

PASSOVER: 5364

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"Cordoba, then Evora!" David exclaimed.

"Amazing! My great-great-grandfather, too!"

"Your family name?" Francisco asked. "Forgive me. Again?"

"Da Costa."

"Da Costa ..." Francisco searched his memory.

"How long was your family in Evora?"

"About thirty years. I'm not sure. They left for Majorca around 1528 or 9."

"Perhaps," Francisco said. "Does de la Penha ring a bell?"

David shook his head.

"Still," Francisco said, "I'm sure our families knew each other. We might even be cousins!"

The two men laughed.

"Forgive me," Francisco said again. "My wife, Blanca. And our children: Hanna, Miguel, and Manuel."

As David nodded across the table, his eyes locked on Hanna's and stayed there, entranced by her amused smile. She looked to be about half his age, fifteen, perhaps, though older than her two brothers. She was not at all beautiful, but she was vivacious, with large, sparkling black eyes set in a round, dimpled face.

Her little body was sturdy but shapely, at least what David could see of it above the surface of the table, and as he raised his eyes back to hers, he could

see that she was pleased by his perusal, and he felt a glint of happiness pierce his heart.

Easy, he thought to himself. Having come to Amsterdam from Venice after a long and ultimately bitter affair, he was much too lonely, homesick, and vulnerable to allow himself to fall in love with a child.

"The ceremony is starting," he whispered both to the de la Penhas across from him and the Lopez family to his left.

At the head of the long table was a shorter table forming a T, at which was seated their host, Isaac Pinto, with his family, Rabbi Uri Halevi of Emden, in East Friesland, who had come to Amsterdam to help Judaize the Portuguese *conversos*, and the rabbi's son Aaron, who would translate the Hebrew into Ladino, since his father knew neither Spanish nor Portuguese, and the *conversos* knew no Hebrew.

David's job was to do simultaneous translation and give directions further down the table from the hosts.

"Not so much wine," he whispered to Hanna, who had taken the instruction, "Fill the first cup of wine" too literally.

She shrugged, smiling. Too late! she seemed to say.

"Then don't drink the whole cup," he suggested. "Just a little of it. Leave the rest for the second cup of wine."

*Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe, Who has created the fruit of the vine,* he translated.

Hanna smiled impishly and downed the whole cup.

"Wait!" he said as she began to refill the glass. "You fill it again later."

She nodded and put down the decanter.

"Drink your wine," she reminded him.

He had forgotten, and took a quick sip.

"Saving for the second cup?" she asked sarcastically.

So he finished it, feeling flush from more than the wine.

The ceremony flowed on at the head of the table as David and the other tutors tried to keep up with the current. They had been recruited from places like Venice and Salonika, where the formerly Spanish Jews had emigrated in large numbers, to serve as liaisons between the *conversos* and the traditional Judaism to which they aspired.

When the meal was finally served, having been prepared under the supervision of the Ashkenazi rabbi, it seemed strange to almost everyone else there – roasted lamb served with a sticky mixture of carrots and prunes, and matzah puffs with onions and mushrooms instead of the usual rice.

"Is this what we have to eat every Passover?" Hanna asked David. "It's heavy! Heavy! Just like the Dutch!"

"Please, Hanna!" her mother admonished her. "You're a guest!"

David laughed. "This is Ashkenazi food," he explained. "Jews from the German-speaking countries

and Poland. In Venice we have three kinds of Jews – the Ashkenazi, the Sephardi, and the Oriental – and each has its own food. Tomorrow night, if you like, I can show you what we Sephardi eat on Passover."

"We would be honored to have you come," Francisco said, and David realized suddenly that he had just invited himself to dinner.

"I didn't mean ..." he said, blushing.

"You're our cousin," Francisco reminded him.

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Please. We want to learn the right way. You can teach us."

"We used to eat just Easter dinner," Hanna said mischievously. "With matzah and bitter herbs. After church."

"Shhh!" her father warned her, but she laughed.

"And on Yom Kippur we had picnics in the country!" she said.

"Please, Hanna!" her mother said.

"Isn't it sad?" Hanna asked David.

"Isn't what sad?"

"That we won't be doing that anymore."

He could see that the wine had made her a little tipsy.

"And we used to pray to Santo Moses and Santa Esterika. We won't be allowed to do that anymore, either. We had our own little ways, and soon they won't be even a memory. We'll be just Jews."

"Hanna!" her father said.

"But it's so cold here, Papa!" she complained. "And dark all the time. And the people are so ... slow!"

We should have gone to Brazil. That's where my uncle Miguel went," she said to David. "He writes it's paradise."

"We've gotten only one letter from him," Francisco said. "Written over four months ago, on the day he arrived."

"I don't want to be either a Jew or a Catholic," Hanna went on. "I want to be a *converso*. I want my children to be *conversos*."

"You see the damage only four generations can do," Francisco said to David.

"It's not damage!" Hanna insisted. "It's history. It's my history. You shouldn't just erase it. OK, we were forced to become Catholics outside and Jews inside, so that's what we became. Jewish cake with a Catholic glaze. What's wrong with that?"

Again she turned to David. "That tastes pretty good, doesn't it?"

"Delicious!" David agreed, daringly, both because he was encouraging her flirting and because he had been brought to Amsterdam specifically to help these people become practicing Jews.

He saw Francisco and Blanca exchange an alarmed look.

"Maybe you should limit yourself to just a sip of the third and fourth cups of wine," David suggested to Hanna.

"I'm so homesick!" she said. "Aren't you homesick for wherever you came from?"

"Venice," David said.

"I'm homesick for Evora! I want to see long, long stretches of golden landscape rolling like a solid sea! I want to see blue mountains in the distance and little brown villages strewn like boulders across a hillside. I want to smell oranges and lemons in my yard, and sit under grape arbors, and walk across wide plazas in the sun. The sun! I can't stand this freezing, gloomy flatness, as though the world had gotten so wet that it shrank!"

"It's spring now," Blanca pointed out. "Soon the sun will come out. You'll see."

"But how will I live through these endless winters!" Hanna wailed. "Even during the day there's no light!"

"Shhh!" Francisco hushed her again. "This is our home now. And we're guests."

"How can it be home if we're guests?"

"Jews are guests everywhere," David said. "Only in some places less unwelcome than in others."

"Why do we have to become Jews, then?"

Hanna said to her parents. "We should have become Catholics, like they wanted us to, and then we could have stayed in Evora."

"Shhh!" Francisco said again, this time more forcefully. "Enough!"

"We're about to begin again, anyway," David warned. "So open, please, to Page 14. It's the grace after meals."

And once again they were immersed in a sea of Hebrew, pulled along by the lifeline of David's



whispered translation until they reached the opposite shore.

At the end of the Seder, David asked Francisco and Blanca again if they would like him to call the next afternoon to teach them how to prepare a traditional Sephardi Passover meal.

"We would be very grateful," Francisco said, "for whatever you can teach us."

"Then perhaps, also, you would like some Hebrew lessons, either for you or your children or perhaps the family. That's what I did in Venice – I was a teacher at the Sephardic Talmud Torah."

"I'm afraid ..." Francisco began, blushing.

"There would be no charge," David said, also blushing. He glanced at Hanna, who looked quickly away.

"But how will you live?"

"Senhor Pinto will be starting a Talmud Torah, and I will teach there. You can send Manuel and Miguel. But for now, and for you and your wife and daughter, I can, if you like ..."

David felt as though he were drowning, as though he had stepped too far into the water and was now being borne out to sea by the undertow, and that it was futile to try to do anything about it.

"We can discuss it tomorrow," Francisco was saying. "We will expect you in the afternoon, yes?"

Later that night David walked back to the house where he was boarding with a Sephardic family arrived recently from Salonika. It was an ingathering of the Spanish exiles in this foreign city, so both like

and unlike Venice with its islands and canals, yet dank and cloudy and heavy and slow. An unlikely place except for the accident that it had been a possession of Spain, and that it had been able to liberate itself from both the oppressive Spanish monarchy and the Inquisition.

Yes, Jews were guests everywhere, here as well. But here, at least, unlike Venice, a Jew needn't wear a yellow star, and could come and go out of the Jewish quarter whenever he pleased. For the moment, at least, it was a good place for Jews.

But who knew what fate awaited them here? Suppose he married the charmingly spoiled and high-spirited Hanna, and they had children and then grandchildren who spoke Dutch, and in the end they all mingled their bones with this rich soil stolen from the sea?

Who knew whether in ten or a hundred or two or three hundred years they would all be massacred? After all, they had lived for centuries in Spain before those most Catholic majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, murdered many of them and forced the rest either to convert or move on.

Who knew? Jews were guests wherever they were. Exiles. Wanderers, with only a mythic home.

That is, until the Messiah came. But for the moment David really didn't care when the Messiah came, life was so hopeful and beautiful and full of love and wonder.