

The First Two Pages of “Your Judaism”

Tasha Kaminsky

“In the interest of being honest, I didn’t kneel down first. I sort of just tapped him with my foot. I didn’t kick him. It was a nudge, and when I think back on the moment I vaguely recall saying something along the lines of: “Man, you can’t sleep here. Have you considered checking out our library?” That’s not a direct quote, that’s just how the story has come to be framed after telling it to a series of different St. Louis police officials. I didn’t feel good about nudging a dead man, who wasn’t really a man. Human and male yes, but man has a certain connotation of life experience and the like, and I’ve had enough time to learn about the guy and he just wasn’t a man. He was a guy at best, and a kid at worst. I’m sorry that he’s dead.

When you tell a story enough times you embrace a pattern. Doesn’t matter if the story is about discovering the corpse of a twenty-two year old in a synagogue lobby. Any narrative can become mechanical. So here is the story as it stands to this day:

I got to work at 7:56. I know it was 7:56 because I was annoyed with myself that I was at work at 7:56 when I didn’t actually need to be there until 8:30. I don’t believe in Jewish Standard Time. That’s complete bullshit and part of an agenda to advance the interests of inconsiderate assholes who can’t keep time. Not to mention I resent the stereotype implied. Jews are no better or worse at keeping time than any other ethnic group. Don’t laugh nervously and say Oh, well, you know, Jewish Standard Time and all, as you walk into the staff meeting fifteen minutes late. That’s not a thing.

I was definitely in the building before 8:00 because it doesn’t take more than a minute to walk from the parking lot to the building. I was also the first one in the building as far as I could tell. I have my own key code to get into the building. The security system isn’t what it should be, but it’s there. You either have a code or you need to be buzzed in. You can, in theory, be followed in because the lock is triggered by motion from the inside. That means once you’re inside, if you approach the locked door it automatically opens so you can exit uninhibited. That also means that if you’ve just entered, if someone is close behind you and you stop to take off your coat or wipe your shoes on the mat, they can just walk right in too.

I went directly to the front office which, naturally, is in the back of the building. Because I was the first one in the building, I unlocked the front office door, and that was when I saw the deceased. I approached him while announcing myself, and then yes, I nudged him with my foot. Once I nudged him, I realized that he was not sleeping and he was unresponsive and that is when I called 911. I only touched the body when prompted by the dispatcher and when I did I observed it was cold.

So that was a fun first day on the job.”

Full disclosure: I struggle much more with endings than beginnings. My approach in fiction is to establish a clear voice that sets the tone for the rest of the story. Sometimes that means first person and sometimes that means third person limited. Either way, I pick the narration that makes sense for the story and the characters.

For “Your Judaism” I knew I was going to be telling a modern young Jewish woman’s story and she would be the kind of girl who liked to tell stories at a bar. I actually imagined this story’s opening scene completely differently and it took careful consideration of my main character, Miriam, before I opted for first person and shockingly personal. For a good long while I thought this story was going to be written in the third person and while the events were still very fresh for Miriam. Ultimately, that’s the tense and immediacy I prefer to write in, but it isn’t how Miriam would want to tell her story, and it didn’t match up to my goal of writing a Jewish woman’s story. I also adjusted setting and timing to allow Miriam to grow and take control of the story. At first I thought to begin with Miriam being late on account of her gruesome discovery and then weaving a story that would excuse her lateness. That felt too much like I would be distancing Miriam from her trauma and the impetus of the story, while taking a lot of time focusing on her passive action of addressing the initial discovery.

A goal I set was to create a contained crime. I knew that my story was not going to be procedural or follow a traditional detective or law enforcement mystery format. My experience in the Jewish world is when someone dies the questions are “what?” and “why?” Why is a much more Jewish question than what, so my inclination was to get the what out of the way quickly, clearly, and concisely. This was a story that was going to really ruminate on why. I tried to be proactive about clearing a space and making a trajectory for the narrator to go on her journey of mapping out why a crime like this happened in a place like this.

I’ll expound a little on that choice. I’m a details and logic person (a terrible mix for a fiction writer) and given the excuse I will put off writing and let myself become blocked if I try to fit a character into a predefined plot and space. My instinct is to clear the technical hurdles of

storytelling early. Since I had no intention (or real interest) in returning to the scene of the crime, I put effort into establishing the base facts and moving into Miriam's action. I didn't want to spend my word count on Miriam interacting with the police or the crime scene. If you are one of those writers who gets hung up on logic and potential plot holes, I think it's important to give yourself permission to cleanly and succinctly write your characters out of those places they don't belong.



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