

The world  
is a Delmore  
Schwartz

1963

In 1963 I rented an apartment on 106th Street and Broadway near Columbia University in upper Manhattan and was one hour and fifteen minutes from work on the Seventh Avenue Subway. In the next six years in these one hours and fifteen minutes on the subway almost every day I read almost everything ever written that I hadn't read: Freud, Sappho, Rumi, Faulkner, Euripides, Dante, Pindar, Mozart and etc and so forth: Everything: I was the Director of Occupational Therapy at The Brooklyn Hebrew Hospital For The Aged. I loved the old Brooklyn Jews and the young Brooklyn Jews and the Middle Aged Brooklyn Jews. These people were a thousand times kinder to me than the Jews of my youth. These Jewish people showered me with acceptance, respect, friendship, and love. After this meeting if I've ever needed anything it has come to me as easy as rain. The Brooklyn Hebrew Hospital For The Aged was built at the beginning of the 20th century far out from Manhattan in Brownsville, a section of Brooklyn then full of dairy farms and trees. The six story hospital must have seemed shining and modern when it was surrounded by cows and grass. It seemed less pristine when it was surrounded by the Depression and a neighborhood that produced a gang called Murder, Inc. in the 1930's When I arrived to be Director of Occupational Therapy in February, 1963, it was well worn and surrounded by miles of very poor black people. Every morning, five days a week, from 1963 to 1968, I walked from the subway to the hospital through this poor black neighborhood. Every morning on that walk, I quieted my mind to silence by counting and attended and nurtured the subtle wise light I had found in my being, by mastering breathing in without breathing out. I was never threatened or harmed in any way by any one in Brooklyn ever save once one summer morning two little black boys of perhaps 3 years of age tried to throw stones at me. As I strolled past, I said: "You shouldn't throw stones at me, boys, I never hurt you. Just because some one's white doesn't mean they hate you." The little boys in the shock of the articulate sing songed back: "Wese going to kill you, Whitey," a few times. They tried to throw a few small stones until I was well past them. My offices were the entire top floor of The Brooklyn Hebrew Hospital For The Aged. My offices were a penthouse of two large rooms surrounded by large windows with views of all New York. My aim here was to protect the old, ill and dying people from meanness to the best of my ability. At my own expense, I turned it into a tropical greenhouse full of palms and easy chairs. Thanks to the Great Society, I was given a group of black kids from the neighborhood to install a roof garden. I asked them to bring up some grass from the lot next to the parking lot and explained how to cut it into sods. To my delight they cut out a carpet of grass 10 X 15 and rolled it up and delivered it to the roof and unrolled it into an instant lawn. We planted a weeping willow in a barrel, turned some old bureaus on their backs, took out the drawers, filled them with dirt and grew flowers. Soon I was working in these lovely hanging gardens of Yidden Helf Yidden along with 500 old sick Jewish people coming and going. And going who treated me better than my own mother and father. And when my old mother and father did pay me a visit in my office one day, 40 old Jewish people on crutches, pushing walkers, and rolling in wheel chairs threw the remains of their lives at my parents in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, German, Polish, English, Hungarian, Turkish and Romanian and hugged my mother and father and as they threw out their arms they cried out: "Your son is my son."

<sup>1</sup> See the beautiful prose poem: THE WORLD IS A WEDDING by Delmore Schwartz.

*I believed that old chronic diseased and dying Jewish people had a right to kindness. I never tried to get anyone to do anything they didn't want to do. Once the head nurse arrived on the elevator with 15 trembling senile ancients for me to force into some State required health labor, I yelled: "Take them back to their rooms! No one's going to herd old Jews into elevators or anything else as long as I'm here. Let them come up when they want to." I did not think that forced labor was fitting for anyone and especially dying old Jews. Fuck Rules, People Come First. As a result of this creed I had a very pleasant department full of happily chatting, singing, and working and dying human beings. There is always something grand and shining in every place that protects the aged. The hospital had a lovely old synagogue and every morning as I walked past, I would see very old Jews wrapped in their prayer shawls wobbling on old legs, or even some mornings a man in a wheelchair would carry the Torah rolling slow around the golden synagogue in their ancient parade of the word of their God. These were not the phony Jews who shaved because the Bible said nothing about electric razors. These were the real Jews, the fabled Jews, the people of the book, the Rembrandt Jews, the 5,000 year old genetic intelligence inherited Jews, the parade of shining minds in sacred rags. Miserable chronic diseases and all wastes of old age vanished within their rush to praise their grand invention of the human spirit. Sometimes to get away I would walk through the dark basement of the hospital to visit the ex-naval engineer Irishman who maintained the huge old boiler in the basement with a crew of Puerto Ricans. The hospital was kept at 80 degrees year round. The old hate cold. The 60 year old boilers shined. On my way to this happy visit, I always passed the buried mystery of the hospital, a strange little room open to the dark basement hallway tunnel almost like a store window. It was covered ceiling to floor in clean old white tiles. In it a death pale man as if in solitary confinement in a bleak shower room in kitchen whites sat peeling vegetables for the kitchen. When I said hello and waved he said nothing. He just looked up as if to ask silently: What have I done to deserve this? Hidden from life? Buried alive? How could I have ended up like this buried up to my coogles in kosher vegetables? Unknown to him, I realized, with tired fire eyes, pale skin, small black square mustache and down sloped hair bang, he looked exactly like a camp shower gassed Adolph Hitler.*

I made a little office in a corner of the glass penthouse where I could be alone and write. Every day a swell old Jewish man would come in and sing some old Yiddish songs to me then walk out almost on goat legs among the working men and woman and sweetly serenade them until there came 40 shrill screams the highest of which was: "Mr. Daniels! Get that scum out of here! He's singing filthy songs again! Come in here!" I would get up and go out and help her. This woman began painting when she was 78. She was copying a Vermeer. A small fat man would come to my office and glue a crayon design he had done on the wall. The wall was covered from floor to ceiling with his dazzling kaleidoscopic designs. A woman who had made wigs for the beauties in the Ziegfield Follies and the great Jacob Adler's Shylock beard and hair would braid clay into intricate vases. Another woman with an amputated leg, severe arthritis, and stomach cancer and one kidney and one blind eye would crochet rugs five hours a day. I asked Hubris Purdue how the woman could do it. Hubris smiled like a fox in a forest fire as she said: "You know how she does it." This was the last time I saw Hubris Perdue. Acorns don't grow under oaks and everyone has to light the fire under their own stove. The old elevator was run by a very friendly old Italian man who loved to show people his driver's license from 1924 Italy. It was the second one ever issued in Italy. He had been Mussolini's chauffeur. He had old photos and an old license to prove it in his wallet. One day I was riding up the elevator with the head doctor, a very refined Warsaw Jew. I asked him what would happen if the old elevator stopped while they were carrying a critically ill patient up to the operating rooms. He said: "They would die." A man in a wheelchair with legs amputated from diabetes but a very strong body came up to see me. I thought it would compensate him for his leg loss to teach him to paint. He wanted to paint a picture of Moses crossing the Red Sea to sell to the nurses for 5 dollars. I held his hand and painted such a picture a few times for him to sell to nurses and aides till he got the hang of it. He was off on a new career for many wanted paintings of Moses crossing the red sea for 5 dollars. One day while he was painting Moses crossing the Red Sea, a doctor rushed up to him and said: "You can walk! You can walk! They invented Stumpys! You want to walk? I can get you Stumpys! You can walk! You can walk!" The old man smiled, threw down his brush, and he never painted again. Stumpys were a kind of cobble stone heavy, hot tar shiny patent leather Italian Futurism one foot high black boots with toes out the back and front for balance. He had just enough leg stump left to be able to wear them. One day a few months later, I was walking by his room. He was sitting in his room in his wheelchair looking very depressed. He said he didn't want to paint, he didn't want to do anything. I guess if I were a real professional I would have beat the shit out of him until he walked but I just wasn't good enough to do it. I asked him why he didn't wear the Stumpys which were lying in a corner of his room. He cried. A few months later he was dead. I asked one of the old Jewish ladies on his floor what happened to him. She laughed: O the crippled midget? He was telling everyone he could walk and everyone yelled, 'OK Let's see!' so he waddled out of his room like a midget nazi with fuhrblundget black duck-feet storm troop boots. All the woman laughed at him: 'Look at the midget duckelah! Diss a du? Donald Gestapo!' and 'Where's your mamalah, Donald?'"

One day a lovely black nurse came up to my office, who loves her doll on the third floor? I went out and bought a little cradle and the cradle. The 96 year old woman wore a Russian beet red rosecovered no taller than 4 feet. Her doll's mouth was covered with cereal. She tried to put cereal in the doll's mouth. She rocked the little cradle and sang in a beautifully clear four year old soprano: "Eat! My little baby. I love you so much. Please don't die of cold. I love you. Eat"

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"Why?" I asked: She asked: "Do you know day. She asked went to see the She was very the little old lady me for a cradle." old lady, the doll, wrinkled. She was

One sunny day I was out on our roof garden fixing up an old thrown out bureau the old people had emptied of drawers, thrown on its back, filled with dirt, and planted vegetables in, when I looked around and saw the head administrator of the hospital looking at me. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Daniels," he said and then turned and walked into the building. At that time I thought he meant that I had a simple cheerful job where I could do varied things easily with no pressure. Now I believe he meant that for a Jew even to earn a small living with no other obligation than to be kind to old infirm Jews earned a very high mozel baruch. Once a year in the heat wave when the Belt Parkway buckled and fires were lit in the garbage cans on the beach of Coney Island crowded with hundreds of thousands of people when the temperature was 90 at midnight, I would sense my entire being as deeply as possible and pour J&B Scotch in a tumbler filled with ice and drink it down in two gulps and sit for an hour on our roof garden high over Brooklyn, looking over toward The City For Conquest, The Naked Jungle, The Big Apple, Lindy's Vestibule, King Kong's Cement Swimming Pool, Rockefeller's Oath Of Poverty, Walter Winchell Hospital's Pervert Ward, Tommy Manville's Nineteenth Hole, The Flower Of The Skyscraper World, The Old East Side, West Side, Trip The Light Fantastic, You Cannot See On Any Street In London Or In Cork The Queens You'll Meet On Any Street In Little Old New York: Up until this time I never believed New York to be a place where any intelligent human being could get anything they were worthy of. I always believed it to be a delusion of grandeur sucker trap where one experienced life at its worst. Little did I imagine, know, feel, or realize anywhere inside or outside or in between my being at this incredible time: The beginning of the pill: The fabled riches I would come to extract from the Center Of World Wealth: Baghdad On The Subway, Beijing On The Blintzah, Athens On The Baked Lam, Istanbul On The Freud, Shiraz On The Dead Rose, Moscow Off The Schnide, Samarkand On The Sewer. That first summer of 1963 as I did this lightning inebriation, I wallowed in Lord Byron sweet ecstatic erogenous incandescent ascendance. In 1969, during my last summer there's elegant dionesian gulps, I realized no attendant difference.