Preschool Visitation

Laurence Goldstein

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There is for every man some one scene,
some one adventure, some one picture
that is the image of his secret life,
for wisdom first speaks in images.
—W. B. Yeats

The troops had come home, not quite American,
more like steerage, quarrelsome refugees,
unwilling grease monkeys, flatfeet, scabs.
The Nazis lived on as invective, their camps
the everlasting site of family wrangles.
Even at three, the meaning of life struck me
as sorrowful, my Russian grandfather slapping
my left hand when I started to write or draw.
War baby, sinister only child
of a rich country recovering from a crusade.

Los Angeles had its little Israels;
we lived in one, before it changed color,
in one of many courts close to the butcher shop,
part of the fish-man’s route, and vegetable-man’s
and the bearded man’s in black who took money
and gave it to Palestine, where we all should go.
I found the spot on a map. Was this my destiny,
to wrest Jerusalem from the ruthless Canaanites?
Then it was war again, and our quarters
helped feed a Joshua’s army of emigrants.

These were grown-up problems, thank God.
I was five, poised to enter kindergarten,
and daily I circled the school’s twisted fence,
peering beyond the foursquare and tether-ball
into rooms with wall-maps, globes, and shelves
groaning with hieroglyphs of the Golden State.  
*Let me in:* the caption on this movie still.
Russia was our enemy, one boy whispered through the rusting iron, “and there are bombs that can blow up the whole stinking world.”

So what did it matter, when an invitation summoned me for afternoon play with a girl who would sit next week as another stranger in those tan desks with crayon and pencil trays, some daughter of the next block who knew me only by sight, that gaunt kid passing the house, hanging on the fence like a DP? She was Alice Obregón who wore party dresses all the time, my mother said, a sign of high-caste hispanic origins.

*Something* was consequential, for I was dressed in my seder clothes, and told some etiquette and sent alone, a gentleman caller, to her door. Alice came at me with a leap of animal joy, twirling her green skirt with crimson sash. Unsettled, I entered my first gentile residence. Wall-hangings everywhere; no plaque of Roosevelt or classic paintings but fabric of bizarre design and furniture that smelled like Western movies, pungent leather and sheepskin that made me sneeze.

Would I like some tea or café? I was a ghost with no informal speech for this Princess who sat us down to a china service and poured rainbows of juice from mango and cantaloupe. A servant set out strangely-spiced cakes dark-skinned and moist; I savored their sesame while dolls of doeskin in lace with gold buttons huddled with Their Lady. How beautifully Alice’s mother pronounced *Los Angeles*, and *Santa Monica*, her nasals a new music.
We were playing house, Alice and I, wifey at the patio fountain with her mate, the very doubles of my folks on Saturday night dressed for nothing more than movies, or prime-rib at a swell roadhouse— and how I felt struck by the lightning of my role, chattering who-knows-what nonsense with cosmopolitan élan as Alice beamed domestically at her social triumph. Now I was two people, barely tilted toward the shiksa bride I found in college and the protocols outside my heritage, half-secret like the sin of assimilation. In the treasure house of her ancestral land Alice made me civil, not her Cid but no longer, quite, the yid who feared every native type and shade of the unknown. Why else in the nineties would I recall one communion among so many afternoons?

And how unlikely it is that Alice of whom I remember nothing more, who I left behind after a year, when my parents crossed La Cienega, following our kin further west, has summoned in thought that fugitive boy. Yet neither of us is lost. Alice stands in an aura beside the person she is, a bright quetzal caged in my domain, perpetually waiting under her roof of red tile.