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DO YOU KNOW WHERE ...

by Jon Gingerich

I MOVED TO New York City without a job or a permanent place to live. Ask me today and I'd tell you these aren't conditions advisable for any relocation—let alone New York—but I was going through a rough patch and 'getting away' sounded like a good idea at the time, preparations be damned.

Once the obstacles I was up against became clear, I buckled down and tried to find work. I mean, the alternatives didn't sound so great: abject poverty or another clichéd, tail-tucked return of a defected Midwesterner. I assembled resumes for every career imaginable and endured enough job interviews to grace the palms of every middle-management yes-man in Midtown. Prospects remained dim, until I finally forced myself to settle on the harrowing realities of a less glamorous fate: temp work.

I signed on with an agency in Midtown that routinely pipped me out for low-level jobs all over the city. And I did everything: office work, trash cleanup and sales. Things hit a new low when I was reassigned to join the untold numbers of the city's vocationalless by giving away promotional materials to tourists in Times Square. The work was humiliating and had done little to bolster my confidence of finding success in the city. Back in Ohio I had a car, a good job and money in the bank. Now, at 29 years old, I found myself standing on the corner of 7th Avenue and 44th, where—in a uniform consisting of a hot-pink t-shirt and matching baseball cap—I would pass out promotional materials for Hollywood blockbusters.

I had no money, no friends, no tangible ambitions and no dignity left to speak of. At least I had a job.

I was in a particularly foul mood one September day after spending eight hours handing out buttons for a soon-to-be-released Hugh Grant

movie, when, walking toward the subway station, I was approached by a young Hasidic man.

"Excuse me," he asked. "Are you a Jew?"

When I replied that I was not, he said nothing and continued up the street in a quick-paced jaunt. Minutes later, I spotted the man again, this time at the corner of 6th and 42nd, where he was engaged in conversation with two other young men, both wearing yarmulkes. I was still too far away to hear what they were saying, but I noticed their hands were waving wildly as they spoke to the Hasid, their index fingers pointing in unison up the street toward Madison Avenue.

It soon became obvious that they were giving him directions. Incensed, I approached the Hasid and gave him a piece of my mind.

"What, goy directions aren't good enough for you, you fucking asshole?"

I stormed off without giving him a chance to reply, brimming with anger but feeling an odd sense of triumph, let alone some much-needed catharsis. Later at home, I relayed the incident to my roommate.

"That's pretty weird," he said. "I didn't know that getting directions only from other Jews was a tenant of their faith."

"Me neither," I said. "Can you believe the nerve of these guys?"

I was at work a few days later when my roommate called. He was laughing so hard he could barely get the words out between his shrieking, choleric fits. Walking to work in Times Square that day, apparently he too was approached by a Hasid. Much like my encounter, the man also preceded the conversation by asking if he was Jewish. When my roommate said that he was not, the Hasid began to walk away. This time, however, my roommate caught up with the man and broached a dialogue that was noticeably less hostile.

"So I approach the guy and I say 'Excuse me—just out of curiosity, why do I have to be a Jew to speak with you?'"

The Hasid looked at him as if he were crazy and replied, "Because I'm looking for directions to the nearest synagogue."

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