Irony, Imagery, and Impending Doom

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All beginnings are hard.
--Talmud

All right, so I didn't actually read that sentence in the Talmud. I read it in Chaim Potok's *In the Beginning*. But Potok says it comes from the Talmud, and he knows more about such things than I do. Anyway, the sentence seems appropriate for a blog post about the first two pages of a story in *Jewish Noir.* And it definitely says something true about the challenges all writers face when they begin a new project.

Always, there's the challenge of capturing readers' attention and making them want to keep going. Each writing project also presents specific additional challenges. When I began to write "Living Underwater," I wanted to make it clear from the outset that this would be a noir story, to prepare readers for tragedy. The story's also an academic satire, though, so I also wanted to establish a sardonic tone. I didn't want the first two pages to seem utterly bleak—who wants to read a story that offers nothing but unrelieved gloom? There had to be some hints of humor. The ability to relish life's absurdities while recognizing its inevitable disasters strikes me as a particularly Jewish type of noir.

So I decided the first two pages should use irony and imagery to start building a sense of impending doom. The first paragraph tries to combine enticing traces of all three elements:

> He had always feared people like her—perky, enthusiastic people, people who smiled a lot and sprinkled their e-mails with emoticons and exclamation points. From the moment Helen Stavros stood up at the September faculty meeting, he knew she was one of those people. When she stepped to the podium, when she flung her arms out wide and spoke, moist-eyed, of her respect for faculty autonomy and her eagerness to learn from others, a wave of dread washed over him. Helen Stavros held a Ph.D. in Institutional Effectiveness and had come to Edson College to serve as Associate Dean for Academic Assessment. She had the power to drain his life of all dignity, all reason. And he felt sure she had the will.

Why would the protagonist—Sam Meyer, as we'll soon learn—fear perky, smiling people? And all the things Helen Stavros says sound so open and liberal. Why do they fill Sam with dread? I hoped these opening sentences leave readers with a sense of the discrepancy that, to me, lies at the heart of irony. I also tried to give readers a preliminary sense of Sam's personality. Sam automatically distrusts anyone who seems too good to be true, too friendly, too nice. Maybe he's paranoid. Maybe he's right.

The paragraph also introduces water as an image to be developed throughout the story. Helen Stavros is “moist-eyed”; “a wave of dread” washes over Sam as he listens to her; he fears she can “drain his life of all dignity, all reason.” As the story goes on, as references to water continue, I hope readers will recognize water as an image of overwhelming, irresistible disaster.

The first paragraph contains other hints of disaster, too. “Helen Stavros”—a flagrantly Greek name. Jews reared on the Hanukkah story recognize Greece as a threat. Sure enough, Helen has made her cold, reductive formulas for measuring academic success into idols, and Sam will get into trouble when he refuses to bow down to them. The paragraph ends with a particularly ominous word: “he felt sure she had the will.” Nietzsche’s will to power, Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*—in a Jewish context, “will” sets off powerful warning signals. Things don’t look good for Sam.

The second paragraph introduces the second major image in the story:

> Before the first week of classes ended, she made her move. On Wednesday afternoon, he climbed the three flights of stairs to the seminar room where the English department held its meetings. There she was, sitting near the head of the long rectangular table, to the right of nervous little Dr. Simpson. Behind them loomed the Cuthbert Window, a magnificent floor-to-ceiling stained glass collage donated to the college by an alumnus who had learned to love William Blake during his time at Edson. Decades later, after he’d made a fortune in rubber, he’d commissioned an artist to piece together intricate, vibrant images of shepherds and laughing children, of bards and chimney sweepers and a naked child on a cloud. Beneath the glory of that window, Helen Stavros spoke to Dr. Simpson in a rapid whisper, her face warmed by the late afternoon sunlight filtering through a languishing glass rose.

Just about any reader who managed to maintain consciousness during an Introduction to Literature class will realize that the Cuthbert Window depicts characters from Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and will therefore suspect that the story concerns some sort of transition from one state of awareness to another. Sam’s not exactly an innocent when the story begins: His view of life is already cynical and pessimistic (some might say realistic). But he has yet to learn how futile resistance to entrenched foolishness can be.

Given the story’s themes, the Cuthbert Window is significant in other ways, too. The alumnus who donated the window to the college “made a fortune in rubber.” There could hardly be a more prosaic way of making a living, but something in a literature class this man had taken touched him so deeply that, decades later, he’d felt compelled to express his gratitude by making a costly gift. The window thus points to education’s power to enrich students’ lives in unlikely, unpredictable ways—ways that Helen Stavros and her ilk can never quantify. Government regulations and powerful accreditation organizations force colleges to spend

millions of dollars and waste thousands of hours collecting data and filling out forms designed to assess academic effectiveness, but can any of this frantic activity truly measure the ways in which education shapes students' minds and souls?

Later in the story, Sam will focus on other images in the window—the poison tree, the tiger—that parallel stages in his escalating conflict with Helen Stavros. The second paragraph ends with a sentence that brings Helen and the window together, as her face is "warmed by the late afternoon sunlight filtering through a languishing glass rose." Lines from "The Sick Rose" come to mind, lines about life being destroyed by an "invisible worm." Again, Helen Stavros looks like a smiling but deadly threat, like a wily, insinuating serpent in the garden. Again, things don't look good for Sam.

The next several paragraphs begin to develop the conflict between protagonist and nemesis:

> Dr. Simpson looked away from her, spotted him, and waved. "Sam," he said, "have you met Dr. Stavros? Dr. Stavros, this is Dr. Sam Meyer, seventeenth-century English literature."
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> Helen Stavros looked him over. She was blonde and buxom, probably mid-forties, prettier than most, eyebrows plucked to high, thin arcs. She wore a gray pin-striped suit and a silky red top that plunged deep. "Great to meet you, Sam," she said, seizing his hand. "These are exciting times, aren't they? Ready for a challenge?"
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> Had he ever before in his life taken such an immediate, intense dislike to another human being? He forced a tight smile. "That depends on the nature of the challenge."
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> "Oh, the best kind of challenge." Her grip on his hand tightened. "The kind that helps you think in new ways and makes you feel better about going to work every day. How does that sound?"'
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> "Unlikely." He pulled his hand away, walked to the other end of the table, and sat down next to Jake Nachshon, his mentor since his first day at Edson, the only other Jew in the department. "My God, Jake," he said. "Where do they find these people? And Simpson won't stand up to her."
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> "He probably can't," Jake said. "But wait and see. Maybe it won't be so bad."

The differences in the ways Helen and Sam speak point to differences in their personalities and to the likelihood that they won't get along. She's effusive; he's reserved. Everything she says is designed to draw people in, to make them agree with her. He holds back. She seems upbeat and welcoming, but her tightening

handshake implies a threat. This is someone who won't tolerate even a hint of resistance. She demands complete, unquestioning support, and Sam isn't the sort who will give it to her. Already, these two seem destined to clash.

These paragraphs also introduce another important character in the story, Jake Nachshon. Like Sam, he's realistic—he knows Helen Stavros probably means trouble—but he's more optimistic, saying maybe the trouble "won't be so bad." I hope some readers, at least, will see the significance of Jake's last name, will see how it continues to develop the water imagery. According to Jewish tradition, Nachshon led the way when the Israelites came to the shore of the Red Sea. Even before the waters parted, while the Egyptian army was closing in and Moses was still praying for divine assistance, Nachshon strode into the sea, pushing ahead until the water nearly covered his head. It was because of Nachshon's actions, the rabbis say, even more than Moses' prayers, that God parted the sea and allowed the Israelites to reach safety. At the risk of sounding pretentious—and it's probably unavoidable at this point—I'll say Sam and Jake are intended to represent two sides of the Jewish soul. Sam expects disaster and resists it head on, like the rebels holding out at Masada. Jake, like Yochanan ben Zakkai, another hero of the struggle against Rome, looks for ways to survive, refusing to give up even in the face of circumstances that fully justify despair. He embodies a clear-eyed resilience that might help explain why we're still around after more than three thousand tumultuous years.

Tumult definitely lies ahead for Sam and Jake, as Jake's hope that "maybe it won't be so bad" proves unfounded:

> It was bad. Dr. Simpson mumbled a bit, welcoming the one new tenure-track department member and the six new adjuncts, then turned the meeting over to Helen Stavros and sank into his chair, wheezing. She popped to her feet and pressed a button on a remote, and a screen descended from the ceiling, covering the Cuthbert Window.
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> "Here's the scoop!" she declared, and pressed a key on a laptop.
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> Nothing happened. She pressed the key again, nothing happened again, and a lank young man in an olive-green tee-shirt rushed forward. For the next several minutes, he fiddled with things, she fiddled with things, and they consulted in whispers. Finally, somebody did something right, and the image of a cone topped by a perfectly symmetrical mound of strawberry ice cream appeared on the screen.
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> "Here's the scoop!" she cried again. "For many years—far *too* many years—higher education in America was all about accounting."
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> "ACCOUNTING" appeared on the screen—all capitals, in a thick, squat font—surrounded by random gray numbers that came in and out of focus.

> “For too many years, we just kept track of the numbers,” she said. “We made sure students sat in classrooms for a certain number of hours each week. We made sure they piled up a certain number of credits each semester. When the numbers looked right, we said the students were educated and handed them their diplomas. Had they actually learned anything? We didn’t know. We’d never bothered to find a way to keep track of that. The only things we kept track of were the numbers. Hours. Credits. We didn’t care about anything else.”
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> “Dr. Stavros,” Jake said, “that’s hardly a fair or accurate way to describe—”
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> She whipped her head around to smile at him, a broad, joyless smile taut with warning. “Please. Call me Helen. And this isn’t a time to get defensive. It’s a time to listen, and to learn. Things are about to get very exciting.”

These paragraphs contain a couple of inside jokes for academics. The chair introduces “the one new tenure-track department member and the six new adjuncts”—these days, when colleges are scrambling to save money, classes are being taught by fewer and fewer full-fledged professors, by more and more underpaid, benefits-denied adjuncts. And not once, in all my years as a professor, did I attend a PowerPoint presentation that went smoothly. Always, the first time the presenter pressed a key, nothing happened, and people had to fumble about madly trying to make things work.

On a more serious level, the imagery is getting darker. As Helen Stavros begins her presentation, a screen descends to cover the Cuthbert Window. The subtle, complex images from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are hidden by crude, simplistic PowerPoint graphics. The window, a silent but eloquent testimony to the lasting effects of true education, is blocked out, and we’re left with nothing but Helen Stavros’ words—her cruel, careless generalizations that deny any merit to the work and the motives of generations of dedicated teachers. (Her speech, by the way, is an almost word-for-word record of something I heard a speaker say at a faculty meeting a few years ago—and the speaker, I’m sorry to say, was not an administrator but a longtime English professor who should have known better.)

When Jake starts to offer an objection, Helen silences him with “a broad, joyless smile taut with warning,” dismissing anything he might say as mere defensiveness. Now we know Sam was right to distrust her smiles. “Things are about to get very exciting,” she says, but we know, by now, they’re about to get worse. The first two pages have made that clear. If those pages have done their work, however, we’ll want to read on, despite the sense of impending doom.

B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens' first novel, *Interpretation of Murder*, is a whodunit that offers insights into deaf culture and sign language interpreting. Her young adult novel, *Fighting Chance*, is a martial arts mystery set in Virginia. B.K. has also published almost fifty short stories, most in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. B.K. has won a Derringer and has been nominated for Agatha and Macavity awards. "Living Underwater" appears in *Jewish Noir*, edited by Kenneth Wishnia and published by PM Press. www.bkstevensmysteries.com.