

SIMON KORNER

Joyeux Noël

IT WAS LEWES THAT MADE me a Jew. I was one before, of course—my penis had a rounded end and I owned a lovely velvet tallis bag and a white satin kappale embroidered with gold thread, and I yawned my way through Yom Kippur in the Cambridge shul, staring at all the old men, many of whom seemed to have clubfeet and hearing aids. Then there were the paper Simchat Torah flags made of card with glitter decorations my father's father would send us, which we never knew what to do with, and the elaborate Pesachs at my mother's parents, the huge music room of their Hampstead house filled with eighty people at table served by waitresses in black dresses and white pinafores, the children stiff in their best clothes, the women perfumed, the men murmuring Hebrew, the faster the manlier.

The day we arrived in Lewes, everything felt wide open. Nothing was hidden—all our pictures and books and rugs and lamps strewn over the grass verge. Our house was like a public building.

It was a beautiful day at the end of August, delicious cool air flowing through the empty rooms, white walls and ceilings newly painted. I nosed round the ground floor, past painters in the hall in white overalls, one squatting on his heels by the skirting board, whistling like a blackbird to the radio. I raced upstairs and on the landing came across a carpenter with tanned biceps as round and smooth as the bannister he was fixing.

I peeped into my room, which was light blue, large and open—as if the sky itself had come indoors. The sash windows were all open and the faint sea breeze pushed against my neck.

The smell of fresh paint was so new and clean I felt like lying on the floor and basking in it. I watched the removal men carrying our sofa into the house. They were like a thread connecting us to the home we had left behind—Mrs. Sage, our beloved old cleaning lady, waving us off and wiping away a tear, and our neighbours the Pellings waving too, my mother crying. Once the removal men left, we would be on our own.

I woke into a bright morning and straightaway noticed something strange. No birdsong. Then I heard the low cooing of a wood pigeon, a soothing throb, answered by another, but that was all, none of the generous spilling of sound of our Cambridge garden. Lewes seemed suddenly barren, far away from my familiar world.

I was directed to one of the eight-sided tables at the back of the classroom. The teacher, Mr. Prescott, had a kind tired voice and kept fiddling with his earlobe, which had a red lump in it. Some of the kids mocked his habit, tugging at their own ears, and he smiled. "It's me war wound," he said in a comical old man's voice.

"No that's your brain, sir."

Mr. Prescott wore baggy grey flannel trousers, which were shiny around the bottom and his stomach hung over the belt, pushing his white nylon shirt out in front. I was glad he was nice but I wished I were back in my prep school with its businesslike women teachers and its crisp grey uniform.

There was a sharp smell coming from the boy next to me. He had sticky out ears and a dirty neck. His friend wore a fluffy jumper, and also seemed to smell. I wondered if they were poor. I followed them outside when the bell went, joined in with them and some girls playing rounders on the tarmac, while a pack of boys roared around the football field. I realized the two boys I was with, Andrew and David, were misfits, and being new made me one too. At lunchtime I sat on the wall near the teacher on playground duty, answering her occasional question, knowing that she felt sorry for me. I had nowhere to be, nothing to do but half-watch the football game up on the playing field. The mass of boys looked identical to me, all chasing the ball in a pack, calling out for it: "Pen'aw'y!", "Faouw!" as if their lives depended on it.

As I lay sobbing on my bed that day after school, with a salty taste in my mouth, I felt my whole life had died. I longed for the garden rolling down to the Fen with its grazing horses and muddy brook. Nothing could bring it back. I had a picture of myself walking home with my friends on the last day of the school year. I could see my sandalled feet on the cinderpath, and the worn place where my big toe jiggled. Though I had the sandals still in my new wardrobe, I knew that what I'd felt then, that sense of being utterly at home, was gone.

I remembered Mendel, an ugly American kid at my prep school, phoning to invite me to the cinema. My mother answered the phone and, cupping the receiver in her hand, mouthed at me who it was. I was looking at an atlas in the armchair. I shook my head, waved my hands. The thought of Mendel's toothy smile filled me with dread, as if he would infect me. "Adam's just told me he's arranged to see his friends today. How about another weekend?"

"But you don't know him, dear," she said when she put the phone down. "He might turn out to be nicer than you think. He plays chess."

"Probably brilliant at it." I felt angry with him for having picked me out just because I was a Jew like him.

"You'll be needing friends next year," she said, but her warning meant nothing to me.

On my way down to supper I passed the carpenter. He winked at me and I said, "Hello," suddenly aware of how hopeful I'd felt only a few days before. I didn't want him to see my tear-stained eyes, and ran downstairs. I ate supper in front of the telly, munching my food in an exhausted slump.

"What's the matter?" my father asked as I went into the study to say goodnight. I'd been weeping again. He was listening to Joan Baez, her mournful voice pure as a bell. There were no curtains yet, so anyone could see in.

"I don't like it here," I told him.

"Give it time."

"But there's no one I like."

"Give it *time*." He took me on his knee and stroked my back.

On Sunday my father and I went for a long walk over the Downs and he told me about being evacuated to Somerset, where there were no Jews, and how his father had simply given him a hundred pounds to fend for himself. His predicament seemed much

worse than mine, yet it didn't comfort me. He'd been so grown-up at an early age while I was a cry-baby. I'd been crying the whole weekend, and I did it again that evening, flopping onto my bed in grief, with the chill of school waiting for me in the morning.

"I'll never be happy again," I said to my mother when she sat down beside me on my bed, rocking the mattress.

"Oh darling, darling!"

The following week, Andrew, the boy in the fluffy jumper, brought me a message. Alison Bicknell, a loud-mouthed blonde girl, loved me. A terrible fear swept over me. I wanted to run away, never set foot in school again. Love? She didn't know me. Why me? Andrew told me I would have to kiss her. I racked my brains to think what trick she was about to play on me. "What do you mean, kiss?"

"Snog her," said Andrew with a grin.

"When?"

"She says tomorrow."

I awoke with stomach ache and couldn't eat breakfast. I told my mother I was too ill to go to school, but she was starting her new job and couldn't let me stay off. At morning play I was dragged towards where Alison stood with a group of girls. A crowd of children had formed a circle around us—the boys had come over from the football pitch specially. I felt like a sacrificial lamb.

"I don't love her!" I protested.

"Well she loves you."

"Why, why?" I screamed, ill with fear, and tore myself free, but there were enough of them to catch me again immediately and surround me. The teacher on playground duty was looking on with a smile. When I was finally thrust towards Alison, I held out my hand and as soon as she'd kissed it I pulled a face and shouted "Yeuch!" and squirted imaginary disinfectant on the place she'd touched.

My mother teamed me up with another new boy called John Stirling who lived nearby. We sat in his front room watching telly after school one day. He had a sulky face with a pouty lower lip. We would never be real friends, I knew, and I had no desire to go there again.

Then one of the footballing boys, Mick Brown, asked me to his house, next door to the school, one dinnertime. We sat eating egg and chips at a table with a plastic cloth, in a room with net curtains. The carpet was brown and swirly. The telly was on. His dad came in wearing his postman's uniform and sat eating his lunch with us. I'd never felt so out of place.

Another football boy, Noggin, who had a deep croaky voice, invited all the boys in the class to his birthday party in a council house on the Neville estate. Noggin's mum was a sweet woman with watery eyes, but everything was too small—the chilly toilet, the narrow hallway, Noggin's tiny bedroom he shared with his teenaged brother, a thug with a malevolent face, who insisted on watching television while the party was on.

After bonfire night, a pall hung over the town. In the misty autumn evening, with the smoke from chimneys and the terraces of small houses riding up and down the hills, it looked like a northern mill town. It was cold, grim, different from the lovely weather of our first day when we'd wandered around like tourists, gawping at the judge in his robe and wig as he entered the Law Courts, exploring the pretty lanes and "twittens" off the High Street.

Now Lewes was dark, cramped, as if it had huddled up tighter against the cold. Smoke wreathed Harvey's brewery down by the river. The river itself was brown, murky, no punts, no willows dipping into its waters. The bridge at Cliffe was where they'd rolled a flaming barrel of tar down School Hill and chucked it into the river. Though we had gone to the more sedate Borough bonfire, I had a vivid picture in my mind of the fierce Cliffe mob, torches blazing, baying as the barrel gathered speed.

Everything seemed rougher here, darker, brooding. I became a "yid," a "jewboy," the first time I'd heard these words. I learned that Jews were rich. And it was true, my grandparents were. On one side. But not the other. I was posh too, had a big nose—again, the first time I knew about it—so I matched up to a proper Jew.

I let myself think I lived in a sea of anti-semites, as my grandfather had so often told me. "Dad, you know you were picked on in Somerset. Did you hit them back?" I knew the answer, had been told the story before, but I wanted to have it again.

"Yes, I did, I punched the biggest bully on the nose," he said, satisfying me instantly. I saw myself aggrieved in the same

way. I could explain all my lonely unhappiness by that now. I longed to yell: "Nazi! Fascist!" at all those who insulted me, longed to fight to the death like the boy hero I'd dreamt up who fought alongside the Israeli army—living wild, no mother or father, like a young Judah HaMacabee, striking in the dark and melting away into the hills.

But soon people stopped calling me names, and I never got the chance to stand my ground and be brave.

Daz was the one boy I'd begun to want to be my friend. He had green eyes and a merry upturned nose, and everyone liked him. It took me three months to pluck up courage to ask him home. After the dress rehearsal for the Christmas play—which had a French theme and would also include a special section about Chanukah and another about the Chinese winter festival—I caught up with Daz in the main corridor. "Do you want to come and play?" I asked.

"Can't today, got a percussion class."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeh, okay."

I felt like skipping all the way home. I burst in and announced to my mother that a friend was coming over tomorrow.

"He'll stay for tea," she said.

The thought of Daz eating supper with us at our big dining table in our big house, which was probably ten times the size of his, made me squirm—my father carving the meat in his shirt and tie, with his Jewish face and glasses, my mother asking Daz questions, the little ones staring. "No, just to play, thanks."

"Alright, darling."

As I showed Daz down the steep mossy garden steps, I was longing for him not be put off by my house. Behind us, kids were going round the back as usual, using our garden as a shortcut to the Landport estate. "They think it's public," I said. "It's such a huge house and garden, bit embarrassing actually." I scrunched my eyes up, as if before a crash. I wished I lived somewhere smaller, less conspicuous, hated the children coming through our garden.

"Are you rich?"

"Not really. My dad's a professor." I paused. "What's yours?"
 "Dunno. They're divorced. I saw him once, when I was about five."

"Oh."

The gulf between us felt unbridgeable. "Huge, eh?"

"Bloody massive," he said, but with no bitterness in his voice. I opened the breakfast room door and we entered the throng, the telly on, Esther, Toby, Rebecca, Mum.

"This is Daz."

"Hello Daz," said my mum.

We went straight into the kitchen and I made tea, fetched biscuits and tangerines, which we took upstairs. Daz had a foxy look on his face as he carried his plate. In my bedroom Daz looked at my posters—Picasso, Che, Hendrix—and I remembered how proud I'd been of our new house, how unembarrassed. In the end we went down to the garden and played football—his suggestion—but the lawn was sloping, the grass too long. I was filled with gloom when he left, knowing it would be a very long haul.

To cheer me up, my mother announced that we would be going to Cambridge after Christmas, to visit our old friends. I saw myself walking across the Fen to the Pellings, the horses wearing blankets against the cold, nostrils steaming, over the plank bridge and up the cinderpath.

The hall was packed, and a murmuring rose from the audience. I could see my parents from the wings. I felt I was building up to something momentous. I was dressed in my smartest clothes and carrying a menorah from home. Noggin walked out in front of the curtains. "Welcome. Bienvenue, mesdames et messieurs et mes enfants!" The audience hushed at once. "Christmas is a winter festival, similar to those of other religions and cultures. Later we will show you some of these, but first, how do our nearest neighbours, the French, celebrate Christmas?"

The curtains opened to reveal a family dinner table, with père (Noggin), mère (Alison Bicknell's friend Rosalind) and four children, all wearing linen napkins tucked into their fronts.

"C'est Noël," said Noggin. He spoke French in his hoarse cockney voice like an old man's that made everyone smile. "La famille mangent le diner. Les cloches sonnent." Mick Brown rang a

handbell, one ring at a time. The curtains closed, the scene changed. A new tableau appeared: a girl dressed as Mary, a tall boy dressed as Joseph, others with animal masks on to signify the stable, all gathered round a crib. "This is the Christmas story in French," said Noggin.

Then Rosalind stood up at the side of the stage. "Trois rois ont vu une étoile."

Three boys dressed in Arab headdresses and beards came on. "Qu'est-ce que c'est?" asked one, lifting his arm.

"Une étoile," said another,

"Allons-y," said the third.

"À Bethlehem, un enfant est né, Jésus," said Rosalind. "Les trois rois ont donné les cadeaux au petit bébé." Each king went up to the cradle and put a gift inside. Recorders began the first tune, a French carol. At the end the audience clapped for a long time.

Noggin stepped out to join Rosalind. "Et chez nous, le boulanger fait les pâtisseries et les gateaux," he said, and a boy wearing a wobbling chef's hat walked out, followed by his bakery assistants, each holding a large mixing bowl, stirring it with a wooden spoon.

"But what about elsewhere?" said Noggin. "Let's look at some other winter festivals."

Then the Chinese girl in our class stood up and explained her festival, but I was too nervous to listen, the blood rushing in my ears. I was next and kept imagining myself walking onto the stage.

When it was my turn, I had a moment of *déjà vu* and almost stopped because of it, but I soon calmed down. "I ... am a Jew!" I announced. Both my feet were planted firmly on the boards of the stage. "Jews do not celebrate Christmas." I knew I was an exhibit, a strange object for the audience to inspect, but I liked that, liked their curiosity and the fact I was educating them. "When the Assyrians sacked the temple, the eternal flame was left with only enough oil to keep it alight for one day. A messenger was sent to fetch more oil, but it would take him eight days to get it. Yet by a miracle the oil in the lamp lasted until the messenger returned. The flame had kept burning for eight days! That is why we call Chanukah the festival of lights."

I came off elated. There was no going back. I was marked out as a Jew from now on. I felt a wonderful relaxation now that

I'd established the fact. I walked through the boys' cloakrooms to the toilets swinging my menorah when I saw Daz and Mandy Waters snogging. I couldn't believe my eyes. They looked like grown-ups, leaning against the wall, her arms round his back, nose squashed against his face. I laughed, tapped him on the shoulder, began counting out the seconds aloud.

Daz asked me if I wanted a try.

I laughed again in amazement. "Can I?" I said.

Mandy's mouth smelled tangy, of spit. But she let me hold her thin back and it was hilarious, absurd. At once, everything opened out for me, and I thought of Alison Bicknell and how frightened I'd been before. There were so many things to be part of now, the whole world.

Then we heard the carol singing begin and we darted back into the hall. I was full, fuller than I could take. I stood with the rest of the cast by the side of the stage, and I didn't know what to do with all the emotion inside me. First came "Once in Royal David's City," like a herd of cows lowing until the pitch rose and I could begin to make out a tune. Next, "Ding Dong Merrily on High," with its endless Gloria which we tried in a single breath—like the fun at Pesach when the grownups competed to sing "Ani-yo-deyah" as fast as they could. Then I was swept up in the dark melody of "God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen." Comfort and joy, comfort and joy—the words struck me. I could feel the cold of that night, with sharp stars cutting through the black sky like ice. The stable looked like our garden shed in Cambridge, and I almost fell asleep. As if in a dream I heard "I saw three ships come sailing in" and I could see sailing ships with tall masts and full-blown sails, but miniature, arriving at a harbour alongside Cliffe Bridge. The next moment they were flying in formation through the air like paper ships over a painted sea, and we were singing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," and when the descant came in, I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck and a tingling all over my body. I almost believed angels were singing on high. The throng bellowed and we were all in it together, the bell players, the triangles, Daz's snare drum, John Stirling's tambourine, Andrew and David playing the xylophone side by side. It felt like the crowd in the stables, shepherds playing whatever they could to rejoice. It was too much for me, and a wave of tears overflowed down my cheeks.

We trooped up on stage to bow and Noggin raised his glass of water high, as high as he could, and almost fell over. "Joyeux Noël!" he roared, and the audience applauded, and more tears fell from my eyes.

As the curtains closed we went round putting our arms round each other, patting each other's backs. I was excited, I wasn't sure about what—everything, the future. It was the last day of term, and tomorrow I was going to Cambridge, and I knew there was no going back, only forwards, as far as the eye could see.