

Theme: Lit Project – the Fiction of W. Kamminer & E. Keret

Source: *Katzenstein* – by Etgar Keret

Once, after we'd made love, my wife said: "Seven years you've been with them, slaving for them, bringing work home every weekend, and now, when push comes to shove, they won't give you a promotion. And you know why? Because you don't know how to sell yourself, that's why. Take Katzenstein for example." I took Katzenstein for example. My whole life I'd been taking Katzenstein for example. I wanted to take a shower, but there was no hot water. The water heater was broken. Took a cold shower instead. I bet Katzenstein has a solar heater.

In high school, I couldn't get into honors class. To my mother it was a really big deal. She cried her eyes out and said I'd never amount to anything. I tried to tell her how tough it was to get in, that only ten percent made it, only the really smart kids. "I met Miriam Katzenstein at the grocery store today," Mom sighed. "Her son got in. Is Miriam Katzenstein's son smarter than mine? Not on your life! He just tries harder. And you - it's as if you're trying to spite me. Driving me to an early grave."

Wherever I went he was always there for them to compare me to. In class, on the block, in the yard, at work, everywhere. Katzenstein, Katzenstein, Katzenstein, Katzenstein. It's not that he was a prodigy or anything. An average guy, no genius, no great shakes at athletics and not very sharp either. Just like me, only a tiny bit better. A tiny bit here and a tiny bit there and another tiny bit ... hell.

It was my own idea to quit my job. It cost me plenty of fights with my wife, but eventually she resigned herself to it. We moved to a different city, far away, and I started working as an insurance salesman. Did pretty well. Didn't see him for about seven years. Things were going my way. My son was born. My grandfather in Switzerland died and left me a lot of property. On the flight back from Basel I saw him sitting there, in first class. By the time I spotted him it was too late. The plane was taxiing down the runway, and I knew I was in for five very long hours. Next to me was this rabbi who didn't stop yapping, but I didn't hear a word. For five hours straight, my eyes were glued to the back of Katzenstein's head. "Take a good look at the empty life you lead. You're a shell of a man. No values." The rabbi was holding a mirror up to my sins, sprinkling his sermon with sacred verses. I had some orange juice. Katzenstein ordered a Jeff Daniels. "For example, take..." the rabbi said. No thanks. I sprang up and made a dash for the rear of the plane. The flight attendant asked me to return to my seat. I wouldn't.

"We're about to land, Sir. I insist you return to your seat and fasten your seatbelt, like..." True, she went on to say "like all the other passengers," but what I saw in her eyes was Katzenstein. I pushed down on the lever and forced the door open with my shoulder. I was perfectly calm as I was sucked out, leaving all hell behind me.

Suicide is still considered a dreadful sin in the afterlife. I begged them to try and understand, but they wouldn't listen. As they were dragging me to Hell, there was Katzenstein. Him and the other passengers, waving at me through the window of the tour bus that was taking them to Heaven. The plane had crashed as it hit the ground, about fifteen minutes after I'd bailed out. A rare malfunction. One in a million. If only I'd stuck it out in my seat another few seconds, like all the other passengers. Like Katzenstein.

Annotations:

2 push comes to shove – when action needs to be taken 11 spite – annoy 13 prodigy – person with exceptional talents 14 sharp – intelligent 21 yap – talk in an annoying way 25 Jeff Daniels – whisky (trademark) 34 bail out – escape from a situation

Assignments:

- 1) Give a short overview of the protagonist's life.
- 2) Work closely on the text to show what sort of person the protagonist is. How does Keret use the supernatural element to reach his aim?
- 3) Compare the protagonist to any character of your choice from stories by Kamminer or Keret that were read in class. Say in what respect you find them comparable and why you prefer one of them over the other.