Graduation

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Graduation

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

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Hannah hurried home from school and announced she needed a white dress for graduation.

"Why?" Ma asked, poking her head out of the pantry and wiping her hands on her torn apron. "Your Pesach dress isn't good enough?" She sighed. "America. Always something new."

Gussie came in from the backyard, a couple of clothespins in her hand. "Wear your Pesach dress," she said. "I don't remember white dresses when I graduated.

"Maybe in those days they didn't wear them."

"You think it was a million years ago?"

"I have to wear a white dress."

"If you have to, you have to. Tomorrow Gussie'll go to the drygoods man."

"Why can't we go to a real downtown store? I want to look like the other girls." She thought of Julia's starched dresses.

"Before the drygoods man finds a white dress for Hannah, it'll be time for her wedding," Gussie said. "I'll take her downtown.

The next day Gussie took her to the Outlet Co. basement and picked out a white dress. "A bargain," she said,

"but what a waste! A white dress. It'll be black in no time."

Hannah thought it was beautiful, as nice as anyone else's — even Julia's.

The next morning Miss Malloy took the class to the auditorium where she explained that graduation was the most important ceremony of their lives. Hannah listened intently. Who would come to see her graduate? If it were up to her father, none of them would even have gone to school. They'd all grow up to be like Gussie, scrubbing, yelling, screaming. How many times had Gussie told her that when they first came to America, their father wouldn't let any of the older children go to school because the schools would make girls cry out of them. "We stayed home till some one on the street squealed and the truant officer came. Then we had to go." Even now Pa didn't want to hear about school, and he begged God to save his children from this America. No, there wasn't a chance Pa would come. But maybe Gussie would take Ma. Maybe Ma would be feeling good that day.

Walking home from school, she and Blanche talked about their graduation outfits. Hannah tried to describe her new dress, but Blanche paid no attention and said in a loud voice that she was getting new shoes, too, even if her Passover shoes were like brand new. Her mother didn't think they were dressy enough for a graduation.

Hannah remembered Blanchie's Passover shoes with their patent leather shine and Cuban heels. "If they were any dressier, she'd fit right in with the vaudeville act at Fay's Theater. Bet you'd never catch Julia in shoes like that."

"Guess who's here," Naomi said when Hannah came home. "One guess. An old lady and she's got the smartest grandson and the most beautiful granddaughter in the world."

"Old Lady Rose," Hannah said, snickering. "Smart Davey! That's a laugh. I bet she doesn't know Davey's mother gave me a quarter last week to help him with his reading."

They went into the house and said hello to Mrs. Rose who sat at the kitchen table sipping tea. Mrs. Rose nodded and without a break in her conversation, continued. "You should see our Davey. A head on him. He's so smart, he'll have to be a doctor. Or an accountant, at least."

"A fine boy," Hannah heard her mother's voice from the bedroom where she and Naomi had gone. "And how about your Zeldeh?"

"A picture," they heard Mrs. Rose's answer. "When she grows up they'll bang down our doors."

Naomi laughed. "Cockeyed Zeldeh. With a face like hers, they'll bang the doors all right. Some beauty!"
“Some beauty!” Hannah repeated, but she didn’t laugh. Why couldn’t her mother ever praise any of them? Everyone knew her children were the smartest on the street, but she could sit and listen to the neighbors and relatives boast how wonderful their children were without one good word about her own. Why? They thought she was somebody in school. All the teachers did, even Miss Malloy. Miss Malloy wanted her to go to Classical High School. Julia, too. “I bet Julia’s father and mother think she’s special.”

Last fall, at the beginning of the term, Miss Malloy had announced, “Her name is Julia Simpson, and I’m sure you’ll all help her get used to her new country and her new school.”

Hannah was glad Julia was assigned a desk near hers but she felt shy in Julia’s presence. She thought of Julia as a princess and sometimes imagined how wonderful it would be if Julia could be her friend, but how could it be? Pa would be mad if she went ‘to the goyim’; and with Pa praying, Ma ready to drop, the kids fighting and Gussie screeching, she couldn’t have Julia come to her house. Better to see her only in school.

With Blanche, it was different. “Like twins,” people said, “always together.” But the Goldsteins were a puzzle to Hannah. They followed the same Orthodox rituals as her family: Mrs. Goldstein blessed the candles, just like her mother; Mr. Goldstein offered the prayers for food and drink, just like her father; but in their house it was quiet and nobody talked about God watching you to catch you if you sinned. Mr. and Mrs. Goldstein acted as if their kids were the best in the world and as if they loved them. So much love made Hannah uneasy. Did her parents love her? In her house love was never mentioned.

Hannah used to think the Goldstein’s house beautiful. “They live on a second floor,” she told her younger sisters. “Everything’s so shiny. You’re not supposed to go in the parlor, but I went, and there’s a purple sofa with big flowers, all kinds of colors. And they got a picture of the whole family, even little Chaikie, on the wall behind the sofa. Pa would be mad, but it’s only a picture, not a statue.”

But now everything was changing. Like last Chanukah. “What are you wearing to shul for the Chanukah party?” Blanche asked her in school. “I’m not going.” “You go with me every year!” “We’re out of cheder now, Blanche. You think I’m gonna to hang around with a bunch of kids grabbing Chanukah candy? Not me!” “Bet you’d go if Julia asked you.” “Julia? She’s not even Jewish.” “See if I care,” Blanche said. “I can go without you.”
And she did.

Hannah didn't like Blanchie's house any more either. It didn't look American. Julia's house wouldn't have such colors and bunches of flowers.

After recess, Miss Malloy announced to the class that Julia would recite a poem at graduation. "Sure," Blanchie said, as they walked home at noon, "Miss Malloy thinks Julia's something because she's a real American, not like us."

"You're crazy," Hannah said. "Miss Malloy picked Julia because she talks so beautiful. Like Ronald Colman."

"I bet everybody talks like that in England."

That afternoon Miss Malloy asked Hannah and John Rathbone to stay after school with Julia and told them she had a poem for each of them to recite at graduation. Hannah sat up straight in her chair. She looked at Julia, who smiled and whispered, "Good!"

After school Hannah avoided Blanchie and walked with Julia as far as Chalkstone Ave., where Julia turned off. "I'm glad we both have a part in the graduation," Julia said. "Think how proud your parents will be."

The moment she walked into the house, Hannah called out, "I was picked to recite a poem at graduation." No one replied, and she repeated, louder this time. "I'm going to recite a poem at graduation. And all the families are invited."

Her mother came out of the pantry, a rag around her head, carrying a plate of fruit. "My head feels heavy today," she complained. "Take some fruit, Hannah. I'll go lie down before Pa comes home."

Naomi, Danny and Miriam came in and started grabbing fruit from the bowl.

"The teacher picked me to recite a poem at graduation," Hannah told them. "Listen:

_Breathes there a man with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land,
Whose heart hath never within him burned —-

"So what?" Naomi exclaimed. "It's not as good as the poem I said on Arbor Day:

_I think that I shall never see,
A poem love, come true.
Gussie came in shaking a dust mop.
Look what a mess you're making in the kitchen! I swept an hour ago, and already it looks like a cyclone. For two cents I'd leave you all and get a job and be paid for being a slave.

"I'm going to be on the stage at graduation," Hannah said. "And all the families are invited."

"You know Pa wouldn't set foot in a goyishe school," Gussie said.

"It's not goyishe. It's American."

"To Pa you think it makes a difference?"

"Maybe you could take Ma? Morris could drive you, or maybe Pa would drop you and Ma and the kids off on his way to shuk."

"Not on your life!" Gussie said. "If I take the kids, who needs to go? And you know Ma. It depends on how she feels."

The following day Julia asked Hannah to come home with her. "We can practice our poems," she said. "And Mother would love to meet you. I told her we'd both be going to the same high school.

Hannah was glad Julia had asked her, yet she felt uneasy. Outside, Julia's tenement house was like hers, but not the inside. "So quiet, so clean," she thought. "Not like my house. Not like Blanchie's either."

"I've heard so much about you," Julia's mother said. "I understand you're going to be in the graduation exercises. Your parents must be as proud of you as we are of Julia."

How nice she talks. How nice she looks, Hannah thought of her mother in her shapeless housedress.

Mrs. Simpson came back carrying a tray. "I've brought some tea for you young ladies. And try my biscuits. They're still hot." She put the tray on a small table and left them alone. Julia poured the tea, and Hannah held on to her cup with both hands for fear she would drop it. She did not touch the biscuits.

After tea Julia took her into her bedroom, a small room with light walls. Hannah thought it was beautiful, not fancy like Blanchie's, but much nicer. And a real desk. All her own.

"Sit here," Julia said, motioning Hannah to a chair and seating herself at the desk. "Let's practice our poems. You go first. You're my guest."

Hannah felt shy and said nothing.

"Go ahead," Julia said. "I know you'll do well."

Hannah stood up, hesitated, then said in a soft voice, "Breathes there a man with soul so dead..."

"Fine," Julia said. "You're doing fine, but try it a little louder."

"Breathes there a man..." Hannah started again, this time in loud and clear tones. She saw Julia smile and continued until she had recited all of her poem.

"It couldn't be better. Julia said, applauding. "Not only do you know your lines, you sound as if you know what you're talking about. I hope I do as well."

You'll be wonderful," Hannah said. "I'm not worried about my lines. I know them, but I'm not sure what to do with my hands. Mother listened last night and suggested I ask you."

She recited her poem and Hannah listened, enthralled. "It's beautiful," she said, "and I think gestures would fit in where you stop at the end of each verse."

"See, I told you," Julia said. "I told you we could help each other."

Mrs. Simpson came in to say goodbye to Hannah and invited her to come again.

All the way home Hannah thought how nice Julia and her mother were, how much she liked being in their house. She wondered what Julia's father was like and thought he must love Julia very much.

The next day Blanchie told her she knew where Hannah went after school. "I know who you're hanging around with," she said. "You don't have to tell me." Hannah said nothing.

At recess Julia asked her again to come home with her. Hannah nodded and looked to see if Blanchie was watching. After school, she hurried out of the classroom. She heard Blanchie calling her but did not stop.

Julia's mother greeted her warmly. "You're a welcome guest," she said. "Julia told me what a help you've been. But today you must try my biscuits."

She brought in a tray, and this time Hannah had a biscuit with her tea and helped herself to another in Julia's room.
Before they started on their poems, Julia said how glad she was that Hannah had come home with her. “And it’s not only for the practice,” she said. “It’s because we’re becoming such good friends.”

Friends? She and Julia? Hannah suddenly thought of her father and dropped her biscuit. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t stay. I forgot.” She left quickly, awkwardly—she should’ve said goodbye to Julia’s mother—and hurried home. Why had she eaten that biscuit? She knew it was wrong to eat in a goyischeh house.

“Where were you? your father asked as soon as she opened the kitchen door. “What were you doing on Chalkstone Ave.?”

“I went to a girl’s house from school.”

“Who was the girl?”

“Julia Simpson. She comes from England and she’s in my room in school.”

“An Englisher? Why do you have to go to a goyiceh? You don’t know God is watching?” He raised his eyes heavenward. “Gottenu, Gottenu! He lamented. “What will become of my children in this America?”

“Why doesn’t God want me to be American?” Hannah thought, but she avoided going to Julia’s again.

Each day of the last week before graduation she recited her poem loudly in the kitchen. “I’m sick of hearing it already,” Naomi said. And each day Hannah reminded Gussie, “Everybody’s invited to the graduation. Even Blanchie’s grandmother is coming.”

At last, it was graduation day. Hannah put on her new dress, her white stockings and her black shoes and went into Gussie’s bedroom to look at herself in the mirror. She lifted her right arm before her and declaimed: 

_Breathes there a man with soul so dead,

Who never to himself hath said,

This is my own, my own dear child ..._

What am I saying?” she asked herself. “Better try again. This is my own, my native land. That’s it, that’s how it goes.

Before she left the house she reminded Gussie that all families were invited.

“If you told me once,” Gussie said, “you told me a thousand times. You think I’m deaf? And if I can get Ma out of here, I’ll take her. It all depends on how she feels.”

Her father, drinking tea at the kitchen table, looked up and asked, “Where you going?”

“To my graduation.”

“To the goyim,” he said, “All dressed up like a goyic. Don’t think you’re fooling God. I should never have lived to come to this country. A land of goyim. Who knows what will become of my children in this country?”

Slowly Hannah walked to school. “Somebody’ll come,” she told herself, “I know somebody’ll come.”

As she walked into the noise and excitement of the school auditorium, boys and girls were running, walking, whistling and greeting each other. “Hi, Hannah,” she heard from several directions. Blanchie came over to show off her dress. “And how do you like my new shoes?” she asked. “Look at those heels! And guess what? Remember my cousin, Itzy, the one who came to shut with us on Passover? He came in with his whole family from North Attleboro. Just to see me graduate. What a mob! Hope there’ll be enough seats.”

Hannah hardly heard. She left Blanchie and went to the front of the auditorium. On the stage stood Miss Malloy, waving her arms and calling, “Quiet! I want absolute silence in this room, all of you! The noise arrested itself and stopped.

“That’s better,” Miss Malloy continued. Listen, carefully. I’ll be going over this for the last time. The first four rows are reserved for the graduating class. I want Julia and Hannah and John to take the last seats on the right-hand
side in the front row. I'll be at the piano. When I give the signal to rise, I want all of you to get up and march quietly onto the stage. We open with The Star-Spangled Banner, and remember, they can't hear you in the back seats unless you sing out. I want every parent, every family member and all our friends to hear every word. You know how long they've been waiting for this great day.

Hannah found her seat and sat. She leaned back in her chair, relieved that it was over. "I did it," she thought. And they saw me. I know they did.

The principal was giving his farewell address, but she hardly listened. She was still caught up in the elation that she had been picked, that she had done so well, that they had been there to see her. "In closing," she heard Mr. Ferguson say, "I want to remind our graduating class that no matter how far they go on life's pathways, they will always remain in the hearts of those they leave behind at Candace St. Grammar School."

As the class went to the stage for the presentation of the diplomas, the audience applauded wildly. Before the last diploma was handed out, a solid mass of people surged forward. "You looked so beautiful," she heard Mr. Goldstein saying to Blanchie. "Everyone was looking at you. My Blanchie."

"Come over a minute," Mrs. Goldstein called to her. "We want to see you."

"I can't," Hannah said, "I've got to find my family." Where were they? Where was Cussie? Ma? She pushed her way to the outer corridor and ran the length of the auditorium looking down the crowded aisles. Her classmates were with their families: kissing, hugging, laughing. Julia's mother waved to her, but she didn't stop. She circled the auditorium once, twice, heard her own heavy breathing and the happy sounds of families, friends and children. "Hannah! Hannah!" Julia's voice called, but she turned and ran out the building.

She ran and cried, and the faster she ran the harder she cried. Up Candace St., past Chalkstone Ave., past Inkerman St., past Pekin St., she ran, crying. She stopped crying when she saw her house. "I'm home," she said, and sat on the front steps. For a long time she just sat there, looking straight ahead, then she got up and went slowly up the stairs. "Better go in," she thought, "or I'll get my dress dirty."

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**August**

by Joan Henson

go reckless to

forget you are in flowers

now when there bloom more

than can be crushed

or even gathered, more

than any earth ever needed, far more

than the spring dared wear

come squander some

wild buttercups and lace

along the brown, brimming curves of my road

---

**Solid**

by Joan Henson

Buy a Shaker pegboard

straight bone of beech

and six strong pegs

No iron filigrees

or carved arms of wood

just a good sturdy board
to hang on for a while
when the closets trim coats
and you have nowhere else to go

Buy a Shaker pegboard
and hold on
until the world makes room