THIS YEAR IN LOS ANGELES

David L. Ulin

LONG and white and formal, the Seder table stretches across the living room like something out of a photograph. A photograph, or a memory, or both—the moment when the picture and the recollection merge. Along its surface sit all the familiar markers of tradition: haggadahs and matzoh, glasses of red wine, and the ceremonial cup for Elijah, as if this year, the old white-bearded prophet might actually descend from heaven to join us for a round. And in the middle, the Seder plate, porcelain like my grandmother's, striated in shades of white and blue, with the Hebrew letters for *pesach* etched across the center, and small blue circles for the egg, bitter herbs, shank bone, parsley, horseradish, and *charoset* that give Passover its peculiar charm.

What scant memories I have of Judaism revolve around a setting just like this one, as ephemeral as a bridge of sighs. When I was a kid, I used to spend Passover at my grandparents' apartment in Brooklyn, where I would sit at the children's table with the cousins I barely knew, grudgingly listening to the story of the Exodus and wondering when I might make my own escape. Back then, all this was just a burden, or even worse, a stigma—a set of peasant superstitions that I couldn't get away from fast enough. Tonight, however, I am taking steps toward adopting those rituals for my own use, as my wife, Rae, and I host our first family Seder here in Los Angeles, the most visible manifestation of my efforts in the last few years to make some contact with my roots.

This process of reconciliation is a tricky one, and even now, I don't know what I think. I'm not the only one; from their places at the table, my par-

ents look bewildered, while my brother and his wife seem more than a little uncomfortable, as if they're not sure why they're here. The only people at ease are Rae and her mother, as well as the handful of friends we've invited to cut the tension, and the kids — my two-and-a-half-year-old son Noah, and his cousins Curtis and Christine — rolling around the floor like wrestlers, blissfully oblivious to any agenda but their own. Perhaps it's true that the whole point of ritual is its reassuring sameness, that by participating in these age-old celebrations, we become connected to our heritage. But my family has never believed that, and in hosting this Seder, I've marked out my own exodus, which to some extent makes Passover a symbol of *dis*connection, of all the things we've tried to put behind us, the fragments of history we could never get to cohere. *Why is this night different from all other nights?* asks the first of the Four Questions, and tonight that takes on added resonance, as my family and I stare at each other across a personal divide. Looking at them, I'm reminded that when I first invited my parents to this Seder, my father laughed and told me, "I never realized you were such a Jew."

My father was joking when he said that, although like most jokes, it carries the small, sharp edge of judgment, as well. Yet perhaps the most appropriate way to read his remark is as another symbol, of the contradictions that beat within my family's hearts like blood. My history is one of assimilation; when I was five, my parents traded our menorah for a Christmas tree, and from then on, I was not taught to respect my traditions, nor even to know them, but to shed them like old skin, after which I might walk bravely, nakedly, unencumbered into a better world. I was never bar mitzvahed, never taught about the Old Testament, and my primary experience of organized religion remains the two years — from ten to twelve — I sang in an Episcopal church choir. Lest this sound more conscious than it's meant to, I should point out that, for me, singing in the choir had less to do with religion than with the twenty-five-dollar-a-month stipend the church paid. But the sheer fact of my having been allowed to do it suggests something fundamental about the way I was brought up, which was to think of faith as fashion, as something that might be useful as a means of self-creation, but was inherently false and empty just the same.

Over the years, I've tried to make sense of this, to reason out a point of view. I've gone through periods of agreeing with my parents, and others when I condemned the depth of their self-loathing, the extent to which they turned their backs on who they were. It's not that I don't understand their logic; growing up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, aspiring to a certain social status, I always knew it was best to keep my ethnicity well hidden. Yet for all their emphasis on reinvention, my parents never wanted us to become Christian, just to erase the stain of our Jewishness and render ourselves new. For them, it was a matter of transformation through negation, but in the process we were stranded, part of neither the world we wished for nor the one we left behind. Once, when I was eighteen, and working construction in Texas, the foreman asked if I were Jewish, and I said, "No." Even then, though, I'd begun to wonder at my spiritual isolation, the way heritage felt like a box of loose slides in the back of a closet, half-forgotten and largely out of reach. Not only was it all uncataloged, I didn't have the necessary projector, which meant the best I could do was hold each image to the light and squint at it, identifying little more than the odd detail from which I might try to reconstruct the rest.

Half my life later, I'm still piecing together this information, looking to see how it fits. It's a solitary process, lonely even, since, given my background, the simplest accommodations come tinged with capitulation, with the feeling that I've turned my back on the person I was raised to be. It's as if I can't trust my impulses, which keep telling me to seek connection while warning me not to believe in anything larger than myself. This, of course, is the central contradiction, for among the most enduring legacies of my upbringing is a deep-seated distrust of organized religion, of its agendas, its compulsive sense of community, and its insistence on placing the issue of identity in a context broader than my own.

In the end, that may explain why, of all the spasms of ritual, the Seder, with its do-it-yourself aesthetic, is the one I've been most comfortable taking on. It's something that moves me at the most basic level, that there need

be no intermediary — no rabbi — to negotiate the ceremony, or tell me what it means. Tonight, if there's an officiating presence, I am it, seated at the head of the table, hiding the *afikoman,* or pouring wine to finger-flick across the crisp white china, ten drops per person for the plagues of Egypt, each in its own way a transubstantiation into blood. For all my uncertainty, it is in these small acts that I sense the fragile tendrils of connection, an understanding that sharpens when Noah and Rae bring a pitcher of water to perform the ritual washing of hands. The moment is hardly solemn; as Noah crawls into my lap and splashes my palms and fingers, his features crinkle and he giggles in high-pitched joy. But in the face of his reaction, I think again about the solace of tradition, and the ways that heritage may leave us not compromised but confirmed.

This is not the first time I've had that realization; when Noah was born, I reluctantly agreed to give him a *bris,* only to find myself moved by what I'd previously excoriated as a "ritual mutilation," a benediction not of love but blood. Then, as now, it was the simple things that touched me, the idea that this was, in the broadest sense, a communal moment, passed down through generations, binding us to our lineage in a way I'd never known. Standing there, holding my infant son's hand as the scalpel cut away his foreskin and left a small, thin ring of exposed flesh, I felt, for a fleeting instant, like part of something, before the feeling faded and I returned to the parameters of my life.

Years ago, I'd have seen this evanescence as proof of religion's inability to sustain us, but these days, such whispers of communion are all I expect. After all, heritage is a hard concept to hold onto, one that slips away each time I turn it over in my mind. There is always an equally opposing impulse; with Judaism, I want both to belong and not to belong. Even at the Seder, I can't avoid that conflict, and when my mother-in-law starts coaching Noah in Hebrew, I clench my fists and glare. Briefly, it's as if time has telescoped, and I'm cast back to my childhood. But then that moment, too, passes, and by the time we reach the closing invocation, "Next Year in Jerusalem," I know that next year in Los Angeles, we will be doing this again.

GOOD WIVES DON'T DRIVE

Joan Jobe Smith

My father refused to teach my mother
how to drive his car, he said it
wasn't ladylike in 1949, a woman driver

was no better than a streetwalker she was
to take the bus and be a good wife like
his mother was so my mother took secret

driving lessons, the instructor man
coming every day in his grey sedan
to show her how to let out the clutch

just right so the car wouldn't jerk, how
to work the choke and the radio, make
turn signals, arm bent up for right

straight out for left, down for slow
me in the backseat watching as we drove
the L.A. streets: Firestone, Rosemead

Sunset Boulevard, Pico, La Brea and
Santa Fe and the day she got her drivers
license she bought herself a green 1939