



## Of Stolen Objects & Places by Jennifer Fliss



My mom kept spices in unused urine specimen cups she'd filched from her job at the hospital. Under the shelf of them, in preparation for the Passover seder, I brought the matzah ball soup to a simmer. From a formerly sterile plastic container, I tossed in some smoked paprika. I then replaced the sample cup on the narrow shelf that held our spices. Name. Date. Doctor. Cayenne. Thyme. Turmeric. My mother taught me to make this soup when I was nine. I've been the one in charge of making it ever since. My mom told me that her mother had taught her.

We lived with her father, my Grandpa Morty. He spent much of his time online, mostly on Google Earth. *Come here, bubbeleh,* he'd say from the small closet-turned-office, and we'd watch the big globe of Earth spiral and zoom into a town in Egypt, in Portugal, a suburb of New York. Desert, grasslands, factories. *My girlfriend,* he would say, tapping the screen at a young woman draped in a red shawl. Or he'd point out a teenage boy on a bike and say, *that is my old friend, Josef.*

But at night, while I was going to bed, he'd be on the computer tapping away and I'd hear him whisper, *Where are they? I can't find them. I can't find you.*

My mom invited everyone in the building to our seder, but only a few said they would come. That year, we had Mr. and Mrs. Garcia from 2A, Heidi, a single thirty-something who lived in 4C, and her new boyfriend, Zeke. We'd met him a few times in the hall. He smelled of marijuana and said things like "gnarly" and "rad." My mom said it was an affectation because, in Wisconsin, people didn't say those things, or if they did, it would've been in Madison. In the eighties or nineties.

As the soup simmered, I helped baste the turkey. The air filled with the scent of poultry fat. On all other days, my mom was irritatingly thrifty, and on this day, she knew no budget; it was a twenty-pound turkey. She filled a syringe bulb with meat juice and handed it to me to drizzle over the bird. I hated to think what the bulb's intended purpose was. It too was something my mother had stolen from the hospital. *Never used*, she'd said, *I swear*.

"A turkey is for Thanksgiving, Mom."

"It's for whenever we eat it."

She pulled out a stainless steel hospital bowl, heaped it with salad; packed charoset into a kidney shaped basin.

My Grandpa Morty leaned in the doorframe. "Rachel, why do I feel like I'm always about to have an enema in this house? Always with the hospital things. You can buy proper jars, bowls." He held up one of the stainless basins. "This is farkakte. This is for vomit and bowel movements. You know this. Yes?" He went to her, placed his hands on her shoulders. "You know this?"

"I know, Dad."

I didn't think that she knew.

My grandfather pulled the seder plate from the cabinet, handling it with reverence. It was an heirloom – gold paint cracking, faded letters for the ritual foods, though we knew where everything went. Out came hardboiled eggs and the parsley and the lamb shank and the kugel and the other kugel and the pile of matzah. I placed small mounds of tangy wine-scented charoset and pungent horseradish on the plate. My mom was instructing me on how to fold the brown hospital-issue paper towels into pleats when the doorbell rang.

She ushered our guests in and offered wine and crudités. "Thanks for having us," Heidi said as she handed my mom a tinfoil package. "I made focaccia this morning."

"Thank you." My mom took the bread and handed it to me. "That's very thoughtful." I stashed it on top of the fridge.

"This is my father, Morty, and my boy, Ben." She introduced us as if we were not also neighbors. "Ben just won his school's spelling bee. Headed to the county championships in a month!"

I was in ninth grade and while bees had been my thing for years, I thought this would be my last. Winning spelling bees and bringing lunch to school in huge bags marked "Milwaukee General" was not the way to win friends in high school.

"What was your winning word?" Mr. Garcia asked.

I looked at my mother. "Purloin," I said and rested my arm on an IV tree masquerading as a plant holder.

"It was not!"

"Okay, fine. Diaspora."

"See? My son, a genius."

“It’s not a hard word, Mom. Plus we’re – ”

“A genius!” She led me to the kitchen to dole out the matzah ball soup into bowls. I inhaled chicken steam, taking care not to burn my fingertips.

My mom was a nurse at a pediatric hospital. One of the best in the nation. State-of-the-art and all that. And still, kids died. All the time. I asked her once if it made her so sad that she ever didn’t want to go back. She curled my hair around my ear and said no. But once, she told me about a thirteen-month-old named Josiah, who had learned to say, *and how are we today?* and the next day died from *fuckincancer*. That night, I saw her in the window tracing the outline of her reflection. I watched as she did this for at least thirty minutes. She then rubbed away her finger marks, yanked the cord, and the blinds clattered down.

*Think outside the box, Benny*, she said when I asked her about the specimen cups. I pointed out that even saying “think outside the box” was not, in fact, thinking outside the box. Every few months, she’d open her backpack and out spilled Band-Aids, tubing, gauze, and new specimen cups. She once sent me to school with some fruit snacks in one and a note came home from Ms. Johnson saying she didn’t think that it was appropriate.

My father had said my mom’s thrifty ways were off-putting; that she was little more than two steps from the shtetl; and where, even, was she keeping her oxen? My father insisted my mom was a thief and Grandpa Morty was a schnorrer. Meanwhile, my father maintained that he was an upwardly-mobile Jew from Scarsdale – *and to hell with this rustbelt town, anyway*. I didn’t know what much of that meant, but I understood the click of the door behind him.

My father paid no child support after he left. My mom had accrued a busload of school debt so, when she wasn’t at the hospital, she sometimes filled the hours working at a copy shop, trying to pay bills, feed me, feed Grandpa Morty, feed herself. She didn’t grow up with much. Grandpa Morty made it to the U.S. after the war with little more than a pair of scratchy trousers, a so-so grasp on English, the seder plate, and a hole in his chest. He eventually moved from Brooklyn to Chicago, got a job as an elementary school custodian, met my grandmother at a dance hall, and married her. The hole in his chest began to fill – like a lake in a drought, slowly. By the time I came around, you might’ve been able to row a shallow boat there, but you could always see the bottom.

My grandmother had been a great cook – Sephardic, she’d make bourekas, mofleta, and sfenj for Hanukkah. On Passover, she hit us over the head with scallions, which she got from her Persian side. She died when I was nine; my father left later the same year. Grandpa Morty moved up to Milwaukee with us a few months after that, where we did just fine and lived in a two-bedroom apartment in an old, beautiful area filled with mansions. I’d ride my bike in the streets under the canopy of maple and ash. Mostly everyone smiled and waved and only once did someone yell about me using their babies’ blood to make “those cracker things you all like so much.”

While our guests mingled in the other room, we finalized the Passover table. My grandpa came in and out, snapped off squares of matzah and then returned to his computer.

“Cry a little into that glass bowl for me, Benny,” my mother said and then laughed a crooked little laugh as she handed me the salt. I sprinkled some into the warm water and tried to see the exact moment the salt crystals dissolved.

“I found it!” my grandpa cried. My mom and I rushed to his side, which we always did, maybe to keep up hope. While scouring the map, he’d mutter in Yiddish, the language of dead Jews, the mother tongue of guttural mourning.

“What did you find?” Heidi asked.

“Whoa. You know how to use the internet?” Zeke asked and laughed.

“Seriously?” I said. I hoped Heidi would dump him.

Grandpa Morty’s best friend, girlfriend, father, mother, and two sisters were all murdered in the fascist amusement parks of Europe. Gas chamber, shot into a ravine, typhoid, botched medical experiment, another gas chamber, and one unknown. He never talked about it, but searching world maps was his way of trying to find the words.

“Like, is that France?” Heidi asked. It was Lithuania. I also won that year’s geography bee.

“It’s a pastime of his,” my mom said.

“No, never mind,” Grandpa Morty said and plugged new coordinates into the text box. His desk was a mosaic of multicolored Post-it notes filled with frantic scribbles.

Zeke snapped a carrot in his rabbit teeth.

“Come on, Dad.” My mom helped him from his chair.

In the dining room, my mother encouraged everyone to sit while she and Mrs. Garcia brought the remaining things to the table.

Once we were all sitting, she held up a pamphlet. “So, this is the Haggadah.”

“Maxwell House?” asked Zeke.

“Like, the coffee?” asked Heidi.

“You guys really do have your hands in everything,” Zeke said. My grandpa made a sound like a horse braying.

“Yes, well, it was a marketing thing for Maxwell House. Became a classic,” my mom said. “Anyway, they tell the story of Passover, the Jews’ escape from Egypt.”

“Rad,” Zeke said, and my grandfather turned to him.

“Rad?”

“Like, cool story.”

My grandfather nudged me under the table, pulled his face into a serious one. “Well sure. Cool story. Rad.” The Garcias shared a smile, looked at me too, and we all made *that* face.

We went in rounds reading the story of the Jews’ escape from the Pharaoh. I asked why this night was different from all others. We three Jews argued about just how much was two zuzim and if it was in fact a good deal for a goat. We sipped wine – juice for me – dipped our fingers and dotted our plates to represent the ten plagues.

Several times, Mrs. Garcia slapped her husband’s hand from his wine glass. Several times, we could hear Zeke crunching on matzah. My stomach growled. My mother stood and pointed out each item on the seder plate: bitter herbs, a leaf of lettuce, parsley, charoset, shank bone, egg.

“Here,” Zeke said, and picked the plate up.

“No, it can stay there,” my mother said. But Zeke still tried to hand the large plate to her over the table, so she reached for it, her hand knocking the underside. The egg wobbled. The bone slid, bounced off the table, and thudded on the ground. The plate followed, but it yielded a different fate, hitting the floor along its side, cracking in half. A speck of horseradish landed on my cheek. Fragments chipped, bounced, spun, and eventually, the seder plate that had been witness and transported from Moscow to Chernigov, to Hamburg, then to New York, to Chicago, and to our little apartment in Milwaukee, made its way to stillness, broken on the hardwood.

We were stunned to silence. Mr. Garcia dabbed a mark on the tablecloth. My mother closed her eyes. Zeke slurped wine and Heidi coughed as if trying to hide the sound. I wiped the horseradish from my cheek, slipping it into my mouth, tasting the burn.

“We didn’t have eggs,” my grandpa said, breaking the silence.

“We have more, Dad.”

“Or matzah, and the power kept going out.”

“Dad,” my mom said as she began to collect the shards with a dustpan. She slid them into the garbage. The larger pieces she placed on the counter.

“And already the Mautners were gone. And the Sieglings. Marta was there, but Karl had been hired by the German Earth and Stone Works Corporation. Ha ha.”

“Dad, are you alright?”

“Hired,” he clucked. “That was me being funny, you know. Karl was sent to Neuengamme. Then Auschwitz. For our last seder, we did not have eggs or matzah or light. We used this plate.”

“I’m sorry man,” said Zeke.

“It’s okay,” my mom said. “It was an accident.”

“It was not,” my grandpa said. “My neighbors said they found the plate later. After the gestapo took what they wanted from our home; they left the garbage. They did not want the plate. But my neighbors also came to see what they could take. They didn’t say this, of course. *You are heroes!* they wanted me to say.” He wrapped his arms around his body. “I did not say.”

“So, you’re German?” Heidi said. I inhaled sharply. My mother refilled wine for the Garcias, whose eyes were darting back and forth. I poured more juice.

“Heidi,” my grandpa said. “Nice German name.” She smiled, naivete blooming on her cheeks like roses.

“When I was a baby, we lived in a village in Chernigov. I don’t even recall the name. I cannot find it on a map.”

“Where’s that?” Heidi asked.

“It is now Ukraine.”

“Oh, um,” Heidi stammered. “I hear it’s really nice,”

“Is that what you hear?”

“Yes?”

“We were just always having to be moving, you know,” my grandpa said. “Do you know the Wikipedia?”

“Oh, I use it for school,” Heidi said. She was getting her MBA, which my mother had said was *unexpected, but good for her*.

“The Wikipedia has a list of towns, Jewish villages. In the Cherta Osedlosti. Ukraine. Russia. Lithuania. All over there were Jewish places. What is a Jewish place, you might ask? And I will say a place where there are Jews.”

“Shtetls,” Mrs. Garcia said.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Like *Fiddler on the Roof*,” Zeke said.

“So on the Wikipedia, beside the names of these Jewish places it says things like *city survived, but all Jews exterminated*. Next to all of them it says, *town survived, city survived*, but I call the bullshit.” He stood up, pulled his yarmulke from his head, and flung it to the ground.

“Grandpa?” I asked. He swigged the wine from his glass.

“Why would such a list exist if the places all survived? What even does it mean for a town to survive? If a town of all Jews survives but all the Jews are killed or forced to leave, who or what, I may ask, is surviving? What does it become when there are no Jews anymore? Who is writing such things? What of the places not on that list? On that Wikipedia?” Sweat was forming at his temples. He was wringing his leathery hands, the ones he used to rub my arms when I had nightmares. I learned in science that as we age, we lose elasticity in our skin. I would pinch his skin and see how long it took for it to return to its place, protecting his bones, protecting me.

“Grandpa,” I said softly. “Anyone can edit a Wikipedia page.”

“There is something strange there. These places did not survive at all.” He left the room. I picked up a tiny mound of charoset and slipped it into my mouth, to cover up the lingering taste of horseradish. Moments later we heard the clickety-clack of a keyboard.

We gave up on the Haggadah and ate. My mother made a plate for my grandpa and I brought it to him. He took it and brushed his fingers along mine in a non-accidental way and grunted. He was scrolling quickly through a Wikipedia entry. Names and names and names until they were only black smudges on a white page.

Back in the dining room, I resumed my seat.

“Do you want to finish?” Mrs. Garcia asked. “You know, with the book?” She held up the Haggadah. “The coffee book?”

We all laughed.

“I’m sure none of you care,” my mother said. “But I’m going to throw in a spoiler here. We did it. We made it out of Egypt.”

“Rad,” said Zeke as he toasted her. As if he could have never guessed this was the outcome of the Passover story, the survival of us.

After cleaning up, I went back to my grandfather.

“Hey Grandpa.”

He patted a chair next to his desk. “Hay is for horses.”

“Sorry about the plate.”

He swiveled his chair to face me. “It is just a thing. You know? A thing?” The vacuum was going. I could hear the murmuring of the Garcias talking with Heidi and Zeke.

“Maybe we can glue it?” I said.

“Maybe, but it is missing pieces,” he said. “Big pieces. You know? Big important pieces?”

“Yeah.”

“Small important pieces too,” he said. “But it is still beautiful.” He held up the two large remnants. He must have filched them from the kitchen.

My mother approached and pushed the vacuum at my feet. I lifted them so she could get under the chair. She did this and then turned the machine off.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “It is okay because I found them.”

“Them?”

“Us.”

He read coordinates from a pink Post-it. Typed them into the box. Dragged the mouse to the magnifying glass. The globe pulled out and out and then in, quickly, dizzily. He tapped his nail on the screen. “Here. I found us.”

On the screen, a bustling marketplace. Above a doorway, was an etched Star of David. A single star, almost primitive looking, above what looked like a convenience store.

“Here is proof,” he whispered and pulled us close.

“*We* are proof, Dad.”

“Yes, that is also true.” He turned to me. “You know as they say, dayenu.” That would have been enough. We are enough.

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