

The Devil's Arithmetic



JANE YOLEN



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"I'M TIRED OF REMEMBERING," HANNAH SAID TO HER MOTHER as she climbed into the car. She was flushed with April sun and her mouth felt sticky from jelly beans and Easter candy.

"You know it's Passover," her mother said, sighing, in a voice deliberately low. She kept smiling so that no one at Rosemary's house would know they were arguing.

"I didn't know."

"Of course you knew."

"Then I forgot." Hannah could hear her voice beginning to rise into a whine she couldn't control.

"How could you forget, Hannah. Especially this year, when Passover falls on the same day as Easter? We've talked and talked about it. First we've got to go home and change. Then we're going to Grandpa Will and Grandma Belle's for the first night's Seder."

"I'm not hungry. I ate a big dinner at Rosemary's."

And I don't want to go to the Seder. Aaron and I will be the only kids there and everyone will say how much we've grown even though they just saw us last month. And, besides, the punch lines of all the jokes will be in Yiddish." When her mother didn't answer at once, Hannah slumped down in the seat. Sometimes she wished her mother would yell at her the way Rosemary's mother did, but she knew her mother would only give her one of those slow, low, reasonable lectures that were so annoying.

"Passover isn't about eating, Hannah," her mother began at last, sighing and pushing her fingers up through her silver-streaked hair.

"You could have fooled me," Hannah muttered.

"It's about remembering."

"All Jewish holidays are about remembering, Mama. I'm tired of remembering."

"Tired or not, you're going with us, young lady. Grandpa Will and Grandma Belle are expecting the entire family, and that means you, too. You have to remember how much family means to them. Grandma lost both her parents to the Nazis before she and her brother managed to escape. And Grandpa . . ."

"I remember. I remember . . .," Hannah whispered.

". . . Will lost everyone but your Aunt Eva. A family of eight all but wiped out." She sighed again but Hannah suspected there was little sympathy in that sigh. It was more like punctuation. Instead of putting periods at the ends of sentences, her mother sighed.

Hannah rolled her eyes up and slipped farther down

in the seat. Her stomach felt heavy, as if the argument lay there like unleavened bread.

It wasn't a particularly long trip from New Rochelle to the Bronx, where her grandparents lived, but the car was overheated as usual and Aaron complained the entire way.

"I'm sick," he said loudly. Whenever he was unhappy or scared, his voice got louder. If he was really sick, he could hardly be heard. "I'm going to throw up. We have to go back."

As her mother turned around and glared at them from the front seat, Hannah patted Aaron's hand and whispered, "Don't be such a baby, Ron-ron. The Four Questions aren't that hard."

"I can't remember all four questions." Aaron almost shouted the last word.

"You don't have to remember them." Hannah's patience was wearing thin. "You're supposed to *read* them. From the Haggadah."

"What if I can't read it right?"

Hannah began to sigh, caught herself, and turned it into a cough. "You've been reading right since you were three, Mr. Smarty." She cuffed him lightly on the side of the head and he cried out.

"Hannah!" her father called back in warning.

"Look," she said quickly to Aaron to shut him up, "it doesn't matter if you make a mistake, Ron-ron, but if you do, I'll be right there next to you. I'll whisper it into your ear just like they do in plays when someone forgets a line."



“I know where they’re taking us.”

HANNAH DREAMS going to her family’s Passover Seder. Her relatives always tell the same stories, and Hannah’s tired of hearing them talk about the past. But when she opens the front door to symbolically welcome the prophet Elijah, she’s transported to a Polish village—and the year 1942. Why is she there, and who is this “Chaya” that everyone seems to think she is? Just as she begins to unravel the mystery, Nazi soldiers come to take everyone in the village away. And only Hannah knows the unspeakable horrors that await.

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