Thomas M. Disch
After Postville

It was a gray, blowy April day, and there wasn’t a moving car anywhere along the length of Main Street, north or south, and not a soul on the sidewalks, with the exception of the young man in the yarmulke on the curb standing outside Pathmark and bowing rhythmically in the direction of the Corner Cafe across the street. He looked as though he wanted to cross the street but couldn’t. As though he were tethered to that particular block of concrete by some invisible linkage that only allowed enough wiggle-room to maintain his bob-bob-bobbing motion, like one of those birds from a novelty store that dips into a water glass, and tips back, and dips again.

Terry had sometimes peeked inside Mount Zion Yeshiva and watched the Jews inside possessed by the same strange rictus while they read their little prayer books. It seemed comical, as though the whole roomful of grown men were desperate to go to the bathroom but someone was already in there–forever. After a while Terry had felt sad, as when he’d watched the television documentary about Bellevue mental hospital in New York City, where a mob of people, men and women, lined the corridors, some seated, some standing, and all writhing to a tune audible to no one else. Some blissed out, some wretched, but all off the wall. All throwing their lives away for no good reason like this poor fellow transfixed in front of the Pathmark.

Finally Terry walked up to him and asked, "Is there some way I can help you? Do you want to cross the street?"

The guy went on with his bobbing motion, refusing even to glance in Terry’s direction, the only indications he had heard him a slightly more fraught cording in his neck, a more determined clenching of his right hand over his left wrist.

This was typical behavior among Postville’s Hasidic newcomers. For them the other residents of Postville simply didn’t exist. They didn’t say Hi, they didn’t wave, they almost didn’t slow down for you if they were in one of their minivans and you were crossing the street. It went beyond unfriendly, but it was all theoretically okay because it was based on their religious faith as Jews, plus the fact that their ancestors had been killed by the Germans in the Holocaust. Before they’d come to town to open up their slaughterhouse, Postville had been something like fifty per cent German, so you could understand why they might be unforthcoming, why they would just look at the hand being offered them to shake and think... Unclean! You could tell that was what they were thinking by the puckering of their lips.

And as to their not eating at the Corner Cafe or anywhere else in Postville, that’s because they were Orthodox and would only eat kosher food of the sort they made a business of. They also couldn’t use plates or silverware that had ever touched nonkosher food, which of course were all the plates and silverware in Postville but their own. Plus they had their own weird clothes that they could not have bought at any store in Iowa that Terry had ever been into. Now they even had their own garage that charged ten cents less a gallon for premium, and that’s where they all went, as a result of which Fred & Frieda’s was slowly going out of business, what with one customer after another opting for the nameless new filling station where two Mexicans worked the pumps.

"Hello," Terry said again. "Do you need help getting to the other side?"

This time the guy let his head tilt back at the upward limit of his bob, and his eyes rolled sideways in an expression of polite despair. "Go away," he

said in a raspy voice. "Just go. Go!"

"It’s sad," Terry volunteered, "about the fire."

"I can’t hear you!"

"I only ever saw the outside of the synagogue. And you couldn’t tell much from that. Just the concrete and the hedges. But it probably looked nice inside. Right?"

The man pressed his eyes tight closed and increased the tempo of his bobbing.

"I mean, why build a church at all unless it’s going to look special in some way? Or a synagogue. My name is Terry, by the way." He held out his hand. "Terry Goren."

The eyes stayed shut, the bobbing continued.

"And what’s your name?" Terry insisted.

The man froze. His eyes opened. When he spoke, it was as though a dentist were pulling each word from his mouth. "I am David Golden."

"You’re dead, David. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Yes, you are," said Terry, choosing to interpret his No as denial rather than a straightforward answer to the question he’d been asked. "You died in the explosion that destroyed the synagogue. That was a month ago. The wreckage has already been cleared away." He nodded in the direction of the charred open space at the far end of Main Street, across from the sign (now highly inaccurate) that welcomed visitors to Postville, Iowa, Population, 1,480.

"And your body has been cremated," Terry went on. "As much of you as they could find."

David Golden bowed his head and closed his eyes and recommenced his rocking motion. A gust of wind lifted a tattered yellow plastic carrier bag from the gutter–a rarity in Postville for there to be such refuse on the street–and whirled it about the inconsolable ghost. Briefly Terry forgot David Golden and savored the fleeting instant, the wreathing interplay of plastic and ectoplasm.

Then he resumed his task as Postville’s awakener and guide to the afterlife, its Hermes Hypnopompe. Slowly, with many repetitions, like a schoolteacher teaching the multiplication tables, he instructed David Golden in the laws governing his altered existence, how he must remain in Postville until, like compost worked into a garden’s soil, he had been entirely assimilated, until the wind and rain had worn away all that was dross and his spirit could at last see clearly the shape of the life it had lost. This, Terry told him, would probably take a long time, for the shape of any life is a function of the lives in which it is enmeshed, and often there is a great tangle to unravel.

"None of this," said David Golden, "pertains to me. I’m Jewish."

"Do you want me to help you across the street?" Terry asked again.

"I don’t want anything from you. And I don’t want to be ‘assimilated’ into

your goyish shithole. Is that clear? I don’t see how I could make it any clearer." A single precious tear moistened his stubbled cheek.

But Terry insisted. "We must learn to be friends, David. Here–give me your hand."

He extended his own hand, palm up, and David, who could not act otherwise, placed his left hand in Terry’s. They both stared at the object of shredded flesh and splintered bone as though it were an item of ritual significance, a pyx or scroll whose esoteric markings must be pondered and taken to heart.

But for now it was inscrutable, mere meat like the beef or lamb that was dressed and blessed, packaged, frozen and shipped from the Jews’ kosher slaughterhouse. Terry handed it back to David Golden with a sense of embarrassment, as though he had accidentally touched the man’s genitals. Then he went across the street, leaving David rocking back and forth with a grief that had begun to be conscious, though still it was silent.

Terry knew when someone could see him, because it was only then that he could see himself–as now, mirrored in the shop windows of Main Street, kitted out with cap and bandanna and his full panoply of merit badges, from Agribusiness to Space Exploration, with stops along the way for Leatherwork, Shotgun Shooting, and, last but not least, Disabilities Awareness. He’d taken on Disabilities Awareness at the behest of his scoutmaster and pastor at the Lutheran church, Jim Quist (whose wife Elaine was in a wheelchair with MS), thinking it would be another easy score like Consumer Buying or Dog Care. It had turned out to be the single most useful merit badge on his bandolier, the one that had paid the biggest dividends in the afterlife.

Each badge was emblem of some essential mystery, the one thing you learn that is the key in the lock of that skill or study and which once you know it you’ll never forget. For the Disabilities Awareness badge that secret was that we are all disabled. There are shelves we can’t reach, doors we can’t open, languages we can’t speak–something that makes us unable to fit in no matter what kind of effort we make. Elaine Quist had helped Terry understand that, though as she had also said, quite truly, "It’s a lesson we all get taught in due course, without outside help."

She had a particular way of smiling when she said that that Terry had come to recognize as the Disabilities Awareness look. Also known as a wry smile, a sour grin, or sadder but wiser. It was a look you saw on almost all those newly dead when they realized that all their plans for the future had not just been put on hold, they were canceled. That trip to Dubuque to see Aunt Marianne for one last time would never happen. The bulbs from Gurney’s would never be planted. That last jar of corn relish from 1996 would never get brought up from the cellar, never be opened, never tasted.

Those were the losses that mattered most to the newly dead, not the things that got people riled up on talk radio. Once they were past the first shock, the bombshell announcing that they were at most only onlookers now, they stopped taking an interest in the official concerns of good citizens. Terry was an exception to the rule in that regard. He’d earned three of his merit badges for Citizenship (Citizenship in the Community, in the Nation, and in the World) and the habit of being a concerned citizen had stayed with him. Perhaps it was the thing that kept him especially glued to the here and now of Postville in the Third Millennium and allowed him to act as a latter-day Charon, ferrying the dead, once they were ready, to the other side. That, and a basic inclination to be helpful.

So here he was on the main street of Postville, looking at himself with astonishment in the front window of Mamie’s Thrift Shop and Video Rentals (which, sadly, hadn’t been open for business for the last two years). After blinking away his surprise, he scanned Main Street to see who it was who was looking at him. Usually you know at a glance. On a street of living people a dead person sticks out like a sore thumb. But not today. There was the usual crowd of Mexicans hanging out in front of Cucina Linda and two bearded rabbis dragging their male offspring along at a brisk pace, as though pursued (the Jewish women, young and old, lived in some kind of purdah, and were less often seen on the streets of Postville, except in pairs, pushing strollers and sporting almost identical wigs, as their religion required). There were even one or two indigenes, very old, very slow, rather sad. But where amidst this usual spectrum of Postville’s diversities was the dead somebody who had taken note of Terry?

There: half hidden round the corner of the Corner Cafe, the specter of Rabbi Irving Rosen, the oldest undeparted victim of the bombing of Mount Zion Synagogue and Terry’s favorite Jew. Rabbi Rosen had been hard to spot, because instead of having his attention fixed on Terry, the only other ghost in the area, he was watching the Corner Cafe’s sole customer, George Scully, tucking away a burger and fries and chatting with Deborah Carr, the lunchtime waitress. George was giving most of his attention to the burger, because it was still oozing juices from the grill and his shirt was fresh that morning and had to last another couple of days.

"Rabbi Rosen," said Terry, crossing the untrafficked street, "good morning. Enjoying the June weather?"

The rebbe’s tongue darted from the right side of his mouth, even as his lips puckered in a wincing Disabilities Awareness smile. The look seemed more at home on his face than on the faces of the newly dead goyim of Postville for whom irony was a novel sensation. He hadn’t had to die to develop a sense of humor.

"Yes," Rosen answered, "but I wish I could enjoy that hamburger instead."

"Hungry," said Terry. An observation, not a question.

"Should a dead man salivate like this? The longer I am dead the worse the hunger gets."

"Would you feel the same if he were eating pork?"

Rosen laughed. "If you don’t like kosher law, go argue with Moses. But to answer your question: yes. Starvation is no respecter of law. If he were shoveling down the shit of a pig and not its spiced ground flesh I’d feel the same envy in my gut. Whatever my tongue could taste I would lick with pleasure. They built Auschwitz to teach that lesson to the living. The dead can learn it for free." He stroked his gnarled, red-and-gray beard as a kind of seal, or Selah, to his brief lamentation.

"I don’t suppose you’ve ever eaten anything at the Corner Cafe."

"No. And that is a sign of what? That I disdain your town, your people, your faith?"

"Is it, Rabbi Rosen?"

Again, but chillier, the laugh; the flick of the tongue; the smile that mocked

all miseries. "Of course it is. I can’t deny it, if I wanted to. But why should I want to? What pleasure have I now but honesty? Don’t you despise this town, these people, a faith that proved untrue?"

The compulsion to speak the truth was not reciprocal, and Terry did not have to answer the rebbe’s questions. He just stood there in his scout uniform, the politest of interrogators.

"This town was dying, you know, when we came here," the rebbe went on. "It was moribund, almost bankrupt. Only the taxes we paid kept it alive. Our taxes kept the schools open, though our children don’t attend them."

"And how did you vote on the bond issues?"

"Oh, we were against more money for your football teams and uniforms and the computers and hockey rink. You wrang all that out of us. Then, once the Mexicans were here in force–Vloosh! the school budget soared into outer space like a rocketship. There was no stopping the progress of Education then."

"And who brought the Mexicans to Postville? Whose slaughterhouse gave them jobs? Who built their trailer camps?"

The rebbe shrugged. "Who else? But who else, my little Eagle Scout, would do the work? The jobs were there, but no one who grew up in Postville was hungry enough to stoop so low. Eight dollars an hour wouldn’t do for a white man. But Mexicans are very hungry, and there are millions of them. Do you think your goyish meat-packers pay better wages?"

"You enjoyed it. You enjoyed turning Postville into a third-world barrio."

"Is that a question? Then the answer is yes. Poetic justice is always enjoyable–for those not on the receiving end. Have the good citizens of Postville merited a kinder fate by their love and charity, by the splendor of their civilization, by the beauty and dignity of their public buildings? When your ancestors took these lands from the Winnebagos or whatever tribe of savages first lived here, was there a solemn pact to guarantee that their children would hold these acreages forever and ever?"

"Like Israel’s pact with Jehovah?"

"Precisely! You begin to understand. There is a time for everything, my junior-league Hermes. A time to live and a time to die; a time to invest, and a time to die; a time to welcome your neighbors from the South, and a time to die. For Postville it is the time to die. But from its ashes Nuevo Pueblo will arise, with its new people, its new customs and cooking, its madder music and more powerful recreational drugs."

"And my people–will they have any place in this brave new mundo?"

"Oh yes!" said Rabbi Rosen, giving a lupine inflection to his Disabilities Awareness grin. "There!" He pointed to the little cemetery abutting St. Jacobi’s Lutheran Church. "In your graves. Like us."

He spoke with no sense of resignation but rather a kind of glee, a cheer that transcended mere Schadenfreude to become something sweet and philosophic. That glee was the reason, for all his dyspepsia and open ill will, that Terry liked the old fellow. Despite the difference in their ages and backgrounds, they really had a lot in common.

"Let me ask you a question," said Rabbi Rosen. "Why are you here, a Boy Scout,

with all this grown-up responsibility?"

Terry was not compelled to answer, but like most of us he was pleased when someone else was curious. "I’m not a Boy Scout anymore," he said quietly.

The rebbe chuckled. "You could fool me."

"I do still wear the uniform. It meant a lot to me. I had nearly all the merit badges I needed to be an Eagle Scout."

"And then–what? So young, it must have been a highway accident. Or some one-in-a-million kind of cancer?"

"I committed suicide," said Terry, "when I realized that I was gay."

Rabbi Rosen nodded and stroked his beard. Slowly his feeling of incipient sympathy for this dead goy became a feeling of revulsion–and of horror at his own situation, adrift in an afterlife for which he lacked any map or compass, a Jew with no homeland but this Iowa cow pasture, no comforter but a queer.

"Do you want to hear something completely crazy?" said Deborah Carr as she plunked down a cup of coffee and a slice of pie on the counter in front of George Scully.

He didn’t, but that was part of the deal when you ate at the Corner Cafe. You listened to what Deborah had to say.

"What," said George.

"You will never guess who I thought I just saw, standing out in front of here."

"Who."

"Terry Goren."

George swallowed the wrong way, choked, brought up the bolus of chewed apple pie and let it lodge inside his cheek, tobacco-like–while he scalded his throat with too-hot black coffee.

"Remember him?"

George nodded. He remembered him all right. They had been best friends in high school until the kid had revealed his sick secret.

"Jesus," said George. "What made you think of him? He’s been dead since...since when?"

"Nineteen seventy-eight. The year Sharon Gates moved to Chicago. Who knows why you suddenly remember anyone from a long time ago. You were a friend of his, maybe that’s why."

"A friend? Not really."

Terry Goren had blown his brains out with a shotgun in the Gorens’ garage. No one ever knew why, officially, though George had a good idea.

"Such a crazy thing to do," said Deborah. "I could never understand it. He

must of been unhappy with Postville."

"Uh-huh."

"Some people don’t fit in."

"Right."

"But he could of gone to Chicago, like Sharon Gates. She’s got a good job there now, better than any you could get in Postville."

George nodded vigorously and swallowed the last of his pie. It was time to be getting back to the feed store.

"I don’t understand how someone could do that."

"Uh-huh." George took three bills from his wallet and laid them on the counter. Then a quarter on top, his tip.

"I can understand someone leaving Postville for a better job. Unless you work for the Jews there’s no jobs here. Unless, maybe, a teacher. But I don’t see myself as a teacher. I don’t have the patience."

"The Jews aren’t the problem," said George. "The Mexicans are the problem. This whole state is going to become another goddamn Mexico."

"Language," chided Deborah.

"A Mexico with snow."

"Well, just be glad you don’t have kids. They’re the ones that will bear the brunt."

"I do have kids."

"Well, yeah. But not in Postville. Not anymore."

George pushed himself up from the counter and reached inside his pants to adjust his boxer shorts.

"Hey," said Deborah. "The men’s room is over there."

George had no comeback. He just let his gut sag back in place and headed for the screen door. Outside a gust of wind lifted up a yellow plastic carrier bag and danced it around the void of Main Street. The Mexicans outside Cucina Linda gave him a dirty look and then, with more deliberate discourtesy, looked away. It was their way of telling him that he did not exist.

First published: _New York Press,_ vol. 14 #36, September 5, 2001.