

CANDLES IN
A WINDOW

Nicholas Gordon

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CANDLES IN A WINDOW

As Solomon Simon lay on his deathbed in Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, he asked his only grandchild Raphael to make him one last promise.

"What's that, Grandpa?" Raphael asked, holding his grandfather's surprisingly strong right hand.

"Promise me you'll put your Hanukkah candles in the window."

"But I don't light Hanukkah candles, Grandpa."

"Then I guess you'll have to start."

Solomon squeezed his grandson's hand and smiled.

"I'm not religious," Raphael protested. "I don't believe in God."

"You don't have to believe, Raphael. You just do it. The belief comes."

"I'm not even Jewish, Grandpa."

"Please," Solomon pleaded. "Promise me. It's a little thing."

Raphael was silent, inside in turmoil. It wasn't such a little thing. He had been raised a New Age sort of Buddhist by his Chinese-American mother. His wife was an African-American Catholic, which was how they were raising their son.

He knew why his grandfather was so insistent.

The old man wanted to make sure a little Judaism survived in the mix. But he was asking a lot. Especially to put the Hanukkah candles in the window. That was a public statement Raphael really didn't want to make, mainly because it wasn't true.

He was about to say, "I wish I could . . ." when he looked up and saw that his grandfather had fallen asleep. That was how he had become from the medication – likely to fall asleep at any moment, even in mid-sentence.

Raphael thanked the God he didn't believe in and slipped out of the room without having to tell his grandfather yes or no. But when the old man fell into a coma the next day and died three days later, Raphael was not happy that he hadn't had the opportunity to answer him. While not saying no was different from saying yes, there remained a residue of obligation that Raphael would rather have done without.

Through the abbreviated period of mourning – the funeral and burial in the morning, the four hours of *shiva* (down from the customary seven days) in the afternoon, Raphael said nothing to his father about his grandfather's dying request. He still hadn't decided what to do about it.

His inclination was to do nothing, but at the murky bottom of that choice something gnawed at him. It wasn't that he thought the soul of his grandfather was looking down at him – dead was dead, as far as he was concerned. Nor was it any promise he might implicitly have made by not explicitly saying no.

Instead, it was something alive in him, perhaps a reincarnation of his grandfather (though Raphael, despite his Buddhist upbringing, did not believe in reincarnation) – an actual desire to do it, a little factoid struggling to break free of the mud below.

When Raphael thought about his grandfather, Hanukkah candles in the window loomed large in his memories. He had been brought up in Sacramento among his mother's Chinese-American family. But since his mother, unlike his father, believed firmly in the importance of family, he had often spent Christmas vacation visiting his grandfather in the Bronx, first with his father and mother, then with his mother, then by himself.

Whenever Hanukkah had fallen close enough to Christmas, he would watch his grandfather light the candles in the kitchen, then bring the lit menorah over to the sill of the living room window, where the little flames danced and glowed in the early winter darkness.

The living room window looked out onto an air shaft, and Raphael could see other Hanukkah candles placed in windows up and down the air shaft, like friendly people waving.

He remembered a certain peace and satisfaction in his grandfather's face as he said the Hebrew prayers, a sense of something beautiful beautifully done, an enjoyment of the musical phrase drawn out and savored at the end. Somehow, he thought, that shouldn't be gone from his life now that his grandfather was gone. It would be a memory of his grandfather embedded in his life. A sort of

reincarnation.

At the end of that long day of saying goodbye to his grandfather, he said goodbye to his father at the airport. He was flying back to Cleveland, his father back to San Francisco, where he lived with his sixth wife – like all his wives, of whom Raphael's mother had been the first, a former student.

"Grandpa asked me to put my Hanukkah candles in the window," he said as they shared a drink before going off to their separate gates.

"You don't light Hanukkah candles, do you?" his father asked.

"Not at the moment."

"Are you going to do it?"

"I don't know."

His father, as always, looked right through him. "You always were a sentimentalist," he said.

"You say that as an accusation."

"Well, it is. You don't believe in that crap, not for a second, so the whole thing is a lie, not just to your family and neighbors but also to yourself. Which is what sentimentalists do. They lie."

"Sometimes you just do something for whatever reasons and the truth tags along."

"The truth never tags along," his father said decisively. "It's just there. In stone."

It felt more like Play-Doh for the first few days after Raphael arrived home in Shaker Heights, as he shaped and re-shaped it, studied it, then re-shaped it again.

One late afternoon after he and his wife Letitia

had come into the kitchen after setting up Christmas decorations on their snow-covered front lawn, he broached the subject of his grandfather's last request.

"He asked you to do *what?*" Letitia asked with the little side-to-side motion of the head that in some African-American women signaled defiance.

"Light Hanukkah candles and put the menorah in the window."

"You didn't promise him, did you?"

"No," Raphael admitted. "He died before I could answer him."

"Well, then."

She took out a colander and began to wash some string beans.

Xavier, their nine-year-old son, came in from throwing snowballs at Harry, their mutt from the pound, who had the body of a pit bull covered by the bristle of a wire-haired terrier.

Raphael looked at his Black-Asian-Jewish child and wondered what he, Xavier, would make of all these heritages, and what he, Raphael, could do to help him.

"Your father thinking about lighting Hanukkah candles and putting them in the window," Letitia said.

"For Pop-Pop?"

"For good. Every year."

"That's nice," Xavier said. "They're pretty."

"They're Jewish," Letitia said.

"Whatever."

Xavier finished hanging up his wet ski jacket, pulled off his boots, and vanished into his room,

leaving Harry shaking off the melting snow in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"This something you really want to do?" Letitia asked.

"Yes," Raphael answered.

Letitia shrugged. "People gonna wonder."

Raphael kissed her on the cheek, sure for the first time about what he wanted to do, and went upstairs to call his mother.

"O-o-o-o-o-h, how nice!" she cooed.

"Channeling your grandfather!"

"Not channeling him," Raphael said. "Just remembering him."

"You'll see. You'll light the candles and believe me, you'll feel his hand guiding your arm."

"You think so."

"I know so. He'll be so happy!"

Then Raphael clicked on the computer to do some research on a subject he knew almost nothing about.

When the first night of Hanukkah arrived, the little family gathered in the kitchen. Raphael put on a yarmulka and one on Xavier, and Letitia wore a shawl over her head. Raphael struck a match, lit the Shamos candle, and began the blessings, singing them in Hebrew, blending a melody he had gotten on the Internet with what he remembered from evenings with his grandfather.

When he was finished, two candles, the Shamos and the candle for the first night, flickered on the menorah.

As he had seen his grandfather do so many times, he carried the menorah carefully over to the sill of the picture window in the living room, shading the flames with the palm of his free hand. It shone out into the suburban night, along with the Christmas decorations, for all to see.

As his mother had predicted, as he carried the menorah into the living room and placed it on the sill, he felt eerily as though his grandfather had stepped into his body, as though for a moment he was his grandfather and was watching the glow of the candles through his grandfather's approving eyes.

Raphael wished only that he had told him yes while he was still alive.

"You happy now?" Letitia asked.

"Yes," he said, watching Xavier watch the flames. He gave Xavier a Hanukkah card with a five-dollar bill in it, calculated to make Xavier ecstatic about the idea of celebrating both Christmas and Hanukkah, and Letitia a card which told her how much sharing the holiday with her meant to him.

Then he stepped out of his house and walked over to the sidewalk to see the effect of the menorah from the street.

The two candles in the window overlooked a natural pine tree on the front lawn decorated with blinking colored lights. Near the pine tree three brightly lit reindeer looked on with wonder.

What his grandfather could no longer do, Raphael had taken over, blending it with the rest of his inner melange so that in his family it would not

die, at least not yet.

Raphael wished that his grandfather could see it. Well, why not imagine that he could and was pleased? He crunched out into the middle of the freshly plowed street, shouted, "Yes, Grandpa! I promise!", and waved up at the cold black sky.