

The First Two Pages of “Devil for a Witch”
by R.S. Brenner

“Devil for a Witch” is a title I’ve been hoarding for years on my brain shelf, waiting for the right match. It’s from a southern expression: *You trade the devil for a witch*. Not an attractive bargain either way. A good title (maybe only a working title) is akin to calling an unborn baby by a name. If not the “real” name, then one off a list of names. A title is my mantra to repeat while I conjure its hidden dimensions. I begin there.

After the title is the author’s name. This is R.S. Brenner’s first publication although her alter ego, Summer Brenner, has published a dozen books of fiction and poetry.

Besides titles for non-existent books, I collect epigraphs. Since I was a child, I’ve kept a notebook of favorite quotes. An epigraph feels like a clue or a key. I often use one to set a tone at the beginning, entice a reader to revisit its meaning, and perhaps introduce them to an unfamiliar voice. “Devil for a Witch” has two epigraphs.

The first by W.E.B. Du Bois is from his poem “The Litany of Atlanta.”

Whither? North is greed and South is blood;
within, the coward, and without, the liar. Whither?

Du Bois’s lament of hopelessness (greed, blood, coward, liar) are all prominent elements in this story that begins in Atlanta.

The second is by Al-Mutanabbi, an Arab poet (915-965 A.D.). You may know of Al’Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, famous for booksellers and cafés.

If you see the teeth of the lion,
do not think that the lion is smiling at you.

A wonderful variation on “devil for a witch” in case you’re foolish enough to think your lot might improve.

The text begins with Leon Greenberg’s funeral, a suicide.

The funeral for Leon Greenberg was graveside, the service short. As little as possible was said about the deceased, nothing personal or elegiac. His death blotted out any cause for celebration of his life. If his existence had once been charmed, it was not mentioned. Star chemist, decorated Navy officer, brilliant raconteur, and once holding the enviable title of husband to a beautiful rich woman, no such attributions were uttered. Suicide was a willful negation of life. Out of confusion, sadness, spite, its legatees accepted that the dead man’s last act overrode all others.

We learn that Leon was smart, probably funny, maybe brave, and married up. Also, we assume he’s dead (deception is the engine of this story).

After the funeral, the mourners convene at a family home where spare dialogue takes over. When I write dialogue, I do theatrical role-playing aloud so I can distinguish the different voices and capture the nuances of insinuation and accusation.

Across town at the reception, limos dropped the mourners at the Steiners' split-level wonder, a glass and steel extravaganza around the corner from the governor's mansion. It was Atlanta's most prestigious address even if the governor was a murderous bigot. In the Steiners' living room, *shiv'ah* was under heated discussion.

"He's an atheist!" Irene Greenberg shouted.

"Was," Phil Steiner said.

"Was! Was! Was! I am his wife! I know what he wants!"

"Wanted," Phil amended.

"He does not want *shiv'ah*," she insisted. "When my father died, we sat *shiv'ah* because he wanted it. We sat two nights until you went off to a golf tournament."

"He wasn't my father."

Irene shook her fist like an impotent human before the throne of God. "He gave you everything!"

"Stop it!" he croaked, holding her wrist and tightening his grip.

"My husband just killed himself! I'm permitted to completely lose my mind!"

Bitter acrimony with a dash of comedy (grave diggers' humor), this is a depiction of upper middle-class southern Jewish life with its affectations of home address, golf, and designer clothes. Let's say death often brings out the worst and leave it at that.

The conversation shifts between the widow, Irene, and her wealthy brother-in-law, Phil, to Irene's sister, Marilyn. Clothes is a subject of contention. Leon never made as much as money as Phil, meaning Irene had to buy on sale in Atlanta while Marilyn shopped at exclusive stores in New York (Henri Bendel) and wore expensive brands famous in the 1960s (Vera and Charles Jourdan). Irene also implies her sister and Leon had a "special" relationship.

"I'm sitting *shiv'ah*," Marilyn Steiner, Irene's sister, said.

"Leon doesn't want it, but now that he's dead, he's helpless. He's in the clutches of Zionists!"

"Helpless!" Phil snorted. "Not with you as lineman."

"I loved Leon," Marilyn sighed.

"Everyone knows about *that*," Irene said icily.

"Shut up!" Phil ordered.

"Your husband wants me to tear my blouse because he knows I bought it on sale at Rich's. I don't wear Vera

scarves and Charles Jourdan shoes like my sister. I can't afford to shop at Bendel's." Irene twisted the end of Marilyn's scarf, shortening the loop like a noose. "Would you tear your precious scarf if Phil died?"

"Get a sedative!"

"Phil Steiner is a usurer!" Irene shouted. "Usurer! Usurer!"

I treat the entire manuscript like a musical score, contrasting description (adagio) with dialogue (allegro/scherzo). Variations of tempo and the integrity of transition from one tempo to the next are particularly important to me. By reading everything aloud, I listen for missed notes, unintentional repetition, and superfluity.

Murmurs of sympathy followed as a phalanx of black maids lifted Irene off the ground and carried her to another wing of the house where Valium was forced under her uvula, her mouth clamped shut, and her neck stroked like a dog's. That was only after Irene broke Sarah Weiner's cane over Phil's arm while Sarah's hands were occupied with lox and deviled eggs. The cane splintered and caught Phil's shirt, ripping it open and scratching his chest. A tiny scratch but Phil agonized as if Irene had bitten his heart out which she would have if she'd had the strength.

Later when the pill wore off and she was home in bed, the recollection of the cane, its percussive thwack, Phil's expression, the blood, his torn shirt, and the chaos and confusion that ensued, was deeply satisfying. Irene laughed about it for years.

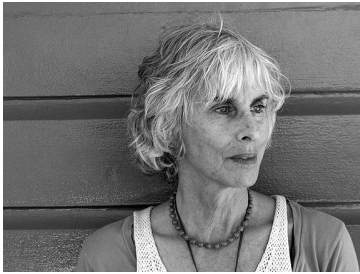
These first two pages might suggest a story of social satire. Hardly! It's about vicious anti-semitism, the KKK, and violent prejudice against Jews and blacks. If you keep reading, you'll get to that. In retrospect, the opening is something of a preface. By the way, I attended a synagogue (The Temple in Atlanta) that was bombed in the late 1950s. There were also bombings of a synagogue and a rabbi's home in the 1960s in Mississippi plus the KKK's signature of burning crosses.

The sections of story in *Jewish Noir* are abbreviated chapters from an eponymous novel. Its beginning was originally the same section you've now read in *The First Two Pages*. However, beginnings are fluid. In a recent edit, I moved this scene deeper into the text. It also has a new epigraph from poet, Jack Spicer.

Mirror makers know the secret-
one does not make a mirror to resemble a person,
one brings a person to the mirror.

My great appreciation to Ken Wishnia for his invitation to join the anthology; and to B.K.

Stevens to share The First Two Pages.



Summer Brenner was raised in Georgia and migrated west, first to New Mexico and eventually to northern California where she has been a long-time resident. She has published a dozen works of fiction, poetry, and award-winning books for youth. Her crime novels include *Nearly Nowhere* (originally published as *Presque nulle part* by Gallimard's *la Serie noire*) and *I-5, A Novel of Crime, Transport, and Sex*.

PHOTO by Raymond Holbert.