

First example: Jewish story 1.**Tell it Not**

I brought my wife and children here because I need a homeland a shelter an identity and them. The new flavours of a new existence. We are in Ashkelon, a small seaside town, blown by Mediterranean winds, small cottages built and built onto, stuccoed and shuttered; narrow streets lined with sycamore and eucalyptus trees, almond blossom and bougainvillea, lizards on walls prowling their territories, bats in the air on winter nights. Guava in gardens in autumn, their scent lying heavily over the neighbourhood, the way clouds lay over the city in England. Crickets tsip-tipping in the sun. The whirr of low-flying dragon-flies, wings catching colour from everywhere. And the roar of low flying aircraft, silver and thunder matched together in a deadly combination across the sky.

We sweat here for months of the year. August we fall asleep exhausted from the heat. Where my wife's head rests on my shoulder a wet patch emerges on which she slides, until she slithers off and back onto her own pillow.

In the morning our son who is three has to go to *gan*. He eats a biblical breakfast - bread, milk and olives. Then I take his hand and walk him to his kindergarten, which is on the other side of the empty square in front of our house. The square had grass on it when we first came here, but it died. The place has been loaded with piles of iron rods and little hills of fresh sand and pebbles. They'll be building something here soon.

He carries a rucksack of provisions, an apple and a cheese sandwich, which jogs on his back. He is brave but uncertain. To him the few yards from our home to his *gan* seem like a world.

Now we are at the *gan* gate. The garden has a rusty slide, wooden swings, two sand pits, a row of tires stuck in the sand, painted yellow blue red and green. Living so near we are often early. My son greets the *gannenet*. Large, dark, sallow, warm, irritable. Tough. The first month I took Danny to her calmly, untroubled. We were building ourselves a new life. The heat, the pressure, the inflation, the expense of furnishing our new home. I was forgetting I was a Jew. (Wasn't that the reason we came here? So our Jewishness might blend, as opposed to stand out?) But on one day of great heat the *gannenet* came to greet us in the garden wearing a short-sleeved dress. As she held out her thick arms to greet my son, I saw first of all the black hairs, the rounded knuckles of her hands - then the row of numbers printed on her arm. History hit me as the gate squeaked.

Second example: Not a Jewish Story.**Camping Maybe**

'Dear Patricia, thank you for sending us Camping Maybe. We found it well-written and amusing. Is it your intention to produce the play? We were wondering what your thoughts are. Perhaps come and have chat. Suggest speak to set up meeting? Don Kenning. Artistic Director. Purple Rug Theatre.'

Heart palpitating, Pat googled Don Kenning! 'This man is a talent spotter. Producers flock to his small venue, look vaguely for a purple rug, then sit down to enjoy play after play that his discerning team of readers have unearthed for the theatre-loving literati of London.' This from an English language tour guide – previously an actor – in Berlin.

When he wrote ‘Suggest speak to set up meeting,’ Pat assumed Kenning would phone her. So she let a month pass, and another. Then she called him. Then she called him again. The first time, no reply, the second time: ‘Don here. Leave message. I’ll get back to you.’

‘Hi this is Patricia Blake. You sent me an email about my play, *Camping Maybe*, and suggested we might speak. A few weeks ago? I would really like to meet up, which is what you suggested. I was delighted you liked the play. I’m happy to come over. Let me know. Look forward to hearing from you.’

A frustrating fortnight later, Pat stood in the lift at the tube station, and with each metre it rose, her spirits rose too. Two more phone messages and he still hadn’t replied - but perhaps he’d given her a wrong number. Or he’d been ill. Or he was away. Or – most likely, he was busy directing a current production. That was why she had come. The *Purple Rug* was on the main road, yards from the tube. The play she was going to see was a revival of something from the nineteen-sixties.

The pub theatre was at the top of three flights of stairs. There was neither handrail nor carpeting on the tortuously twisting top flight. A low door, curtained, and the box office. A tiny space, a man behind a desk. She recognized Don Kenning from his website.

‘Hello. I’m Patricia Blake. I wrote *Camping Maybe*.’

‘Oh! Hi. Lovely to meet you at last. Great that you have come! Um.’ He looked down vaguely at his desk – strewn with pieces of paper. He picked one up. ‘Yes. It was a real shame you missed our meeting.’

‘What meeting?’

‘Wednesday morning. We were supposed to meet, weren’t we? I had it written down somewhere. Yes. Here. We spoke and you were coming over.’

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but we haven’t spoken – maybe it was someone else.’ Cool as anything, he screwed up the piece of paper and threw it down. Destroying the evidence, she thought. He’s a liar.

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Third Example: Another Jewish Story

From the Dining Room Table

Shabbat Afternoon, at three o’clock, and I’m at home. Where else? It’s a rainy day. I’m in the dining-room. Mummy sits in her green baize armchair, feet stretched out as if they yearn for a footstool. Lunch is over. Chopped liver. Chicken, not quite brown enough. Butterbeans, hot, solid, swimming in pale sauce. Butter bean juice. Through the net curtains I see the bare branches of the plane tree in the back garden. A lively squirrel disobeys a rule they told me about in school - that squirrels hibernate through winter. This one crawls along a branch, leaps on another, swings perilously, hits a lower branch, hops to safety.

Lorna comes into the room looking normal that is until she sees *me* at which point she frowns darkly. The frown flowers into a sunny smile as Mummy turns and says to her:

‘Hello darling.’

‘I thought we were having a Hebrew Lesson,’ says Lorna my big sister, aged thirteen.

Now we are at the dining room table. Lorna, Daddy and I peer at our books. Old books, I think, with sand-coloured covers, and on the front this word: *Aleh*. This is Hebrew. Go up. Ascend. Go to the higher place. Lorna begins to read. Oniyah. A boat. There is a picture of a boat, which has a deck.

‘Oniyah. Al hasipun omed ish. Ish oleh le eretz yisrael.’

‘What does that mean, girls?’ Daddy asks us - beaming. It means the world to him, this sitting at the table, this Shabbat afternoon, giving us a Hebrew lesson. We say the words together and separately. Lorna starts, I start, then with that toss of black hair she interrupts and takes over, until I get back in the race somehow and we end together. A boat. On the deck stands a man. A man is *going up* to the land of Israel.

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It is Friday night at eight o’clock. ‘I saw eternity the other night, Like a great ring of pure and endless light..’ I brought this Henry Vaughan poem home from school on Friday, which by sunset became Friday Night, different from other nights. I tried to share it with Mum and Dad, with Lorna, who was now sixteen, but all they did was laugh.

‘The point being,’ Mummy said, who was still Mummy to Lorna, Mum when I could manage it in the outside world, Mummy at home maybe; Vanessa Price called *her* mother Mama, which I personally found stylish. ‘The point being...’

‘What did you say the point was being?’ Daddy asked, scratching his head, and my parents and my sister laughed together. So there was no discussion. Here was how it went, frequently. Not, I had discovered, when Lorna wanted to bring up serious questions of Jewish observance, or Mummy and Daddy wanted to talk about Israel. But when I attempted to import a Metaphysical Poet, the prose of Henry James, or the contemporary style of T S Eliot, there was hilarity around it. And as for my hoped for appointment to office! Secretary of English Club, under the chairmanship of Vanessa Price? The hilarity expressed, the peels of laughter - well, they blew tiles off the roof.

‘Why is everyone laughing?’

‘We’re not,’ said Lorna.

Fourth Example - Not a Jewish Story

By Madeleine Black

Quarter to six. Here they are. Three of them. A triumvirate of professionals wearing badges. Sweaty Steve, Probation Officer. Svelte Yulia, Case Manager for The Charity. Last but not least - The Psychologist. (I won’t name her; she has a stunningly perfect name; I won’t falsify that even for the sake of a story.) They are here to introduce me to My Two Volunteers. These, I gather are on their way.

They’ve been hand-picked for me, my two do-gooders by Svelte Yulia and The Charity. I’m where I was told to be. I’m at a corner table in Patrick’s Place, twenty yards from the tube and Big Issue Seller. I asked for a glass of water. It has a smear on its surface which looks like an oil-slick, except it can’t be.

I’m not relaxed. Would anyone expect me to be, less than a month after my release? I’m thirsty but whatever is floating on the water bothers me. Inside, I wouldn’t have noticed. I’d have drunk it. Life now is magnified. If I lean to the left the slick disappears. Lean to the right it comes back. Weird.

I'm careful about what things mean. When I was inside, when life had picked me up, swallowed me, spat me out existentially devastated, I kept asking myself 'Why?' So what did I do? I began to study Philosophy. I got one quarter of what could have become a degree. The reason it won't now is because of capitalism and what that does to the chances of people like me. (I read about capitalism as well.)

Before My Volunteers arrive, My Professionals talk me through the rules of our new game. A new script for a film. I often imagine, when someone is talking, that I'm in a film. I'm in half light - dusk, or dawn after a complicated night. I look up and see a camera, and a boomswinger. I love that word.

Synopsis: Ex-offender starts to meet regularly with two women volunteers. The identities of the volunteers to be buried beneath a pile of rules. 1. No surnames. 2. No addresses. 3. All messages to be conveyed through switchboard of The Charity - ie no mobile or email contact. Best rule: The Charity will permit them to buy me a meal! Upper budget, Yulia spelled out: six pounds. Fish and chips. Pasta. Bacon butties.

They are not allowed to ask me what I did. It's up to me whether I tell them or not. The Psychologist suggested I might find it hard to talk about it. This was at our last meeting. The one where we discussed the thirty page document she had given me to read. 'Borderline Personality Disorder.' The essence of that was: People are complicated. Stuff happens. Nobody knows whether people make stuff happen or whether it happens anyway and the people are fucked, or as she tried silkily to get me to say: why not try using a word like 'crushed?' Or any word other than one deliberately calculated to shock?

Here is my take on this world full of lies and distortions. My small contribution to the evil network called humanity is minor, on the scale of things. I committed one accidental crime. One.

Fifth example, if there is time.....A Story about an antisemite. (Does it qualify as a Jewish story?) About the Books.

They sat in the Estate Agent's office, about to sign a contract for a flat on the third floor of a block beside a tube station.

'Sorry,' Mary said tearfully, 'but I have to be in a house, even if it's a small one.' Fred shifted slightly, breathing slowly, conveying the message that he was getting fed up with their moving process. They had decided, surely? London it was. Here they were. The agent lightened the mood.

'Something,' she raised an eyebrow elegantly, 'just on the market. A flat in a converted house. It has a small garden and might be what you're looking for.' She showed them the flat that afternoon. A month later they signed on it.

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Six months later, Mary is in the garden, talking to her new neighbour. Nothing that she feared has come to pass. Shame on those people in the north who warned them against making the move. This friend couldn't be a better listener, and in return Mary listens to her. They're close to seventy, but they exchange biographies like first year students! She's called Carol. She has two daughters. One lives in New Zealand, and is a midwife. The other runs a dog food store on the outskirts of Los Angeles. People spoil their pets in California. Carol is away a lot, and doesn't always reveal to Mary where she is going. But when she does tell her – it

confirms for Mary how lucky she and Fred have been to end up living at close quarters to someone with a stimulating cultural existence.

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Thirty-seven B. Their flat is the small half of the downstairs of 37 Penwood Lane, a large double-fronted Edwardian house. Carol's home is the big half of the ground floor plus all the rest – the rest comprising a first floor, and a loft conversion.

At the back of the house, the garden has been divided into two. Their section is narrow, accessed through the kitchen door. Carol descends into her part of the garden via a majestic spiral stairway which leads from her large veranda. She says it's three times the size she needs. Fred has offered to be her gardener.

On the day of their move, Carol invites the newcomers into her living room, on the ground floor, where they sit for half an hour in awe. Three of its walls are bookshelves. Hardbacks, paperbacks, books in French, Russian and either Chinese or Japanese.

After they exit the narrow hall and re-enter their minuscule flat, Mary says to Fred: we are lucky; we have negotiated down-sizing from Liverpool to London, and landed in a virtual house-share with a very interesting woman!

Sixth extract. Another story set in Israel. If there is time.....

The Lizard

It is August 1975. We have moved from our three-roomed third storey immigrant flat to this dilapidated villa, one of the original Ashkelon cottages of twenty years ago, when the State of Israel could hardly afford bricks, let alone mortar. Four tiny rooms, a kitchen with standing room only, every doorpost or window ledge rotted by woodworm. (It takes us a while to recognize that brown lines snaking up walls are woodworm colonies.) In our tiny garden a streetlight grows up through the branches of a tree, encircled by frantic bats. There is the sweet suffocating odour of guavas, which will rot on the sandy ground until the school-children start to come, collecting them for the soldiers, somewhere in the desert.

Two small children, a third on the way. The lavatory – a necessary appendage at any time, but with small babies more valuable than twenty trips to a zoo – blocked. Our landlord assures us the black stuff in the bottom of the lavatory will come off with bleach, and suggests we probably use it too much.

We sit in the garden on the cracked wall, suck at sweet peaches, and watch a giant cockroach perched near us, its antennae waving. The cockroach family has been around three hundred and fifty million years longer than the family of man. I guess they are at a high level of awareness.

It is from within this morose scene that we first set eyes on Margaret and Simon, our neighbours. The cottages adjoin, the lawn (ours overgrown and yellow, summer scrub, theirs clipped short and sprayed green,) in common, and the roofs made of the same grey tiles. Under one of those tiles, a pigeon will get trapped one day. Their children, watched by ours, will scramble up to the roof, remove the tile and set it free; but that comes later in the story.

They stand on their veranda, he in white shorts and shirt, she with a yellow 'alice band' across her hair. They're here to breathe the night air, not to inspect new neighbours. But seeing us, they're welcoming enough. His voice is a cello, hers a viola.

And my growing writing habit! Our very first night, I take out a notebook, and write.

“Our neighbours are psychologists. They are new to Israel as we are, trying to come to terms with whatever Israel is to the English-speaking Jew. I dictate to myself a writer’s exercise. I shall put them down on paper. I shall ignore cockroaches and dirt. I love my babies for having brought me to this house – car-free paths for them to walk and play on, lined with sycamore trees and bushes - and I shall write day after day.’ Except of course, it isn’t going to happen. The writing exercise, or whatever I mean by it. Life is too busy.

Finally: Is this a Jewish story? The Dressmaker.

‘Do come in,’ says Madame Colette Safran, beckoning. A narrow corridor with a rich dark carpet leads to her workroom. The walls are lined with photographs in diamond studded frames. Women look radiant in fashionable settings. Celebrities, ball gowns, sequins, men in bow ties. This could be a dream, except it isn’t.

‘So. Tell me how I can help you.’

‘I have this dress. I bought it for a friend’s wedding. Then I found the front was too low. For me, that is – personally. Embarrassingly low.’

‘Really?’ She raises an eyebrow. ‘Let us regard the offending garment!’ Her accent is French, I think. Or Belgian. She eases the dress out of its cover, rests it over the back of a crimson chaise-longue. It lies there, limp, innocuous. Her posture is erect, soothing. Something in her dark, watchful eyes, gently regal smile. Out begins to pour a veritable Curriculum Vitae.

Myself. My mother. (*Late* mother.) My husband. Our sons. Our daughter. I relate how Julia strayed for a while. Goth, anarchist, cannabis, born-again, she is now a college librarian with an interest in refugees.

‘And tell me,’ purrs this dressmaker I selected from Yellow Pages Online, ‘more about the dress. ‘You say that your dear mother *instructed* you to find a dressmaker?’

Have I already told her that? I have been babbling.

She did. Almost the last thing she told me - hours before she died. She died months ago. I’m supposed to have passed the first stages of mourning, as they refer to it in books. I’m supposed to be remembering the good things. Tears threaten.

This is the moment when I turn my head, and spy six pale, anxious looking women gathered around me. I frown at the first one who frowns back. Look again and see the same woman to my right. Same to the left. And one over there in the corner. I notice the shabby tunic-top.

Mine. Colette Safran’s work room is not simply hung with a mirror or two, as you would expect. Three walls are made of two mirrors each, nothing but mirrors. In the last mirror this woman, late sixties, coarse hair that needs a trim turns towards me accusingly.

‘Et alors...’ Colette gathers our green dress softly on her outstretched arms. I fix my gaze on her so I won’t have to stare at these six illuminated versions of me. They stand in tight pantie-girdles and long bras. And their legs. Not that fat, actually but far too white. Veinous estuaries above the knees gleam blue and purple.

‘Voila,’ Colette seems relaxed, unlike the six women whose faces now freeze in one tight, puzzled, determined expression. Like my mother at the moment of death. She sat up straight then, her mouth set stiff, not going gentle into any dark night thank you, eyes glaring, wide. Mirrors surround me. The women in the mirrors share one expression. A brightly illuminated one. I’m slipping into a cage of cold light. Self-reflection. At my age.
