

# *Sukkot-Festival of Tents*

---

As his train arrived at Glasgow Central Station, Aaron Metvich hauled his rucksack from the storage shelf and swung it onto his back.

'Careful there, you nearly hit me!'

'Oh, I didn't realise you were there. Sorry.'

'That's okay, don't worry, no harm done. I'm Sarah.'

'Aaron. Nice to meet you.'

'Are you a student?'

'Yeah, how did you guess?'

'Takes one to know one, I'm in second year at Strathclyde. Biosciences. You?'

'Fresher. Applied Maths at Strathclyde too. My Uncle is a Prof there.'

'So, Aaron, are you looking for accommodation?'

'No. Maybe. Not sure, actually. I think my uncle wants me to stay at his place but, well, mixed signals. Family issues.'

'Families, eh? Tell me about it.'

'Yeah, it's complicated. Personal. My father and brother fell out years ago but my Mum gets on well with Uncle Daniel's wife. They do business together, distance no object. Mum did her Architecture degree at Strathclyde. Anyway, who knows. Do you have accommodation on offer, I hear it's horrendously short in supply.'

'As it happens, yes. My roommate Dieter failed his resits and has gone back to Frankfurt to do something completely different. Medical Photography, he says. His goodbye email was, well, confused. He was drunk no doubt. Dieter was almost always drunk. A weed fanatic. So, Aaron, I'll hold it for you for a few days while I give it a good old fashioned clean out. At least he paid me, eventually.'

'Sarah, fancy a coffee?'

'Sure. But not Starbucks. No way. There's a great Costa near GOMA.'

'GOMA?'

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

'Gallery of Modern Art, it's only a five-minute walk.'

'Oh, right. Just a minute, that roller bag is mine too.'

'O Emm Gee! That's a monster. I've never seen one that size before. Where did you get it?'

'Tel Aviv, actually.'

'You're from Israel? My sister's there at the moment, doing her Kibbutz year.'

'No, I'm from Manchester, actually. But I got it during my Kibbutz year.'

'Manchester? I'm from Southport. My family are in wholesale jewellery. Yours?'

'Yes, mine too. High end stuff. They manufacture to order. And they have a line in vintage watches. They have a franchise from three Swiss watch manufacturers. I have two uncles in Geneva.'

'Any family in Israel?'

'Dozens. You?'

'Just one. A widowed aunt, Freda. She's a GP. My father insisted I do a Kibbutz year too but I refused. I'm not religious, not now. Not after what happened to my brother.'

'Your brother?'

'Josh. Went off to train as a Rabbi. He was killed by a suicide bomber as he was entering the Rabbinical School in Jerusalem. Killed eight others and made paraplegics of three more. Josh was such a lovely, gentle boy. I keep getting flashbacks from the video the bastards posted online. I worry all the time about Becca. She only has two more months to do then we get her back. Mum is on pills to keep her sane. Dad has gone over the edge. He was always, well, *fervent* but after he lost Josh, he sold out to his brothers and went out to Jerusalem to try to find the group who killed Josh. Dad still believes in all that vengeance stuff, you know, 'An Eye for an Eye'. Look, sorry, I get a bit worked up. Ah, here we are. Let's sit outside, grab the last of the September sunshine, eh?'

Two hours later the taxi dropped Aaron outside an imposing villa in Newton Mearns. A Silver Mercedes 500 SEL stood outside a three-car garage. Beside it there was a Mini Cooper. Both cars sported personalised number plates.

The Uber driver, a Turkish illegal quipped:

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

'You is Jewish, yes? Bahstah!'

He spat on the pavement and drove off leaving a trail of blue exhaust fumes.

Aware of the cameras monitoring his progress, Aaron approached the house up the long driveway. Before he reached the grand entrance the door opened and a teenage girl stepped out and walked towards him. She moved gracefully, like a gazelle, Aaron thought.

'Hi, are you Hannah?'

'No, I'm the younger one, Jennifer.'

'Jennifer?'

'Yes, I changed my name. You can do it without permission when you're sixteen. Who wants to be *Gertrude* anyway. And I'm a lesbian, just so you know. Here. Let me help you, I'll take the rucksack, you take the big bag. My God, it's a monster. Bet you got it in Tel Aviv, yeah? Saul got one too. I think it's in the attic.'

'Saul's in America?'

'Yeah. Doing a PhD in Interplanetary Travel at MIT. You should hear Papa on that one. Waste of a top-class mind, he says. Best steer clear of Saul as a topic is my advice. Dad's still obsessing about it.'

'Jennifer, so, do you have a girlfriend?'

'You mean a 'partner'. We Lesbos don't like the term girlfriend. My current partner is Eva. She's not Jewish and, well, we've broken up for a trial period. She's older. Twenty-two, or so she says. I would say she's older, maybe twenty-five but she won't have it. She said our 'suspension' is just for the summer while she's back in Latvia, or that's her cover story. Her English is weird, so funny. But I happen to know she is in Edinburgh, at the Fringe. I saw her online. She said it wouldn't be fair to shackle me to her for a whole three months. So, I've been dating online, just chatting in the dark with cameras switched off, no video revealing, not yet. But Aaron, don't tell anyone about my Lesbianism, OK? It's a secret. If Dad finds out the shit will hit the fan.'

'Don't worry, your secret's safe with me.'

'Hey, this is your room. Cool, eh? Papa had it completely done over, everything new. You've even got a new shower room all to yourself. They nicked a bit of my bedroom next door to make it work. We think he has targeted you as his replacement for Saul. I'm not in the

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

know, but he has great plans for you, so be warned. He's tenacious. Maybe even a bit mad, they say. He says you've got five A-Levels, all As too.'

'Yes, and two speed top-ups for Latin and Russian from summer school at Cambridge.'

'Fuck's sake. Another fucking genius like Saul and Hannah. I'm the afterthought you know, the 'unfortunate mistake'. I'm training to become a ballerina, hopefully. You don't need brains for that, now do you? No wonder Papa wants you for his project.'

'Yeah, Hannah warned me, Mum too. 'Handle with Care' was the phrase she used.'

'Good advice. Hey, are you straight, Aaron?'

'Yeah, 100% heterosexual. Boring, eh?'

'Yes, but you do look quite dishy. Look, later, we could go to a really cool place I know. You're supposed to be eighteen but they never ask. I've been twice before, with Eva.'

Her mother's voice called from below:

*'Gertie, bring Aaron down, please. Auntie Ruthie is waiting to see him.'*

*Bugger!* The old witch is here again. Bloody haunts this place, she does. She's my godmother. Wants to name me as the first beneficiary in her Will, bequeath her royalties to me, because I'm artistic. She's seventy-two but Mum says she'll live till she's a hundred and ninety, even though she smokes like a chimney and works non-stop. Another obsessive in my life. Writes romantic fiction. Sells like hotcakes. Worst of it she reeks of tobacco, ugh! Look, I'll go and head her off, take the heat. I'll tell them you be down after you take a shower.'

00000

Aaron knew that his aunt, a property developer operating under her maiden name ( Miriam Joseph) was joint owner of a business she owned fifty-fifty with her older cousin Ruth Bellhouse. Ruth had put up the seed corn money when Miriam started out two decades earlier. From his mother he also knew this business was the source of Mitvich's family's wealth, not Daniel's university salary and consultancy work.

Daniel and Miriam had met as twenty-five-year-olds during their Kibbutz year. Both were important members and supporters of the local synagogue.

An hour later, wearing his smartest shirt and trousers and his newest yarmulke, Aaron made his way to the back of the house to a large conservatory overlooking a manicured

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

garden where the elders of the Metvich family were waiting, gathered around a large, glass-topped table.

Daniel sprang to his feet and strode across to grab Aaron's hand which he shook warmly. His aunt swished over and presented her cheek to be pecked. Miriam was a head taller than her slim husband and quite a bit heavier but statuesque, not obese.

A thin scratchy, imperious voice called from behind the table:

'Aaron, come, come. Let me see you. Yes, yes. No doubt about it, handsome like your father and bright like your mother. Come, give me a hug.'

From the tennis court, Hannah shouted across:

'Aaron, do you play?'

'Not really. Not very well.'

'No worries, come and partner Gertie, she's losing, first time ever. I simply can't imagine what has been distracting her.'

'No, Aaron. Come with me, please', said Daniel, hooking his arm into Aaron's and guiding him away towards a hidden corner of the garden screened by a hedge.

'Well, Aaron, you know what this is, don't you?'

It's a Sukkot, a shelter built for the Festival of Tents, to celebrate our Forty Years in the Wilderness after the Exodus.'

'Yes, spot on. Shall we celebrate together? It's all right, Miriam and Ruth have agreed I can have you for half-an-hour or so, all to myself.'

After their prayer ritual Daniel poured two small glasses of thick syrupy golden wine and handed one to his nephew.

'Here's to your success, Aaron Metvich. Now, sit down please, and listen carefully.'

Aaron sat on the bench opposite his uncle, thinking this man had the same intensity of focus as his father, expecting a long homily on how important it was to put his studies first, above everything else.

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

'Aaron, put aside what my brother may have told you. It makes me sad that we no longer speak but that is in the past. I cannot make him see my point of view. But the mere fact he allowed you to come to see me, to live in my house, well, that is a start, isn't it?'

'You have a lovely home here, very posh.'

'And your mother, she is smart, just like you. Marion depends on her. Ruthie too. If the truth could be vocalised, it would be said that your mother is the true brains behind their operation, so, to be fair, this proposal is because of her. It's all right, Marion and Ruth have agreed I can make this offer.'

'Right, so what is the big secret?'

'Aaron, I know you dabble in computers, right? Well, I have landed a research grant from NASA. What do you know about their work?'

'Almost nothing except their involvement with the James Webb Telescope. I've been following it on *YouTube*. The images are amazing, astonishing.'

'Yes, yes, all well and good, of course. But my area is image analyses, looking at the inventory of images from our coastlines over the last twenty years. Coastal erosion and rising water levels are a huge issue. Around eighty percent of the world's population lives on coastal land. I've been banging my head on this nutshell for months now and I need someone to come aboard, to work with me, to help me, to challenge my protocols, someone with a fresh, unbiased mind, a fresh perspective. Look, I can pay you a little for your inputs. Would £1500 buy me ten days of your time over the next three months? We can meet at my research lab at Strathclyde. What do you say?'

'Yes, I'll be pleased to help, if I can. I don't really know anything about analysing digital images but I'll have a go. Nothing like a challenge to get the juices flowing, right?'

'Great, Great. Fantastic. It's all about pattern recognition really. But I don't want to prejudice your thinking. It's a fresh approach we need. Anyway, how do you like your bedroom?'

'Well, it seems very nice, but actually I would rather not impose myself on you. Dad has given me a fairly generous allowance and I really fancy having a go at living the student life. I met a girl on the train and she's at Strathclyde too. Turns out she has a room free at her place, and, well, I've sort of half promised her.'

'No Aaron, no. Someone you met on the train? A stranger. Is she Kosher? I mean, you can't be too careful, can you? It might be a complete dive. What is she charging? No, no, Aaron, you'll be far better off freeloading with us. We can give you a lift into Uni or run

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

you to the railway station. Or you can take one of the bikes from the garage. And remember, as a new student you'll be under a lot of pressure so the last thing you need are distractions. Far better off here. What do you say?'

'Thanks. That's very generous of you but, you know how it is. Turns out I'm stubborn so thanks but no thanks.'

'Well, Miriam won't like it, that's for sure. Nor Ruthie.'

'Hello in there! Time's up. Mum says it's time to eat! Come at once, please.'

'OK Hannah, just finishing up. With you in five.'

'Listen, Aaron, don't mention this conversation about you not staying here, OK? I need to wait for the right moment later tonight to try to break the news to Miriam, OK?'

'Yeah, sure. No big deal.'

'Have you met Hannah yet?'

'Yeah, we met on FaceTime last night. Two hours. She told me everything I need to know about her life, but sorry, I'm sworn to secrecy.'

'OH NO! With Video? Was she, eh, fully clothed. She has taken to walking around nude over the last few months. Only indoors, thankfully.'

'No, she was wearing a bikini, doing Yoga exercises the whole time we were online, very bendy and stretchy. She's a very good-looking girl. Gorgeous, actually.'

'Yes, I suppose so. Spitting image of Miriam when we first met. Anyway, don't mention the nudity thing to Ruthie, she would explode.'

'Fine by me. None of my business, really. Is it?'

'What did you find to talk about for two hours?'

'Hannah did most of the talking. All about her PhD topic. Da Vinci was an amazing guy.'

'So, she's flipped again, back to Da Vinci. It was Albert Einstein a few days ago. OK, Aaron, let's go eat. You'll soon learn we must never be late for food, not in this house. A wee word of warning, watch out for Ruthie's Black Forest Gateau, it's laced with Brandy, addictive and very fattening.'

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

00000

Later, from his bedroom, Aaron called Sarah on a *WhatsApp* video call.

The backdrop through the lounge window of her top floor tenement flat overlooked a green area which she advised was Queen's Park.

'Hi, so how did it go with the family?'

'Well enough, I think, but I'm really hoping your offer still stands. If you like, I could help with the clean-up. I'm free for the next few days ahead of Freshers' Week. Actually, to be totally, totally honest, there's no way I can stay here. They are all as mad as hatters.'

'Really? You mean that, Aaron? You want to help me clean up? Can you drive? I mean, if I rent a van, could you drive it?'

'Yes. Why do we need a van?'

'It's horrendous, ghastly. I've checked out Dieter's bedding and mattress and, well, ugh. I think he must had some sort of problem. They are wet and soiled. And some of the furniture in his room is beyond redemption. Honestly, I didn't realise Dieter lived in such squalor. I mean, he seemed like a nice guy, just a bit reserved, a bit, well, secretive. I think he was probably a closet gay. I knew he smoked weed from time to time, opening his window, you know, but I had no idea how much of a careless smoker he was. In fact, he told me several times he was reformed. Aaron, you don't smoke, do you?'

'No, never. No weed, no drugs. I do like wine though, but not plonk.'

'Good, I'll try *Arnold Clark*, I think. It says on their vans they rent by the hour. I'll look them up. We can take all Dieter's bedding and other junk to the municipal place and dump it. It's close to IKEA, if your OK with their stuff. I'll pay for everything of course.'

'Sure, I'll need your address?'

'You're in Newton Mearns, right?'

'Yeah, very posh out here.'

'You can get a train direct to Queens Park station and I'll meet you there. I'm only five minutes away. Would tomorrow at ten o'clock-ish work for you?'

'Yeah, sure, see you at ten-ish at Queens Park station.'

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

'Good, I'll have figured out the van hire by then.'

'Sarah, just one thing missing here?'

'Yeah, what that?'

'Should we talk about rent?'

'I charged Deiter £400 a week. Are you OK with that?'

'Any extras?'

'No, provided you don't go mad with the heating and hot water. I have a dishwasher and a washing machine and a 42" plasma screen and Netflix and BT-TV.'

'Broadband?'

'Yes, BT Superfast something or other. I'm not techie but it seems to be pretty good.'

'OK, Sarah. Tell me, is £400 a week the going rate?'

'The guy across the landing takes £550 a week and my place is much nicer.'

'OK. Let's give ourselves four weeks to see if we are compatible, shall we? I'll pay you up front when we meet tomorrow I take it cash is OK?'

'Good with me. Right, see you at ten tomorrow. Sleep tight, Aaron Metvich. Oh, by the way, I checked you out online. *Impressivo!*

'Thank you, Sarah Beltrakker. I checked online too and you are one very smart lady. Sleep well.'

00000

Sarah met him at the top of the stairs leading from the platform. She was wheeling two Dutch-style upright bikes, bought from Facebook marketplace then refurbished and upgraded.

'Hi, we need to get ourselves to Yoker for our van pick-up. I got the bigger one, the Luton. We can take our bikes with us and use them to get home again when we are finished with it.'

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

She led Aaron along quieter streets through Pollokshields, sometimes riding on pavements when they were free of pedestrians, weaving to avoid busier roads until they crossed the river at the Squinty Bridge and found the Clydeside walkway which led them to *Arnold Clark's* hire depot.

'There we are, only 23 minutes. It might have taken much more in a car and certainly much longer by public transport. Cycling, the green way to go, eh?'

00000

By late afternoon, they were at the depot to drop off the van then back at the flat just before five o'clock.

'Well, Aaron, shall we eat first or carry on and get your new bed sorted and the furniture assembled?'

'Let me do the bedding and we can leave the furniture until later. What if I give the room a lick of paint tomorrow before we clutter the place up and put down the new rug. In our house I'm the go-to man for decorating.'

'OK, you sort your bed and I'll make us a veggie curry. Did you say you like your curries hot and spicy?'

'Yes please.'

With the meal over, Sarah said:

'Well, Aaron, how do you like it here, so far?'

'Yes, it's very nice. It seems very quiet. I thought the traffic noise from the main road would be an issue.'

'I know these windows look original but they are cunning replacements, fully weather-sealed and double glazed. It was my first project after I moved in. And apart from Terry and his flatmate across the landing, all the neighbours are elderly. The two ladies on the ground floor are retired, widows. Mary is on the right as you come in and Theresa is on the left. They argy-bargy the whole time but they're good friends, both in the same church, about a mile away which they attend arm in arm every day, twice on Sundays. They are very nosey, it has to be said, but they act as unpaid security. Anything odd happens and they let us all know, posting little messages through our letterboxes. Quite often we get two accounts, one from each of them. It's hilarious. When they need help with online issues, I take my iPad down and sit with them and we solve it together.'

# Sukkot-Festival of Tents

---

'That's brilliant. So, no hassle about being Jewish?'

'I'm not sure I would classify myself as Jewish nowadays. Not really. I don't attend services and almost all my friends here in Glasgow are gentiles. You are my only Jewish friend.'

'I suppose I'm still a bit Jewish, just to please Mum and Dad. As I explained, my Newton Mearns rellies are big into it but even they are not strict, so far as I could tell. For me all religions seem unfathomable. I mean, all of them, every single one, is based on fables and dubious ancient manuscripts. I mean the Dead Sea Scrolls, fragments pieced together and then 'interpreted'. Are we supposed to believe life on Earth began only 6,000 years ago? But, despite my scepticism, I can see how these religions do work for the common good, binding people together. I mean, take us, we might not have got together like this if we had not had similar backgrounds, yes?'

'Yes, I suppose so. But it wasn't really because you're Jewish I made the offer. It was because I fancied you.'

'Yeah, me too.'

'Yeah, we seem to make a good team, so far. Well, Aaron, I'm ready for a shower and an early night.'

'Me too. See you in the morning.'

00000

An hour later Sarah tapped softly on Aaron's door:

'Aaron, I've got two huge spiders wandering about in my room. Could you come and catch them for me, please. Spiders give me the creeps.'

'Well, sorry, Sarah, we have a problem here at Mission Control. Spiders give me the creeps too. So, why not come and cuddle in with me? So far as I can see it's spider free.'

'Really? Are you sure?'

'Yes. Absolutely no spiders. Just little old me.'

# *Sukkot-Festival of Tents*

---