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A Personal History of the Jews

Tricia Holland Baatz*

When I was small, I believe six or seven, I had already spent a couple of years of my life being indoctrinated by the Catholic Church through the sly missionary works of seemingly footless, breastless nuns whose tales of damnation hissed through their teeth in accompaniment to the rustle of their mysterious black skirts, the folds of which hid rosary beads and holy cards. They produced these holy cards like magic tricks, revealing such oddities as Christ the First Communicant, dressed in a little suit and necktie, hands folded, beaming face turned expectantly upward, waiting to receive and eat His own body. There was Saint Lucy holding a plate of eyeballs, I believe her own, and countless variations of the Blessed Mother Virgin Mary, whose face was always beautiful and kind, and whose bare feet could be seen squashing the head of The Snake. We collected these cards the way Protestant children collected baseball cards. We kept them tucked in the pages of our missals and traded them during daily mass, which was recited in mysterious Latin. Only the sermon was in English.

I was among the true believers because in the secluded valley of German, Catholic New Ulm, Minnesota in 1962, there was no evidence to contradict what was presented to me. There was a consensus among all the wise adults who guided and defined my world. Of course I believed that all the animals could talk at midnight on Christmas Eve, because Jesus was born in a barn. And there really were people who were holy and blessed and bled from their side or feet or hands. We even placed red-coated chocolate candies in our sweaty little palms and claimed M&M stigmata. And Jesus really was going to show up on the very last day of the world when all the people who were dead and buried for centuries would suddenly pop out of their coffins and follow Him like an army of rotted zombies to Kingdom Come. Huge locusts and other B-movie horrors figured into this scene, so that at the age of seven

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I was completely consumed by thoughts of the End of the World, obsessed over its imminence and haunted by nightmares unrivaled by stories of tortured martyrs. That was the past; Armageddon was the future, *my* future, lurking around the corner bigger than the Boogie Man. I remember the famous psychic Jean Dixon had reported a dream in which she saw the talons of a huge bird gouge into the shoulder of the Pope. As adults at the dinner table maintained that this vision predicted the end, I sat under the table eavesdropping, quivering, staring at scuffed brown shoes and pant legs, already regretting the loss of my mundane life. In my own dreams, I saw a fiery Phoenix tearing off the arms of the Pope, carrying him away, his red beanie spinning off his head and down to the crowd below. I woke up wailing, jabbered to my mother, and confessed my fears of the Second Coming. When was it going to happen? The anticipation was driving me mad.

My mother assured me that the end of the world couldn't happen until all the Jews moved back to Israel. There are a lot of Jews spread out all over the earth, she said. It would take a long time; I shouldn't worry. This was no consolation. I had never heard of a Jew and could not imagine one. I knew what God looked like, and could draw the wings and halos of angels, the horns and red satin cloak of Satan, but a Jew? My mind went blank.

My mother told me Sarah Good was a Jew, and so was her father, Mr. Good, who owned a women's and children's apparel store in town. I locked onto the image of Sarah, who was fat and had hair so long she could sit on it. She also had long fingernails that she filed and painted pink. I pictured a line of long braids and pointy nails all slouching toward Israel, which I thought must be something like Disneyland or the Wisconsin Dells. I started to hang around Sarah Good so I could keep an eye open to any possible relocation plans. But she wasn't much fun; she was a lot older than me and didn't play with Barbies. Sometimes she would sit on the steps on her hair and read books to me. One day we got into an argument. I yanked her hair and she drew thin, bloody lines along my left arm with her nails, then ran home to tell her father who came down the alley and argued with my older brother. Mr. Good wore a suit with a bow tie in the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday. My brother defended my hair-pulling and dragged me through the dusty yard to show my arm to Mr. Good. I was struck dumb by the fear of alienating the Goods enough to drive them off to Israel, bringing us another day closer to the end. Later, in the dusk before dinner, I lay my cheek on the chipped green paint of our back stairs, and mourned with the morning glories who closed

their eyes against the failing sun. I was saddened to see the brown, fleshy arms of my mother pulling clean sheets from the clothesline. How I adored these things. How painful to know that such simple pleasures were denied in Heaven, where, even if you made it there, you only got to sit in a folding chair for all eternity somewhere to the right or left hand of God.

That night at supper my father said Mr. Good was a kyke. I didn't relate this to his being a Jew until later that summer, when a bunch of us kids sat on the big sewer cover that spewed the contents of its belly into the Minnesota River as we recited *Eenie-meenie-minie-moe, catch a nigger by the toe*. I asked what a nigger was and someone laughed at me and said *A stinkin' colored, you dummy*, and I understood in some vague, inarticulate way that there were names that were hateful names. I wondered silently, for fear of being laughed at again, if there were beings such as niggers and kykes, then what in the world were we?

It's amazing, really, how much we limit our worlds, define our small selves as the righteous and the good. How we fence ourselves in that petty backyard barbecue and place cold briquettes in our eyes. My family moved to St. Paul in 1964 where there are thousands of Jews, even more Lutherans, some Hindus and Muslims. But I only knew the city by its parishes. I could identify a girl's school by the plaid of her pleated skirt. In the late afternoons, I would see them wistfully searching the racks at Dayton's for a pretty dress. I noticed how their skirts hung unevenly, flat in the butt from sitting all day. I went to high school mixers where all who entered had to show proof of membership by flashing laminated IDs bearing the names of Our Lady of Peace or St. Thomas or Derham Hall. After school, I worked for the nuns at St. Joseph's Hospital, and I *never* missed Mass on Sunday at St. Luke's where a Byzantine Jesus with eyes the size of planets stared down on my small, bowed head. I learned that the boys I sometimes saw in long locks and beanies lived two neighborhoods over in a place known as Hebrew Heights. I strolled home from Our Lady of Peace with my friends in our navy blazers and bright yellow monograms that read OLP. This opened us up to wisecracks from the public school kids we passed, who pointed and taunted *Our Lord's Prostitutes!*, laughing as if they were original, as if we hadn't heard their joke the day before, or the week before that.

I matured, quit church, and took up smoking in front of the drugstore a block away during the eleven-fifteen guitar Mass with a girl I met named Heidi, who was thrown out of her *Bat Mitzvah*

class for mixing salt and wine together. This was an enigma to me, a forbidden aberration of an unknown ritual that I could relate to and understand nonetheless—there were certain parallels. Heidi possessed an attitude both adolescent and adult, full of self-deprecation and a tentative cool I tried to imitate. Every Sunday morning I'd make my way through pink sponge rollers and greeting cards at Bober's drugstore to find her leaning passively against the magazine rack paging through *Glamour*. She'd lift her eyes, twist up the left corner of her mouth and say *How does a JAP commit suicide? She piles up all her designer clothes in the corner of her bedroom, climbs them and jumps off*. She was skinny and had long legs, the only girl I knew who looked good in jeans. She emphasized this attribute with high-heeled boots and a hands-on-hips swagger to draw attention away from her wired crown of copper hair, which I loved and she hated. We'd go to the front of the drugstore, lean against the window, light up a couple of Salem 100's and begin an ongoing critique of anyone who passed. Heidi remarked mostly on asses and hair, I on weight and breast size, or the length of men's feet. We were never charitable in our remarks and always made a game of outdoing each other. And when she ran out of adjectives, she sometimes resorted to yelling out her epithets to our unaware victims. She was cruel. She was cool.

She was kind. When the locally infamous lawyer T. Eugene Thompson was charged with the murder of his wife, Heidi, who lived directly behind them, smashed fallen crab apples and used their juice to wash away the chalked message on the Thompson's garage door that read YOUR FATHER IS A MURDERER! She also had a pronounced tick in her left eye when someone said the word *Jew*. This led me to say *Jewish*, which sounded nicer and seemed to better describe her.

I don't remember if it was this alliance that led me to read the diary of Anne Frank, or if it was the soulful eyes of Anne herself on the cover of the book, her tender face like a beatified and martyred saint. How articulate, how intelligent and sensitive she was, holding her breath, not moving a foot for fear of creaking a floorboard. No bike, no friends, no ice cream or school. Everything sacrificed only to be betrayed and forsaken, only to die two weeks before freedom. In spite of everything, she believed people were good.

She was a martyr and a saint. Not a saint like St. Anna, who hid in a monastery in Constantinople and was known as "the Eunuch Euphemius," or St. Anne Line, a convert hanged at Tybburn for harboring priests, or even St. Anne made famous by

her grandson Jesus. Anne Frank was never made a saint, because Jews are not saints, though her eyes were holy and true and clear, turned upwards to see a few birds fly over her prison annex window through the blue sky of tortured Amsterdam. On Wednesday, 23 February, 1944 she wrote, "*The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy.*"

Who were those birds she saw? What angels held her hands, lifted her through that solitary window to beatify her, to fill her mouth with the bread of such hope? Her diary lay beside my bed for a long time.

It was during that same time in my life that my Saturday chore was to do the grocery shopping with my father. He seemed to enjoy this weekly outing, choosing to drive to the Appelbaum's in Highland Park rather than going to the less appealing Kroeger's in Midway Center, where my brother bagged other people's groceries. My brother made good tips due to his demeanor which was imprinted on his soul by the Christian Brothers and officers of the U.S. Army who ran the school he attended. His back was straight and his shoulders square. He always said, *Yes, sir!* His hair was so short and clean it bristled and shone in the sun. He was a good Catholic boy.

My father and I never drove directly from home to the grocery store, but instead drove up and down the pleasant streets of Highland Park where people owned modern ramblers with landscaped lawns. Some of these people were Jewish. My father believed they all were, and cursed their wealth. He cheered himself, though, by singing the same song every Saturday afternoon as we followed our ritual checkerboard path, heading first east and then west, down one block and up the next. He sang, *All you with broken noses, come join the ranks of Moses, fight, fight, fight for Palestine! If you love pork and gravy, come join the Jewish Navy, fight, fight, fight for Palestine!*

At Appelbaum's, my father chatted with the owner, taking on a completely different personality. He introduced me as his daughter Rebecca and spoke in a strange voice that was supposed to be a Yiddish accent. He was pretending to be a Jew among Jews. It never really startled me, for I was accustomed to my father's departures from reality. Nevertheless, it bewildered me and caused me to fall silent and morose, staring at the bright linoleum floor, willing it to open wide and swallow me whole. After Appel-

baum's we stopped at Cecil's Deli, where he gleefully continued his charade, waving his arms in caricature calling *Rebecca, Rebecca, did you take a number, Rebecca? What do you got to do to get service around here?* He tried to wink at me on the sly, but I would not, could not, meet his eye. Instead, I stared at the huge slabs of corned beef brisket through the cold display windows, felt the bespeckled eyes of Mrs. Adelman staring at the back of my head from the matzo soup label and felt a terrible shame that haunts me still. *Do you think they knew?* I asked my friend Sonja not long ago. *Of course they knew, she said, they weren't morons.*

But this is not the question that burns inside me. Nor have I spent long years wondering why it is that people love or even crave what they hate, stealing ethnicity as easily as they bash it to bits. My real question, arising from a fetid history of shame, is simply, *What about me? What role did I play in my father's production?* If I was so righteously horrified by his actions, why didn't I simply disappear on Saturday in a fog of drugstore cigarette smoke as I would the following morning, attempting naively to avoid the enormous eye of God? I have to depend on memory here, an unreliable and suspect witness. I want to remember myself as pure and innocent, untouched by the bigoted nature of the world I lived in, but is this even a possibility?

My own mind, when pressed, presents a case against me. Again, in New Ulm, in the summer of 1962. The town's annual festival was approaching. It was called "Polka Days," which always involved obese German farmers drinking far too much beer and pissing and vomiting in people's yards, carnival games where children could win walking sticks with hideous glass poodle heads or over-sized dice for knobs, and modern-day German atrocities such as blood sausage. Polka Days also included a parade with floats and bands.

That year, Peter's Meats, for whom my father drove a delivery truck, bussed in a band from Chicago. When word of this spread, taking only thirty minutes in that tiny community, everyone began to whisper, *The colored people are coming to town.* It was repeated everywhere I went, from Herberger's to Sugar's Bar, from the library and back to the huge meat coolers at Peter's Meats, where the boss' bony Chihuahua would snarl and bark bug-eyed to keep you from a side of beef three hundred times its size. The phrase eventually became to me an invocation of something mystical and unknown, and I began to imagine a parade like none I had ever seen, with hoop-carrying harlequins with faces and costumes in lovely pastel shades of lavender, pink and blue. The col-

ored people were coming to town, and I waited. I was disappointed at first to see merely a marching band of black men wearing shirts saying Peter's Meats. That was until the flash of brass and the synchronized movement of their dark dancing bodies pulled my own body through the air in motions of childish sex and joy. And when the parade was over, the men in the band were brought to the truck garage at Peter's where long tables and box lunches waited for them. The huge garage doors were left open and every kid in town lined up to watch them eat their food. I was in the front row, never once thinking it degrading that these men were made to eat in an oily garage instead of a restaurant, not considering for a moment the effect of rude eyes of a gang of children staring without self-consciousness or decency. I had never seen a black person before, and had no experience in racism to assume any attitude at all, and yet an attitude was upon me, an old silent assumption sanctioned and reinforced by the actions surrounding me. I know I would not have stared at any other people eating hot dogs and red Jello, for I was a polite and quiet little girl.

Then there was my childhood friend Donna who is my friend still, who meets me at the White Lily for dinner sometimes, or at Ciatti's bar for martinis before a sad and sappy movie where we cry in the dark, staring straight ahead. Her parents moved to Minnesota from Mexico and lived in my old neighborhood. Before we became friends, Donna and her sister Lupe used to chase me home from school shouting threats in a language which was a combination of English and Spanish. I was afraid of those weird girls in their black braids and odd, hand-knit caps that tied under their chins. I was still new to the neighborhood and lonely, being made to endure the child's version of natural selection. But somehow I survived and one summer found myself in Donna's backyard where she was playing *I Hear Crying in the Chapel* on a blue and white accordion her father had brought her from a vacation in Mexico. She was ticked off because she had asked her father for a guitar, and he said guitars were for boys. An argument ensued, but he was tender toward her and promised that if she showed serious musical intent by learning the accordion, he would buy her a guitar the next time he traveled with her mother to Mexico. She spilled out this story to me as she squeezed the accordion in and out, while sitting on her back steps, pumping the keys with her skinny little fingers. I found all this terribly romantic and began to spend many of my days with her.

The inside of Donna's house was another world, with the smell of homemade tortillas, the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe and its perpetually burning votive candle, and a huge blue-

sequined sombrero that hung on the living room wall. Donna eventually got her guitar and so did I. She learned to play and I did not. I would sit beside her with my hands in my lap and sing along with her as years passed, as adolescence passed. Years later, she told me that when we were younger, I had been cruel in teasing her and had called her a Spic. I made a joke of it, and did it more than once. I was shocked by this revelation, not because I didn't believe her, though I had no memory of it, but because I knew at once it must be true, for Donna would not lie to me. And I couldn't blame it on the ignorance of youth. I had to know what I was saying, what it meant, and how it would hurt her. What other reason is there for the existence of such words, what other way to utter them? And afterwards, no matter how much later, there are no words for sorrow and regret that can change or even alter them.

So what was I doing all those Saturday afternoons with my father? Did I laugh along with him and encourage him? Certainly, I never betrayed him. I only betrayed myself and those I called my friends. It has occurred to me, in trying to reconstruct my own history, that I craved any time with my father, longed for a moment when I felt love, even in complicity, and I knew this would only happen in public, for the eyes of others. At home, locked in our rooms, my father turned his anger and hatred toward me, and instead of Tricia or even Rebecca, he called me *The Stupid Bitch*. At home, it was never a matter of games or songs, and if I said earlier that I could not imagine a Jew, I was not really telling the truth; I may have been confused by mere semantics, for a Jew is a Nigger is a Spic is a Bitch. All my life, I have known that the Jews are the chosen ones, and I have asked myself *Chosen for what?*

Every afternoon around 3:30, an almost unbearable anxiety fell over our house. My mother would sit before the TV watching *As the World Turns*, ironing as a woman possessed, even the cotton sheets and my father's underwear, stacking everything in neat piles on the sofa behind her. The statue of the Infant of Prague sat on top of the TV, with the antenna behind him appearing to come out of his crown as if he were some alien. My mother's novena cards, perhaps a rosary and our school books lay on the dining room table. We hurriedly gathered everything. Only two hours to go: dinner to be made; things to be put in their proper places; eyes searching every corner for the offensive mitten or an empty milk glass left on an end-table. Nothing was ever good enough. Our father would come home and storm through the house, even the basement, once dragging upstairs the lint catcher from the washing machine that had not been cleaned, shaking it in our mother's

face and screaming at her, accusing her, belittling her in front of my brothers and me. None of us ever escaped his loathing and rage, though every day we went through the same ritual trying to save ourselves. We could not understand that it was not the dirty dishes or unfolded towels that he could not tolerate, but just our selves, our very existence that made him go mad. Years passed before I realized his prejudice toward us was something that we simply could not help, like the darkness of skin, an accent, or the shape of an eye.

One summer, away at last from the mind-splitting contradictions of the Christian Brothers military school, my brother underwent a transformation as remarkable as Kafka's Gregor Samsa, cockroach boy. First, he grew his hair out and fashioned a ducktail at the nape of his neck, then donned the garb of a greaser, wearing dirty sweatshirts with the sleeves torn out, exposing his teenage biceps, and a dog's choke chain around his neck. One day he came home with swastikas painted on his shirt in black magic marker. As he swaggered through the front door and up the first few stairs toward the landing, our father, in a fit of rage and screaming, grabbed the shirt by the back and yanked so hard it split open all the way down my brother's chest and belly, pulling him backward into the furious cage of our father's arms and fists, which pounded my brother's body and knocked him to the ground. *I will not have this goddamned thing in my house!*, our father shouted. We all stared at the torn and filthy rag of a sweatshirt with its evil insignia where it lay on the floor, and at my brother, half-naked and crying, split lip and bloody nose flowing into one pink stream down his heaving chest. Later that evening, as hot as it was, my brother and I crossed the floor of my bedroom and climbed the stairs to the attic where we pulled back the familiar floorboard where his pack of Old Golds was hidden. We sat by the open dormer window and smoked, looking down at our street, with neither of us saying anything about the Nazi sweatshirt or his split lip. Another image of my brother I can remember from that summer was when he rode home from the river on his bicycle with an enormous carp tied inside his shirt, and spread across his face was an excellent expression of joy.

Those years are gone, but energy cannot be destroyed, it only changes form and appears again in strange and mysterious shapes. Karl Rabinowitz is a student of law at the University where I work. On several occasions while visiting me or doing paperwork, he has eased down the length of my desk and studied, with close scrutiny, the face of my husband Ethan in a camping photograph in which he is about to eat a seriously charred potato.

Ethan is beautiful, the kind of man who looks even better after a few days in the woods, curly blond hair streaked by the sun, blue eyes, and a deep tan. When Karl squinted at him, I thought he was trying to figure out what the potato was, since it was burned beyond recognition, but one day he looked back over his shoulder and said *He's a Jew, isn't he?* And I said *Yeah, but what makes you ask?* He told me that Ethan looked like a Jew, that he could always recognize Jews. *We just have a certain thing, he said, a kind of appearance.*

There are others who appear at my desk, making absurd comments. On one occasion, a student said *There are a lot of Jews on the faculty.* I responded that there are a few, wondering where the conversation was headed. He insisted there were a lot of Jews on the faculty and a lot of students who were Jews who got special treatment, better final grades than the rest. I said, *Right, they have a secret society,* and reminded him that there is a blind grading system; the blue books for exams are assigned numbers, not names. He snorted at me and said *Oh, they know. They know.*

In our neighborhood today, Nazis creep through the streets at night, leaving under windshield wipers badly mimeographed fliers proclaiming white supremacy. The grammar is bad, the drawings crude. One evening as Ethan and I lay in bed, trying to sleep despite our neighbor's strained oboe practice, we were further disturbed by the sound of a group of young Nazis marching down the street shouting slogans and threats. Ethan leapt from bed and into his jeans, ran out the back door and into the street. I sat in the darkness, suspended by fear, and listened to my husband shout at the group of them, ordering them to shut up and leave. They shouted back as I walked in slow motion, it seemed, toward the phone in the next room, in case I needed to call the police. But the Nazis left, my husband came down the dark hallway, got back into bed and pulled the sheet up over his shoulder saying *Those bastards, there are little black kids living in this neighborhood; they shouldn't have to lie in bed and hear that kind of crap.*

After work each day, I used to go to Hamline University where I attended graduate school at night. Occasionally I would meet one of my professors, a tiny and energetic woman whom I admired. We'd share a sandwich and talk about school. After a few months we began to relate parts of our private lives to one another, and through the doorway of a conversation about our unhappy relationships with our fathers, she described her lost childhood to me; how she'd been taken from her home during the night in occupied Poland, barely a year old, and left to live with a gentle

family; how during the five years that followed, she spent almost all of her time in the kitchen with the cook, who, she told me, was either anti-Semitic or terrified, but would constantly admonish her not to act Jewish. *Don't eat like a Jew, don't walk like a Jew*, my professor remembered. *I didn't know what a Jew was, I had no idea; I thought I was being silly or bad.* She never left the house, sat there without other children or toys. She was never held. When the war was over, bells ringing, her host family encouraged her to go outside and celebrate. She was frightened of the unknown territory of the front yard, and when she ventured out she screamed at the sight of an old man in rags and a long, filthy beard kneeling and praying in the street. She was told not to be afraid of him, he was a Jew just like her, and she turned her fear toward herself, thinking she must be insane.

She was left at an Orthodox orphanage where it was believed Jewish parents could more easily find their displaced families. There she joined hordes of others like herself, made to sit at the long tables to cut their fingernails once a month. The people who ran the place made each child count out ten nail clippings before they could throw them away, telling the children that if one of their nails were separated from the rest, when they died their souls would wander the earth forever, searching for the lost fingernail. This experience deepened her conviction that Jews were crazy people, and she accepted her fate of a crowded, walled-in yard full of homeless children. She remembers only once being hoisted up to see over the wall, when she saw a man pass by on a bicycle.

When she first arrived at the orphanage, she was brought to a second-floor office where she was plainly told that it was certain her mother had died. There was a fifty-fifty chance that her father was still alive. *Father* was another foreign word to her, so two years later, when she was called back to the second floor and saw a strange man standing there, gaunt and overcome with emotion, she simply gazed at him and said *Fifty-fifty, you must be my father.* After two years of searching, starving and praying, imagining this moment, he fell to his knees and threw his arms around her, held her close to him and wept. This was the first embrace in her memory. She stiffened as if in *rigor mortis*, an omen of the future of their relationship.

One night before class I stood by the Coke machine searching the cafeteria for her. She saw me and came rushing toward me, her hands outstretched. *Oh, I love those long earrings!*, she exclaimed, touching the dangling silver, pulling her hands away as

quickly as she had reached for them. 'Oh, no, I'm sorry. I shouldn't, she shook her head, held her hands. I'm socially retarded, you know.

That's okay, I told her, so am I.