

Prologue

...a life

that was meant to be a long one came to its end.

—Yehuda Amichai

On a sweltering afternoon in the late summer of 5760, corresponding to the year 2000 of the Common Era, most uncharacteristically for Jews, who are a tardy people, it was standing room only at Paperman's a full half-hour before the scheduled funeral service.

The long, stark room held four banks of pews into which six hundred people were crammed. An enormous mahogany carving in the shape of a shield dominated the chapel. It may have represented the Wailing Wall or, more prosaically, a gigantic gravestone.

No one likes doing business with Paperman's, but it's the only game of its kind in town. Ever since Lazar Paperman converted a volunteer burial society into a business a century ago, Paperman's has held the monopoly on the final passage of Montreal's Jews. Heeding the founder's motto, his descendants continue to deliver the traditional rites gracefully, tastefully, and affordably.

In the fourth row, a couple of seats in from the aisle, Helen Stern turned her shellacked head and scoured the hall. Her eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"Isn't this something?" she announced. "Of course, I did call everybody," she added.

Her voice carried over the subdued murmuring in the room, and a woman with a blaze of auburn curls topped by a black lace doily gave her a withering look from the row directly in front.

Helen erased the smirk from her tawny face. "If it were up to me I'd be at the very back of the room, but Jeff—" here she indicated her husband at her side with a nod, "is a pallbearer."

The redhead whipped her head back to face the front. She did not utter a word, but her rigid spine expressed outrage.

It's not where you're sitting that's my problem, Helen. It's that you actually think it's because of you that we're all here.

Like a gust of cold air, silence fell over the room. A black-suited funeral director had entered by a side door.

"Please rise."

A collective gasp swept the hall at the sight of the gleaming oak casket rolling into the chapel. It was as if everyone had inhaled in unison and then been instantly strangled.

"You may be seated."

Rabbi Kaufman took the podium, accompanied by a cantor.

The young cantor, a beautiful tenor, chanted the Twenty-third Psalm. Next to him at the lectern, Nate Kaufman surveyed the crowd. A lanky man with a neat chin beard, he wore a tiny crocheted black kippah. A close observer would have noted red and swollen eyes behind his owlsh glasses.

The rabbi began in a barely audible voice.

My eyes flow copiously,
My heart is confounded with grief,
My whole being laid waste
Over the ruin of the daughter of my people.

His voice gathered strength: “This verse from the Book of Lamentations is an outpouring of grief bemoaning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the sixth century BCE. Traditionally we read it on *Tisha b’Av*, one of the saddest days on our calendar.

“In Hebrew the Book of Lamentations is called *Eikhah*.

“*Eikhah* means *how*? Surpassing even the agony of loss we are experiencing, we are overwhelmed by our shock, horror, and disbelief. *Eikhah*—how could it be that we are here to cry out at the tragic passing of such a keenly alive, such a *spirited* human being? *How could this have happened?*”

Part One

*The Jewish people read Torah aloud to God
all year long, a portion a week,
like Scheherezade who told stories to save her life.
By the time Simchat Torah rolls around,
God forgets and they can begin again.*

—Yehuda Amichai

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“It had to be a man who dreamed up *Simchat Torah*,” Rhoda said.

“Well, obviously,” Faith said. “The entire religion thing is rooted in patriarchy.”

Rhoda continued as if she hadn’t heard. “No woman is stupid enough to invent another holiday on top of four weeks of breast-beating and gorging on brisket and honey cake.”

“But *Simchat Torah* isn’t at all about breast-beating,” Erica said.

The three friends were walking along Netherwood towards the Baily Road shul on a crisp October evening as fast as the considerable foot traffic allowed. Statuesque, silver-haired Rhoda was in the middle, with Faith and Erica hustling to keep up with her long stride.

“It’s a holiday designed to make everybody look like a fool.” Rhoda was on a roll.

“*Hakafot!*” She practically spat out the Hebrew word. “Please! All those self-important *machers* parading around with the Torah, and the kids running wild with their flags, and those half-hearted horas. As for the rabbi, don’t even get me started!”

“We won’t.” Faith smothered a full, cherry-lipped smile, catching Erica’s eye. “He was in good form,” she added.

“He was *drunk*,” Rhoda said, but she did drop her voice. It was one thing to criticize Nate to Faith and Erica, another to be overheard by the general public.

“You’re *supposed* to be a little high on *Simchat Torah*,” Erica said. She had her reasons for being partial to Nate, who had been exceptionally understanding at the time of her mother’s death.

In a rare blaze of intra-denominational goodwill, this year the Rabbinical Board of Montreal had decreed a community-wide *Simchat Torah* celebration, centred on the Baily Road shul, the biggest synagogue in the twin boroughs of Hampstead and Côte St. Luc. Each congregation in the area had been invited to bring over Torah scrolls for a street festival.

The three women crossed Harrow Crescent and nearly tripped over Jeff and Helen Stern. “Ah, our three lovely Graces. Thick as thieves as always,” Jeff muttered under his moustache, as the trio stepped off the sidewalk to pass. It was Jeff, the former president of Congregation Emunath, who had once dubbed them the Three Graces at a party, and the moniker had stuck.

“*Putz*,” Rhoda cracked, when they were out of earshot. Beneath her prickly shell beat a loyal heart, and she still nurtured a grudge against Jeff Stern, for ignoring Faith’s very presence at the annual general meeting. The one investing her as the new president. Caught off-guard by Rhoda’s expletive, Faith gave a rich belly laugh, while Erica shook her head in mock disapproval, her auburn curls shaking.

“We have to behave,” Faith said, wiping her eyes.

“Only you have to behave, Madame la Pres,” Erica said. “The rest of us can be as bad as we want.”

“Hello, Faith. Hello, Rhoda. Hello, Erica.”

“Hi, Marty,” the Graces responded in unison as Marty Riess, one of the stalwarts of the shul board, came up behind them and then pulled ahead.

Faith waited for Marty to be swallowed by the dark. “Odd to see him without Leona,” she observed.

“What’s odd about it?” Rhoda arched an eyebrow. “Hershy didn’t see fit to come. And, for that matter, neither did your Al.”

Faith stopped midstride for a moment, placing her hands on her hips. “They weren’t sitting together during the service, either,” she said.

“Maybe Leona was with friends,” Erica said.

“Leona doesn’t have friends,” Faith retorted. She and Leona Riess had had a spectacular run-in a year ago when Leona was the editor of *The Shul Monthly*. “I still think it’s very odd. It’s not like them at all.”

“You’re *such* a yenta,” Rhoda scolded, just as they reached the shul. Outside her flesh and blood, Faith was arguably Rhoda’s favourite person in the whole world.

A crowd was milling about in the street, people’s breaths forming small clouds in the brisk night air. A cluster of women spun madly in the middle of the road, surrounding a girl clutching a Torah to her breast, as if afraid someone would pluck it from her arms.

“Look at all those guys in their black hats and white leggings up there on the stairs. I think they want to tear her limb from limb,” Faith said.

“Oh, but there’s Nate with Rabbi Shulman!” Erica exclaimed, giving a little wave.

“Don’t tell me they’re going to let Nate speak here,” said Rhoda.

“They’re not,” Faith said. “He’s standing up there with the dignitaries, but they’re never going to let him open his mouth. They think Reconstructionists are heathens!”

Rhoda sniffed. “I smell weed. I wonder who’s responsible for that?” She paused and then asked, “Faith, how much longer do we have to stay? Surely we’ve shown our faces long enough.”

Erica’s toes were tapping. “I want to dance,” she announced. “You’re supposed to dance.” Having come to Judaism by a roundabout route, Erica was big on tradition.

“Go right ahead.”

Erica hesitated, shy of breaking into the circle without her friends. A writer isn’t a natural joiner by habit or temperament, but she was a good dancer and she had taken a stand. Pulling back her narrow shoulders in resolve, she approached the dancers, a slightly built, almost dainty figure melding into the ring.

“You’re being way more of a curmudgeon than usual tonight,” Faith said, crossing her arms beneath her generous bosom. Short and stout, she was a good head shorter than Rhoda. The two of them continued to appraise the scene, slightly to the side of the crowd. Reisa Kaufman, Nate’s wife, her head wrapped turban-style in a scarlet kerchief, was beckoning them to join a new band of twirling women.

“My tolerance for glorifying a piece of parchment dressed in old velvet has just about run its course,” Rhoda said.

“C’mon, we’re supposed to dance!” Erica had broken free and now grabbed Faith by the arm, tugging her towards Reisa’s group. “*Am Isroel, am Isroel, am Isroel chai!*” *The people Israel lives*, Erica sang, linking hands with Leona Riess. Torn between Rhoda’s truculence and Erica’s enthusiasm, Faith wavered before allowing herself to be pulled into the circle, her face lit by a huge smile.

Rhoda moved out of the way of the dancers, casting a sceptical eye on a knot of kids from the shul youth group. They were clustered around a banner held up by a girl on one side and a boy on the other. By the gleam of the street lamp, she recognized the girl as Ilana Stern in a tarty miniskirt and bomber jacket. The boy had an earring and a two-day stubble, and was in shirtsleeves despite the chill, his head covered by a baseball cap worn backwards.

Is Faith right that I’m being a killjoy?

It was an article of faith with Rhoda to be strictly, maybe even brutally, honest. Direct and outspoken, she didn’t hold with the current wisdom that being judgmental was a bad thing. She rather prided herself on judging and pronouncing. But it wasn’t her intent to be a party pooper; certainly not to rain on Faith’s parade. Her sense of fun was at least as well developed as Faith’s and Erica’s. So why was she being such a wet blanket? The thought popped into her head that she’d once been a rabble-rouser marching against a war—not towards a synagogue. And in the same era she had taken part in a sit-in for *McGill français*. She didn’t want to do the arithmetic on how long ago that had been. The war she had protested was Vietnam, and she’d never actually voted for the Parti Québécois. But now here she was, toeing the line of convention and tradition, a three-day-a-year Jew rubbing elbows with a crowd of religious fanatics. Not that Faith and Erica were religious fanatics (though Erica with her peculiar, crypto-Jewish background did try too hard sometimes). Nor for that matter were Rabbi Nate or Reisa. But these guys with the *tzitzes* and the *payes* and the white stockings and the air of superiority—what was she doing among them?

Rhoda reminded herself that she wasn’t here for them. She was here for Faith.

And Faith was here because she was the new president, and the presidency had its price. Sure, it had its public highs, which clearly she enjoyed, her smile enormous as she hauled the Torah around the sanctuary at Shabbat services. Or when she addressed the entire congregation in full motivational flight on Rosh Hashanah. She had been so engaging and effective that, besides harvesting many compliments on how well she had spoken, people were now calling the shul office to volunteer to serve on the new committees she had urged them to join.

But there were other duties Faith found onerous, tonight’s street festival being a case in point. She had declared she couldn’t face it without Rhoda and Erica.

Friendship too has its price, Rhoda said to herself. So why then be so grudging about this nocturnal expression of loyalty? Perhaps she ought even to look on the bright side and acknowledge that the weather added a sheen of grace to the proceedings.

Rhoda loved this time of year, loved the distinctive sweet fragrance of decomposing maple leaves. She inhaled deeply and threw her head back to gaze up at the stars that were beginning to glitter.

The singing stopped abruptly, and a flock of black hats began mounting the podium. Rhoda's moment of bliss dissipated. Faith had promised they would leave before any speeches, but clearly it was too bloody late for that.