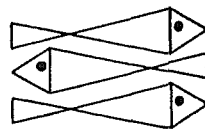


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HUGH NISSENSON

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In the Reign  
of Peace



FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

New York

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Charity

**M**Y MOTHER DIED IN THE WINTER OF 1912 when I was twelve years old. At the time, I was living with my parents in one room of a cold-water flat on Ludlow Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side. My father was a finisher of men's pants. He lined the pants at the waistline and hemmed the pockets. Working twelve hours a day on his rented Singer sewing machine, he made an average of seven dollars a week. While I went to school, my mother helped him by sewing on buttons and buckles. After school, my job was to deliver bundles of the finished pants to the subcontractor on Stanton Street who had hired us.

All told, we cleared a little over ten dollars a week. We paid fourteen dollars a month rent and ate very

little: a roll and a cup of chicory-flavored coffee for breakfast, a bowl of chicken soup for lunch, and a crust of rye bread and big green pickles for supper. I always went to bed hungry. The only time we splurged on food was on Friday nights in celebration of the coming of the Sabbath. As a religious Jew, my father insisted upon it. We scrimped and saved all week and on Friday afternoons my mother went shopping on Hester Street, where she bought everything from the pushcart peddlers or the outdoor stalls. Beginning Friday morning, my mouth would actually water in anticipation.

When I got home, the table—the only one we owned—would already be set with a pair of brass candlesticks and chipped china plates with little rosebuds painted on them. There would be a fresh loaf of challah, covered by a threadbare embroidered doily, a little glass goblet of sweet red wine for each of us, a plate of stuffed carp, sweet-and-sour meat, roast potatoes saturated with gravy, and candied carrots. Soup—chicken soup again—made from legs and wings, always came last, and for dessert my mother would serve calf's-foot jelly which she had cooked that afternoon and set out on the fire escape to cool. Mother would light the candles, pronounce the benediction over them, and after blessing the bread and

wine, my father would turn to our guest with a nod and invite him to begin eating.

We always had a guest on Friday nights, someone even poorer than we, and alone, who had no place to go to celebrate the Sabbath. It was a religious obligation my father had brought with him from Russia. On Friday afternoons, he would take an hour off from work to wander the streets of the neighborhood, looking for a Jewish beggar or a starving Hebrew scholar who slept on the benches of some shul. They were almost always old men smelling of snuff, who wore ragged beards, earlocks, and had dirty fingernails.

They would wash their hands in the sink, mumble their prayers, and, smacking their wrinkled lips, begin to eat, making grunting noises deep in their throats. Very often, on particularly cold nights, my father would invite them to remain with us, and they would curl up on the table, covered by a woolen blanket. Their snoring made it impossible for me to sleep.

"Papa," I'd complain.

"Shhh!" he'd tell me. "Remember. 'Charity saves from death.'"

He quoted the words from the Bible in Hebrew in a resonant voice that never failed to shut me up. I would lie awake in the dark, listening to the mingled

sounds of the snoring, the wheezing and occasional cough, along with the scurrying of mice across the floor. The room was freezing. Coal was too expensive to keep the stove burning all night. Very often, in the mornings, the glass of water by my bed would be frozen solid.

Then, quite suddenly, in the middle of December, my mother caught pneumonia. She awoke on a Wednesday, as I remember, about midnight, with a splitting headache and a severe chill that made her teeth chatter and a raging fever that for some reason flushed only the left side of her face. It looked as if she had been slapped. Every bone in her body ached, she complained, and within a few hours, at about two in the morning, she was suffering from an agonizing pain in her right side.

"Like a knife," she whispered through clenched teeth.

Convulsed by a short, dry cough, she lay in bed for two more days. The left side of her face was still flushed. She breathed very quickly, with a grunt every time she exhaled. When she drew a breath, her nostrils were distended. There were open sores on her upper lip. Her dark brown eyes were peculiarly bright—I had never seen them so beautiful. I wanted to kiss the quivering lips. But the barking cough made her

raise herself up and claw at her right side. She began to spit blood.

In her semi-delirium, she babbled half-remembered legends from her childhood, and things she had read in Yiddish chapbooks written for women.

"Is it snowing?" she asked me.

"Yes."

"Ah, but not there," she whispered. "Never there."

"Where?" my father asked her, and she gazed at him with her glittering eyes, and smiled. "Where do you think? Where there are fruit trees, trees with golden leaves, always in bloom. Apple trees and orange trees, and one huge tree, they say, where apples, oranges, pears, and grapes grow on the same branches, all together . . ."

He rubbed her moist, hot hands. "Listen to me. This kind of talk is forbidden. Forbidden, Malka, do you understand me? Can you hear me? It's absolutely forbidden to talk this way. One must want to live."

"I've been a good wife, haven't I?" she asked.

"Of course."

"I've tried. God knows, I've tried to be a good wife, a good mother, and a good Jew."

"Of course you have," my father said.

"I'm glad. I've read, you know, that when a righteous soul is about to enter Paradise, the angels come

and strip off her shroud and dress her in seven robes woven from the clouds of glory. Did you know that? Seven shining robes. And on her head they put two crowns. One of gold and the other . . . I forget now what the other is . . .”

“Stop it!” my father yelled.

“I remember,” she said. “Pearls. A crown of pearls . . .”

When I came home that Friday afternoon, a doctor was there from the hospital on Second Avenue and Seventeenth Street. He was a tall German Jew who wore a blond goatee.

“Yes,” he said in English, putting away his stethoscope. “The crisis will come in a week, maybe a little less.”

“The crisis?” I repeated. “What’s that?”

And looking down at me, he stroked his goatee. “A crisis is a crisis, my boy. It’s as simple as that. She’ll continue to get worse until the crisis, and then, if she’s strong enough, her fever will drop and she’ll survive. Of course, she’d have a much better chance in the hospital.”

“What’s that?” my father asked in Yiddish. “What’s he saying?”

“It’s up to you,” the doctor went on, addressing me.

“But that’s my considered professional opinion.”

“A hospital?” my father suddenly repeated in English. It was probably the only word he had understood. He shook his head. “No . . .” His eyes filled with tears. I knew what he was thinking. In the shtetl north of Odessa from which he’d come, the hospital was a shack on the edge of town, supported by the local burial society, where the poor were sent to die.

My mother coughed, the doctor glanced at the face of a gold watch he wore suspended from a gold chain on his vest, and said, “Well?”

“This is America, Papa,” I told him. “The doctor says that Mama will have a much better chance in the hospital.”

The watch ticked, my mother gasped for breath, and my father finally nodded his head.

“Good,” the doctor said. “I’ll make the arrangements. The ambulance will be here in about an hour. In the meantime, keep her as warm as possible.”

And when I had wrapped my mother in my own quilt, stuffed with goose feathers, my father said, “God forgive me. I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“You’ll have to do the shopping,” he told me.

“For what?”

“For the Sabbath, what do you think?”

"Tonight?"

"The Sabbath is the Sabbath."

"I'm not hungry tonight."

"But our guest will be."

"Tonight?" I repeated.

"And why should tonight be different from last Friday night, or the Friday before that?"

My mother coughed again into her handkerchief. When she brought it away from her mouth, it was soaked with blood.

"Listen to your father," she whispered.

"No."

"Do what he tells you," she said.

I went down to Hester Street. In spite of the bitter cold and the grimy slush in which the horse-drawn wagons had made ruts, it was jammed with shoppers. For a moment, I stopped in front of a pushcart peddler who was selling cracked eggs at a penny apiece. Then, all at once, I understood. It was a *mitzvah* my father was performing, a good deed, a holy act, which bound together the upper and nether worlds, and hastened the redemption of Israel. I glanced up at the low clouds, hanging just above the city, which had a reddish glow, reflecting the lights below. It was a sign; the heavens and the earth had come closer together. And tonight of all nights, when it was a mat-

ter of life and death. The Holy One, blessed be He, saw everything. My father's charity would not go unrewarded. I walked on through the slush that seeped into my shoes. Scrawny chickens and half-plucked geese hung by their feet in a doorway and, still fluttering, awaited the butcher's knife. The butcher himself, his brawny arms covered with feathers and splattered with blood, chewed on a black cigar, spat into the gutter, and tested the blade of his knife on the ball of his thumb. It began to snow.

By the time I reached home, my mother was gone, but there with my father was a tall, emaciated, stoop-shouldered man wearing a ragged black frock coat and a battered black silk top hat. Over one arm, he carried an umbrella.

"This is Reb Rifkin," said my father.

"I know. *Shabbat shalom.*"

"And a peaceful Sabbath to you, too," Rifkin answered me in his high, cracked voice.

I had seen him around the neighborhood for years. He was a broken-down Hebrew teacher who barely kept himself alive by giving Hebrew lessons for ten cents apiece. He lived in a shul on Essex Street, where he slept in a tiny unheated room behind the Ark. It was said that rats had once attacked him and bitten off part of one of his toes.

Shivering, he warmed his blue hands over the coal stove while my father and I prepared supper. Because the doctor had been so expensive—two dollars—we had only a little chicken soup with noodles, half a loaf of stale challah, the head of a carp, a bowlful of raisins and almonds for dessert, and a glass of steaming tea with lemon. My father gave Rifkin the fish head and he devoured everything except the eyes and the bones, which he sucked one by one.

"God bless you," he said, wiping his fingers on his beard. "Would you believe it? Except for a little salted herring and a glass of tea, this is the only thing I've had in my mouth for six days. As God is my witness. Six whole days."

A little color had already seeped into his thin face with its greenish complexion. He had a tiny white spot on his right pupil which made him seem unable to look you straight in the eye. He appeared to gaze slightly above you and a little to the left.

"How's Mama?" I asked my father.

"In God's hands."

"How true. Aren't we all?" asked Rifkin. "If I hadn't gone for a walk on Ludlow Street and met you, I'd be in my room right now, lying in the dark. Do you know that the rats there eat my candles?"

"When can we visit her?" I went on.

"Tomorrow."

"I heard the sad news," Rifkin said to me. "But don't you worry about a thing. God willing, she'll be well in no time."

"I hope so," my father said.

"How can you doubt it?" Rifkin cried out. "God is just, but He's merciful too. To whom will He not show His mercy if not to a fine woman like that and her husband who feeds the starving?"

"We shall see," my father said.

"Well, I should be going," said Rifkin, picking up his umbrella.

"Nonsense," my father said. "It's snowing. You'll stay the night and share breakfast with us tomorrow morning. Lunch and supper too, if you like. Whatever we have in the house."

"No, no, I couldn't think of it."

"But I insist."

"Well, of course, if you put it like that . . ."

As I had expected, Rifkin snored; not only snored, but whistled. I couldn't sleep, so I got up and with the blanket wrapped around my shoulders went out onto the landing. We lived on the fourth floor. The building reeked of urine from the toilets at the end of each

hallway and the smell of cooked cabbage, fried onions, and fish. There was the whir of sewing machines. To make ends meet, God help us, some Jews were forced to work on the Sabbath. I sat down on the steps. The words of the proverb rang in my head: ". . . but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he."

"Jacob, is that you?" my father whispered when I went back into the room.

"Yes, Papa."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, Papa."

"Come over here a minute."

"What's the matter?"

"I can't sleep."

"Neither could I, but I feel much better now."

"Do you? Why?"

"Because Mama will get well."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You said so yourself."

"Did I? When?"

"You said that charity saves from death."

"What's that got to do with Mama?"

"Everything."

He suddenly raised his voice. "Is that what you think a *mitzvah* is? A bribe offered the Almighty?"

"But you said so. You said that charity saves from

death," I insisted. Rifkin, half awakened, turned over and groaned.

"No, not Mama," my father said in a hoarse voice. "Him."