

Converso Jews- (A Hidden Family Story)

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## ***Prologue***

When Pablo's grandmother died, Gladys told the funeral director that she needed to wash her mother before wrapping the body in white linen and placing her in her coffin. The mortuary found the request unusual for a Catholic. Washing and bathing were frowned upon and the only acceptable preparation was embalming. Gladys wanted her mother to be protected from prying eyes and hungry animals. She clipped each of the finger and toe nails. When Gladys questioned these practices, the answer was, "We've been doing this for generations."

Additionally, Gladys was taught by her grandmother about *sudario*, the Spanish word for shroud. This was the first death for Pablo. As a troubled teenager, the intimacy with his *Abuela* prevented his emotions from splattering. His sheltered life had kept the concept of death removed from him. Why didn't his parents warn him of this crushing anxiety that would be unleashed? Pablo became an abandoned animal without his *Abuela*.

Before 13-year-old Pablo left for camp he told Abuela, "Dad is insisting that I go. He says it will be good for me. But I don't want to go! I hated camp last year! The boys kept laughing at me because I couldn't catch the baseball."

"You're a year older. And your *papi* has been working with you on the weekends. Throwing the ball. I've watched you. You are improving."

"He never tells me that. And he keeps hollering at me when I drop the ball. Never smiling even if I catch it."

"He's just trying to help you out. He knows you like music, and he takes you for guitar lessons. He taught you tennis and how to use golf clubs at the miniature golf range."

"I just don't seem to be good at anything. And I'll miss you. And who is going to help you when you make tapas with that special ingredient that you made me swear not to tell anyone

about. This is the best part of the day when we talk. What happens if you get sick? The doctor said your heart was weak. And who is going to massage your feet when I'm gone?"

"I'm fine. I take my blood pressure pills every day. Don't worry about me. Your father will take care of my feet. He's good with his hands."

"Why don't I have any friends at school? Is something wrong with me? I'm ugly. I have a big nose. And I look so different from everyone else. I feel like I am an alien."

"No. Why do you say that? You are the sweetest most beautiful grandson. I'm your friend. I love you, Pablo."

"And I have this horrible acne. They call me pizza face." Pablo's tears made him dissolve into his grandma. He snuggled into her fleshy arm as she ran her hand through his black hair. When his face dried, he started giggling when Abuela tickled his underarms. The laughter enabled Pablo to stitch a pattern of happiness into his life. Both Abuela and Pablo eased into an afternoon nap.

Pablo continued to protest camp despite Abuela's encouragement. His father said, "You are going. We paid \$500, and it's not refundable."

Pablo stopped talking to his parents. When they drove to the YMCA camp, he refused to hug them. He grabbed his backpack and suitcase. No crying. A zombie walking to his incarceration.

His first thoughts upon entering the campsite were *I hate this place. I don't like the outdoors. It's dirty. It's going to screw up my allergies. I can't play any sports. I won't go swimming. No one can ever see my body.*

The camp director pointed him in the direction of his cabin number 9.

Pablo had never shared a room and being in a dormitory setting with other boys traumatized him. He felt as if he were an orphan waiting to be chosen by a future parent. Each of the boys was examining his defects; his scabby skin, his big ears, his crooked teeth. After the leader of the animal pack, Sam, stopped encouraging the laughter of the campers, he said, "What's wrong, sissy? Can't find your bed? You've got the best bed in the cabin. Everyone wants the top bunk."

Pablo said, "How do I get up there?"

Sam giggled, "Oh, you don't need a ladder. You can use a chair."

Despite Sam's torment, Pablo kept staring at Sam's arms which looked like they were ready to rip through his tee-shirt.

"Oh, don't be such a baby. If the chair doesn't work, I'll help you. I could probably lift you up with one arm."

If Sam touched him, he would die. Better to run back to the camp director and tell him he wanted his parents to retrieve him.

As he backed up to the door to flee, he was blocked by a large man.

The gentle giant said, "What's going on in here?"

After a torturous week at camp, Pablo was summoned to Daniel's office, the head counselor. Pablo was comforted by the wallpapered walls full of a sun-bursting flower design.

"Come in, Pablo. Sit down. I just got a call from your parents. They are coming to pick you up."

Pablo didn't sit. He backed against the wall hugging the flowered wallpaper.

A thunderous relief swept through Pablo. But then Daniel's somber face made Pablo's stomach clench.

“Your grandmother died last night from a heart attack.”

As Pablo stiffened, he became plastered against the wall until he collapsed to the wood floor. When he woke, he was in unfamiliar surroundings, and his head ached.

His mother was saying “Oh god, Pablo. Thank goodness you are okay. You fainted before we could pick you up. The doctor said you have a concussion and need to rest. Your blood sugar was very low. They have to watch you for the next forty-eight hours.”

“Where is *papi*?”

“Your father is making arrangements. The funeral is tomorrow, and there is so much to do.”

“Whose funeral?”

“Abuela’s.”

Pablo held his hands against his ears. He willed his eyes to shut.

Still his mother kept talking, “Abuela needs to be buried quickly. It would be a bad omen if we waited until you came home. She died on Wednesday. The funeral is tomorrow.”

No closure for Pablo because he had no opportunity to say goodbye to his beloved grandmother. He had trouble remembering her smell, and when his mother made the same fish stew that Abuela was famous for, it never tasted or smelled the same.

He was never sure his parents loved him the way Abuela had. His search for a replacement began.

## Chapter 12 - The Inquisition

With the Inquisition raging in Spain, the *Bar Mitzvah* of Salomon and Sarah Palache's son, Jacob, was to be the last openly Jewish life cycle event celebrated by his family. Any future celebrations would only be performed underground. Jacob had been busy studying for this ritual of commemorating his thirteenth birthday. Even though *Bar Mitzvahs* had occurred in Iberian synagogues since 1488, his temple had begun practicing the ritual only recently. Now Jacob's *Bar Mitzvah* was going to be the last of its kind.

His mother and sister would be part of the service too, in contradiction to Jewish law. His father had told him, "You know, the Bible explicitly says that women should not read from the *Torah*."

During the medieval period, the prohibitions against teaching women the *Torah* had been relaxed. Women's prayer groups were formed, and they were granted participation in the Jewish practices of the synagogue. They learned to read the liturgy in Hebrew.

Although Jacob's tone deafness was going to make chanting the blessings a painful part of the service, it would be compensated for by his recently deepened voice that he would use during the reading of the *Torah* portion. His papa would then recite a special blessing, *Baruch sheptarani mei-onsho shelazeh*, "Blessed is He who has freed me from responsibility for this boy." To conclude the service, Jacob would pick his favorite passage from the *Talmud* to address the congregation: "So, the cycle begins where whoever teaches his son, not alone his son, but his son's son, will continue for generations to come."

By 1530, the Inquisition still flooded the streets leaving no Jewish survivors. Although the reports of Jews being expelled or tortured had diminished from the height of the Inquisition, the aftermath was still eating away at the ghetto where the Palaches lived. And Muslims were

being persecuted just as vigorously. Muslims in Valencia and Aragon had been forced to convert, and subsequently, Islam was banned in all of Iberia.

Papa Salomon had long ago put in place a plan to save his family. They would become New Christians. First and last names would be changed to prevent any suspicion that they did not embrace Catholicism. Papa Salomon gave Mama Sarah and Jacob's sister, Miriam, a crash course in Christianity. After he told them the story of the Virgin Birth of Jesus through to the Crucifixion, he explained, "You've got to convince people that you believe these stories; that he was the son of God, performed miracles and was resurrected."

After this indoctrination, he told them, "We must privately keep our own faith alive. The only thing we are sure of is that Jesus was born Jewish. We as Jews believe there will be a Messiah, but for us, it is not Jesus. I like to think that their Last Supper is like our Passover Seder. And do not think that we will be safe once we convert. We will have to be on guard for the rest of our lives. The *Moriscos*, the Spanish Muslims who converted and were baptized, are also being targeted by the Inquisitors."

But all this could wait until after Jacob's rite of passage had occurred.

On the day before his "becoming a man," Jacob skipped attending his underground *yeshiva*. He would spend this last day of freedom before assuming adult responsibility by going swimming. The stress of reading from the *Torah* without making a mistake was intense. He trusted that the healing powers of the sea would give him relief. When he would go on fishing expeditions with his father, he would jump into the water and race with the dolphins. His father would scream at him, "What are you doing? If you are not careful, you will get caught in a net or get punctured by a harpoon."

He had recently been cursed with acne and imagined that when he stood in front of the congregation, they would be staring at his crusty red pimples. Jacob wished he could revisit the northwestern corner of Spain near the Mino River where his family went on their yearly vacation. The piping-hot mineral-rich thermal waters in that area would have cleared his skin. He hated being defined as a sickly child with stomach, asthma and skin afflictions, but the sulfur in the baths had always proven to be curative.