

My Mother's Eyes

by Shirley Adelman

As the landscape on the street changes, we lose sight of those we've noticed accidentally, through the objects around them. More and more often in urban America, we take in the setting, a building or garage, like the backdrop in a play, until our eyes rest on the person living on the street. Before Market Street, in center city Philadelphia, was renewed, the landscape was on a smaller scale, so those who were barely visible could still be seen.

I remember when they littered the sidewalk outside Reading Terminal, human beings strewn about like bits of garbage. All along Market Street, between 11th and 12th, they huddled on vents and against buildings, creating temporary homes in revolving doors that no longer moved. I passed them on my way to work, across the street from the Community College of Philadelphia, where I taught English. But as I hurried by, day after day rushing passed the same people in the same places, like a frozen theatrical set, I felt a disturbing yet inexplicable connection to them. My mother's words, translated from Yiddish, "one must be a mensch" buzzed in my head, and I knew, somehow these strangers were part of my past.

The florid-faced man on crutches with half an arm missing and one leg, a flowered bandanna wrapped round his head, stood drinking a soda while he asked passersby for money. He might have worked at the old Steel Pier in Atlantic City where the partial and damaged hustled, performing for the audience that gorged on peanuts and cotton candy while laughing at the show. Now the acts are on the street. The freaks and the drifters, the mentally sick and lost

live on the street, their bed a cardboard box, their medicine a discarded lunch. The asylum is the street.

I noticed them all, I thought. The young bearded man, utterly passive, like a beautiful waxen figure until he bolted up and argued with his other self, adding the points he'd made on his long, thin fingers, laughing until he coiled in again, at rest with himself. I'd heard the "Duck-Woman" was dead. She had always been in motion, fighting loudly, emitting loud quacks that scared me into seeing her. There seemed to be no other women. But there was one; although, I did not notice her until I passed an abandoned H & H and smelled a foul and terrible odor. There, on the sidewalk, she sat, a small, frail looking woman, furiously scratching at herself. She must have lice, I thought and felt my back stiffen. But, her blue eyes looked familiar and caught me; alert and beautiful, they shone from her face that was a mask of dirt. Somewhere I had seen her, but never had I seen such a dirty woman. It was, however, the vile smell that reminded of things I had almost forgotten.

There were the trips to my zayda's that began when I was four and seemed never to end. With my mother and father, I set out in a freshly laundered dress, carrying a small, green handbag. I stood between my parents waiting for the #9 trolley car that would take us from Strawberry Mansion to South Philly. On 32nd Street, where we waited, I could smell the freshness of the trees rooted deep in the sidewalks. But once on the trolley, the air grew thick as the world outside passed in fits and starts that made me feel hot and nauseous. When passengers boarded and walked toward the rear, the trolley moved forward, and the sights outside swept by before I completed seeing them. Dizzy and wet with perspiration, I would sometimes vomit before I could get to the paper bag my mother had taken along. Even when I reached the bag in time, I felt smelly and soiled.

My zayda, Zissy, sat in a bed that occupied most of the room, a windowless, interior space adjacent to the grocery store he could no longer manage. The stench of urine was so powerful that I took little, baby steps, inching my way to zayda's bed, trying not to breathe. Zayda, Zissy, cried. He cried in joy for my existence, an unexpected, late in life daughter for my father, who had two, nearly adult sons when I was born. He cried in shame and frustration for himself, a grown man diapered like a baby. My father listened well and waited to leave before crying. After he folded up his big, white handkerchief and put it into the pocket of his trousers, I closed my hand into his, cupping my fingers against the cushion of his palm. Going home on the trolley, I seldom got sick.

Early one Saturday, on my way to an appointment, I left the terminal, enjoying the ease of not having to hurry to school. Empty of commuters, Market Street looked deserted, the gray sky strangely visible. There were no pedestrians and only an occasional car. I'll enjoy a cup of tea in solitude, I thought, but near 11th Street a sickening blast of odor hit me in the face. Propped against a temporary wall she sat, clutching a paper bag and looking as if decades had passed since I'd seen her a week ago. Her hands and face were patched thick with dried dirt, her slacks wet and soiled. Beyond her wall, construction workers had begun digging up the earth to build a transit corridor linking the east and west terminals. Their machines, now mute, stood against the horizon like silent monesters, making her look like a dazed survivor of a cataclysmic horror.

Still, I could not go to her. The fear stuck in my throat like a piece of food. As I walked along Market Street, I felt as though I had awakened from a dream that slipped by the moment I saw it. Yet, I remembered the feelings of the young girl who was forever at her mother's side.

With my mother, I went to the market on Thursday morning in preparation for Shabbos. Women crowded into the kosher butcher shop, elbowing their way toward the counter, already hard at work for tomorrow's Shabbos meal.

There was so much blood in the butcher shop, on the butchers' aprons and cutting boards, and on the huge cleavers. Afraid, yet unable to move, I looked down at my shoes and saw blood all about me, dried and caked in sawdust. As I looked up, a small woman reached for her package; the inside of her of arm looked scrubbed dry, but the faded, tattooed numbers were still legible.

Finally, it was my mother's turn . We left with a chicken, "plump with eggs." The air outside felt so good I wanted to gulp it down, but I was not sure I could open my mouth without vomiting. Careful as I had been not to step on it, I reeked of blood. If I stayed out all day like my mother's laundry, maybe I would smell clean.

Later in the morning, on my way back to the station, I turned to the woman with a quiet "hello" and gave her a dollar. "I hope you will get yourself something to eat," I told her. She thanked me in a whisper, her head lowered. "I've seen you often," I said. "I wonder how you're doing."

"Do you work here?" she asked.

"Yes, I teach," I answered.

"That's very nice. "Her voice was soft, sweet like custard. She sounds like anybody, I thought, but nicer than most people. I was afraid that the smell would make me gag, but I knelt close to her. "Have things been hard lately?" I asked.

"Oh yes, my pocketbook was stolen, and I've had to live here."

Maybe her purse was stolen a dozen years ago, I thought, maybe yesterday, maybe never. I suppose I'd hoped she could explain what was happening to

her and make sense of it somehow.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Emily."

"Emily, I love your name; it's my daughter's middle name and one of my favorites. Emily, I'll see you Monday. Take care over the weekend," I said as I stood up and slowly backed away. I waved, walking toward the train. She smiled goodbye.

And I went home to my children who had built tents with blankets and chairs to protect their lovies. That weekend, like so many others, I played Clue with my son and I Spy with my daughter, cozied up with them as we read our favorite stories and breathed in their freshly washed hair when I kissed them goodnight. Sunday evening, as I stood in my kitchen preparing lunches for my children, I thought of Emily and wished I could draw her into a circle. All I could do was make her lunch.

I searched for Emily early in the morning, before going to school. If I couldn't find her, I'd run out between classes, going up and down Market Street, looking carefully in doorways when she wasn't in her usual place against the wall. One afternoon, she asked my name but forgot it immediately, calling me instead, Theresa. Through the din of traffic and construction, I heard her soft voice call, "goodbye, Theresa" as I hurried back to school. When I finished my classes that day, I felt unable to make the transition toward my home and children before seeing that Emily was okay.

Sitting on her corner in the sunlight, she looked so young. "Emily, I said, you're very pretty. You have beautiful eyes. Would you like to have your own room, a soft bed and a dresser with bottles of perfume?" "Oh yes, but things are so expensive, and this is all the money I have," she said as

she opened her hand to show me a dollar and a few coins. As always, she offered to pay for the food I gave her. "Tomorrow I'll bake cookies for dessert," I told her. "Thank you," she said. "I'm working to rehabilitate myself." "And how do you do that, Emily?" "I walk around the block and try to keep my head clear," she answered. "Sounds like a good idea," I replied. "Where did you live before you moved here, Emily?" "Oh, in mental hospitals. The last one was in Norristown." "How long, Emily, since you had a home?" "Not since high school; when I was fourteen I got sick." "And how old are you now, Emily?" "Forty-four, I think."

When I saw Emily the next morning, she looked smaller than I remembered. "Inside my head there is a terrible pain," she said as she rocked back and forth, moaning, crying that the doctors would not take the pain away; although, she had asked them, "begged them to open the little door at the back of my head."

"Would you like me to leave you alone now, Emily?"

"No. Tell me what you do."

"I teach English. I read poetry. There is a wonderful poet named Emily."

She stopped rocking and said, "I didn't know that."

"Yes, Emily Dickinson. Would you like a book of her poems?"

"I don't know. I read poetry so long ago, when I was fourteen."

"Would you like to hear a poem by Emily Dickinson?" I asked.

"Yes. Can you read it to me now?"

"I can read it without the book, I told her, because the poem is inside my head":

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you Nobody-Too?

Then there's a pair of us?

Don't tell: they'd advertise you know! 1

I'm sorry: I can't remember the second stanza," I told her.

"Oh, then say the first part again. I like it," she smiled.

And so I did.

"I'll try to remember it. I never knew there was a poet named Emily," she said as I was leaving.

"Take care, Emily. I'll see you in two days."

I wanted to get Emily off the street before winter and into a facility where she could be treated. I talked to a friend in social service who put me in touch with John Loeb, a veteran of the system. He recognized Emily from my description; like thousands of others, he had seen her near Reading Terminal. Excited that I had maintained contact with Emily, he hoped she might trust me enough to agree to go to a center for a shower and delousing.

John called back to tell me Emily had a long and troubled history. She last lived at Mercy House, a home run by Catholic Charities. Sister Mary Clark, Director of Mercy House, remembered Emily as "an intelligent, hard-working woman who scrubbed the porch cleaner than it had ever been." As long as Emily regularly got out-patient treatment and medication, she was able to follow house rules. But when she stopped treatment, refusing to take the medicine, her delusions returned. She heard the terrible voices, argued with God, withdrew from group life and begged for money.

Emily was also an alcoholic.

"Did she receive therapy?" I asked.

"No," Sister Mary Clark answered, "she was too sick; she received medication." Why, I wondered, be chemically sane if one learned nothing about

one's self? Who was it then who followed the rules if the demons that appeared when Emily was drunk were not met when she was sober?

I had met Emily after she left Mercy House where she no longer could follow the rules.

"We told her," Sister Mary Clark said, "she was welcome back anytime she was willing to stay on medication and off liquor." "She's smart," Sister Mary Clark warned me. "She'll stay out as long as she can."

I asked a psychologist what could be done for Emily; he rolled his eyes upward. "There are so many of them," he said. But, to me she had a name. I packed her lunches along with my children's, wondered if she preferred chocolate or vanilla wafers, knew that she would drink 7UP only if there was nothing else.

Fall was unseasonably warm, but a sudden cold could settle in overnight. I was anxious to get Emily into treatment before the temperature dropped and the street was wet and cold. On my way to the dentist, I visited with Emily, gave her lunch and said, "I can stay five to ten minutes because I have a dental appointment."

"How is your work today?" she asked.

"Fine." I barely heard her.

"Emily, I know the doctors didn't take the pain out of your head, but if I find a very good doctor, would you see him or her? I would take you if you like. "She began pounding her head against the wall, hitting it hard while holding her ears. I was terrified. I covered my mouth with my opened hand and shook my head no. She stopped the pounding and looked at me, through me, really.

"I'm so sorry; please forgive me; I will never mention a doctor again. Shall I leave, Emily?"

"No," she answered; "it's a warm day--let's talk about the weather." And we did. I recited the first stanza of Keats' "To Autumn," missing whole phrases, but keeping the tempo somehow.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, 2

On that bright, October afternoon, Emily said, "I like to sleep in the sunshine."

One warm afternoon later that week, when shoppers crowded the city, Emily and I talked while we ate soft pretzels and drank sodas. A woman, who was obviously unfamiliar with the area, stood aghast, pointing at Emily and saying again and again, "Can you believe it--what a pity!" Emily looked up at her and said, "What a pretty suit. You look very nice today." Still the woman repeated the refrain, "Can you believe it--what a pity." I am not as nice as Emily, so I glared the woman down until she moved along.

The noise of the construction project was almost deafening. Emily and I had to shout to one another, drawing the attention of startled workers. "Honey," one of the hard hats asked, "What's a woman like you doing talking to her?"

When the temporary wall was removed, Emily lost her place at 11th and Market Streets and moved off the corner near a video store. Now that the pedestrians were separated from her, Emily looked as if she were in solitary. "Why can't I get to you?" I called. It's Shirley, Emily; I have your lunch."

She walked to the fence.

"What's going on here? I asked.

"It's a conspiracy, she answered. The city is trying to drive the people away." From her perspective, the statement was entirely rational.

"How did you get in and how will you get out?"

"I know the back way," she answered.

Suddenly, I remembered when I was five years old and sitting on the blue mohair chair, the place that was my father's on Sunday afternoons, when my mother began talking about the pogroms.

"My sisters, my sisters, my sister Charna with three beautiful daughters, my mother cried, burned alive in a synagogue. Ashes." I was transfixed by my mother's blue eyes that had become wells of tears. Eyes that looked so much like Emily's. " I don't want to see Russia even in my dreams," my mother said.

"How did you and your parents and cousin Lou get out," I asked.

"The bandits, she answered, went from town to town killing Jews. My sisters lived in a different town."

"Why didn't they run away?" I questioned.

"They came. The bandits came and locked them in the synagogue. All around the outside, they put kerosene. Now do you understand," she said.

"People heard, she continued. One person told another...the news spread, and people ran. My parents didn't care for their lives, but I was a child, so they ran. For more than a year, my mother said, we lived in such fear, hiding in the woods, digging for a potato to eat. And we had lice she said with a shudder. You shouldn't know of such things, she said, you're only a child."

But she went on, "People helped us because of my father. He was so good...he gave away so much money to poor people. That's how our lives were saved. He gave a poor family from our town money to go to America, and in America they made a good living. So when they heard about the pogroms, they looked to help my father. And when we ended up in Belgium, after running and hiding, they found we were alive from a Jewish organization. They paid for the ship to take us to America. May my father's memory be a blessing for you,

she said as she smoothed my hair. You carry his name," she reminded me and kissed my head.

It was my mother's eyes, wide, luminous and blue, that I was seeing in Emily's face. And wasn't Emily going through a pogrom called by a different name? Soon Emily couldn't even get to her spot on the corner. She moved along Market Street and sat on the edge of a concrete tub, under a thin, new tree, across from a department store, her back toward a window of mannequins wearing bathing suits. In the glaring light, she drew the stares of shoppers.

"Theresa" she said, "I like your jacket."

"Emily, thank you. I see you have a new jacket," I told her.

"Yes, it's for the cold, and it really fits me," she said.

"Wear it well," I told her. She cast her eyes down, too shy I thought to take the good wish, perhaps too fearful to think that I meant it.

At the edge of the street, Emily's world had become obscenely public. I missed her corner where she'd been able to stretch out and nap on the real dirt that made a little hill before it met the sidewalk. "Is this your new place?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said; "I'm looking around."

"Do you have any place in mind, Emily?"

"No, I have to rest today. You see my arms are broken, but I'm not worrried."

"I'm sorry your arms are broken," I said.

"Don't worry Theresa. I know they'll heal." I looked at Emily stroking her arms, trying to comfort herself while reassuring me, and I felt the memory of my mother whose life had been saved by a man who set out for America to try

to make a living, an opportunity given to him by her father's great generosity. I had a name to live up to, and would do my best to be a mensch.

In memory of my mother, Chaika Adelman

Dedicated to my children, Haim David Kenig and Rachel Emily Kenig

1 Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *Emily Dickinson's Poems* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1961), p. 47.

2 Harold Edgar Briggs, ed., *John Keats Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 383.