

## 1/ The French Mirror

The brief description of Harry Kohen's job at Bearman Textiles had always revealed a good deal about him in only seven words, but not everything of course. "Full-time plant manager, Boston; summer salesman, Maine," said his yearly contract in the fall of 1979. Harry was, it said, a divided man.

Harry Kohen slipped a calloused hand into the inside pocket of his wool overcoat, checking that his copy of this year's work contract was there. It was there. He exited B.T.'s three-story brick building through its heavy front door. He listened to the door close behind him at the end of the workday. In a cold autumn rain typical for Boston, he stepped across the plant's cobblestone parking lot.

Fifty-six, Harry was a tall man with a strong face, steady green eyes, and a fair complexion. His once heavy, dark eyebrows were the dignified gray of his hair. His nose was straight and sharp. These facial features gave Harry the look of an aging wolf, quipped one of his customers in Maine recently. Harry snugged on a pair of leather gloves kept in a side pocket of his woolen overcoat. He jogged for the Tremont Street bus stop, stepping past the white stone lot. A New England wind slapped him in the neck. Harry halted his steps. On this late October afternoon, he then tightened a Tattersall scarf around his neck with a gloved hand, the icy rain angling against the skin of his face. Harry pulled his brown fedora part of the way down over his ears, protecting himself from the driving rain and wind.

Its white body trimmed in a sunny yellow, the lumbering #49 bus came lurching around the corner right on time. The bus stopped a block away from the plant, from B.T. Harry jumped on

board, protected from the bad weather. The city's poor and its disadvantaged packed the #49. The upcoming winter months in Boston would not be easy on the lower incomes, Harry told himself, nor on anyone. He found a rare unoccupied seat, warming its black vinyl torn in three places.

The throbbing, corn-yellow bus sliced past the Elevated. The top six inches of the bus's interior walls were not surprisingly a long ribbon of repetitive advertisements promoting a cure for constipation, for hair loss, a cheap loan, a state lottery, a million dollar attorney, and the 1979-80 season at Boston Philharmonic. Harry was not paying much attention to any of the hype today. We live every day less and less everyday in an enlightened democracy and, he told himself, more and more in a blindfolded capitalocracy. An individual was worth the number of dollars he was able to generate, period, with the obvious and important exceptions of course. Harry looked past the bus's smudgy window beside his seat, staring at the rush-hour traffic of downtown Boston. The crisscrossing vehicles charged through the hard rain. Depending on the crush of the traffic, Harry's home stop on the bus's repetitive run was ten or fifteen minutes away. The sturdy #49 slipped past Revere Street. Harry, a bright man, started to think about time. The passing of time accelerated as one got older, he understood. There was an inverse ratio between a person's chronological age and the rate of his perception of the passage of time. Time passed slowly when he was a child. A day was an eternity. His present age reversed the experience. Now a decade had passed by as if it were a year, a year a month. A day was a couple of hours. July segued into August, August into September too quickly. Today was the fourth week of October, the first cold month in Boston, the rate of the passage of time accelerating all the while. Harry had to decelerate, he told himself, to slow down his sense of

time, before the sand in his hourglass drained to the bottom. What was time after all, but the movement from before to after?

Accelerating too was Harry's present feeling about working for Jamie, his long-time boss, the president and owner of Bearman Textiles. Harry was feeling a tad used and overworked on the job these days, namely here in the City of Paul Revere. Had he not become merely a dutiful drudge at the plant, a pack mule, the company carry-all? If he were to quit B.T., however, he was to lose the Maine Territory, his oasis of twenty years. Harry hardly wished to suffer that loss.

The rumbling white-and-yellow bus jerked to a stop. Three passengers exited its front door. A suavely dressed black man nabbed the vacated seat across the aisle from Harry. The young man had leapt on board the #49 a few stops back, standing and grabbing one of the packed bus's leather safety straps. The stranger was tall and well-built. He had a relaxed style and a cool manner about him. Nattily dressed in the style of Jack Smith, he wore a classy-looking brown tweed jacket, a white shirt with a Princeton collar, a green wool necktie, creased gray flannels, and a pair of cordovan penny loafers. His hair was conked, flattened, and parted in the middle.

Harry Kohen was startled, but not displeased, by the resemblance of this young gentleman to Jack, setting aside the fact that Harry himself no longer felt young, especially in Boston. The next stop on the #49's route surprisingly belonged to this dapper dude. He stood up. He straightened the knot on his green wool tie. The young man strode for the back exit door, jumping from the bus in the next minute. Harry no longer stared at this debonair, cosmopolitan guy as if into a mirror, it seemed.

Harry jumped from the dirt-splashed bus fifteen minutes later, but only after engaging in the

most common of human activities during duration of his bus ride. He was thinking about the past. He was intuitively, if amateurishly, composing an informal memoir. What else do we humans do more often than this? Today's little chapter in the autobiography of Harry Kohen had collected the usual random series of events from earlier times in no particular order, near or distant, but mostly events in Maine.

Harry's home was a traditional Victorian bowfront of weathered red bricks trimmed in white sandstone, with the strong, black ironwork of old Boston fronting the historical building. The building was one of a row of identical five-story designs that crowded the block. Harry speedily walked the rainy block and a half from the graffitied bus stop to his modest rental. He climbed his building's winding interior steps to his third-floor apartment, ready to share the news of his workday with his wife Felice. He artfully turned a nearly-toothless key into the rental's front door lock, crossing into a lit kitchen. The evening's rain clung to the shoulders of his gray tweed overcoat picked up at Filene's five years earlier.

Harry sauntered across a dated kitchen, calling loudly to his wife and son, "Felice, Alexander." In the small kitchen that lacked a wall between it and the living room, no reply followed his shout-out. A disappointed Harry hung his icy overcoat, hat, and gloves on hooks in the kitchen closet. He tossed a slender dark necktie worn only on Monday over a wooden kitchen chair. He flipped the B.T. envelope holding his copy of his work contract onto a sturdy walnut kitchen table, after grabbing it from his overcoat pocket. He was belligerent about his toss. The envelope flew into the air, landing squarely against a tall glass water vase on the table. The glass vase held three red, three white baby roses. Impossibly, the tossed envelope had remained just there; had not moved from its leaning against the vase of flowers nor was falling over. Harry waited for the monogrammed stationery to drop onto the round table. He was

waiting forever. A copy of the morning's *Globe* and a decanter of Black Label were only inches from the vase of flowers.

Harry wore a pair of tan chinos, a rumpled white shirt, and a pair of polished tie shoes, his necktie being worn at the plant only on meeting day. Harry grabbed a short drinking glass from a white cabinet over the kitchen sink. He dropped three ice cubes from the fridge's bottom freezer into his glass. Harry wearily slipped his fanny onto a kitchen chair upholstered in green velvet. The familiar scent lingering in the kitchen air suggested that a pot roast was browning in the oven of Felice's white porcelain stove. The drip of its fat bubbled noisily. Harry slipped off his worn brogues, letting his shoes drop to the tan linoleum floor. He stretched his stocking feet past the *Globe* on the glossy table. He poured himself a couple of inches of the Black Label, sipping his glass of the good Scotch. On the street-side wall, the kitchen's steam radiator warmed the room.

Felice evidently was stalled at Dr. Springer's office. She and the young doctor, Harry guessed, were talking over her case. He seriously wished to hear the latest diagnosis, especially if it were good news, before he shared the significant news of his day with Felice. Harry covetously picked up the threads of his earlier bus-ride thoughts in the loneliness of the walk-up.

The third floor apartment was a twobedroom, one bath, with a steam radiator in each room, polished wood floors, high ceilings, and beige walls. One of the walls in the living room displayed three intimate family photographs in matching wooden frames, their son Alexander standing between Felice and Harry in living color at the ages of three, seven, and Bar Mitzvah. An oil painting of the Common on a snowy January day graced the opposite wall, Felice's work at the Open Art School. One of Alex's black-and-white photos, an abstract, hung on the same wall. A working grandfather clock and a large antique French mirror took up the space on a

third wall, the mirror handed down to Felice by her maternal grandmother.

Harry lowered his dark wool socks from the kitchen table to the tan linoleum. Spritz the table clean, he warned himself, before Felice walks through the door. Pouring himself a third inch from the bottle, Harry stared at the large antique mirror. A strange image appeared on its glass. The image was not the figure of himself, Harry Kohen. Harry, evidently, was hallucinating. He normally was not seeing things, illusions. Harry was seeing there at first the head of a handsome Clydesdale, Jamie's description of him on this very morning, when the mirror suddenly imaged instead the head of a common plow horse.

What was Harry to make of these sights on the antique glass? The equine images settled into Harry's thoughts as coldly as the ice cubes into the cloudy bottom of his glass.

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