

On Rosh Hashonah

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Ellie looked around the room, at Steve and all the rest of them. I'm a queer too, she felt like saying. I'm one of those people you think would be better off dead. But the words wouldn't say themselves. Not here, not now. She wouldn't open herself that way to someone like Steve.

She wouldn't have felt so alone if Kate had been there. Or John. Or one of her other friends, who could understand what it felt like to be a lesbian running up against a guy like Steve.

BY SARA EDELSTEIN

They came in twos, husbands and wives, the Newmanns...the Cohens...the Grossbergs...the Levines. "Good Yontif," they wished everyone. "Happy New Year."

It was like Noah's Ark, Ellie thought. The repopulation of the earth apparently begun, the one or two children per couple skipped ahead or dangled behind as the couples entered the room.

Sitting in a comfortable armchair, sipping the drink she'd made strong enough to help herself through the evening, Ellie mentally kicked herself for her bad attitude. It wasn't any of the nice couples' fault that she was the only unattached person of marriageable age in the room. It wasn't their fault either that she and Kate had split up a few months ago. Or that even if they hadn't, she could only have brought Kate here, if at all, as a friend she happened to be travelling with.

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Of course, Ellie thought, if she hadn't made the mistake of telling her mother and father what her real relationship to Kate was, everything would have been easier. Her mother wouldn't have had reason for her tight-lipped silences, her low-voiced entreaties that Kate not say anything to the rest of the family.

Only her brother David understood. He'd been really glad for her when Ellie had told him about herself and Kate.

Three years younger than Ellie, David had big shoulders and a thick dark beard which made him look older than her sometimes. He stood with Susan, his pregnant wife, near a card table laden with appetizers — herring, gefilte fish, chopped liver, slices of rye bread and challah. Since it was Rosh Hashonah, the start of the Jewish New Year, there was a plate of apple slices to dip into honey. That was supposed to symbolize the wish for a good, sweet new year.

David was eating a slice of bread spread with chopped liver and talking animatedly with Richard, the older son of their Aunt Ruth. For a few years now, the dinner on Rosh Hashonah for family and friends had been at Richard's large, well-furnished home in a northern suburb.

Richard smiled at Ellie when she went over to the appetizer table. "So how does it

feel to be back in the windy city?"

"To tell the truth," Ellie said, "I've been in Portland so long, I'm starting to feel like a stranger here."

"So eat a little something," her brother David said in a fake Yiddish accent. "A nice girl like you should feel at home."

The three of them laughed, and then David and Richard went back to talking with each other. Ellie helped herself to a piece of gefilte fish. She took a couple of apple slices too and dipped them in the bowl of honey. This last year had ended so badly — with Kate leaving her — that she didn't have much faith in good wishes. But she still liked the taste of apples and honey.

Ellie's parents and her Uncle Morty were sitting on the oval couch which dominated the living room. Her uncle waved her to come sit by him. "So how's my favorite niece? You're looking prettier every year." He winked at Ellie's father. "Wedding bells are gonna be ringing for her soon, that's for sure."

Ellie forced herself to smile at her uncle. He never seemed to notice that she was already in her thirties, and that she should have been married long ago. With a feeling of relief, she saw her Aunt Ruth come into the living room. "Come eat," she said to them. "Dinner is ready."

Ellie watched her parents and uncle heading for the dining room and followed David and Susan into the den. The children, she was pleased to note, were removed to the basement for their own noisier version of dinner.

A long table was set up in the den, and dishes of food were lined up on the sideboard. Ellie filled her plate with baked chicken, brisket, spicy pieces of kishke, candied sweet potatoes, green beans, and jello salad. Then she took a place at one end of the table.

Lois Levine, a college teacher who Ellie remembered from last year, sat down next to her. Dan Levine, Lois's doctor husband, sat on the other side of Lois. A thin, dark-haired man and a blonde woman sat across from Ellie. "We're Fred and Marsha Cohen," the man said to her.

Steve, Richard's younger brother, was at the table too, along with Bonnie, his wife. It was too bad that Richard's niceness hadn't rubbed off on Steve, Ellie thought. Steve was taller than Richard, large-muscled and big-boned, with a sharp tongue and a sometimes arrogant manner. He sold cars for a living and Ellie imagined that he closed the sale by bullying his customers. His wife Bonnie was dark, good looking, and quiet. Probably she never got much of a chance to talk with Steve

around, always ready to air his opinions.

Glasses of sweet red wine were set in front of every plate, a traditional drink at Jewish holidays. Ellie finished most of her glass while she slowly ate her way through the array of food. Eating was one of the best parts of Jewish holidays, and it usually made more sense to her than the religious stuff. The ten-day Jewish New Year, as far as she could figure it, was mostly about begging forgiveness from a patriarchal God. Of course, there was also the part about forgiving other people and asking for their forgiveness.

Ellie thought about Kate telling her they wouldn't be together any more. Kate telling her she loved Diane now, she couldn't help herself, but the two of them could still be friends. Ellie's fingers tightened around her fork. She had thought that Kate loved her as much as she had loved Kate. She hadn't expected — and didn't think she could forgive — Kate's betrayal.

As the plates and wineglasses were slowly emptied, conversation flowed across the table. Ellie talked with Lois Levine about books they'd both read. "I'd like to read more," Lois said, "but teaching keeps me busy. There's a lot of pressure to publish also, but I try to keep in mind that my first priority is to my family."

Ellie nodded sympathetically, trying to imagine what it would be like to have a husband and children. "My wife feels the same," Fred Cohen put in. Dan and Lois began talking with Fred and Marsha Cohen, and Ellie just listened to the web of conversation about jobs and kids and houses and married life.

At the far end of the table, her brother David, Ellie noticed, sat with his arm casually draped over Susan's shoulder. Ellie could imagine what the reaction would be if she had brought Kate and had sat there like that with her.

They were drinking coffee now and eating dessert. Steve was talking in his usual loud voice about working out at a health club he'd joined recently. Mr. Macho, Ellie thought, looking at Steve's big arms and shoulders and picturing him pressing iron at the gym. She took a forkful of chocolate cake and tried to tune out on the conversation.

The note of anger in Steve's voice brought her back to the room. "That faggot put his hand on my arm. I told him to keep his hands off me. Go spread AIDS somewhere else."

"A hand on your arm isn't going to give you AIDS," Dan the doctor pointed out.

"We can't be sure of that," Bonnie said in her high, timid voice.

"That's not the point," Steve interrupted. His voice got louder. "Those fags just make me sick. If you ask me, they deserve what they get. And they'd better keep it to themselves."

Ellie clenched her teeth. Appetite gone, she looked down at her half-eaten piece of cake. Her stomach tightened with anger. She didn't want to argue with Steve — not with her mother and father and aunt and uncle sitting in the next room. But she didn't know if she could stand to stay silent.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" David asked. His voice had enough of an edge to it that Ellie knew he was angry too. "Are you talking about isolating all the people exposed to AIDS? Putting them away somewhere just like we did to the Japanese in World War Two?"

"Or like the Nazis did to the Jews," Susan added.

"That's about the size of it," David agreed.

Steve brushed aside their arguments as he had his opponents on the high school football field. "That civil liberties stuff is a lot of garbage. It's not the same situation at all." He turned to face Fred and Marsha. "You've got kids. Would you want them to go to a school where the teacher had AIDS? How about it? Would you want your kids to be taught by a bunch of queers?"

Ellie wadded her napkin into a ball and compressed it in her hand. "You don't know the first thing about it," she found herself saying in a louder than usual voice.

Looking surprised, Steve turned towards her. His expression changed to a smirk, half-humorous and half-contemptuous. "And I suppose you do?"

"A lot more than you," Ellie said. Anger made her voice shake a little and blurred the edge of her vision. "I guess you haven't ever known any gay men like I have. Like my friend John. He's a great guy. A really good friend. And one of his best friends just died of AIDS."

Steve and Dan both started to say something, but Ellie kept on talking. "You think John's friends deserved to die of AIDS? That's disgusting. It makes me sick to hear you talk like that."

Ellie looked around the room, at Steve and all the rest of them. I'm queer too, she felt like saying. I'm one of those people you think would be better off dead. But the words wouldn't say themselves. Not here, not now. She wouldn't open herself that way to someone like Steve.

She stood up abruptly, pushing back her chair. There was a brief silence in the room. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to this." Looking at no one now, Ellie left the room.

She walked quickly down the hall and through the kitchen. Then down another hall and up a flight of stairs to Richard and Lynne's guest bedroom.

Standing just inside, with the door shut, she listened intently for a moment, but heard no one calling her or following her up the stairs. She sat down on the bed. She could be alone here, for a few minutes, and then she would have to go back down.

She sat with her palms covering her face, still shaking a little with anger and feeling as if she might start to cry. She could still see Steve's face — half angry, half mocking — as he talked about queers and AIDS.

All of a sudden she thought about John. His kind face and gentle hands. The way he'd helped take care of his friend Peter when Peter was dying of AIDS.

She looked at the bedroom furniture in shades of green and the matching venetian blinds. She was glad she'd said what she did to Steve. Even though he wouldn't listen to her. Even though the Steves of this world never would.

Ellie sat up straighter. She could feel her anger pressing on her chest. Steve was one thing, but even her own parents wouldn't accept her as she was. Maybe the main difference between them and Steve was that they wouldn't call her names.

It was ironic really, Ellie thought. Here she was at the Jewish New Year where everybody was supposed to end all their arguments, forgive and be forgiven. Everybody was supposed to feel like one big family. But John felt a lot more like family to her than Steve did.

Ellie clenched her fists. She couldn't forgive Steve. And she couldn't forgive anyone else who thought the same way he did.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. "Who is it?" Ellie asked.

"It's me, David."

She opened the door, glad to see only David waiting there. "Thought I might find you up here somewhere," he said. He came into the room, closing the door behind him. Then he put his arms around Ellie and hugged her.

The woolly smell of David's jacket was comforting. Ellie leaned her face against it for a moment.

"Hey Sis," David said, "you really gave Steve an earful."

Ellie tried to smile.

"That Steve is getting to be a class A asshole," David went on. "After you left, Susan and I both told him what we thought of his ideas."