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Restoration

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By: Heather Bachman

Based on the Life and Legend of Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman (1886 - 1969)

Swinging my feet beneath the pew, I catch the yawn that threatens to expose my boredom. I furtively glance past the other children to Sister Olga further down the aisle. She is staring reverently at the sanctuary praying along with Father Dmitri.

My best Sunday clothes are stiff and itchy, and my tightly pinned golden curls tug at my scalp. I wonder if Sister Olga wears her headress because, over the years, the tight pins tore all her hair out. Biting my tongue, I barely contain my giggle. I sigh and succumb myself to the remainder of mass by continuing the rhythmic motion of my legs.

The pungent incense penetrates my senses. Father Dmitri lights the multitude of candles in the front of the sanctuary. His black robes flow around him as he treads over the stone floor. His deep and droning voice chants the endless ritual of prayer.

Sister Olga pulls out her prayer beads, and her spindly fingers lovingly caress them. Her eyes flash to the children around her warning us that we had better do the same. As a result, the entire sanctuary bustles as we reach for our rosaries. My awkward adolescent fingers fiddle with the wooden beads meaninglessly.

In the sanctuary, a brass cross thinly frames the distorted body of a pierced and beaten Jesus. Mother Mary stands detached, gazing without emotion, while many scenes of Biblical people and events are played out in stained glass behind her. The lifeless figures are irrelevant; I prefer to talk directly to Jesus in Heaven.

Jesus, I want to ask you for a favor. You know that I usually don't ask for myself, but there are some things I really want to know. Who is my family? Where do I come from? Father Dmitri says I was brought to them for protection from the Nazis during the war many years ago. However, I don't think I belong here now. Please, help me find who I am!

I lift my head and face Sister Olga's threatening glare. The other children are lining up to go back to the living quarters. Sister Olga points one pale brittle finger to the forming line and clears her throat.

"Eliana," she barks in a husky voice as she stares down her nose at me, "get in line now!"

In haste, I slide off the firm bench and take my position in line as Sister Olga strides to the front next to Father Dmitri. They march us through the dark hallways and into our school room. A loud knock abruptly diverts Sister Olga's attention to the orphanage entrance.

"Children, please meditate on the sermon and peruse your Bibles," Father Dmitri instructs before he settles into his favorite chair in the far corner of the room. We obediently bring out our Bibles from within our desks.

I gently stroke the gold embroidery of my Bible - my one treasure in this place. Father Dmitri had given it to me at my very First Communion. During the last few years, I have cherished every word. I flip through the worn pages and stop at a favorite verse in Deuteronomy 31:6. "Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee: he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee." Taking the words to heart, I fervently continue to read through the chapter.

The door latch lifts with an unexpected sharp click. Everyone in the room halts their breath. The large door swings open, and Sister Olga enters followed closely by an unfamiliar man.

The stranger has creases in every shadow on his face. Beneath his chin, and from shoulder to shoulder, stretches a mass of thick whiskers. The man wears a small cap on the crown of his head over wisps of white hair. My eyes widen and my hand quickly covers my gasp. He's Jewish!

"Sister Olga, I see we have a visitor," Father Dmitri's voice booms as he stands up to greet the guest.

"Let me introduce Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman," Sister Olga briskly gestures to the man behind her. "He is on a mission to seek out the Jewish children strewn from the war and take them to Israel."

"Is that so, Rabbi?" Father says, apprehensively.

The Rabbi nods his head and confidently responds, "I have discovered that many Jewish children have been graciously protected within Catholic churches throughout the diaspora. They have survived the atrocious war, but they have lost their parents and their faith. It is my deepest desire to restore their Hebrew heritage to them." His compelling voice echoes in every mind.

Father Dmitri scoffs, "Well, you will not find your kind here. As you can see, these children are Catholic."

Pursing his thin lips, the Rabbi wrinkles his shadowy brow and slowly scans each young, curious face. The Rabbi casts his head down and appears to be praying. He then raises his right hand over his eyes. Rocking himself, his lips part, and he begins to calmly sing:

"Shema Yisrael

Adonai eloheinu

Adonai echad."

Memories, previously suppressed, suddenly flood over me.

...

"Mamma, Mamma!" I call out, rushing to the fence that is separating us.

"It's all right," Mamma reassures, hushing my cries. "It's all right, Eliana."

"Mamma, I don't want to go with him! I don't want to leave you!" I choke on a sob.

"Eliana, listen to Mamma." Through the openings of the fence, she cups my toddler face within her icy fingers. The barbed edges cut her arms causing her to bleed, but she does not loosen her grasp.

The man in the black robes paces anxiously.

"Eliana, listen to me. This man," Mamma nods her head beside me, "is going to lead you to a safe place. You're going to grow up happy, away from the Nazis and their destruction."

I pull myself closer to her. She wraps her arms tightly around my slim shoulders. "Even though I am not able to be with you," Mamma gazes heavenward and then shifts her inspired eyes back to me, "Hashem will never leave you. Do you remember what I taught you, Eliana? Come now; sing it with me, one last time." Mamma lifts her right hand over her eyes. Trembling, I do the same. Without looking at each other, pushing closer through the fence, we sing the words inscribed within our hearts.

"Shema Yisrael

Adonai eloheinu

Adonai echad."

I sniff and look one last time into Mamma's gentle eyes. Stained with tears, they shine above her tender smile. "Eliana, remember these words, remember your people, and remember your faith." Mamma rubs my cheek restoring warmth from the bitter cold. I urgently press into it knowing that it will be her final touch.

The man in the black robes immediately whisks me away. The last sound I hear is Mamma singing the Shema softly to herself.

...

"Mamma, Mamma!" I cry as the vivid memory subsides into the school room of the orphanage. The room echoes with the weeping of scattered children. They raise their right hands to their eyes and remember, as I had, the words of their past. My tears stream ceaselessly. I'm Jewish!

I look to the Rabbi. His whole being is illuminated. He stares toward the ceiling, rejoicing. "Thank you, thank you, Adonai!"

I slip out of my desk and race to Rabbi Yosef who gathers the dispersed children around him. We embrace the Rabbi in tears of elation.

He gazes at me with compassion and asks, "Do you want to go home, home to Israel?"

I cast a glance to Sister and Father retreating in the doorway. Then, I close my eyes letting the warmth of joy surge out. I am reminded of Isaiah 43:2 about the regathering of His children in His land. "And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth."

Clenching my treasured Bible, I whisper, "Thank you, Jesus."

I meet Rabbi Yosef's eyes. "Yes, I want to go home."

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Wish for Wings

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By: Jessica Bell

My chin rests on knees bandaged from today's Evel Knievel antics. Children can't fly, no matter how high they get the swing to go before they leap. I had wished for wings when I blew out my birthday candles, when I saw Santa at the mall, when I heard them doing it in the next room. Now, crouched behind the living room chair, I wish my hardest.

The floor is scared. I can feel it shaking under me. "Be brave, be brave," I beg myself. Even with my hands firmly cupped over my ears, I jump in unison with every blow to the door.

"Jillian, Jillian, open the goddamned door!" I can hear the rattling of the knob and then another thump to the bathroom door. "You're pissing me off, Jillian. Just open the fucking door or I'll bash the fucking thing in! You know I will." If the landlord had suspected anything when he came to fix the door last time, he didn't show it. Standing on the tips of my toes I could barely see through the hole he had left, but he said I had done it. I wish I had. Then I could help her.

I stop rocking, and refuse to breathe. Muffled cries come from the bathroom where my mother had barricaded herself, but I can't hear him. He's remembered I'm here. To an invisible God I pray, "Please don't let him find me." My ears strain to see what is going on beyond the chair. Footsteps, yelling, banging, something, anything...please. I should look. I can't look. I need to look. "Jillian." I exhale.

"Go away, Frank," she says, still locked in the apartment's only bathroom.

"Come on baby, I love you. I just want to talk. Open the door."

Don't open the door, Mom. Don't open the door.

"I'm sorry, baby. You know how I get when you piss me off."

"Please...go away."

"Why can't you just open the door? Let's talk about this. It doesn't have to be this way. I love you, Jillian. I need you."

My stomach turns on itself as I hear the jiggle of bathroom lock. I hear the release of the latch as the knob is slowly turned and then "THUD" followed by a whimper as he slams the door into her. I bite my arm to keep from screaming out as she begs for him to stop. "You worthless piece of shit. Look what you made me do. You shoulda just opened the damned door."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Frank. Please. Please...I won't let it happen again." The snap of an open palm slap shivers through my body. Smiling faces trapped behind glass rattle on the wall as my mother screams out.

Do something. Don't just sit here, do something. My legs are stiff as I straighten them to rise. I kneel behind the chair peering around its overstuffed cushions. I freeze when I see the spot where the phone is supposed to be. She tried to cover the receiver, but he yanked the phone from the wall and pitched it across the room when he had heard a man's voice on the phone. Second time this month. She had tried to explain to him that it was just someone from work. Her bloody lip said he didn't believe her.

"Frank, Stop!"

He is going to kill her. I hold my breath as I tiptoe past the bathroom and down the hall to their room, making sure to avoid the creak in the floor about two-thirds of the way down. Snatching the cordless from the nightstand, I roll under the bed and reading by the orange glow of the buttons, I press 9-1-1 and swallow hard.

"911. What is your emergency?"

"He's going to kill her."

"Who's going to kill her? Who is 'her'?"

"Frank, Frank is. He won't stop hitting my mom."

"Where are you sweetheart? What's your name?"

"I'm under the bed. Help her, please. I don't know what... Shhh."

"Jennifer. Where are you?" He's out of the bathroom. "Oilly-olly-oxen-free. You can come out now."

"Honey, what's happening?"

"Shhh."

"Come out, Jennifer." He's closer.

"I need you to tell me..."

"Dammit, Jennifer. I will find you," he threatens.

"Shhh. He's coming."

Clutching the cordless I can hear a whispered voice telling me police were on the way. I can hear his labored breathing as he enters the room and when I see his boot poke under the bed I cling tighter to the sweet voice on the phone. My cheek hits the button and it screams in response. Game over.

Eyes filled with fire from the orange glow of the phone's keypad lock with mine. I cringe and cover my head as he reaches toward me. He tries to pry my fingers from the phone. I refuse to relax my grip knowing it's all that's keeping him from starting in on me. He backs out from under the bed. Don't move. It's a trick. My ears strain to locate the rhythm of his breathing. The thumping of blood to my brain is the only sound I can hear. Sweaty palms start to lose their grip on the phone. Knees pulled up to my chest and head tucked under my arms. Everything goes dark. The face of the phone has traded its warm glow for drab, unresponsive grey. I press "On"—nothing. Again—nothing. And again and again—still nothing.

It's a handful of hair he grabs this time. Scrambling to keep up with him, I scoot myself out from under the bed. With a fistful of my hair he forces me to walk on my toes out to the living room. "Who'd you call?" I watch out the window with words trapped in my throat. The tops of the trees wave their leaves inviting me to come. "Who was on the fuckin' phone, Jennifer?" His face is so close to mine that just breathing could cause me to touch him.

Thud, thud, thud. "Police, open up."

"You'd better be smart and tell them I didn't do anything," he hisses, petting my head where he'd released my hair.

"Police. Ma'am, are you OK? We got a call about a disturbance at this address. Please open the door."

"Please, Jennifer, tell them you didn't mean to call. Tell them you were playing around. Do it for mommy, Jen." Her eyes strain to capture the attention of mine. I look away. "Open the door. I need to go wash up. Be good Jen. Please, for mommy."

The officer at the door was big. Bigger than Frank and I liked that. I stood by him. He let me. "Where's your mom, sweetheart?" His voice made me think of Mr. Rogers; calm, comforting. Not like Frank's. He raises his hand to put it on my shoulder, I flinch and he pulls it back. He crouches down in front of me and offers me his palm-up hand. I take it. "Can you tell me where your mom is?" I don't understand what his eyes are telling me. I try to turn to Frank, to see if he is watching. "Don't worry about him, just look at me," says that calming voice.

"In the bathroom."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Frank coughs. I can hear the click of the lighter and I know he has lit a cigarette. Scars on my stomach burn as I remember.

"Nothin'," I mumble lowering my eyes to the floor.

"Nothing? Someone thought something was happening. They were scared and thought that we might be able to help. Do you know who might be feeling like that?"

"We were having an argument and Jennifer got a little scared," my mother interjects. "They had an assembly at school last week about the importance of calling 911. I think she just wanted to try it out." My mother had washed up well and had even taken time to refresh her make-up.

"Jennifer, is that true? Did you just call to try it out?" He stands and again I feel small.

"Yeah, I guess. Can I go now?"

"Sure. I'm going to talk with your mom and dad here for a minute, OK?"

"He's not my dad." No one had told me I needed to lie about that one. I slam my bedroom door and take my post seated in front of it. It's going to be a long night

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