Rituals

I am Jewish because my parents are Jewish. I also look Jewish and others can recognize this easily, so even though I would like it to be a private matter, it isn't entirely: My identity is out there, for everyone to see. I never speak about my being a Jew unless I am asked directly. I would consider it to be an imposition, obvious and useless information, which should not be offered. Why burden others with my problems, especially if there is nothing they or I can do about it? My family name, Grünfeld, is also an obvious giveaway, easily recognizable as Jewish. Sometimes when I pronounce it, I notice the person's eyebrows rise, as if to say, "Aha, I knew it." This happens at the beginning of each school year in class, when the teacher does not know what to do with my foreign-looking last name. I have to stand and pronounce it out loud, in front of everyone. When the teacher asks what my nationality is, I blush and wish I were not Jewish, or had a name like Popescu or Ionescu, any name but my own. I don't understand why they need to ask me every year, in front of the rest of my class, what my nationality is. They must have it written down somewhere by now. Idiots!

Religion is not important to me. It is something that belongs to my parents' generation. Especially to Father, who wakes up every morning and prays in the bedroom, with the old prayer book open on top of his desk. From the bed where I lie half awake, I hear his fast murmur and see him turn the tattered loose pages very speedily while his finger moves on top of the page at an incredible pace—how can he read so fast? —and the morning light comes in through the

curtains, outlining his full body rocking slowly back and forth. It looks a little strange to me since I don't believe in God, but this is Father. He also goes to the synagogue every Saturday morning, all by himself, carefully combed and dressed in his dark suit. He doesn't ask me to come along. Father never speaks of God to me and seems to accept that I am not a believer. Once he explained to me that early on he and Mother decided that neither Ferkó nor I would suffer because of our being Jewish. "I myself need to believe, and continue being Jewish," he said quietly. "If I stopped, all my suffering during the war would make no sense and it would have been for nothing. But you children don't have to believe." He went on with some hesitation "or to be Jewish."

So our parents decided not to teach us anything about the Jewish tradition or even to circumcise us. "I hope that you would not be so easily identified as a Jew, as I was when the Nazis lowered my pants," he explained, looking at me seriously.

I didn't dare ask when this happened because he looked too pained. Neither did I really understand what exactly Father meant by not having to be Jewish. I knew too well that I was.

Blanka *néni*, Father's sister who lives in Bacău, is also a believer of sorts. I don't know if she actually goes to the synagogue, like Father does, or prays at home, but her daily language is full of references to saints, Christian or otherwise. Just like peasants, newly come to Cluj and still maintaining their country customs, my aunt believes in the power of intervention of all saints, asks them for help and even crosses herself. Her husband, Károly *bácsi*, a dental technician who works illegally as a dentist, seems too down to earth to be a believer, but I cannot really tell because he is the person I know least in my family. To me, it looks like he is just putting up with Blanka *néni*'s superstitions.

Mother seems neutral on this matter. I don't think she believes in God, but I am not sure. When she lights the

Sabbath candles on Friday nights, she looks like a true believer. First she pulls the curtains on the kitchen window that faces the courtyard. Then she covers her head with a large colorful kerchief, the shiny kind that peasant women wear, and ties it in a knot under her chin—this makes her eyes glow and her face seem thinner—while she circles the lit candles with her open hands, whispering something in Hebrew. Then she covers her eyes with her palms and sighs deeply. Looking at her like that, as if gone to a different realm, I want to cry, but then she comes back and kisses me, and we have a great Sabbath supper around the kitchen table, admiring the candles slowly being consumed on our beautiful silver candleholders.

On the other side of the family, in Bucharest, Zoli *bácsi* and Ida *néni* are true communists, which explains it all for me. He is Jewish, and she is Christian, and they never go to church or to the synagogue. They are, in fact, openly anti-religious. When Blanka *néni* invokes her saints, I see them roll their eyes indulgently, as if saying, "She is family, what can we do?"

As for myself, I agree with Zoli *bácsi* and Ida *néni*. My father's beliefs are his private thing, something that adds to his seeming just a little strange and different. My special sense—which helps me identify Jews by the way they look and behave, and I do not mean only by the shape of their noses—tells me that father is very Jewish. This sense tells me that I too look very Jewish, though I surely try not to. Like me, my brother Ferkó is not a believer, but he is the only one in our family who can pass because of his blond hair and straight nose, which I have always envied him for.

My friends know that I am Jewish, and I know that they know, but there is nothing we say to each other about it. It is all tucked away inside the folds of my house. If my friends catch a glimpse of it, we have to shut the doors tighter, and pull the curtains.

One summer Friday night my Hungarian friend Aurel, whose parents worked at the Hungarian Theater, came home with me. It was getting dark and we were hungry, so we ran into my apartment to ask Mother for something to munch on. As I opened the outside door I knew immediately that it was not the right moment to bring someone home, but it was too late. Father was seated at the table, facing us, and Mother was just lighting the Sabbath candles, her back towards the door. She turned her head, looked at us quietly, put her index finger on her lips and continued. As we made our way in, I could see amazement on Aurel's face as he watched the strange way Mother lit the two candles while saying a prayer in a foreign language. Father, silently sitting at the table with his fedora hat on, must have also looked foreign to Aurel. When Mother stopped her prayer, Father stood up and came towards us as if wanting to ask a question, but Aurel, who was faster, pointed his finger at Father's hat and blurted out in Hungarian, "*Zsidó van a házban. Szar a calapjában*," which means there is a Jew in the house, and he has shit on his hat.

For a moment none of us knew what to say. We just looked at each other, stunned.

"Aurel, I don't think Misike will play any longer tonight," Father said softly. "He needs to stay in. Please go home now."

That was the first and last time that a friend of mine ever saw my mother light the Sabbath candles. And Aurel and I stopped being friends.

There aren't many public places that can be identified as Jewish in Cluj. It is clearly important not to attract much attention, so Jewish associations or traditional places are often hidden in courtyards and behind

anonymous closed doors that would not give them away. I have never seen a public sign of a Jewish institution on a wall. However, there are several such places that I know of. One is the large synagogue on Horea Street, on the main road leading into town. From outside the building looks rather like a tall church with vaguely oriental features, like beautifully colored, tall oval windows. I have often wondered what it is like inside, but have never found out because it was closed after the war. It just stands there on one of the main roads in town like a different, somewhat mysterious place. Only the Jews and old people know that it was a synagogue before the war. A smaller synagogue is hidden at the back of a narrow courtyard you enter through an unmarked gate on Gheorghe Barițiu Street.

Father sometimes took my brother and me to this synagogue, when we were small, but since we were never taught how to read the prayer book, we mostly ran around and played. It is a fragile, two-floor wooden building with a single row of pews facing the Torah. The room has only a few windows, and it is always dim inside. On the right, facing the front, stands a tall balcony where women and girls my age pray, if and when they are present. The left wall is bordering on the River Someș, and teenagers throwing stones from the other shore have broken its three windows. Now they are completely covered with dark paper, which makes the whole place feel gloomy.

Another unmarked public Jewish place is The Federation—as we call the Romanian Federation of Jewish Communities. It is a two-story slender house located on a narrow street near Mihai Viteazu Market. I have accompanied Father there many times, waiting patiently while he finishes his "business," which to me seems to be never-ending talking, mostly in Yiddish. The place has many rooms with large wooden desks, metal file cabinets that won't close, old chairs and completely worn-out office furniture, where older Jewish men with heads covered in

fedoras arrange official Jewish matters. To me, they seem to be either gossiping in a whisper or loudly fighting about official matters in a mixture of Yiddish, Hungarian and Romanian. There is something depressingly Jewish about this place that makes me want to stay as far away from it as possible. However, this is the governing place of the Jewish population in Cluj, so everyone visits there for one reason or another. Once a year, for example, we go there for help from an American organization called JOINT. We wait patiently in a long line to receive a couple of boxes of Matzoth for Passover. Mother butters pieces and doles them out as if they were dessert. It doesn't taste so good, but it is unusual and it is American, which makes it special.

Another Jewish institution is the butcher shop: a small, unmarked one-room store near the market where Jews purchase kosher meat once a week. Two butchers work in that place, mostly standing around, bored, waiting for the meat to be delivered. On the day the meat is expected, many people line up on the sidewalk, and the entire distribution lasts for a few hours, after which the store becomes empty and silent. Meat is usually too expensive for our family, so we almost never go there though Mother often tells me that she has heard Christians asking why the Jews have meat when the Christians don't.

Just around the corner from the Federation, there is another unusual place, completely unmarked from the outside and hidden at the back of a courtyard. This is a small, one-story house, old and gray, with crumbling plaster walls. Mother sometimes takes the live chicken to be cut there in the kosher way.

One Sunday morning in 1958—I am nine years old—we are coming back from the market with several full bags that I proudly help Mother carry. In one of them there is a live chicken with its feet tied. We walk slowly through the courtyard till we reach the house, and Mama knocks twice at the old wooden door. It makes a deep sound. I wait

behind her, hiding a little, even though I have been here before. Mama has explained to me that she doesn't like coming to the Shochet. “But before an important holiday,” she said, “it is better to make the chicken kosher. This is the right way.”

A short, bearded man with shiny eyes and thick black eyebrows opens the door and greets us with a smile of recognition and a friendly voice. “Come in, Mrs. Grünfeld.”

He lets us go through and closes the door carefully after himself. We follow him through a dark hallway into a larger room. The strong morning light is pushing through a couple of dirty windows with no curtains, illuminating an almost empty place. There are no decorations on the walls. On the right, near one of the windows, there is a low round table full of old papers turned yellow and three uninviting wooden chairs. The floors are worn. In the middle of the room, a huge square basin stands alone. It is as tall as I am and very wide, almost like a small swimming pool, and entirely covered with clean white tiles. I have never seen a square basin like this anywhere else.

“Can I have the chicken?” the man asks in a kind voice, while tying a dark apron around his waist. He is dressed in black, wears a black hat, and a whitish unkempt beard covers most of his face. Mama opens our shopping bag and pulls out the live chicken by its bound feet. The bird flaps its wings and squawks loudly. She hands it over to the Shochet, who takes it in his left hand and walks behind the basin. He faces us now and towers over the basin like some kind of dark judge. I approach slowly, careful not to miss anything, and wait with fear and trepidation for something I have already seen several times but need to come back to witness over and over. The Shochet unties the bird's legs, throws the string on the floor, and while holding the bird in the left hand starts mumbling a prayer in Hebrew. I don't understand a word, but it sounds familiar, like Father praying in the morning with his black fedora and

still in pajamas. The Shochet, with his eyes half closed, rocks slowly back and forth, while the chicken, calmed as if by a miracle, just hangs there. Then, while holding the bird under his left arm, with his hand he arches its neck backwards like a wheel and grabs its head. A large knife shines across the chicken's neck in a swift move, and the head falls off motionless. The man drops the bird into the basin.

For a moment the chicken looks perfectly alive without its head. It just stands there still on its feet, leaning forward and slightly off balance, as if thinking. Then, suddenly, it starts swinging its wings and legs, violently bouncing off the walls of the basin. The shiny red blood drops on the pure white tile look like stars in the sky. The bouncing goes on and on for an interminable time, and the basin gets redder and redder, smeared now like a dirty rag. As the bird slows, its wing movements become less powerful. One last spasm comes out of nowhere, and after a few moments of quiet it is all over. My heart beats wildly, and I cannot take my eyes off the red smear on the basin. The lines look like wide letters of an unknown alphabet. The chicken's neck is a short bloody stick, with flesh hanging, and the head rests motionless in a corner, the eyes still open.

I look up. Mama and the Shochet are whispering in Yiddish like old friends, paying no attention. When it is all quiet, the Shochet bends over the basin, picks up the drained bird by its legs, places it in an opened newspaper and wraps it all up with a habitual movement. Then he adds the head to the package and hands it to Mama. She puts it in her shopping bag and gives him some money.

“Thank you,” she says, and we leave.

We walk quietly towards home, along the Market Square where Father has his stalls, but we do not stop to see him. I am holding Mama's warm hand, but cannot say a word even though I would like to talk about what just

happened. I look at store windows distractedly. It is mid-morning, and the street is full of people walking by me in a hurry. The sun is shining in my eyes. We pass the radio repair shop. I like this place, and I usually stop to watch the uncovered radios in the window, with their complicated metallic insides: neat, shiny and mysterious. I always wonder where the voices really come from and would love to take a radio apart, all the way to the smallest screws, to find the hidden source of the voice. Today, however, I am not interested. Across the street, through the uncovered windows of the butcher shop, there is nothing for sale, as usual, except for a few small cans on the shelves, and the two butchers, dressed in white aprons, are just standing, looking out through the windows and chatting.

"Mama, is it true that the Jews smeared blood over the doors of the Egyptians so the Angel would kill their children?"

She stops and looks at me with strange, almost angry eyes. "Who told you that?"

I have only rarely seen this face. Then, I pull my hand out of her tight grip. "You are hurting me."

"I am sorry, Misike." She places her free hand on my shoulder, looks me in the eyes and asks a little more softly, "Who told you that?"

I don't like telling on my friends, and I hesitate. It was Sanyi's father who had recounted the story, according to my friend, one evening at dinner. His mother had agreed all along, nodding. The following day as we were returning home from an afternoon at the pool, he asked me if it was true, and I didn't know what to say. I had never heard the story. It sounded cruel and bloody. I wished that Péter, my brother's Jewish friend, were there to answer and defend me. He always knew what to say and had so many good stories to tell about Jews, praising and defending them. I glanced at Sanyi, and he was quiet, just walking beside me, and I somehow knew that the story was true. Without

saying a word, I left him and ran ahead, to the lake. I could not stop running for a while. When I stopped at last, I picked up a stick and started hitting a tree, repeating over and over: “I don't want to be a Jew.”

“Who told you that story?” Mama shakes my shoulder as if to wake me up.

“Oh, it was Sanyi. Actually, his father.” I avoid her eyes because I don't want her to know the whole story.

“It is not true, Misike.” Mama tightens her grip, and her voice sounds intense again. “This is the story of the ten plagues, in Egypt, and Sanyi's father changed it.”

My shoulder hurts from her grip now. I look up. “What happened then, really?”

“It was the last of the plagues. The Jews smeared blood on their own doors so the Angel of Death would know not to kill the Jewish children, only the Egyptians ones.” Then she goes quiet for a while and we keep on walking. “I will explain the whole story when we get home. It is quite different. You will understand.”

But I already understand. And I cannot stop thinking about the chicken in Mama's bag. I feel cold despite the strong sun and the beautiful morning. I know that Sanyi’s father was right. There is something really bad about being Jewish.

My parents never spoke to me about their youths and their lives before deportation. I understood that remembering the concentration camps was painful, and I could see their pain when the war and the camps were mentioned. They would become very quiet. When I was smaller I would ask questions, but I soon learned to stay away from their pasts. Even from their childhoods, which I wanted to know more about. Where did they grow up, who were their friends, who were their parents, my

grandparents? The concentration camps seemed to have blocked out everything. They kept it all to themselves. Sometimes it felt like a dark and scary shadow lived with us, between us, in our apartment, a shadow that we could not see but which was everywhere, on every object that surrounded us, present on all the surfaces of our lives, unspoken, but present.

Despite this silence, a little information did eventually reach us, directly or through our relatives. I knew early on that my parents had been married to other people before the deportation and that their respective spouses had died in the camps together with their parents and almost all their siblings (Zoli *bácsi* survived the camps and Blanka *néni* was never deported). However, only when I returned to Romania at age thirty-nine, in 1988, to bury my father did I find out that he had had two small children before the war. I don't even know if they were boys or girls. They had all been deported together and never returned. Father never mentioned them to me. I don't even know their names.

Once—only once—did my mother open the locks of her memory to tell me a story about the concentration camp. I was ten years old, and it came to me quite unexpectedly, like a unique gift.

It is Sunday morning, after breakfast, and I am on my way out to play with my friends when I hear Mama's friendly voice from the bedroom. "Misike, come here and stay with me a little."

I am sitting in the kitchen, tying my white tennis shoes and thinking of the day ahead, so I walk into the bedroom reluctantly. Mama is sitting on the carpet, leaning against the wall with a soft bed pillow behind her back. She is holding a small notebook on her lap and a pencil in her hand.

"Sit down here with me, Misike. I want to teach you the Hebrew alphabet." She signals to the pillow next to her,

in between the tall bedroom mirror and the cold wood-burning stove.

"The Hebrew alphabet? Now?"

"Please, come and sit by me." Her voice is friendly and inviting, so I sit down, resigned.

A bright sunlight pours in through the windows in front of me, lighting up the white crumpled sheets of my parents' unmade beds, side by side. Through the open windows I see the tops of the horse chestnut trees and faintly hear children's voices coming from the park just across. Sometimes I climb out our back windows to get to the park faster. Mama puts her arm around my shoulders and gently draws me close to her in a comfortable position. "I would like to teach you the Hebrew letters, Misike."

It is always Tata who reads the prayer book, although Mama recites the Sabbath prayer on Friday evenings. Does she know how to read Hebrew? Sitting on the soft carpet, I feel her warm arm against my skin. I snuggle in closer without saying a word. She opens the notebook, and with a pencil she slowly draws a curvy letter that resembles the strange letters I have seen in my father's prayer book.

"Aleph," she says.

"Aleph," I repeat after her, tentatively. Then she draws a few more, pronouncing each one slowly. "Beit, Gimel, Dalet."

I repeat these strange sounds trying to feel their curvy shapes in my mouth.

"Would you like to draw them?"

I don't want to learn to pray like Tata, every morning. I don't believe in God. Mama is smiling invitingly, holding out the pen in her right hand, but these unusual letters don't mean much to me. None of the few Jewish kids I know studies Hebrew, so why would I? Then something else occurs to me. It seems the right moment so I ask again,

although without much hope, “Mama, would you tell me something about the concentration camps?”

She remains quiet for a long time, as if waiting for something. I don't dare move at all, and the warm sunlight just pours in through the open windows. Mama puts the notebook and the pencil on the carpet beside her and pulls me even closer to her. The morning air feels still around me. Then she begins very quietly. I can barely hear her soft dreamy voice despite the perfect stillness.

“I was taken to Auschwitz in Poland during the summer of 1944, towards the end of the war.” I don't dare look up at her, afraid that she will stop. “I spent the winter in a large wooden barrack together with many other women. We did not have warm clothes and we were hungry all the time.” She pauses for a few seconds as if trying to sift through her memories. “During the day, from early morning till late at night, I worked in a factory, a long way from the barracks. We had to walk there, all of us on the road, every morning. It was an airplane factory.”

“What were you doing there?” I almost can't believe that my mother worked in an airplane factory.

“I was a riveter. I was riveting the wings on German airplanes.”

“You mean the German war planes?”

“Yes. I worked there from early in the morning till late at night for almost one year. It was hard work. I was tired all the time, and we received very little food. And we were hungry. Very, very hungry.”

A faint smile appears on Mama's face as she continues. “We were so hungry that some of us risked our lives to get a bit of extra food, anything at all, just to fill us up a little.”

Mama’s voice perks up a little here, as if she were telling me about some kind of an adventure. “I did this only a few times because I was too scared,” she says. “One night I was so hungry I got up and very quietly sneaked out of the

barrack. At first I walked a few steps towards the fence that surrounded our camp, and then I crawled so the guards in the high posts wouldn't see me. There were lights that moved across the camp and the fields beyond the fence. I knew of a spot where I could get out, through a hole under the barbed-wire fence. A friend had told me about it. I crawled all the way to the hole and made my way under the fence carefully."

"What if the guards saw you?"

"They would have shot me," she answers in a low voice, "but I was so hungry that I didn't care anymore. I just had to get some food. I crept slowly into the field that surrounded the camp. Not far, there was a place where potatoes had been planted a long time ago, and we all knew about it. It was early winter, and the ground was half frozen, but if you scraped it with a stick, you could find a potato. I started digging the half-frozen ground with my fingers and eventually found a potato. I wiped it clean on my uniform and bit into it right then and there. As the piece gradually warmed in my mouth, I chewed. It tasted really good, and I kept it in my mouth for a long time, slowly chewing it before I swallowed."

At this moment Mama turns towards me with a faint smile on her face and asks, "Have you ever tasted a raw potato?"

"No," I say, amazed at her question.

"I'll get one," she says. She stands up, walks through the kitchen into the pantry and returns with a small round potato, a knife and a small plate. She sits down by me and slowly and quietly peels the potato, lost in her thoughts, so solemn I do not dare whisper a word.

"Of course, there I did not peel the potatoes," she says. Then she cuts a small slice and puts it in her mouth. She also cuts me a thin piece. I start chewing. It tastes starchy to me, mostly bland and raw. I look at Mama's face

as she eats it slowly. I expect her to cry, but she doesn't. She is just somewhere else, far away.

"During the nights in the camp," she says, "these potatoes were a real delicacy for me. The two times I got them, I savored each bite. They tasted so good I promised myself that if I survived and ever got out I would eat one raw potato every day."

I look at Mama, knowing the answer before I even utter the question. "Have you been eating a raw potato every day?"

"No, of course not," she says softly. "I forgot. And I don't anymore want to remember what happened there."

I snuggle up to her warm and soft body, hide my tears under her arm, and we remain quiet, looking out the window.

I don't think any of my friends believe in God. We are all taught by the same schoolteachers, who explain religion away quite successfully. And it makes a lot of sense to us: How could God exist? Where would He be? Certainly not in the sky, among the stars. Even my good friend Dănuț, whose father is a Greek Orthodox priest, agrees. He would never tell his parents so, but he is of the same opinion. This, however, doesn't stop us from visiting several times during the summer his father's church in Cojocna, a small village about five kilometers from Cluj. The tiny stucco village church where his father preaches comes with an enormous parish house of some fifteen rooms. I have never seen such a vast house, where you could wander from room to room and very easily get lost in it. Dănuț and I bicycle to Cojocna but don't sleep in the house. We prefer nesting ourselves in a corner in the barn, where we can tell scary stories while listening to the terrifying noises made by mice and other small creatures. After such a night, imagining witches and

devils, my atheistic stance softens considerably. However, I cannot help noting that even this country church is mostly empty, which again is further proof to us that God doesn't really exist.

The same thing happens in the city, only worse. The Franciscan church on my street, on Museum Square, looks empty and abandoned, except of course for a few very old ladies, always dressed in black, and a couple of crippled beggars hanging out by the entrance door. My friends and I are not shy to tiptoe in with our heads lowered, dip our three forefingers into the holy water and make the sign of the cross while slightly bending our knees and looking up piously at the tabernacle. We sit down in one of the pews and pretend that we are praying till one of us cannot hold in his laughter any longer, and we run out noisily.

Even though we are not religious, all my friends celebrate Christmas at home, receive gifts and have beautifully decorated trees in their living rooms. They always talk about their gifts, which make me jealous. One year workers came and raised a huge Christmas tree in the bare lot behind the Post Office, near Caragiale Park. They decorated it prettily, and a white bearded old Saint Nicholas came that evening to distribute sweets to the children gathered around the tree. From that year on, every National Folklore Day—that's what they call it now—I go to the park to admire the Christmas tree and wonder whether the gift boxes hanging on the branches are empty or full. Like this year, in 1959.

I am already ten years old and am allowed to spend the entire day with my friends, on the street. They started putting up the tree yesterday, and my friends and I were nearby, observing the operation very closely. This involves a crane, ladders and many workers. It has been snowing all day, and the entire city is covered in a thick layer of sparkling fresh snow, which makes the tree look even prettier. When finally evening comes, the workers are

finished, the lights come on, and I am ready to go home. I say good-bye to Romi and Gică, my best friends, and run to report to Mama.

"The Christmas tree in the park is up. They have finished it. You must see it."

From the kitchen nook where she is washing dishes, Mama turns her head with a smile, but her hands don't stop rinsing the plate in the large pot of water on the stove.

"Do you want anything to eat, Misike?" She reaches over and places the plate face down to dry on the plastic-covered table.

"You should see the decorations, Mama. There are streamers and colored bulbs that rush up and down the tree as they light up. And huge gift boxes all wrapped up in colored paper. Do you think they are empty inside?"

Mama looks at me with laughing eyes. She dries her hands in the green apron and hugs me. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," I admit.

She pushes me gently towards the table. "Go sit down." I sit facing her and wait while she fixes me a slice of bread with butter and plum jam on a plate. She also hands me a glass of milk. "Here."

"Mama, could I have a Christmas tree?" I ask this even though I already know the answer. "Romi and Gică are getting a tree, and so are Sile and Costel and Dănuț. And they are all getting gifts."

A cloud covers Mama's smile. "Misike, you know that we are Jewish. We don't have Christmas trees. Only Christians have them."

"I know, Mama, but I don't care. Everybody gets one. I want one, too." Mama crouches down in front of me and looks me in the eyes. "I am sorry, Misike, but you can't have a Christmas tree."

I can feel my throat tightening, and tears start rolling. What an unfair thing!

“Why can't I have a tree when all my friends have one? Why can't Jews have trees? Besides, last year when we went to Bucharest, I did get a gift, didn't I?”

Mama and I went to Bucharest by train to visit my brother Ferkó. On Christmas Eve, Zoli *bácsi* and Ida *néni* took us by taxi to a huge theater. Mama had made me put on my brown suit and a white shirt. The theater was lit up, decorated with green pine-tree branches and completely full of people. I didn't really know why we were there, but there were a lot of kids running around noisily. The curtains opened, and I saw Saint Nicholas all dressed in red, sitting on a throne in the middle of the stage. On his left was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree, and beneath it, a tall pile of red boxes. He cleared his throat and spoke for a while. I listened carefully, but I didn't understand much except that we were all welcome. Then a pretty blond woman who was standing by him started handing him boxes, one at a time. He read out loud the names on the boxes, and children went up to get their gifts. I knew I wouldn't be called since I was not from Bucharest. How would Saint Nicholas know that I was there? Besides, I was Jewish.

When the Saint called out my cousin's name, Eugen Roth, I remembered that Ida *néni* was not Jewish. Then I heard Ferkó's name spoken out hesitatingly, and then my own. From where I sat I could see that Saint Nicholas was trying to figure out how to pronounce our last name. Francisc and Mihai Grünfeld. With boxes in both hands, he looked up across the room full of people. I froze. Mama pushed us gently. “Go ahead. He is calling you.”

We approached and walked up the stairs to the stage. Ferkó took his gift first. “Thank you.”

“And this is for you. Take it,” said Saint Nicholas, smiling while handing me a square box. I did not know what to do.

“You can go back now,” he whispered. I turned around and ran to catch up with my brother who was getting close to where we all sat. I grabbed him by the arm. “Saint Nicholas doesn't know that we are Jewish. He must have made a mistake.”

My brother did not answer. He was busy opening his gift. It was a storybook. On the blue cover there was a magical unicorn with large white wings, flying over a mountain. In my box there was a brown dog with short legs, white ears, and brown round eyes. It was perfect.

“Mama, I want a Christmas tree, please,” I plead, while sobbing as hard as I am able to. She looks at me with sad eyes and says nothing. Then she walks to the kitchen. I grab her long skirt and follow her.

“Please, Mama, please. I want a tree. A small one. Please.”

“I will speak with your father tonight, when he comes back from work.” She turns away from me, reaches over to the dirty dishes and continues washing.

It is Christmas Eve and we are at home, decorating the tree. Mama and I found one this morning at the market, and it's twice as tall as I am. We also bought a wooden foot to make it stand up. The stove is full of burning wood, and the room is warm. Through the open door I can see Tata reading the paper at the kitchen table. He wears a white shirt and his nice black pants, but he is turned away from us. I know that he and Mama had a discussion last night. I could hear their loud voices in the kitchen, disagreeing, but I kept away from it, pretending I was asleep.

Mama wears her pretty olive-green dress with short sleeves and she has had her hair curled. I help her hang the decorations we bought after we hauled the tree home. We purchased fifteen colored-glass globes covered with sprinkled snow, several candleholders and candles to clip on

the branches, glittering shreds of paper and white cotton for the snow. I am already eyeing the full box of bonbons waiting under the tree.

When we finish with the decorations, Mama gets a chair and puts a five-cornered red star on the very top. “No angels for us, thank you.”

“Why?” I ask, looking up.

She takes my hand and steps off the chair. “I don’t believe in angels, Misike.”

I don’t know what to say, but I wonder if Saint Nicholas is an angel, and if he will bring me gifts.

Mama gets the matches from the kitchen, and we light the candles very carefully. “We must not put the tree on fire,” she tells me.

When we are all done, we move away from the tree and look at it proudly. It is beautiful, tall and alive.

Mama hands me a brush and a can of black shoe polish she brought in from the pantry. “Misike, it is time to shine your shoes.”

When I am done, she takes the brush and goes over a pair of her own shoes. Then she polishes Tata's shoes and winks at me not to tell him. As if knowing that something is happening, Tata folds the paper, stands up and comes over.

“It is really pretty,” he says admiringly. He notices his shoes in the window and looks at Mama softly. “Let's hope Saint Nicholas will remember us all.”

“Misike, are you also going to put your socks in the window by the shoes?”

I nod happily. “Tata, do you think Ferkó will receive a gift this year? I really miss him.”

“I don't know,” he answers quietly. “He received one last year, when we visited him, didn't he?”

We are all sitting now on the soft carpet by the tree. Tata gets up as if remembering something, goes to the bureau, lifts up our new record player and brings it near us

on the floor. He is very careful with it. After he brought it home, only a few months ago, I was warned not to open it by myself. It is very expensive. Tata chooses one among the several records we have, opens the rectangular brown lid, puts the LP on the turntable and checks the needle carefully with the tip of his index finger. With his right hand he winds the record player up and rests the little round metallic head with the needle on the LP. It floats up and down as the record turns steadily, and a melodious high voice comes out. It is Ima Sumac, the Peruvian opera singer, whose crystal-clear voice surrounds us with soft magic. I lie back on the carpet, thinking of the chocolates and the gift I will probably receive. Tata is sitting close to Mama, covering her hand with his.