

## 1/ Jack Smith

The last of my guys and gals had punched his time card of a quiet yellow like an autumn moon. The line of the loyal workers at Bearman Textiles had moved forward easily. At five-thirty in the afternoon, we were happy to be done with the work day. On this day in early October, I double-checked on my copy of this year's contract. It had it. It was snug in an interior pocket of my overcoat. It was there. I wanted to show it to my wife, Felice. It said a good bit about me, yet not everything of course.

I high-tailed it out of Bearman Textiles metal front door a half-hour later, after tidying up some paper work. I was striding for the Tremont Street bus stop. A cold rain angled against my neck in our cobblestone parking lot. An icy wind slapped me in the face. I tightened a green Tattersall scarf with a gloved hand. I then pulled a brown fedora over a pair of disproportionately small ears, protecting myself from the arctic rain and the driving wind.

The lumbering #49 bus halted a block from the plant. Its white body was trimmed in a sunny yellow. I jumped on board. If you had been there, you'd have seen I am a tall, muscular man. I have green eyes, my nose is straight and sharp. My once dark eyebrows are the dignified gray of my hair, I'm told, giving me the look of an aging wolf, quipped one of my customers in Maine recently. The bus lurched forward. My stop was ten or maybe fifteen minutes' away, depending on the rate of late rush-hour traffic. The #49 was packed mostly with the city's poor and its disadvantaged. The up-coming winter months would not be an easy time for them. For me, it was normally a repetitive, thoughtful ride on the pushy, odiferous bus. It was my habit to spend this brief stretch of time in the grip of memory and of meditation.

It had then been my habit for months. Meditation, spiritual or not, is commonly the practice

of persons of my age, fifty-six, when the certainty of the events of the revealed past is likely to be richer and more exciting these days than the dreamy speculations on one's future, never mind the present. When my son Alex told me recently of a new specialty in our colleges called a "Futurist," telling me this professor held a *paying* position, I distrusted it. I had to laugh at this example of the human comedy. The best of jobs in the world was precisely the opposite, in Alex's opinion. It was the job of an historian. All of the riches are in the past, he liked to say, if you think about it. But what did he know? He was sixteen years old.

I myself was at a magical, but mixed age when (again) – corroborating Alex's insight -- the past is predictably more promising in its insights than future expectations. It was a nice coincidence between the two of us. I was my own historian in a slide show of events and persons remembered. It was my own my photoplay of times gone by, and I was a ready resource to those individuals that studied the past and valued it. I was it in the flesh, especially when I might be a bit philosophical if inclined that way.

This week's not so great news was on my mind, as I warmed a seat of a black vinyl on #49. To begin, there was Felice's second crisis with diabetes. Next, it was the unpleasant news about Maine. I had heard it from Jamie only that morning. The news occupied my thoughts. During the lugubrious process of my signing this year's contract earlier in the day, Jamie let it slip that Schultz, the accountant, had a plan. At the time, we were chatting in Jamie's suite of offices about Maine, among other things. Schultz, the *pisher* CPA, had been recently hired to modernize Accounts with a fancy, new computer. Well, this MBA in his flashy Donatelli suit had Jamie taking his crazy ideas seriously. The kid was talking hard about cutting the sales force, and Jamie was listening.

More dangerous than the kid denigrating sales? In his own clever head, Jamie had listened

seriously to Schultz's thoughts of closing down the accounts in southern Maine, my oasis, after twenty plus years.

I stared out a smudgy window, squirmy on the bus's torn seat. I was staring the ghost, we'll call it, of the Ohabi Chesed Synagogue. It was Boston's first Jewish house of worship, 1852. I had thought nothing of it in recent months, when the bus passed its former spot on Union St. abandoned by the *shul* at the turn of the century. I had not shown up at our own Temple Israel on Longwood Ave. across town in years. Yet I was now recalling an incident of years ago. At Temple Israel, I had accidentally drop a *yalmulke* nearly weightless to the floor. Quickly, I grabbed it. I stuck it on the crown of my large head, kissing it. Next, I twisted the white tassels of the *tallis*, the prayer shawl, around my index finger until it turned purple. It was roughly twenty years ago, I said to myself, eyeing downtown Boston's rush hour traffic fighting a hard rain.

I recalled next the ritual of putting on *tefillin*, checking the cross-traffic on Tremont St. I was remembering how I tightened the grip of its leather strap, as it raised blood in the veins of my arm. Its leather strap and its hard wooden box tonsured my skull like a vice grip. The mystery of the phylacteries' enigmatic wooden box smaller than a walnut came back to me in the midst of these meditations. The *tefillin* box contained God's mystical name, it was said, speaking of the unspeakable. It was there in a script so minute a Talmudic scholar with spectacles thick as bottle glass mightn't read it without a magnifying glass.

The unspeakable, the mysterious, was the beating heart of my meditations on this day. It was contract day. Contract day at Bearman Textiles was always the first work day after Yom Kippur, the most solemn, soul-searching of days. One confessed his sins of the year gone by on this day, asking the Lord God to be made right with him. Now there were millions of mysteries in the

universe, of course. God, for one. Yet the most mysterious of all the world's mysteries was maybe the human self, in my opinion at this time. The self? One great philosopher argued it was always in the process of change; a second it, essentially, never changed.

The corn yellow #49 sliced and it throbbed past the Elevated. Sitting erectly inside of it, I, no Einstein, started to think about time. The passing of time accelerated as one got older, I was saying to myself. In my solid, if not brilliant mind, what did it mean? It meant there was an inverse ratio here. The inverse ratio was between a person's chronological age and the rate of his perception of the passage of time. Time passed slowly, when I was a small child. A day was an eternity. Now I was fifty-six years old. It was the reverse. A decade passed as if it a year, a year like a month. A day was a couple of hours. Too quickly, July segued into August, August September. Today was the second week of October, the first cold month in Boston. The rate of the passage of time was accelerating all the while. It was unsettling. Then as I compared the mind of the past to the contemporary view of things, it brought little new insight into either one on this dark autumn evening.

Rather, it fueled a growing sense of the ambiguity of things. This was especially the case with my working for Jamie. I felt used, working for Jamie Bearman. I even felt abused at times. Yet Jamie had at the same time gratified my higher sense of myself more fully than any person alive or dead over the years, with one exception. It was a paradox. It conflicted me at my inner core.

Many other subjects caught my fancy at this time beyond the rituals of the synagogue noted here and beyond the nature of time passing in its odd and strange ways. For instance, there was a second inverse ratio. It was between the intensity of a person's outer and his inner life, I was saying to myself, having an eyeful of the conditions both inside and outside of old #49.

Regarding the inner and outer life of a human being? An hypothesis. With a rise in the intensity

of either one of them, the other declines, simultaneously. It might be a fact worth remembering, if so, I was saying to myself. Then, there was the idea of peripity.

Abruptly, the rumbling bus jerked to a stop. It snapped me out of the immediate consciousness of these meditations. I had entered the mind, now I was exiting it. I was back in the perceptual world. Or was I? Was it possible for a human being to exit his mind? I couldn't help noticing next a suavely-dressed black man. He was tallish and slim. This gentleman had leapt on board at the last stop, nabbing the seat across the aisle. He was dressed top to bottom like Jack Smith. Jack Smith was my alias, my identity in Maine. The young man's hair was conked, flattened, and parted in the middle. He wore a pair of cordovan Bass Weeguns and a pair of creased gray flannels. He dressed nattily in a brown tweed jacket, a white shirt with a Princeton collar, and a green woolen necktie.

I was not displeased, but startled by the resemblance of this gentleman to Jack Smith. Oddly, the next stop belonged to this dapper dude. Standing, the young man strode for the Exit door. In a minute, he jumped from the bus. I was no longer staring into the mirror, it seemed, at this debonair cosmopolitan guy.

I jumped from the dirt-splashed bus a block from home. Home was a bow front of weathered red brick with a white sandstone trim. It was fronted by the traditional, shiny black ironwork of Victorian Boston, one of the identical five-story apartment buildings that crowded our block. I hurried up the winding, interior steps to our apartment on the third floor. I had the day's news to share with Felice. I turned a key nearly toothless into the rental's door not artlessly. I crossed into a lit kitchen. The wet of the evening's icy rain clung to the shoulders of my overcoat I had picked up at Filene's four or five years earlier.

I called out, "Felice, Alexander," entering the antiquated 70's kitchen. There was no reply to

my call out. It was a small, open kitchen with no wall between it and the living room. I tossed a slender necktie over a wooden kitchen chair. I then flipped my copy of this year's contract on a polished walnut table. I was belligerent about it. It landed against a glass vase holding three red and three white roses. Oddly, it was leaning steadily there. It never fell over onto the round table. A decanter of Black Label and a copy of the Globe were inches from the antique vase of flowers.

I grabbed a short glass from a cabinet over the sink, dropping a handful of ice cubes from the freezer into it. Warily, I slipped into one of four kitchen chairs. It was upholstered long ago in a green velvet. A pot roast cooked in the oven, the smell of it lingering in the kitchen air. The melt of its fat bubbled in a white porcelain stove noisily. I slipped off a pair of brown oxfords on the linoleum floor, relaxing my stocking feet on the glossy table. The kitchen had a steam radiator on the street-side wall. It warmed the room nicely.

Felice was stalled at Dr. Springer's office, evidently. They were likely to be talking over her case, I said to myself, sipping on the scotch. I very much wanted hear the latest diagnosis. I also wanted to share the news of my day with Felice. Covetously, I picked up the threads of my bus ride contemplations in the loneliness of the walk-up. I had done too little for myself over the years, especially in Boston. I said out loud to the walls. I had somehow come to be a dutiful SOB, nothing but. To remedy this? Did I not in the first place need to locate the fuggin' courage to quit Bearman Textiles, I said only to myself, swigging down an inch?

Our apartment was a two bedroom, one bath. It had a steam radiator in each room, polished wood floors, high ceilings, and beige walls. There were three family photos in a plain wooden frame, Alex in the middle of Felice and I, on one living room wall. An oil of the Common during a snowy January was on the opposite wall. Felice had done it at the Open Art School.

One of Alex's framed, black-and-white photographs, an abstract, was beside. On the third wall was a grandfather clock and an antique French mirror that was handed down to Felice by her maternal grandmother.

I lowered my feet in their wool socks to the white linoleum, pleasuring in a second inch, lounging at the floral table, I stared directly into the antique mirror. There, a dark, negative image flashed into my sight. I was hallucinating, evidently. The image in the mirror was the head of a horse. It looked like a plow horse at first. No, it was a Clydesdale. Jamie's words this morning. What was I to do with this odd sight, showing up on the antique glass? At the time, it settled in my thoughts as coldly as the ice into the cloudy bottom of my glass.

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