

The Shabbos Goy

By Michael Fine

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It was a good gig, even for an atheist. It was steady work. He could ride his bike to work. It was only in the morning on Saturdays. All he had to do was sit there and open the locked door when people approached. They made him wear a mask, which fogged his glasses on humid days, but the place was air-conditioned so it wasn't a big deal. They didn't care if he took his shoes off, which he did from time to time when his feet got hot. He wore a yarmulka out of respect and would say 'Shabbat Shalom' to people as they came through the door. Almost everyone was pleasant to him and said Shabbat Shalom back, even the people who looked past him as if he didn't exist. The pay was okay. It covered food, and he had a couple of other gigs – in a wine store, walking dogs, and unloading trucks at a supermarket at midnight three nights a week that covered what he needed to cover, so he could take one course at a time and make a little music on the side. Most of the Jews came at about the same time, when one of their services was about to start, so he'd be up and down a lot for thirty or forty minutes at a time. After that he could rest and take his shoes off until stragglers came or until the next service was about to start.

Sometimes Casper wondered why they wanted him there. He wasn't any real security. Maybe the locked door kept out homeless people or neighborhood kids, but almost everyone who came to the door belonged inside, so he never turned anyone away. It wasn't Casper's job to say this one can enter but this one cannot. It was his job to sit there and open the door for anyone who came. If a terrorist or serial killer came, Casper was dead meat. They told him the glass was bulletproof. But there he was, sitting there in the window unarmed, in plain sight like a duck decoy on a lake in the fall. A sitting duck. Literally.

So when a woman on crutches came to the door on one rainy Saturday in May, Casper jumped up and opened the door without thinking. The woman was dark skinned and heavy. She was middle aged but not old, and she wore a green and blue kerchief over her hair. One of her legs was bandaged and she held it bent so it didn't touch the ground. The crutches made a sucking sound, like the sound slow windshield wipers make in a drizzle, when the woman placed those crutches on the grey tile floor. Casper noticed that the bandages on the woman's bad leg were stained yellow and rust red, as if they covered open wounds that were weeping.

“Whew,” the woman said. “Thank you Jesus. I need to sit down.”

“Shabbat Shalom,” Casper said. “The service is in the foyer today. Not in the main sanctuary.”

“You got a chair?” the woman said. “My breath is short and I be sweatin up a storm. Need to sit down. Just for a little while.”

“Sure, sure,” Casper said. “I have a chair right here. The one I was sitting on.”

Casper turned and pulled his chair forward, kicking his shoes, which he’d taken off, out of the way.

The woman turned so she could sit. She dropped her weight into the chair, groaning. She held her crutches out as she sat and then handed them to Casper, who took them and leaned them against the wall.

“This some kinda church?” the woman said.

“It’s a synagogue, Casper said. “For Jewish people.”

A knot of people came to the door, a man and a woman and a girl of about ten. They wore dark wet raincoats, and they stamped their feet to get the water off their shoes when they came across the threshold.

“Shabbat Shalom,” Casper said.

“Shabbat Shalom,” the man said after a pause. He looked at Casper and at the woman sitting in the chair, and then the three people walked past to climb the stairs to the sanctuary.

“I ain’t no Jewish,” the woman said. “But it sure is good to have me a place to sit down.”

“Can I get you a glass of water?” Casper said.

“Much appreciated,” the woman said.

“That leg looks pretty rough,” Casper said when he returned and handed the woman a paper cup of water.

“It ain’t as bad as it looks,” the woman said. “I got me scalded from boiling water. Tripped with a kettle. Then fell right down and broke my damned leg. Hurt like the dickens when I done it. Doesn’t hurt so much now ‘cept the bandage is too damned tight. They don’t want me walking on it yet.”

An older couple came to the door. The man was bald and had a goatee. The woman was heavy set. She was pear shaped and walked with a limp. They were regulars so they were used to Casper. He and they recognized each other. Casper opened and held the door for them. He said Shabbat Shalom and they said Shabbat Shalom back. They also looked at the woman sitting in the chair and also walked right by.

“When do they change the bandage?” Casper said.

“They is supposed to change it tomorrow.” The woman said.

“It’s Saturday...” Casper said.

“I know. I know,” the woman said.” They told me to come to the ER. That’s where I be headed. Don’t know if I can make it that far though. It’s a walk. And I ain’t much for walkin now. Say, you got a fan or something? It be hot as blazes right here. And I be sweatin.”

“I’m not that hot,” Casper said. “But if you are uncomfortable, well, let me get you something.”

He put his shoes on. You always have to be ready to do what needs to be done. Then he walked up to the office. There will be a pad there, he thought. A pad of yellow-lined paper will do. She can wave that pad back and forth and cool down.

Sure enough, sitting on the desk in front of the office door was a stack of yellow legal pads. He took one and turned. And then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. It was a red-and-white *Johnson-and-Johnson* first-aid kit, hanging on the wall next to the door. They told him about that kit when he started working in the synagogue. First-aid kit, here. Call 911 for any trouble. There is an emergency button hidden under each desk in case you can’t get to a phone in time, though they didn’t say in time for what. First-aid kit. Huh, he thought.

Then he heard someone knock. The front door. He had stepped away from it. Someone wanted in. The buzzer in the office went off. They were knocking and now pressing the doorbell to the side of the door.

So he went flying down the stairs, yellow pad of paper in hand.

There was a man in his fifties and a young woman, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, at the door. The man was tall and thin with half glasses in front of tired eyes, a receding hairline and a strong nose and chin. The young woman looked like a college student. She was also tall and thin, and also had a strong nose and chin, swept-back black hair and dark sad lustrous eyes. She looked like the man only younger, and beautiful where he looked strong and resilient although perhaps worn down by life. They both wore a little pin that had a black ribbon attached to it on their lapels.

“Shabbat shalom,” Casper said. “I stepped away for a moment. Sorry to keep you waiting. I should have been here.”

“Shabbat shalom,” the man said as he and the young woman came through the door. They stamped their feet to shake the water off their shoes.

“Doctor Ben-Levi! What are *you* doing *here*?” said the woman in the chair.

“I go here,” the man said. “Shabbat Shalom. This is my daughter. Ayela, this is”

“Leonora Barros,” said the woman in the chair.

“Leonora Barros,” the tall man said. “That’s some leg you have there.”

“Scalded it with boiling water,” the woman said. “Then fell down and broke it. Just my luck.”

“And you’re here..?” the man said.

“Was on my way to the ER. The bandage is too tight. They was going to change it tomorrow. Thought I could go over today. Just stopped here to rest my weary bones,” the woman said.

“Well, good to see you,” the man said. And he started to climb the stairs to the sanctuary.

“Abba, don’t you know how to do dressings?” the young woman said.

“I’m a psychiatrist,” the man said, kindly, and he looked at his daughter over his glasses.

“But we did Ema’s...” the young woman said.

“This is a synagogue. There aren’t bandages here. We’d need bandages, bandage scissors and tape,” the man said.

“We actually might have some,” Casper said. “Wait. Just open the door for me if somebody comes.”

Casper ran up the stairs, and came back down a moment later, carrying the first-aid kit.

More people came to the door and Casper opened it. Before long there were five people clustered around the woman in the chair, some on their knees, first loosening the old, stained gauze on her leg and then cutting it away, putting antibiotic ointment, new gauze, and a new rolled bandage where the old one had been, wrapping it tight enough to hold everything in place, but checking with the woman as they did so to make sure it was not too tight. The woman fanned herself with the yellow legal pad as they worked.

“That’s better,” The woman said. “Way better. Thankyou.”

Then the woman stood on her one good leg. Casper handed her her crutches. She put one crutch under each arm and leaned into them. The suction cups on the end of the crutches made a squishing sound as the rubber collapsed against the tile floor.

The father, daughter and three other people who had come while the dressing was being done stood up together. They watched the woman rock forward. She swung her good leg in front of her and placed her weight on it. Then she lifted her crutches and swung them farther in front of her yet, the suction cups squishing against the floor again as she transferred her weight back onto the crutches.

Casper opened the door. He didn’t look behind him. Maybe someone would say he shouldn’t have let the woman with crutches in, but it wasn’t his job to judge. His job was to be ready when someone came up and then to open the door for them.

“Glad I didn’t wait,” the woman said, as she walked away. “Glad I came today.”

Then the five people climbed the stairs to the sanctuary, going up to pray.

Casper returned to his seat, ready to open the door should anyone approach.

The rain stopped and the sun edged out of the clouds. Beams of light poked through the trees and made the puddles in the street glisten.

What a day!

A *Goy* is a non-Jew.

A *Shabbos Goy* is a non-Jew who works for Jews on the sabbath, when Jews are prohibited from cooking, driving, or working. Non-Jews have been employed by Jewish communities to help support the life of the community (and of families and individuals) for hundreds of years. While there was traditionally suspicion and fear of non-Jews in the Jewish community, and more than a little disdain by some, there has always been affection for Shabbos Goys, a gratefulness that they are willing to help, combined with a certain tiny disdain, as if all were people such reduced in circumstances that they would have to take such employment, reflecting some Jewish self-hate: who would be willing to work for *us*? given that the world thinks so poorly of us. There must be something wrong with them.

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