



FLOWERS FALL

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

The December Dilemma

YET, THOUGH IT IS LIKE THIS, SIMPLY, FLOWERS FALL AMID OUR LONGING,
AND WEEDS SPRING UP AMID OUR ANTIPATHY.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

I love holidays. They include all my favorite things: cooking and eating, hanging out, giving and receiving stuff.

And yet there is something sad about this time of year too. Before becoming a parent, my adult holidays felt a little random. I would always enjoy whatever fun came my way, but the people and celebrations changed each year, depending on where I lived, who was in my life, or what kind of mood I was in. And that was fine with me, as I appreciated my independence. But since getting married and, especially, having Azalea, not only is any fantasy of independence dead in the water, but I also actually enjoy the intimacy of being in a family. And I feel a great urge to develop some family tradition, some happy, holiday thread woven through Azalea's life, year after year. The problem is that I don't know which holidays to celebrate. Between growing up Jewish, being totally immersed in our Buddhist community, and feeling very connected to T's "Nutcracker"-loving WASP-y parents, it's hard to know whether we should be eating latkes, stuffing stockings, or just hiring a babysitter so we can sit in the Buddha's Enlightenment Vigil all by ourselves, in silence. T is very flexible, and not too attached to the way his family celebrated holidays growing up, so in past years we have attempted to do it all as a way of not leaving anything out, but as Azalea gets older, I wonder if there is a better way.

One of my favorite Zen teachers, Charlotte Joko Beck, writes, "Suppose I don't know whether I should marry one man for his money or another man for no reason—I just like him. If that question can even occur to me, there's something about myself I don't know I don't know who I am." And so it is, as I ask myself whether we should celebrate this holiday or that holiday: Who am I?

Even though it confuses my in-laws, who are quite comfortable, even proud of the fact that their son and his wife are Buddhists, I do still consider myself, and thus Azalea, Jewish. My mother converted to Judaism before marrying my father, and growing up, we totally acted like Jews. We went to temple on Fridays, my brothers were bar-mitzvahed, we didn't eat pork in the house (thus my lifelong obsession with ham), and we never had a Christmas tree. We spent all the religious holidays with the Voights and Saltmans, maybe at Grandma Beryl's, or my Great-aunt Babe and Uncle Sam's, or at our house.

And it was fun! People seemed kind of happy and there was food galore: Chopped liver, crackers and pickles on every table, Spanish peanuts on the piano bench, grape juice, a little red wine for the adults, nut-covered cheese balls, maybe some sweet kugel, some blintzes, and, of course, latkes with sour cream and apple sauce. And presents in blue and silver foil wrapping. Depending on the hosting home, the boys wore yarmulkes as we said the prayer to light the menorah. It's not like Hanukkah in and of itself was some peak experience

(though chopped liver always is), but it was, indeed, something. Or more specifically, it was some *place*. And my presence was an assumption there, a kid who belonged to the physical body of history, one more Saltman in the funky parade of peddlers that came before me.

When I was pregnant with Azalea, I actually made an appointment with a rabbi to discuss this conundrum: Even though my mother converted, I don't believe in God, I am not particularly drawn to the spiritual practice of Judaism, and I am a Buddhist, so will my daughter still be Jewish? Can she still belong? Is she yet another Saltman? Or have I cheated us both out of a tribal connection? His answer was: Well, since you are Jewish, your daughter is too. She could live in Israel should she so desire (not exactly what I was after, but okay...). And yet, Judaism is something one *does*. To be a Jew by name only is not quite Judaism. He offered to do a naming ceremony for her when she was born, and of course invited us to shul. It's been four years, and the closest I have come to anything of the sort is buying a menorah at Marshall's, and lighting it.

Tomorrow is the first night of Hanukkah. I am still toying with the idea of schlepping the whole family to the local temple for a latke party with a bunch of people we've never met. (T is such a mensch!) Oy. I guess I just can't let it go.

As Joko Beck writes, "The problem isn't out there." This is not exactly about Hanukkah vs. Christmas, or Buddhism vs. Judaism. I am Jewish in some ways and Buddhist in others. Azalea has grandparents who want to share Christmas with her. What's the big deal? The problem comes when I am looking at all the different celebrations as expressions of who I am and, by (narcissistic) extension, who Azalea is. I am afraid of losing touch with my family, even though it is a gathering of ghosts more than anything: my mother, in Michigan, who worships nothing, my brothers to whom I seldom talk, grandparents long gone, my dead father, a genealogical trail that leads to Flint, Michigan and, then, vaguely, Latvia, which may as well be Plant Xenon for all the connection I feel to the place. And yet, these are *my* ghosts. They look like me. Azalea looks like them. I am crazy like them. We have the same small feet. Even so, it's not like I ever felt some great sense of belonging. And that *is* the problem.

And it's becoming clear that going somewhere, even somewhere super-Jewish like a synagogue, will not give me what I long for. I think instead I will just go to the store and pick up an onion, some liver, and maybe some herring, and come right back home. We have potatoes, and the Marshall's menorah of course. I need to wrap Azalea's first night-gift.

And then tomorrow night, at sundown, instead of worrying about where I fit in, we can stay right here. We can teach Azalea how to light the first candle and celebrate the possibility of belonging everywhere. ●