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AN HOUR IN PARADISE By Joan Leegant. W. W. Norton & Company

Was That Elijah?

Stories by a writer who knows how to avoid the perils of connecting faith and fiction.

By Louis Bayard

Fiction, in its ideal form, is an open system, suggesting without determining. Religion is at heart a closed system -- a ring of certainty. Bridging those two worlds has been the mission of generations of writers, but only a few have kept their footing, their very survival a testament to the dangers they have passed. These are the perils that Joan Leegant in turn skirts, bows to and transcends in her arresting new short-story collection. Her work is, in fact, an enactment of those perils: a series of chord changes between the secular and mystical, never quite resolving.

Reading "An Hour in Paradise" is like watching a procession of modern-day Jewish pilgrims in a medieval tapestry: seekers captured in the act of seeking. We watch a former Holocaust refugee surveying the plain of his history, a yeshiva student striking a tentative bond with a dying AIDS patient. A father comes to grips with his son's embezzlement, while a Jerusalem intellectual ponders the influx of young Americans into his city: "So many broken hearts and fractured souls. So many meaningless Seders and incompatible roommates and cotton-headed parents and trips to the therapist. Who could survive an American youth?"

Young and old alike are folded by Leegant into a prose of fine-boned

clarity and compassion. Things get problematic only when she pushes compassion into benevolent deism and grants her characters infusions of miracle. Thus the unhappy wife in one story sheds her barrenness with the winter rains, and in "The Lament of the Rabbi's Daughters," a young woman's ghost seems to guide her living sisters down new romantic paths. These flights of magic realism go down easily, but I don't think they have the deepening effect that Leegant intends. The "Rabbi's Daughters" story could pass for a higher-end "Touched by an Angel" episode. As for "Seekers in the Holy Land," in which a young American's arrogant religiosity is mortified by strange visions in the ancient city of Safed, the story's arc of retribution seems pointlessly didactic.

Leegant is less prone to error when she works in the secular vein, not because the religious trappings are absent but because she is free to examine her characters without making examples of them. "Lucky in Love" also has the benefit of a dandy opening: "Six people attended my mother's wedding. Her mother Mae, my aunt Rose who was carrying twins though no one suspected at the time, Rose's husband Lou, my mother's best friend Peshy who lived upstairs in 6D, Rabbi Wax, and, of course, the groom. My father was not among them."

I love everything about this passage: the steady accretion of data, the subtle signifiers, the names: Peshy, Rabbi Wax. We know immediately where we are, and then we don't. Each of Leegant's stories demonstrates passages of comparable skill, but only once, I think, does she successfully fuse all her concerns, religious, personal and aesthetic. "The Tenth" begins inauspiciously enough, with a rabbi sending one of his aged congregants, Nathan Lefkowitz, to canvass the streets for a 10th man to complete the morning minyan. The dazed Lefkowitz returns with a pair of Siamese twins, a brief encounter that sends reverberations through both Nathan, who glimpses his own onrushing death, and the rabbi, who wonders if the twins weren't a visitation from Elijah.

Not an idle speculation for a man who has spent his life calling out God's name. "Never, of course, would he expect an answer," Leegant

writes. "Though lately he'd discovered in himself a shameful desire, a wish to have, just once, a glimmer. A sign." It's to Leegant's credit that in this instance, she leaves the sign no more than a glimmer, an oblique vision of conjoined bodies moving "in a single swift motion" and then, "like a great bird preparing for flight," vanishing. Here, as nowhere else, Leegant has brought matter and spirit together and left them vibrating with unsuspected, unquantifiable meaning.

Louis Bayard's new novel, "Mr. Timothy," will be published this fall.