

Mr. Hubert
by Bryn Symonds

“After fourteen years of silence, I spat on an old woman in the metro. Only her toes touched the ground. Her melted, liver-spotted hands held her beige handbag defensively on her lap. She had a scarf and a hat of matching sky blue. Her face was unremarkable. As kind as any grandmother-type although she did not have the power of my grandmother, a silently powerful woman who ruled through grace, subterfuge and coercion. No, this woman had the repugnance of anyone over 65. Grey, wrinkles, saggy, smelly. When I spat on her, most of it landed on her right cheek just to the left of her cheek bone. Some spread up the side of her nose – dribbling just a little. More landed on her drooping eyelid and on that terribly soft patch in the corner of the eye just on the bone. There might even have been some on her bottom lip. Just one or two drops. Very small. I’m not sure. Some guy pushed me out of the metro car.

After fourteen years of silence I had spoken. My first word.

My second word was ‘The’, audibly capitalized and then I paused. I had more in mind but was too shocked to say more. The sound of my own voice surprised me. I repeated ‘The’ and added ‘man.’ Now you must understand that for fourteen years I had chosen not to speak. I moved from the city to the country twice. I slept, worked, paid bills. I just didn’t talk. You might ask why but I can’t give you a good reason. None that would satisfy such abhorrent behavior anyway.

A strange thing happened when I gave up speaking. People stopped speaking to me. When my speechlessness was new, the few intimates I had asked me but I never satisfied them. Nothing I wrote down in explanation was good enough. I tried. Well maybe not, but I thought I did. I wanted them to just say okay but they kept pushing. I had nothing else to say. So they stopped asking.

Soon it just became an accepted fact. I didn’t talk. Needless to say that after fourteen years there weren’t many people left in my life. No one you would call close. And I know there are thousands of mute and deaf people who are fully functioning members of our society, have jobs and homes and lives. But I really—it wasn’t the act of speaking that I rejected, it was conversation. It was the banter, the back and forth, the endless pattern of expression, misunderstanding and trying to explain yourself to another who couldn’t possibly understand. How could they, they weren’t me?

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In the beginning I wrote a lot. I went to the dollar store and bought a bunch of lined, spiraled note books. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. I don't know, I guess I was working stuff out. Figuring this out. Trying to shuffle everything, all the pieces into one picture. To link the dots. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. I was 27 when I gave up talking so I had a lot to say or not say... to work out. Whatever. I don't know. In the end I gave up. I realized that I never had any intention of sharing these writing with anyone so what was the point. I mean, what's the point of writing anything down if no one's ever going to read it? Everyone writes to be heard. Everyone wants to be a star, don't they? On the other hand maybe I was just finished. Maybe. With no more input maybe I had finished. Maybe the drawing was finished. Maybe all the lines had been drawn, all the connections made. All the dots were connected and now all I was doing was drawing more and more of them, filling in the space with infinite number of black lines. I hope not. I had it the other way. I mean, I really thought I stopped writing in rebellion. In revulsion. Hmm. Anyway.

When I gave up writing my journals, an even stranger thing than the disappearance of people happened. I stopped having reactions to things. Without the writing there were no more witnesses, not even myself. So oddly enough the story stopped. Don't get me wrong. As I said, I lived. I aged. I changed clothes when it was necessary. My emotions stopped. The causative links between the events of my life and my emotional reactions stopped. So the chronological accumulation of these links that were how I understood myself and my place, stopped. Time didn't stop. I stopped. It was as if when I stopped writing I stopped telling myself my own story. When I did that, I gave up the last reader. The story stopped.

In 1995, I moved to the country. I edited books for a publishing house. Not a huge one but big enough. I read, edited and submitted the corrected texts without ever saying a word. I had a few freelance projects but they didn't go well. People hiring freelancers weren't satisfied with my blunt written judgments of their work. It was impossible to indulge in the literary debacle that most of those people enjoy.

My company had signed an author to write a series of five short, adolescent novels over three years and I was her editor. She would send me chunks of her work. Sometimes ten pages,

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sometimes fifty and I would make sure she was adhering to the word count and lexical limitations of her contract.

I set myself up in a two bedroom bungalow in St-Xavier de la Montagne. It's a little village down in the Townships. Nothing special. Nothing going on. Just country people doing country stuff. You know. Hanging out at the bar. Going to weddings and funerals. The high school play. Smoking joints in parked cars. Not really that much different from the city, I guess. Just darker out there. I'm not really a good judge though. I didn't really try to get involved. I'm sure they were good people. Just far from the epicenter, you know.

The locals thought I was mute and just adapted accordingly. People simply waved or nodded greetings. That awful, meaningless question: 'How are you?' I had a teacher once who said that 'how are you?' is just a way people have to say 'I see you.' No one actually wants to know the answer. Maybe. Even the cashiers at the grocery store came to know me and stopped being offended when I didn't answer and chat. Some of the peppier ones still asked and usually engaged in a funny one-way conversation. All I needed to do was nod or smile. That was all the answer they needed to discuss weather or politics or her mother in a really clever stream of rhetorical questions. I mean, don't you think she should let me go? I mean, why wouldn't I be allowed to go? It's not like I'm going to crash the car again? Conny's driving. You know? I would nod or smile. That's 27.34, Mr. Hubert. And that was the way it went. My quiet country life. Small communities adapt quite readily so long as you meet them in the middle. The only thing they ask is that any change happen slowly and if possible with due warning. The community will accept a newcomer but introduce yourself and your mold has been cast. It's not the people. Don't get me wrong, I think it's just a side effect of living with so few people. You know them all. You feel protective of them and yet you mistrust them all. You know they're judging you the way you're judging them. It sounds binding but I guess some people are just more comfortable with known quantities. Anyway. Whatever. What am I talking about? Don't listen to me. I'm the crazy one who didn't talk for years, right? What do I know? These people could all be the divine lambs of god and the city people the raving idiots. Who knows? Anyway."

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Suddenly, Mr. Hubert looked tired. The audience that had gathered to listen to him talk about his experiences was glad of the break. They relaxed. They had just gone through one of those awful moments when the speaker goes off track and there's no way to bring him back. They had listened closely to everything he had had to say but when he started talking about life in the country he seemed to wander off course into a rambling diatribe without a purpose. He got lost and his audience of first year university students was lost with him. And they were all too polite to show disinterest so they faked it and tried to follow. They were happy to have a break, to speak to their neighbors, to leave the room. Others, the keeners at the front, went over their notes getting ready for the question period at the end.

Leaning up against the wall outside, Mr. Jacques Hubert lit a cigarette. He looked at the McGill campus. And the grey, fall city behind it. It was good to get outside. Get some fresh air.

"Scuse me. Do you have a light?"

Mr. Hubert grunted and handed his lighter to the young man who had walked up. The man lit his cigarette and handed it back. "Thanks, Mr. Hubert" It was a test, a question just trying to make sure it was the right man.

"You're welcome."

The two stood together for a while. The old man wondering why the boy was standing there, knowing that something was about to pop out of that beautiful young mouth. The young man smoking, thinking of a good way to begin.

"You have a very interesting story, Mr. Hubert. Thank you for coming today."

Mr. Hubert smiled. Gratitude was always a good savior. Well, not always, but today it worked.

"I'm glad you think so. I'm not sure. But it's good for book sales."

The two laughed nervously, unsure whether they were close enough yet for such ironic candor.

"Can I ask you something?"

Ah, so finally the courage has been screwed tight enough. "Yeah."

"There's something I don't understand about your story."

"What's that?"

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"Well, you said that after you stopped writing, you stopped reacting, feeling, changing. But when you moved to the country, didn't you change there? I mean, you were exposed to new people and places. Didn't they affect you at all?"

Too easy boy. You're not listening closely enough. Stop thinking about who you're going to screw tonight and pay attention. "It must have changed me. I'm here, aren't I?"

The boy looked embarrassed. He smiled and hung his head a little. Thank god for the cigarettes. They'll always give you something to focus on when you need it. Just pay attention to smoking. Somehow you're invisible for a little while.

Mr. Hubert spoke first. "I'm sorry. That wasn't a good answer. I was expecting something...something that you were perhaps embarrassed to ask in the auditorium. Nothing quite so pedantic." Mr. Hubert smoked his cigarette.

What you don't realize is how alien speaking was to him at this point. It just wasn't part of his life. He'd adapted to a new system, a new way of doing things and by that point talking to another human was as foreign as breathing under water or as difficult as learning to ride a bike at 40. But then again maybe that was just a lie he told himself to keep safely cloistered behind the mute distance between you and me. In fact, it must have been. All that stuff about the story stopping. Bullshit. He had the desire to move to the country. He had the desire to go to the saunas and the club, didn't he? History, his history obviously continued. What a crock. This man's no visionary. No ascetic. He's just a coward who refused to participate because he couldn't cut it. Found it all too much.

"Anyway. I should go back in. They're probably all waiting for me. The exciting conclusion."

"I'm gonna stay and finish this. Maybe I'll come and find you after. I'd like to talk to you some more. Maybe take you out for a beer?"

A dangerous game, young man. "If you like."

And with that, Mr. Hubert walked back inside to finish his speech. To deliver the rather disappointing answer to the inevitable question of why he spat on the old woman. Truth was he hadn't really figured it out yet. What he told the students. What he had told all the students waiting for the conclusion, the inevitable return to the beginning. All the rage, all the frustration that

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seethed and boiled under his skin. That same rage that had silenced him fourteen years before exploded. The woman, for whatever reasons, had become, for that moment, the repository of all the ignorance and stupidity in the world, all the lack of understanding and problems of communication. For that moment, she was the poster-girl of everyone's inability to adapt, to understand the new, the tendency of people to filter everything, to hear only what they wanted to hear, to flail madly at the message, destroying and discarding it before they had even tried to decode it. The arrogance that comes from the certainty that you know the world and it is the way you understand it to be. Most students like this idea, this explanation. It fits nicely into their models of the transference of novelty and innovation from generation to generation. That what is passed is passed. It was useful to build on but really no longer applied and trying to explain something to the older generation was a waste of time. They simply had a different frame work and different set of values that made it impossible for them to understand. For some, he was sure, it might even fit into their personal experience of having a parent or grandparent who just refused their logic. The obstinate moral righteousness of responsibility. Yes, most of the kids liked his explanation. The point-explosion of all the rebellion and frustration. They even liked the rather wry joke that he used to end his speech. His second words, as he liked to call them: "The" and "man"

Oh, I said those to the guy who helped me up from the platform. He wanted to know why I had fallen out of the metro car.