

Stories from the Wilderness

written by Guest Contributor | April 1, 2021



This is how one story goes: My PopPop's PopPop and his family fled Romania sometime in the decades leading up to the holocaust, leaving behind land and family and lives in order to escape Romanian pogroms and the rising tide of antisemitism in Europe. The name Kleckner is a stolen one, from a phone book, maybe, or a German neighbor—it changes with each retelling—that enabled them to enter the United States when they would otherwise have been turned away. As a child, I imagined something like *The Sound of Music*, which I'd seen more than once because it was the longest movie my mom could think of to keep me and my siblings occupied during home renovation projects: the sneaking out in the dead of night, the thrilling pursuit, a country that was only just beginning to be dangerous to live in. I knew that we were not Holocaust survivors—although my public-school education held that this was just about the only story of Jewish history there was, so I still felt a connection—but I had the impression that we had perhaps made it out just in time.

Here is another: At my parents' wedding, a unitarian minister presides over the Great Hall at Ripon College, my mom's alma mater. My mom walks down the aisle in a long white dress, and my dad visibly tears up, his joy clear even on the grainy tape recording from 1997. The minister speaks plainly about bringing together two people and two families and two faith traditions. In the tape, his face is obscured by one side of the chuppah. A friend of my mother's reads from the Bible. My parents break a glass, which for practical reasons is really a lightbulb wrapped in a cloth napkin. At the reception, my Grandma Honey is thwarted in her attempt to dance on a table in celebration.

We used to watch the video every year on their anniversary, as a matter of tradition. Tradition is, by definition, a part of every culture, and we grew up with more than most; December was particularly busy, with three Christmases, two birthdays, and eight nights of Hanukkah. Tradition, for us, is breaking fast on Yom Kippur at my grandparents' house, with bagels and lox and two kinds of blintzes. Tradition is the way Grandma Honey answers every phone call with "What's wrong?". Tradition is lighting candles each night of Hanukkah, reciting the same words our ancestors said before us and theirs said before them, and tradition is throwing out an extra prayer on the last night that we don't burn the house down when we light every menorah we own and eat dinner by the glow of the candles and of the Christmas tree in the

background. Tradition is Passover Seder, which we had with my grandparents when I was young, and then, as their winters in Florida crept further and further into spring, at our house, where my Lutheran mother makes the latkes and the matzo ball soup, and the Haggadah from which my brother reads the four questions has a footnote on every single page, "Adapted by Jason Kleckner without permission," which our dad did so that we only have to recite *some* of the words that our ancestors said before us and theirs before them, allowing us to eat after only about an hour of ceremony, instead of four.

There's a popular joke that the central message of every Jewish holiday is "they tried to kill us, we survived; let's eat!", and it is especially true of Passover, when the foods we eat for Seder are particularly representative of the suffering we endured in order to eat them. Pesach, the lamb sacrificed so that our firstborn children would be spared from the tenth plague; matzo, unleavened because we left Egypt before our bread could rise; maror, bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness of our pain and suffering in Egypt. Tradition teaches us that in every generation, we are obligated to look upon ourselves as if we personally had come out of Egypt, and in a way, many of us have; the story of our oppression in and exodus from Egypt is one that is repeatedly mirrored across history.

This is another story: Last February, I spent a weekend in Krakow with the most annoying of the three roommates I had in Paris, all of us Americans in the same study abroad program. After a two-hour flight that we nearly missed and a nightcap of Polish vodka that tasted like nail polish remover, we wake up at five in the morning to get a shuttle to Auschwitz. (My sister texts me the night before, to remind me that under Polish law I can be arrested if I say anything to suggest that Poland was maybe a little bit complicit in the atrocities that took place on their soil: "If you're not careful, they'll keep you there," she teases. I counter, "You mean you don't want me to get the interactive experience?" because I don't know how else to prepare myself for what I'll see.) It's a cloudy day, and when we walk through the gates at 7:45, the air is still damp, the brick buildings and barbed wire shrouded in a foggy haze. For the first hour, before any of the guided tour groups arrive, the camp is hauntingly silent, except for the crunch of gravel under our feet. We spend most of the day there. I cannot describe what it felt like.

Back in Paris, I sit with my heritage. I have missed many Passovers since leaving for college—we are not Jewish enough to warrant a five-hour drive home for a bowl of soup and a story we've all heard before—but there is a sense of responsibility that comes with the weight in my chest of the generations that came before me, and it no longer feels either inconvenient or inconsequential to observe tradition even when I am alone and far from home. My parents had told me before I left home, half-joking, to avoid delis while I was in France—where, as in the States, antisemitism has been rising in recent years—so I don't text my mom to ask her for advice on preparing

lamb. It joins my search history, under *do they have horseradish in France* (they don't). I compile a list on my phone; soup seems not worth the effort, but charoset is simple enough. The Monoprix on our corner has all of the fresh bread you would expect of a French grocery store, but the ones in arrondissements with larger Jewish populations will have matzo in time for Passover. I look up the metro route for future reference and feel a quiet kinship every day when I pass the apartment two floors below ours with the mezuzah nailed to its doorway.

In Romania, accusations of blood libel resulted in mob killings of Jewish communities in the middle ages and 1800s. They were regularly rounded up for pogroms or forced military conscription. Various laws explicitly prevented Jewish citizenship; others prevented non-citizens from holding most kinds of jobs or from owning land in most parts of the countryside. In the 1890's, legislation prevented Jewish children from attending public schools. Tens of thousands of Jews left the country between 1898 and 1904. This was not a country that was just beginning to be dangerous; this was a country that had never been safe.

We don't know what year my great-grandfather, Philip Kleckner, left Romania. My PopPop attempted some genealogical research a few years back, but the Ellis Island site only has records of the relatives Philip sponsored: a brother in 1906, their parents and two more brothers in 1909, and a few others. Philip would have been the eldest son, sent ahead of his family to pave the way, securing a job of unknown variety and an address in Brooklyn. He may have sent money home to his family in Romania to help them make their eventual journey to America.

In March, when the coronavirus begins to pose a threat to Europe and the United States, I and hundreds of other study abroad students are frantically pulled out of France in a whirlwind of program shutdowns and travel restrictions announced in the middle of the night. I am on facetime with my mom, who is on the phone with Grandma Honey, who is watching PopPop trying to use whatever special status thirty years of travelling for work has earned him at Delta to try to get me home before the end of the weekend, while swathes of international flights are being cancelled in real time. When the improvised phone tree dissolves around dinnertime, I have a ticket booked for nine a.m., a flight which could be considered to be either seven hours, four days, or two months earlier than I had planned to leave, depending on which point in the last forty-eight hours is being considered. It feels like it might very well be the last possible flight out of the country, if it doesn't get cancelled before morning. (I knock on wood). "Seems our family has a habit of fleeing Europe in a hurry," my mom says. I stay awake all night, packing, repacking, and pacing the length of the apartment I called home for just over a month, leaving for the airport when it's still dark outside. In Minneapolis, I quarantine for two weeks, then go home and spend Passover with my family for the first time in three years.

My dad reads from the Haggadah:

Following the slaying of the first born, Pharaoh allowed the Jewish people to leave. The Jews left Egypt in such haste that their dough did not rise, so they ate *matzo*. When Pharaoh changed his mind and chased after the Israelites, God miraculously caused the Red Sea to split, allowing the Israelites to cross safely. When the Egyptians entered the Sea, it returned to its natural state and the mighty Egyptian army drowned.

I am four years old. We are at my grandparents' house after church on a Sunday morning, because Grandma Honey wanted to see us in our Easter dresses. It is Passover, or recently has been, and I am enthralled by the story of Exodus, particularly the part where little redheaded girls convince their grandparents to pretend to be the Pharaoh and to chase them all around the living room. ("I was a lot younger then," Grandma Honey always says). My parents sit on the couch with my baby sister, while I run laps with Grandma around the wall that divides the front of the house from the back. "Chase us, PopPop, chase us! You're the Pharaoh!" I shout, running down the hall towards the bedrooms. "Me and Grandma don't even have time to stop and make girl bread!"

"It was like a record scratch," my mom says. "Everyone stopped to look at you."

When I had been coerced back into the living room, I was persuaded to explain myself; my dad didn't eat leavened bread during Passover, but my mom still made us sandwiches for lunch while he was at work—somehow, nobody had ever quite explained to me why that was, and I had drawn my own conclusions. "After that, we changed how we did things," my mom says, when I call her to confirm my memory of how the story is told. "I guess we could've explained it to you and moved on. But we decided the whole family would eat matzo during Passover. There was no reason not to. It had just been easier to make sandwiches." We talk for a few more minutes—she asks me to explain what I'm writing about, and I do my best, though I'm not completely sure myself, yet. (I still don't tell her about my abandoned plans for a Seder in Paris). We circle back to the various challenges of raising and of being raised in an interfaith family. "Cause your dad and I, we're just making this up as we go along," she says, speaking as if it's still a work in progress, which surprises me, but shouldn't, and is encouraging, too; if they haven't figured it out yet after twenty-two years, I guess it's okay that I haven't, either.

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In elementary school, I thought of myself as half-Jewish, before I learned that religion wasn't the kind of heritage you could share in proportions. By high school, I had grown enough to understand that being Jewish was more than just a fun fact that let me feel unique among the other kids, but I didn't feel the need to examine its role in my life; everyone that mattered knew me well enough to know the specifics of my family's culture, regardless of how I labelled whatever my personal identity might have been, and I didn't think about it that much. There were more pressing concerns: discovering and coming to terms with my asexuality; wrestling with my ADHD as I tried to balance college applications on top of seven classes, after-school theater rehearsals, and online gym; arguing with my siblings over whose turn it was to unload the dishwasher instead of who would be more likely to get themselves arrested given the political climates of various European nations (we've since learned to multitask).

My grandparents went to college in the sixties, PopPop migrating from a very Jewish neighborhood in New York to a school upstate. In his first week on campus, a classmate came into his room, searching his face curiously. "What are you looking for?" PopPop asked. "Your horns," the other student replied. ("I didn't think I had moved that far," PopPop tells me, "but he was serious.")

When I start college, in an effort to explain my background to new friends without the built-in illustration of spending holiday dinners with my family—we are not Jewish enough to warrant a five-hour drive home to sit in temple for four hours on an empty stomach—I laugh and tell them, think of it this way: "I'm more Jewish than people who aren't Jewish." It begins to weigh on me a little more with each repetition. (My mom, at home, sometimes calls our family "Jew-ish," which amounts to the same thing: not Jewish enough). I ignore the discomfort that comes with laughing off the half of my heritage that had always felt more salient to who I am, and sit quietly in the back when my first gender studies class turns out also to be the first time I find myself in a room full of women unquestionably more Jewish than I am.

I don't know what to do with this feeling of loss. It's been building for months, since the first time I had to say, "No, we're only sort of Jewish," or maybe for much longer, and it culminates now, in a class about food and social justice, while a number of my classmates discuss celebrating holidays like Purim and Sukkot with food traditions I've never heard of. I don't ask my parents why we observed the holidays we did, and not different ones. It doesn't occur to me. There won't be an answer that does anything to resolve a cultural disconnect nineteen years in the making.

When you grow up half-Jewish, not going to synagogue or to Hebrew school, only celebrating a handful of holidays that you are mostly too young to understand the significance of, what you know about Judaism is what you learn in Social Studies about World War II. You check out Anne Frank's diary from the library at your elementary school and read it with the same fervor and

emotional investment with which you'd read *Romeo and Juliet* the week before—which is to say, quite a lot, because you're nine, and invested in everything; not because it feels personal.

Not yet.

"I had a nickname in the dorms," PopPop says: "'Jack the Jew', because I was the only one."

It was fine, he says, he didn't mind it, except for one guy; "I could tell, when he said it, he *meant* it."

I never fully understood why so many of the Jewish people I had begun to follow on Twitter were so firm in their belief that it was disrespectful for non-Jews to refer to us as Jews—I grew up in a family where my dad once printed a little paper sign that said "Jew-ber" in the style of the Uber logo, to put on his dashboard when picking us up from church on Christmas Eve—until last fall, when I took a politics course on human rights, with the expected Holocaust unit, and on the first day another student said something completely innocuous about "The Jews," with a smirk on his face and in his voice that made my skin crawl, and I thought to myself, oh, I get it now. (He would later reference "the Jewish Question" with just enough plausible deniability in context that I couldn't call him out for speaking as though he believed it was a legitimate concept—but nobody else in class ever found reason to reference Hitler's ideologies using his preferred euphemism.)

Tens of thousands of Jews left Romania between 1898 and 1904. There are no specific emigration records; the numbers are estimated from the declining proportion of Jews among the general population. The rate of emigration cannot be estimated after 1904, because in 1905, targeted by a spike in pogroms and murderously antisemitic riots, Russian Jews fled their homeland en masse, many settling in other Eastern European countries.

In the Ellis Island records, PopPop found his mother's father, Isac Merin, who came alone from Minsk in 1904 with eighteen dollars to his name (Ships manifests from Eastern Europe are full of passengers with eighteen dollars to declare; eighteen is a *chai*, a lucky number, and we are a superstitious people). He told me that he hadn't been able to find anything about his grandmothers, because he doesn't remember their maiden names.

(Names in Jewish culture are a matter of some significance. When my little sister was born, my mom wanted her middle name to be Ruth, after PopPop's mother. My dad vetoed this outright; Big Mama, as I called her, unable to wrap my tongue around "great grandma," was still alive, which made it bad luck to give Isabel her name. As a child, I lamented with relish how close I'd come to having a sister whose initials spelled "irk," which I felt would have been an appropriate label for her).

My grandmother's maiden name is Burton, which her father changed from

Bierholtz when he was going into business in New York, probably sometime in the 1930s. "It was better not to be a Bierholtz," Grandma Honey says.

Our name, Kleckner, was changed in Romania; it was PopPop's great-uncle Benny, the youngest of the brothers brought by Philip to America, who told him the story, when he was young. It would have been a family gathering, larger than the dinners and holidays I've grown up with; Philip had eight children. ("My father always joked that he was half the man his father was," says PopPop, "because he only had four.") Speaking through the good-natured heckling by PopPop's aunts and the side comments and mid-sentence contributions that are inevitable in a culture with a strong tradition of participatory listening, Uncle Benny revealed that it was a great-great-great-grandfather of PopPop's who took the name of a neighboring German family to the German embassy, hoping to escape the ongoing pogrom by gaining German citizenship for his family. The original name, according to PopPop, Uncle Benny thought may have been something like Hurtag or Hurtig. But Kleckner is the name that we chose, to keep us safe.

In 2013, during the government shutdown, my family took a trip to DC, where we visited the Holocaust museum. My memory is hazy; I can see the shape of the room, a mountain of stolen shoes, a catwalk where walls stretch far above our heads and every inch is lined with photos and names of the dead. The featured exhibit at the time was about neighbors, and demonstrated that more often than not, the everyday people who aided Jewish refugees suffered no serious personal consequences. Yet we are taught that those who passively supported the Nazis had reason to fear for their own lives. People want to excuse their ancestors for their inaction. They want to excuse themselves, too; they are afraid to know what choices they would have made.

Here is another story: in my first semester at Cornell, I had a friend who we'll call Andrew, because that was his name, and this is not a story that warrants anonymity. We were close right away; he was tall and charismatic and we traded stories about our summers, mine featuring an introduction to Dungeons and Dragons, and his, vivid hallucinations as a result of testing the limits of how long he could go without sleep. When he didn't come back to Cornell the next semester (as a direct result of not having gone to most of his classes in the first), we continued to text regularly, and called each other on occasion to talk about our lives or to argue about Star Wars.

That April, I leave a comment on a Facebook post he'd shared, in which I express the opinion that America's Japanese internment camps were racist and indefensible. I don't believe that this is an opinion that has anything to do with my cultural background; it feels like an obvious one.

It isn't long before another of Andrew's friends responds to my comment: "(((Kleckner)))," he writes first, and then, "the fucking stereotype is true every time. Even down to the Khazar snout."

I have to look up the meaning behind both the parentheses and the insult.

My account is private; he's determined my heritage based on nothing but my name.

Like any member of any kind of marginalized group, I am wary of threats that I've never encountered. I've never been catcalled, that I remember, but I still think about the possibility whenever I leave the house. I'd never been targeted before for being Jewish, but I wasn't unaware of the possibility; I had not watched *The Sound of Music* dozens of times as a child only to not believe in Nazis. I had known, too, albeit vaguely, that Andrew had online friends with political beliefs I would disagree with. I had not known that when confronted with the choice, he would defend them instead of me.

"Lmao Kendall's no Nazi," Andrew texts me, after explaining his friend's remarks, at my request, in much more ambiguous terms than those I'd discovered on my own. "Jews aren't his only axe to grind or even his biggest tbh." He argues that his friend's comment was not actually meant to suggest that my connection to Judaism invalidated my opinions, but somehow never gets around to explaining what the more palatable intention was. When I ask if he is going to intervene on my behalf, he declines, citing the moral high ground of "not getting involved in the comments section." We don't speak again after this week.

Our mutual friends at Cornell, all of whom I'm still friends with three years later, are sitting next to me in the dorm lobby throughout most of the exchange, and none of them logs on to step in, either. I don't trust that any of them would act differently now. I don't know what kinds of actions I'd trust them to take in a more serious situation, or what would have to happen before they'd see something as serious at all. I try not to think about it. I don't think I want to know.

(That summer, when I re-watch *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* with my family, Moishe says, "You have to pick your friends as if there's a war going on. You want someone who'll take a bullet for you, not one who points to the attic and says, they're up there!"—and I wonder.)

When I take to the comments section to confront Kendall myself, he spews an impressively florid and exceptionally vague explanation of the "unnatural" history and political goals of Judaism, which he calls "essentially entropic in nature." Me, he deems "a living stereotype of whiny Judaic interloping,"

demanding that I somehow prove him wrong in this point despite having already decided that everything I've said is as a result of the political agenda of my people and through no agency of my own. He gives us far more credit than we deserve; Jews have an entire religious text dedicated to ancient Rabbis disagreeing about Torah, and we're far too busy arguing over whether sour cream or applesauce is the superior latke topping to rally behind a single cohesive conspiracy.

I could have played dumb from the beginning. I could have said, I'm not Jewish, and I don't know what you're talking about. I hadn't known until that moment that my name, stolen to protect us from people like him, was still a Jewish one; he might have believed me if I'd claimed not to have known that we'd ever been Jewish at all. I could have told him that I grew up going to Sunday school and had a job lined up that summer to lead a day camp at my mom's church. I don't know if he would have listened to what I had to say either way—he seemed firmly to believe that my original comment had been unrelated to the discussion at hand, and ended our exchange by calling me “a stupid little girl,” so I doubt it would have made a difference—but I was never going to do any of that. I may not have felt comfortable claiming my heritage just yet, but I wasn't going to deny it, either. Not for him.

(The next fall, I'm sitting in the back of the theater seeing *BlackKkKlansman* with some friends when Adam Driver says, “I'm Jewish, yes, but I wasn't raised to be. I never thought much about being Jewish...And now I'm in some basement, denying it out loud. Now I'm thinking about it all the time.” It slots into place in my chest, fitting neatly into a gap next to the still-new drive to *be* Jewish, not just to *feel* Jewish—or maybe the other way around—and I cry quietly in the dark.)

The Ellis Island database doesn't have records for anyone by the name of Bierholtz; the names of Grandma Honey's mother's parents prompt fifteen and forty-eight entries, respectively, none of them with anything close to the estimated dates, ages, or locations associated with her grandparents. “I guess I was just placed here,” she jokes. “I have no ancestors.” She tells me that she has a cousin who thinks her father's family might have come by way of Canada, but they aren't sure, and when I find the Canadian equivalent of the Ellis Island site, it can only be searched by ship name. We don't even have a year.

Isac Merin, PopPop's maternal grandfather, went on to run Fox Square Laundry in the Bronx. When my grandparents were dating, the business came up once in conversation between PopPop and his mother-in-law, my dad's Grandma Evie; “She said, “Oh, so you're rich!”—when I knew my grandfather, we weren't rich anymore,” PopPop chuckles. “But she knew the name, because, although it wasn't a ghetto, there were a lot of Jews, when they came to the country, lived in the upper Bronx.” His definition of “ghetto” doesn't come from the slang term, but from the walled neighborhoods in cities across Nazi-occupied Europe where Jews were forced to live apart from respectable society. “You

know, everyone lived in kind of a ghetto in New York, the Irish had their area, the Jews had their area, and so on. Because everyone wanted to stay close to each other, for community.” My grandparents moved to Minnesota when my dad was in junior high. They were the only Jewish family in their neighborhood.

“When I was growing up, we were only allowed to date Jewish boys,” Grandma Honey says on a four-way facetime call with me and my siblings. She and PopPop have mastered the art of taking joint video calls from separate patio chairs by splitting the difference between them, so my view through their camera is of a blank wall. “And there was one black boy at our synagogue, and my cousin Hope wasn’t allowed to date him, either,” she remembers. “When I dated Italian boys, I just lied about his last name to my parents to make him sound Jewish.”

My mom told us once that when she got engaged, she was worried about what might happen when she told her grandmother. She’d grown up knowing that when her parents got married, her dad’s mom had insisted that her daughter-in-law convert to Catholicism. My mom was raised Lutheran after her parents’ divorce, and while she was close to her grandmother, she wasn’t sure if she would react well to learning that her granddaughter was going to marry a Jewish man.

“Did you have that expectation for your kids?” Isabel asks. Our dad and his younger brother both married Christian women; their oldest brother is unmarried. “I mean, you expect it, sure,” PopPop says. He compares it to having a child who’s gay, “or whatever,” and Isabel and I manage a mutual understanding of apprehensive eye contact through our screens. “You have expectations, and you want their life to be easy, and it’s easier if you do certain things or stay with people in your culture and community. But in the end what matters is if they’re happy.”

The way the story goes, when my mom called to announce her engagement, her German-Catholic grandmother had one question.

“Do you love him?”

I call Isabel while scrolling through ships’ manifests on the Ellis Island site, trying to corroborate what I remember from talking to PopPop months earlier before I re-listen to the ninety-minute recording of our conversation.

“It’s his mom’s side of the family, from Russia,” I tell her. “I think they all came over together.”

"And they all have eighteen dollars, right?" asks Isabel. "Because everyone had eighteen dollars."

"They all had eighteen dollars," I remember, "except the father, who had thirty-something, for the family."

"And that was kind of a lot of money, too," she continues. "Like, you know sometimes the whole community came together to make sure someone would have the right amount of money for good luck. I imagine, like, the little Jewish grandma giving some guy her life savings, so he can have eighteen dollars instead of seventeen."

I look up the inflation rate. "I don't want to burst your bubble, but I don't think her life savings was one dollar," I tell her. "Besides, we had money in Russia."

"Don't ruin my fantasy with your facts," she says. "It's not about the money. It's about the love."

I remember going to the movies on Christmas Day as a family, back when the tickets were physically purchased at the theater, and our dad would distribute them, one by one, just before it was time to have them scanned, rather than trusting us to keep track of our own tickets in the twenty feet between the kiosk and the attendant. PopPop did the same with Vikings tickets when he took two of his adult sons and me to a football game when I was young. Having now travelled across an ocean and back on my own, I'm still not sure if on the next family trip—if it's ever safe to travel again—I'll be deemed capable of holding onto my own boarding pass before we get within thirty feet of the TSA.

I imagine the patriarch of this generation, holding up the line at Ellis Island in order to dole out eighteen dollars to each of his children so that it will be written down, for us to read a hundred years in the future, that they each came into the country with a lucky amount of money to start their new life.

"And then collecting it back right away again on the other side," Isabel adds.

"Obviously."

We speculate for a while on the father's possession of thirty-something dollars, instead of a multiple of eighteen; the most likely explanation is, of course, that it was simply the remainder of whatever money they'd had that was in cash, rather than sewn into their clothes as jewelry and things, as was common practice; but my sister and I entertain ourselves by superimposing our own parents, grandparents, and lovingly-held stereotypes of old Jewish people onto the Russian great-great-grandparents we've never met, falling a little bit in love with the fictionalized versions.

It's obvious, we decide, that dad has struck up a conversation along the way with another passenger; some teenager, maybe, so proud of himself for being sent ahead of his entire family with a whole sixteen-fifty in his pocket, and

dad says, no, son, that's not the way it's done. You need eighteen dollars, for the best start possible. The lucky number to bring luck in America; and he gives him some money. Or maybe it was a young woman with a toddler, finally joining her husband who left for America before ever getting to meet their child, and as they're all getting off the boat, she's checking her pockets, and she can't find her last dollar; she's lost it, or she miscounted all along, and she's so tired, and mom says, "Isac, look at the poor girl. Give her some money, you know is bad luck to come to United States with only seventeen dollars," and Isac, already reaching for his wallet, argues, "What about my good luck? I don't need a chai for good luck in America?" and mom says, "Don't be ridiculous, you don't need luck, you have me. Idiot man."

"Okay, never mind, he didn't die young," Isabel says. "He lived a long and fulfilling life, because that's a mitzvah."

"That's what happened," I tell her. "Who's going to prove otherwise?"

(The record, in fact, proves that I'd mixed up two of the stories; Isac Merin, just twenty-five in 1904, travelled alone and carried exactly eighteen dollars, as many passengers did; Philip Kleckner's parents and brothers, in 1906, are grouped together on the page, with thirty dollars attributed to the father, for the family. I hold onto the stories we imagined, though, the ones that made our ancestors feel real and familiar. I wonder, if we were to repeat the joke to our brother, or to our cousins, or to our children, if someone along the way will forget that the story is an invented one; if it too will join the family lore, already patched with guesses and misrememberings and blank spaces we have no way to fill; if someday, someone will believe this, too. After all, it might have happened, to someone, in some form. Who's going to prove otherwise?)

"Oh," Isabel says, "He did, though. We know that they did all live long and fulfilling lives. Because we're still here."

Tradition teaches us that in every generation, we are obligated to look upon ourselves as if we personally had come out of Egypt. We all were there, coming out of Europe, coming to America, changing our names and our lives with no idea of what might lie ahead. And we are all here, now.

"We're just making this up as we go along," my mom tells me.

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We didn't grow up going to temple, except on Yom Kippur, once my sister was old enough to fast and began asking if we could spend six hours at services instead of in school. The first time I actually set foot in Shir Tikvah, the

reform synagogue across the street from our elementary school, was when they lent their sanctuary to my high school for IB testing. When my grandparents took me with them to New York to visit my Uncle Scott the summer I was twelve, they said it was in place of whatever they would have done for my bat-mitzvah, but Hebrew school had never been a consideration. If it had been, I think I still would gladly have given it up to spend my Wednesday nights with the children's choir in the basement of my mom's church.

We were Jewish the way some families have game nights; it was something we did, for the holidays, but not something we talked about on an everyday basis. It was part of our family culture, something we shared along with the experience of growing up in a house that was constantly under construction. It was important, but it was also, for a long time, something that felt like it was just ours. There were two other Jewish kids in my grade in elementary school, but I wasn't friends with either of them. I had a friend whose family was made up like ours, half-Jewish on her dad's side, but we fell out of contact long before I started thinking in any depth about what it meant to have this heritage.

The connection between our family traditions and a broader culture was always an abstract one. I knew, of course, that other Jewish people were Jewish together, in community, but that just wasn't how we'd always done it. And I knew from a very young age that the relationship between Judaism and the rest of the world was not always a friendly one. When I was in first grade, we moved from one side of Minneapolis to the other, and my mom found a new church closer to our new house. It was a process she was intentional about. She told us, explicitly, that she didn't want to attend a church where her kids would grow up being told that their dad was going to hell, and we didn't. But we knew, in an abstract sort of way, that we could have.

When PopPop was in seventh or eighth grade, he tells me, he had some friends he would hang out with, and one of them was a girl he was seeing. "We'd maybe gone to the movies, held hands once," he says. "How old are eighth graders? Thirteen? Fourteen?" After a few days, the girl came back and told PopPop that her priest had told her she couldn't date him; "Because I was Jewish, and I was going to hell, I might corrupt her," PopPop remembers. He laughs. "We were twelve years old. We hadn't kissed or anything. But that's what they were taught." PopPop recalls that the rabbi at his Hebrew school was very progressive, and that they learned about and attended the services of many other religions as part of their studies. "In New York, you can do that," he says, "because there's a little bit of everyone." He says he grew up thinking that everyone must know a little bit about religions other than their own, because living in New York, even his non-Jewish friends had some awareness of what it meant for him to be Jewish.

"I have a hard time answering that question," PopPop says. "It's part of who I am but I can't put it into words. Like describing love. It's one of those things that's hard to describe."

"I've never been anything else. It's the only thing I know," Grandma Honey says. "I don't know what else I would want from life."

When I ask them about their identity, they don't always have answers; both of them grew up in Jewish neighborhoods and went to school with other Jewish families, and never had to think much about why they were Jewish or how they felt about it. For me, it's been a choice; for them, it's the way things have always been.

"It's part of my identity," my dad tells me, "But I'm not sure. it's not something I outwardly display, you know? I'll wear a Wisconsin Badgers shirt out, but I'm not going to wear an 'I'm Jewish' shirt." (He has, in the past, worn Hanukkah-themed socks to my mom's parents' houses for Christmas). "There's an element of shared history there, which is maybe more perceived than real. But there's something about being similar to other Jewish people that matters."

Grandma Honey had less of a formal religious upbringing than PopPop did, and while my dad went to Hebrew school and had a bar mitzvah, he says that for him, it's not about the religion or a belief in god, but about family, and food, and gatherings; family traditions that happen to revolve around religious things, but are more about being together as a family, and a connection to the past. We don't do things exactly the way he did them growing up, and he didn't grow up doing exactly what either of his parents had done; but every generation brings something forward with them.

I text my brother to ask him how he thinks our interfaith upbringing has shaped him. (Xander is fifteen, and I think he's probably thought about as much about his religious and cultural identity as I had at that age, if not less; he is attending high school in a much more tumultuous period in history.) He says, "It was pretty good, why?"

He elaborates with only minimal prompting (but not before I screenshot the exchange for future generations). "I like our traditions, because it's a good time to enjoy each other's company," he says. "I like making fun of a holiday while we are actively celebrating it. I think it was nice growing up to have a different perspective on things, that having parents from two different religions allowed me to be more open to new ideas." (This is the angle that I cheerfully exploited for every one of my college application essays, and I fully expect both of my siblings to do the same; but just because it's easily cliched doesn't mean it isn't true.)

"I guess knowing that two people from different religions could get along together, and not only want each other to practice but to participate in each other's traditions, it made it seem to me like maybe one thing doesn't always need to be right. Like, there can be multiple correct things, not only in religion but in life in general."

For my mom, her religion has always been about the religious part of it. My dad said this made it easier to decide how religion would be incorporated into our lives as a family; we went to church because church was important to her, and we engaged culturally with Jewish traditions as a family, because that's what was important to my dad. I never had a formal education on being Jewish. My sister and I have talked about seeking it out, about attending services at Shir Tikvah, but it hasn't happened yet; our distaste for going to church services growing up had as much to do with 'going' as it did 'church,' and I'm not religious, anyway; though a concrete belief in god isn't a requirement of Reform Judaism.

(Judaism has a long tradition of wrestling with god, of having doubt and uncertainties and asking questions, and we should have all realized long ago that I was made for leaning into this side of my identity; when I was in a church youth group, we had an assignment to write an essay about what we believed in, and mine was four pages of "I don't know, and nobody else knows anything for sure, either.")

So I'm probably not going to start going to temple anytime soon. Instead, I follow progressive Reform rabbis on Twitter and I drink in what they have to teach me. I read a thread from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg about repentance; in Judaism, when harm is done, the focus is not on the victim to forgive, but on the perpetrator, to work to repair the damage they've caused. It resonates with me, putting into words something I already believed without anyone telling me to. It feels good to choose this, and it feels better every time I realize how much of it already fits with who I am; that I have grown to be a very Jewish person all on my own. It feels like maybe I was always meant to reach this place, one way or another.

"We just got to take the scenic route," says Isabel.

Earlier in this essay, I alluded to once having felt a nebulous distinction between "being" Jewish and "feeling" Jewish; I think now that a more complete assessment would have been threefold. When I ask my grandparents what feels most important to them about Judaism, Grandma Honey says tradition. "I don't necessarily believe in things. But I believe it's important to have tradition, something to celebrate, something to do as a family together." This is "doing" Judaism; the break-fasts and the Seders and the candles, saying the words that our ancestors said before us and theirs before them.

"Being" Jewish, in this equation, is both more abstract and more internal than the "doing" of it. My sister and I have discussed how affirming it is when we find that Jewish cultural attitudes and values and beliefs align with ones we already held; my dad recalls looking up the name of a potential

employer during his most recent job search. "And I was like, oh, Rosenblat!" he says, with interest, then laughs. "Like, it doesn't mean anything, it was just like, oh! That's another Jewish person, probably." Engaging with culturally Jewish ways of thinking about the world, feeling that immediate sense of connection and community towards other Jewish people, I think has something to do with what "being" Jewish is.

"Feeling" Jewish, then, is just a matter of being comfortable enough in the doing and in the being to claim it, internally, as your own.

"Anyway," Isabel says, once we've resolved this, "now that I have ascended spiritually and can talk to god with my mind, I actually need to get up off the floor and take a shower."

I think back to Exodus. I think about Moses, who was raised by the daughter of the Pharaoh, in the house of his people's oppressors. He probably wasn't raised Jewish, either. Did he struggle to feel worthy of claiming his identity? Of not only joining his people but of leading them to freedom? I have to imagine he did. (Somewhere, I'm sure he had a grandmother who had none of his doubts, saying, "Of course your job is more important than everyone else's. You're my grandson. Haven't I always told you you're important? It's about time God figured it out. Just wait 'til I tell the Mintzes.")

Tradition teaches us that in every generation we are obligated to look upon ourselves as if we personally had come out of Egypt. I am here because of what my ancestors did for me; I was there with my ancestors crossing the red sea, and I wandered for forty years in the wilderness with them while they tried to find their way. I was with them on the boats to America, and they've been with me while I've been searching for my identity, and they are with me now, sharing my joy in finding it. We're all still figuring it out as we go along.



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