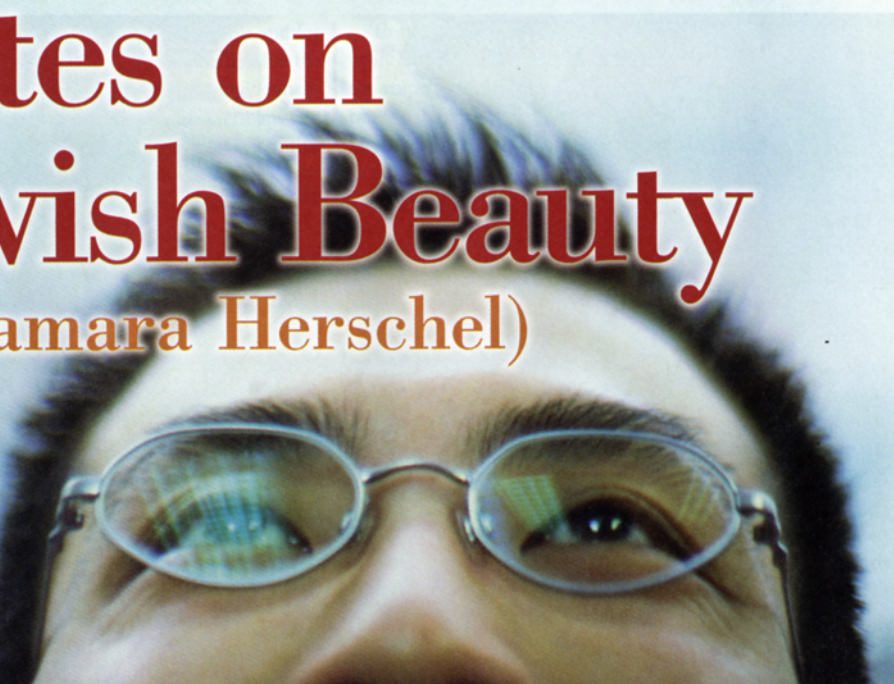


Notes on Jewish Beauty (or: Tamara Herschel)

ISAAC
LEUNG



I often go to the Travis Perkins lumberyard on the roundabout off Harrow Road to get wood cut. It's a good place to get a piece of lumber cut. Although actually, they don't have a buzz saw now and if you want to get something cut you have to go to a yard in a place called Ladbroke Grove. It's called "New Lines" and they often cut things there for free. It's right, right and right again out of the station. The tube station. That's right, right and right again. It's under the flyover. So, anyway, I used often to go down to Travis Perkins to get wood cut. And I'd often go walk or take the bus and then walk down from where the bridge where there is this station called Royal Oak, because I'd always miss the right stop. Then I'd ask the driver if he knew when we had passed Travis Perkins and either he'd know, or another passenger would tell me. And you can walk through this kind of graffiti-space, except there isn't much graffiti there, just some, through these gigantic bushes of flowers someone has planted there. I guess it's the Council. They are called bougainvilleas. I know because this girl told me. Anyway, I'd often go down to Travis Perkins, perhaps holding one or two pieces of lumber under my arms or carrying it on my shoulder or in front of me, like a gun, but like I wasn't aiming it at anybody. Sometimes I'd see this newspaper writer cross on the other side of the roundabout, or the road, or across the flyover, real small, on the other side. I knew he was a newspaper writer

because I saw him close up one day after I had just left Travis Perkins and he was arriving there. I looked at his face, but he didn't look at me at all. He also had some wood to cut, probably for different reasons to me (I like to adjust the height of furniture a lot). Then, I saw his face in a newspaper called the *Guardian* next day. His photo was right there over his column. You see, he's a 'columnist' and so he writes a 'column' every week. I know because someone told me. I don't regularly read the newspapers. Anyway, his name is Jonathan Friedlander or something. And I kept on seeing this Jonathan Friedlander guy crossing on the other side of the road, going to Travis Perkins like me, or maybe going there while I was going home (I never saw him going back while I was going to the yard). And he often looked kind of lost or confused about the direction, and I frequently saw him make some wrong turnings. This really made me laugh. I laughed once so hard for so many minutes Jonathan Friedlander walked by me—he had come right round, but he didn't take any notice and didn't seem to notice me, or my laughing, at all. I often made wrong turnings as well, although they're not always wrong—sometimes I just want to 'check out' a piece of fencing or motorway 'architecture' or something. I can jump down onto an embankment or jump back up. No problem. I'm good at jumping. I always know which way is north, but I get a little confused by the roads around there too, because they're not really designed for pedestrians. Sometimes

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the pavement is just maybe one foot across. Sometimes there's no pavement at all. Then you have to be careful of the traffic. Come to think of it, it was really only me and Jonathan Friedlander I ever saw round there. Usually. Except sometimes I'd see Jonathan Friedlander walking to Travis Perkins with a girl. Usually (but not always), the same girl. A very lovely girl. A girl called Tamara Herschel.

I like the girls in the adverts for "call-centres." You know, they have those neat little ear phone and micro phone in front of their mouths. They are called, "headsets." I like the girls in the adverts for haircuts, in the hairdresser's. They are so hot sometimes. I don't think they actually have their hair cut in 'the place,' though. I like the girls on the medicines and stuff in the pharmacist's, like the girls on the packets, I mean. Like the girls on the packets for Pantene hair colour or Crème of Nature Colors. But I like Tamara Herschel, more than those girls. Or at least 'as much.'

I remember once I walked the wrong way to Travis Perkins, and was at the end of this one-way road beneath the flyover, where cabbies get their cabs cleaned and there is some kind of office or car park, or maybe some kind of "site delivery offices" (I spoke to people about this). I asked this cab driver where Travis Perkins was (this was only maybe my third or fourth 'visit') and he turned round and he had this Hebrew writing on his T-shirt. It was like, Hebrew writing, which is Jewish writing. Like our alphabet we use (I mean everyone) is called the Roman alphabet. Because it is Roman. And the Jewish alphabet is called the Hebrew alphabet. Or it is the Hebrew language. And I felt a kind of like, weird 'bond' with this guy, because I remember my mom once said to me that she was Jewish and that means I am Jewish too. Apparently, Jesus was also Jewish, my mom told me. My dad is Korean, so I guess I'm, 'Korean Jewish.' So anyway, he was telling me to go back the way I came and turn right at the roundabout, or something, and I wasn't saying anything, just nodding, but thinking, 'I feel some kind of "bond" with this guy.' I didn't say anything after I said, "Do you know where Travis Perkins is?" I just nodded, while I was thinking and he was explaining. Oh, maybe after I'd taken a few steps away after he'd helped me I turned around again with this big smile, but he was already getting back into his cab. (I can't remember if I did this, maybe I just thought about doing it.) Anyway, so he was this cab driver. He had been cleaning the cab windows. Amazing, isn't it? I didn't know there were so many Jewish people. For example, Tamara Herschel is Jewish. And I am too, according to my mom (who is no longer with us). And so was that driver. It's so amazing. And, I think maybe Jonathan Friedlander is also, like, Jewish. Tamara told me one day, but I wasn't sure to believe her. Actually, I can't remember whether she told me this or not. She told me a lot of things. Like there are lots of Jewish taxi drivers in New York, which is in Ameri-

ca. I told Tamara I had never been to America, only to California. She looked kind of embarrassed but also really happy and she went kind of red and made all these strange noises, like she was laughing or something, but I couldn't tell exactly because she wouldn't let me see. Later, I felt really embarrassed, because I realised why she was laughing. I was born in Guam, which is a U.S. protectorate. Then we went to California, where my dad worked for the LAPD and my mom worked as a textile worker after he left us, even though she had been trained as a nurse. My mom is part Ethiopian-Jewish, but I don't look black at all. I look, kind of half-Korean and half, like, European.

It's kind of an amazing story of how I met Tamara Herschel. I was delivering pizza leaflets near my aunt's place where I live in this tower block and I was just about to put pizza leaflets in the door of this flat when it opened and there was this guy there. It was Seymour Herschel. Actually, I didn't know it was him, because I only knew later when Tamara told me. But he said I should come in, because it was just starting. So I ran out to tell F-, who was this Afghan guy I delivered leaflets with, that it was starting and I had to go, and I'd catch up with him later (we did each side of a street, or we'd do each a level in a block but go up two at a time, so we didn't double up the work). Actually, this guy didn't understand English at all really, but he understood when I went into the flat and Seymour took a leaflet

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Apparently, Jesus was also Jewish, my mom told me.

from him said thank you and then closed the door on F- outside. Anyway, it appears there was a misunderstanding because Seymour thought I was one of the people come to this kind of event thing he was having in his flat. We all sat down in these little chairs, like children's chairs, and people started reading things out. I realised there had been some kind of mistake and after just five minutes I said I had to go and he looked surprised. And he asked me for my cell number. And I didn't have my mobile at that time. Really, I didn't have any mobile then (actually I don't have one now because I just lost the fucker), so I gave him my aunt's number, which she always makes me carry around. I kind of thought there might be some kind of problem, like when I have broken something, but I knew that if I

explained to my aunt exactly what happened, I knew there would not be any problem and I would not have any problem. F~ was waiting downstairs and we started leafleting again without saying anything. It was the football world cup in Korea and all the leaflets had a football theme. I always wanted to explain to F~ that my dad was from Korea, but he didn't seem interested. Actually, we never really spoke because his English wasn't too good. He spoke a language called Pashtun. Sometimes he would sing, in Pashtun.

Anyway, 'to cut a long story short' (that phrase is really amazing), Seymour Herschel was how I met Tamara Herschel, because Seymour Herschel was her cousin. Later, Tamara said that she would have met me there but she arrived 15 minutes later. Next thing I know, they have got my address from my aunt and they visited me, together, because they thought something was wrong. Nothing was wrong, it was just a mistake. It's so funny to think of Seymour and Tamara Herschel talking to my aunt in the kitchen or something. I was out in the back, lying on my back, watching the clothes dry, because I wanted to wear my tracksuit before I went out to shoot pool. My aunt told them that I was out, because she thought they were missionaries, or maybe from social services. But next thing I know, my aunt is driving me to Tamara Herschel's house because they have invited me. My aunt is Korean. She actually isn't my aunt, but she is family, because she is my father's cousin, like Seymour Herschel is Tamara Herschel's cousin. I just call her my aunt, anyway. Tamara says, that is common in a lot of cultures. Tamara Herschel lives in The Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. It's really desirable round there. My aunt said she would wait for me round the corner. I had wanted to wear my tracksuit, but my aunt said that would be a bad idea, so I wore these really 'formal' trousers with creases in them, dry clean only, from my dad when he was in the LAPD in the

early nineties. I am about the same size as he was, is or would be, right now. Actually, my dad wasn't really in the LAPD, he was a kind of informant or something, whatever that means, although he did have a badge for a few months. But my aunt says I shouldn't talk about that to anybody. He was also bisexual, which means he was half gay. I remember because he told me when I was very young. That's why I never feel weird about gay people. I haven't told anybody about my dad being half gay.

Anyway, when I came in to Tamara Herschel's place, there were already a lot of people there, like some kind of gathering again. But first I should say that Tamara answered the door. She looked really lovely. She had loads of freckles.

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And this kind of mixed golden hair, with red and even white in it, if you looked real close up. "You must be Bonaparte," she said and I said that that was correct. I remember I used the word, "correct." She told me to come in, so I did. There were lots of people sitting around again. It kind of looked like the party I once went to with Janine, but there was no music, and Pablo wasn't there. Pablo who is in jail now because my aunt caught him trying to make me take drugs across town for him. There were big books in black

leather with Hebrew on the 'spines.' People started reading things out again, kind of like at Seymour Herschel's place, but I couldn't really follow them. In fact, I kind of fell asleep a little bit which was very embarrassing except it didn't happen because Tamara touched my shoulder as I was about to droop forwards and asked me if I was O.K. And I said yes and she looked pleased. And then there came a part where nobody was talking at all and Tamara said to me, "Bonaparte, do you have anything for us? A poem?" I said no, not really. But then I felt this kind of pressure, because everyone was listening to us and looking at me. It was like Tamara had told them I was coming, even though Seymour wasn't there. And so I said, maybe I did have a poem after all. And I said it was very short, and I wasn't sure what the title of the poem is (poems usually have titles). And I read out this poem from my memory, "I used to sing about telling you, whether you remembered, that government yard in Trenchtown." It's a good poem, because it's based on the lyrics of a song by Robert Nesta Marley. I love the music of Bob Marley. I like to listen to it lying down or cycling, on headphones. My aunt likes it too, and she listens to it too. Anyway, the people at Tamara's place really liked my poem because they applauded. I heard Tamara lean forward to this guy who was looking at her right in her eyes and say, "it's about time, it's about memory," and he said, "it's about a relationship too." There was another guy who said it was about Caribbean politics. I know what he was talking about, because Jamaica is in the Caribbean, and Robert Nesta Marley is from Jamaica, except he died, in 1982. I think they must have also have known about Robert Nesta Marley too, the people at Tamara's place, because they all seemed to know what I was talking about. Actually, they had different ideas, but I think they were all right, true I mean. There was a really good atmosphere suddenly and I was kind of enjoying myself.

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But then I remembered my aunt was waiting for me in the car around the corner and I got up to say I had to go. I was going to explain about my aunt waiting for me, but Tamara got up and said, "Do you have to go?" And she took me to the door. I kind of wanted to kiss her like I made out with Janine last summer on the estate but Tamara turned her head maybe because she didn't realise and I ended up kissing her cheek. Since then I've noticed that a lot, guys kissing girls on the cheek and vice versa. It's fashionable. I'd like to have kissed her, fully, you know, but she didn't really notice and anyway just then she kind of leaped away because she had to talk to someone on the other side of the room. And I turned and made to go but Tamara was there at the front door again. She said that "Seymour would be so glad" and that Seymour was sorry he couldn't be here today. My aunt was waiting for me. She was listening to my Bob Marley tape and trying to figure out the route home, which wasn't far. She didn't ask me anything about it, but a few months later when I said I left before everyone else, she looked kind of disappointed.

Actually, before I went back to my aunt's car I kind of stood there a while outside the house, staring in at the living room through this gap in the curtains where everyone was. Some people passing in the street looked at me kind of weird because I must have stood there for maybe fifteen minutes. Because I was just realising that I had seen Tamara Herschel before, with the newspaper writer guy. But I didn't know she was called Tamara Herschel then. Saturday I didn't have much to do so I wandered back to Tamara's house. I walked. I didn't really know the way, but I found it quite quickly, after only maybe six hours or something, and I only had to stop walking down the motorway a couple of times when I went really 'off track.' I didn't really know where The Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was but there was a little voice inside of me that said, "Don't go this way.

Go that way," kind of whispering, "Go that way. Don't go this way." Actually, I think it was kind of my own voice, because it wasn't always right. When I arrived, I looked at my digital watch and it was 11:30 a.m. I remembered the garden and curtains and looked inside and there was Tamara. So I knocked and said, "I've seen you before with that newspaper writer guy, going to get wood cut at Travis Perkins under the Westway." Tamara looked really stunning that day. Her hair was all long and curly, not up like last night. She looked really beautiful and she was smiling at me. She had a really great figure. The telephone rang just as I was talking but then it stopped so she didn't hear me. "Oh did you leave your diary here," I remember she said and she went into the next room to pick up this black leather diary and she wiggled it and I said no, and just kind of looked around because we were in the living room now even though the front door was still open. She asked me how I got here and I said I walked. She said she didn't know I was "from," but she didn't finish the sentence and just kind of looked at me, smiling. I said she didn't know I was from where and she started laughing crazy, laughing like, for about forty-five seconds. I know because I set the timer on my digital watch after about fifteen seconds, real smooth without looking away from her. I got used to doing that ever since I got that watch. I can time a lot of things. I often time how long the neighbours have sex.

I wanted to have sex with Tamara, but she was kind of different from Janine. She said, have you come to be my chavruta? Actually, I didn't understand what she was saying and she told me this word later, which is like a Jewish study partner. I didn't know what she was talking about so I wandered round the room looking at her, like I did with Janine once before I fucked that bitch so goddamn hard. Tamara went to close the front door and I went over to her Hebrew books. They had these kind of golden letters on the 'spines' so I just

ran my finger up and down the 'spines' a couple of times. Then I wondered whether the gold had come off in my hands like wrapping paper for chocolate and maybe was poisonous like my aunt used to tell me to scare me. So I put the fingers to my lips and just then Tamara came back in and she just was kind of looking at me in this funny way smiling and stuff and standing back against the door looking real nice. I began to feel kind of embarrassed which is something I often do, in social situations that I can't recognise, Dr. Poulgrain says. Then somehow she made me sit down on this chair and she sat on the sofa and she read out some Hebrew and some English from one of these really big books and she started saying things I really didn't understand. She kept on asking me what I thought. And I was kind of thinking about a text message I could send her if I had a mobile, maybe something like "honey I wanna d8t you, do you wanna d8t me cos u m8k me feel 4-nee like I wanna 4nicate with u." 4nee is like 'horny.' Pablo told me. He is a Peruvian graduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Then something really weird happened. I was drinking this orange juice Tamara had given me and she kind of stopped and asked me something and I just kind of looked real blank because I didn't want to say anything stupid and I kind of hoped she would just carry on like she had done before several times when I hadn't said anything. I got up and there was a little piece, a little 'drop' I guess of OJ at the bottom of this glass and I kind of decided to throw it in the back of my neck (I was thirsty from all that walking) but it wouldn't move it just stood there, stuck there I mean. I kept on trying to throw it in the back of my neck and looking at Tamara sideways like, 'out of the corner of my eye,' to see if she had started reading again, but not reading out. But she didn't and she was looking at me real different. Like angry.

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So I just forgot about the last drop of OJ and sat down. Actually I dropped this cup the OJ was in and it bounced several times on the floor and I said sorry and picked it up but I was so freaked out. Her eyes went all strange. I saw a programme about stars exploding the other day. You know the sun is a star and when suns get old they either 'explode' or 'implode.'

Sometimes they do both. Tamara Herschel's eyes looked like inside, deep, deep inside them a black star, was imploding. Not like a little black star. Like a big, big, black star, the biggest black star you could ever imagine. Ever. It was all there behind her eyes. I told my aunt yesterday and she started crying and she said she never heard me speak like that before. I felt

really, really sad, because her eyes looked so different. But I was cool and I said, "Do you know Janine?" and then I stood up and walked around. When angry people realise I don't understand they get less angry quickly. I said, "Is that Hebrew writing? I saw something like that on a T-shirt once." And she stood up and went into the other room and was standing and she had her hand on her head and I looked at her down the corridor and she said, "Hi there, I'm just thinking" and she closed the door. Then after two minutes she came out and said, Bonaparte, I want you to do something for me. I want you to dial the telephone over there, and call "999." Have you got that, dial "999." I called my aunt instead because I wasn't dialling no 999 and my aunt said maybe it was a misunderstanding and that I should call Seymour and I said, who's Seymour and Tamara was listening and said, Seymour's got a friend who can answer the phone today so you can call him. So Tamara gave me Seymour's number to call and she went round to the neighbours. I just got this message which was like music. The police came and the neighbours came too and they were talking in the kitchen and I was alone with Tamara in the sitting room again and she said, "Do you even know my name?" And I said yes, because I heard that guy at your party say it, but I've met you before, walking with that newspaper guy to Travis Perkins to cut wood. And she said, Jonathan Friedlander? And I said yes, even though I didn't know his name. And she said, that's so amazing. You haven't been stalking me have you, Bonaparte, because the police might want to know about that. And I said no. And she said, I thought you were Seymour's friend, and Seymour must have thought you were my friend—isn't that funny? And she said, how old are you, what do you do? And I said I was 22 and Dr Poulgrain was seeing what learning deficits I retained before he could recommend me for an apprenticeship. And I said I saw a Jewish

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taxi driver, and Tamara said there were lots of Jewish taxi drivers in New York. And I said my aunt was really my father's cousin, and Tamara said that Seymour Herschel was her cousin and I'd met him, and that she was called Herschel too, and that calling a close, older female relative aunt, was common in a lot of cultures. And she said a chavruta was a Jewish study partner, and it was so funny that she had thought we could study together. And she said I understand you are part Korean, part Jewish, and I said I'd never been to America, only to California. And I said I'd seen her walking with Jonathan Friedlander through all those flowers by the Westway. And she said they were bougainvilleas. And I said could I come again and she said maybe not, like a teacher. And she said goodbye when the police took me home. My aunt was out and they just dropped me on the corner. I didn't tell my aunt the whole story because she would just have worried.

I saw Tamara Herschel again recently. My aunt said she was a teacher in the University of London, and I knew where the University of London was because I had once done swimming for school in this big pool round the corner. My aunt got me a mobile after the whole thing with the Herschels so I was thinking maybe I could find Tamara Herschel and get her number. There were so many people going into the Tube and the funny thing is that there she was about to get into this taxi. I said Tamara and she looked round and I said, I love you. She asked me how I had found her and she looked around but there were so many people nobody was looking at us and anyway I wasn't doing anything wrong. And she looked very sweet all of a sudden but like a teacher and she stopped but then said to me that it was not possible that I was in love with her, because you can only really love someone if they love you back too. And she said she was in love with her rabbi. And I asked her if she was in love with Jonathan Friedlander and she

said no. And I didn't say anything and then the taxi driver started shouting and I felt really angry and strange suddenly and I turned around and there was this bus that I knew, the kind you can step on and there's a conductor, that I knew would take me all the way home. So I got on the bus and when I turned round Tamara Herschel was looking at me kind of

funny. And she said, "Oh, Goodbye, Bonaparte," and I just looked away because she looked so nice. Then the bus started moving away real fast. I'm going to buy her a ten-metre length of deep blue and white patterned silk from a 'designer' called Abraham, of Switzerland, at 52 bucks per metre from Mr. Joel's, on Church Street.
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