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Gray Areas

by Peter Brav

Louis Ginsburg stared at the eye chart beyond the motor vehicle counter and tried to recall the numerous ways he had been fucked over in his life. After a few seconds, he gave up as usual. Eighty-nine years worth of screws were a lot for anyone to recall, and a bit of dementia spiced with the eight red and blue pills he took every morning made detailed bitterness impossible. He smiled and read the E F P T O Z top three lines to himself. Some things, the good things, didn't change, didn't need to. The asshole ingrate of a son could drop names on Thanksgiving like Facebook, Internet, eBay, tell him they'd be getting rid of the Motor Vehicle altogether someday, but Lou knew they would keep the eye chart forever. That was a comforting thought.

A lady came by in a purple dress with a name badge that read Ms. Hunter and asked if she could be of assistance. Seems she had noticed him sitting alone on the pale wooden bench for the better part of an hour and had grown concerned. If he couldn't actually wait on those interminable lines, she could indeed help him, because he was old. She didn't exactly put it that way, but he got the gist. He always had gotten it, the gist. So what if he had a hard time figuring out whether she was colored, black, Negro, African American? There had been a lot of terminology changes in 89 years, and better yet, these days he might have just referred to her as that nice lady at motor vehicles.

No, I'm not here to renew my driver's license, not here to register my car, don't have a car anymore, don't have any plates to surrender, and didn't come in for a non-driving ID because I wasn't aware I needed one.

That's what he was thinking anyway, even though all he managed to do was shake his head. Ms. Hunter excused herself politely and departed to look for other old people in need of assistance.

An ID to walk very slowly, to eat, to shit, to sleep, to try and tell jokes to phone company repairmen who came by the house, always stumbling at the punch lines and attempting a graceful exit with a you know what I mean. What was this world coming to? Wasn't his veteran's card enough, a wallet-sized reminder that he had saved the world from Hitler back in simpler times when there really were good and evil, black and white, when these gray areas didn't ruin everything?

Lou remembered his first car, a gently used '52 Impala he had been sold well below book by his boss Murray. The car turned out to be a piece of shit with far more time in the shop than on the road. There you go, another way he'd been fucked over. He would have to start keeping a list.

He wondered if he could buy an eye chart for the home. They had to sell them somewhere, though there was always the possibility that all of the eye charts ever made were in use. You never know. He could test his eyes and his memory with one simple device. One day, his eyes would be failing and he would rely on his memory. The next, it might be the opposite.

A man was shouting at the counter to the right, kicking at the brown linoleum tile. They had a tough system of identification these days, a whole lot of proof required before New Jersey would give out a license to drive. You might know who you were but it was a big world and nobody else knew or cared so you would have to prove yourself. Not in any kind of dramatic way, a contest, an arm wrestle, just your damn identity, show that you were the same load your mother had dropped 20, 30, even 89 years ago.

Lou knew it was the terrorists. They could be anywhere and everywhere, even the lady behind the counter on the receiving end of all that shouting, she could be evil and Lou wouldn't be one bit surprised. Giving out hundreds of licenses to drive with made-up names and apartment numbers so their recipients could bomb buildings and steal from Social Security without anyone being the wiser. Even so, Lou wanted to rise up from that bench, give that nasty fella a piece of mind, tell him how to treat a lady, inform him that he used to be the man on his Flatbush block in the '30s, the man you didn't want to mess with. But he held his seat and covered his right ear with his right hand and waited for the commotion to end. The lady in the purple dress was there now, gesturing, and Lou saw her usher the man away from the window.

They announced that they would be closing in 15 minutes. Lou couldn't remember how he had gotten here and wondered how he would get home. He was sure they had taxicabs out front and, if not, there was always that card the nice driver had given him a month ago. Winter was past a few weeks now and he wouldn't mind at all waiting out front for an hour or so in the dimming early evening light if he had to.

There was no hurry. Sylvie was gone five years, and the two children and five grandchildren were photographs he got every once in awhile. All the people who he'd known at temple were gone, the guys who landed with him at Le Havre in 1945, gone, all the orders he'd taken and followed up on at work, gone, and he thought there still were a ripe melon and some Melba toast back at the house. Indeed, there was no hurry. He might even try walking it.

Brav, a Princeton resident, is the author of "Sneaking In" and "The Other Side of Losing," a chapter of which was presented in the 2008 Summer Fiction Issue.

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