

Passover Voodoo

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One summer night in 1912, the village constable informed Abraham Abramowitz, age 18, that he was to report for conscription into the Czar's army the following morning. This did not sit well with Abraham, since his Uncle Yitzhak had told him that the Russian Army treated Jews only slightly better than mules. So that night, Abraham and his wife Helena, also 18 packed their meager belongings into two trunks for their journey west, first to Poland and then on, they hoped, to the new world and freedom.

Among the coats and dresses, pots and pans, dishcloths and blankets Helena managed to squeeze into her trunk was a Cluny lace tablecloth. It was Helena's dearest possession—white linen embroidered with lace inserts and pink roses in every stage of bloom. It was her wedding present from Abraham's mother, who died of a blood infection from a needle prick as she sewed their chuppah two weeks before the wedding.

The journey was difficult and frightening, but Abraham and Helena were young, strong and determined. Helena had an uncle who lived in Western Pennsylvania, and so, after passing through Ellis Island, she and Abraham made their way to McKeesport, twelve miles south of Pittsburgh. Abraham found work in the wholesale produce business and Helena began to have babies. She passed down the tablecloth to Miriam, her first and only daughter, who passed it on to her daughter, Esther.

Now the tablecloth drapes over the head and shoulders of Stephanie, 22, Helena's great granddaughter. The lacey edges of the tablecloth brush against the tile floor in her mother's kitchen, where matzoh ball soup bubbles and brisket cools on the counter.

Stephanie looks into the dining room through the eyeholes she's cut in the tablecloth. She sees her father Alan at the head of the table. He and her brother Noah, age 31, discuss which sections of the Seder ceremony they should skip, for the sake of brevity. They have identical bald spots and bangs, so they look like a pair of storybook friars, except that her father's is fringed with grey. Noah says next year he could do his part of the Seder via Face Time, so he wouldn't have to fight the six o'clock traffic.

Stephanie's mother sits to her husband's right, with her back to the kitchen. She asks Great Aunt Minnie, 88, if she's finished with her gefilte fish. She speaks to Minnie as if Minnie is hard of hearing, which is not the case. Minnie is virtually blind due to macular degeneration, but her hearing is as sharp as a fawn's.

His father wants to pass over—no pun intended, he says—everything in the Haggadah text except for the explanation of the six items on the Seder plate, the listing of ten plagues and the four questions.

Noah says, "Why not just do the four questions? They say it all."

Aunt Minnie says, "You're cutting the heart out of it."

As if he didn't hear her, Alan says, "Speaking of the four questions, where is Stephanie?"

His mother gets to her feet. "I have to turn down the soup, it's probably boiled over already." She turns toward the kitchen. She screams, "Oh my God."

Alan says, "What? What?"

"Oh. My. God."

"What? What?"

Her mother points at Stephanie. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Stephanie says, “Hi, Ma.”

Aunt Minnie says, “Is that Stephie?”

Her father and mother stand together, some three feet away. Her brother swivels in his chair. “Stephanie? What the hell?”

“My God, that’s Nana Helena’s tablecloth. Look what she’s done to it, Alan.”

She shouts, “Minnie, your granddaughter is wearing Nana’s tablecloth over her head. She’s ruined it. She cut out eye holes.”

Her brother says, “What are you supposed to be, the ghost of Passover Past?”

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done, young lady? That is a sacred tablecloth passed down from your ancestors, and you have gone and ruined it. It’s a sin. Why, why have you done this?” A sob escapes her lips.

Her father puts his arm around his wife, a show of solidarity. “Answer your mother.”

Stephanie says, “Six items on the Seder plate. Ten plagues. Four questions. As if Passover can be reduced to numbers.”

Aunt Minnie says, “Hear, hear.”

“Let my people go. Charlton Heston parts the Red Sea. The same Passover Voodoo I’ve been hearing since I was six years old. Now Noah wants to do it on Face Time.”

Noah says, “God, Stephie, give it a rest.”

“You want to know why I did this? Because I wanted to know what it feels like to wear a burka. To feel oppressed.”

Noah laughs. “You don’t know anything. Those oppressed *A-rabs* you’re so in love with, they wear it because it’s part of their stupid religion.” He looks to his father, as if for affirmation.

“It’s oppression. They have no choice. Whatever happened to a woman’s right to choose, Noah?”

“Oh, please.”

“What happened to freedom? I thought that was what Passover was supposed to be about. That Jews will never be free until all men—and women—are free. Including the *A-rabs*.”

“God, where did you get that crap, Stephie? Your women’s collective?”

“Shut up, asshole.”

Her mother says, “Stop it the both of you. What in God’s name does this have to do with Passover?”

“Oh ma, go check your soup.”

“Alan?”

Aunt Minnie says, “I think Nana Helena would be proud of you, Stephie. She was looking for freedom, too.”

“Proud? The tablecloth is ruined.”

“It’s just holes. It makes it more interesting. As long as you always remember the story behind it.”

Stephanie sits down next to her aunt. “Aunt Minnie, can you tell me again?”

Minnie puts her arm around her. “Sure, honey. In Russia in 1912.” She takes a long sip of wine. “Abraham and Helena, they were just kids. A little younger than you.”