

WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

Irving Layton

IF I HAD TO ATTRIBUTE to any one event in my life the further unfolding of that life, I would have to point to the circumstances of my birth.

I must have been six or seven when my mother told me that I had been born circumcised: the messianic sign. Rabbis, she said, had come from many hamlets, some had journeyed from as far as Poland and Russia to our Roumanian village to see for themselves my miraculously foreshortened member and afterwards, their reverent gaze still fixed on it, to break into psalm-singing and prayer. Jews have always been on the lookout for a messiah. Picture a history of ghettos and persecution, a people served up by a malign fate to disasters, discrimination, the nightmare of pogroms; is it that unnatural for them to engender out of their misery a messiah to lead them to the promised land or, at least, out of their unending tribulations? Moses had been the only Jew before me born circumcised and that was because the Pharaoh had ordered all Hebrew boys to be killed at birth. Since Yahweh had some mission for Moses and because under the circumstances it was impossible to perform the rite of circumcision it was by divine will that the child was born foreskinless. Born circumcised and destined to lead.

You can understand how this would make a tremendous impression on an imaginative child who, because he is Jewish, has been studying the Talmud in Hebrew which he takes to be the original language of his forebears. Of Moses. Of God Himself. The identification with the great Jewish leader is swift and unthwarted. Despite my poverty-stricken surroundings, I was one of the favoured. Like Moses I have a mission to perform. Great things are in store for me. My mind parts the bathwater in the tiny washbasin as if it were the Red Sea. I throw my stick on the floor; it turns into a hissing viper. Of course I continue to lead the normal vigorous life of a Jewish kid on St. Elizabeth Street, to play tippie and baseball, to wrestle and fight barefisted anyone who threatens to take away the title of Jack Dempsey from me. But the intelligence that I have been favoured with the messianic sign is lodged in my mind and suddenly in the midst of the

roughest and most boisterous of games I would suddenly find myself standing quite apart, a solitary brooding figure surrounded by shouting companions, their mouths opening and closing as in a slowed-down film.

The second circumstance connected with my birth had, I think, an even more powerful effect. When my mother was carrying me in her womb she took dangerously ill with double pneumonia. The doctor despaired of her life. There was no way, no way, that she would recover. I remember my mother telling me this. I was seven or eight. The doctor had told my grandmother, "When hair will grow on my palm, that's when your daughter will recover from this illness." I can still see the scene. We are in the kitchen, beside the kitchen stove; it's winter, it's cold outside, bitter cold, the snow is piled up against the windows, the stove giving off the only heat in the house, and my mother holding out her hairless, deeply furrowed palm to me.

And here's what happened. My grandmother, sturdy as a peasant, and blessed with perfect health, went into the sick room where my mother was lying on her bed. She stretched herself on top of my mother's fevered body and spoke these words: "Whatever death is intended for you, may it come to me. Because you are filled with fruit and I am barren. Not even by a miracle can I give birth to another child. Let your death come upon me." One week later my grandmother who had never even complained of a headache took sick and died. My mother recovered and gave birth to me.

I can't overstress the importance of my surroundings, my Jewish environment, and its decisive influence on the development of my imagination and feelings. The poet-to-be was born with the smell of baked *chalah* in his nostrils. Other smells have come and gone; this smell has remained, dictating rage and tenderness, an epistemology unique as himself and tougher than nosehairs, a metaphysics far removed from that engendered by sticks of incense. For I was born into a world of fable, a world of stories charged with significant meanings, the world of the Jews, a people like no other people on this planet. The stories I heard from my mother and corroborated by my older sisters made me feel — I am alluding here to the strange circumstantiality of my birth — that there was something mysterious and awesome about my life. That feeling never left me. More than any other fact sociologists and psychologists may one day unearth about me, it accounts for the glories and disasters I have known, my almost daily commuting between heaven and hell. For the feeling grew stronger as I grew older, to be reinforced by my reading, stories about heroes and saviours, and always the mysterious circumstances attending on their birth: Moses, Buddha, Alexander the Great. Didn't the story of my own birth fall neatly into this packet of legends, myths, or miracles? Conceit or an imagination hungering for the miraculous, whatever, tempted me to believe I also was marked for something special, something out-of-the-ordinary. My life had been set on rails with a different gauge.

My father: black beard, dark eyes, a body frail and unexercised, more silent than a shadow, shutting himself off in the small, unaccommodating bedroom, his tabernacle and sanctuary, and there entertaining God's messengers. Now for me all this was very real. I was quite sure, when my father closed the bedroom door behind him, that he was about to communicate with God himself, or receive a message from Him through His angels. It now occurs to me that I was always invaded by the feeling that I was living in two worlds, the world of St. Elizabeth Street, where there were French-Canadian antisemites, where I played tippie or baseball with my streetmates or swung from the boughs of the few remaining trees: that was the actual world of rough-and-tumble encounters, of rivalrous brawls, of quiet Sunday mornings and the sound of the distant church bells. But inside the domicile inhabited by my father and mother, by my siblings and the stray cat I had brought home and was determined to keep despite my mother's protesting curses, was the world of miracle, legend, myth, heroic suffering in the face of persecution, the sense of imminent danger where saviours and messiahs were not an impossibility and the stories of a destiny-laden member pointing to a unique future mortised comfortably into my mother blessing the Sabbath candles each Friday night and putting her hands together in prayer next to the Quebec stove, the candles themselves sending a warm glow through our small kitchen. I can still see the candles flickering. I've described them in one of my poems as joyful old men dancing in ecstasy, throwing their shadows on the white spotless tablecloth, and it always impressed me that the shadows would come together in a wonderful dark unity. Behind her: the sink, a cockroach roaming leisurely from one end of the wallpaper to another, the toilet painted an ugly verminous green. It was a narrow cabinet reaching from the floor to the ceiling that you knew was always there; and I remember thinking how odd, what a contradiction the toilet was to the candles and the spotless tablecloth. The one dark green like the grave-covering grass, the other white — neither the flag of my disposition. But there they were, side by side, the sacred and the profane, their propinquity forever fixed in my mind and indis severable, so fused or bonded that neither priest nor rabbi, theologian nor philosopher would ever be able to split them asunder or for long keep them apart. Then my mother would remove the prayershawl from her head and reveal her very serene face, the benediction over, her amber beads and small light brown eyes shining as brightly as the Sabbath candles flickering above the tablecloth.

IT BEGINS WITH SENSATIONS. A smear of red paint on your left thumb. The white vapour from the kettle disintegrating before your eyes. The cold wetness of pee in your underpants on a frosty morning. Later on there are feelings. Much, much later comes thought.

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I must have been four years old. The house was illuminated by oil lamps. We didn't have electricity. We were too poor. I remember I had to go to the toilet. I was wearing a nightgown and found a candle, a lighted candle. It couldn't have been a Friday night, because I wouldn't have been allowed to touch a Sabbath candle, and yet I think it was and I did.

It was summer. My mother was entertaining guests in the bedroom; it would have been too cold for her to play hostess there in the winter. The kitchen was the only room in the house that was warmed by a stove. I went to the toilet with this candle in my hand and, as I was seating myself, out of pure curiosity I tipped the flame towards my nightgown, just to see what would happen. Of course before long I became a sheet of fire. I remember seeing the flame rising higher and higher and hearing shouts of alarm, screams, then somebody banging on the latched toilet door. My mother and her guests were hysterical, but they pried the door open and took me out covered in flames. I had by now lost consciousness.

The doctor thought it looked very bleak for me, but he went ahead with the prescribed brutal treatment of the time. For weeks and months the blackened burnt skin was ripped off my neck and chest. Firstly, Dr. Budyck would swathe me in vaselined cloths and then the torture of the skin being torn off would begin. My sisters tell me that I lived through this very painful period — I still bear the scars — only because of my superlative constitution. I was also very lucky that Dr. Budyck was both patient and conscientious. As you can imagine, it must not have been very easy doing that to a four-year-old boy. That is my first memory; it was so traumatic that it has blocked out all others anterior to it.

I am now six. I have fully recovered and it is time for the spring cleaning. Every year just before Passover began my family would wage war against the cockroaches that had made love and proliferated during the year. It is a very vivid memory. Huge pails of water would be set on the kitchen stove for scalding, four or five of them; then they would be taken down and my mother, my sister Dora, my cousin Fanny who was living with us, my brother Hyman, and myself all got ready for the great attack against the cockroaches. The kitchen wallpaper was ripped from the walls, exposing millions of the vermin, a heaving mass, almost like a small tidal wave, a reddish-brown agitated movement: it was as if the wall itself was beginning to move. As a child, you are not filled with revulsion; curiosity, yes, fascination at seeing these syrupy masses of brown, yellow, black, short, long, fat, thin cockroaches racing with comic dignity along the wall, foolishly exposed and vulnerable now that their cover was gone. They did not know death was waiting for them. Then my mother, sister, cousin Fanny, and Hyman would fling the scalding water, pailful after pailful, against the walls. The insects fell to the floor in violent little struggles, moving around with decreasing conviction and fervour because they were badly scalded, their senses benumbed by the relentless

downpour of water over their paper-thin bodies. But some of them still displayed remarkable vitality and I remember thinking my god, you know, what strength, *where did they get it from?* There they were: the lowliest kind of life protesting its extinction, demanding its rights, saying I too have my place in this cosmos and you have destroyed me.

My job was to stamp on them as they tried to scurry into some corner or floor-crack or maybe, if possible, under the linoleum. I could use a book or folded newspaper, whatever was needed to kill them, but my heels were always the fastest, the most effective. I recall the crunch they made under my heel, like when you step on a large June bug, and the smell — like that of a bedbug — of formic acid. And then the smear: what all valiant life reduces itself to ultimately. Before long I would find myself standing triumphant over hundreds of these mutilated corpses, and I remember very well the feeling of power and elation that swept through me when I looked down on the now silent battlefield with its armies of slain cockroaches. Napoleon could not have felt more victorious after one of his successful engagements than I did in my kitchen surveying the vermin I had destroyed. Those that had survived the scalding water and stamping feet by clinging to the walls were finished off with kerosene; the walls would reek of it for many days after.

Do I sound like a young monster, cruel? But what is cruelty if not the self-enjoyment that comes with the feeling of power? You must remember the significance of the coming Passover. I had read nothing about Napoleon or Alexander the Great or about any other successful mass murderer in history. On the one hand I was just a killer of cockroaches. I felt no spasms of guilt or shame. I regarded them as mortal enemies, vermin; they had to be exterminated. But on the other hand, for me anyway, it was a very thrilling way to bring in the Passover. A marvellous prelude to my favourite holiday. In my mind these were Egyptians whom I had slain, tyrannous slave-drivers. I was studying Exodus in Hebrew. How else would I see them, being an imaginative child? They were an army to be destroyed by the righteous Israelites, to be swallowed up forever — or at least for a year — by the Red Sea. These were Pharoah's minions that were being slaughtered, and it was God's will. And I, yes . . . I was Moses.

ABOVE OUR HOUSE was a semi-brothel. The lady of the house, with her husband's approval, played fast and loose with her morals. It was one way of supplementing their meagre income. Every Saturday night we knew there would be a party going on upstairs. Wild drinking, drunken obscenities, shouts, and cries. The clatter of an overturned table, of falling chairs. A whole orchestra under the baton of a demented conductor. Impossible to get any

sleep. My poor parents would groan aloud but my father was too timorous to do anything about it. Even my mother, usually intrepid and vociferous, was cowed. Since I was the youngest, already a dreamy rhymist, it fell to me to leave the snug warmth of the bed, find the broomstick, and pound the ceiling. Silence seemed to flow from its wooden handle. It didn't last long. Ten minutes later bedlam was again loosed over our heads. We thought of calling the police but they were never very friendly. At least to immigrant Jews.

It was as though we lived in different worlds. The police were mostly French-Canadians, part of the hostile world that surrounded us. The sense of being picked on, the sense of injustice, the sense that a Jew cannot expect protection or human decency, was very strong. A Jew would hesitate to go to the police and ask for help. The police were not there to protect Jews. They were there to harry streetwalkers or to see that my mother kept her small grocery store closed on Sundays. So you didn't go to the police. You didn't go anywhere. You just stood your ground and suffered. And called down Pharoah's ten plagues on the brutes.

By the time I was five or six I'd already begun to sense the difference. The close-knit family life, the intimacy and warmth, and then slowly the feeling of apartness, my first awareness that somehow we were different. *We were different.* And I remember not being able to understand what the difference was; just that we were not accepted, that we were hated. That strange spiky flower that held in its cup the venom of antisemitism. A child lives almost entirely in his sensations; he doesn't have many thoughts. He hasn't developed the capacity to generalize. He hasn't had many experiences and so is left with his raw percepts. Sex, death, antisemitism: they're all concepts. If you had said antisemitism to me I wouldn't have known what you were talking about. But it was in the streets and alleyways. It blanketed us like a fog. *Maudits Juifs!*

It's winter. I see my father walking towards the house. He is coming back from the synagogue. I'm watching through the window the way only a child can watch waiting for his father to come home. A gang appears as if from nowhere and someone throws a snowball. It hits his fur hat squarely and knocks it to the ground. I see my father bending down to pick it up. The hat is made of black fur and on the snow it looks like a stunned animal. My father has straightened himself up, his dignity restored. On his face there is pain and contempt. Cold contempt. But also something like serene indifference. The badge of suffering borne with pride.

You'd also see the same look when the French-Canadian kids followed him down the street mimicking his gait and launching into what they thought was Yiddish, jabbering, laughing out loud. He would not retaliate. Jews had been trained for centuries to passive resistance. To resist overtly was to invite further trouble. You did as my father did. You ignored the abuse. With patience and contempt you ignored the tormentors or took to your heels. You never gave

them the satisfaction of showing anger. At worst, you cursed under your breath. The Holocaust and the Israeli Air Force have changed all that.

Every Easter young barbarians descended on our street armed with bricks, bottles, stones, and knives. We had spies stationed to give early warning. The alarm given, the older Jewish boys came running out of their houses prepared to give battle. Soon the street was covered with groups of adolescents clawing and tearing at one another. The snarls and screams were terrifying. Everyone fought with a savagery an Iroquois might envy. You could lose an eye, have a leg broken, or get your face cut up badly. If you weren't lucky you might even get killed.

The older boys fought like Maccabeans. Gallant and tough, heroes everyone of them. My sixteen-year-old brother, Larry, was in the fray. So was cross-eyed George — a heavy, clumsy fellow but enormously strong. And Hymie Lindover and Max Cherry and Benny the Beanpole. Everyone was on the street, taking or giving blows. I remember Hymie Lindover getting a stone thrown at him. It barely missed his eye and hit his forehead. I can still hear the yell of pain. I can still see the blood running down his nose.

There wouldn't be any French-Canadian kids my age to fight with, so our job, the job of the younger Jewish kids, was to act as auxiliaries. We'd grab cans, bottles, and stones for the older boys to hurl. As a rule we beat back our adversaries because we had to. If they really got you down you could get worse than a beating, your bones might be broken. After all, we were Christ killers. We had killed their god. The only way they could avenge this terrible deed was to beat the daylights out of his kin. George was eventually blinded in one eye. You knew it could happen to you also. They weren't fooling around. They took their religion seriously. In their eyes we were evil incarnate. So we knew we had to win. If we did, it would postpone their coming back until Jesus was resurrected the following year.

The first break in the neighbourhood's antisemitism came when our neighbour died. The Labelles lived two or three doors away. The two sons, Henri and Gaston, were an especially nasty pair. The older one, Henri, was the same age as my brother Hyman. Gaston was slightly older than myself. They were always throwing snowballs at my mother or father and took an especial delight in picking up horsebuns — frosted and hard in winter; moist, round, and soft in the summer — and throwing them into the passageway when my mother was serving a customer. My mother would run to scoop up the mess but half-an-hour later they'd be back with more horsebuns. The supply seemed endless. I wondered whether they were foraging for them in other streets than St. Elizabeth.

And then something like a miracle happened. My father had died in early December. About one month later our neighbour died, the father of Henri and Gaston. Shortly after his funeral his widow came into my mother's grocery. I

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forget what item she bought but I remember my mother's excitement as she came running into the kitchen and crying: "It's a miracle! God be thanked! God be praised!" From now on all show of dislike or hostility ceased. The two boys who had been so vicious, the same Henri and Gaston whom my family would joyously have torn limb from limb and had cursed to end their lives as lepers now displayed a touching friendliness. They no longer called me a dirty Jew, they no longer pelted my father with snowballs, they no longer hurled horsebuns into the passageway. They always waved at me or my brothers whenever we passed them on the street. This friendliness endured until we moved away.

That episode has given me a feeling about death that persists until today and has inspired several poems of mine. In them I hail death as the great Reconciler, as mankind's greatest benefactor, as the Messiah.

Death washes the face of the world
as the light-filled water
purling over the beachstones at my feet.

HER CATS

Liliane Welch

Early mornings the cats
rise silent as Antaeus
from the embrace of night

a fabulous mound of
leaps dreamed, the
wilderness' memory

these rituals children
improvise in a wrestle's clasp