

**In Zarephath**  
By Jeremy Adelman

*At rise, a dark stage.*

**Old Man:** *(singing, and playing guitar, but unseen in the darkness)*

You can go down, ol' Hannah  
Well, well, well  
Don'cha cry anymore, ol' Hannah  
Ol' Hannah, don't you cry.

*The stage is now illuminated, entirely from the front, such that the back of the stage is still masked in shadows. The scene is of the edge of a railyard somewhere in the Midwest sometime in the early 1930s, in the hour just before dawn on a brisk autumn day. The **Old Man**, to whom our eyes are instantly drawn, is upstage right. He sits atop a small pile of crossties, the guitar on his lap, his body angled so that he faces somewhere between the audience and the other side of the stage. Though he is clearly about seventy, with gray hair and silver beard, he sits fully erect, and there seems about him an ageless energy. He is dressed in overalls and a dirty work shirt, and is barefoot.*

*Lying next to the old man, with his head propped up against the stack of crossties and his feet pointed towards stage left, is **Jack**. He is about twenty, and like the old man, dressed in rough work clothes, though he has a pair of boots. An old pork-pie hat rests cock-eyed on his head, almost covering his eyes, and making him appear to be asleep. A hobo's bindle, made from a red handkerchief tied to an old fishing rod, lies on the ground by his feet.*

*Directly across the stage from the old man is **Chava**, also upstage. She sits on a piece of rail beside a carpetbag, with her legs crossed in front of her. For the most part, she stares directly out towards the audience, as if pretending not to see the others, but every once in a while she will turn to cast a quick glance at the old man. She is about eighteen, and is dressed in dark, ragged clothing that has clearly gone a long time without being washed or mended, or perhaps even changed. A handkerchief, once white but now gray with dirt, covers the crown of her head.*

*All three of the characters are dirty and disheveled, and there is about the entire scene a sense of dilapidation and decay.*

**Old Man:** *(still singing and playing)*

I remember nineteen an' five  
Nineteen an' five  
Ain't no man still alive  
From nineteen an' five

An' I remember nineteen an' ten....

*Enter **Eddie** from stage left. He, too, is about twenty, and like the others he is dirty and unkempt. Though his clothes are now torn and ragged, they are of finer material than*

*those worn by the others. He carries a small satchel under his right shoulder. After entering, he crosses behind Chava, and approaches the old man with a bitter look on his face.*

**Old Man:** *(still singing and playing)*

Nineteen an' ten  
They work'd the women with the men  
In nineteen an'

**Eddie:** *(in a harsh half whisper)* Jesus Christ! You want all the bulls on the whole goddamn line to know we're here? *(The old man abruptly stops his playing.)*

**Old Man:** Don't you be worrying yourself about the bulls. Roger Crenshaw's yardmaster here, and he's a good sort of fellah – the kind that'd give a poor hobo a cup of coffee and a nickel if he caught one. He'd never sic the bulls on us, no sir. Not Roger.

**Eddie:** Can it, anyway, old man. Your singing's giving me a headache.

**Jack:** *(without moving)* Well, I liked it. *(Eddie scoffs. Jack straightens his hat and then sits up.)* Reminds me of somethin' I heard once.

**Old Man:** Aye. Reckon it would. That there's a prison song. That where you heard it too, eh? *(Jack pretends not to hear him, and slouches back down.)*

**Eddie:** *(After a beat)* What'd you do, huh? To get yourself put in the slammer, I mean. Was it jus' ridin' the rails? They don't send you to prison for that, do they? *(The old man smiles.)* C'mon, out with it. What'd you do?

**Old Man:** Lots of things. An' a damn good deal more they never caught me for.

**Jack:** Ain't that the truth.

*There is a short beat of silence.*

**Eddie:** You got a cigarette, old man?

**Old Man:** Sorry, but I'm plum out, young fellah.

**Eddie** *(looking down at Jack)* What about you?

**Jack:** Got a dime.

**Eddie:** A dime? Hell no. An' for a damn cigarette? Jesus Christ.

**Jack:** *(sitting up again)* Hey, you asked.

**Eddie:** (*spying Chava*) What about you, sister. You wouldn't happen to have a smoke, would you? (*Chava turns away, pointedly ignoring him, but he approaches her anyway.*) C'mon, be friendly now, sister. I don't bite. You got a cigarette?

**Chava:** No. I don't smoke.

**Eddie:** (*still towards Chava*) Say, I didn't see you 'round the jungle last night. You out here hopping the same freight we are? The one to Marion, I mean. (*Chava nods.*) Great! You wanna share a box-car or something?

**Old Man:** C'mon, Eddie. Don't torment the poor girl.

**Eddie:** (*flashing a look back towards the old man*) How do you know my name, grandpa?

**Old Man:** I heard you talking last night with the other hobos. That damn voice of yours isn't too quiet, you know. (*Eddie gives the old man a final sneer before turning back towards Chava.*)

**Eddie:** Anyway, I don't think we've met. What's your name, sister?

**Old Man:** Hell, Eddie. I told you, don't torment her. She's not interested. Can't you see?

**Eddie:** You're not the boss of me.

**Old Man:** It's not me who outta worry you. It's this fellah here. (*He points downward towards Jack.*) If you keep pestering her, he'll bust your noggin.

**Eddie:** Why? Is she his squeeze, or something?

**Old Man:** No. Worse than that. His sister. (*Chava's head jerks suddenly at the word "sister," her startled expression revealing that the old man is lying. Eddie does not notice her, however, since he is looking at the old man, and then at Jack, who now cracks his knuckles, smiles, and stretches. As he rises to his feet, Eddie can now clearly see that he is tall and muscular, hardly the sort of person Eddie would want to encounter in a fistfight. Eddie takes a step away from Chava, and then rubs together and blows on his hands.*)

**Eddie:** Cold day, huh? (*After no one replies, he continues.*) You think there really is work for us in Marion?

**Old Man:** Yeah. Jimmy Martins said so himself last night. That Jimmy's been riding the rails for a long time, even back before the depression. By now, he can smell a job a hundred miles away. If he says there's work in Marion, then there's work in Marion. You can bet your last dime on that one.

**Eddie:** But where the rest of 'em? Where the other boys from the camp? The train's gonna come by soon.

**Old Man:** It's gonna stop right on that track, there, in... oh... a half-hour or so.

**Eddie:** So where's the rest of 'em? It don't smell right.

**Old Man:** You worried they've tricked you? Sent you barkin' up the wrong tree? Don't you worry about that, Eddie. The rest of 'em boys aren't here because after you hit the hay, the bottles of whiskey came out. It's gonna be long past sunrise before we'll see many of 'em stirring, that's for damn sure.

**Jack:** *(to the old man)* You know an awful lot, ain't' chya?

**Old Man:** Aye. An' if you get to be my age, you will, too.

**Jack:** If? You ain't reckon I'll be old as you someday?

**Old Man:** There ain't many so lucky – or unlucky, I guess it'd be. *(He chuckles at his own witticism)*. It's a hard life we lead, ain't it?

**Jack:** Aye. But thing's'll get better someday.

**Old Man:** Maybe. But 'til they do, you remember this, you hear: never ride the rods. That goes for you, too, Eddie. *(He gets to his feet, and begins walking towards Eddie while still carrying the neck of the guitar in his left hand)* You hear me, Eddie? Never ride the rods. The blinds? The blinds are fine. But the rods – never. I've seen too many boys who ended up greasing the tracks after they tried riding the rods.

**Eddie:** Whatever you say, grandpa.

**Old Man:** I'd listen, if I were you. It'll save your life someday.

*For a brief moment, the old man and Eddie lock eyes. Then Eddie looks away, down toward his feet.*

**Old Man:** *(quieter now, as if in intimate conversation)* You don't really want to go to Marion, do you?

**Eddie:** *(shrugs)* There's work there. I'm flat broke, same as the rest of us.

**Old Man:** Yeah. But you don't just want a few day's work. You want something more.

**Eddie:** A job?

**Old Man:** A purpose. Here. *(He lifts up the guitar and offers it to Eddie.)* Go ahead. Take it. Just promise me one thing.

**Eddie:** What?

**Old Man:** That you'll hop that train, there, instead. You don't want to go to Marion. *(He points out into the audience. Jack and Chava also follow his finger.)* That's the train for you.

**Eddie:** Huh? Where's it go?

**Old Man:** West.

**Eddie:** West?

**Old Man:** Back home.

**Eddie:** *(after a beat)* I don't play guitar.

**Old Man:** You'll learn. *(Eddie hesitates)* I'm giving it to you. Take it. *(He does, gingerly.)* Good. Now go hop in that boxcar. That train'll be leaving soon.

*For a moment, Eddie stands with a perplexed look on his face. Then we hear two short blasts of a mournful steam whistle.*

**Eddie:** Guess I better be going. *(He exits, still holding the guitar, down through the audience. The three others follow him with their eyes, including Chava, who now stands up. We hear another whistle, followed by the sound of a train thumping across jointed rail. Chava and Jack then look away, back towards the old man, both with expressions of awe.)*

**Chava:** Who are you? *(The old man replies with a smile.)* Why did you say we were brother an' sister?

**Old Man:** It worked, did it not? He left you alone. *(He turns to face Jack).* What about you, Jack? You've got questions too, ain't you?

**Jack:** How did you know my name's Jack?

**Old Man:** *(now beaming)* Oh, I call everyone Jack if I ain't know their name. Sometimes I'm right, an' then I make myself a fast friend. An' if I'm wrong, it ain't no bother. But that ain't the question you were gonna ask, was it?

**Jack:** Why'd you give a roach like that your guitar? You know he's jus' gonna pawn it, first chance he gets.

**Old Man:** Aye. But after he's burned through the five bucks he's gonna get for it, he's gonna feel bad about it. So next time he's got five dollars, he's gonna buy himself another one an' learn to play it real good. He's a guitarist. He jus' ain't know it yet.

**Jack:** You should've given it to me. I'd've never pawned it.

**Old Man:** That would be wastin' it. You ain't no guitarist.

**Chava:** What makes you say that?

**Jack:** I could learn, same as him.

**Old Man:** You got other talents, Jack. Not all of us are guitarists. *(To Chava)* You aren't a guitarist either.

**Chava:** What am I, then?

**Old Man:** Lost.

**Jack:** *(laughing)* Ain't we all.

**Old Man:** Not all of us. I ain't lost, not at all.

*There is a moment of silence. Chava and Jack look at one another.*

**Old Man:** *(smiling)* Now Jack, don't you look at her that way, an' get her thinkin' you might be the one she's lookin' for. You an' I both know that ain't true. *(Chava and Jack break eye contact. Chava faces the audience, mouth agape in befuddlement. Jack turns to the old man.)*

**Jack:** You seem to know an awful lot about me. We ain't met before, have we?

**Old Man:** No. But I've seen your type, many times. That song I was singing – *(he sings)* “You can go down, Ol' Hannah” – that's a prison song, that is. You know it 'cause you heard it in prison. Ain't that right? *(Jack looks away.)* Come now, Jack – there ain't no shame in it. I dare reckon I've spent more time in prisons than you've spent alive.

**Jack:** It was jus' the bulls, got me for hoppin' a freight... vagrancy... ain't nothing more'n that...

**Old Man:** Is that right? *(Jack nods. The old man grins.)* Why you lyin'? You think I ain't smart enough to know when you're lyin'? We've been talkin' long enough now for you to know I ain't no dummy.

**Jack:** Okay, you got me. It was assault.

**Old Man:** Aye. That's more like it. *(To Chava)* See, now, why I said you were his sister? He really would have beaten that Eddie up if he didn't leave you alone.

**Jack:** Naw. I ain't no animal... He called my mother a... a... I had no choice.

**Old Man:** Aye. Bet you didn't. An' I bet you licked him real good.

**Jack:** Busted his jaw, knocked out half his teeth, an' sent him to the hospital for a week. Or so the judge said.

**Old Man:** Aye. I'll believe it. You've got a real talent there, Jack – a real, natural talent.

**Jack:** What? Beatin' people up?

**Old Man:** It's a talent. Same as playin' guitar. That Eddie, he's a guitarist who ain't know it. But you... you're –

**Chava:** *(semi-aside, directed as much to herself as to either of the others)* A boxer.

**Old Man:** *(with a nod)* Girl's right. Reckon you outta listen.

*There is another short beat of silence.*

**Jack:** So... So what should I do 'bout it? You gonna give me a pair of boxing-gloves, or somethin'?

**Old Man:** *(laughing)* No. But I will tell you which train to hop. An' it ain't the one to Marion. You want that one, there *(again, he points out towards the audience)* – the one that ol' switcher's assemblin' right now. That's gonna be a hotshot – express, straight to the yards just east of Chicago. That's the train for you, Jack.

**Jack:** Chicago?

**Old Man:** Aye, Chicago. On Adams Street, jus' by the bridge over the river, there's an athletic club – Palman's is the name on the sign. You go there an' ask for Mr. Palman. Say you're an amateur boxer lookin' to make some money as a prizefighter. Tell him Stephen Martins sent you, an' he'll be sure to give you a fair shake.

**Chava:** Is that your name? Stephen Martins?

**Old Man:** No, but Joe Palman ain't know that. You remember that name now, Jack – Stephen Martins from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That'll get you your in, an' that's all a boy like you'll need. Ol' Palman's a real good trainer; he was a fighter himself back in the day. Fought a bout with Jack Johnson once, though o'course that one ain't ended too well for Ol' Joe Palman... Aye! He'll train you good, real good.

**Jack:** There a lot of money in prizefightin'?

**Old Man:** Enough to hold a man over 'til things get better. An' they will, someday, jus' like yeah said. But it ain't really about that. Boxing'll give you a purpose. Takes a lot of discipline, to be a good boxer – a lot of training an' discipline an' a whole lot of smarts. It ain't jus' two oafs swingin' at each other, no sir. Ol' Joe Palman'll give you discipline, an' more. An' that'll be somethin' that sticks with yeah long after you hang up your gloves.

**Jack:** *(after a deep sigh)* Well, then. Guess I'd better find a car to hop, eh? *(He looks down and picks up the hobo's bindle that he had left on the ground.)*

**Old Man:** Aye! But remember, no ridin' the rods, you hear? That's a good way to get yourself killed. An' remember those names – Palman's on Adams Street an' Stephen Martins from Pittsburg.

**Jack:** *(while exiting through the audience)* I ain't gonna forget. Bye now, an' thank you.

**Old Man:** Bye.

*There is another short pause, in which Chava casts the old man a sheepish glance. He replies with a smile.*

**Old Man:** Well, I guess it's your turn now, Chava.

**Chava:** *(mouth agape)* There is... There is no way you could know my name.

**Old Man:** But I do.

**Chava:** How? That's... that's not possible. I don't know you.

**Old Man:** Look inside yourself, Chava.

**Chava:** Who are you?

**Old Man:** You can run away from your home, from your family, from the life that once was yours. But you cannot run from yourself. Look inside yourself, Chava, and you will know my name.

**Chava:** *(after a long, dramatic pause)* Elijah the prophet.... Eliyahu HaNavi

**Old Man:** The very same.

**Chava:** I... Hashem be praised.

**Old Man:** Indeed. Now, let me help you, as I have helped the others. *(Chava is too awestricken to muster a reply.)* Tell me, Chava, why you are here.

**Chava:** You know, don't you?

**Old Man:** Of course. But I would like to hear it, nonetheless. It helps, sometimes, for us to speak our troubles aloud.

**Chava:** It is as you said. I ran away from home.

**Old Man:** *(after a pause, when it is clear Chava will not continue.)* Jack and Eddie ran away from home, too, and while the details are different, their stories are much the same – a father out of work, younger siblings going hungry, a sense that it was time for them to make it on their own in the world. But your story is not like theirs, is it?

**Chava:** No.

**Old Man:** So why did you run away?

**Chava:** I did not want to marry him.

**Old Man:** Yes. And why?

**Chava:** *(after a pause)* Because I did not love him.

**Old Man:** Yes. Yes indeed. *(He draws a deep breath, and exhales it slowly.)* It would have been an easier life, if you had stayed in New York, and married –

**Chava:** Don't say his name. I can't bear it!

**Old Man:** You doubt yourself now, don't you? You think you made the wrong choice. At night, you stay awake, wondering whether you should head back east, back to New York, back to the family that still says prayers for you, every shabbat –

**Chava:** *(near tears)* I cannot bare it!

**Old Man:** But you never do it, because you think it cannot be undone. He would never marry you now – and you are right. Even your family's love – you do not trust it. You will always remember that time, in that hobo camp in Indiana, when you were hungry, so very hungry – the first time you ate a mulligan stew, even though you knew there was bacon in it. You feel you have defiled yourself. And so here you are, ready to hop another freight, to chase another rumor, to stay lost, as lost as you were yesterday, and as lost as you'll still be tomorrow.

*There is a short, pregnant beat. Chava sniffles and dabs at her eyes.*

**Old Man:** You have a question for me, don't you, Chava? *(Chava nods.)* Ask it, please.

**Chava:** *(after a short beat)* The messiah. When will he come?

**Old Man:** *(laughing)* That was not the question I meant, and you know it. But I'm glad you've asked it, anyway – it shows, if nothing else, that there is a part of you, deep

inside, that cannot be defiled. Your heritage goes with you, Chava. No amount of bacon grease can erase that. As for the question itself, I will not answer it. However, I will tell you this: you have met him.

**Chava:** The messiah?

**Old Man:** Yes. You might not remember. It was almost a year ago, now, in a railyard just east of Buffalo. A rumor had gone through the hobo jungle that there was work to be had in Cleveland, and all of you were lining up to hop the first hot-shot. But the anointed one never rides a hot-shot; he only rides the milk train, for he must always be near a station stop should the Eternal One declare the end of time. You perhaps did not notice him, the one hobo who stayed behind while the rest of you hopped into the boxcars. But he saw you. He sees all. *(He pauses, briefly)* Now, ask me the question that is really on your mind, instead of the one you thought you ought to ask for the sake of appearances.

*For a moment, the old man looks towards her, intently, but she averts her gaze and keeps her silence.*

**Old Man:** You did not love him. You knew, by some preternatural instinct, that you would never love him. And so you ran away. But now that you are lost, you begin to doubt yourself. What if you threw everything away for nothing? You gave up so much, Chava – your family; your community; the easy, conventional life you could have had with him. And you did it for love. Yes, for love – you may never have thought about it that way, but it is true. When you ran away eighteen months ago, it was because you believed in love – you believed there was someone out there whose souls was bound to yours by the will of the Eternal One. But now your faith is wavering. If you continue on the path you are on – if you hop that train to Marion today – then someday, someday soon, you will stop believing in love entirely. And then you will be lost forever, consumed by regret. So ask me, Chava – ask me that question that has followed you, like a shadow, ever since you hopped your first freight.

**Chava:** Is there... is there a soul, bound to mine? *(The old man smiles but says nothing.)* Tell me! Tell me, please. Surely you know! *(Again, he says nothing.)* Why do you torment me?

**Old Man:** *(pointing once again out into the audience.)* Do you see that boxcar, there?

**Chava:** *(with sudden excitement)* Will that take me to him?

**Old Man:** *(after shaking his head)* No. That boxcar will take you to Jersey City. From there, it is an easy trip across the Hudson, back home. *(Chava's spirits fall, visibly; once again, she seems on the verge of tears.)* It will be a tough road for you. Your father will not accept you back, at first. But your Uncle Moshe will take care of you, and in time you will be reconciled. You will never marry. Gossips will tell all sorts of lurid tales about you, and there will always be those, proud of their appearance of virtue, who revel in looking down at you. But you will no longer be lost.

**Chava:** *(after drawing a deep, calming breath)* So there is no such thing as love... no one, meant only for me...

**Old Man:** I did not say that. There is another path you may choose to take. *(He points again, this time in a slightly different direction.)* See that gondola, there? *(Chava nods.)* It will take you – eventually – to Omaha, Nebraska. Take it there, and you will meet him, the one whose soul is bound to yours.

**Chava:** *(with returning excitement)* It's true! I always knew it was true!

**Old Man:** It's not true for everyone – some souls are meant to live out their days alone. And even for those lucky enough to be bound to another, few ever allow themselves to experience true love. They blind themselves to all but a narrow slice of the world, force themselves settle for an illusion, or set aside their innermost selves for practical concerns – for money, for status, for ease.

**Chava:** Why did you do this to me? Why did you tell me about the other car?

**Old Man:** Because if you board that car, you will never see your parents again. *(Chava gasps.)* See now why some bow to practical concerns? True love, Chava, is as much a curse as it is a blessing.

*For a long, dramatic moment, Chava's eyes dart back and forth between the two "cars" in the audience that the old man has pointed out to her, a solemn look set across her face.*

**Chava:** *(while still looking out at the "cars")* Which one should I take?

**Old Man:** I cannot answer that for you.

**Chava:** He's a goy, isn't he?

**Old Man:** *(nodding)* Yes.

*There is another pause, this one slightly shorter. Then Chava turns to face the old man.*

**Chava:** *(Decisively)* Thank you.

**Old Man:** You've made your choice?

**Chava:** Yes. *(She returns to her carpetbag, which she picks up and places over her shoulder.)*

**Old Man:** Which car will you hop?

**Chava:** You already know.

**Old Man:** *(with a chuckle)* I do. I do indeed.

**Chava:** You were right. I was lost. Thank you for finding me.

**Old Man:** I did nothing of the sort. I only helped you find yourself. Good bye, Chava.

**Chava:** Good-bye.

*Chava, too, exits through the audience. The old man stands in the middle of the stage, watching her depart.*

**Old Man:** *(quietly, semi-aside)* Do not be afraid. Go and do as you have said.

*He watches her a little longer, and then he chuckles to himself. He then turns and walks back towards the pile of crossties on which he was sitting at rise.*

**Old Man:** *(singing, quietly at first, but growing louder with each line; by the end of the song, he is sitting exactly as he was at the beginning of the play, except that he no longer holds a guitar.)*

You can go down, ol' Hannah  
Well, well, well  
Don'cha cry anymore, ol' Hannah  
Ol' Hannah, don't you cry.

*Blackout*

### **Notes:**

The acoustic guitar used to play “Ol’ Hannah” at the beginning of the show should be tuned a whole step flat, so that while the song is sung in Gm, it is played in the (much easier for amateur guitarists) key of Am. (In the provided sheet music, I have denoted the chords assuming the guitar is so detuned. If played in standard tuning, the chords must all be lowered by a whole step – e.g. Am becomes Gm.)

The old man does not need to be a particularly good guitarist, but he must be an emotive, if not necessarily strictly pitch-perfect, singer.

It is imperative that the actor playing the old man be able to pronounce the name “Chava” correctly (that is, using the voiceless uvular fricative “ch” from Hebrew). If this is not possible, her name should be changed to the (slightly less thematically appropriate) “Rifka.” (N.B. – “Chava” is the Hebrew equivalent of the English “Eve,” while “Rifka” is the Yiddish equivalent of “Rebecca.”)

All improvisations are encouraged and welcomed, and all staging notes may be amended as necessary to fit the vision of the director and the constraints of the theatre.