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A PURIM STORY

The funny thing about being Jewish.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

I suppose it is a sign of just how poor a Jew I am that when I got a letter from the Jewish Museum last February asking me to be the Purimspieler at its Purim Ball I thought there must be some kind of mistake. I don't mean that I thought there must be some mistake in asking me. I am enough of a ham that I would not be surprised if a Hindu congregation asked me to come forward and recite choice selections from the Bhagavad Gita. I mean that I was surprised because I thought the Jewish Museum was making a mistake about the date of Purim.

"Isn't that the one in the fall?" I asked my wife, Martha. "With the hamantaschen? And the little hut in the back yard?"

"No," she said. "No, it isn't. They have hamantaschen all year round. Even I know that."

"The thing that puzzles me," I went on, holding up the letter and reading it again, "is how they ever figured out I was Jewish."

She executed what I believe our fathers would have called a spit take. "That is the most ridiculous question I've ever heard. There's your name, for one thing, and then the way you use Jewish words in writing."

"What Jewish words have I ever used in writing?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, 'shvitz.' And 'inchoate.' "

" 'Inchoate' is not a Jewish word."

"It is the way you use it. You've got 'Jew' written all over you. It's obvious."

"It's obvious," my six-year-old son, Luke, echoed, looking up from his plate. "It's obvious." I was startled, though not entirely. We lived in Paris for the first five years of his life, and ethnic awareness is one of the first things he's been exposed to on coming home to New York. The lame and the halt, the meaning of Kwanzaa and the nights of Hanukkah—all the varieties of oppressed ethnic experience have become the material of his education. He sees the world in groups, or is beginning to. His best friend, Jacob Kogan, has a sister who was asked by her grandparents what she wanted for Hanukkah. "A Christmas tree," she said. Luke reported that with pleasure. He and Jacob have developed a nice line in old, Henny Youngman-style jokes, which apparently circulate permanently in the lower grades of New York schools, like Mercury space-program debris circulating in outer space, getting lower and lower in its orbit each year: "Waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup!" "The backstroke."

I gave him a look. His birth was the occasion of my realizing just how poor a Jew I am. When he was born, at Mount Sinai hospital, in New York, almost every other baby in the nursery had Lubavitcher parents, and in the isolette they had proudly placed a little framed photograph of the Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, so that the first thing the baby saw was the thin Russian eyes and the great Rembrandt beard of the Rebbe. The Hasidic fathers clustered around the glass of the nursery, and I felt at once drawn to them and inadequate to their dark-suited, ringleted assurance. They looked wonderful, and I, another member of the tribe, wanted, at least provisionally, to attach myself to them.

"He's crying from the circumcision," I explained to the father on my left, significantly.

He stared at me, and, with the hat and fringe, he looked at first very old and then, as my eye saw past the costume, very young. "He's been circumcised already?" he said. I hadn't known you were supposed to wait.

Still, he grasped the gesture toward commonality. "What's his name?"

"Luke," I said proudly. "Luke Auden."

He backed away from me, really backed away, like a Japanese extra in a Godzilla movie when the monster comes into

view, looming up above the power pylons.

I returned to the letter. It was a very nice, warm letter, from the director of the museum, explaining that the "event takes the form of a masked ball in celebration of the Purim holiday, with approximately seven hundred guests gathered for a black-tie dinner-dance at the Waldorf-Astoria." The "highlight" was a "10-15 minute original Purimspiel—a humorous retelling of the story of Purim, Queen Esther's rescue of the Jews in ancient Persia." In a postscript, the director promised "to send some background information on the Biblical story of Purim."

Looking at the letter again, I began to realize that the Purimspieler barrel must have been thoroughly scraped before the museum people got to me, and also that, getting to me, they knew what they were getting. They had been able to deduce that, though Jewish, I was sufficiently ignorant about Jewishness to need "some background information on the Biblical story of Purim." If they had been asking me to talk on life in France, I doubted that they would have thought to send me a map of Paris.

"Daddy, did I tell you the new version?" Luke said, suddenly.

"Which new version?"

"Man goes into a restaurant, he says, 'Waiter, waiter.' "

"No," I corrected him. "He should just say, 'Waiter!' It's the guy who goes to see a doctor who says it twice: 'Doctor, doctor!' Just 'Waiter!' " What a thing, to be a pedant of one-liners.

"Oh. He says, 'Waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup?,' and the waiter, then the waiter says, 'There was no room left in the potato salad.' "

I laughed. "Of course I'm going to do it," I said.

"Is this going to be one of those things where you end up still skeptical but strangely exhilarated by the faith of your fathers?" Martha said. "Because if it is, I don't want you to do it. It's hard enough having you around morose all the time. It would be even worse if you were strangely exhilarated."

The next morning, a Saturday, I took down the Book of Esther from the shelf—or, more precisely, I took down the old King James Bible, the only one I owned. It has all the words of Jesus picked out in red, as though highlighted by an earnest Galileean undergraduate. I was in charge of the kids, but I felt sure that I would have time to read. Luke was shut in the bedroom, watching Saturday-morning cartoons, struggling desperately to understand; I knew he would interrupt only occasionally, seeking clarification on some cartoon convention. Because of his time in Paris, he missed a lot of cartoon-watching, and now he is frantically trying to catch up. He gets a worried look on his face as he runs into the room and asks about what he has just seen: "Why when people go through walls in a cartoon do they leave holes exactly the same shape as them?" "Why when someone touches electricity in a cartoon do you see his whole skeleton? But only for a second?" The rules of an alternative universe, what there is to laugh at and what is just part of life, remain mysterious.

Meanwhile, the baby, Olivia, was happily occupied at the window, dog-spotting. "Dog! Dog!" came the occasional shout. Breakfast and dinner, she will not stay in her high chair but insists on scanning the skies, or streets, like a scientist in a fifties sci-fi movie, searching for life forms she has identified as alien. She is endlessly excited, and wildly agitated whenever she spots one, which, given the density of dogs on Upper East Side streets, she does, predictably, twice a minute.

The fly in the soup was an essentially Jewish joke; I was in the middle of another.

"Good girl," I said absently, and went back to my Bible. The story of Purim, I learned, takes place in Persia, and mostly in the court of King Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus, who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, has a wife, Vashti, who has a "banquet for the women" and then refuses to come when the King commands. The King overreacts, and his advisers tell him to divorce the queen and hold a beauty contest to choose a new

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one, which he does. He chooses a Jewish girl named Esther. Esther's cousin, an ambitious fellow named Mordecai, then saves the King's life by exposing a plot against him. But the King gets bored with Esther, and meanwhile his chief councillor, Haman, decides to start a pogrom against the Jews, for all the usual reasons: they are tight and clannish, and obey only themselves. He gets the King's approval, and Mordecai, hearing of the plan, goes out in sackcloth and ashes to protest. He tells Esther that she ought to protest, too, and she says, "Well, what can I do?" "Do something," he tells her. She gets dressed up in her best clothes and goes to the King, and the King, thinking she looks nifty, listens to her. He suddenly learns how Mordecai saved his life, and orders Haman to be hanged on the scaffold he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the Jews, about to be pogromed, massacre Haman's followers, including all ten of Haman's sons, who are hanged or, depending on the translation, impaled on stakes. Then everybody celebrates.

I stopped reading. Send this up? I couldn't even grasp it. I knew that the thing to get was Esther's rescue of the Jews, but that seemed almost incidental to this general story of competitive massacre and counter-massacre and bride-shopping. The trouble, I realized, was not that I did not know how to read in the text but that I did not know, had never been taught, how to read past it. Like Luke with the electrified cat, I did not know what was significant and what was merely conventional—I did not know what were the impaling practices of ancient Near East culture, and what was, so to speak, the specifically Jewish point. Although all our official, school training in reading is in reading in—in reading deeply, penetrating the superficial and the apparent to get to the obscure and hidden—in truth a lot of the skill in reading classics lies in reading past them. The obsession with genetic legitimacy and virginity in Shakespeare; the acceptance of torture in Dante—these are not subjects to be absorbed but things you glide by on your way to the poetry. You have to feel confident saying, "Oh, that's just then"—with the crucial parallel understanding that now will be then, too, that our progeny will have to learn to read past sentences like "After the peace demonstration, they stopped at Joe's for veal scallopini," or, perhaps, "In their joy, they conceived their fifth child," or even, "They immunized the children." Obviously, it was necessary to read past the impaling of Haman's sons, the ethnic pogroms, to some larger purpose—otherwise there would not be Purimspiels and happy Purim balls—but I did not know how to do it. I saw impaled Iranians where I needed to see a fly doing the backstroke in the soup.

I walked over to the baby at the window seat. Out the window, in the near distance, we could see a synagogue. Even now, I thought, in there people were being taught to read past the scaffold. "Dog, dog!" the baby cried, as a dog-walker came up the street, six or seven dogs on leashes held in one hand. She began to cry out in delight. So many dogs! I closed the book, and hoped glumly that a spiel, that whole leashfuls of them, would come before Purim did.

The next day, I decided to return to the only Jewish tradition with which I was at all confident, and that was having smoked fish at eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings. Every Sunday morning throughout my childhood, my grandfather would arrive with the spread—salty lox and unctuous sable and dry whitefish and sweet pickled salmon. Sometimes he took me with him to shop, and he always had a pained, resigned look as he ordered: "Yeah, I guess . . . give me some of the whitefish." But when he got home he would be pleased. ("He has very nice stuff, Irving," he would say to my father.) For Purimspiel purposes, I thought, I had better get into Jew training, and eat as my fathers had.

Every Sunday morning for the next few weeks, Luke and I went together to Sable's, the extraordinary smoked-fish and appetizer store at Second Avenue and Seventy-eighth Street. Sable's is the only place in my neighborhood where my grandfather would have been entirely comfortable—with the hand-lettered signs and the Dr. Brown's and the mingled smell of pickles and herring—and yet it is owned and staffed by Asians who once worked as nova slicers at Zabar's, on the West Side, and who walked out to claim their freedom. (I imagined them wandering, in their aprons, through Central Park for years before arriving at the promised land.) They sell Jewish food, and with the same bullying, ironic Jewish manner that I recalled from my childhood trips with my grandfather, but they do it as a thing learned.

"They got nice stuff, anyway, Irving," I said to Luke as we walked over.

"Why are you calling me Irving?" he asked.

"My grandfather always called me Irving when he took me shopping for smoked fish. He had me confused with Grandpop, I guess."

"Oh. Is Grandpop's name Irving?"

"No," I said. "His name isn't actually Irving, either. But your great-grandfather could never remember what his name really was, so he called him Ir-

MARRIAGE

My husband likes to watch the cooking shows, the building shows,
the Discovery Channel, and the surgery channel.
Last night, he told us about a man who came into the emergency room

with a bayonet stuck entirely through his skull and brain.
Did they get it out? we all asked.
They did. And the man was O.K. because the blade went exactly between

the two halves without severing them.
And who had shoved this bayonet into the man's head? His wife.
A strong woman, someone said. And everyone else agreed.

—Marie Howe

ving. I think he thought all small Jewish boys should be called Irving."

Luke wasn't interested. "Oh," he said. I could see he was looking inward. Then, in a rush: "Why in cartoons when someone touches electricity, after you see their whole skeleton for a second, then they go all stiff and straight up in the air and then their whole body turns black and then it turns into dust and then it crumbles while they still look out and smile as if they were feeling sick? Why?"

I said it was just a convention, just the way cartoons are, and was meant to be funny.

"Why is it funny?" he asked.

We walked on in silence.

Later that day, I sat down with a piece of paper. I had one mildly derivative comic idea, which was to adapt the Purim story to contemporary New York. Ahasuerus was Donald Trump: dumb as an ox, rich, lecherous, easily put out, and living in a gaudy apartment. So Vashti must be Ivana—that was easy—and Esther was a Russian Jewish model who had immigrated from Odessa, a beauty, but hardly aware that she was Jewish save for the convenience of immigration. Haman—what if you said that Haman . . . But I couldn't focus. How was it, I wondered, that I could know nothing of all this? For the truth is that Jew *is* written all over me. If on my father's side they were in wholesale food, on my mother's side they were dark-skinned Sephardim who had stayed in Palestine—so busy squabbling that they actually missed the bus for the Diaspora. One of my maternal great-grandfathers, family lore has it, was the rabbi sent from Hebron to Lisbon at the end of the nineteenth century to call the Jews out of hiding and back into the synagogue.

And yet, when I think about my own upbringing, the best I can say is that the most entirely Jewish thing about us was the intensity with which we celebrated Christmas: passionately, excessively, with the tallest tree and the most elaborately wrapped presents. Coming of age in the fifties, my parents, like so many young intellectuals of their generation, distanced themselves from the past as an act of deliberate emancipation. My parents were not so much in rebellion against their own past as they were in love with the idea of using the values unconsciously taken from that culture to conquer another—they went from Jewish high school to Ivy League college and fell in love with English literature. Like so many others, they ended in that queer, thriving country of the Jewish American possessor of the Christian literary heritage: they became Zionists of eighteenth-century literature, kibbutzniks of metaphysical poetry. The only Bible-related book I can recall from my childhood was in my father's office, an academic volume called "The Bible to Be Read as Literature"; the joke was, of course, that in those precincts it was literature that was to be read as the Bible. (We didn't have a Christian Christmas; we had a Dickensian Christmas.) The eradication left an imprint stronger than indoctrination could have. We had "Jew"

written all over us in the form of marks from the eraser.

What was left of overt, nameable Jewishness was the most elemental Jewish thing, and that was a style of joking. My grandfather, who ran a small grocery store in a black neighborhood, lives in my memory, apart from Sunday-morning fish, mostly in his jokes, a round of one-liners as predictable as the hands on a clock, and yet, weirdly, getting funnier by the year: "Joe Banana and his bunch? The music with appeal." And "I used to be a boxer. In a shoe store." And "I used to sing tenor—but they traded me in for two fives." And "Feel stiff in the joints? Then stay out of the joints."

The first time I had a sense of Jewishness as a desirable state rather than as background radiation, humming in a Christian cosmos, was when I was thirteen and, turned on to the idea of New York, saw that it was made up of Jewish comedians—of jokes. I discovered the Marx Brothers and then Woody Allen. I bought a book of old comics' routines and learned the telephone spiels of Georgie Jessel. ("Mom, why did you cook that bird? He was a valuable bird; he could speak six languages!" "Oh . . . he shoulda said something.") "The Ed Sullivan Show" fascinated me: Corbett Monica and Norm Crosby and Jackie Vernon, and, hovering above even them, Myron Cohen, the mournful storyteller, and Henny Youngman, genuinely the funniest man, who looked exactly like my grandfather, to boot. The greatest generation. I read interviews with obscure Jewish comedians, old and young—really obscure ones, Ed Bluestone and Ben Blue—and noticed, with a rising thrill, that none of them talked about "jokes" that you "told." Instead, they talked about "bits," which they "did"—and killed "them" doing them. That, for me, explained everything, life and art: life was stuff that happened, art was bits you did. It was the first religion that had ever made sense.

I came to New York to practice that faith, do bits, be a Purimspieler—only to find that that world was gone. Some time in the decade after my arrival, the Jewish comic culture dried up. The sense, so strong since the beginning of the century, that New York was naturally Jewish and, by an unforced corollary, naturally funny had gone. Of course, there were standup comics, many of them Jewish, but the particular uneasiness, the sense that talking too fast might keep you alive, the sense that you talked as a drowning man might wave his hands, the whining, high-pitched tone and the "r"-less accent—that had gone. Paul Reiser, Jerry Seinfeld, much as I enjoyed and even identified with them, were as settled and as American as Bob and Ray or Will Rogers. This was an event with a specific date, marked in the work of the last great New York Jew comedian. Between 1977 and "Annie Hall," where being a Jewish comedian is a slightly weary and depressing obligation, to be rebelled against, and "Broadway Danny Rose," just seven years later, when the black-and-white world of the comics shpritzing at the Carnegie Deli is frankly presented as a Chagall world, a folktale setting, the whole thing vanished. Even Jackie Mason, a rabbi in training and ostensibly a master of the style, was quite different; his subject, when, in the eighties, he returned from obscurity, wasn't the unsuspected power of being a loser but the loss of power in the face of all those new immigrants.

New York Jewish comic manners were still around, only they were no longer practiced by Jews, or were practiced by Jews as something learned rather than as something felt. What had replaced the organic culture of Jewish comedy in New York was a permanent pantomime of Jewish manners. The fly doing the backstroke in the soup was part of a kind of chicken-soup synchronized-swimming event, as ordered and regulated as an Olympic sport: Jewish New York manners were a thing anyone could imitate in order to indicate "comedy."

One sensed this at Sable's, where Jewish traditions of shpritzing were carried on by non-Jews, and in television commercials, where New York taxi-drivers were still represented as wise guys, even though they had not been for a generation or more. But it was true in subtler ways, too. On "Seinfeld," which I had missed while living abroad but now could watch in reruns every night, everything is, at one level, shockingly Jewish, far more than Sid Caesar or Mel Brooks was ever allowed to be, with mohels and brisses and whining fathers who wait all week for their copy of *TV Guide*—but the unstated condition is that there be absolutely no mention of the "J" word, while the most Jewish character, George, is given an Italian last name, Costanza. This is not because Jewishness is forbidden but because it is so obvious. Jewishness is to "Seinfeld" what the violin was to Henny Youngman—the prop that you used between jokes, as much for continuity as for comedy. The Jewish situations are mimed by rote, while the real energy of the jokes lies in the observation of secular middle-class manners. In the old Jewish comedies, it had been just the opposite: the manners of the middle class were mimed by rote—the suits and ties, the altered names, Jack Benny's wife called Mary—while the energy of the jokes lay in the hidden Jewishness. (The comedy of Phil Silvers's great Sgt. Bilko almost scandalously derives from the one thing that no one on the show is allowed to mention, which is that Bilko is a clever New York Jew dominating a kind of all-star collection of dim Gentiles.) New York Jewishness was now the conscious setup rather than the hidden punch line.

One Sunday morning, Luke and I walked over to Sable's and bought even more than usual; we were having company. But the cashier was unimpressed. He looked over our order.

"How many people you having?" he asked.

"Eight."

"From out of town?"

"Yes."

He sighed. "Me, I would be ashamed to put this on the table."

"You would? "

He looked at the ritualized bits of cured sable and salmon, and shrugged again—my grandfather to the life!

"This is not worth putting on the table. I would be ashamed."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Get a pound of herring salad. Pound of whitefish salad. Pound of bluefish salad."

I did. "Now I proud to put this on the table," he said. "Now I no longer ashamed for you."

He had learned to do it at Zabar's, I realized as I left—the permanent pantomime of Jewish manners with wings on! Though it cost me nearly a hundred dollars, it was worth it for the lesson.

The combination of an Asian sense of face with a Jewish sense of guilt may be the most powerful commercial hybrid in history.

"So, see, I have an Esther in my family, too. The matriarch of my family. She dominated her sisters, in a grasping way, and then came to die of emphysema in my grandparents' apartment in Florida. We went to see her in, this is in about 1993, I guess. Wheezing and pained, she said, 'People tell me you are doing well, but I lie here in bed at night and worry, oh, I worry about you. How I worry. So now tell me, tell me, so your aunt won't lie here as she is dying and worry . . . tell me . . . how much are you really making?' "

"You can't possibly tell that story," Martha said. "It's anti-Semitic."

"It's true," I said.

"Of course it's true," Martha said. "It's just not appropriate."

I was trying out possible spiels on the more Jewish of our many Jewish friends. We have a certain number of friends who, though coming from backgrounds not unlike my own, have recommitted themselves to Jewishness in a serious way. While Yiddishkeit as a practice had nearly disappeared from New York, one of the things that were replacing it, paradoxically, was Judaism. A number of our friends are what I have come to think of as X-treme Jews, who study Cabala or glory in the details of the lives of Jewish gangsters, and even like to call themselves "Hebes," in the manner of young black men calling each other "niggas."

I envied my friends the seeming clarity of their Jewishness, just as I envied, a little, the clarity of the family of observant Jews who live down the hall from us. On warm Friday evenings, one or two of the adolescent boys in that family will come knocking at our door, galumphing in heavy shoes and with pale faces, and, looking woeful, say, "Could you come and turn on the air-conditioner in our apartment? We can't, 'cause we're Jews." I admired the simplicity of their self-definition: "We can't, 'cause we're Jews." We are unashamed of our essence, even as it makes us sweat.

But, whatever the appeal of that plain faith, I can't say I was inclined to follow them. It seemed to me that my contemporaries, in contrast to the boys down the hall, had chosen Jewish—they were majoring in Jewish, just as my father had majored in English—when the force of the tradition was that it was not elective. I decided to sit down and read what I imagined was the bible on the subject, Alfred Kazin's memoir "New York Jew," a book that, over the years, I had neither read in nor read past but simply not read, thinking, unforgivably, that I already knew its contents. (The forties, boy! The fifties, joy! The sixties, oy!) In fact, it's an unpredictable, rhapsodic, uncontentious book—but, for all the starkness of its title, its premise is that Jewishness is the board from which one springs, rather than the ground one must dig. To be a New York Jew is, for Kazin, like being a New York tree. It is what you are.

Reading Kazin, I became a little impatient with my own apologetic attitude toward the poverty of my Jewishness. Wasn't it the invigorating inheritance of the self-emancipation of my parents? My father had done the deracinating, to become a devotee of Pope and Swift, Molière and Shakespeare, and to reracinate was to be disloyal to him, to the act of emancipation from tribal reflexes that, with a considerable effort of will and imagination, he had pulled off. What is bracing about Kazin is not his Jewishness but that he makes no effort to pretend that he is something else. His liberation lay in not pretending to be Van Wyck Brooks; the liberation for us surely lies in not pretending to be Alfred Kazin.

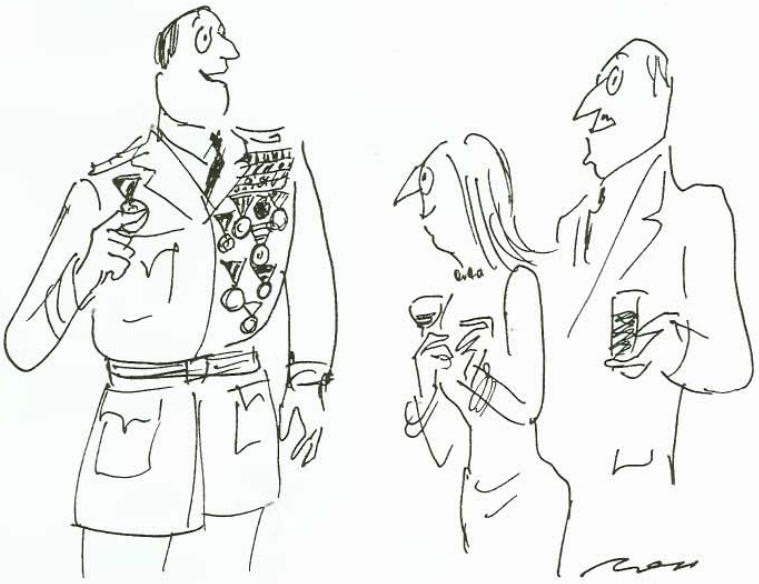
In the midst of these bitter-herb thoughts, Luke came in.

"Here's the new version," he said. "Man says to a waiter, 'What's this fly doing in my soup?' 'Sh-h-h,' the waiter says, 'everyone will want one.' " It broke me up. Whether or not there are Jewish essences, there are surely some essentially Jewish jokes. That was one, and I was in the middle of another.

I was about to call the Jewish Museum and give it all up, when a friend suggested that I speak to a rabbi. "Go see Rabbi Schorsch," he said. "He's the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. He's a terrific guy, and I'm sure he'd be glad to help you out with the spiel thing." I vaguely remembered hearing Rabbi Ismar Schorsch on the radio once or twice, so I made an appointment—it felt like making a date with a dentist—and on the day I took the subway up to 125th Street.

The rabbi's secretary showed me into his office, and after a couple of minutes there was Rabbi Schorsch.

"Rabbi," I began, "I was not raised as an observant Jew, but I am nonetheless of a Jewish background, and I am naturally concerned to show some grasp of a tradition that, though familiar in spirit, is still alien to me in many ways." I don't



"This one's a bonus for all the others."

know; that's how I thought you ought to talk to a rabbi. Anyway, I eventually explained that I couldn't make head or tail of the Book of Esther.

"It's a spoof, a burlesque, really," he almost mumbled.

He picked up my Bible, riffled through it as though there were a kind of satisfaction just in touching the pages, and then frowned. "This is a Christian Bible," he said, genuinely puzzled.

He was the kind of hyper-alert elderly man who, instead of putting on weight around the middle, seems to have drawn all his energy upward into his eyes and ears, which gleam, outsized. "Yes. It's a kind of comic chapter, not to be taken entirely seriously," he went on, holding my King James Version in his hand as though it might be loaded. "It's a light book with a serious message. You see, Scripture, the Bible, one of the remarkable things about it is that it contains a chapter about every form of human experience. There's a book of laws and a book of love songs. A book of exile and a book of homecoming. A skeptical and despairing book in Job, and an optimistic and sheltering book in the Psalms. Esther is the comic book, it's a book for court Jews, with a fairy-tale, burlesque spirit."

You could see my whole skeleton underneath my jacket; my hair stood on end; I turned into a pile of black ash, smiling sickly as I slowly crumbled.

"It is?" I said.

"Yes. You see, Mordecai is a classic Jew of the Diaspora, not just exiled but entirely assimilated—a court Jew, really. It's a book for court Jews. Why doesn't he bow down to Haman? Well, it might be because of his Judaism. But I think we have to assume that he's jealous—he expects to be made first minister and then isn't. Have you noticed the most interesting thing about the book?" He looked at me keenly.

"I hadn't even noticed it was funny."

"It's the only book in the Bible where God is never mentioned," he said. "This is the book for the Jews of the city, the world. After all, we wonder—what does Esther eat? It sure isn't kosher. But she does good anyway. The worldliness and the absurdity are tied together—the writer obviously knows that the King is a bit of an idiot—but the point is that good can rise from it in any case. Esther acts righteously and saves her people, and we need not worry, too much, about what kind of Jew she was before, or even after. She stays married to the Gentile King, remember. This is the godless, comic book of Jews in the city, and how they struggle to do the righteous thing."

I was stunned. This was, as they say, the story of my life. A funny book about court Jews . . . I had been assigned to burlesque it, when the text was pre-burlesqued, as jeans might be pre-shrunk.

We talked for a while longer, about the background of Haman as a Jew-hater, and of how the most startlingly contemporary thing in the book was the form of anti-Semitism; even twenty-five hundred years ago in Persia, the complaint against the Jews was the same as it is now. In the end, he gave me a signed copy of the Bible, the Jewish Bible, the Tanach. (Signed by him, I mean.)

We got together a couple of times after that, and eventually I decided to try and go ahead with the Purimspiel. He said, "Why not? What have you got to lose?"

What have you got to lose? It was, I reflected, like the punch line of a Jewish joke.

In the ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, hundreds of people in dinner jackets and sequinned dresses were wearing masks, although this made them look less festive than vaguely embarrassed, as though they were worried about being seen by their friends. I had forgotten the look and feel of a New York benefit: the ballroom made to look like a gym, the chicken, stretched out, mortified, on its plate, with the Indisputably Classy Ingredient—the quince, or sun-dried tomato, or preserved lemon—laid on top of it. The fiftyish women, sexy and intimidating in sports clothes, look wilted in their fancy gowns. The only difference was that at this benefit there was a giant video-projection screen at either end of the hall and one above the podium, and the speakers—who included Rabbi Schorsch, saying the blessing—were projected on them. I gulped. I had thought it would be like a night club, where I could play with a microphone in the manner of Rodney Dangerfield, and this was more like a political convention. I was an impostor, even though I had bits to do. I heard my grandfather's voice: *Feel stiff in the joints? Then stay out of the joints!*

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At last, just before dessert, I got up and went to the podium. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my own image on the giant screen.

What did I tell them? Well, I did the New York as Persia, Donald, and Ivana bit and then I did a bit I'd made up that afternoon on Haman. That got a modest laugh, and, encouraged, I went on to do the man-goes-to-see-a-rabbi bit. I said that, once I had thought of transposing the story to New York, I had got stuck on Mordecai. Who could Mordecai be in the modern city? I had gone to see a rabbi, and the rabbi had told me that the Book of Esther was in part a spoof, a burlesque: a comedy in which worldly people took risks and did unworldly things, and that Mordecai, if he was anyone, was us—the assimilated court and city Jews. And this was sort of amazing to me, since the idea that the man of the world might be the honest man was an idea that was central to the comic tradition I revered—Molière says it, for instance, just like that—but was not one that I had known had a place in the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition, I had always thought, proposed that the honest man was the man out of the world, the prophet crying in the wilderness. But I saw now that there was a connection between a certain kind of comedy, the comedy of assimilation, and a certain kind of courage, the courage to use your proximity to power, bought at the price of losing your "identity," to save your kinsmen. The real moral center of the story, I saw now, lay in the tiny, heartbreaking, and in many ways comic moment when Esther—trayf-eating, dim-witted, overdressed, sexy Esther—appears before the King, who hasn't found her particularly sexy lately. I could see her in her Lacroix pouf dress, I said, gulping for breath and showing up, so to speak, at Donald Trump's office in the middle of a busy day saying that she had to speak to him. But she did, and the Jews were saved, for once.

It went over O.K. I didn't kill them, but I didn't die, either. They were expecting something more consistently amusing, I suppose, but no one minds a little moral sententiousness in an after-dinner speaker. "Congratulations, that was unusual," or "You obviously spoke from the heart," or "I knew that when we asked you to do the Purimspiel we would get something different!," or just "Thank you for your interesting remarks" was the general tone of the things that people said when I got back to the table. (I still meet people who were there. They give me exactly the look a father might have after seeing his daughter topless in a progressive college production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; he respects the sincerity of the intention, but it was extremely embarrassing to be there, nonetheless.) I had dessert—fund-raising-benefit dessert, something soft and white interspersed with something red and juicy—and went home. As a thank-you present, I was given a little silver grogger, a rattle, meant to be shaken when you heard the name "Haman."

Though I am not strangely exhilarated by my experience as a Purimspieler, I did find something significant in the Book of Esther, and I am certainly glad I did it. In one way, it was no different from any other exposure to an ancient, irrational belief-culture. I suppose I would have felt about the same if I had been a young Athenian who finally goes to Delphi and hears the oracle: even if it didn't change the future, it was nice to make the trip. But if there is something particularly Jewish about the experience, it may lie in the odd combination of a narrow gate and a large gathering; the most exclusive and tribal of faiths, Judaism is also the one that sustains the most encompassing of practices, from Moses to Henny Youngman, from Esther to Sammy Davis, Jr., and all us Irvings. Whether it sustains this because, as the rabbi believes, it is in its nature narrow but infinitely various, or because, as I sometimes suspect, anything ancient and oppressed must be adaptable, still it is so. At least for a certain kind of court Jew, being Jewish remains not an exercise in reading in or reading past but just in reading on, in continuing to turn the pages. The pages have been weird and varied enough in the past to be weird and varied in the future, and there is no telling who will shine in them. The Jewish occasion lay in rising to the occasion. Even if it was too late to be an everyday, starting Jew, one could still be, so to speak, Jewish in the clutch.

We celebrated our own Seder this past spring, and are thinking of joining the synagogue we can see from our window, in part because we want to, in part because there is an excellent nursery school there for our daughter. That is the kind of things Jews do in Persia. I gave the silver grogger to the baby, who holds it at the window and shakes it in warning when she sees a dog. I believe that she now has the first things a Jewish girl in exile needs: a window to see from and a rattle to shake. ♦