1/ Jack Smith

An irregular line of the forty loyal workers at Bearman Textiles moved forward, until the last of my guys and my gals punched his timecard. The card was a quiet yellow like an autumn moon. Happy myself to be nearly done with the workday on this October afternoon, I double-checked to see if I had my copy of this year's contract with me. I had it. It was snugged into an interior pocket of my overcoat. I fingered it there. I wished 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's metal front door a half-hour later, having tidied up some paperwork. A cold rain angled against my neck in our cobblestone parking lot, as I hurried for the Tremont Street bus stop. An icy wind was slapping me in the face. I tightened a green Tattersall scarf around my neck with gloved a hand. I then pulled a brown fedora over a pair of disproportionally small ears, protecting myself from the arctic rain and the driving wind.

The lumbering #49 bus lurched around the corner into sight. A good omen, it was on time! It halted a block from the plant, its white body trimmed in a sunny yellow. I jumped on board.

I am a tall, muscular man with green eyes, my nose is straight and sharp. My once dark eyebrows are, I'm told, the dignified gray of my hair. It gives me the look of an aging wolf, quipped one of my customers in Maine recently. My stop was only ten or maybe fifteen minutes' away, depending on the crush of rush-hour traffic in downtown Boston. The #49 was packed with the city's poor and disadvantaged. The upcoming winter months would not be easy on them.

Today offered me a typically thoughtful ride, I expected, on the pushy, odiferous bus. It had been my habit for months to spend my free time in the grip of memory and of meditation.

Meditation, spiritual or not, is commonly the practice of a person of my age. I am fifty-six. It is the time of life when the certainty of the revealed events of the past is likely richer and more exciting than our dreamy, but tentative speculations on the 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 had to distrust it. I had to laugh at this example of the human comedy. The best job in the world, Alex said, was precisely the opposite, in his opinion. It was the job of an historian. All of the riches are in the past, he likes to say, if you think about it. But what might he know? He is sixteen years old.

I myself was at a magical, if mixed age when, corroborating my son's insight, the past is more promising in its insights and events than unknown expectations of the future. It was a nice coincidence between the thinking of the two of us. I had reached a time when I was my own historian, historian of myself, with a ready slide show of the events and the persons I remembered and was able to re-imagine. It was my own unique photoplay of times gone by, and also a ready resource to those individuals that wished to study this period of time and valued it. I was an example of it in the flesh, especially when I might choose to be a bit philosophical, if inclined that way.

This week's news was not great and was on my mind, while I warmed a seat of black vinyl on the #49. There, first, was Felice's crisis with the diabetes. Then it was the unpleasant news about Maine. I heard it from Jamie Bearman himself only on this morning. The news occupied my thoughts. During the lugubrious process of my signing of this year's contract earlier in the day, Jamie let it slip. The new accountant, this punk Schultz, had a plan. At the time, Jamie and I were chatting in his suite of offices about Maine among other things. Schultz, the *pisher* CPA, was recently hired to modernize Accounts with a fancy new computer. This MBA in a shiny

Donatelli suit had Jamie taking his crazy ideas seriously. The kid was talking hard about cutting the sales force. More dangerous than the kid denigrating sales in general? In his clever head, Jamie was listening to Schultz's thoughts of closing down the accounts in southern Maine, my oasis, after twenty plus years there.

I stared past the bus's smudgy window at the ghost of a building, we'll call it. It was the ghost of the Ohabi Chesed Synagogue, Boston's first Jewish house of worship, 1852. It once resided there in a two-story brick building that is now an empty lot. While the bus passed its former spot here on Union St. daily, I had not thought anything of it in many years. The building itself was abandoned by the congregation at the turn of the century. I myself had not shown up at our Temple Israel across town on Longwood Ave. in years, yet I was oddly recalling an incident there. I accidently had dropped a blue *yalmulke* to the floor during a Saturday morning service. The skull cap nearly weightless. I grabbed hold of it. I stuck it back on the crown of my large head, according to Jewish tradition, kissing it first. I then twisted the white tassels of my *tallis*, my prayer shawl, around my index finger until it turned almost purple. It was roughly twenty years ago, I said to myself, eyeing the madness of the rush-hour traffic of downtown Boston charging through a hard rain.

I was recalling next the full ritual of putting on *tefillin,* while I checked out the slashing cross-traffic on Tremont St., how I tightened the grip of its leather strap, I remembered, how this raised blood in the veins of my arm, its strap and its hard wooden box had tightly tonsured my skull as if it in a vice grip, and in the midst of these meditations, the mystery of the enigmatic wooden box that was smaller than a walnut came back to me. It contained God's mystical name, I was told, speaking of the unspeakable. It was there in the box in a script so minute a Talmudic scholar with spectacles thick as bottle glass might not read it without a magnifying glass.

The unspeakable, the mysterious was the beating heart of my meditation on this dark October afternoon. It was contract day. Contract day at Bearman Textiles was always the first workday after Yom Kippur, the most solemn and soul-searching of days. On this holy day, a Jew was committed to confess each of his sins of the year gone by, asking the Lord God to be made right with Him. Thinking of the millions of mysteries in the universe, God, for one, the most mysterious of all the world's mysteries was probably the human self, in my opinion at the time. One great philosopher has argued it is always in the process of change; a second it, essentially, never changes.

The throbbing, corn-yellow #49 sliced past the Elevated. I, no Einstein, started to think about time. Within the bus's walls of adverts and graffiti, I sat erectly in my seat. The passing of time, I told myself, accelerated as one got older. What might it mean in my solid, if not brilliant mind? It meant 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 I was a small child. A day was an eternity. Now, at my age, it was the reverse. A decade passed as if it were a year, a year like a month. A day was a couple of hours. July segued into August, August September too quickly. 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. As I began to compare my own consciousness of the past to the contemporary view of things, it sadly brought me too little insight into either one on this autumn evening.

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

being.

Outside of the rituals of the synagogue noted here and the nature of time passing in its odd and strange ways, many other subjects were catching my fancy on this evening. There was, for instance, a second inverse ratio of interest to me. It was between the intensity of a person's outer and his inner life, I was saying to myself, catching an eyeful of the conditions 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? The other, simultaneously, declines. It might be a fact worth remembering, I told myself, if so. Then there was the idea of peripity.

The rumbling bus jerked abruptly to a stop, snapping me out of these meditations. I had gone a ways into the human mind, I was now exiting it. The great human problem was not how to get into the mind, I have heard, but once in there how to get out again. I was back in the perceptual world. Or was I? Was it possible for a human being to exit his mind? I could not help noticing next a suavely-dressed black man that nabbed the seat across the aisle. He was tallish and slim. This young gentleman had leapt on board a few stops back. He was dressed like Jack Smith top to bottom. Jack Smith was my alias, my identity in Maine. The young man's hair was conked, flattened, and parted in the middle. He dressed nattily in a brown tweed jacket, a white shirt with a Princeton collar, and a green woolen necktie. He wore a pair of cordovan Weeguns and creased gray flannels.

I was not unpleased, but startled by the resemblance of this gentleman to Jack. Oddly, the next stop belonged to this dapper dude. He stood up, straightening the knot on his tie. The young man strode for the back exit door, and in the next minute, he jumped from the bus. I was no longer staring into the mirror, it seemed, at this debonair cosmopolitan guy.

I leapt from the dirt-splashed bus five minutes later, a block and a half from home. Home was

one of Boston's traditional bow fronts of a weathered red brick with its trim of a white sandstone. One of a row of the identical, five-story apartment buildings that crowded our block, it was fronted by the traditional, shiny black ironwork of Victorian Boston. I hurried up the winding, interior steps to our apartment on the third floor. I had the day's news to share with my wife, Felice. Artfully, I turned a key nearly toothless into the rental's front door, crossing into a lit kitchen. The wet of the evening's icy rain clung to the shoulders of my overcoat. I had picked it up at Filene's four or five years earlier.

I called out, "Felice, Alexander," as I sauntered into 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 blue necktie over a wooden kitchen chair, flipping my copy of this year's contract onto a polished walnut table, belligerent about it. It, oddly, landed against a glass vase that held three red and three white baby roses. The contract was leaning steadily there. It never fell over onto the round table. Inches from the antique vase of flowers, a copy of the Globe and a decanter of Black Label waited for me.

I grabbed a short glass from a white cabinet over the sink, dropping a handful of ice cubes from the freezer into it. Wearily, I slipped into one of four kitchen chairs upholstered long ago in a green velvet. The smell of Felice's pot roast cooking in the oven of her porcelain stove lingered in the kitchen air. The drip of its fat, I heard, bubbled noisily. I slipped off a pair of brown loafers, dropping them on the linoleum floor. The kitchen had a steam radiator on its the street-side wall. It nicely warmed the room. I stretched my stocking feet over the Globe on the glossy table.

Felice evidently was stalled at Dr. Springer's office. She and the young doctor, I told myself, were to be talking over her case. I sipped on the Scotch. I much wanted to hear the latest

diagnosis, especially if good news, wishing to share the news of my day with Felice. I covetously 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, I said out loud to the apartment's walls, especially in Boston. I somehow or other had come to be merely a dutiful SOB, a drudge, a company carry-all. To remedy it? I badly needed to locate the fuggin' courage, I mumbled, to quit Bearman Textiles. I swigged down an inch. I needed more of Maine, less of Boston.

Our apartment was a two bedroom, one bath. It had a steam radiator in each room, polished wood floors, high ceilings, and beige walls. Three family photographs were displayed on one wall of the living room, each in a plain wooden frame. Our son Alex stood between Felice and myself in living color at the ages of three, seven, and Bar Mitzvah. A nice oil of the Common during a snowy January graced the opposite wall. Felice had done it at the Open Art School. One of Alex's black-and-white photos, an abstract, was beside it. There was a grandfather clock and a large antique French mirror on a third wall, the mirror handed down to Felice by her maternal grandmother.

I lowered my dark wool socks from the table to the white linoleum. Spritz the table clean, I warned myself, before Felice walks through the door. I pleasured in a second inch, while I stared directly into the large antique mirror. A strange image was on its glass. I, evidently, was hallucinating. The image on the glass was the head of a horse. It looked at first to belong to a common plow horse. No, it was the head of a Clydesdale. Jamie's words this morning. What was I to do with it, this odd sight showing up on the antique glass? It settled into the back of my mind as coldly as the ice cubes into the cloudy bottom of my glass.

*

2/ Contract Day

Jamie perched at the front edge of his bulky office desk. It was earlier on this same October day. To me, he said, "Harry, success is never easy. But we did it. Did it during the long, hard winters in Boston, shorter summers in Maine. Let's not forget Maine," he said. "Without you, Harry? I'd be in the toilet, the shitter," Jamie said. He pointed a fat Cuban cigar at the ceiling. He then jumped off the green felt blotter topping his executive desk. He revolved behind it, as if a proud medieval lord in his castle conferring with a vassal over estate business.

Jamie had handed me my yearly contract across the desk. I was seated in one of two mid-century modern guest chairs fronting its shiny oak. The contract needed to be signed here, initialed there. A mere formality, said Jamie, on this busy morning. The tan carpeted office had a ceiling of florescent lights that were humming like bees at the hive. Jamie's face sparkled under the glare of the lights. It was a rosy face. On this hectic Monday, he wore a luxury gray wool suit with a red-and-blue check. It looked, I had to guessed, like a Hart Shaffer & Marx. Jamie was at home in it. Wearing a Shantung necktie that was a shade lighter than the suit, a slim silver bar clipped to it, his tie accenting a white piqué shirt likely tailored in Singapore, he stood as tall as possible behind his desk. Jamie was a fastidious clothes hound. The man made the clothes, of course, not the clothes the man. Yet the clothes helped to make the man, according to Jamie, were evidence of his success, aiding him in it.

Bearman Textiles was a three-story brick warehouse two and a half blocks from Boston Bay. It had been in business for thirty years. In the textile biz, Jamie was called a "converter." A converter was a middle man. It meant that Bearman trucked in thousands of yards of bulk goods from the many textile mills in neighboring New England states week in and out, converting

these shipments into pieces of under twenty yards to be sold retail in the home-sewing department at the big outfits, Sears, J.C. Penney, or Kmart, while catering also to the small, independent mom-and-pops of New England. The textiles market in America had declined badly in recent decades, Bearman Textiles not having a great year in the last decade, likwise the sales to the mom-and-pop stores in southern Maine, my territory. Where did it leave me on the open market where a person either was worth the money he made for others, or was valued for a rare or a highly desirable talent, *if* he might have one?

Sixty-five, Jamie's early morning routine was repetitive. He slicked down the last patches of his head's white hair with a scented oil. He took a breakfast of one slice of bacon, one poached egg, and one piece of toast with jam. On the day after Yom Kippur, the Peruvian oil perfumed his presidential office of three rooms carpeted in a thick wool. Narrow panels of an imported white oak that ran vertically covered the walls. A stylish set of wood and of metal furniture articulated a vibrant show place under a nine-foot ceiling.

Bent over Jamie's desk, I inked my contract with a signature of swirling letters. I was wearing a pair of heavy chinos, the brown loafers polished, and a white shirt with a narrow necktie. Once the signing over, I straightened my back in the sleek metal chair. Jamie lounged in a leather swivel chair behind his desk. I was directly across from him, my posture firm, my personal bearing, I suppose, a bit stern on this morning. I unbuttoned my collar, loosening my tie.

There was plenty of the legal verbiage in my contract, too much. There was a single line among it, however, that stated the two-sides of my position. Cryptically, it said, "full-time plant manager; part-time summer sales, southern Maine." It was only ten words. I did not need to reread it. It said so much about me in outline, might serve as the epigraph on my gravestone one day.

I was, it said, a divided man. I, as plant manager, sweated with the nine-to-fivers. I labored with my guys and gals like a Pegasus in harness both inside the plant and on its paved grounds. As a salesman in summery Maine, I, to the contrary, never saw a time-clock. There's no clock, said Shakespeare, in the forest. I had a salary, plus commissions. I was free to pull off my sales any way, any day, peddling Jamie's fashionable piece goods to the mom-and-pop stores in southern Maine for two decades. My ideas and my plans only were my boss, my guide for these two months of the year. It freed me from routine, routine, and more of it. It released me from the duty to shepherd others, if only for a time.

Maine, typically, was a sweet deal all around. My sense of happiness there, I would have to say, elevated to the level of sublime at times, and this heightened, giddy feeling was apparent in the most ordinary of things and present in the most common of events, yet it was not to be severed easily from other times of great sorrow, the sting of personal tragedy, and so much more to remember.

I, politely, handed the contract back to Jamie. I am a bulky man. I was fitting into the shiny chair like a pineapple into a juicer not much larger than it. Exactly as I anticipated, but dreaded, Jamie started in with his brassy praise. He was starting to praise this prickly pineapple in his always self-assured voice. Feisty Jamie was to orate his laudatory bit with the sumptuous eloquence of a Cicero.

He asked, "What in this world don't I owe to you, Harry Kohen? Owe you for your loyalty in particular. Over the years, you have tilled the ground of our many successes together. Together, I repeat. You have done it like a giant of a plow horse, a god-damn handsome Clydesdale," said Jamie. These were the words I was not soon to forget.

It was typical of him. Standing by the big New York buyers when they hit the plant here in

Boston, or parading the plant floor before the machinists, the sewers, and maintenance, or at a pot roast supper with Felice and Alex at our walk-up on Tremont St., Jamie liked to wax eloquent on the subject of my virtues in long, ornate Victorian sentences, and this year's contract day was no exception.

As to my side of his story? There were (to repeat myself) two parts to it, and if a person truly desired to make sense of it, I wished to tell Jamie on this Monday morning, he really needed to take my Boston *and* my Maine, halve them again, to sense what I was up to. Jamie was not likely to get this. Here was the rub. Jamie valued me. He genuinely seemed to admire me, while I was no longer happy to work for him, especially a Jamie not aware of it nor of the reasons for it. It had soured our working relationship, the end of it was perhaps close by. It fractured our friendship, from my point of view.

*