

JIMMY THE TAILOR

by Francis Baumli

There are people who go through life and somehow never quite seem to live. Maybe some of them weren't very much alive to begin with. I once viewed a man, who was barely a man, in a mental institution when I was working in Iowa. This man had been born with virtually no brain, and was just a tiny fetal-like body lying there. This creature barely seemed alive. I knew another man, not quite so "compromised" (as the descriptive kindly puts it), who was retarded, cheerful, almost monstrous-looking because he was (as the neurologists neutrally put it) microcephalic.

If people such as these two specimens are barely alive to begin with, there are other people whose lives atrophy and even diminish to where they almost disappear—even

though they yet persist minimally as if to inform us that a life barely lived is possible. This may happen with someone who abuses alcohol for decades, or sinks into an oblivion of heroin addiction, or succumbs to a wasting neurological illness. Then there are people whose lives have been extremely attenuated by hardship, such as a prostitute now aged and decrepit, who never did much with her life, but used what primal cunning she possessed to survive. Now, with all youth and beauty and means of support gone, she is a street person living a meager life with a paucity of sentience and a great deal of tenacity—as if to prove to us that there is profound meaning in the tautology: "Life is not dying."

We encounter such people, we are frightened, or maybe stirred to pity, or we recoil even as we try to camouflage this impulse. How much easier it is to encounter such people as characters in literature. Take for example the main character in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." What did he amount to? Very little. He managed to exist, sort of. He managed to be a part of society, but by a mysterious, indecipherable insinuation. He obtained employment, humble as it was. He seemed to deteriorate

mentally and finally died in a prison that served as his mental institution. He came into the tale without a past; he left the world leaving no trace upon it except as he now comes down to us in a great piece of literature.

A more horrifying, if more subtle, absence of life characterizes the two characters in Henry James' The Beast in the Jungle which is his finest piece of literature. May Bartram exists contingently. John Marcher is a cipher, incapable of loving or of perceiving that he is loved, only able to live a life of ridiculous and puny self-delusion, and in the end his realization of this aridity does not proceed toward a resurrection of his long-buried self, but instead he succumbs to a spiritual death that is no different from what he was before except now it is made spasmodic by the horror of self-knowledge—the horror of death knowing itself as death.

Then there is the almost unbearably brilliant short story by John O'Hara called "Over the River and Through the Wood." Mister Winfield has had a relatively normal life, including a wife, but now she is dead, his money is nearly gone, and in a fit of foolish, fumbling, geriatric lust he succeeds in damning himself forever from the environs of

any welcoming society. The terror of his self-made private hell is a paralyzing self-immolation, and however much any reader might be impressed by how O'Hara has brought this character to life on the page, that reader can not but recoil in disgust and derision from this shadow of a man who has managed to snuff himself out.

Of course there are other people who fade into the oblivion of anonymity without there being any significant causal factor in their lives which we know anything about, and without their anonymity being a fictitious anonymity—which, ironically, is much less anonymous than real anonymity! I think of the vague references in history. In any of many battles fought several millennia ago, many thousands of lives were lost. Each of these people who perished had a name, a personality, a family. But now even the moldered bones of all those soldiers perhaps do not exist.

In a more personal way, I have encountered such anonymity in an antique store. When I was in my late 20s, I lived in Saint Joseph (usually referred to as St. Joe), Missouri from June of 1974 to February of 1976, on Garfield Avenue. Down the street, perhaps a mile, was a very

interesting antique shop, and the owner whom I came to know quite well primarily stocked his store by buying up old estates. Amongst the clutter of these old estates there often were large collections of very old photographs, and the proprietor of this shop had dumped them into a huge bin, perhaps a foot deep and measuring about four-feet square. I enjoyed looking through these photos, some which would be vague and almost indecipherable, and others having a clarity and immediacy rarely matched by the best of modern photographs. The faces in those old photographs, I realized, all shared one thing in common. They belonged to people who by now were dead. Every one. Those busy lives—a big family arrayed in front of a huge house, a bigger family clustered in front of a small shack, a close-up of a dead baby, or an old grim-faced couple defying their age by continuing to exist in this photograph. All those busy lives stilled by death! All those faces now skulls and the histories of virtually all those people entirely forgotten, except for a few old baptismal records or worn headstones on graves. I thought these photographs beautiful, but at times I felt overwhelmed by this fetid cornucopia of photogenic death. Yes; all these people had passed into

oblivion simply because they had not (as far as I could tell) lived lives of fame or distinction. They had simply succumbed to the toll of their mortal years. They had died, and had done it so long ago there was no one left to remember them. All those people forgotten, just as surely as the piles of skulls in an ancient monastery's catacombs. Dead, forgotten, forever gone. Residents of oblivion.

I wish to here describe someone who is somewhat different. I want to present a life that is, or was, quite real and, though unusual in small ways, probably quite ordinary. In fact this accounting and examination of a "life" involves my reckoning with an amazing, if relatively obscure, person whom I knew for a few years just before I moved to the small city of Saint Joseph, Missouri where I would find all those old anonymous photographs in that antique dealer's store. This life, or this person (perhaps best honored by referring to him as a personage), lived in Columbia, Missouri where I myself had lived (and had worked as a student) almost six years until I would move to Saint Joe. When I left this person (now I almost feel like I abandoned him) in Columbia, Missouri and moved a distance of almost 200 miles to St. Joe, I thereby consigned him to

the remote and shadowy regions of personal memory. At the same time (not yet aware of this), I assigned myself the task of one day returning to him in fervent prose.

So now I proceed to focus this little essay toward this particular person, with the ardent intention of presenting him as a character, i.e., someone whose personality deserves being made public and also deserves being remembered and honored. But I must confess, at the outset, that I begin this description with an admixture of ignorance and reverence. I will be writing about someone I really didn't know very well. And yet, for reasons so vague they surely suggest that I do not know myself very well, I feel an almost sacrosanct duty to breathe a modicum of life into what I do know about him so that his memory will be preserved in these few pages. In a way it seems that I am writing this person's eulogy, spare as it must be, and also his encomium, spare as it is. I am giving honor to a man who now is almost anonymous. (Or, if not anonymous, then he had connections and perhaps accomplishments too which I knew nothing about. But in truth I doubt that he ever did anything, or attained sufficient stature in the eyes of

others, to escape the inexorable clutches of anonymity once he was dead.)

I emphasize that my eulogy here is spare. I did not even know this man's last name. I am not sure of the spelling of his first name. I do not know if he had any children, although I suspect that if he did, then he likely did not know of them and it is unlikely they ever knew him. I conversed with him perhaps a dozen times, each time for about fifteen minutes, and we spoke mainly about matters that were quasi-philosophical, or he spoke of people he knew well but whom I did not know at all. Sometimes he talked briefly about his work, and when he talked about people he made sure to speak of their faults. Not with malice, but with a kind of scolding reprobation, as if he wanted me to know that he was better than those people.

His name was Jimmy. When referred to in the third person, he was called Jimmy the Tailor. Yes; a lowly tailor. I say "lowly" because I don't think he ever fabricated a single article of clothing, at least not in the time I knew him. All I ever saw him work at was repairs, and occasional alterations. He possessed such an aristocratic mien I am tempted to write his name as "Jimmie

the Tailor," and indeed it may have been this, although I suspect it was simply "Jimmy." He was reputed to be an alcoholic, and indeed when I would go to see him, there often were several men clustered in the two rooms of his shop, most of them obviously alcoholics—a few whom I had seen walking the streets in a state of extreme inebriation. It was these people Jimmy spoke of in a scolding voice.

(Such words were addressed to me when they were absent.)

Although Jimmy was reputed to be an alcoholic himself, I never saw him drunk, nor did I ever witness him in a state where he seemed to be suffering from the effects of having been drunk. I would guess (and guess is all I can do) that either he himself never drank alcohol or, if he did, it was rarely or in moderation.

It was myself who would make reference to certain of the people I saw in his shop—but I referred only to the ones I had seen on the street. I would refer to having seen them drunk, or on a couple of occasions I referred to one particular fellow who walked by my house every day and on two occasions had obviously been beaten very badly—to where his face was so bruised and swollen he was scarcely recognizable.

About this last person Jimmy would always say, "No. He didn't get beaten up by anybody but himself. He abused himself. That's how it always is. People abuse themselves. Always self-abuse!" Or he might comment, "That kind of attachment to drink is just stupid self-abuse. You can't talk sense into such people. They don't listen and they don't change." These judgmental sermons were brief, not because Jimmy was wary of implicating himself by talking too much, but because his opinions were so well formulated as to be terse. And it seemed that his opinions were so well formulated precisely because they were so angry. He had no desire to excuse or tolerate this behavior which he deemed self-abuse—and so his judgments were forceful, deft pronouncements that were always scornful and terse. There was never, in his mind, need to justify or further explain these judgments.

How did I get to know Jimmy the Tailor? I.e., why did I seek him out? I needed his services as a tailor. I needed him for repairs to my attire, although what I wore in those days was so simple, even shabby, I scarcely deserve the right to use the word "attire." So I will put it this way: I was told about Jimmy the Tailor by a fellow student, so

sought him out to sew up, or patch, rips and tears and holes in my clothes. Being a poor student, putting myself through college by being a musician, I rarely bought new clothing and so had a special need for someone who was skilled at doing such repairs. Skilled and cheap.

Jimmy's place was easy to get to. It was situated only about a block from the north end of the main campus. I went through the wide entrance at that end of the campus most days on my way to classes. So going to Jimmy's place from there was simple.

The first time I visited him I was impressed by many things, most of all by Jimmy himself. But there were other aspects that seemed somewhat unusual. First, rent in Columbia, Missouri was very expensive, and it impressed me that Jimmy's place had two rooms, the first room a small one where he did his sewing, and the second room seeming to be a very large storage room, with clothing of every sort all in disarray, some of it on hangers, much of it in piles on the floor. Nothing was fancy, but everything seemed functional. Jimmy's quarters (I am not sure if he lived there) were on the second floor of a tall building, and one mounted many steps to get up there. The door seemed

inviting; one did not feel the need to knock. Once inside, there sat Jimmy sewing. His machine was situated so he was looking directly at the door, and his greeting was the kind that would bring just about anybody up short. He was a small black man with light-brown skin and a face so handsome it seemed sculpted. His brown eyes were clear, his manners impeccable, but what struck one the most was his speech. He was a black man, but he did not have a trace of the Negro dialect, or "Ebonics dialect" as it is now called. His grammar was flawless, his diction perfect, but what struck one most of all was his accent. In a voice that seemed loud because of this accent, even though it wasn't, he spoke English with a British accent as thick as a plum pudding. One would think he was a London native who conversed daily with the royalty at Windsor Castle.

In my social interactions I am usually very direct while being thoroughly tactful. So, with my usual formula of being both candid and proprietous, I asked him how it came about that a man of London background, obviously possessing a black heritage, would have made his way to the United States, and then to the town of Columbia, Missouri,

keeping his diction so unscathed—so “flawless and beautiful” was how I put it.

He explained that he wasn't from London. Rather, he was from Trinidad. He gave me a brief history about Trinidad, explaining that it had long been a center for slave trade and then became a British colony. So he was descended from black slaves who had taken on a British identity (and accent). Since he had been raised in that milieu he spoke English as an Englishman would. I was tempted to ask him why he came to this country, but already having been told by the fellow who recommended him that Jimmy the Tailor was an alcoholic, it occurred to me that perhaps there might be something amiss in his past which had caused him to flee Trinidad. So exercising my usual practice of behaving like a gentleman, I left that topic alone.

But as we talked I remained impressed by the clarity, even the beauty, of his intense brown eyes. I made up my mind right then and there that I was sure no alcoholic could have eyes that clear.

On this first visit Jimmy was alone. On most subsequent visits there would be several men there, most of them black, a few white, all of them clearly winos. Some, as I

already stated, I recognized as the well-known town drunks. Whatever their reasons for associating with Jimmy the Tailor, I felt quite sure it was not to drink booze with him.

When Jimmy and I talked, our conversation was always interesting. He was intelligent, cosmopolitan, and very well educated. But I soon realized that our conversations should never go beyond about fifteen minutes. Jimmy the Tailor was at work, and even sparing fifteen minutes for conversing with me was generous. We would transact business after our conversation, and I would go my way.

The business transaction itself was somewhat unusual. He never gave a ticket to use as proof for later claiming one's clothing. And he would ask for payment in advance. Always he gave the same explanation, "Because I'm out so much." This was his one utterance which did not seem up to the standards of his usual speech and conduct. The price he usually charged me was one and one-half dollars. The job was usually small. So I knew he wasn't out very much, either monetarily or with his time. Hence his, "I'm out so much," always sounded like grubbing for money. Perhaps I was unfair with this assessment. Since so much of his

sewing was done for students, it may be the case that before he started requiring payment in advance he many times repaired clothing which never got picked up, therefore was not paid for, and could not readily be sold, so he got stuck with pieces of cheap merchandise out of which he probably could not regain his small investment.

Not only did he not issue a receipt for what was left with him, it also is the case that he gave no phone number. He merely stated when the clothing would be ready. I think every time I went to pick up what I had left with him I wasn't entirely sure it would be ready. I wasn't even entirely sure he would be able to find it. But always, without exception, the article of clothing was patched perfectly and was ready the day he had said it would be. I would accept it. Not wanting to insult him I would give it a glance by way of inspection, we would converse for our fifteen minutes, and I would be on my way—newly impressed by the fact that a humble black man, plying his trade as a "fix-it" tailor, had such flawless diction, grammar, and an impressive British accent. His work may have been humble, his quarters somewhat shabby, but he himself was the epitome of propriety and rectitude. Despite his station in

life, he possessed a class status that was nothing less than blueblood patrician. Hence my wish that I could give him a name somewhat more debonair than Jimmy. ("Jimmie"? No; this way of spelling doesn't add anything. "James?" Or, "James the Tailor?" Something here is gained, but not enough. I must make do with "Jimmy the Tailor.")

As I explained, I went to Jimmy the Tailor for his cheap and skillful services for keeping my clothes patched up. But while procuring this general service I tended to focus on a very particular article of clothing. I shall describe it presently. But first it would help to set a context for why, or how, that particular service was quite important to me.

The context involves something I have often witnessed in academia, and have felt much contempt for. I call it "feigned eccentricity" on the part of professors. Mind you, I did not generally respect professors. There were a few exceptions. Some of them I respected immensely and can, to this day, say they were among the most impressive human beings I have ever known. But generally I thought they were stupid, lazy, incompetent. To this day I contemptuously

refer to them as "perfessers" and even this word is too mild for expressing the abyss of disgust I feel for them.

The "eccentric professor" is something of a stereotype on most campuses. Eccentricity is thought to be a sign of high intelligence, even genius, so the average perfessers, aware that they are as inferior as I know they are, indulge in feigned eccentricities to try and make people give them more credit for being intelligent than they deserve.

I can give examples. In one of my early philosophy classes, the perfesser would use a wadded-up piece of paper for practicing golf shots in the back of the room when we were taking tests. Those of us who were the good students found this behavior immature and the crack of his golf club against that paper irritating. The other students thought it funny, would titter, and later would comment about how such "unusual" behavior by a perfesser in the classroom surely meant he was very intelligent. I once asked one such person, who was making this observation, how that behavior could be an indication of intelligence. She replied, "Because he's so uninhibited!" I don't remember whether I smirked or merely grimaced.

Another somewhat droll example involved a professor in a class being taken by a friend. She and I were spending the day together, and she told me of his habit, which frankly I thought she was exaggerating. But no. Not at all. I would soon find out because I decided to, that day, attend the class with her. After the students were seated, their professor, affecting much self-importance, strutted into the classroom, picked up a piece of chalk, walked over to the side of the classroom, opened a window, and threw the piece of chalk outside. He had, early in the semester, explained to the class why he did this, and my friend had already told me about it. But I sat there feeling somewhat offended, if by nothing else than by the fact that he was wasting chalk. Since I was not a member of his class, and therefore could not be worried about my grade, and already having made sure to not reveal any affinity or even any relationship with the friend I had come to the class with, I decided to challenge him innocently. Seeing my hand raised, he acknowledged me, and I merely asked him why he did that. He gave the answer my friend Cathy had told me he gave earlier in the semester. "I am a skeptic, and I want to prove to myself every day that the law of gravity still

exists." He then turned to his books, ready to commence class, but I had not yet commenced. I replied, "You're being stupid." (That jerked his head around.) "When you got up this morning, I am sure you performed your usual morning ablutions. One of these involved, I am sure, emptying your bladder. I would think the fact that you didn't bepiss yourself would be sufficient proof that the law of gravity still exists. And you couldn't have made your way to this class, by walking, if the law of gravity didn't exist. If it didn't exist, you would have floated out into space by now." He was glowering, and was making ready to unleash his temper, but before he could explain anything I got to my feet and said, "I am, at the dean's request, auditioning some classes this month. I have learned all I need to know about this one. I shall make my report to him." And without further ado I promptly walked out. An hour later, when I met up with my friend Cathy, I asked her if my words seemed to sober him. She answered, "I don't think so. He just said, 'The dean happens to like me.'"

She did report that, at the next class, he did his usual ritual of throwing chalk out the window. This time, however, some members of the class tittered. He promptly,

and without explanation, punished all of them by administering a pop test. None of them ever tittered again when he wasted chalk.

I shall here give a current example: About one year ago (as of this writing), in my own house, I was talking with a professor who teaches at (or taught at?) Missouri University of Science and Technology, AKA, University of Missouri-Rolla (formerly called: Missouri School of Mines and Metallurgy). All this awkward and dubious amalgam of words is a branch of The University of Missouri. This professor (teacher of photography), stupid and pompous in every respect, took upon himself the self-indulgence of luxuriating in telling me how he "tests the fiber" of his students (as he put it). He "gives them a hard time" when they phone him. For example, if when he answers they say, "Is this Professor Phelan?" he says, "Yes," and promptly hangs up. Many, obviously intimidated by his brusque answer, never phone him back. Others may call as many as thirty times, and in response to each question they ask, he gives a terse answer and hangs up. Some, those who are especially brave, come to his office and ask (demand, I would hope) an explanation as to why he has been doing

this. He replies innocently, "You asked me one question. I answered it so I hung up." This professor, Bob Phelan, thought this immensely funny as he told me about it. I thought it immensely abusive, told him so, and scarcely concealing my rage asked him what the dean would think if someone produced a recording of such an exchange with a student. Or several such exchanges. He was taken aback, not by my question but by my temper, and said he hoped the dean would understand that he was teaching his students an important lesson about life—that it is hard, and they should learn this now before they go out into the real world.

I pressed my point, told him I thought his behavior was not at all pedagogical, but rather was downright abusive. He chuckled and blandly replied, "I'm giving them a valuable lesson, and they should be grateful, because no one else is going to give them a lesson this valuable." Sensing my growing indignation, he uneasily turned the subject to the issue of his failing health (obese, and about the same age I am, he was having significant neurological difficulties), and began making lamentations. So I did not see fit, at this point, to vent my towering

ire and I let my anger go. I did not even revisit it when, as he was leaving, he turned and admonished me with, "Don't worry about what I do with students on the phone. It makes them uncomfortable, but I can assure you, it makes them respect my intelligence. When they get older, they'll respect it even more."

There it was. Again. A professor feigning (actually preening himself with) eccentric behavior and attitudes, just so he could make himself look impressively intelligent while justifying his abusive behavior. I hurried him out the door.

Giving this many examples, I am trying (unsuccessfully) to cathart my disgust at these professors who feign eccentricity to make people think they are intelligent. Would I be trying my reader's patience by being so self-indulgent as to give one more example? This one I glean from a source other than myself. It comes from a book by Linda M. Hasselstrom, whom I consider the best poet alive. In fact, I consider her one of the best writers to ever ply the English language. However, her last book, The Wheel of the Year: A Writer's Workbook (2015) was a painful departure from the quality of her usual writing, perhaps

because of the amateur audience it was written for—her students. Still, the book contained many amazing passages and many small citadels of her genius. For the purposes of this essay, I turn to a passage in that book which here warrants comment because it is one more example of how professors not only indulge in feigned eccentricity, they also use it as a vehicle for their abusiveness toward others.

After giving unbridled praise to the Nebraska State Poet, Bill Kloefkorn, Ms. Hasselstrom proceeded to write about his conduct in the classroom when teaching writing students, and noted, "While his students wrote, their hands cramping around their pens (no computers in the classroom) he stalked around the room bellowing, 'Keep writing!' Be glad he's not standing behind you now, shouting encouragement."¹

In my view, bellowing can scarcely be a form of encouragement. I consider it rank abuse. So I relayed to Ms. Hasselstrom that if I were in his classroom (although taking a class in writing is something I can scarcely imagine myself ever doing) I would get to my feet and, without a word, politely leave. If he challenged my right

to leave, then my words would be firm. If he were so rash as to escalate his position, I would be so noble as to escalate mine—to whatever level would be needed to assert not only my right to leave, but also let him know what an abusive jackass he was being.

I am an adult man in my 60s. Those students of his, at college, might have been as young as 18, and I doubt many of them were older than their early 20s. In other words, they likely did not yet possess the maturity and self-confidence to be assertive. I suspect they felt downright abused. And how could they hope to write when a teacher, stalking the room while bellowing, was ordering them to write?!

I am sure he was puffed up with pride, feeling much self-importance at this bellowing—this feigned eccentricity. In truth, I can not imagine it being anything but counter-productive for writing. A few students may have tittered when they first heard him acting this way, but I am sure that, very soon, most of them were terrified. The well-known poet, Bill Kloefkorn, should have been fired for being such a bully. And what is baffling, Linda M. Hasselstrom obviously delighted in what he had done,

approved of it, and when I wrote to her expressing my stiff objection to her idol's behavior, she eschewed comment.

But here I have a confession to make. Although I am sure that I was never a bully in the classroom when I taught at college or university, there was a brief period when I myself indulged in feigned eccentricity. It was during my second semester of graduate school, i.e., in early 1971. I admit I was feigning this eccentricity for the same reasons most professors do it. I was trying to seem ever so intelligent, profound, and even so distracted from the mundane world by my lofty thoughts that I could not but behave strangely. This particular eccentricity actually began, one might say, by accident. I came into the classroom one day, wearing a jean jacket (or, as it might be called, a denim jacket), and took it off to begin teaching. But because I was in a very bad mood, when I started to toss it on the floor in the corner, I wadded it into a ball and forcefully threw it in the corner. Some of the students laughed, I pretended that nothing was unusual or amiss, and proceeded to teach. But the brief accolade of that laughter had given my ego a small if momentary boost, so for the next month or so I indulged this ritual at the

beginning of every class—I would throw my jacket in the corner with force and exaggerated temper. The students thought it funny while I pretended to be oblivious to what I was doing.

I soon gave up that unseemly ritual. I knew it was pretense. I realized it was feigned eccentricity, which I had already come to despise in professors. I didn't want to be like them, so I halted this practice, and never allowed myself any such indulgence (self-degradation) again. Perhaps some will be so kind as to forgive me this sin on the grounds that I was young (age 22), and just beginning to forge my identity as a philosophy teaching assistant in graduate school.

At this point in this essay's excursion, any sane reader would have good reason for wondering whatever happened to my story about Jimmy the Tailor. Here, however, is where he figures in. I earlier mentioned that among the many items of my attire which he applied his skills to, there was one which warrants special mention. This item is that jean jacket which was the instrument of my (still embarrassing) feigned eccentricity.

I do not remember when or where I obtained that jacket, but I know I had it before I moved to Columbia, Missouri in late summer of 1968 at the age of 20. It had already been worn much, the result being that by the time I moved to Columbia it was already tattered. Hence it was not long after moving to Columbia that I procured Jimmy the Tailor's services, first on behalf of this jacket which I very much liked (warm, light, limber, thoroughly comfortable), and then later on behalf of other articles of clothing also.

So during my six years of schooling in Columbia, Missouri I knew Jimmy the Tailor nearly all that time—from late 1968 to early 1974. When I left that town I did not seek him out to give a farewell. Our relationship did not quite warrant this. It was formal, friendly, and would not have existed had we not been transacting our small bit of business. Even now, these many years later, I often think of him. It is not impossible that he is still alive, although if alive he would be quite geriatric. And if he is alive, but now is very old, I hope he is being cared for and is neither destitute nor lonely. He certainly had many acquaintances but I doubt those many winos I saw could be called friends—in the true sense of the word. He apparently

made a decent living, since he could afford two rooms in a town that was notorious—even nationally notorious—for how expensive its rental properties were.² But was he wealthy? It is hard to believe that he did little more than “get by” since he charged so little, seemed to have no clients who possessed what one would call class, and from what I could discern, virtually all his customers were poor students like myself—seeking out his services because they were cheap. (To digress: The first semester I lived in Columbia I paid a woman to iron my shirts. She charged 25¢ each. I and my room-mate found a different woman who did it for 15¢ a shirt. I am almost ashamed to admit that I paid someone so little for what to me seemed like a very onerous task. Even so, this arrangement did not last long, because at the beginning of my second semester I abruptly decided that I no longer needed her services since I didn’t mind wearing wrinkled shirts. I have always wondered how that woman, maybe thirty-five years old and obviously very poor, got by.)

So what stands out about Jimmy the Tailor? Most of all, that unyielding British accent. It was thick, it had not at all been “Americanized,” and it sounded the same regardless

of who he was talking to—another black man, a white adult man, an educated student such as myself, an uneducated poor woman. To everyone he spoke with the same elegant, precise, flawless voice that was as thickly British as that of any British citizen I have ever known. The point is that his British accent was obviously not feigned. And he did not flaunt it as an eccentricity. He spoke the same whether he was wondering aloud how he would repair a split seam that had been repaired too many times before, or if he was talking with a young college student such as myself who wanted to know if any important philosophers had come from Trinidad. He sounded thoroughly British if he was sternly telling a wino to leave because the fellow was about to vomit, or if he was laughing at a joke about how the limeys hate murphys (i.e., how the English hate the Irish). He sounded the same whether it was morning or evening, whether he was tired or spirited, whether he was angry or jovial. In short there was nothing affected or feigned, nothing involving one bit of pretense, in Jimmy the Tailor. He was all candor when he spoke of himself, even though he revealed little about himself—not it seemed, because he was secretive, but because he had neither the time nor any

reason for being self-revealing. So I can honestly say that even though I knew little about Jimmy the Tailor, what I did know revealed him to be one of those rare men who have the self-prepossession, the candor and the courage, to conduct themselves in terms of exactly who they are.

Not only did Jimmy the Tailor feign nothing, he was never pompous, arrogant, or abusive. With that British accent, one almost expected such attitudes to at times come launching forth. But there was never a trace of pompous behavior. And I never once saw him be abusive. Yes; he ordered a couple of winos to leave his shop—one who was so drunk he was about to vomit, the other because he was using foul language.

And as for being a businessman, Jimmy was unyielding, and refused to bargain with someone who argued his price—which was already modest to the point of being generous. In summary, while he was always formal when friendly, he was always fair when firm.

As a perfect gentleman Jimmy the Tailor was paragon, archetype, inspiration. I stood in awe of his unwavering decency and the absolute lack of abusive attitude in those few instances when I witnessed interactions that were

unpleasant or difficult. In short, Jimmy the Tailor was the exact opposite of those professors whose feigned eccentricities were too often a conduit for abusiveness.

As for what happened to him? Perhaps he eventually went back to Trinidad, or maybe the cost of rent eventually made it so he had to leave his quarters and go to a cheaper part of town. Would that have caused him to lose business, lose income, and eventually need to leave Columbia, Missouri? I have no idea about any of this. In my world, Jimmy the Tailor existed for not quite six years, then I had no contact with him ever again. It is possible—even likely—that all his wine acquaintances of yore are now dead. And it is quite probable (since it seems that almost everybody but myself is afflicted with a memory that is sparse, apathetic, and lacking in loyalty to old memories) that not a single one of his old customers ever thinks of him or even remembers him. Except me.

This seems to be my lot in life: The one who always remembers. Remembering is a task, even a burden, but also it is a duty and a privilege. I am the one who has the honor of remembering that Jimmy the Tailor was a handsome black fellow who had a British accent as thick as a plum

pudding, who had come to this country from Trinidad, and was a skillful tailor. I suspect that my jean jacket, so constantly worn that it needed more and more patching, long before I left Columbia had reached a state where the mere act of sewing it together probably required more skill than would have been involved in putting together a waistcoat for the Prince of Wales.

So thank you, Jimmy the Tailor, for not ending up as an anonymous photograph in an antique dealer's store. Thank you for having more life than a fictitious character fabricated by a novelist. Thank you for taking care of a small—even miniscule—need which I often had during those years of my youth. Most of all, thank you for having been such a gracious and unique personality that I have always remembered you easily, vividly, gratefully.

If somehow it could happen (admitting that this possibility is terribly remote) that Jimmy the Tailor and I were to ever meet again, I would shake his hand and, with no need of a British accent, say, "Always a privilege to renew acquaintance with a gentleman. A privilege and a pleasure."

His reply, I know full well, would outclass my sincere and cultured words. But of course, when it came to class, Jimmy the Tailor had no peers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Linda M. Hasselstrom, The Wheel of the Year: A Writer's Workbook (Princeton, New Jersey: Red Dashboard LLC Publications, 2015), p. 135.

² During the second semester of my senior year in Columbia, Missouri, a report came out in the newspapers (spring of 1970) that Columbia, Missouri had the highest

rental prices of any town in the entire nation. Given what I saw, and paid, I could well believe this. Even the fabled prices for living in New York City did not match my town. Fortunately, this news was a cue for real estate entrepreneurs, and a building boom immediately ensued. I suspect that in less than a year Columbia had lost its scarcely enviable status.

*(written July 7 to July 9, 2017,
i.e., three days in the making)*

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