

## A TASTE OF SEDER

By Sonia Levitin

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WE USED TO HAVE A SEDER at Passover time. Now it is not allowed. My friend Katrina and I talk about past times, when there were no soldiers on the street.

Katrina has a new baby brother named Daniel. Poor Daniel will never know what a Seder is like.

Katrina and I talk about the Seder we had last year, when Papa was with us. I asked the Four Questions, because I was the youngest. "We should try to make a Seder," I say, "no matter what."

Katrina agrees. "We are supposed to tell the story every year, so that we'll remember that we were slaves in Egypt, and Moses helped us escape. We have to be thankful that we are now free."

"But we are not free," I say, stamping my foot into a puddle.

Old Sol, the Sweeper, sees us. "Hey, Bella," he calls. "Keep your boots dry. "It's not easy to buy new shoes these days." Sol has a round face, and he is always smiling, even when he is sad.

"We were talking about having a Seder," Katrina whispers to Sol. He used to work at the bank. Now he says he is lucky to have any job at all.

Sol looks over his shoulder. "There is no matzo in the stores," he says. "How could you have a Seder, my little ones?"

Minna the newspaper lady moves closer to us. She whispers. "You girls mean well, but it is impossible." Minna once wrote for the newspaper. Now she sells them on the street. "Go now. Go to school. Hurry!"

After school we go to my apartment. Katrina stays with us until her parents get home from working in their shop. They keep baby Daniel with them all day.

We take the Haggadah from the shelf and show it to Mama. “Look,” I say. “It is almost time for Passover. We should have a Seder.”

“Hush!” Mama says, with a warning glance to the window. Across the way we can see straight into the apartment of our neighbors. The boy who lives there often sits at the table, studying. Once I saw him by the window with his pet bird on his finger.

“Mama, we are like those slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt!” I exclaim.

“Hush!” Mama goes to the window and quickly pulls down the shade. She sits down quietly, thinking. Suddenly Mama stands up and says, “You girls are right. We will have our Seder.”

Now we whisper excitedly, Mama, Katrina and I, making plans.

“We could bake matzo,” Katrina says. “I know it has to be done quickly.”

“So that the dough won’t rise,” I add. “We need flour and water and salt.”

“I never baked matzo in my life,” Mama says.

“Let’s try!” Katrina and I exclaim, bouncing up and down.

Where can we buy flour for matzo? There is not even enough bread in the city. People line up for hours to buy a single loaf. Mama, Katrina and I go out and find Sol, the sweeper. He knows many people, and he has good ideas.

“I know someone,” Sol says softly. “Don’t ask me how, but I will get you the flour for matzo. I’ll bring it over tonight.” He smiles broadly.

That night Sol brings a large sack. On it he has written the words SAND. We laugh as we pull the sack inside, open it and see the white flour. Mama, Katrina and I put our hands into the flour, feeling its softness as we place it into a large bowl. We add water and salt, and then we mix. But something is wrong. The dough sticks to our hands and to the rolling pin.

“Nearly half an hour has passed,” says Katrina. “Matzo has to be finished in 18 minutes.”

We try again, this time all three of us mixing the dough. Our matzo cakes look perfect. But something is wrong. When we take them out of the oven, they are burned nearly black.

Once again we mix flour and water and salt, working quickly. We stand by the oven, watching carefully. At last Mama pulls out the matzo cakes, and Katrina and I

shout, "Perfect!" Not perfectly round or square, like the matzo from the store, but we each take a small taste and it is good. I clap my hands and shout. "Hurrah!"

"Hush!" Mama warns. "The neighbors."

We settle down and wonder, how can we get wine for the Seder? I remember that in her tiny backyard Minna has a pomegranate tree. The next day Katrina and I ask her, and she lets us pick pomegranates for wine. Several soldiers turn their heads, but we do not look at them as we hurry home.

Our hands turn red from peeling the pomegranates and picking out the seeds. Mama gives us a large clay jar with sugar in it, and a bit of yeast. Soon the apartment is filled with the fragrance of sweet fruit turning into wine.

The day before Passover, Katrina brings over two candles, hiding them in her coat pocket. "My mother said to use these for the Seder. She is worried. She says we cannot all come at once."

"That's true," Mama says. "We are not allowed to gather together in groups.

Only a few people at a time."

Mama and I make a list of things we still need. Apples and honey, bitter herbs, salt water, hard boiled eggs, a chicken neck or lamb bone.

I ask, "What will we eat for dinner?"

"We will buy a large chicken," Mama decides. She takes the beautiful glass vase down from the shelf. "This was a wedding present for me and your father," she says softly.

Mama sells the vase to a second-hand shop. With the money we buy horse radish root, apples and honey, eggs, and a large chicken. The day before the Seder, Katrina's father brings over a bag of vegetables. "For the Seder," he whispers, and then he is gone.

Katrina and I are so excited. Katrina will stay all day until after the last Seder. First Minna will come, then Sol, then Katrina's parents with Baby Daniel. They will slip into the house very quietly and quickly.

The day has arrived! The chicken is bubbling in a large pot, and we are hungry. Mama boils rice to go with it, and the carrots and beans that Katrina's father brought.

"Bella," Mama calls, "make sure the window shade is down before you set the table." Before I pull down the shade, I glance into the room across the way. Nobody

is there, but I can see the little blue bird in its cage, and I wish I could hold it on my finger.

Katrina and I set the table, checking everything in our Haggadah. Candles. Salt water. Wine glasses. Chicken neck. Bitter herbs. Chopped apples and honey. A hard-boiled egg, the symbol of life.

The Seder can begin when there are three stars in the sky. When it is nearly dark, Katrina and I tell Mama, “We’re going outside to count the stars!”

Katrina races down the stairs, just as the boy from across the way is running up with his books. Wham! Books fly about. Katrina stumbles and nearly falls. I reach out for her and glance at the boy. He runs away up the stairs.

Katrina and I go outside to check the sky. It is filled with stars. We see Minna coming up the street with newspapers under her arm, as if she is making a delivery.

“*Hag Sameach*,” Minna whispers. “Happy holiday.”

Together we light the candles and begin the Seder. We take turns reading from the Haggadah. I ask the Four Questions. “Why is tonight different from all other nights? On all other nights we eat bread or matzo. Tonight we eat only matzo. On all other nights we eat many herbs, but on this night we eat bitter herbs. On all other nights we do not dip herbs even once, but tonight we dip twice. On all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night we all recline.”

I turn to Katrina. “Do you know, the Haggadah doesn’t really answer the Four Questions.”

“I never thought of that,” says Katrina.

“Neither did I,” say Mama and Minna. “Maybe,” Mama says, “we are supposed to find the answers for ourselves.”

Minna says, “We eat only matzo because this is the bread our ancestors ate when they escaped from Egypt. We remember their haste and their fear.”

We read the whole story and say the prayers. We sip the wine and taste the sweet and bitter foods. Then we eat the wonderful, tender chicken, rice and vegetables. Usually we sing songs at the Seder, but tonight we must keep very quiet, so we only whisper the final prayer. “Next year in Jerusalem!”

Minna kisses us goodbye and goes out into the night, just as Sol is coming up the stairs. “*Hag Sameach*,” he whispers. “I made sure nobody followed me,” he says.

Again we hold the Seder service. I ask the Four Questions. We read the entire story, and Sol says, “We eat bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness of being slaves.” He smiles and adds, “We also eat sweet apples and honey, to remind us that life can be sweet when we are free.”

Mama, Katrina and I eat only a little, because we know the evening isn’t over yet. After the final songs and the prayer, “Next year in Jerusalem!” Sol goes to the door. He thanks us, and beneath his smile, I see the trace of a tear in his eyes.

Katrina and I clear the plates and straighten the Seder table once again. We hear footsteps on the stairs. We wait for the signal, two taps, a pause, three taps. I open the door. Mama helps bring in the baby carriage. Katrina’s parents move inside quickly.”

We begin the Seder for the third time, with Baby Daniel sitting on his father’s lap. My friend Katrina looks so pretty, with red ribbons in her hair. Her mother’s eyes are shining. “Thank you, thank you,” she says again and again as we eat the Seder foods and discuss the Four Questions.

“We dip our vegetables in salt water,” Katrina’s father says, “to remind us of our tears when we were slaves in Egypt. Tonight we have no tears, because we are holding this lovely Seder.”

Katrina’s mother adds, “We lean back in our chairs like free people. Tonight we feel free.”

Suddenly the window shade snaps up. Everyone gasps. Straight across the empty space, standing at the window, is the boy. He has seen everything, the candles, the special foods, and the guests sitting around the table. His mother is standing behind him, with the little blue bird on her shoulder.

I run to the window. My heart is thumping, and my knees tremble. I want to cry out, “Don’t tell, please, don’t tell.”

The boy stands there, very still, watching. Slowly his mouth moves into a smile. The mother nods and brings the little bird onto her finger. And I know our secret is safe.

Maybe next year we will share the taste of Seder with our neighbors. Maybe next year.

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