fact, as the tyrannical state that will eventually "disappear" his son.

Yet Pato does not merely deny Kaddish's authority. In keeping with the book's theme of erasure, Pato has, in his mind, actually *replaced* his patrimony with the ideas in his books. Thus, had Kaddish asked him how he had come to read this or that

work, "Pato could have led him the whole way: How *Ward Six* had gotten him to *The Cherry Orchard* and that to *Onegin* and on to *A Hero of Our Time*, which led him by fluke to Voltaire. Each book begat another and another. For a boy whose entire family history dead-ended on his father's side, this is how Pato traced his family line." It is for this reason, perhaps—his belief in his books as a more authentic and desirable heritage than his own—that Pato refuses to comply with his parents' wish that he destroy his collection, even though he surely knows the books could get him into trouble with the authorities. It is also the likely reason why he reacts the way he does when he happens upon Kaddish burning them, touching off a series of events that result in his arrest and "disappearance" by the state.

And it is here, in his description of the moment of Pato's disappearance, that Englander's real talents as a writer shine through. In a paragraph reminiscent of Kafka's *The Trial*, Englander's simple, straightforward prose is at chilling odds with the surreal scene being described:

A man in a sharp gray suit walked out the door into the darkness of the hallway, a book tucked under his arm. A second man followed, two books, like dead weights, one hanging from each hand. A third and a fourth man walked out the door with Pato, Kaddish's son, standing

between them. They held him very firmly by the elbows, grasping tightly, so that his arms were bent and his hands straight in front. As he passed out of the apartment he smiled at his father, who hadn't moved from his place by the heavy door, holding it open (needlessly) with a foot.

One immediately notices the precise attention to detail—the gray suit, for example, the most nondescript of outfits and the perfect metaphor for the opacity surrounding Pato's arrest. So, too, does the emphasis on the weight of Pato's books bely the absurdity of the "crime" for which he is being arrested. Then there is the drawn-out pacing, marked by short clauses whose interruption elongates the action, making the paragraph a feat of dramatic tension and suspense. Finally, by referring to Pato throughout the rest of the passage only by means of a pronoun, Englander shows that his disappearance has already been effected: Pato the individual is no more. From this moment on, he is merely another victim of a system—much like the elevator upon which Englander's description lingers—that is machine-like in its disregard for a person's humanity:

Kaddish heard it all clearly. He also heard the elevator gate open and the hum of the old motor in the dark, since no one pressed the button for the hallway light. The gate to the elevator slid back, teeth caught gears,

and then, along with the motor, there was the click of the release as the car lowered and the five bodies started to descend.

Just as the narrative quickly shifts from the act of Pato's disappearance to Kaddish's efforts—heartbreakingly pitiful in their randomness—to process the event ("The second man had a windbreaker on between his suit jacket and shirt, mostly hidden, but Kaddish caught a glimpse of nylon: Red and black, Newell's colors. Kaddish was a Boca fan"), so too does Englander seek to shift our focus from Pato to the real subject of the novel. For this is not, in the end, the story of the *desaparecidos*; it is, rather, the story of those they leave behind, and of the different ways in which they choose to respond to the sudden and devastating absence of their loved ones.

It is at this point that Englander's Buenos Aires becomes a world in which answers are never granted, uncertainty is never resolved, and the quest for control over one's fate leads to the brink of madness. Absurdity abounds, most notably at the Ministry of Special Cases, "a bureaucratic dumping ground" and the last resort for the families of the disappeared: Each morning, hundreds of numbers are given out to the people lined up outside, and although only a fraction of those will be called before the

office closes, the numbers start all over again the next day. The clerks insist on a writ of habeas corpus, even though there is no body. And in a particularly cruel twist, Lillian is finally issued such a writ, only to find that it is for a girl she doesn't know:

It was the right date and the right time. It was the right description of Pato's abduction at the right address. All was exactly as it should be but the name.

"This is a lie," she said.

"What's a lie?" he said. It was that much more frustrating for Lillian to talk with someone who gave the impression of understanding. "You're not saying the arrest you reported was a fake?"

"No," Lillian said.

"I wouldn't think so, because it has produced an individual. A habeas corpus has been granted you and the turnaround has been amazingly fast. Beyond that," he said, "it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that receiving one is rare."

"It's supposed to say Pablo Poznan," Lillian said. "You can't expect me to believe this girl was taken from my block, from my home. You can't expect me to accept that I've lost my mind."

"I make no judgment," he said, taking back his clipboard.

At the Ministry of Special Cases, as in Englander's Argentina as a whole, hope leads down corridor after endless corridor, only to dead-end at yet another closed door.

Yet, in the midst of this unbearable tragedy, Englander strikes a strange comic note. The free nose jobs Kaddish and Lillian accepted (Pato refused to participate in this act of "conformity") prove problematic: Kaddish's new nose is strikingly handsome, but Lillian's, done by the surgeon's apprentice, has been botched. While she sobs in the wake of Pato's disappearance, it gives way. The couple's grief thus abruptly interrupted, Kaddish confronts the surgeon in an exchange that borders on slapstick:

"The kid's nose collapsed," Kaddish said.

"The kid's?"

"My wife's," Kaddish said. "The kid's work is no good. The bone—"

"Cartilage."

"It's hanging loose on her face."

"That's a different story," Makurzky said. And as quickly as he'd turned stern, a flash of empathy set in. He passed a coffee to Kaddish. "Was she hit?" the doctor said. "Did she walk into a wall? Frisbees—ever since the Frisbee made its way south, they break many a nose."

"Crying actually. She was upset and crying and it fell."

"It collapsed on its own?"

"Came loose, more. She feels—we feel—it should be under warranty."

Just as we prepare to share in Kaddish and Lillian's pain, a farcical interlude derails our efforts. In the ensuing comedy, we cannot help but forget the larger—and far more

important—tragedy that is beginning to unfold, and our return to it will inevitably be on a lesser emotional footing. And while Englander does attempt, however briefly, to tie the nose job debacle into the narrative of Pato's disappearance (when a police officer, comparing a picture of Pato to his parents, insists that they cannot possibly be related, Lillian is horrified that her new nose has "erased" her one visible link to her son), the ultimate effect of this subplot is to undercut the seriousness of a novel we should, by all counts, be taking seriously.

There are other problems with the book as well, such as the noticeable absence of historical detail. Apart from the main characters' all too brief observations of Buenos Aires' increasingly charged climate—Lillian sees a tank stationed in the town's main square on her way to work; Kaddish and Pato stumble upon a young boy with his throat slit in the cemetery—and some snippets of dialogue about therapists and professors gone missing, we are offered little insight into the political upheaval that resulted in one of recent history's ugliest episodes. Instead, Englander's focus is determinedly narrow, revealing only that which directly affects the Poznans' plight. True, Englander has not set out to write a historical novel. Rather, his is a philosophical work, concerned with the meaning granted to one's past and

one's identity. But surely these things apply equally to society as a whole. How much more powerful, then, might his work have been had it permitted, through an occasional widening of scope and a closer attention to detail, an exploration of the effects of the kind of tragedy suffered by one family on an entire nation?

Ultimately, however, the Poznans' story is so gripping, and the writing so strong and impressive, that we can largely overlook these flaws. Indeed, there are moments when the description of the Poznans' pain is so piercing, and so beautifully rendered, that it succeeds in touching the reader deeply. There is the scene, for instance, in which Kaddish burns Pato's diary and his letters—the last traces of his son's existence—so as to protect his friends from suffering the same fate. There is Lillian's constant watch out her window, waiting for Pato to turn the corner, although she knows, in the depths of her subconscious, that he never will. And finally, there is Kaddish's desperate attempt to pass off another man's bones as his son's, so as to convince Lillian of his death, and thus, at long last, bring closure to an otherwise open-ended grief. These are the marks of a tragedy that rises above absurdity and farce, making it real—and making our own feeling for the implications of a "disappeared" past real as well.

“Which man is better off... the one without a future or the one without a past?” Kaddish is asked. If the Poznans’—and Argentina’s—story is to serve as any answer, it is that the two cannot be separated; individuals and societies as a whole cannot move forward without coming to terms with their past. This idea is hardly new to Englander’s work: In *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, it is the past in the form of the Jewish tradition that cannot, and will not, be denied. There, the characters battle to reconcile their desires within the framework of their tradition. Yet that tradition, and the community that embodies it, is depicted as rigid and unforgiving, an all-or-nothing system that offers little in the way of succor to those who have embraced it.

Interestingly, the Jewish tradition is portrayed differently in *The Ministry of Special Cases*. To be sure, there are similarities between the two works: As in *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, Englander depicts Jewish identity as an indelible, undeniable trait—even for those who would wish it otherwise. Kaddish, who long ago renounced his membership in a community that, in turn, rejects him, nonetheless turns to the Jews for help in saving Pato when all other avenues have failed. So, too, does he scoff at Lillian for lighting Sabbath candles—a habit she attempts to

revive after Pato’s disappearance—after it is already dark and thus a desecration of the Sabbath, even though he feels it is “nothing but superstition, nonsense to light candles when they did nothing else.” Moreover, the novel’s institutional symbols of Jewish tradition, such as Buenos Aires’ United Jewish Communities (UJC) and the city’s aging rabbi, are, much like the insular community that forms the setting of *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, portrayed as unyielding and unsympathetic in the face of individual anguish: The head of the UJC refuses to add Pato’s name to its official list of the disappeared because he is the son of an unrepentant *hijo de puta*, and the rabbi offers Kaddish no help when confronted with the latter’s plea to hold a funeral for Pato despite the absence of a corpse.

And yet, that same Jewish tradition also offers a sense of comfort to those most sorely in need of it. Lillian expresses this fact when she lights the Sabbath candles, explaining that “It’s not hypocrisy,” but “what lapsed Jews do in times of trouble. They make amends and beg help from God.” Even Kaddish, in one of the book’s most moving moments, winds up at the old Benevolent Self cemetery synagogue, broken and exhausted by a search that turns up nothing, and holds out no promise of doing so:

When he was so tired that his body would have to let him sleep, Kaddish made his way over to the old shul. He went up to the ark and yanked down the curtain he'd left hanging.... Kaddish lay down on the first pew and used the curtain for a blanket. He made a pile of prayer books, soft from reading, for his head. He gathered them together and he slept.

In the end, however, it is neither Kaddish nor Lillian who best expresses the idea that Jewish tradition—or any tradition, for that matter—is not only inescapable, but also, and perhaps more importantly, something from which one should not want to escape. It is, instead, an old Jewish couple Lillian meets at the Ministry of Special Cases whose own son was disappeared two years before. The strain of the search has nearly killed the husband, they explain, and they have decided it is time to move on—to Jerusalem. After all their suffering—indeed, perhaps because of it—they have reached the conclusion that the only place for them in the world is to be found among their

own people, and their only hope for a reprieve from their grief is to be found in the embrace of their own tradition.

Thus, perhaps, is Kaddish's decision to mourn his son's death, despite the fact that his body will never be found, a heroic act. In the Jewish tradition, when a loved one dies, a discrete period of mourning is mandated, and after that a return to the world of the living. Kaddish, whose very name means "mourner," has, perhaps unconsciously, chosen to uphold a Jewish custom that has brought comfort to generations in the face of grief and desolation. Indeed, if Englander believes that our past and our tradition condemn us, he also seems to think that they alone have the power to save us as well. And in a world as evil, absurd, and uncertain as the Poznans'—and ours—this may just be the only salvation to be had.

Marla Braverman is an assistant editor of AZURE.