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Isaac and Mae

Laurence Goldstein

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ISAAC AND MAE

(Los Angeles, 1955)

- He: You are perfect in all ways, but one.
A model Jewish wife, sweet-natured, modest—
when have you ever preened in a mirror?
And how the children *kvell* from you!
All six have your delicate good looks—
alright, mine too, my deep-set olive eyes
you love to stare into as if transfixed.
- She: How am I imperfect? Tell me.
- He: Darling, yesterday you forgot again—
you *always* forget—the *Yortzeit* candle.
Mother died two years ago today, blessing you
who made her last home a heaven. Her word.
“Isaac,” she would say, “Mae is heaven-sent,
she brings the gift of life wherever she goes.”
- She: I loved your mother too. How she cooked!
and made the kids choke down all that grease—
chicken fat, chopped liver. Poor things!
I never liked it either. Nor did you!
We’re happier now I rule the kitchen, aren’t we?
I have hundreds of recipes, and the whole
Imperial Valley to furnish me peaches,
lemons, grapes, those purple plums you favor,
and the tart Granny Smiths from up north
I bake into pies, strudel, sauce for your latkes—
look, your mouth is watering like before a meal!
Your mother didn’t always love me. On the crossing
she cursed me for a Delilah: “Keep away from my son,
shiksa!” “Go somewhere else on the boat! Go!”
My vows of conversion changed her mind.

He: More than that, Mae. You charmed her
with German lullabies, and that eerie ballad
of the storm on Venusberg. Charmed me too.
Jews are not deaf to the sorcery of love
though instructed in the cost of it, so *often*
and *wrongly* instructed, as you proved, didn't you?
You melted her heart. I was all she had left.

She: At the border she wanted to name me Ruth.
I said No, I would be named for the month.
We recommenced our lives in famous Hollywood,
raising my first babies while you went back
into the Black Forest, this time with a gun.

He: Do you remember that actress from *Lost Horizon*?
After the war she stopped you in our deli and said,
"Are these your four children? You look like a girl."
Our wayward life has been like a movie, nothing
romantisch, me selling dead meats on credit,
but think how many in our family had it worse.
Often I dream of my sisters, how the Nazis . . .

She: Let's forget the past. This is America.

He: And you never light the candle for papa.
Don't turn away—I'm trying to be helpful.
I mark the day on the calendar. Listen,
this is a small matter. Let's not quarrel.

She: I didn't know your father.

He: Such a gentle man . . .

She: Possum's birthday is next Sunday, remember.
She wants a day at the beach, a picnic.
I told her she could invite six. "Oh mom,"
she said, "three brothers and two sisters,

so I get *one* friend?" "Hush," I said,
"you're too fair for summer heat, too blond.
You'll burn. Not even oil will protect you."

He: All day I've been thinking about my father.
I guess it's my *Halfte des Lebens* this year,
the crossroads. How he wanted to survive.

She: Killed by the Nazis. I've heard the story.

He: Nobody knows the story but me. I've lived
a lie. Or say, I chose to forget the truth.
Why should it drum and drum at me all day?

She: I have things to do. Shopping. Skippy needs
a ride to skating practice—no, it's Tuesday—
he needs a ride to . . . O, it's on the calendar!
Go look!

He: We fled from the Nazis, yes.
How it all comes back to me. 1939,
January. We got news of another sweep.
Papa and I set out for the *Schwarzwald*,
some refuge so dismal even the Nazis
would let us two helpless Jews alone.
A snowstorm like you could never imagine,
dearest, or none of our children, or anyone
in this temperate part of the New World.
Snow more deadly than bullets, our bones ice-cold.
Lost, we staggered forward like golem.
We came to a river, and no way to cross.
No ferryman, but his hardwood hut
stood open for us to die in. We lay down . . .

She: I will honor your father. I will light the candle!

