

All the sorrow that came after

“And was Jerusalem builded here?”

William Blake

1.

Oxford, England, April 1221 Anno Domini

Edric watches her in the marketplace. That is where he first sees her. She is choosing fish and arguing with the merchant about the freshness of the catch. She's right; here in Oxford, with the river running just on the outskirts of town, there's no excuse for fish that's less than perfectly fresh. These have the dull skin of yesterday's haul. She argues sharply but merrily.

“Haven't I got eyes?” she says, “haven't I got hands, to give this fish a prod and see that it's dry? I'll give you a farthing for it, no more.”

“Lady,” says the fishmonger, “at that price I'd as well throw it back in the river and hope it spawns again.”

She's not deterred.

“If I bought it from you at a penny, I'd be as good as throwing my money into the river!”

Edric watches her from behind. She's wearing a dun brown dress with white collar and cuffs, freshly laundered. Her bottom is round and neat, her hips broad. He's newly arrived in Oxford from Coventry, hasn't been here longer than three months and he's only touched one girl's cuckoo's nest before. Her hair is black and her skin is golden like wheat. He wonders already what her breasts look like, what colour the hair between her legs might be.

She turns her face to the side, holding her forehead to indicate her frustration with the fishmonger. Edric's not disappointed by her features. A wide mouth, a high brow, a small nose, a darting quick brown eye. He's already preparing an opening line – maybe he'll just ask her what she's planning to make with that fish – when, as if she's planning to walk off in disgust, she turns round. And he sees the white patch sewn onto the front of her dress.

2.

“There being unfortunately no sufficiently visible distinction between Jews and Christians, there have been mixed marriages or less permanent unions; for the better prevention whereof, it is ordained, that every Jew shall wear on the front of his dress tablets or patches of cloth four finger-lengths long by two finger-lengths wide, of some colour other than that of the rest of his garment”  
Statutes of the Realm c 1215

When I read this, I measure it out. Sewn onto my clothing, curved around my body, it would go from neckline almost to my waist. There could be no concealing it. That's the point of course.

These patches and symbols and even special hats for Jews were common in Europe. When Reinhard Heydrich, one of the chief architects of the Holocaust, introduced the yellow star with the word *Jude* in the centre for the Jews of the Reich, he wasn't inventing something new. He was bringing back an old tradition. A piece of Medieval Europe; like banners and pageantry and guilds.

3.

Edric says nothing to her. He watches her as she bargains a little more – comes away with the fish for probably half of what it's worth. He thinks to himself – how Satan comes in with these little

thoughts, how he worms his way into the heart like this – that it can do no harm to appreciate a woman's form, even if she is a Jewess. He is only a lad of 20, after all. She is, perhaps, a little older – 22 or 23. Her breasts are outlined by her dress, round and soft and high.

But it does do harm, of course it does. She notices him staring. She catches his eye. She smiles. He's not a bad-looking lad himself, as it goes. He had a pox when he was 16 left him with a constellation of pockmarks on one cheek, but the other is fair, and he's strong in the shoulders and the arms. He thinks about how he could lift her up with one arm maybe, and how she'd squeal and how he'd like it if she did. He smiles back at her and thinks: she doesn't look like a demon to him. And if there are horns under her hair they're well-concealed.

He says: “you got a bargain with that fish,” and feels full pleased with himself for his Christian generosity in making a pleasant remark to her just as if she were a good woman of Oxford like any other. There's no need to treat them like beasts, after all.

She looks at him, impassive. Blinks once.

“Sorry,” she says, “I don't speak to Christians. You might bring peril to my soul.”

She smiles, with such naughty glitter to her eyes. There are dimples in her cheeks. It is the dimples that delight him. He cannot but say more to her, linger there a little in the market, though he hears a tut from one or two of the old women. After all, what harm is there in conversation?

“What's your name?” he asks at last.

“Jewess,” she says, “why would you need another?”

She is nothing but cheek. He wants her sorely.

“No but tell me,” he says, “tell me your name.” He has no more cunning in him than this.

“Hanna,” she says, “daughter of Eleasar the Leech.”

“The doctor! I know him.” Edric's college master has directed him more than once to the Jew doctor for cures. “His powders for griping of the guts are... they're very effective.”

She smiles, a swift and natural smile, no artifice or teasing.

“I will see you again, then.”

4.

The Jews, they say, were brought to Medieval England by William the Conqueror, although there is some evidence that some Jews were here before that he certainly swelled their numbers. He gave them the King's protection, proclaiming in 1070 that he would “treat both their persons and their property as his own”. The Jews were the property of the King; no man could harm them without harming the property of the King, and no Jew could travel or settle except where the King willed it.

5.

In the cool chapel of the Augustinian House, Edric kneels before the statue of the Blessed Virgin. He presses his forehead to the flagstones. He mutters a prayer.

“Keep me far from temptation and lead me not into evil. I know it is wrong, Blessed Mary I know she is poison, I know she is cursed, please stop me wanting her.”

Even as he says the words, he thinks of the thick wet feel of her, as if it were poison dripping from between her legs, and Jesu help him he is still full of desire.

It had not been hard to find reasons to visit the Doctor. The buildings of the Augustinian House are damp. Someone is always sick with a fever or an ague or a cough that will not lift and is it not his Christian duty, his charity, his compassion, to walk through the muddy streets to have the leech mix up a cure for them? Like Adam accepting the apple, he knew what he was doing.

In the warm, close back room of her father's shop, while the old man mixes his potions and grinds his roots and herbs, Edric and Hanna talk. She is clever, he finds, and her conversation is interesting. She reads – this astonishes him. She tells him that Jewish women learn to read just like the men – that on her wedding day a Jewish woman might be given a hand-written little stitched book of Psalms. He finds that he likes her. She has met half the men in the Augustinian House when they come for cures and she makes funny little mocking impressions of them. She tells him her worries for her father, if she were to marry and leave him alone. He tells her of his parents in Coventry – so proud that their son, their only son, has been ordained a Deacon – eager for him to find a wife.

It is there, when their conversation drifts to silence and they look at one another, and his heart is thumping in his chest and she shifts a little towards him, it is there with her father grinding spices in the next room that he first kisses her and she kisses him.

They walk in the quiet forest in the morning when she goes to gather plants, when his morning prayers are finished they meet there. And they talk, and she holds his hand. And pushed up against an oak, he lifts her skirts and touches her with his fingers. To their great pleasure. He would have gone further but she shakes her head and laughs and says:

“I must have some virtue for my wedding night.”

He is amazed, charmed, puzzled, excited. These things must show on his face.

“After all this,” she says, “did you still think a Jewess is a devil woman?”

She kisses the top of his head.

“It is the same,” she says, “your laws and our laws are the same. Except that yours are more... newfangled than ours. We keep to the old ways, and you have let them go. It is not so different.”

God help him, when he presses his face to the cool of the chapel floor and begs the Virgin to protect him and change him, and take away his unnatural desire, God help him, he thinks she may be right.

6.

My grandmother's cousin and her children were evacuated in the Second World War to a farm in the north of England. One day, my grandmother's cousin found the farmer's wife examining the children's heads, running her hands through their hair, searching out the scalps with the pads of her fingers.

“Have they not come in yet?” said the farmer's wife.

“What?” said my grandmother's cousin.

“The horns,” said the farmer's wife.

Those children are alive still – they are my parents' age.

7.

The Virgin does nothing to protect him. He tries, for a few days, to stay away. It is fire in his veins.

Something is grievously at fault with him, he knows it. In confession, at last, after several days, he tells the priest that he is filled with lust for a Jew-woman. Behind the screen, the priest mutters that Satan gives them wiles to tempt good Christian men, and he is to devote himself to the contemplation of the blessed Virgin. He says his penances. In the aisles of the chapel, he knows which priest it was who heard his confession by the unblinking stare he gives him – it is Thomas, a hard and godly man. Edric casts his eyes down not to meet Thomas' gaze.

That evening, the Virgin fails again to help him or protect him. One of the lay brothers develops a powerful cough, so wheezing and so deep that the man can hardly breathe. Someone says – is it Satan who says it? – “this cough is a danger. Some man must go to the apothecary to bring a cure.”

It is late, and raining hard outside. No one wants to go.

“I will go,” says Edric, “I will go to the doctor to fetch medicine.”

The others thank him. Thomas gives him a dark look and a tiny shake of the head. But Thomas does not volunteer to go in his stead. The rain is very heavy, after all.

Hanna is angry with him at first, for staying away so long. She shows it by talking to him like any other customer.

“Yes sir,” she says when he tells her father the symptoms of the lay brother, “Doctor Elasar will make the treatment now, a syrup of honey and herbs. You may wait here until it is ready. Sir.”

“Will you not wait with me?”

The idea that he might have lost her now makes his heart cry out.

“Why no, sir. I do not wait with customers, only with my friends.”

Elasar looks between the two of them, his eye shrewd.

“Daughter,” he says, “I have forgotten where you put the herbs I need for this tincture. Come and help me with it and leave this good man in peace.”

“Why that is what I wanted to do, father.”

They leave him there, waiting alone. The mere sight of her has stirred him up again so much that he cannot bear the thought that he will not touch her tonight.

After a little while, she opens the door to the room with a fire where he is waiting.

“My father would have me ask you if we can offer you some food, or a cup of ale, while you wait. Sir.”

The father is not with her. He leaps to his feet and, before she can protest, or move, he kisses her, kneading at her breast with his hand. She kisses him too, for a few moments, then angrily pushes him away.

“Is that all I am to you? Some Jewish whore you can grope at while you wait for medicine?”

“No,” he says, “no no no.” And his heart breaks open. He tells her the truth. “I think of you all the time. I prayed to the Virgin Mary to make me forget you but I can't forget you, you are all I want.” He says it again, because he has noticed for the first time that it is really true. “You are all I want.”

She looks at him, searching out his face for the marks of truth. There are angry tears in her eyes.

“I cannot marry you,” she says. “I can marry only a Jewish man. My father has picked one out, I think.”

He smiles. “Did I ask you to marry me?”

Her eyes are black, and a tiny hint of merriness is back in them.

“I expect you will,” she says.

They talk on. By the time the tincture is made, their quarrel is over. She wants him too, is the clear thing. With his short, wiry frame and his kind, worrying head. Somehow, yes, this.

Elasar looks between them again when he brings the tincture in. It is impossible to keep such a thing out of one's eyes. Elasar shakes his head, sadly.

“It is forbidden under your laws, you know,” he says to Edric.

Edric's heart is too glad to hear anything. She wants him too: that is the whole of the law.

He and Hanna kiss a long goodbye on the shining dark streets of Oxford, the rain having passed. As

they part, both breathless, she whispers to him:  
“The Virgin Mary was a Jew woman too, you know.”

He has never heard anything so obscene as these words.

8.

The Jews were known mostly as Christ-killers. It was the presence of the New Testament, of course, that book which carried hatred of the Jews from town to town, from nation to nation, until it had spread over half the Earth. It was reported widely that the Jews killed Christian children in mockery of the crucifixion. That they drank or ate their blood. Other Kings had not been so magnanimous toward the Jews as William the Conqueror. They were accursed of giving Richard I the 'evil eye' at his coronation, leading to a great massacre of the Jews across England. In 1190, the Jews were murdered in King's Lynn, in Norwich, in Stamford, in Colchester, Thetford, Bury St Edmunds and York. Such outbreaks became, if not routine, at least regular.

9.

There's one thing left to do. She doesn't ask him to do it, but he knows that it has to be done. Although Eleasar offers to help him, he decides it is better to do it himself, alone. Early one morning he wades naked, waist-deep, into the River Isis and stands there until he can no longer feel his feet or his legs or anything above them. He walks out and quickly, with the sharpest blade he has been able to find, pulls his foreskin taught and slices at it, in one motion. The pain is blazing loud even despite the rudimentary numbness. He bleeds more than he'd expected and is grateful for the salve Eleasar gave him to smear on it. For two weeks, he keeps to his room in the Augustinian House, saying that he had taken a wound to his thigh when falling in the woods. They bring him food and water and he feels a little guilty knowing what he is planning to do.

He leaves the Augustinian House with all appearance of sorrow. The Lord, he said, appeared to him in a vision and told him that his great calling was not to be a deacon and a student but to leave on other work. Thomas, and some of the other brothers, look suspiciously at him. But what can they do? He is a free man, he thinks, and can go where he likes and do as he pleases.

He goes to Hanna's house in the Jewish district. She has been waiting for him. He tells her that it's done. He's still sore, but the wound is healed clean. There's no going back for him now. As he tells her, a terrible fear strikes him that perhaps she will not have him, that she would tell him now to go away.

But she does want him. She feared, herself, that he would not come back, that she would see him again in the street in months to come and he would mock her and call her a Devil Whore to cover up the tenderness that had been between them. They are both afraid. But the yearning is greater than the fear. She kisses him with kisses of her mouth, and his love is sweeter than wine. And within the month, when he is fully healed, they are married.

Now, they do have some months of happiness, this is certain. There are sweet mornings waking together and making love tenderly, and her stroking his face as his beard begins to come in fully, and the things she teaches him of her ways and faith and the secrets of the herbalist, and how she sits on his knee while he shows her the Latin grammar and tells her about Coventry. We cannot deny that they had some months together.

But in spite of the holiness of the confessional, in the end Thomas will speak eventually to Matthew, and Matthew to Simon, and Simon to Roger, and so the word will come to the church

authorities that a Christian man had taken on the Jewish faith and married a Jewish woman. And so one morning, while Hanna is at the river bathing, twenty of the Sheriff's men with cudgels come for Edric. They find him working on a pot of salve for bruises. And he shouts to the neighbours to warn Hanna and tell her to run, as the men take him down and cover his face with a sack.

10.

This story is a true story, at least in its bones. It is recorded in various chronicles, along with the many other massacres and murders of Jews in Medieval England. During the period that I was reading about it in the library, I got chatting to another woman, also working in the library. I told her about the Jews put to death in various ways under the various Kings of England.

“Well,” said the woman, “you have to understand these things in their historical context.”

I found I was blindingly angry when she said this to me.

“I don't think the people put it in its historical context,” I told her, “when they were being murdered. I don't think they said to themselves: well, I must understand the society and cultural forces which made this happen. I think they suffered, and died.”

I suspect this woman felt that I was insufficiently magnanimous. Not filled with enough Christian love and charity.

11.

Edric is brought to trial before the archbishop. They show him a cross with the Crucified Lord upon it. Edric remembers his boyhood, kneeling before a cross like this, kissing it with the lips that have kissed Hanna again and again. He wants her now so that his body aches to hold her. And he imagines her as she must surely be, in the little pedlar's cart belonging to her uncle, on her way to London, concealed under the blankets and the apples. Safe, maybe. And perhaps he will see her again.

“Repent,” says the archbishop, “throw off your sin and shall you not be forgiven?”

He could say it now. It would be simpler. He could say: I recant, I accept the Lord Jesus into my heart. He could do that and perhaps they would believe him and perhaps let him go and then maybe under cover of darkness he could steal away to find Hanna in London and snake his arm around her waist and hear her chuckle soft and low. And maybe they would travel somehow to Paris or Amsterdam or even Spain where they could be just another Jewish man and his Jewish wife, her belly full of their Jewish children. This is what he wants, this simple thing.

There comes a time when the heart is so certain of what it wants that the tongue cannot be persuaded not to utter it.

“I don't want the new-fangled law, I am for the old ways. I don't follow the teachings of Jesus. He was a liar like his mother Mary – surely she lay with a man, and when she fell pregnant lied that the Lord had got her with child. I am a Jew now. A Jew like those others.”

It is the truth. Does it not say in the Gospel of John, “the truth will set you free”?

12.

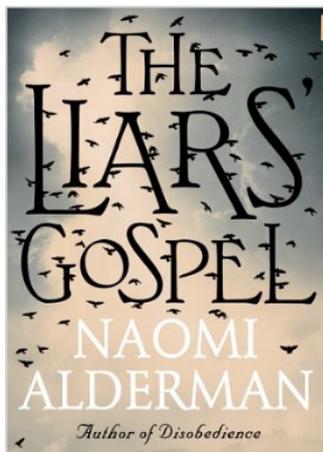
The archbishop is Stephen Langton. He had himself been the subject of a great quarrel between Rome and England – King John refusing to recognise him as Archbishop of Canterbury, Pope Innocent insisting. The result of the quarrel had been a five-year interdict: the Pope refused to allow any birth or marriage or mass to be celebrated in England.

An interdict is a bad business for the souls of the English. It cannot be risked again. For a good Christian to insult the Virgin Mary in this fashion is to bring the wrath of God – and the Pope – upon the land. There is only one possible ending.

13.

The chronicles are a little unclear and contradictory on how it happened. Some say it was fire, and this is the majority view. But Matthew Paris' vivid account tells it differently. He has Stephen Langton cast out from the church the English deacon who had loved a Jewess with an unlawful love. And then Sir Falkes de Breauté, a local knight who, Paris tells us, was “ever swift to shed blood”, was so horrified by the conversion of a Christian man to Judaism and by the words he spoke against the Virgin that he: “at once carried him off and swore 'By the throat of God! I will cut out the throat that uttered such words,' and dragged him away to a secret spot and cut off his head. The poor wretch was born at Coventry. But the Jewess managed to escape, which grieved Falkes, who said, 'I am sorry that this fellow goes to hell alone.'”

And perhaps it was fire. And perhaps it was the sword. But we know that the man whom I have called Edric, for his name is long forgotten, died by the hands of the church and those who sought to protect its honour. And the Jewess whom I have called Hanna, for her name likewise is not recorded, escaped. Perhaps we can imagine her, there, among the apples, weeping for her husband as the cart travels the rough miles to the coast. And perhaps he died knowing she was safe. And maybe there was comfort for her in her womb, in some new life stirring there. And maybe he knew this when he died. Maybe. Perhaps.



Naomi Alderman's new novel *The Liars' Gospel* was published by Penguin in August 2012. Many of the historical details in this story are taken from Robin Mundill's excellent *The King's Jews*.