

## **In Elijah's Seat: A Story**

*By Hannah Blount*

*“Religion is a central element in the Jewish civilization, perhaps even its origin, but that civilization cannot be presented as nothing more than religion. From the religious source of that civilization grew spiritual manifestations that enhanced the religious experience, changed it, and even reacted against it: language, customs, lifestyles, characteristic sensitivities (or perhaps it should be said, sensitivities that used to be characteristic), and literature and art and ideas and opinions. All of this is Judaism. The rebellion and apostasy in our history and in recent generations - they are Judaism, too. A broad and abundant inheritance. And I see myself as one of the legitimate heirs: not as a stepson, or a disloyal and defiant son, or a bastard, but as a lawful heir.” - Mordechai Kaplan*

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Jasper worried that the blue shirt was the wrong decision. White was definitely more appropriate, he thought dismally, fiddling with a loose thread on the Centre Line seat as he trundled towards Shepherd's Bush armed only with a bottle of kosher sacramental wine and a text saying,

“Wear anything.”

Perhaps he should have cancelled next week's camping trip, or ignored the unspoken rule that work drinks last night was compulsory. There was a great bar not too far from his house, a lovely familiar setting where he could comfortably see Maia again. But a sudden drunken fear that those terrace steps, damp in the lamplit fog, would be the last place he would see her blonde curls again landed him on this crowded Tube instead. After so many mumbled excuses, dull conversations and awkward meet-cutes, Maia's enthralling stories and cool grey

eyes in the vodka bar on Uxbridge made Jasper decide there must be a second date at all costs.

The costs, it turned out, were high. A mere single day in the next month was available between the two of them, and apparently that day marked the events of Exodus. Jasper had swayed standing as he scrambled to recall the years of dusty Sunday scripture with Mrs Bunding who rustled like dried Bible pages every time she moved. He remembered how Maia had stood gleaming in the nighttime glow,

“A few friends who are here without family are going to do Passover dinner together,” she had explained, and after a pause in which Jasper attempted to recount his schedule out on his fingers,

“Come.”

Jasper looked up, blinking. “Come,” said Maia again, her shoulders pushed back and a sly smile on her lips, “It will be fun,” she gently pushed on his chest with her fingertips, “my friends will be excited to have a goy at Seder. You can take Elijah’s seat.”

And so Jasper’s Saturday morning was spent deep in a Wikipedia spiral on lamb shanks, bitter herbs, locusts, hand washing and Biblical Hebrew. Each little blue hyperlink saw him eventually resort to writing down notes as the rules of kosher food became too numerous to remember, and the Rabbinical interpretations of Exodus too convoluted. Pictures depicted long tables with white cloths, thick, bound prayer books and feasts cooked in tin-foil trays.

He found the half terrace front after doubling back having walked past it a good minute ago, and climbed the three crumbling brick stairs to knock on the door of what his dedicated research concluded was a Great Unknown.

His feet felt the soft beat of the radio as sing-song voices floated in the yellow light visible through smudged glass panes. The voices mustn't have heard his knock, he rapped again, louder. A whoop emanated from the depths of the house, patting feet, and the door opened to a girl with a gap-toothed grin and corduroy smock, tight ringlets in her eyes and a glass of red in her hand.

“Jasper! Come in, I’m Ella,” she said in a friendly, surprisingly deep voice, “Maia’s in the kitchen, oh just put your jacket here,” she gestured to a faded red velvet chair apparently designated as a coat rack, and Jasper followed her through the dark wooden hallway to the lounge. The walls were decorated with a somewhat pleasing miscellany of second-hand shop framed oils, and photographs in which he recognised Ella’s wild brown curls. As Jasper entered the lounge, he was met with the domestic universe of student living; brown couches were brightened with colourful crochet throws, a collection of pot plants in various states of aliveness were balanced on windowsills and a muddled record collection brooded in the corner. Greetings and introductions were thrown towards him, and Jasper found himself suddenly acquainted with Becky rolling tobacco and Noah with cornflower blue painted fingernails.

“Hey!” came a welcomed familiar voice, and Maia emerged from the kitchen carrying a steaming pot of lumpy looking soup, carefully setting it down on the table. In lieu of the starched, wedding-ready set ups of Google Images, the wooden dining table was covered with mis-matched ceramics, sweating pots, and as many wine bottles as people in the room.

“Glad you could come,” said Maia as she wiped her hands on her sides and gave Jasper a quick hug. Her hair was pulled back from her face, and without the dim bar lights and black dress from their first encounter, Jasper felt that perhaps this was the true entity behind what had become just a choreographed photo in his mind of a late night date. It was beautiful.

“Oh that’s so lovely of you!” she exclaimed as he gestured to the bottle in his hand. Ella snatched it up from Maia’s hands, licking her lips,

“You brought the sacramental stuff,” she said, her thick brows coming down slightly as she looked up at Jasper who froze, at a total loss for a reply, “that’s uh, really nice. We usually just use the Cab Sav but I’ll put it with the others, I guess,” she said, and wandered off into the kitchen.

Pans were rearranged, spoons shoved into an empty glass, small talk about Noah’s industrial design degree and Jasper’s economics Masters flowed acceptably, and Jasper found himself squished at Maia’s elbow on the spare fold out chair, and following everyone else’s gaze towards a slightly corroded silver platter he supposed must be the *seder* plate.

Ella stood at the head of the table leaning against her chair, unscrewing a wine bottle lid with her teeth as her other hand was occupied with a suddenly empty glass.

“Alright ladies!” she said finally, “first glass!” The other three cheered while Ella poured generous standards. She cleared her throat, raised her glass, and as Jasper was expecting a solemn incantation in the First Testament’s ancient tongue, the four of them erupted into a loud and purposefully off-key song, banging on the table not quite properly in time,

*Baruch ata Adonai! Eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen, amen!*

“A-women!” Ella screeched and Maia choked on her wine with laughter, “A-bitches!” she continued, downing the glass in one hit. Ella winked at Jasper’s dazed face that he must have failed to hide, “God’s a woman.”

Jasper sipped self-consciously, and as Maia began to explain the four glasses of wine traditionally drunk throughout the service, Becky piped up,

“Elzie you idiot, you forgot the *maror*”

“Bitter herbs”, Maia translated in a whisper, and Jasper watched as Ella dashed to the kitchen and came hopping back with some torn up lettuce leaves, chucking them onto the Seder Plate with a shrug.

“Alright ladies, go wash your hands then,” Ella instructed, shoo-ing them towards the bathroom. Maia chatted softly to Jasper as they waited behind Noah and Becky, a story from her morning about her cantankerous neighbour and a reassurance that he really didn’t need to do anything except wash his hands. Jasper gazed at the bookshelf next to the bathroom alcove that he was leaning against, scanning the double ups of Haruki Murakami novels, squished Penguin Classics with fragile looking foxing, and what he judged to be an unnecessary amount of Nietzsche. Unlike the colourful conglomeration of modern paperbacks on the upper shelves, the bottom one housed ten or so severe looking tomes with golden gilding and thick Hebrew writing. In the remainder of the space was an assortment of titles, *The Chosen People*, *On Zion*, *Kingdom of Olives and Ash*, *Behind the Myth of Arafat*.

Hand washing completed, they retook their seat and Ella introduced the *seder* plate, Jasper assumed likely for his benefit.

“So as Becky pointed out we do not, in fact, have *maror* . However I personally think this lettuce does a pretty good job of reminding us of the bitterness of our time in slavery,” Noah snorted and raised his eyebrows at Jasper, who nervously smiled back, “We’ve got some of last year’s *matzah* because that stuff keeps forever if it’s unopened, much like how it sustained our people while they fled to the desert,” Ella continued between gulps of wine, “*karpas* and salt water here for the tears even though it tastes delicious, Maia made us all some *charoset*, ” she gestured to a gluggy looking brown spread, “because apple and cinnamon are an exact representation of the mortar used to build the pyramids in ancient Egypt, and an orange because we don’t eat egg or lamb in this house and apparently in America they all use oranges now.”

“Pretty sure it’s to represent the LGBT community,” piped up Becky, and Ella shrugged again, handing out last year’s *matzah* . Suddenly she clapped, calling everyone to attention.

“Maia’s the youngest! C’mon girl, let’s hear it,” she commanded, the others laughed and turned to Maia.

“The youngest at the table is meant to start a song about why Passover is special,” she explained to a bemused Jasper as she got out her phone and found the English transliterated lyrics.

*Ma nishtana halyla hazeh mikol halaylot?*

Once again the room was filled with booming voices as the others stumbled along, reminding each other of the lyrics and thumping the table so hard Jasper found himself surreptitiously holding it steady.

*Mikol halaylot?*

*She'bechol halaylot, anu ochlim chametz u matzah?*

*Chametz u matzah?*

*Halya hazeh halaylah hazeh kulo matzah!*

“Guys!” Becky shouted, “We skipped a verse!” but the others just laughed and kept going along at the slightly different paces they had all set for themselves. Jasper watched as Maia sang wildly off key Hebrew interspersed with hysterical laughter, shrieking and clapping along with her friends. With her singlet straps slipping off her shoulder and hand slapping her thigh through linen pants, Jasper had to carefully stop himself from outwardly appearing to gawk at her beauty. But it was a strange beauty, an intimate and naked one, and Jasper oddly felt as if he was looking at someone at their most *alive*. Alive not just in that moment, but with the life force of a thousand generations.

As the strange song clamoured on, he imagined the brittle pages of the Old Testament crumbling into soft ashes. And while the coated men and their bewigged wives up in Golders Green freeze, unable to continue the Seder, unsure of the Judaism of their future, Maia, Ella, Becky and Noah are still sitting here, making up the words to prayers, inventing vegan recipes for matzah ball soup, and coming together as the far flung children of a once single tribe.

The night continued with increasing headiness, as food was supplied unceasingly and Jasper took it upon himself to drink the sacramental wine since no one else reached for it. The traditional reading of the story of Exodus was apparently replaced by playing the Prince of Egypt in the background during dinner, in Hebrew with English subtitles because the only available version was the one on Becky's laptop from her teaching job in a synagogue kindergarten. At one point, Ella announced that she had uninvited the spirit of the Prophet Elijah and that only the spirit of Miriam - Moses' sister - was permitted to enter this household, since there were just too many men at the table already. Modern versions of the ten plagues were brainstormed over dessert, ranging from sex trafficking to the meat industry to neoliberal economics to the closure of Omri's falafel joint.

Jasper heaved himself down the front steps at midnight carrying three containers of leftovers, humming along with Maia to Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston's *There Can Be Miracles*. Maia pushed open the gate, before quickly turning and bouncing back to the door to touch her hand to something shiny on the frame. She paused for a second, before rejoining Jasper on the footpath in time for the chorus.

"What was that?" Jasper asked,

"A *mezuzah*," Maia answered with a shrug, "they have a prayer inside, to protect the household or something. I usually ignore them but I like Ella's, I think it has a poem by Shaul Tchernikovsky in it instead."

"Do you believe in it?"

"In what?"

“It. I dunno, everything. God, prayers, Moses in the desert,”

Maia stared at the shadowed terrace, the smell of garlic managing to make its way through the chilled air.

“I believe in Jews.”