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"Hello, this is Harry..."

by Julie King

When you get this call unexpectedly, you will smile with delight as you fondly remember this fascinating fellow you met during your travels. He saved your name and phone number in a packet of faded index cards and without hesitation you find yourself saying, "Harry, when are you going to be here?"

Harry Frankel, 81, loves to travel the world by train, but he doesn't go to resorts and he doesn't need reservations. He simply stays with the people he has met before along the way. He bundles up his big backpack, two little suitcases, gets a EuroRail Pass from his home in Israel and wherever he goes, someone is looking forward to his visit.

"I don't know why He [pointing heavenward] takes care of me, but He does. I am healthy, I am happy and I love to travel. My friends all say, 'Oh Harry, it's so wonderful how you travel so' and I say, 'you are young yet, why don't you travel?' But they all moan and groan, 'oh my back, oh my feet.' It is always, 'oh this' or 'oh that.' They are not so happy, you see, and are like this [hunches over feebly and slowly shuffles around], 'Oh my back, oh moan and groan...'"

Harry straightens up energetically. "Me, I go to the doctor twice a year. He says, 'Harry, what are you doing here, do you need a doctor?' And I say, 'I don't know, you are supposed to tell me.' And he does all the [pulls down eyelids, sticks out tongue with an 'ahhhh' and pokes in his ears]. And he checks here, here [points to heart and then groin] and here [bends over and points to backside]--which is not so nice--but what are you going to do? It is necessary.

"And I jog on the machine and the little tape comes out with all the little squiggles, and the doctor studies the tape [holds up imaginary tape and squints at it] and he says, 'Harry, what are you doing here? You are healthy, get out of here.' So here I am. I ride the trains and I see everything there is to see. And I meet people who are so nice when I come. Some people are not so nice, but what do you do? You stay away from them and He looks after me. I don't know why, but He does..."

My boss, Charlie Nystrom, met Harry on the train from Bergen to Oslo last year and told us all about him at lunch one day. "I gave him my number and last Saturday, my cell phone rang. I almost didn't pick it up since I didn't recognize the number, but I had a feeling I should. He really mispronounced my name, but I recognized the voice instantly. It was Harry and he's going to be here next Wednesday." To say the least, I looked forward to meeting this wandering wonder.

Picture Victor Borge in jeans and a denim jacket with a long white ponytail poking out of an Israel Police cap carrying a well-worn backpack. That's who I saw coming through the door with Charlie. Not only was there some resemblance to the famous comedic Maestro, but he radiated the same kind of charismatic charm with that sly twinkle in the eyes of a sharp wit.

After introductions and showing him around the office, Charlie brought him back to the conference table where Harry had left his pack and I was having lunch. "Harry, Julie here is a writer and would like to get your story. Is it alright if she interviews you?"

"My story? Who wants to know my story? Sit, sit, I'll tell you my story."

"Well I have some things I need to get done here before we go, but you can tell Julie your story."

"What about your lunch?" Harry asked me as he gestured at my plate. "And I must make some calls, if that is alright?" Once it was established that: a) I could eat while we talked, b) they would be getting their lunch later, and c) yes he could use the phone, Harry sat down. He grabbed his backpack and out came the infamous packet of index cards stuffed in an old plastic sleeve. They were exactly like my boss had described to us.

"I like to let them know I arrived here and I always call ahead to make sure plans have not changed," Harry explained as he rummaged through the stack. "I try to plan ahead but then people are not so nice and want to go on vacation--even though they know I am coming--like that one." He nodded with a wink in the direction of Charlie's office, who was going to be out the rest of the week. "I am only joking, you see, but don't tell him that.

"But Amtrak, they are very nice. I say to them, it appears I will only be here one day. Can you please see if there is a train leaving tomorrow for Chicago? And they make the changes. It is an open ticket for the time I am here, like the EuroRail Pass, and that is a very nice way to travel. It is a North-American Rail Pass, but that is only for foreigners who come here to visit, you see.

"I have some long time friends in Frankfurt, Germany and I always visit them when I travel. They have this nice little closet for me. Some cities have suitcase restrictions on the train, you see, and so I leave my bags there and go on. Then I pick them up again when I come back through there.

"I have been traveling every year since I retired at the age of 65 after working at the hotel in Netjhanya, Israel. I travel from April to October and every third year, I come to the United States and Canada. I would like to come here more, but it is so expensive, so I am only here every third year."

Harry has been a "traveling man" ever since he backpacked through Sweden during the Nazi occupation of Denmark where he was born. He had never been to Sweden before and wanted to see the country. "No one knew what "hitchhiking" was back then. I put out my hand when a car came along and they would say, 'Why are you stopping me?' And I'd say, well, if you happen to be going to such and such

city, may I come along? Most people are nice, some people are not so nice and so you stay away from those.

"I was born in Copenhagen, like Victor Borge. He is from there, you know," Harry said as an ardent admirer of the Maestro. "Beautiful city... the people are so nice. My grandparents had come there in the 1890s and my parents were born there. We were all there in this [Jewish] community, happy... and then the Germans came in April of 1940. They were not so nice and started rounding everybody up by October of 1943, you know. Many of us were lucky to escape by boat to Sweden, but others were not so lucky.

"I don't know why He looks after me, but He does. I escaped by boat with my backpack and there I was in Sweden. I spent a whole year traveling through there and seeing the country. After the war, I went back to Copenhagen and ended up in the furniture store where I worked from 1948 to 1971. After that, I worked in the hotel in Israel because I spoke six languages."

Charlie came around and handed me my paycheck. "Where is mine?" Harry asked, holding out his hand.

"I don't have one for you, Harry. I didn't know you were coming."

"Didn't know I was coming?!" Harry exclaimed with mock indignation. "Did I not call and tell you I was coming?"

"Yes, well, you don't work here, Harry. Next time you come, I'll put you to work and then you'll get one."

"Work?! I don't want to work! I am retired, you know. Besides, I came all the way over here from Europe to see you, I should get one anyway."

My boss gave up and just patted Harry on the shoulder before moving on. "Nice try, Harry, but I don't think so."

When Charlie was out of earshot, Harry leaned across the table and whispered, "I am only joking with him, you see, but don't tell him that!"

"So how did you meet my boss?" Of course I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear his version.

"I met him and his lovely wife on the train in Norway. I was sitting across from them and I could see they were American because their "English" was not so good. And I started a conversation-even though I am so shy, you know-and asked them how they liked Sweden. And we talked, and then I mentioned that I am traveling to the United States from Seattle to Chicago, and he said to give him a call if I should stop by in Minneapolis. And so I did and here I am.

"I have many friends in the United States I like to visit. I lived in Houston, Texas, from 1958 to 1961 working for the furniture company in Denmark. You know, when "Modern Danish" was becoming real popular here. Everyone wanted that "Danish" look. I have a very good friend there-we worked together and have been friends ever since. Yes, here is his card. I visit him every time I come to the States."

I asked him if I could have his friend's address and Harry's as well. "Yes, but do not write to me

until I get home on October 18th. The post office, they are very kind to me, and allow me to post date my cards I like to send every year for the Jewish "High Holiday" [Rosh Hashanah]. I have 180 friends and the post office is kind enough to mail them for me in September because I am not home yet. But I do not want them to get confused, so do not send me any mail until I am home on October 18th. I travel one third of year and I am home two-thirds of the year in Israel."

"But Harry, aren't you afraid traveling like that-especially in this day and age?"

"Afraid? No, no, why should I be afraid?"

"Because you're just meeting these people and then you're staying with them? You have no way of knowing if Charlie might be a murderer or something."

"Nah, most people are very nice, like that one," he answered, indicating Charlie again with a nod in the direction of the big office. "True, some people are not so nice. They are all [makes an angry face] and I say to them, if you have a problem, perhaps you should talk to your lawyer and see how much it will cost you before you get into trouble. That is why I like to wear this cap. People see it and light up and they say, 'Oh I have some friends in kibbutz,' or 'Oh, we went to Holy Land,' but if they are all [angry face] not so nice, just ignore them."

Harry found the numbers he was looking for and reached for the phone. He told me how he keeps a second set of cards, which are the old ones from last year, in his suitcase This set stays with him in his backpack. Since he didn't have a cell phone, I asked him how he keeps in touch with everyone. He has a calling card and will use a pay phone, or his friends are kind enough to let him use theirs while he is there. I noticed how prudent he was with long distance charges and did not talk long.

"Hello, this is Harry and shalom. I wanted to let you know that I arrived here safely and to thank you for your kind hospitality... Yes, thank you again for your kind hospitality and please greet your family for me. Good-bye.

"Hello, this is Harry and shalom. I am calling to let you know I will be arriving in Chicago tomorrow morning if that is still agreeable...?"

I couldn't help but smile; he used the same greeting each time. Later, I learned that "shalom" means so much more than just the literal translation of "peace". It's more like wishing a total sense of well being for the person.

When he was done with those two calls, he set the phone aside with a satisfied sigh. "I don't know why He is good to me, but He is. I have my health and I am a free spirit like "Dirty Harry", you know, the movie? I am like Dirty Harry," he declared gleefully. I nodded in agreement, but I was still thinking Victor Borge and not Clint Eastwood.

"I was only married eight years-which was not so nice-but these things happen. It was an easy [amicable] divorce. Some people are not so nice and always fight, but we had an easy divorce. And I have one daughter and two grandchildren: a girl who turned 4 in January and a boy who will be 3 in a few months. They all live in Denmark."

"How did you end up in Israel? Why didn't you just go back to Denmark?"

"Well you see, I was brought up very Zionist, you know, where some day we will all be home as a

Jewish state in Israel. A friend of mine told me about a very nice job at the hotel, but I knew nothing about the hotel business and they asked me that when I called. I said I know nothing about hotels, but I speak six languages. Well, right away I got the job! I speak English, German, Danish of course, some frustrated French-but I could not live at the hotel when you work there. I had to get an apartment and that is where I have been ever since.

"People send me cards or letters and I see the postage is not cancelled, so I am nasty and I use them again. I am being nasty to the post office because when I go there to send out my cards, I always say that I have friends who collect stamps--and Israel ones are very special, you know--can you please be careful with them? Well, since they are so busy and I have so many friends, they let me do it myself and I make sure the stamps are not cancelled. It is being nasty, I know, but that way my friends have free stamps to use."

Harry started gathering up his index cards and saw another address he pointed out to me. "I have another good friend here in the United States and they live in Vegas. That is the only place I like to gamble and I will tell you why. During the '40s-'50s, I did a lot of tours and saw all the sights to see, but now I just go to visit friends. I met them while they were at the U.S. Embassy in Bonn, Germany, through the furniture thing, you know. They worked for the State Department Foreign Service and when I told them I would be going to the United States, they said to me, 'Have you ever been to Vegas? You must go because one of our sons is a manager at the Frontier Hotel-a higher up manager.'

"So I go there, and I come in as you see me now with my backpack and they look me over [makes an arrogant face] not so very nice and they say, 'Do you have a reservation, because we are all full.' And I say, no but would you please tell your manager that Harry is here. And they get on the phone and call upstairs and are astonished! Now they look at me all nice and polite and I get a nice room and some gambling chips. I don't go so much now to the casinos because his parents are retired and live outside of Vegas."

Totally captivated by his story telling, it seemed like we had just gotten started when my boss came back to collect Harry. Yes I knew they had to get going, but we had just met and already I hated the idea of saying good-bye. After several rounds of hugs, I found myself saying if Charlie was not available when he came back to the States to give me a call. "But that will be three years from now, you know, and I am already a very old man," Harry mumbles feebly hunching over again.

"Yeah, sure you are, "Dirty Harry". Listen, I have no doubt you will be here again in no time stirring up trouble."

"True, but what will your husband say?"

"Oh, I'm not married. I live with my sister."

"Oh my, there are two of you?! Well, I don't know about that..." He laughs and hugs me again saying he is only joking with me. "And I will find you a husband-for you and one for your sister. I travel around a lot, you know, and meet people even though I am so shy..."

Epilogue

I took the liberty of contacting Harry's friend in Houston to introduce myself and request I be notified if something ever happened to Harry. His responses were a charming epilogue to meeting the wandering wonder. Harry has been visiting him every third year for quite some time now and they enjoy touring and even just chatting. His son and daughter-in-law were so captivated by Harry that they insisted on taking him out dinner—just the three of them.

Harry did not make it to Houston in time for Shabbat services and his arrival time on Sunday prevented them from going to the friend's Episcopal church where he was a huge hit the last time. "Imagine this Jewish sprite, replete with sandals and ponytail, in the midst of what's predominantly an upper class congregation dressed in their Sunday best!"

One interesting tidbit he shared was that Harry likes to leave a memento of his visit with each host in appreciation of their hospitality. He travels with a selection of print reproductions of paintings from Palestine during the 1830s showing some special site or vista that drew tourists there 170 years ago. The Houston friend now has four of them. Did Charlie get one, too, for such a short visit? Sure enough, he and his wife saw the collection and got to choose one to keep for themselves. I couldn't help but laugh—of course Harry would have something for everyone.

Harry left Houston for New Orleans on Friday, and then it was on New Jersey.

Yes, I must admit I look forward to his return three years from now and possibly collecting a print of my own. In the meantime, I really don't expect to ever hear any bad news regarding this Victor Borge of the railways because the irrepressible imp from Israel is happy, healthy and God looks after him. We don't know why, but He does...

The author would like to hear from anyone who has met Harry or knows him really well. She can be reached at writehearted@hotmail.com.