

Milk, Honey and the Dying Willow Tree

God promised the Jewish people “a land flowing with milk and honey.” We’ve been searching for it for centuries. Exodus 3:8.

We are not the same, my father and I.

He has brown eyes. I have blue.

He has curly hair, which was once shoulder-length and black with a bright patch of white near the front (now all his hair is white and silver). My hair’s blonde, limp and short.

He wears glasses. When I was ten, I lied on my eye exam because I wanted glasses too.

His skin is darker than mine. He looks like a Jew. He wears the echoes of our stories on his skin—permanent as ink.

Years ago, around a plastic cafeteria table, a girl my age told me I looked Aryan. Maybe, she said, I would have survived the Shoah. (Probably not, but maybe). What an awful thing to hear, as a child with a vivid imagination. At that moment, a list unfolded in my head, detailing every way I might have lived through the genocide of my people. My storied family, whose blood bled my same red. These are thoughts too terrible for my sheltered life. These are thoughts too terrible to voice on the page. I fear that writing them down would make them real.

My father wears a gold chain around his neck with a Magen David pendant. All the lines of the star weave together like a basket. He hasn’t taken it off in twenty-five years.

I asked him if he ever felt scared wearing it, the times my mother told him to hide it ghosted over the question. He said he would, but mostly, he didn’t.

In the basement, on our sagging gray sofa, my father tells me:

Antisemitism is everywhere. In all the buildings, people and streets. It lingers in bars and small talk, haunting homes and families. We can’t pick and choose when to be scared or not, of this hate, born centuries ago. That’s not how it works.

My father believes in God. A God, not the exact variation the Torah describes, but something similar. Something just as benevolent and beautiful, despite his hardships. (Hardship births faith, he says. I don't understand this).

I would like to believe in God. It would be a wonderful relief, to live a life more purposeful and less temporary than the one I am currently living.

I do believe in God, in a small, pessimistic way. I leave a half-hope for God. I pretend all my beautiful moments are signs from above: a song that follows me into cars and coffee shops, birds chattering and it sounds almost familiar, an old smell lingering in my Zaida's sweater.

My father grew up with seders of twenty-five people, who my Bubbe pulled down from the drooping willow branches of our family tree. The tree she cared for like a daughter; she kept the leaves bright, well-kept, and the roots healthy. Everyone obliged my Bubbe. The Zimmermans, a boisterous kind of people, the Lotzkars, who kept jokes in their suit pockets, and the Harris', quiet, reserved but loving, always.

Seders are just us now, my father, mother and I. I don't feel any resentment about this smallness. I prefer it, mostly. But the way my father talks about the loud, idle chatter of reunion, the sweet sound of twenty-five voices in prayer, it is so warm that I begin to miss something I never knew.

My father knows Hebrew, almost fluently.

I learned Hebrew for eight years, since my very first memories, and today I can't string together a single sentence. The language is lost as completely as the toys I left at kiddie parks all those years ago; perhaps now, they now live with other little girls. The language tried its very best to imprint itself onto me, a language of survival and resilience, but no mark was made on my pale skin.

My father's closest friends are all Jewish.

I have no Jewish friends left.

The only Jews I know are my father's friends and my classmates from elementary school, who I avoid, to forget about the ones who cast me out and called me names. (I won't forget, but the memories aren't as strong as they used to be. The bitter taste has matured into something slightly sour, almost sweet sometimes).

My father knows the Jewish community so intimately, sometimes I think he knows every Jew in Vancouver, Toronto, or even all of Canada. (It's almost plausible. We're less than one and a half percent of this country's population).

My father goes to Shul (Yiddish for synagogue, because Jewish vocabularies are a soupy mix of Yiddish, Hebrew and English), often enough.

I haven't been in years.

But when my father's best friend dies, I go to the funeral, the Shiva and bring food for their family (they have more than they can eat, but this is how we say I'm sorry for your loss).

I learn about the Shoah whenever there is a chance to. I take classes, read memoirs, and talk to survivors. Some call it sad, to always be learning this history. But without it, I'd be lost—stuck in the merciless present and its miseries. I cry for the millions I didn't know personally but still know. This, to me, is intensely religious.

My father says that religion and community weave together like his necklace does.

Because the Jewish community prays for the dead but also keeps the grievors standing. They come to Shiva, for God yes, but also for you, because when one of us hurts, we all do.

My father is religious when he blesses the Challah, but also when he talks about his parents. When he takes me to their graves—wraps an arm around my shoulder and says “I miss them” quietly, but deliberately.

I am religious in the songs I sing during Hanukkah, in my Tikkun Olam and Tzedakah. I am religious in my love for my father and in the ways I have tried to become him: from wanting glasses to longing to carry his kindness.

We are the same, in this way.

We are not religious in the way the world expects of us, but we are religious because we are Jewish. No matter how many Jewish laws we forsake, how much we sin, my father and I are Jewish in all the ways there are to be Jewish.

We’ve got milk and honey in our marrow.

We’ve got milk and honey dripping from our family tree.