

Slipping Sideways

Through Eternity

JANE YOLEN

*Millions of devout Jews set a place for Elijah at the table every Passover—what would happen, though, if he actually showed up ...*

*One of the most distinguished of modern fantasists, Jane Yolen has been compared to writers such as Oscar Wilde and Charles Perrault, and has been called “the Hans Christian Andersen of the Twentieth Century.” Primarily known for her work for children and young adults, Yolen has produced over 270 books, including novels, collections of short stories, poetry collections, picture books, biographies, and a book of essays on folklore and fairy tales. She has received the World Fantasy Award, the Golden Kite Award, and the Caldecott Medal, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award, as well as winning two Nebula Awards, for her stories “Lost Girls” and “Sister Emily’s Lightship.” Her more adult-oriented fantasy has appeared in collections such as Tales of Wonder, Merlin’s Booke, Sister Emily’s Lightship, Storyteller, Dragonfield and Other Stories, and Once Upon a Time (She Said), and in such novels as Cards of Grief, Sister Light/Sister Dark, White Jenna, The One-Armed Queen, and Briar Rose. Her children’s fantasy collections include Twelve Impossible Things, Here There Be Dragons, Here There Be Witches, Here There Be Angels, Here There Be Ghosts, Here There Be Unicorns, Dream Weaver, and The Girl Who Cried Flowers. Her children’s fantasy novels range from high fantasy like The Magic Three of Solatia, the Young Merlin Trilogy, Sword of the Rightful King, Wizard’s Hall, and Dragon’s Boy to time travel such as The Devil’s Arithmetic, to urban fantasy like the Tartan Magic books: Wizard’s Map, The Pictish Child, and The Bagpiper’s Ghost, to science fiction fantasy, most notably the Pit Dragon trilogy. Her most recent fantasy novels are Pay the Piper and Troll Bridge both with Adam Stemple, and The Year’s Best Science Fiction and Fantasy for Teens, coedited with Patrick Nielsen Hayden. She and her family live part of the year in Massachusetts and part in Scotland.*

\* \* \* \*

S

HANNA opened the door slowly and peered out. The lake surface ruffled in the wind but there was no one on it. She shrugged, came back to the seder table. “No one there,” she said. She was only five after all, ten years younger than me. She got to ask the questions, open the door. I got to drink watered wine. It was some sort of trade-off.

Everyone laughed.

“Elijah is there, only you can’t see him,” Nonny said.

But she was wrong. I could see him.

Elijah stood in the doorway, tall, gaunt, somewhere between a concentration camp victim and a Beat poet. I read a lot of poetry. Then I paint the poems, the words singing their colors onto the page. Sometimes I think I was born in the wrong century. Actually, I *know* I was born in the wrong century.

Elijah saw me see him and nodded. His eyes were black, his beard black and wavy, like a Labrador’s coat. When he smiled, his eyes nearly closed shut. His tongue came out of his mouth tentatively, licked his upper lip. It was the pink of my toe shoes. Not that I dance anymore. Pink toe shoes and *The Nutcracker*. That’s for babies. Now I’m into horses. But his tongue was so pink against his black beard, it made me tremble. I’m not sure why.

I motioned to the chair. No one but Elijah noticed.

He shook his head, his mouth formed the words: “Not yet.” Then he turned and left, slipping sideways through eternity.

“He’s gone,” I said.

“No,” Nonny contradicted, shaking her head, the blue hair a helmet that never moved. “Elijah is never gone. He is always here.” But she looked at me strangely, her black-button eyes shining.

I took another sip of the watered wine.

\* \* \* \*

THE next time I saw Elijah was in shul. It’s the only temple on the island so everyone Jewish goes there, even though it’s a Reform temple. I was sit-ting snuggled up next to Shanna, more for the warmth than friendship. Shanna’s okay, when she’s quiet and cuddly. But little sisters can be a pain.

Especially when they’re ten years younger, an embarrassment, and a sign that your parents—your parents, for G-d’s sake—are still having sex.

We were in the middle of one of Rabbi Shiller's long, rambling book reports. He rarely says anything religious. My mother likes that. Thinks it's important. "Keeps us in touch with the greater world," she says. Meaning non-Jews. I get enough book reports in school in my AP classes, where we call them essays but they are really only high school book reports, though with bigger words. Besides, the rabbi was talking about *Maus*, which I'd just done an AP report on, and got an A, and my insights were better than his. So I snuggled close to Shanna and closed my eyes.

Or I almost closed my eyes.

And there, standing on the bima, finger on his lips, was Elijah, same black eyes, same black wavy beard, same pink tongue. I was not sure if he was shushing me or the rabbi but he was definitely shushing someone.

I sat up, pushed Shanna off me, looked around to see if anyone else had noticed him.

But the congregation was intent on the rabbi, who had just announced that in *Maus*, "The commentary should disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure ..." which I recognized immediately as a quote from Friedlander. The rabbi had been doing his re-search online. And he was not giving credit where credit was due, as my AP English teacher, V. Louise always reminds us. She would have had him gutted for breakfast.

I glanced back at Elijah, who was shaking his head, as if he, too, knew the rabbi was a plagiarist. But maybe if you had to give a sermon every Fri-day night for your entire life, plagiarism becomes a necessity.

To be certain I wasn't the only kid seeing things, I checked on my friends. Barry Goldblatt was picking boogers from his nose. Nothing new there. Marcia Damashek was whispering to her mother. They even dress alike. Carol Tropp had leaned forward, not to listen to the rabbi but to tap Gordon Berliner on the shoulder. She has a thing for him, though I can't imagine why. He may be funny—like a stand-up comic—but he's short and he smells.

I kept checking around. Every single one of the kids I knew was distracted. No one seemed to have seen Elijah but me. And this time I had no watered wine to blame.

Clearly, I thought, clearly I'm having a psychotic break. We studied psychotic breaks in our psychology

class. They aren't pretty. Either that, or Elijah, that consummate time traveler, that tricky wizard of forever, was really standing behind the rabbi and snorting into a rather dirty handkerchief, the color of leaf mold. Couldn't he take some time out of his travels to go to a Laundromat? We've got several downtown I could tell him about.

I shook my head and Elijah looked up again, winked at me, and slipped sideways into some sort of time stream, and was gone. He didn't even disturb the motes of sunlight dusting the front of the ark.

Standing, I pushed past my sister and mother and father and walked out of the hall. I know they thought I had to pee, but that's not what I was doing. I went downstairs to wait in the religious center till the service was over. The door to the middle students' classroom was open and I went in. Turning on the light, I sighed, feeling safe. Here was where I'd studied Hebrew lessons with Mrs. Goldin for so many years. Where I'd learned about being Jewish. Where no one had ever said Elijah was real. I mean, we're Reform Jews, af-ter all. We leave that sort of thing to the Chassids. Leaping in the air, having visions, wearing bad hats and worse wigs. Real nineteenth-century stuff.

I idled my way over to the kids' bookcase. Lots of books there. We Jews are big on books. The People of the Book and all. My father being a pro-fessor of literature at the university, we have a house filled with books. Even the bathrooms have bookshelves. We joke about the difference between litterature and literature. One to be used in the bathroom, the other to be read. Those sort of jokes.

My mom is a painter but even she reads. Not that I mind. I'm a big bookie myself, though I don't take bets on it. That's another family joke!

Finding a piece of gray poster paper, I began to doodle on it with a Magic Marker. Mom says that doodling concentrates the mind. I didn't draw my usual—horses. Instead I drew Elijah's head: the wavy hair, the dark beard, the tongue lolling out, like a dog's. A few more quick lines, and I turned him into a retriever.

"And what do you retrieve?" I asked my drawing. The drawing was silent. I guess the psychotic didn't break that far. Yeah—I have the family sense of humor.

I thought maybe there'd be a book or two in the classroom on Elijah. Squatting, I quickly scanned down the spines. I was right. Not one book but a whole bunch. A regular Jewish pop star.

Settling down to read the first one, I felt a tap on my shoulder that didn't make me jump as much as it set off a series of tremors running down my backbone.

I turned slowly and looked up into Elijah's long face. Close, he was younger than I'd thought, the beard disguising the fact that he was probably only in his twenties. A Jewish Captain Jack Sparrow with a yarmulke instead of a tricornered hat.

He crooked his finger at me, held out his hand.

Years of stranger-danger conversations flashed through my head. But who could be afraid of a figment of her imagination? Besides, he was cool-looking in a Goth beatnik kind of way.

I put my hand in his and stood. His hand seemed real enough.

We turned some sort of corner in the middle of the room, slid sideways, and found ourselves in a long gray corridor.

\* \* \* \*

WAS I afraid?

I was fascinated. It was like being in a sci-fi movie. The corridor flick-ered with flashes of starlight. Meteors rushed by. And a strange wandering sun seemed to be moving counterclockwise.

"Where are we go . . . ?" I began, the words floating out of my mouth like the balloons in a comic strip.

He put a finger of his free hand on his lips and I ate the rest of my question. What did it matter? We were science-fictional wanderers on a meta-physical road.

The sound of wind got wilder and wilder until it felt as if we were in a tunnel with trains racing by us on all sides. And then suddenly everything went quiet. The gray lifted, the flashes were gone, and we stepped out of the corridor into . . . into an even grayer world, full of mud.

I craned my neck trying to see where we were.

Elijah put his hands on both sides of my head and drew me around till we were facing.

“Do not look yet, Rebecca,” he said to me, his voice made soft by his accent.

Was I surprised that he knew my name? I was beyond surprise.

“Is this place . . . bad?” I asked.

“Very bad.”

“Am I dead and in hell?”

“No, though this is a kind of hell.” His face, always long, grew longer with sadness. Or anger. It was hard to tell.

“Why are we here?” I trembled as I spoke.

“Ah, Rebecca—that is always the most important question.” His r’s rattled like a teakettle left too long on the stove. “The question we all need to ask of the universe.” He smiled at me. “You are here because I need you.”

For a moment, the grayness around us seemed to lighten.

Then he added, “You are here because you saw me.” He dropped his hands to my shoulders.

“I saw you?”

He smiled, and, for the first time, I realized there was a gap between his top front teeth. And that the teeth were very white. Okay, he might not hit the Laundromat often enough, but he knew a thing or three about brushing.

“I saw you? So why is that such a big deal?” I think I knew even before he told me.

Shrugging, he said, “Few see me, Rebecca. Fewer still can slip sideways through time with me.”

“Through time?” Now I looked around. The place was a flat treeless plain, not so much gray as hopeless. “Where are we?” I asked again.

He laughed into my hair. “ ‘When are we?’ is the question you should be asking.”

I gulped, trying to swallow down something awful-tasting that seemed to have lodged in my throat. “Am I crazy?”

“No more than any great artist.”

He knew I did art?

“You are a really fine artist. Remember, Rebecca, I travel through time. Past and future, they are all as one to me.”

Even in that gray world, I felt a flutter in my breast. My cheeks grew hot with pleasure. A great artist. A fine artist. In the future. Then I shook my head. Now I knew I was dreaming. Too much watered wine at the seder. I was probably asleep with my cheek on Nonny’s white tablecloth. Yet in my dream I painted a picture of Elijah brooding in that open door, dark and hungry, his lips slightly moist with secrets, his mouth framing an invitation in a language both dead and alive.

“You will paint that picture,” he said, as if reading my mind. “And it will make the world notice you. It will make me notice you. But not now. Now we have work to do.” He took my hand.

“What work?”

“Look closely.”

This time when I looked I saw that the flat treeless plain was not empty. There were humans walking about, women, girls, all dressed in gray. Gray skirts, gray shirts, gray scarves on their heads, gray sandals or boots. Oh, I could see that the clothes they wore had not always been such a color, but had been worn thin and made old by terror and tragedy and hopelessness.

“You must bring them away,” Elijah said. “Those who will go with you.”

“You are the time traveler, the magician,” I told him. “Why don’t you do it?”

That long face looked down at me, his dark brown eyes softening. “They do not see me.”

“Will they see me?” I asked. But I already knew. They were coming toward me, hands out.

“Elijah,” I asked him, “how will I talk to them?”

He reached out a hand and touched my lips. “You will find a way, Rebecca. Now go. I can tell you no more.” Then he disappeared, like the Cheshire cat, until there was only his mouth, and it wasn’t smiling. Then he was gone entirely.

I turned to the women and let them gather me in.

They told me where we were, how they were there. I had read their stories in books so I had no reason to disbelieve them. We were in a camp.

Oh, not a summer camp with square dances and macramé projects and water sports. I’d been to those. Girl Scout camp, art camp, music camp. My parents, like all their friends, saw the summer as a time to ship-the-kids-off-to-camp. Some were like boot camp and some were like spas.

This was a Camp.

I asked the question that Elijah told me was the one I should be asking. “When are we?”



And when they told me—1943—I couldn't find the wherewithal to be surprised. I'd already seen a ghost out of time, traveled with him across a sci-fi landscape, been told about the future. Why not be landed in the past?

"Thanks for nothing, Elijah," I whispered.

Something—someone—whispered in my ear, the accent softening what he had to say. "Thanks for everything, Rebecca."

"I've done nothing," I whined.

"You will," he said.

And the women, hearing only me, answered, "None of us have done anything to put us in this place."

\* \* \* \*

SO my time in the Camp began. It was not Auschwitz or Dachau or Sobibor or Buchenwald or Treblinka, names I would have recognized at once.

"Where are we?"

"Near Lublin," one woman told me, her eyes a startling blue in that gray face.

I knew that name. Squinting my eyes, I tried to remember. And then I did. My great-grandmother had been born in Lublin.

"Do you know a ..." I stopped. I only knew my great-grandmother's married name. Morewitz. What good would that do? Besides, she'd come over to America as a child anyway, and was dead long before I was born. I changed the sentence. "Do you know a good way to escape?"

They laughed, a gray kind of laugh. “And would we still be here if we did?” said the woman with the blue eyes. Her hand described a circle that took in the gray place.

I followed that circle with my eyes and saw a gray building, gray with settled ash. Ash. Something had been burned there. A lot of somethings. It was then I really understood what place Elijah had brought me to.

“So this a concentration camp?” I asked, though of course I already knew.

“There is nothing to concentrate on here, except putting one foot in front of the other,” said the blue-eyed woman.

“And putting one bit of potato into your open mouth,” said another.

“Not a concentration camp,” said a third, “but a death camp.”

“Hush,” said the blue-eyed woman, looking over her shoulder.

I looked where she was looking but there was no one there to hear us.

“I have to get out of here,” I said. Then bit my lip. “We all have to get out of here.”

A gray child with eyes as black as buttons peeked from behind the skirts of the blue-eyed woman. She pointed to one of the buildings, which had an ominous metal door that was standing open. Like an open mouth waiting for those potatoes, I thought.

“That is the only way out,” she said. Her face was a child’s but her voice was old.

I took a deep breath, breathed in ash, and said, “We will not go that way. I promise.”

The women moved away from me as one, leaving the child behind. One whispered hoarsely to me over her shoulder, “This is a place of broken promises. If you do not understand that, you will not live a

moment longer.” Then she said to the child, “Masha, it’s time to go to bed. Morn-ing comes too soon.” But she was speaking to me as well.

The child slipped her cold gray hand in mind. “I believe your promise,” she said. She looked up at me and smiled, as if smiling was something new that she needed to practice.

I smiled down at her and squeezed her hand. But I’d been a fool to promise her any such thing, and she was a fool to believe me.

“Elijah ...” I began, “Elijah will help us.” But he’d helped me into this mess, then disappeared. I realized with a sinking feeling that I was on my own here. Now. Whenever.

“Elijah the magician?” She scarcely seemed to breathe, staring at me with her black-button eyes.

I nodded, wondering what kind of magic could get us away from this terrible place and time.

\* \* \* \*

FOLLOWING the women, like a lamb after old ewes, the girl led me into a building that was filled with wide triple bunk beds. There were no sheets or pillows or blankets on the beds, only hard slats to lie upon. The only warmth at night came from the people who slept on either side. I had read about this, seen movies. What Jewish kid hadn’t?

The cold was no worse than a bad camping trip. The slats on the boards were like lying on the ground. But the smell—there were three hun-dred or more women squeezed into that building, with no bathing facilities but buckets of cold water. No one had a change of clothing; some must have been living in the same dresses for months. And those were the lucky ones, for they were still alive.

Masha snuggled next to me, her body now a little furnace, a warm spot against me. On the other side was the blue-eyed woman who introduced herself as Eva. But that first night my head raced with bizarre imaginings. Either I was crazy or dreaming. Maybe I’d had some kind of psychotic break—like my cousin Rachael, who one night after a rave party thought she was in prison and tried to escape through a window, which turned out to be on the third floor of their apartment building. I just couldn’t stop from wondering and I didn’t sleep at all. A mistake, it turned out. By morning I was ex-hausted. Besides, sleep was the one real escape from that place. It was why the women went to bed, side by side, as eagerly as if heading for a party. Af-ter that there was the work.

\* \* \* \*

YES, there was work. That first morning they showed me. It wasn't difficult work—not as difficult as the work the men were doing, breaking stones on the other side of the barbed wire—but still it broke the heart and spirit. We were to take belongings from the suitcases inmates had brought with them, separating out all the shoes in one pile, clothing in another on long, wooden tables. Jewelry and money went into a third pile that was given to the blovoka—the head of the sorters—at day's end. She had to give it to the soldiers who ran the camp. Then there were family photographs and family Bibles and books of commentary and books of poetry. Piles of women's wigs and a huge pile of medicines, enough pills and potions for an army of hypochondriacs. There were packets of letters and stacks of documents, even official-looking contracts and certificates of graduation from law schools and medical schools. And then there was the pile of personal items: toothbrushes and hairbrushes and nail files and powder puffs. Everything that someone leaving home in a hurry and for the last time would carry.

I tried to think what I would have taken away with me had someone knocked on our door and said we had just minutes to pack up and leave for a resettlement camp, which is what all these people had been told. My diary and my iPod for sure, my underwear and several boxes of Tampax, tooth-brush, hairbrush, blow-dryer, the book of poems my boyfriend had given me, a box of grease pencils and a sketchbook of course, and the latest Holly Black novel, which I hadn't had time to read yet. If that sounds pathetic, it's a whole lot less pathetic than the actual stuff we had to sort through.

And of course the entire time we were sorting, I alone knew what it all meant. That there were these same kinds of concentration camps through-out Poland and Germany. That six million Jews and six million other people were going to die in these awful places. And my having that knowledge was not going to help a single one of them.

Boy, it's going to be hard for me ever to go to a summer camp again, I thought. If I get out of here in one piece. That's when I began crying and calling out for Elijah.

“Who's Elijah?” a girl my age asked, putting an arm around me. “Your brother? Your boyfriend? Is he here? On the men's side?”

I turned, wiped my nose on my sleeve, and opened my mouth to tell her. When I realized how crazy it sounded, I said merely, “Something like that.” And then I turned back to work.

The temptation to take a hairbrush or toothbrush or nail file back to our building was enormous.

But little Masha warned me that the guards searched everyone. “And if they find you with contraband,” she said—without stumbling on the big word, so I knew it was one everyone used—“you go up in smoke.”

The way she said that, so casually, but clearly understanding what it meant, made my entire backbone go cold. I nodded. I wasn’t about to be cremated over a broken fingernail or messy hair. I left everything on the long tables.

\* \* \* \*

THE days were long, the nights too short. I was a week at the camp and fell into a kind of daze. I walked, I worked, I ate when someone put a po-tato in my hand, but I had retreated somewhere inside myself.

Masha often took my hand and led me about, telling me what things to do. Saying, “Don’t become a musselman.” And one day—a day as gray as the ash covering the buildings, gray clouds scudding across the skies, I heard her.

“Musselman?” I asked.

She shrugged. A girl standing next to me in the work line explained. “They are the shadows in the shadows. The ones who give up. Who die before they are dead.” She pointed out the grimed window to a woman who looked like a walking skeleton dressed in rags. “She is a mussleman and will not need to go up in smoke. She is already gone.”

I shook my head vehemently. “I am not that.”

Masha grabbed my hand and pulled. “Then wake up. You promised.”

And I remembered my promise. My foolish promise. I looked out the window again and the woman was indeed gone. In her place stood Elijah, staring at me. He put a finger to the side of his nose and looked sad. The lines of his long face were repeated in the length of his nose. There were shadows, dark blue with streaks of brown, under his eyes. My hand sketched them.

“What are you doing?” Masha asked me.

“I need to paint something,” I said.

“Foolishness,” the girl next to me said.

“No—art is never foolish,” I told her. “It is life-giving.”

She laughed roughly and moved away from me as if I had something contagious.

I looked over the tables—the boxes of pills, the jewelry, the documents, the little baby shoes, the old women’s handbags. And finally, I found a battered box of colored chalks some child must have carried with her. I picked the box up, grabbed up a marriage certificate, and went into a corner.

“What are you doing?” asked the blovoka. “Get back here or I will have to report you.”

But I paid no attention to her. I sat down on the filthy floor, turned the certificate over, and started to draw. With black chalk I outlined Elijah’s body and the long oval of his face. I overlayered the outline with white till it was gray as ash. Having no gum eraser, I was careful with what I drew, yet not too careful, knowing that a good painting had to look effortless. At home I would have worked with Conte pastels. I had a box of twenty-four. But I used what I had, a box of twelve chalks, most of them in pieces. To keep my drawing from smudging, at home I would have coated the whole thing with a light misting of hairspray. But home was a long way—and a long time—from here. And hairspray was, I guessed, a thing of the future.

The blovoka began to yell at me. “Get up! Get up!” And suddenly there was a flurry of legs around me, as some of the women were shouting the same.

Masha sneaked through the forest of legs and sat by me. “What are you doing?”

“I am making a picture of someone you need to see,” I said. I sketched in the long nose, the black and wavy beard, and the closed-eye smile. I found a pink for his lips, then smudged them purposefully with fingers that still had black chalk on the tips.

The blovoka had stopped yelling at me and was now yelling at the women who had formed a wall around

Masha and me.

I kept drawing, using my fingers, the flat of my hand, my right thumb. I spit onto my left fingers and rubbed them down the line of his body. With the black chalk I filled in his long black coat. I used the white chalk for highlights, and to fill in around his black eyes. Brown chalk buffed in skin tones, which I then layered on top with the ashy gray.

“I see him. I see him,” Masha said to me. “Is it Elijah?” She put her hand on the black coat, and her palm and small fingers became black at the tips.

Two of the women standing guard above us drew in a quick breath, and one said to the other, “I see him, too.” It was Eva’s voice. She knelt down and touched the paper.

Someone suddenly called my name. A man. I looked up. Elijah stood there, in the midst of all the women, though none of them seemed to notice him.

“Masha,” I said urgently, “do you see him there?” I took her head in my hands and gently turned it so she was looking up as well.

“How did he get here?” she asked, pointing right at him. “In the women’s side?”

Eva gasped at the sight of him.

But Elijah smiled, holding out his hands. I stood and took his right hand and Masha took his left. Eva grabbed hold of Masha’s waist as if to drag her from me.

“There they are!” came the blovoka’s shrill voice. “There!” The rest of the women had scattered back to the sorting tables, and Masha, Eva, and I were in her line of sight. Beside the blovoka were two armed guards.

They pulled out their guns.

This time Elijah laughed. He dragged us toward him, and then we turned a corner in the middle of that room, sliding sideways into a familiar long gray corridor.

Eva gasped again, then was silent, as if nothing more could surprise her. She held tight to Masha's waist.

And then we were flying through the flickering starlight and rushing meteors. A strange sun stood still overhead. As suddenly as they'd begun, the lights and sounds stopped when we came to the other side.

Masha dropped Elijah's hand and looked around, but Eva never let go of her waist.

This time I knew to ask the right question. "When are we?"

Elijah said, "We are still in the same year but five thousand miles away. We are in America now."

"We are in America then," I said.

He nodded. "Then," and he touched my shoulder. "Kiss the child, Rebecca. Assure her that she will be well taken care of here." His face seemed no longer gray, but blanched, as if the traveling had taken much of his energy. "The woman, while not her own mother, will watch over her."

"Eva," I said. "First mother."

"Of course." We both nodded at the irony.

"But I can't just leave her," I said, though I saw the two of them had already found a table of food and were happily filching stuff and hiding it in their pockets.

"You must. The child will have a fine life, a good family."

"Will I ever see her again?"

"No, Rebecca, she will be dead before you are born. Besides, you have pictures to paint. Of me." He smile was seductive, as if he were already posing for me.



I think my jaw dropped open. But not for long. “Why . . . you . . . you.” Suddenly I couldn’t think of a word bad enough for him. Had this whole thing, this trip into the past, into that awful place, had it just been to satisfy his enormous ego? I stared at him. His face was positively gaunt, the eyes like a shark’s, dead giving back no light. How could I ever have found him intriguing? My cheeks burned with shame. “I’ll never paint that pic-ture. Never.”

He held up his hands as if to ward off the blow from my words. “Hush, hush, Rebecca. The picture has to be painted. This is not about me but about you. Not about you but about your people. For the children of the great Jewish diaspora. To remind them of who they are. It will begin a re-naissance in Judaism that will last well beyond your life and the lives of your great-great-grandchildren and to the twentieth generation.”

I don’t know what stunned me more—that a picture I was to paint some-day would have that power, or that I would have great-great-grandchildren. I mean—I was only fifteen after all; who could think that far?

“But why me? And why Masha? Why Eva?”

He glanced over his shoulder at where Masha was sitting, now surrounded by a group of children her own age. She seemed to be playing, all that lost innocence returned to her in a single moment. Eva stood with her back to the wall, watching carefully, already Masha’s guardian, her angel, her mother. Elijah turned back and cocked his head to one side. “Surely you have figured it out by now.”

I looked at Masha again. She looked over at me and smiled. It was my sister’s smile. How could I have not known—except Masha had never smiled before. Not in the camp, where there was nothing to smile at. Of course. My sister had been named after our great-grandmother, Mashanna.

“If she’d died in the camp, you would never have been born,” Elijah said, even as he started to fade. “The picture never would have been painted. The great renaissance never to happen.”

“But I was born . . .” I began.

“Born to paint,” he said, before grabbing my hand and dragging us both sideways into the future and home.

\* \* \* \*