

JEWISH LEGACIES

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Would You Hide Me?

I DON'T KNOW WHY I'm so worried about how I look, asking myself if I'm appropriately dressed. What will the young man think? I've never visited anyone in jail. I've never even been near a jail. Maybe I should blame it on Samuel Beckett. Oh, I bet Beckett would have loved the texture of my story

Yearning, longing, that was what I was thinking about. Trying to fashion a poem. Lately I've been thinking more about writing poetry, and less about being a professor. Everything I am surrounds being a professor of comparative literature, nearly three decades of my life, and I'm thinking about quitting, or should I put it more gently—retiring early. For all my thinking and deliberating and reflecting on my life, I don't know for certain if it is dissatisfaction with my career, or worse still, my entire life, or a desire to start a new life. It isn't like I'm a risk-taker or adventurous. My one departure from my secure, predictable, uneventful academic life is to get into my car and drive, drive without destination, merely to drive for an hour or two in whatever direction impulse or whim takes me, and return back to my office at the university or home to my apartment overlooking Halifax Harbour. What I do know for certain is that I'm caught on the ledge of the thought that I'm a year older than my mother when she died. That's why I got in my car once again and took a drive out of the city and into the country—to think about yearning and longing. And as I was driving in the country yesterday, already a hundred kilometres away from my downtown university office, I picked up a hitchhiker. I couldn't recall the last time I had picked up a stranger. I'm a mature woman, a professor of comparative literature, after all. A young male yet,

holding a small, drab backpack. Early twenties, I'd say. The age of many of my students. It was the sweatshirt. Beckett's face. I'd recognize Beckett's face anywhere. I'd written my master's thesis, thirty years before, on Beckett's pre-1936 writing—I chose 1936 because that was the year Beckett turned thirty—particularly his early published books, *Whoroscope*, poetry, and *More Pricks than Kicks*, stories. How, when I was a young woman, did I relish entering the mind of a young Beckett, getting a secret delight in merely saying the titles of the books—varying the pronunciation. In those days that was as bold or suggestive as I'd get: *Whoroscope*, *More Pricks than Kicks*.

I asked the hitchhiker first if he was a student—Made it through high school, barely, he said—and then if he was a fan of Beckett's and he told me he hadn't read anything by him. Found the sweatshirt in a second-hand clothing store. Looked like an uncle of his. Even the same kind of wire-rimmed glasses. I think of the Hugh Garner story, "The Yellow Sweater," but that was an older man picking up a young woman hitchhiker. And she was carrying a suitcase. I can't recall how the story ends, only the tension and foreboding. A Beckett sweatshirt is not a sweater, a backpack is not a suitcase, I think. The Hugh Garner book with that story in it had been a present from a roommate who thought I was too immersed in European writers, hadn't been paying enough attention to Canadian authors.

The hitchhiker politely thanked me as he entered my car, and put the small backpack on his lap. I had to tell him to put on his seatbelt, and as he buckled himself in he apologized as if he had done something harmful to me. The handsome hitchhiker was talkative and friendly, a small crucifix around his neck. This would have been the sort of young man, had I brought him home to meet my parents when I was a young woman, that would have set my parents worrying. Not enough Jewish boys for you to date? We didn't survive Hitler to have you marry a *shaygets*. Mom and Dad, I'm just going out with him, not marrying him. A date can lead to matrimony and it would be most unholy matrimony with this boy, my father might have said. My father, like my mother, could get so melodramatic over my dating. But I rarely brought my dates home. My dates with men, Gentile or Jewish, became less frequent. When are you going to get married? my father or mother would ask during one of my regular visits home; sometimes they would ask the question together, as if they had rehearsed, gone through long

discussions on how to protect their daughter in this modern world of Canada.

What is your destination? I asked the hitchhiker; immediately annoyed with the way I had phrased the question. Where you going, kid? I think, and wonder how long I would have to rehearse those words to make them sound believable. I'm interested in the younger generation, what they think, have been teaching the young year after year. Two of my students have even gone on to become prominent Beckett scholars.

Have a friend to visit, he said. He told me where he was going, much farther than I had intended to drive. As close as you can drop me off to there would be great, and I said it wouldn't be a problem dropping him off where he wanted to go.

I want to ask if the friend is female or male, but do not inquire, say something vague about friendship, want to say a friendship like Damon and Pythias—a joke or an attempt to impress at a gathering with colleagues? At a faculty social function recently I had mentioned that there had been two film versions of the Damon and Pythias story, 1962 and 1914. The silent one is far superior, I had argued. Sometimes I could sound so pedantic, even when I tried not to. I have no close friends, I say to this stranger, and make sure I make the statement strongly, not pitifully.

Me either, really, he said. This is an acquaintance friend, someone who I help out on occasion. We have a little business transaction we have to negotiate. I hope to make some money out of it.

How much money? I want to ask. What does "some money" mean? A few dollars? Thousands? I do have enough money to retire early from teaching. I could travel, write, do anything I very well want. Would you like to travel with me? I could ask the hitchhiker; I could handle the expenses. We could have an enjoyable, pleasant adventure together. I would have to rehearse for a hundred years to get those words to sound unforced, natural from my lips. I do say, travelling is enhanced when you have an enjoyable companion. I've had a dream that Beckett and I travel around Canada in an old car, sometimes I drive, other times he does, taking in all the sights, discussing life and literature, writing about what we see. Actually it is sort of a recurring dream of mine. One dream, not all that long ago, we drove all the way to Austin, Texas. The hitchhiker asked me if Beckett and I liked country music; he wouldn't mind getting down to Austin or Nashville. I told him that I've never

developed a taste for country music, and somehow doubt that Beckett was a big country music fan, but you never know. Many of his papers are housed at the University of Texas, at Austin, I explain to the hitchhiker's puzzled expression. Before I curtail my lecture, I say that Beckett won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. I remember writing Beckett a letter congratulating him, I was such a huge fan of his, a gushing, adoring letter, but I don't know if he ever read the letter or even received it. I was really hoping he would write back, but it was not meant to be. I bet his autograph would be worth a lot, the hitchhiker said, and told me he used to collect autographs of sports figures when he was a kid, but his collection got destroyed in a fire. Arson was suspected, but whoever did it was never caught. I said how sad about his collection, and the hitchhiker told me it was no big deal, he had everything he needed in his backpack, and gave the backpack a kiss. What do you have in there, your life savings, I joked, and he told me that I was awfully close.

Ever try to analyze or figure out your dreams? I asked the hitchhiker, and he said nope, but he liked dreaming, had some real beautiful ones sometimes.

We should head on down to Austin right now, the hitchhiker smiled at me. I could listen to some great music and you could check out those letters. That would be an interesting trip, but I'd have to make some arrangements first. We could be like a mother and son on a well-deserved trip. Let's not call it grandmother and grandson. I'd never call you grandma, the hitchhiker said.

Going to read some of his books now. What with you liking the guy and me having this sweatshirt, the hitchhiker said. He asked what book he should start with, and I went on about Beckett's plays and novels and other work. Finally, I said the collected plays, I could lend him a copy. Give me your address and I'll send you a sample of Beckett's work. He asked for my address, saying he was between addresses, and I told him my university address, invited him to sit in on some of my classes, if he wished, when he was back in Halifax. Said he'd send me a couple good country music CDs.

When we were driving past a treed area, the young man asked if I'd call that a "woods" or a "forest"? In Poland, during the Second World War, I said, hearing my professorial voice, my father hid in the forest. Was he hiding from the Big Bad Wolf? the hitchhiker asked. So carefree, so in love with life. No, the Nazis.

Skinheads? No, the genuine article, I said, trying not to sound too burdened. I've expended a great deal of energy in my life trying not to sound too burdened. I like older women, the hitchhiker said. Women my age bore the hell out of me. You know what I mean? How old do you think I am? A good-looking fifty, at the most, he said, and I smiled. Close enough, and thought, losing my smile: my mother dead at fifty-three. I didn't tell the hitchhiker my mother had survived Auschwitz; killed herself in Canada.

Is your dad still around? the hitchhiker asked, pointing at the trees, seeming to look for my father in the dense foliage.

Yes, but he's still hiding. And I wordlessly pointed to my head. I, who have spent a lifetime dwelling in words, merely point. Word-dweller. Forest-dweller. Yearning, longing.

What's he hiding from? I hear the young, confident voice.

He doesn't speak much anymore. Lives in a seniors' home. I visit a lot, as much as I can. I read to him, but there aren't many conversations. But he does ask one recurring question: Would you hide me? When I was growing up, safe in Canada, he would say the one thing you could ask from a person, actually he would say from a Gentile, is would you hide me. *Would you hide me?* I try to say in my father's voice. But he has a Yiddish accent, and spoke with energetic passion, at least he spoke that way as I was growing up, before everything caught up with him.

Hide him from what?

He experienced terrible horrors in Europe as a young man. Those memories, I think, are getting stronger as he gets older. I love my father.

My father's big question: Would you buy this stock?

My father lost everything in the Second World War.

My father accumulates money. He runs our family like he runs a corporation. I like to put distance between me and dear old accumulating dad.

Drifting away from fathers, we were enjoying ourselves. The young hitchhiker began singing a beautiful song. As if I had met an ambassador from another land. Then I saw the flashing lights in the rearview mirror.

Shit, the hitchhiker said.

I wasn't speeding, I said.

Please say you're my mom or something, please help me. Then he rolled his window all the way down and threw the backpack out.

Slowing down, pulling over to the side of the road, for the first time in my life I think that lying might be more desirable than telling the truth.

But before I could even begin to fashion a lie, the way I have been trying to fashion poems—poems for my burdened spirit, poems for my father, poems as an escape route—the police had arrested my new, young friend. Now I will go to visit him in jail. Perhaps I will be able to write a poem about him, for him. Yes, *yearning, longing*