

The Teachers' Room
Dr. Melodie Rosenfeld

I take several steps into the teachers' room. A classroom from the 80's with round beige tables, speckled, square brown tiles on the floor, tan weathered curtains. Cups scattered near a sink, instant Elite coffee and sugar spilled nearby. And teachers sitting around. Two teachers alone, correcting papers in English. Five or so talking together animatedly in Hebrew. I'm new to the room and sit alone, smiling at the two English teachers and getting smiles back. I smile at the Hebrew speakers, but no one notices. Never mind. It's a Monday. They're busy.

Wednesday between classes, I'm in the teacher's room again. I take out my cream- cheese sandwich. The same group of Israeli women are at the same table. It's not hard to figure out that they're pedagogical advisors, laughing and talking about articles and students and plans and tactics, sharing jokes and waving their arms and drinking coffee and discussing plans to metamorphosize seminar students into teachers. I sit nearby. I smile and say "Hi" – after all, I recognize them from Monday. And we're colleagues! We all work at Achva! They look up, disinterested. Obviously, they have an important job. I bite into my apple.

Monday again, I'm back. And there they are again. A pleasant "hello!" slips out of my mouth. They look up. She's talking to us? No one answers. It's quiet in the room. The tall woman with the black hair, a bit older than I, looks directly at me and then turns back to the group and laughs about some plan or another. Where I come from in California, even the street cleaners say "How y'all doin'? Have a nice day now", even if they've never seen you before and never will again.

The semester continues. What wonderful classes I have, and my heart sings with the joy of teaching. And then I pass the tall woman with the black hair in the hall. My heart isn't sure what to feel, but my mouth smiles at her from years of training. I mean, how can you pass someone you recognize and not acknowledge them with a smile, or a nod, or something, for goodness sakes? She looks through me.

It's now May and time for students to demonstrate their final projects. I'm assigned to room 214 for the ordeal. It's a large room on the second floor and years later was to become part of the library. Class ends at 2:00 but we continue into the 15-minute break since two students haven't finished presenting. And then the door swings open. No knock. No "excuse me". It's the tall woman with the black hair. My heart stops. "This is MY room and you are over your time. I teach here now. Take out your students." I sputter, "But the next class starts at 2:15 and it's only 2:10 and it's still the break-time, and we just need a few more minutes to finish and it's so important for the students to finish." She slams the door shut. The students finish in two minutes and file out of the room.

She is waiting for me out in the hall, surrounded by her students. She towers over me. "How dare you take my room?! How dare you go over the time?! Don't let that happen again!" My mouth is frozen. My heart is cold. Tears begin to sting my eyes. She doesn't see them since I turn away quickly and go downstairs.

I suppose that the universe has a way of setting things up. It just so happened that after living in Israel for 9 years I signed up for a class on Assertiveness. And this was the year. I had really wanted a class on Aggressiveness. I was sick of American patsy win-win relationships. I wanted to laugh and carry on and ignore someone who sat alone in the teachers' room. I wanted to look through someone who smiled at me. I was ready for the blood and guts and satisfaction of winning, Middle East style, while the other guy loses.

No such luck. The class was Assertiveness training and standing up for yourself, without attacking. O.k., skip the satisfaction. But what am I supposed to do with *her*?! "Stand like this, and look her right in the eye and say it like it is." So I practiced all week until Monday.

I took several steps into the teachers' room. The beige tables and tiles and curtains and cups and sugar were all in their places. And there she stood, next to the sink, making some coffee. I put down my bag. I walked to the sink. Both of my hands went to my hips, directly facing her, my legs strong and grounded, my eyes on her eyes. I didn't even tremble. Likely because I had been practicing all week. "Don't you ever talk like that to me again, especially in front of students. I have waited many times for *other* teachers to finish. It may even happen again. And if it does, you will wait patiently for *me* to finish."

I didn't move. I was holding my breath. And then it happened. She smiled.

And when I passed her in the hall on Wednesday she smiled and said "Hi Melodie". And years later she even took a short course I taught and showed great interest. And every single time that I saw her after that day, she looked at me and said hello. And I smiled back of course, and said "Hello, and how are you, and how are your students and your family?" But something had withered inside of me. It was back then that I had needed her. Then, when I was a naïve American, with the weird cultural habit of acknowledging a stranger with warmth. Now, of course, I had my own colleagues and we laugh and talk over plans in the new teachers' room on the third floor of Building 6. And yes, I continue to search out new faces to welcome.

Without exaggerating the importance of my story, I cannot help but think of Simon Wiesenthal's book, "The Sunflower". A dying Nazi asks for Wiesenthal to forgive him. Wiesenthal walks out of the room. For who is he, to forgive the Nazi? It is only the dead who can forgive him. And they are dead.

During the ensuing years I accepted her smile, of course. But I begrudged any joy I would have felt for gaining an Israeli friend. It was not me who needed the smile. It was the American sitting alone in the teachers' room. And she was no longer there.

End