

A Night of Questions

by Bruce Black

Each spring Jews around the world celebrate Passover to commemorate their freedom from slavery in ancient Egypt. At the Seder—the ceremonial dinner marking the beginning of the holiday—a child (traditionally the youngest) asks the Four Questions as a way of stimulating further questions about the Seder’s rituals and about the holiday itself.

NO MATTER HOW often Michael practiced the Four Questions, just thinking about standing to recite them at his family’s Seder made him feel lightheaded. That was what had happened last year. He’d gotten to his feet, and the room had started to spin, and his knees had buckled under him, and then everything had gone blank. Luckily, Uncle

Nate had managed to catch him before he hit the floor.

Tonight would be different, Michael promised himself as he finished buttoning his new shirt. He would show courage this year. He’d stand in front of his family and say the words without stuttering or shaking—which is what happened whenever he had to speak in front of people—and he wouldn’t faint.

But the moment Grandma greeted Michael with one of her bear hugs at her apartment door, he felt lightheaded again. All the smells that he remembered from last year—chicken soup, matzah kugel, carrot tzimmes, and roast brisket—floated out of the kitchen, making the air thick with memories. Sweat started to pool under his arms, and his heart beat faster.

“Are you nervous?” Grandma asked.

“A little,” he said.

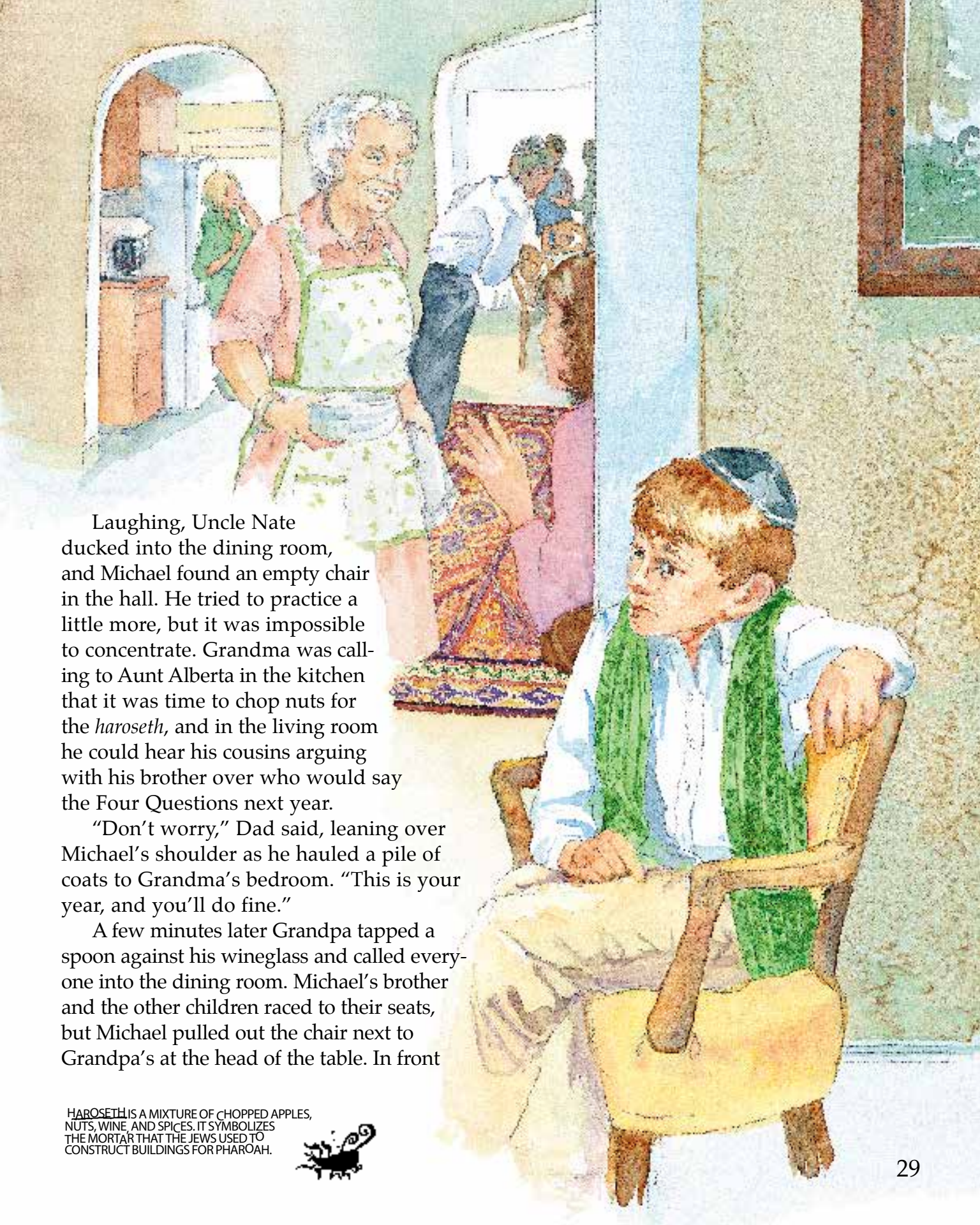
“Why should he be nervous?” Uncle Nate paused in front of them, a stack of freshly ironed napkins in his hands. “It’s a cinch. He’ll say the words fast and—presto—he’ll faint like last year. I promise he won’t feel a thing.”

“Stop teasing, Mr. Big Shot.” Grandma swatted him with a corner of her apron. “You were just as nervous when you were his age. If you think it’s so easy, you stand in front of everyone and ask the Four Questions yourself!”

MATZAH KUGEL
IS A SWEET
PUDDING MADE
WITH EGGS,
MATZAH, APPLES,
SUGAR, CINNAMON,
AND RAISINS.



CARROT TZIMMES
IS BOILED, MASHED
CARROTS MIXED
WITH RAISINS,
ORANGE JUICE,
AND HONEY.



Laughing, Uncle Nate ducked into the dining room, and Michael found an empty chair in the hall. He tried to practice a little more, but it was impossible to concentrate. Grandma was calling to Aunt Alberta in the kitchen that it was time to chop nuts for the *haroseth*, and in the living room he could hear his cousins arguing with his brother over who would say the Four Questions next year.

"Don't worry," Dad said, leaning over Michael's shoulder as he hauled a pile of coats to Grandma's bedroom. "This is your year, and you'll do fine."

A few minutes later Grandpa tapped a spoon against his wineglass and called everyone into the dining room. Michael's brother and the other children raced to their seats, but Michael pulled out the chair next to Grandpa's at the head of the table. In front

HAROSETH IS A MIXTURE OF CHOPPED APPLES, NUTS, WINE, AND SPICES. IT SYMBOLIZES THE MORTAR THAT THE JEWS USED TO CONSTRUCT BUILDINGS FOR PHAROAH.



THE FOOD ON THE SEDER PLATE, SUCH AS BITTER HERBS, A ROASTED EGG, AND GREEN PARSLEY ARE SYMBOLS TO REMIND JEWS NOT ONLY OF THE YEARS THEIR ANCESTERS ENDURED AS SLAVES IN EGYPT BUT ALSO OF THE HOPEFUL RENEWAL OF LIFE EACH SPRING.

A KIPPAH IS A HEAD-COVERING WORN BY TRADITIONAL JEWS TO SHOW RESPECT FOR GOD.

THE HAGGADAH IS A BOOK USED DURING THE SEDER THAT GIVES THE ORDER OF THE SERVICE AND TELLS ABOUT THE JEWS' ENSLAVEMENT AND FLIGHT FROM EGYPT.



ELIJAH'S CUP IS SET OUT BECAUSE, ACCORDING TO LEGEND, THE PROPHET ELIJAH VISITS ON PASSOVER EVE, BRINGING HIS PROMISE OF A PEACEFUL WORLD IN THE FUTURE.



of him the tablecloth shimmered like lacy sea foam under the fine china plates and holiday silver, and the Seder plate was set in the middle of the table beside Elijah's cup.

As everyone sat down, Michael grew more and more nervous. He wondered if anyone would notice him slide off his chair and crawl into the kitchen. But he couldn't sneak away. The Seder was about to begin.

"Welcome," Grandpa said, his hair sticking out from beneath his *kippah* like clumps of tangled gray thread. "Thank God we made it to another Seder."

"Yes, thank God," Grandma said.

"Amen," Aunt Sylvia said, winking across the table at Michael.

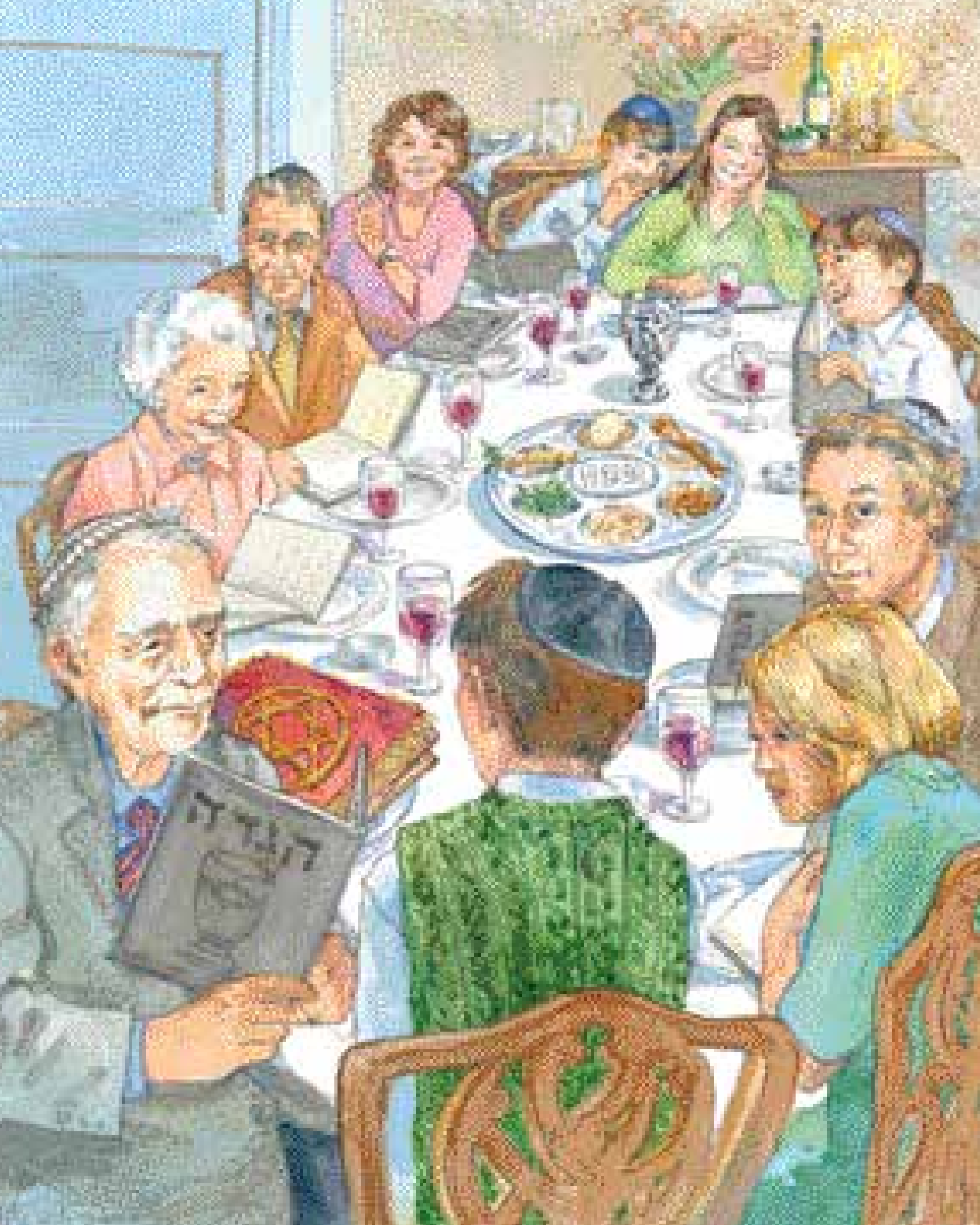
Grandpa opened his Haggadah. Lifting the crystal goblet, he chanted the special blessing over the wine. Luckily, nobody could see Michael's knees shaking. If only there were a way to make himself invisible or to fool Grandpa into skipping the Four Questions so he wouldn't have to stand up.

The Seder had just started, and Michael already felt his tongue swelling. His lips tasted dry. It will be worse than last year, he thought. I'll forget the words and faint, and everyone will laugh about it for years. "Hey, remember the Seder when Michael fainted?" Ha, ha, ha! "Why is this night different? Because Michael always faints." More laughter.

When Grandpa had finished the blessing, he took a sip of wine, put down the glass, and, after washing his hands and dipping the parsley in salt water, nodded toward Michael. Everybody looked up in anticipation. It was time for him to begin.

But Michael couldn't move. His legs felt heavy, as if stuck in mud at the edge of the sea. Michael remembered reading about the Four Sons in the Haggadah: the Wise Son, the Wicked Son, the Simple Son, and the Son Who Does Not Know How To Ask. There should be a fifth son, Michael thought. The Son Who Is Too Scared To Stand Up.

He tried hard not to think about last year. But trying not to think about it only made him more nervous. Everyone was depending on him. He couldn't turn back. The Seder couldn't continue until he'd asked the Four Questions.



Michael pushed his chair away from the table and got to his feet. The room started to sway. No fainting, he told himself, reaching for the edge of the table and waiting for the floor to stop swirling.

“You’re on, buddy,” Uncle Nate whispered.

Michael had practiced all week for this moment. But he couldn’t remember a word. Not a single word!

But he couldn’t
remember a word.
Not a single word!

Then, as if Grandpa knew what was happening, he started humming. It was the same tune that Dad had taught him, the one that Michael had practiced all week. Someone—Mom, Dad, Uncle Nate, or perhaps the invisible prophet Elijah—nudged his elbow. Michael opened his mouth. All of a sudden he heard Pharaoh’s army chasing him. He could feel the hot desert sand under his feet.

Amidst the roar of the sea, a voice—*his* voice—filled the air. It sounded deeper and stronger than usual, as if a gust of wind had filled his lungs.

“*Mah nish-ta-nah ha-lai-lah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-lei-lot?*” he burst out, and the Hebrew words soared over the table like birds whose wings were suddenly set free. “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

It was as if the question had been hidden deep inside him all along, only he couldn’t hear it until he’d opened his mouth. Now it echoed in his ears, full of mystery, the anxious question of a people free after four hundred years of slavery.

And then, before he knew it, he’d finished singing the last of the Four Questions and could hear the silence of his own breath.

Grandpa rose from his chair and grinned. “Good questions, Michael. I suppose now you want the answers.” Turning the page, Grandpa began reading. “Once we were slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out of bondage with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. . . .”

Michael sat down and looked around. The people he loved most in the world were at the table, their faces gleaming like silvery waves beneath a full moon. For the first time in his life, he felt as if the Passover story wasn’t just a story in a book. Tonight he felt as if he was part of the story, fleeing Egypt with his family and crossing the sea to safety. 🦋