

Canning Jars

by

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nonfiction

The blue-green canning jars, opaque and bubbled, are the only things of beauty in this place. I lift them carefully and place them on a cardboard box where light shines through. The lids are that old silvery metal, dull and flaking. One of the jars is large, more than a quart. The others are pints, perfect for storing dried beans or lentils. Hanukkah gifts for my sons.

I approach an older man and an older woman sitting on wooden folding chairs in back of the shop--a thrift shop on a country road in rural Virginia.

I'm not the only person in this shop. I've come with a friend, an artist, and the stop is impulsive, a veering off on our way to Crabtree Falls. It's been an unusually warm and sunny fall, and we intend to drive to the falls and bask in the sun's last warm rays.

Another customer talks with the owners, their voices rambling over and around counters

and boxes, all stacked and overflowing with baseball caps, glass and ceramic dishes, tottering in towers, glasses stored inside of glasses, old sneakers, old shoes (men's and women's), cotton skirts, woolen skirts, shirts and blouses, dresses and coats, hanging on and off of hangers, plastic bowls, all of it coated with dust or spotted with mildew and smelling musty. The accent I hear is thick and southern. The speech is rhythmic, soft and slow, and I'm taken with its lilting sounds. I catch words about sons and guns. "They ain't gonna take mine."

His sons or his guns, I wonder. "I'll take all four of those canning jars, if you give me a good price," I say to the woman.

"You go take a look," she says to the man. "I already marked them down though. They come in with eight dollars each. More for the big one."

I follow behind the slight, small boned man. "You make me an offer. Go ahead put a price on," he says.

I look at the jars, their imperfect bubbles as tiny as pinpricks, as large as beads, all trapped inside blue glass walls. I calculate. Not too low. Not too high. The man waits. It's a game we play. The stakes aren't high. I want the jars, not for myself, but to give as gifts. The total price is twenty-five dollars. I figure a twenty percent discount and offer eighteen, two dollars less. I don't know why. Maybe it's the man's eyes, cold, gray and watching me.

He counters with twenty. I shake my head.

Instinctively, I know he'll cave. Won't lose a sale for two dollars. It's an animal sense I have of capturing prey. Now we wait. I lift a plate, turn it over, check for chips. In the center pink roses fade and crack. I trace one with my finger feeling grit. My friend feigns an interest in a mixing bowl. I set the dish back on the stack. "Ready?" I say.

Her head tilts toward the blue-green jars, still sitting on the cardboard box. "Aren't you going to buy them?"

"Guess not."

Before I leave, I make my eighteen dollar offer one last time.

The man lifts his chin and looks at his wife. She stands, now, behind a counter, leaning an elbow on an old cash register. "Up to you," she says to her husband. "A bird in the hand..."

"What's the tax?" the man says.

The woman holds a small calculator and punches numbers. "Eighty-one cents."

"Make it nineteen," the man says.

I smile. "Nineteen."

He looks at me, and I expect him to smile, too. After all, he's saved face. Nineteen. Less than twenty, but more than eighteen, so I'm not prepared for what he says, can't believe I'm hearing correctly. I lean in. His words slur. Understanding seeps, slowly, so slowly that he must repeat. "I hate a woman Jew."

The blow is swift, rushing quickly into to my stomach where revulsion and fear swirl in a vortex. I'm stunned; my friend is stunned, and in that instant when our glances meet, I see her wince. She feels the blow as keenly as I do, for we are women; we are Jews. We know the same icy fear, bred into us for centuries— flee, but not too swiftly. She walks backward and reaches for the door. I want to move, but I can't. My feet are rooted, my mouth mute, and I wonder: Does he see a telltale sign? Smell an odor?

Absently, I run my thumb over my wallet's worn leather, and I know I'll never open it, never take out the bills, never give those beautiful bubbled jars to my sons, and I wonder if I've

done something wrong--played the game incorrectly, been too cheap, should've gone up. And so I take whatever it is that is happening here in this store into my gut where it opens up old wounds--taunts on the playground, "dirty Jew," "Christ killer." And later, "Jew you down," "Cheap Jew," words that make me into "the other."

I look the man in the eye. "You've just lost a sale, Mister."

In the car, my friend looks for ways to close the wound and scab it over one more time. "He'll look at those jars, and he'll know. They'll sit there. They'll haunt him."

It's we who are haunted. All we talk about is that man, the soft lilt of his speech, his deadpan face, and the way he drew us in. Was he joking? Didn't we get it? Would he have said those words if he knew? His words echo inside the car, woman, Jew, hate, as we try to figure out what went wrong.

We drive, now, without words, lost for these moments in private thoughts. Perhaps like me, my friend looks out at the countryside and tries to recapture the pleasantness of the afternoon--blue sky, rolling hills, a long green valley where cows graze, and seeing those cows, my mind leaps back. One morning in Wyoming, I awoke to the sorrowful mooing of a herd of cows. It wasn't a sound I'd heard before. Then, I heard a series of pops. I knew the sound of rifle shot, and I'd been warned that the ranch hands would be killing the herd. Too many head to winter over. Still, all that morning and afternoon, I felt sick. Couldn't eat. It was the cows and their awful mooing. I thought of their bulk, and the way they moved, lumbering almost side to side. I thought of their eyes and their moist pink muzzles. I thought of their bones holding up their hairy coats. Nobody else seemed to notice those missing cows. Just the Jews.

At supper that night, a Jewish friend and I talked about those missing cows, and what I

saw in my mind's eye was a long line of black coated men walking slowly into a forest. I saw women in dresses clutching children. I saw the shiny boots of the S. S. These are images I carry like bubbles trapped inside of blue-green glass.

"They told them they were going to another pasture," my friend joked about the cows.

I smiled. It is what Jews do, we laugh instead of cry.

The road narrows. It twists, curves, and climbs. Beside the road, a stream skims rocks and rushes past. Hawks circle and spiral up into clear blue sky. Sunlight glitters and dapples the pavement as I drive, and I think I must be nuts, linking a man in a thrift shop in rural Virginia to slaughtered cows on a ranch in Wyoming to dead Jews in a Polish forest, all so distant in place and time. But in my heart, I know I'm not. In fertile soil, misunderstanding takes root, grows, and flowers into hate. Best to dig up those roots and dry them out in the glittering sunlight of a nearly perfect autumn day.