

It's Hanukkah—time for shiny presents, delicious potato pancakes, and glowing candles. But Penina's presents aren't ready, the potato pancakes are soggy, and her sister is hogging the candles.

When Grandma and Grandpa show up, so does a blizzard. Penina walks home through the snow and straight into another storm—a big argument between her mother and grandmother.

Hanukkah is going horribly wrong. Can Penina turn it around? She's going to try, with hand-cut snowflakes, a game of chance, and a plate full of crispy-hot potato pancakes.



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Penina Levine

Is a Potato Pancake



Rebecca O'Connell

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1. Splat

“No,” Penina said, “I think we should wait.”

The mountain of Hanukkah gifts was higher than the clock on top of the bookshelves. The presents were shiny and glittery and colorful, and it looked like there were dozens of them, scores, hundreds.

There were presents from Mom and Dad to Penina or Mimsy, presents from Mom to Dad or from Dad to Mom, presents from Mom’s students or Dad’s principal to the whole Levine family, presents mailed to them from faraway aunts and uncles and cousins, and a little mound of presents for the pet cat, Daisy.

But the presents from Penina weren’t in the pile. They weren’t ready yet. That was one of the great things about Hanukkah. It lasted eight nights. If you didn’t have everything wrapped and ready by the first night, you still had a week to catch up. That’s what she’d been hoping, anyway.

“Let’s not open them tonight. Let’s wait till

Grandma and Grandpa get here. That way, we can do it all together,” Penina said. Grandma and Grandpa wouldn’t be here for five more days, plenty of time to finish her gifts for Mom and Dad. She was making them coupon books, twelve coupons apiece. “Redeem this coupon for a thorough vacuuming of the den” and “This coupon good for 30 minutes of peace and quiet on the morning of your choice.” The coupons were going to be hand-painted in watercolor and bound in poster-board covers with colorful lacing. She thought about running upstairs and finishing them quickly, but that wouldn’t work. She was using glitter glue to decorate the covers, and that took a while to dry.

“No, now!” said Mimsy. She shrugged one shoulder and tilted her head, her Cuteness Routine. “Please? Pretty please?”

The Cuteness Routine was a powerful weapon. Penina had nothing to match it.

“I don’t see why we can’t each open one,” Mom said.

“There will still be plenty left to open when your grandparents get here,” said Dad. “Let’s light the candles first, then we’ll open presents.”

“Yay!” yelled Mimsy. “Hooray!” She ran around the living room and twirled like a ballerina—a short,

clumsy ballerina—in front of all the gifts. “Open mine. Open mine. Open mine,” she chanted.

“Take it easy, Mimsykin,” said Dad. He held Mimsy’s shoulder to keep her from spinning, which Penina thought was like putting his hands between the blades of a rotating fan, but it worked anyway.

“Okay, girls, who will help me light the menorah?” said Mom.

“Me!” yelled Mimsy, and she shot across the room to the front window. That’s where Mom had set up the menorah. It was a tall brass candleholder with room for nine candles: one for each night of Hanukkah, plus one helper candle, the *shamash*. The wrapped packages were shiny, but the polished menorah was radiant, luminous, brilliant.

“I get to pick the candles!” screamed Mimsy. She was already digging through the box. “I want pink and purple!”

Why did Mimsy get to pick the candles? Shouldn’t Penina get first pick? She was older, so it was only fair that she should go first. But if Mimsy picked two candles tonight (one for the first night, plus the *shamash*), then tomorrow Penina could pick three. They’d take turns night to night, and on the last night, Penina would get to fill the whole menorah, nine candles, all by herself.

“Okay, Mimsy,” Penina said, “you pick tonight. I’ll pick tomorrow.”

“That’s fair,” said Mom. She took the candles from Mimsy and placed them in the menorah.

“No! The purple one is the *shamash*!” Mimsy screamed.

Mom reversed the candles. “Okay, ready?” she asked. Mom sang the first note of the blessing herself, then everyone joined in.

Baruch ata Adonai

As they sang the blessing, Mom lit a match and held it to the purple *shamash* candle. She shook out the match and took the *shamash* out of the menorah. She used the *shamash* to light the pink candle, the candle for the first night.

le-hadlik ner

Shel Hanukkah.

When Penina sang “*shel Hanukkah*,” she always thought of a smooth pink seashell, but that’s not what the blessing meant. It was really a way of giving thanks for the candle-lighting tradition.

“*Hanukkah sameach*,” said Dad, which was Hebrew for *happy Hanukkah*. He gave Penina and Mimsy a squeeze, but Penina had to shrug out of it because Mimsy was jumping up and down, and it was jolting her.



“You said we could open presents!” Mimsy yelled. Penina didn’t have anything to give Mom and Dad.

Well, she did, but her gifts weren’t finished. She wished she’d gotten the coupon books done earlier. She wished she’d just bought her parents something at the mall. “I don’t think we should open presents tonight,” she said.

“Sure we should,” said Mom.

“Just one apiece,” said Dad.

“Pina!” yelled Mimsy, as if she knew Penina was joking about not opening presents.

Penina was not joking. She didn’t have anything to give her parents—or Mimsy, come to think of it—and that was no joke.

“Hanukkah is not about presents,” Penina declared. “It’s not about malls and catalogs. It’s about—”

Mom interrupted. “It’s about guerilla warfare.” She gave a flat little laugh. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t have presents.”

Technically, Mom was right. Hanukkah was about guerilla warfare—sneak attacks and hand-to-hand fighting. It was about the Maccabees’ victory for religious freedom. It was about—

“Open mine! Open mine!” Mimsy screamed, swinging two blue tubes like battle axes. “They’re for you! I made them!”

“Okay,” said Mom. She took a tube from Mimsy. “Daddy and I will open these. You girls each pick one to open tonight.”

Penina couldn’t believe the greed of these people. Hanukkah wasn’t just about opening gifts. It was the celebration of the rededication of the Temple. Mrs. Greenbaum had been over it with them in religious school a thousand times. In ancient Judea, the evil

King Antiochus had banned Judaism. He wrecked the Jewish Temple, and anyone caught being Jewish was killed.

Judah Maccabee and his brothers fought Antiochus, even though Antiochus had a huge army and all the Maccabees had were sticks and stones. Miraculously, the Maccabees won. They had a big celebration to rededicate the Temple. *That's* what Hanukkah was about, not presents.

"Hanukkah doesn't have anything to do with presents," Penina shouted. "Why can't you think about the true meaning of Hanukkah?"

"Don't you want your presents, Penina?" asked Mom. "Last week you had a long list of things you wanted for Hanukkah. What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," Penina answered.

"You know, Pen," Dad mentioned offhandedly, as if he weren't about to rev up into Lecture Mode, which Penina could tell he was, "exchanging gifts has been an important part of celebrating Hanukkah for hundreds of years."

Penina gave him a skeptical look.

"Really," said Dad. "Hanukkah was traditionally a time for European Jews to pay the teachers in the community. The students brought *gelt*—money—to school to give the teachers at Hanukkah. That's

where we get the tradition of Hanukkah gifts.”

“Especially for teachers,” Mom said, grinning. She was a teacher. So was Dad.

But I don't have anything to give you. Penina was all set to admit it, to explain that their gifts would be done by the eighth night but weren't ready yet. Her parents would understand, and when they got the coupon books, they'd see it had been worth the wait. Penina was just opening her mouth to tell them, but Mimsy opened hers first.

“Here! Take this! Mine first! Mine first!”

“Okay, Mimsy,” said Mom. She picked the tape off one end of the tube of wrapping paper and slid out another paper tube. She unrolled the inside tube and gasped. “Oh, Mimsy, thank you! A painting! It's just beautiful! Oh, look! This is just exquisite! Thank you!” She hugged Mimsy and gave her a big, loud kiss.

Dad tore the wrapping off his present and made a big huge fuss over the painting from Mimsy. “Thank you, Mimsy! This is fantastic! Look at your use of color and line! Wow! Some of my students don't produce work like that.”

Dad's students were teenagers. Dad taught high school art. There was no way Mimsy's painting was as good as a high school student's. Dad didn't know what he was talking about.

“Pick out your gifts, girls—one each,” said Mom.

Mimsy picked up a flat square box, but it wasn’t from her pile of gifts. It was from Penina’s. “Open this, Pina,” she said.

Penina’s gift for Mimsy was really nice. It was a stuffed toy cat with white and yellow patches, just like their pet cat, Daisy. It was life-sized and extra soft, and it was on a shelf in the bookstore at the mall. Penina had picked it out and put aside the money for it. She just hadn’t gotten it yet.

“Open it. Open it. I made it at school,” said Mimsy. She thought play group was school.

Penina took off the curly silver ribbon and the glossy blue wrapping and the top lid of the box. It was a paper plate. It was the outside of a paper plate, with the inside cut out and all kinds of junk glued to the rim.

“This is a button, and this is a flower, and this is a piece of yarn,” Mimsy yelled. She took the plate from Penina and held it up to her own face. “It’s a picture frame, see?”

“Thanks, Mimsy,” said Penina. “It’s really nice.”

“It’s beautiful, honey,” said Mom.

“It’s a really special gift,” said Dad. “What a nice thing to make for your sister.”

“And I glued on a pinecone right here, see?” said Mimsy.

“It’s great, Mimsy. Thanks,” Penina said. She put the paper-plate frame back in the box, but before she could put the lid back on, Mimsy grabbed the plate back.

“And these are beads. This one is orange, and this one is red.”

“Okay, very nice. Thanks for the frame,” said Penina. Mimsy should have just kept the thing if she liked it that much.



“And this one is blue, and this one is orange like that one—”

“Okay! I see it. It’s wonderful. I said thank you. Do I have to say it again? Fine. *Thank you!*” Penina yelled. She shouted. She screamed so hard she thought she saw the Hanukkah lights flicker.

Mimsy started to cry.

Dad picked her up and rocked her. Mom plopped down on the couch and put her face in her hands.



“You know what, Penina?” said Mom. “I am really tired of hearing you yell at your sister. She’s seven years younger than you are. Why can’t you just be nice to her?”

“Why can’t she be nice to me?” Penina answered. The words were out before she had time to think about them.

“She was nice to you. She gave you a handcrafted present.”

Mimsy lifted her head from Dad’s soaking-wet shoulder. “I *made* it for her!” she wailed. She sniffed twice and put her head back down.

“And I said thank you. Come on. I said it a hundred times, but she just wouldn’t quit bragging about it,” Penina said. She hated that stupid frame. She hated Hanukkah presents. She hated Hanukkah.

“You know what I want for Hanukkah?” said Mom. She’d taken her face out of her hands but was still slumped in the corner of the couch. “Penina, I want you to be nice to your sister, for the full eight days.”

“I am nice to her!” Penina shouted. This was so unfair. How could she be nice when Mimsy was such a brat?

Dad sat down next to Mom. Mimsy snuggled in his lap. “Your mother is asking you not to overreact.

If you have a problem with your sister, talk to her.”

Mom held out her hand, as if she wanted Penina to take it. Penina decided not to notice. She was not in a hand-holding mood. “I know you get frustrated,” Mom said, “but you’re the big sister. You have a responsibility to behave like one.”

Mimsy turned to Penina and smiled. Mimsy had snot on her face, and her curly hair was frizzed out all over the place. How anyone could think she was cute was a mystery to Penina.

Mom cleared her throat and said, “My parents are coming in a few days, and I don’t want them to see you fighting with your sister. Please, as my Hanukkah present, would you just *cool it?*”

Penina didn’t answer. She didn’t look at Mom and Dad and Mimsy. She looked at the menorah instead, and as she watched, pink and purple wax dropped off the candles, onto the base of the menorah.

Splat.