

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

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MRS. SHYLOCK

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I finish my graham cracker, wipe away the crumbs I accidentally scattered all over William Shakespeare's mustache, and close my dog-eared copy of World Literature, wondering how I will ever come up with five-hundred words about Shylock by the beginning of third period tomorrow morning, Monday. That's when Miss Finney will collect the dreaded essay she assigned on Friday. I've already read The Merchant of Venice twice and can't think of a single nice thing to say about it. Last year, in the eighth grade, we studied Romeo and Juliet. Like me, Juliet is a teenager, and she loves Romeo so much she'd rather stab herself to death with his dagger than live without him. But Shylock's beard is scraggly. The dark nubby suit all the Jews in his town are forced to wear is so drab a girl like Juliet would walk right past him on the street. And who could blame her? Shylock must be at least as old as Papa.

I stare at the lines of grease etched into the wall above our stove. They never fade, no matter how often Mama scrubs them. My older sister Mina, who I left upstairs an hour ago with her nose buried in a chemistry book, waltzes into the kitchen, her hair a sleek bob. She earns enough money at the drugstore where she works weekday afternoons to splurge on a stylish outfit like the blue sailor blouse, navy pleated skirt, and heavy wool sweater she's wearing today. Hopefully, I'll inherit the blouse and skirt in a few months when she gets tired of them. Mina, who just started the university, is studying to become a pharmacist. She sits down across from me and props her chin on her fist.

"Sarah?" she asks. "Who died?"

"You had Miss Finney when you were a freshman, didn't you?" I ask.

She nods.

"Do you remember Shylock?" I ask.

"That kvetch," she says. "Don't tell me he's still on her reading list. Hasn't she forgotten about him by now?"

"Not yet. What am I going to do?"

"Transfer to Central High School. Their building is newer than South."

I should have known better than to ask Mina such a stupid question. She has a smart answer for everything.

"What did you write about?" I ask.

"Let's see," she replies. "Something like how awful everyone was to poor Shylock because he's Jewish."

"And nothing else?"

"It was enough to earn me an A."

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"But you always told me English was your weakest subject." It's mine, too. Algebra is much more fun, numbers being less slippery than words.

"Miss Finney figured because I'm Jewish and Shylock is, too, it was only natural for me to understand whatever was going on between his ears."

"Did you?"

"Somewhat." She shrugs. "Not that I remember much about my essay, except throwing it in the trash after I saw my grade. Anyhow, I'm late. Cora and I have to study for our calculus midterm on Tuesday. Henry will be there, too."

Henry is the latest in an endless stream of boys she's been interested in since she started college a couple of months ago.

"Is that why you're so dressy?" I ask.

"Maybe," she says.

She stands up, spins on her heel, and says goodbye over her shoulder. A second later, the kitchen door slams behind her.

The clock on the narrow arch above the cupboard says it's five past two. During the next fifteen minutes, I scribble down a total of thirty-one words in my notebook. I count them twice: "Antonio should not borrow money from Shylock he cannot repay. He helps his friend Lorenzo steal Jessica from her father Shylock. Lorenzo is a Christian. Jessica must refuse to marry him."

At this rate, I'll be glued to the table until dinnertime.

Jessica is, of course, wrong to abandon her father and her religion in order to marry Lorenzo. Papa would wring my neck for even looking at a Gentile boy, let alone taking one to be my lawfully wedded husband. If I dared to do such a thing, Papa would certainly dig my grave. Then he'd recite the Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer for the dead, every year on my wedding anniversary and never speak to me again. Which wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing.

I take Mina's advice to heart and write about how sad it is that Shylock has to suffer because he is Jewish. By five-thirty, I've somehow managed to squeeze out the remaining 469 words, plus four extras. I copy everything onto two fresh sheets of paper. and just as I'm tucking the pages into my notebook, Mama shows up and starts preparing dinner. I set out the dishes and silverware, hoping Miss Finney doesn't give me a C-, like she did on the essay before this one. She said it was disorganized with too many sentence fragments. My best friend Irene Garten read it and told me it was great, but she's not the teacher.



Three days later, on Wednesday morning at exactly three minutes past eleven, I sit at my desk in the back of Miss Finney's room and look out the window at a huge golden dog chasing a tiny, terrified squirrel across the lawn. I hear my name and nearly jump out of my chair.

"Miss Spirer?" Miss Finney asks. "Are you with us?"

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"Y...yes, ma'am," I reply.

"Come to the blackboard, if you will."

My stomach does a somersault. I rise slowly and make my way forward, wishing the floor underneath me would cave in and swallow me whole. This is not as ridiculous as it might sound since the entire building is crumbling into bits and pieces. At our autumn assembly, Principal McCafferty showed us drawings of a new school that will be erected four blocks south of here during the summer of 1925. That's when they'll tear this old wreck apart. Good riddance to the broken windows and sagging ceilings, one of which came crashing down on Mr. Warner's social studies class last week. Several boys kicked up a hailstorm of dust, while the girls complained about their hair being caked with plaster. A few of them were such a mess Mr. McCafferty had to send them home for the day.

"Your essay was intriguing," Miss Finney says, as I take my place beside her. "I'm quite interested in how you feel about the play."

I struggle to untangle the gauze that has suddenly wrapped itself around my tongue. I hate having to speak English in front of the whole class. I was born in Hungary and came to the United States right after the Great War ended. That was four years ago. I was only ten, but I've never truly shed my accent. My teachers often ask me to repeat myself because they can't understand what I'm saying, though it seems perfectly clear to me.

Edward Klopfer, who sits in the third row, sneers at me. He calls me foreign trash and dirty Jew and tried to hit me in the head with a rock this morning. Luckily, his aim was off, and Irene and I chased him away.

"Well?" Miss Finney asks.

"I...I do not...I do not like the characters," I stammer.

"Why not?"

"Lorenzo...he loves Jessica, and she is selfish."

"And Shylock?"

"He is Jessica's father. She should respect him. I...I like him." I suppose one tiny fib won't hurt.

Edward grunts.

"Is there something you wish to say, Mr. Klopfer?" Miss Finney asks.

"Why wouldn't she like him?" he replies. "She's a shylock just like he is."

Everyone laughs. I don't see what's so funny. Shylock and I are nothing alike. He's a man, and he must be forty years old if he's a day. He's ugly and wears a ragged coat, while I do my best to look stylish in Mina's hand-me-downs. I comb my hair every morning and even dab on a little bit of her rouge when she's not looking. Miss Finney raps her ruler on her desk, and the laughter stops.

"All she and her kind care about is money," Edward says.

"To Edward's point," Miss Finney says, giving him an icy look that

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shrinks him about an inch. "Have people misjudged Shylock so thoroughly that his name has become synonymous with all-consuming greed?"

"That is why he is so sad," I reply.

I immediately realize how foolish I am for not keeping my big mouth shut. Instead of daydreaming the rest of the hour away at my desk, I'm still stuck watching perfect Miss Polly Baldwin in the first row fiddle with the top button on her crisp cotton blouse and bleached-blond Grace Carter lean over to tie her shoelace. She grazes George Adams' leg with her wrist and mutters something that makes his bushy brows hop up and down. If Miss Finney notices, she doesn't let on.

"Can you elaborate?" she asks me.

"He is the only decent one," I reply. "The others are...they are cruel."

"Shylock is a tragic character who suffers because of his religion, and Anti-Semitism is at the heart of this play."

Edward glares at me.

Yesterday at lunch, he snatched my chicken and tomato sandwich off the table before I had a chance to take a bite. I whacked his arm with my notebook, but that didn't stop him from jamming the whole thing in his mouth as he trotted out of the cafeteria. Irene gave me one of her boiled eggs to tide me over. Otherwise, my stomach would have grumbled for the entire afternoon, and Edward would have told anyone who'd listen that I was going hungry because I come from a family of immigrant peasants who can't afford to feed me.

"People have debated Shakespeare's attitude toward the Jews for centuries," Miss Finney says. "Does Shakespeare approve of Antonio's behavior?"

"I...I am not sure," I say.

"Perhaps reciting Shylock's most famous monologue for us will help you decide."

I shuffle my feet uneasily as she grabs a tattered red textbook from her desk. She opens it about halfway, and when she hands it over to me, it weighs a hundred pounds. The ten sentences she has underlined start to skitter toward the edge of the page until I silently beg them to behave themselves. They surprise me by marching back where they belong.

"He hath disgraced me," I say softly, meaning Antonio.

"More volume," Miss Finney says.

I speak a little louder. "He laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew."

"I'll say you are," Edward says and draws a big hook nose in the air.

"For that remark, I am deducting a full letter grade from your essay," Miss Finney says.

Edward narrows his eyes at me. I pretend to ignore him, gloating because he should have kept his big mouth shut, too.

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"Continue, please, Miss Spirer," Miss Finney says.

"Does she have to?" George asks Polly, who snickers.

"That's enough from you, Mr. Adams."

As I read through Shylock's questions about whether Jews eat and drink like everyone else, are wounded by swords, and feel cold in the winter and warm in the summer, my voice grows gravelly, almost masculine.

"If you prick us, do we not bleed?" I bark. "If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

On and on I go until I finally arrive at the end of the speech. I heave a big sigh of relief, but some of Shylock's words sting my throat and stick to my fingertips, even after I close Miss Finney's book and give it back to her. The class is so quiet I can hear Maisie Hammond's wheeze. She has asthma. Grace, George, and Polly don't look up at me.

You see, Shylock whispers in my ear. You and I are not so different.

I suppose he's right since we both understand what it's like to be bullied and slapped by the likes of Edward and even worse for no other reason than we happen to have been born Jewish. We know how much it hurts when people make fun of the size of our noses and accuse us of stealing their money. It's why we choose to live in our own neighborhoods, attend our own synagogues, eat our own food. And marry within our religion. That way, we won't wake up every morning complete strangers in the world.

"What do you make of Shylock's conversion to Christianity at the end of the play?" Miss Finney asks.

"It...it does not seem fair," I reply.

"Why not?"

"Shylock wants to live."

Naturally, he whispers. Wouldn't you?

"And what else?" Miss Finney asks.

"If you are born Jewish, you cannot take it off like a hat," I say.

"I'll say!" Edward shouts.

"That's enough, Mr. Klopfer," Miss Finney replies sharply. "Off you go to Mr. McCafferty."

As Edward stomps out of the room, George mumbles, "Uh oh, Someone's in for it."

"Mr. Adams, would you care to join him?"

"No, ma'am. I wouldn't."

"Glad to hear it," Miss Finney says. "Go on, Miss Spirer."

"And Jessica," I say. "What about her children? Judaism is passed down by the mother. Jessica can send her sons...and her daughters...she can send them to church, but they will never stop being Jewish."

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"Sarah's right," Irene pipes up without raising her hand. "Mothers are the ones who keep the religion going, after all."

The class laughs again. Irene winks at me, and I wink back.

"Thank you, Miss Garten, for reminding us of that," Miss Finney says. "And you, Miss Spierer. Most enlightening. You may take your seat."

The rest of the period inches by uneventfully. George leans over to whisper something to Polly, who titters, and she swats him away like a fly. Miss Finney quickly banishes him to the hall, and when Edward doesn't return from the principal's office, I hope that means he's been expelled for the day. A couple of minutes before the bell rings, Miss Finney returns our papers. A huge red A- is scrawled at the bottom of the second page of my essay. Not up to Mina's standards, but definitely a big improvement. I may yet raise my C- to a B this semester.

I fold my essay in half, stuff it happily into my textbook, and hurry to the lunchroom. All this talking has made me hungry. An hour later, I leave the cafeteria just as the second bell is about to ring. I don't want to be late to algebra, so I take a little-used short cut down the narrow hallway to Mr. Carl's class at the rear of the building. I'm about to turn a corner when Edward jumps out at me. He plants his feet wide on the scuffed tile and opens his arms so wide he blocks my path. I have choice but to stop.

"You are in my way," I say.

"So what?" he asks.

"Let me pass. I will be late."

"Do you think I care about that?"

He takes a step toward me. We're standing so close our noses touch. There are beads of sweat on his forehead, and his cheeks are bright red. He reaches over and shoves my shoulder with the palm of his right hand. I don't budge.

"Stop it," I say.

He shoves me again, this time so hard he sends me rocking back on my heels. I steady myself and look desperately up and down the hall for somebody to help me. But he and I are the only ones here.

"There's no Miss Finney to save you, you stupid Yid," he says and wags his fist in my face. "It's just you and me, and I'm gonna get even."

I stare him straight in the eye, as the last sentences of Shylock's monologue come roaring out of my mouth. "If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

Edward's jaw drops. "Are...you crazy? W...what are you talking about?"

"You heard me." My voice is a low growl. "Get out of my way."

He stumbles backward, speechless, as deflated as a leaky balloon. Shylock, who has been rumbling around inside my head since he first ap-

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peared there during English class, hooks his elbow through mine. Together, we weave our way down the hall.

Well done, Mrs. Shylock, he says.

"Thank you," I reply.