

# She's Not Here Now

by P. David Hornik (February 2015)

1

Every time, that spring, I looked out my window into the city, I thought of Tara. I thought how strange it was that, even though I'd lived in or near the city for eleven years, she was the only person in it—in the country, for that matter—with whom I had, or possibly had, some connection.

That wasn't strictly true—there was also my wife; but my wife didn't count anymore, since we'd divorced the preceding November. And there were also the couples we'd known while still married; now, though, I felt I'd already lost the connections with these people.

So I would look, from my high window in the north of the city, down into the soft cream-gold and red of the center of the city, and think how somewhere, in that soft mass of buildings, the mite that was Tara existed—she was there.

2

She'd come here from Vancouver. I'd met her in February, when it was still only trying to be spring. I was walking on Ben Yehuda Street; there was a competition between the sun and thick grey clouds, the stones of the street were damp, it was only an excuse for spring but people were milling about as if it had already arrived. I saw her, a woman with long blond hair, in a faded denim jacket and jeans, playing her guitar. Though never the type to introduce myself to a strange woman, in this case it seemed unpardonable not to.

Whereabouts in Canada? Vancouver. Toronto, too. Mostly Vancouver. That's really nice, what you play. Thank you. I've always liked that kind of music. Oh, really? Yes. I used to play piano....

3

She was thirty-seven. A year ago, in Vancouver, she was supposed to get married—at last, never had before; but instead she and the man had broken up. Since then she'd been drifting—Yellow Knife, Santa Fe, Mexico City—but always with the idea in her mind of Jerusalem. Why Jerusalem? She couldn't say. As if it was both too obvious and too obscure.

In March it was already outdoor-café weather; she claimed this was all she had time for. She

had a waitressing job long into the night; she picked up additional spare change playing guitar on Ben Yehuda. She was living in a hostel. The faded denim jacket and jeans were, I came to realize, practically her only clothes, aside from a few T-shirts.

She had a small face, with round features, and at worst could look pallid and pinched. Other times, though, with the shiny blond hair and a certain round candor of her eyes, she had some attractiveness. Her talk was slow and faltering, with long, bewildered pauses; I can't imagine anymore how I sustained as much conversation with her as I did.

Of course, I wouldn't have persisted in meeting with her if I hadn't been in a faltering, bewildered condition myself. At that stage I saw myself as little more than driftwood, hoping to graze another piece of driftwood in the stream. Also, she was interesting.

4

She grew up in a town on the coast quite a ways north of Vancouver. Her parents were immigrants—father from Trinidad, mother from Ireland; and she had five siblings. It was a fishing town, and her father was a fisherman. All in all it was a harsh, strained existence.

Her father, once, took her with him in his fishing boat. They came to a place where they could no longer see the shore; she felt scared, thrilled. Then she saw the net plunge into the water and come up filled with wriggling fish that flashed and sparkled in the sun. Her father poured the fish out on the deck, and it was as if the sun had shattered onto the deck in glittering fragments.

5

In winter the sea turned grey and frigid, the days were short, and people spent their time cooped up together indoors. That, for her, was the worst of it. In childhood it didn't faze her; she and her friends would run outside and play in the snow. But in adolescence...that was when she started playing guitar.

Which, in itself, was a bitter struggle: she shared her room with two sisters and it could be an ordeal to wait till they weren't there, or to get them to let her play while they were there. Was she influenced, I asked, by the Canadian songsters—Ian and Sylvia, Joni Mitchell, Gordon Lightfoot? I was surprised when she answered that she didn't know them much then; she listened to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, but not to them. She didn't have to listen to them, she explained—she was one of them.

I told her how, in around that era when I was growing up in northern New York State, I had a

special fondness for those Canadian songsters; their guitar chords took me to dreamy places. I didn't tell her that, when I first saw her playing guitar on Ben Yehuda, I almost felt I was back in one of those places.

She didn't go to college, but she went to Vancouver and worked as a musician, waitress, barmaid, secretary, sales clerk, switchboard operator. She had boyfriends, was supposed to get married a couple of times but nothing worked out. She went with one of them to Toronto for a while. About three years ago, back in Vancouver, she met Roger—and that was supposed to be it, she thought she'd finally settle down.

6

But why Jerusalem? I asked again.

It was April. We sat at a table under a canopy; around us was sunlight, patterns of leaves on pavement.

I hadn't seen her in a while. She'd turned down my previous couple of suggestions of meetings, talking about her time problems; yet something in her voice made me feel she wasn't just putting me off, or at least that it wasn't that simple.

Another thing that kept her on my mind—increasingly, and today more than ever—was the way she looked. She had a light golden tan now, and aside from being admirable in itself, it set off the yellow hair, making it more striking. Also, she'd managed to buy one new article of clothing—a red T-shirt. I'm pretty sure she was wearing it that day; it also fit into the picture well.

Why? She said.

I said: Yes, why. You're not Jewish, and I gather you're not a very observant Catholic. So...

She gave a look of round, vague perplexity.

Because I'm a lost soul.

Aren't lost souls supposed to come to Jerusalem?

7

That spring I was something of a lost soul myself, though it wouldn't have occurred to me that living in Jerusalem was a solution for it. I was alone—implacably so. Half a year ago I'd left

my wife; a year before that my mother had died; fifteen years before that, my father, and also, somewhere in there, I'd left the country I'd grown up in. "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee." "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." These words, in terms of the leave-takings they dealt with, were certainly apt; but other words would have been needed to describe where I now felt I was.

And yet, compared to Tara, it was solid ground, it was security. Whether or not I would ever be in a family again, I had *been* in one, and remained the father of my children whom I saw every week. But Tara... Once she was a girl in British Columbia, I'd think, lying in my bed at night. A girl with shiny blond hair, living along the Pacific...what had happened to her since then? Anchorless, unable to hold onto anything?

I had nothing to do but think, and I thought long thoughts. About how, just at this time of my life when I was the most adrift I'd ever been, I'd met someone who was *more* adrift. How, just when I felt the most severed from my past I'd ever felt, I'd met someone who was like a stray, northern fragment of that past. How her hair still kept that gleam of northern sun.

8

The city, at dusk, was so soft and vague it could have dissolved and floated away. Birds—wing spans, rather, dark against silver—floated in the ambience. There were "buildings" out there, but far and faint, as if borderline-real.

My life. This is where I am, in my life. A long time ago people who are now dead conceived me; I dutifully took shape, assumed my form, walked, looked around and tried to make out what I was seeing.

Late April. Light falls in a late April dusk, bounces gently off roofs and pine trees, lands and is still. Birds seem weightless, stranded in ether....

Yes, but why not call her?

Call her?

Yes. So she hasn't returned your calls for two weeks—is that a reason not to call her? Did you expect her to be anything but tenuous, evasive...?

I walked out to the room I called my living room, where there was no light on and it was almost night. I didn't turn the light on. I went to the phone and dialed in the near-dark.

And again the voice from the hostel: She's not here now. Yes, I gave her your message. I don't know... I don't know.

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**P. David Hornik** is a freelance writer and translator in Beersheva, Israel. In recent years his work appears especially on the *PJ Media* and *Frontpage Magazine* sites, and his book