FICTION

Faith, Hope, and Charity

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IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE WHOLE DIFFICULTY of our friendship was reflected in our names. It wasn't that we had feuding surnames—certainly no Capulets and Montagues—but in fact the conflict was more fundamental because it arose from our given names, choices our parents had deliberately made with connotations they liked and most wanted to hear.

"I have never had a close friend named Christine," she told me with uncharacteristic shyness, either because she had called me a close friend or because the statement acknowledged unreconcilable cultural differences. "There are no Jewish Christines."

Christine as in "Christ," I thought, understanding, but feeling stupid too because it had to be explained to me. It seemed pointless to mention my uncle Christopher as the actual source of inspiration. I sipped the herbal tea she had given me, trying to ignore the cat hair floating in it.

"Your name reminds me of 1 Corinthians, chapter thirteen," I told her. I recited the verses, as any church-going Mormon my age could have. "Faith, hope, and charity. You see, I think 'Faith' is a Christian name, too."

"Let's not mention it to my mother," she whispered, but she said it with complicity, so that I understood her regard for me, as she smiled and passed me bread thickly smeared with exhaustingly sweet halava.

Faith and I were neighbors at 43 Henry Street in Brooklyn Heights when I was new to the city and not just a little lonely. I had observed her family through my peep-hole in front of the elevator: Faith entangled in dog leashes and dogs, and Ben with an assortment of riding toys perched on his shoulders, trying to keep track of their perspective riders: some interchangeable blond children. A family, I thought, with a stab of homesickness for my own in Utah.

It was probably the loneliness more than the ostensible need for an egg that prompted me to cross the hall and knock so boldly on their spectacularly multiple-dead-bolted door. I waited, uncomfortably doubtful about the permissibility of egg-borrowing in New York and intimidated by the sight of an ivory *mezuzah*, ominous to me in my innocence.

But the door was flung open by a small curly-headed six-year-old who

apparently knew nothing of the legend of New York paranoia. Behind her I was greeted first by the organic scent of clutter and then by chaos itself as I was seemingly borne on the shoulders and backs of children and animals to be deposited in front of a thoroughly welcoming Faith. "Hello," I said, knowing that nothing in Pleasant Grove, Utah, had prepared me for this. Pleasant Grove, I thought, where animals were mostly kept outdoors and cleanliness was mostly kept in.

"May I please borrow an egg, please?" I was so confused that I almost curtsied.

But Faith was not queenly. In fact, she was small and round and looked very much like a fairy godmother on her day off. She wore a well-worn jumper and school-girl tights with a mischievous run sneaking up her calf.

"Hello," she said, three times in rapid succession after I introduced myself. "Chris," she said, pronouncing it exotically, "you're new here," she informed me. "Where are you from?"

"Utah," I said and began a mental count. On the count of two—with most people I got to four or five—she asked, "Are you Mormon?"

I nodded my head bravely, never sure what response awaited me. "Oh, nice," she said, generously ecumenical. "We're Jewish. Let's get you a drink."

They took me into their tiny kitchen, and the children and animals followed, piling in like some fraternity prank. They gave me a Dr. Brown's cream soda to drink, which must have seemed to them one of the few safe drinks to offer a Mormon. For no readily discernible reason, they yelled to me, and they yelled around me to each other, and occasionally to the children and animals.

"Chris," Faith shouted, "get some tickets for the Brooklyn Academy of Music. They have them half-price, don't they, Ben?" But Ben was doing his own yelling at two cats that were fighting on top of the refrigerator.

"Have you been to the Cloisters yet?" he asked, when he had separated the cats. I wondered if the suggestion came from some subliminal religious association.

We abruptly left the kitchen when they decided to take me on a tour of the apartment. In their son's bedroom I admired a postage stamp view of the Statue of Liberty as I balanced precariously on his bed with my nose pressed suffocatingly near to the wall. "Great," I said, feeling a little foolish.

"There's an exhibit on Pompeii at the Natural History Museum," Faith told me, still tossing out suggestions of places to visit. "I'm taking a group from the church to see it."

"Church?" I blurted, confused. Synagogue, I thought. "I work at a church, All Saints Episcopal. I'm the assistant coordinator for volunteers and services. Have you noticed that the longer your title is the less important you are? Anyway, I help arrange care for the elderly. I arrange various

outings for interested members, and coordinate community volunteer activities." The equivalent of the Mormon Relief Society, I thought, suddenly at ease, grateful for solid footing wherever I could find it.

They grandly called their furniture antiques, which perplexed me because at home we would have called them old or used. But the furniture was secondary to the books. Like the dozen cats of some elderly woman, the books dozed in corners and brushed against the legs of chairs. Many seemed to have found homes where someone put them down on the way to answer the phone. *Holidays Jewish Children Celebrate* was abandoned next to *Lolita.*

But occasionally I noticed, due to the huge number of them, despite the randomness of their storage, some books were stored in places of odd appropriateness; Hardy's *The Waiting Supper* was over the stove, and Johnson's *The Tale of the Tub* was in fact in the bathroom.

"*Barchester Towers,* my favorite Trollope," Ben said, patting the cover affectionately before he handed it to me.

I negotiated my way around the children and animals (which I had discovered to my amazement numbered only three of each). Faith called my attention to a French pot and an old world *menorah.* When I returned to the peaceful barren quiet of my apartment, I had four books, a subway map, a bagel for my next day's breakfast, and no egg.

I had learned from my short time in the city and now in my neighbors' apartment that westerners move more slowly, but also more quietly and with distance between them. If you asked to borrow an egg in Utah, you got, well, an egg.

It was one of many lessons I was learning as I made an adjustment to New York, freshly M.B.A.-ed, profoundly liberated, and surprisingly employed in commercial lending at a respectably large bank. My new citizenship was wondrously foreign and sometimes frightening.

At home the only person my parents had ever tipped was the waitress at Bob's Big Boy. Now their daughter was tipping a woman standing primly in a public bathroom. A bathroom? Taxis were another problem. Lacking a native's brazen, graceful salute, I had trouble hailing one. I raised my hand tentatively, like a student not entirely sure of his answer. That hesitancy rendered me invisible to cab drivers.

But Faith took me under her wing—or her wand—when she appeared at my door the following Saturday. Looking over my shoulder at my decidedly used furniture, she said, "Great rocking chair," and pointed to my parents' 1955 Sears purchase. She handed me an egg with an apologetic shrug and offered to take me shopping in the neighborhood.

We walked into a warm spring afternoon. Faith showed me the house where Arthur Miller had lived when he became engaged to Marilyn

Monroe. She pointed out a building that had the schizoid past of having housed both a monastery and a brothel.

She introduced me to the butcher as "Chris from Utah," with wonder in her voice, as if I had walked from there. When we left the store she told me that their family didn't really keep kosher though there were some foods they didn't eat because it didn't seem right. When I looked puzzled she explained, "I think we have inherited some restrictions just because we're born into a certain culture. We're stuck. It doesn't always make sense."

"I don't eat bacon," she announced, "but I do love the smell."

"Coffee," I countered, "what a sweet aroma."

As we walked on, she indicated the best pastries at the bakery. And when I asked her where all the drive-up windows were, she gestured grandly as if to indicate the madness of her city, "Taxis, buildings, traffic. Oh, Chris, they wouldn't fit here." And she laughed at the happy incongruity of it.

She greeted nearly everyone we passed enthusiastically, as we walked toward Montague Street, and after they passed she would comment on them with a succinct statement, as if she had read bumper stickers pasted on their hearts. It was the sort of summary that could be carved on a headstone, a tender explanation.

She took me to see her church. It was a large city church now on a very small piece of land. It looked Dickinsonian, encrusted in New York soot with a few worn and tottering headstones in the side yard.

"Do you like your job?" I asked standing in the chapel looking at the solemn colors of the stained-glass Jesus.

"It has so much variety. I get to travel this amazing city, doing all kinds of things. But most of all, I love the people."

But she hadn't answered what I really wanted to know: how it was to be Jewish working there. Did she find it awkward that she didn't belong? What happened when she observed her Sabbath on their Saturday? Did she have to decorate the Christmas tree?

Faith was not so reticent in her questioning of me. She told me that she had once visited Salt Lake City and asked—trying unsuccessfully for nonchalance—if I had any ancestors who were polygamists.

"Why, yes," I said, realizing for the first time the nefarious distinction of the practice. I felt uncomfortable about it, though I knew Faith wouldn't ask me to defend ancestral behavior. As I left, Faith told me sympathetically that she knew that my predecessors had all been the first wives. Somehow, it made it sound as if I were from Siam, and I felt like a movie extra in *The King and I*.

I remembered how New Yorkers sometimes smiled in comprehension when I explained that my accent was from Utah.

"Ah," they would say, "the mid-west." I was pleased to realize that not all the cultural misunderstandings were mine.

Faith called me a few days later to invite me to join the church in picking up litter on the Promenade.

"You can meet some of the people in the neighborhood. Afterward we'll have dessert and coffee. We'll give you your own to smell."

I picked up trash, pausing occasionally to admire the panorama of Manhattan that I had seen in movies all my life. But I also admired Faith. She put an arm around the women; she kissed the men. She fairly danced from a crushed paper cup to a newspaper in flight.

"Faith without works is dead," I thought, thinking I would have shared the scripture with Faith if it had been in the Old Testament instead of the New.

Afterward at the church, as the others drank coffee and I drank herbal tea, I watched Faith talk to an older man who had rubbery, dropping features.

"You know, Jesus was a Jew," he said, gesturing backward, perhaps toward the stained glass of the chapel. I winced at his insensitivity. But I saw that his purpose was to include her, to say that her background was immaterial to him, though he said it apologetically, as if the gesture were doomed.

"You're right," Faith said, simply, as if Jesus being a Jew was a nice touch to this lofty Protestant religion.

In the following months I attended a very off-Broadway play with Faith's group. We then cleaned a shelter for abused women. I told *them* about quilting, grateful for my pioneer heritage.

Sometimes the similarities made me forget the differences. I would remind myself with obvious profundity that we all embraced the Old Testament. But then something trivial—a Yiddish word, the Protestant cross—would startle me into recognizing that we also studied with exclusivity the Torah, the Apocrypha, and the Book Mormon.

I talked about it to Faith one evening as we made kits to distribute to an emergency room. I told her about how I had startled my colleagues that day by ordering a Bloody Mary. "Virgin," I had corrected, speaking too loudly, blushing as if I were making an embarrassing—albeit true—sexual confession.

"I just wanted to order a drink with a little more dignity than a Coke. I'm always making mistakes," I admitted.

"Christine," she said, "it's a journey. A journey," she repeated, pleased by the word. "Just keep working at it. Don't worry."

I ran into Ben a few days later as he was returning from moving the family's rusty Plymouth station wagon from one side of the street to the other.

"Hey," he said, "ask Faith the news." Apparently not able to wait, he continued, "Her boss, the director of volunteers and services, is resigning. Faith has been asked to be acting director until the board is able to meet this week to make a permanent decision." He told me that in the past the assistant who had been the acting head had always been made the director. He interrupted my congratulations by saying that they were premature, but his smile said otherwise.

I paid a congratulatory visit to Faith as I left on a business trip to Ohio. She thanked me for my good wishes and raked her fingers through her hair, curls like those of the infant cherubs at the Metropolitan Museum: short ringlets, innocent of much combing. She straightened her dress, her delicate fingers with the uneven nails stroking the fabric downward, as if preparing even now for the interview.

"Have you been to Cincinnati before?" she asked and joined my laughter realizing that, of course, I had not.

I left my suitcase just inside the apartment door when I returned from my trip. When I visited Faith, I smiled confidently. "Am I speaking to the new director of volunteers and services?"

Faith had some malady of the eyes that caused one of her eyes to focus differently from the other. This lack of harmony gave her a more distracted appearance than was fair to her. It also caused her to rub her eyes, perhaps in an unconscious effort to correct it. She repeated this mannerism now and forced a smile. "They haven't come to a decision yet," she said quickly, and I feared, bravely, trying not to show the hurt.

She told me that they had hired her as the director only until they came to a decision.

"What does that mean?" I was filled with the righteous indignation we save for a wronged friend. "Faith, you need to tell them that it is important for you to know where they stand so that you can make plans. I know that that is a bit intimidating, but how dare they string you along this way!"

Faith looked generally uncertain and definitely miserable. "I don't know. I don't know that that would do anything to further my cause. These men are, well, they are just what you would expect."

I considered how useful those words would be under the viney writing of the name and dates on a headstone: "Just what you would expect."

But I replied, "What I would *expect* is fairness. This is a job you enjoy, a job you do well. Faith, don't let this go. How dare they act this way: indecisive, cruel, incredibly unchristian."

Christian. It almost echoed. I felt my stomach constrict. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say . . .," I mumbled lamely. Faith smiled her cherubic smile. I knew why the elderly parishioners adored her. She answered quietly, "You are right. You are right. Christian." The word held no hope.

I didn't know how to make things better with Faith and I feared making

them worse. I felt trapped in my Mormon-ness, doomed by my provinciality, dimly aware that if Faith had created such a faux pas she could have remedied it. But I didn't know how to ask or receive her forgiveness.

I limited my association with the family to chance meetings in the hall. Shame and remorse caused some unbridgeable gulf between us. But when I saw Ben loading the children, animals, and several suitcases into the back of the Plymouth, I knew that they were going on vacation and that I had to know about Faith's job. The children and Faith waived happily to me through the open car windows. I yelled to them, "Lucky!" and turned to Ben as he shoved in the last "antique" suitcase and slammed the tailgate several times before it latched.

I told him that I had been worried about Faith's job. "Tell me, did she get it?"

Ben showed a flash of emotion and answered unhappily, "I guess that just wasn't meant to be." I was pained but not surprised by the news. Actually, what most startled me was his choice of expression, because it was just what my Mormon father would have said.

"Who got the job, Ben?"

"A board member's niece. Nice fresh-faced *shiksa* with an M.B.A. They've expanded the job to fit her over-qualifications."

"How is Faith?"

"All right, but she is looking for a new job."

He patted my back, returned to the car where he had to nudge an animal out of the way to push in a tattered beach umbrella, then got in. I waved to them and called, "Take me with you." They laughed in happy anticipation of their time at the shore, and drove off, leaving this not so fresh-faced *shiksa* behind.

New York City and I have parted company. I went back west.

I married and we live in a suburb of Salt Lake City. Ordering something to drink is easier. I ask for some "pop" which we all know means a carbonated soft drink—"soda" is what we use in baking. The people I tip are waitresses. And sometimes as I dry my hands in a public rest room I think fondly of the hair-netted women who once stood there in another part of the country.

Most of the time I understand my neighbors. We go to a modern brick chapel together, and they think a request for an egg means a request for an egg, which they answer with precise courtesy and often disappointingly little else.

The "Christmas" card I sent Faith and Ben this year has a picture of our three children, so many years younger than theirs. I wrote in the card that I have finished the new biography on Trollope. I told them that my son, Nathan, wants to be a banker too, because he is optimistically mistaken

about the ownership of money at a bank. I told them we got a dog, just one. And along with whatever other news I could think of that would maintain that tenuous long-distance link between us are the careful words, "I hope that you have a lovely holiday season."