

## METAMORPHOSES

SALOMEA PERL

*Translated from the Yiddish by Ruth Murphy*

### THE CANVAS

Don't think that I've always been a merchant-woman. My husband, may he live and be well, was once well off, a wealthy man—Leybl Sender Katz!

He had the look of a count, a king; he is handsome even now, a striking man. These days he lies in bed, poor creature, paralyzed; he's lost the use of his arms and legs...Eleven years already he's lain this way. It's cost me a fortune—wherever there was a doctor, a healer, a rabbi who worked miracles! Three times I've sent him to Busk, to visit the graves of the miracle workers.

It has been ordained, an affair of God. One is not permitted to argue with God—praised be the Eternal One!

He and I, poor things, never had any children. As for feeding him, he does eat; surprisingly, he has an appetite...I buy him this and that, a little wine, milk, an orange; the neighbor woman gives it to him a little bit at a time. However, he would rather that it was I who served him his food. He loves me like life itself; he misses me so each day, as if we had just gotten married. "Goldele, is that you? My darling, my precious one!"—and he hugs and kisses me, like long ago...

I didn't want him—I wept. What a foolish child I was! He was a widower, a rich man. I was already more than old enough to be married—eighteen, almost nineteen, without fortune and without dowry. Beautiful I was, yes—eyes black as coal and a splendid part in my hair—very beautiful. My mother worried about me; entire nights she would be unable to sleep, fretting: what will become of her? What will be her life?

I was a silent one, a little bit odd, as if I were a stranger in the house. For days on end I sat by the window and embroidered, and as an embroiderer, I had a rare talent. I embroidered wings, along with trees, also flowers—it was magnificent to behold. I'd never been taught but I had a gifted mind, and what the eye saw, the hand soon reproduced.

When I was still a child, a girl of not quite ten, I embroidered a curtain for the Holy Ark, and it lit up the whole synagogue. It was embroidered with gold and silk, except for the Star of David, which was done in pearls—sewn with the tiniest of pearls!

I understood how to select colors as does a painter; under my hands the canvas became alive, and the trees grew and grew as if they

were in a great, green field. I sat for entire days engrossed in my work, not speaking a single word. Even if a fire had broken out, I still would not have uttered a sound.

“I beg of you, my darling—may you be well—what kind of demon is tormenting you?” my mother would many times burst out in anger, but would afterwards bite her tongue. She did not want to swear at her child; she trembled before curses as if they were fire. All her rage, however, all the bitterness in her heart, she would unleash on her husband, alas, on my handsome father:

“Why don’t you concern yourself about this? How will things turn out for her?”

“It’s proper to you then, that she sits here until she is an old maid” she raged at him. “Why aren’t you seeing to it that a match is made? Too few wealthy men in town? Go to all your householders, yell, exclaim: Jews! In the streets lies merit for the World to Come! A Jewish maiden, nineteen years old...”

Up in the garret of my girlfriend’s mother there lived a young student with big, big dark eyes. He was sick, a consumptive. Yet such a gaze he had, so deep, so passionate. At night, when everyone else was asleep, he would play his fiddle. There he would play, sitting in the window, under the open sky, above him the stars...

I wouldn’t sleep; for hours and hours I listened, and I trembled. The fiddle spoke words, sweet and sad...it wailed and pleaded, it called... One time my mother had gotten out of bed, and dragged me down from the window by my hair.

And truly in my house I felt like a stranger, like a prisoner, like someone bought and sold. I was drawn to somewhere faraway, far—to where, I myself didn’t know. It seemed to me that I had been born in another land, among other people, in a different society. I dreamed of other worlds, these beautiful worlds, of crystal palaces with enchanted emperors and empresses.

In my thoughts were being woven and embroidered images even more beautiful than the flowers and trees of my canvas—images painted with colors as bright and vivid as those of the great artists. And it intoxicated me, elated me, inspired me. Hours long I stared, engrossed in those pictures, in my own thoughts. I saw myself free and proud in those crystal palaces, with those enchanted kings—near me a prince, an enchanted prince.

I loved—so terribly loved—this bridegroom, the Unknown One,

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who lived deep in my heart, quietly, so very quietly, such an intimate quiet. Many were the times that with a rush of intense feeling, I pressed my hands to my heart and called out into the air: "Come already, come!"

My father, when my mother was not at home—he feared her as he did fire—would quietly come up to me, take me by the hand, and stroke the part of my hair softly, with a loving softness.

"Don't worry, child!" he consoled me. "Your intended, God willing, will come." And I would look at my father and smile.

I sat with my girlfriend in front of our house on the lovely green grass, embroidering a watch pouch for her as a Purim gift for her groom. It was a warm spring day, and the little birds in the breezes danced and sang—it was a song filled with joy and delight, a wedding song, and the birds danced their wedding dance.

"Mazel tov, little birds!" my girlfriend laughed and clapped her hands. "Mazel tov to you! May you celebrate a bris next year!"

I did not laugh; I sat preoccupied, gloomy. A feeling of anxiousness constricted my breast. Long did I spend picking out colors—from each color came forth to me a dozen others, very, very dark and very, very bright.

"Mindele! Why hasn't he played for the last two nights?" I asked quietly, oh so quietly, holding my breath. My lips trembled.

"He is ill, Goldele, mortally ill. He can play no more."

My heart thudded like a hammer; I didn't speak, didn't reply. The canvas fell out of my hands; my eyes soared far, far away.

"My child," my mother came up to me. "Put aside your work; enough taking care of other brides and making gifts for other grooms. Tomorrow, God willing, it's for your own betrothed that you'll be embroidering trees, birds, and flowers...your engagement contract is being written. Child, get up!"

I remained seated, my head hanging low, silent, pensive, far away. The little birds in the air above us danced and sang. Before my eyes swam the flowers and trees that I had sewn onto my canvas. Inside me, my heart wailed and shrieked. With love and longing, I pressed my face to the bright colors.

"Leybl Sender Katz: a wealthy bridegroom! Get up, child, come!"

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## THE THEATER

“A fine son-in-law you’ve acquired for yourself, may it happen to all my enemies,” said Beile angrily to her husband. “Again the evil spirit has entered him—again he’s coming home late at night, just like he did last year. God forbid that we should have to go through this once more!”

“What? Is he going to the theater again?” a startled Moishe replied in alarm.

“Only the demons would know...” she answered testily. “After all, am I watching him to see where he goes? It’s enough that three, four times a week now, he’s again coming home at one or two o’clock in the morning.”

“To hell with that young man,” Moishe banged his hand on the table. “Only the Dark One knows what has become of him; such a brilliant mind, such a Talmudic genius, and suddenly—such a disgrace. And what does Malke say?”

“Malke?” She repeated the question. “Malke? She is a child; of course she loves him; indeed, he is a fine-looking young man—tall as a tree. Well, certainly she won’t divorce him!”

“Who is talking about a divorce?” he said heatedly. He got up and paced across the room. Distressed, he tugged at his beard and continued:

“A divorce? Who’s talking about a divorce? Have you forgotten that he’s a grandchild of Reb Zadok, and who is Reb Zadok, do you know? Reb Zadok”—filling with pride, he stopped pacing—“is one of the ‘Lamed Vovniks,’ the thirty-six hidden righteous ones! To have such an in-law doesn’t seem like a small thing, does it? Don’t you think? No shame there, it seems, right?”

“Yes...”

Now Beile wanted her turn to speak, but he had not yet finished with his—“And don’t worry,” he cut her off, “with God’s help, I’ll drive the craziness out of him, as I did with him a year ago.” He halted once again in front of Beile.

“Do you remember that jacket of his?” Once more he became infused with pride.

“I cut it up into little pieces, and the student who talked him into it—I told him off good and ran him off; Dovid himself received a stinging slap.”

Beile was horrified!

“I beg you, Moishe, don’t lose your temper so quickly; one can sometimes accomplish more with a carrot than with a stick.”

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“Of course I’ll try the carrot first!”

“The most important thing,” said Beile, “for me, is Malke. She nearly died back then; I didn’t think she would be able to endure it...”

“Ay! Well, enough of this! But if you like, speak first with Malke...maybe she knows something about it...”

“Everything would be all right,” said Beile, “if he prayed with you at the same prayer house...”

“He doesn’t want to, the scoundrel!”

“And perhaps,” Beile attempted, “You would go to his?”

“What? Have you lost your mind? Do you want to catch an earful from me? Will you talk me into all kinds of bad ideas? Isn’t it enough that all these problems are because of you?”

“Because of me?” Beile retorted, offended. “Because of me? Was I the one who made that jacket for him last year? Brought a student here? Took him to the theater?”

“Come, come; I know—no evil eye—what a mouth you’ve got... that we should pray in the same prayer house!...It would have been better if you hadn’t insisted on a separate apartment for them. Then we would all be living together, and he wouldn’t be coming home at all hours!”

“I’ve already told you, that today they can’t...today they no longer...these days a couple must live apart, today...”

“Today? Again and again with today! What is happening these days? Is the world turning itself upside down, or what? But why am I even talking; you’ve had your way, and that’s enough...”

Affronted, Beile was silent.

“Well, what do we do?” She asked after a while.

“What do we do? I’m going to his prayer house; if I find him there, it will be his death! And you go to see Malke; talk the matter over with her.”

Malke was sitting on the bed lost in thought, her head hanging low. The lamp on the nightstand cast a pale light onto her slight, attractive, yet downcast figure.

“Is that you, Dovid?” she jumped up, hearing steps. Catching sight of her mother, she stood there ashamed with a blushing face.

“I thought it was Dovid,” she explained defensively, and sat back down.

“Your Dovid, it appears, is once again a man about town,” said Beile in a mocking and bitter tone. “It’s already nine o’clock and he lets

you sit here by yourself...”

Malke let out a moan.

“Last year he was dealing with students, books, trifles . . . what is it about today?”

“I should know?”

“A strange spirit has taken hold of this boy!”

“How do I know?” Malke said quietly. “He says he’s suffocating here.”

“Suffocating? It’s not suffocating at all, what an amazing lie...and well, if it is—you can open a window!”

“He says,” Malke continued, her voice becoming even sadder, “he says, that he feels tied down here, confined...”

“Is that so? Free? He wants to do whatever he pleases? Without having to answer to anyone?” Beile said angrily. “And you, what do you say?”

Malke was silent. Her head dropped even lower, and she bit her lower lip so that she would not let loose of the wail that was splitting apart her breast. Beile’s heart took pity on her and moving closer to her, took her by the hand—a hand that was trembling.

“There, there,” said Beile with a calm, soft voice. “Now then, don’t be frightened, it will all work itself out...”

Malke bent over and hid her head in her mother’s lap. Her mother stroked her wig.

“With God’s help, everything will turn out right,” she consoled her daughter. “But you must help us...Papa and I...you must tell us everything, everything...”

“Everything?” Malke was taken aback.

“Certainly! First you must keep an eye on him, follow after him, and see who he goes around with...”

Malke remained mute.

“Haven’t you noticed anything?” her mother continued, questioning her.

“No...”

“Oh yes,” her mother said, recollecting something. “Keep your eye especially on his tallis kotn...see if he doesn’t leave it at home sometimes.”

“Do you understand, child?” her mother continued. “A Jew who wears a tallis kotn doesn’t roam about late at night.” Seized by a yawn, she cast an eye on the clock. “Ay! It’s already very late, ten o’clock. Last night at this same time, I’d already rolled over onto my left side.”

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She got up.

“Go to sleep, Malke. Don’t wait on this lowlife. Don’t worry; he’ll catch plenty from Papa.”

Her mother went out, and Malke began to pace around the room, wringing her hands as her lips trembled. Her mother’s words weighed on her like a stone on her heart...

They will beat him! Her Dovid! Yet maybe he really is on a bad path—she doesn’t know. She doesn’t understand what’s become of him, from the way he was last year to the way he is now. Yet she would prefer that they castigate and beat her instead of Dovid. A year ago, he was still a child, yet over this past year he’d really become a man; above his upper lip—such sweet whiskers had now grown. His eyes, too, were very different these days, so passionate and lively; his cheeks seemed altered, his gestures had changed...But why does he feel stifled? Why does he flee from the house every night? Why doesn’t he talk to her?

She sat back down on the bed and rested her young, distressed face on her hands...He’s keeping bad company, she knows this, although she won’t tell her mother, her father certainly not...He’s learning to play a musical instrument...!

Yesterday someone came to visit him; probably the one who’s teaching him how to play...he must be a musician...they were talking about the theater. Seized by weeping, she threw her whole body on the bed, her face in the pillow to muffle her sobs. At the thought that he might be going to the theater—her heart skipped a beat in terror!

She has never been to the theater. She does know where it is; she’d been by the box office with a girlfriend and seen where the tickets were sold. She’d seen, too, the steps on which one walks up to the entrance, those white marble steps. Her companion tried to persuade her to go in, but she would not be led astray. More than once, she’d heard her father say that the theater contained idolaters, showboys dancing with showgirls, and all manner of sorcerers imitating rain, thunder and lightning to spite God, just like the magicians once did in Egypt!

Yet her girlfriend had told her something different: she said that in the theater people sing—forgive the comparison—more beautifully than in synagogue...and truly, for that lie, she had cut herself off from her friend—she doesn’t want to know her anymore...what good would it do her to have anything to do with sorcery? And her Dovid is in the theater, among idolaters, sorcerers, and—she doesn’t want to let the words pass her lips!

It seems to her that her Dovid is standing bent over a deep well, and will fall in at any moment...a cold sweat of fear covers her, and she jumps up.

He must be saved, rescued; and she herself, she doesn't want her mother to berate him, her father, God forbid, to beat him—no, she won't be able to bear it...she herself will do it all! She already knows what to do! She will go to him in the theater and tear him out of those godless hands; God will help her and she will not be harmed, and he will listen to her...at times, he loves her so much, so much...and she will weep before him...weep with bitter tears! Sometimes such things happen, when a wife must rescue her husband from hell! Her mother had once told her about an aunt of hers who had dragged her husband home from some very disgusting companions...her mother didn't want to say who and where and what, only that her aunt was prepared to sacrifice herself! They'd wanted to thrash her!

And she too, will sacrifice herself for her Dovid...only she won't go like her aunt did, armed with a broom, and she won't drag him home as did her aunt did—by the ears...instead she means to plead with him, to weep, to wrap her arms around his legs and kiss them—she will prevail...he loves her so much sometimes!

And if not, she wants to perish along with him!

Money she does have, for a droshky and a ticket; she's still kept on hand perhaps half of the cash that *guests* had given at her wedding for Dovid's Torah speech...she'd not wanted to lend it out for interest as her father had told her to do. She'd grown a bit affectionate towards these banknotes she'd received for that talk of his...and truly, it is with this money that she will save him...

As she goes down the street in the droshky, she closes her eyes—she's ashamed to meet the glance of anyone in the street; she doesn't want to see a familiar face. Leaning in a corner, she feels her heart trembling from fear...

Maybe she's not doing the right thing? A year ago, when Dovidl was given a beating and she could not be consoled for her grief and heartache, her mother had said to her that he was not worth her tears, that he was a deceptive thing, a worm-eaten plum, that he'll be thrown out along with the garbage, and that she will yet get a handsomer and better husband...

But then she had wept even more...because even if a king should come, a king with a jeweled crown on his head, she still wouldn't trade



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him for her Dovidl...after all, doesn't her mother know what a sweet Dovidl she has? Does she realize this?...At that time, he had wanted to run away again...he was packing his bags! Yet when he was done, he had gazed and gazed at her, until his heart was softened...she could not utter a word, but he fell at her feet and had...

“Whoa!”

They are at the theater already. There's no line in front of the box office. She wants a ticket for “whatever it costs,” lays her purse down. The cashier notes her predicament, gives her a ticket, and counts out the price of the ticket himself.

“First floor,” he tells her, “on the right...number 110...”

In the theater, she turns her face away from the stage; she feels that here must be actual sorcery, true idolatry...if it weren't so cramped, so impossible to extricate her arm, she would cover her ears...at any rate, she'll close her eyes just until it becomes quieter. Surely here, in the theater, there must also be—excuse the comparison—a pause in the service like when the Torah is taken out, an intermission, and then she'll search for him; she'd know him a mile away.

She closes her eyes, but the music intrudes upon her ears...they are singing, and they are playing so sadly, so weepingly, coming so much from the heart, that it matches her situation precisely, her heartache...

And the scene on the stage, which had at first scared her so, now begins to attract her like a magnet. In vain does her “yeytser-tov,” her good inclination, try to keep her eyelids closed; they open on their own and grab onto every beam of light, her ears to every sound...and it all goes straight to her heart, and her heart is so tender, so incredibly tender, so saturated with tears .

Perhaps this is not a hell at all? This flashes through her mind, yet the thought goes no further—the scene forces its way into her heart and mind, here she can even forget her Dovidl...when the kettle drum calls out or the braided trumpet sounds, her legs tremble beneath her; then when the fiddle sings or a clarinet wails—oh, then she feels so good...

God be praised, she thinks, in today's performance there are no sorcerers, no idolaters...no showgirls even...there, on the stage, are only fine ladies in silk and velvet dresses and noblemen standing in yellow boots with curved swords, dressed in gold and silver clothing...and one of them, the most handsome of them all, stands in the middle and presses his right hand to his heart; a heart that must be aching, and he sings tearfully, and all answer him in consolation, yet he does not allow himself to

be comforted, and laments even more and more...

Suddenly, pushing his way through the noblemen and fine ladies comes an old man. His hair is as grey as a dove, yet he has a voice like a lion, and—a pistol in his hand! He speaks with rage to the young man, the one who was weeping; he asks him something, one time, a second time, and then grasping the pistol, shoots him dead on the spot!

And only then did the inferno begin: the curtain fell and people began to clap their hands, to stomp their feet, to shout and make crazy sounds! Surely they want the old murderer to be handed over to them—they will tear him to pieces! Everything turns dark before her eyes, she feels that she can bear it no longer, and runs out of the theater...

Terrified and breathless, she is scarcely able to reach the door of her parents' apartment. She can't find the doorbell; she rattles the door knob with unusual force. The housemaid opens the door with the kitchen-lamp in her hand, and almost drops it from fright.

"Malkele—what's the matter with you, Malkele?"

Her mother appears, dressed in a nightshirt.

"What has happened, dear God in heaven..."

"Don't be afraid, Malkele" her father's voice breaks in. He too has gotten out of bed and is standing behind the door. "Don't be frightened, Malkele. He's sitting in the prayer house; that's where he's been, his prayer house. I've paid him a visit...he has a gentile's luck; he's won maybe ten gulden!"

Several days later as dusk fell, Dovid was pacing around the house, once again complaining that he was suffocating there, that he has been put in the grave while still alive...Malke came up softly behind him, threw her arms around his neck, bent her burning face to his ear and with a trembling voice, whispered, "Shall we go to the theater? What do you say, Dovid?"

He grabbed her, picked her up, and began dancing around the house with her...

In the midst of the dancing, she again whispered to him:

"If you like, you can take off your tallis kotn."

"Whatever for?" he asked her in astonishment.

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### CHILDLESS

Mendl the lumber merchant was preparing to go to the bathhouse. Slowly he packed his little brush in the red foulard handkerchief, bringing together the ends so that, God forbid, none of the bristles would become twisted. But the entire bundle fell out of his hand, such a shriek did his wife Rivke suddenly let out.

“Look at what’s happened to me! A calamity!” she exclaimed, terror in her face. Wringing her hands, she fell down onto the bench.

“What is it? What’s happened?” asked Mendl, angry and scared.

“What’s happened, you ask?” wailed Rivke. “What has happened? It’s just a minor thing—the hen is treyf!”

“What are you saying?” asked Mendl again, now more agitated. “Treyf?”

“There it is, look!”

She pointed him towards the meat board, where there lay a large, beautiful hen covered with fat as yellow as if made of gold. Its throat was severed, and it was split down the middle.

He came up to her and she handed him the head.

“See that bone, that little bone!”

“Foolish woman! Who told you to go looking inside the head?”

“Was I looking?” Rivke defended herself. “I suddenly happened to see it!”

Serious and silent, he took the small head in his hand and examined it from all sides. His forehead lay in deep furrows, and his gaze became severe and scrutinizing.

“Such a hen, such a hen!” lamented Rivke with a voice one used when mourning the destruction of the Temple on the Ninth of Av. “Six weeks raising a hen, guarding her like she was the apple of my eye...for Shabes Nakhamu, everything for the Shabes of Consolation. I took so much pride in her: what a sweet broth it would be, what a liver studded with fat, what a neck for the kugel...Now—bang! The joy is gone...”

“It seems to be treyf,” pronounced Mendl in an uncertain voice...

“Treyf,” Rivke repeated reluctantly, “treyf... And tell me, Mendl, with what will I prepare for Shabes now? With what? It’s late; the kosher slaughterer must already be at the bathhouse, the butcher shop is hammered shut...and the hen, what’s to be done with the hen?”

“Hah,” said Mendl impatiently. “You will still get meat, and take the hen and sell it to a non-Jew, to the watchman...”

“No!” Rivke sprang up hastily. “I refuse to allow him to enjoy

such a hen—his grandmother has never eaten such a hen! And is it fair to call it a hen? It is a goose, a goose! No! Not so quickly! I'll run to the rabbi...God can still help; the rabbi, may he live and be well, with God's help will make it kosher, if I have any merit in heaven, Master of the Universe!"

She threw on her shawl, with the tiny head underneath the shawl. "And if the rabbi says it's treyf...?"

"Ha, so I'll run to the butcher at his house; I'll get the meat from his pot..."

She was already outside and had shut the door. Mendl stood there, not knowing what to do—whether he should bolt the door and go to the bathhouse, or wait at home. Rivke's voice soon removed all his doubt: she flung the door back open and shouted in:

"Mendl, have God in your heart and keep an eye on the fish—they're cooking on the stove!"

Mendl let drop from his hand the handkerchief with the bath brush wrapped inside it, and took out the small Chumash from his tallis bag. He would go over the week's Torah portion, and between one verse and the next, take a look at the fish. He pushed the chair up to the chimney and settled in; but he had not yet managed to relax the furrows on his brow.

The whole business was not to his liking. That a man should take care of the house, be watching the fish!...

"And all the bad luck happens to her..." he thought angrily.

Rivke shot into the rabbi's court like a bullet, and went straight up to the rabbi's table.

"Where is the rabbi?" she shouted at the beadle who was sitting on the bench, his head resting on the table and his arm serving as pillow.

"Quiet, young mistress, don't shout! There's no fire, God forbid!" The beadle lifted his head tranquilly and answered her with indifference.

"What do you mean, there's no fire? A one and only hen, a religious question, Shabes Nakhamu, it's so late..."

She was short of breath from running and her voice was breaking every second, yet the beadle went back to his nap and had no desire whatsoever to answer her.

"All the same, where is the rabbi?" Rivke shouted in a louder voice, and grabbed the beadle by the shoulder.

"In the bathhouse, in the bathhouse, woman," he replied to her impatiently. "Sit yourself down, woman, sit down on the bench...don't

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go grabbing males by the shoulder!”

Rivke turned even redder with shame. At the same time, she heard the murmur of a clock. She lifted up her eyes and caught sight of it on the wall over the rabbi’s chair; a fresh wave of blood rushed into her face: The clock said one-thirty! Only five hours until it was time to light candles and say the blessing!

She trudged despondently back to the wall, and sat down on the bench the beadle had pointed out to her.

She could still prepare for the Sabbath; it was, praised be His beloved name, thank God, a summer day... If only the rabbi wouldn’t tarry!

In fact—it occurred to her—it was deeply unfair that the rabbi didn’t go to the bathhouse on Thursdays... How can one live an hour on Friday without a rabbi? Religious questions arise every minute, every second!

And not necessarily about a little bone... your mind is distracted, you’re rushing, and you grab a milk spoon for the meat. Or in the meantime you’re not watching the stove, and it could happen that the milk boils over! Can you guard against everything?

Her heart was pounding, so agitated was she, but she comforted herself that no doubt the rabbi wouldn’t take too long, he knew that it was Friday... a rabbi wouldn’t dawdle...

Having calmed down, she just then noticed that in addition to the beadle, there was someone else present in the room.

Not far from her stood a man with a hostile gaze, puffing angrily on a short tobacco pipe. Opposite him sat two women: one an older woman, holding a small bottle of water in her hand and shaking her head every second so that the green ribbon of her bonnet kept quivering. The other was a young woman with tear-filled eyes.

Rivke sprung towards them.

“Also with a religious question?”

“No,” answered the older woman with a sigh. “Alas, not with a religious question.”

“What else then?”

“A divorce!”

“A divorce? Friday? Are you serious? Is he crazy, God help us?”

“What can one do with a stubborn brute? He’s dragging her here!”

Rivke understood that the old woman was speaking of the angry man who puffed his pipe with such fury.

“And just like that—all of a sudden?”

The young one replied not a word. She only lowered her head

more deeply; silently, tear after tear trickled from her eyes. The old woman responded to the question eagerly:

“It’s not so all of a sudden; they have no children and it’s already the eleventh year of the marriage...it costs a lot of money...Hasidic rabbis and, excuse the comparison, healers, and bone-setters and I don’t know what else...and it doesn’t help. And should any little thing happen in the house, this porter boy grabs her by the shoulder and drags her to the rabbi! If she doesn’t walk fast enough, he gives her one in her side... today he smelled smoke; the meat for the tsimmes was scorched! Well, well!”

Rivke became frozen stiff with fear. Her husband was not a porter boy, he wouldn’t grab her by the shoulder, but the tenth year was approaching and she had no children...she too had been to bone-setters, healers, and Hasidic rabbis.

“And what did the rabbis say?” asked Rivke in a voice permeated with tears.

“What do the holy rabbis say, alas? ‘God will help,’ they say! A neck full of amulets—she could have already had a pearl necklace for the money spent! The Letychiver rabbi, woe is us, had wept with her! May I see gold, as I have seen with my own eyes how a tear dropped from his holy eyes to his holy cheek. He too said that ‘God will help,’ but above all he instructed her that she take extra care in the mitzvah of ‘OyNEG Shabes’...she should see to it that her husband has a good, merry Sabbath, that the house is clean, that she dresses in her Sabbath clothes, and that she is cheerful...and most important of all is the cholent! Well, it just so happened that the meat for the tsimmes got burnt...”

Rivke became even more caught up in the story; it was so similar to her own life. She too had been “to the ends of the earth,” and had everywhere heard the same thing: ‘God will help; just be a kosher little wife, observe your mitzvahs, and above all prepare a kosher, merry Sabbath.’ Her situation was not as bleak – her husband was not so crude as the porter there, and up until now the Sabbaths had been successful for her...yet who knows what will come later? She still had a few years to the ten-year mark, God still had time to take pity on her, yet with this young wife he had not shown compassion! She too had given gifts to the Hasidic rabbis, had dropped money into all the charity boxes, and wept her eyes out...To wait longer than the ten years, this her Mendl would not do for an instant! It’s not permitted!

“And she has never...never?” asked Rivke.

“No...nothing,” answered the old woman.

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With Rivke it had been different...One time it had seemed to her that behold, God had helped her; she suddenly felt her heart quickening...she was constantly craving something different: here she would want a little jam, there a bit of lemon...and Mendl smiled, just like he had the days after the wedding...

He walked around the house and sang his little song; under his breath, but happily, and snapping along with his fingers...And each time he was out, he brought her home something different from the street: a little apple, a cucumber, a bit of cinnamon...thus it had lasted for six weeks, six weeks of paradise she'd had, and then it had come to nothing! And Mendl started going about angry at home, sour, scowling...by now he'd already forgotten about it, but he no longer sang, no longer snapped his fingers, and no longer smiled! Who knows, perhaps he too will start dragging her before the rabbi?

No! She must save herself! Once again to the Hasidic rabbis, healers, shepherd-healers, gypsies...

She would do it all!

But after all, that one had also done it all!

Bad! Up until now she'd had the merit of the holy Sabbath; today that had also been ruptured...until now, God be praised, she'd not had a single spoiled Sabbath. It had not yet happened to her that something should come out burnt: not the fish, not the meat, not the tsimmes...

No! One would wish a cholent like hers on all one's good friends! Her challahs came out more beautiful than the baker's; her honeycake melted in one's mouth! God be praised for this, but today this too had been severed; six weeks she'd raised a hen...

She jumped up: the rabbi (who had silently come into the room) was already sitting by a holy book; a short distance in front of the table there already stood a young wife!

Ah, she'd let herself be delayed, distracted with talking...the rabbi could still prohibit the hen, and then she would miss the ritual slaughterer and the butcher.

The wife who presented herself before the rabbi had quite an extraordinary religious question. She stood with downcast eyes, and twisted the corner of her apron between her fingers.

"So, in short," the rabbi asked her again.

"So I fell into the water," recounted the woman in a tearful voice. "The water was deep; in one more minute, I would have drowned...so a man pulled me out...I've come to you now, Rebbe, to ask a religious question: what should I do?"

“From where did you fall in?” the rabbi continued questioning, with what seemed to be a harsher tone.

“From the ship, Rebbe,” she replied. “I was traveling by steamship; I was going to Plotsk.”

“Well, and your husband?”

“My husband was also traveling on the steamship, but he stood some distance away...”

“I don’t have any children with him,” she added in a muffled, weepy voice.

“So, in sum, what do you want?”

“Rebbe, I want to do atonement—my husband says that I *should* do atonement, and if I don’t, he wants to divorce me.”

“Well, give to charity,” the rabbi said.

“Rebbe, I’m a poor person.”

“Then give three times eighteen, the number *khay*.”

The wife walked away, tears in her eyes. Now Rivke rushed up to the table. From under her shawl, she hastily pulled out the little head with the gullet and laid it down on the table before the rabbi.

“Rebbe,” she said. “For six whole weeks I raised a hen, raised her in honor of Shabes Nachamu. Now I went to kasher her, and I don’t know if this little bone is proper...”

Rivke felt her hands and feet trembling beneath her; her eyes hung on the rabbi’s lips as if it were a matter of life or death. Oh God, blessed be He, she begged in her heart. Just don’t let me have a spoiled Sabbath, just not a spoiled Sabbath!

“Has the hen laid eggs?” the rabbi inquired, again looking into the holy book.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’ve had an entire three score eggs from her...big eggs, like those of a goose.”

The rabbi picked up the head again, felt it, and examined it from all sides.

“What do you think, Rebbe, a hen indeed, like God has ordered, a hen from the land of hens—”

“Kosher!” the rabbi interrupted her.

“God be praised!” Rivke exclaimed with joy, and quickly scooped up the head, just as if she’d rescued her beloved child from under the slaughterer’s knife.

“Thank you, Rebbe!” And she wanted to run out of the house, but at the door she remembered about the divorce, and remained standing there.



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I'll wait, she said to herself. I must hear what the rabbi says. The hen is kosher, kosher, kosher! And there is still time to prepare it.

"Well, in short," asked the rabbi again, without directing himself to anyone.

The man was already a little calmer, and slowly went up to the table.

"Rebbe," he said. "Nine years already I've lived with this female, and I have no children from her..."

"Um!" said the rabbi, with a shake of his head.

"And I want to have a Kaddish said for me, as God has ordered and respectable people do, by the way..."

"Is she a sickly woman, then?" the rabbi interrupted him.

"What do I know? I'm a porter, not a healer...I only know that she has no children. Incidentally, as I said, she's not a very good housewife. Rebbe! She can't bake challahs either, but to burn the meat for the tsimmes, there she's an expert!...What do I have to wait around for? Be done with her and an end to it!"

"Are you sickly?" the rabbi turned to the wife, again lowering his eyes to the holy book.

"No, Rebbe..." she answered with a shiver.

"Well, what then?"

"How do I know? God has sealed me this way." She began sobbing heavily.

"Now hush, don't wail, God can still help," the rabbi comforted her. "From nine to ten years is still a big gap, and we have a great God, a merciful one!"

The wife and her husband were silent.

"Listen, Rebbe," the old woman wanted to begin telling him something.

"No, no." The rabbi didn't give her a chance to talk. "A mother or a mother-in-law shouldn't meddle...if they themselves are silent, it is already good."

"Truly good, dear children? Good, ha? Well, well, stay quiet, stay quiet, as long as it's good! Now go home...prepare for Shabes...Don't spoil the holy day for yourselves. As you go down the street, pick up for home a little sponge cake and brandy...a few almonds, Sabbath fruit... you'll reconcile with each other, in merit of the holy Sabbath, all will be well...and if not, so be it, there's always a Sunday and an entire week!"

His audience remained silent, and the rabbi hurried them out amiably:

“Well! Go, go, dear children, go, it’s late—prepare for the Sabbath!

The wife looked at her husband with fear, and at the rabbi with hope.

“You are ordering us to do this, Rebbe?” the man wanted confirmation.

“Yes, I order it,” said the rabbi, “and the Torah so commands it... and it ought to be this way. A good Shabes, dear children!”

“All right... come home!” said the porter.

Rivke clapped her hands together; a heavy stone fell from her heart. She breathed strongly and deeply, and with a lighter mood ran out of the house. It was already very late; at this hour she certainly would not have gotten any meat...

God be praised, she thought, that the hen isn’t treyf—it would be proper for her to say the blessing for when one averts a great disaster—and may our rabbi live long and be healthy! Such a sage, such a holy Jew! To make peace in this manner! Ay, ay, a character of gold!

With courage she shoved open the door of her house, but remained standing in the doorway as if turned to stone—

“I can smell something burning,” she cried out.

“Huh? Who? What?” Mendl was roused from the small Chumash.

“Oh, such a calamity to happen to me, the fish is burnt!” Rivke wrung her hands.

“Burnt?” Mendl was now fully come to. “Burnt?” He sniffed several times with his nose. “Yes, indeed!” he said. “You can tell!”

And both of them stood there, wringing their hands by the pan of scorched fish. But Mendl was the first to recover:

“Why did you take so long?” he said in a fury. “Couldn’t you have come home sooner?”

Rivke gave a start; this was the first time she’d heard such a hard voice from him! The first spoiled Sabbath was about to happen!

“And where is the meat?” he demanded. “Why are you standing there like a dummy?”

“The hen is kosher.” She only now recalled the joyful ruling.

“The hen is kosher? Kosher, you say, you good-for-nothing? And meanwhile, I sold it to the watchman!”

“Whatever made you do that, Mendl?” she let out a heart-rending cry.

“This just really serves you right,” raged Mendl. “If it’s kosher, why did you sit there? If one sits there, then it’s treyf. So I was sure that

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you were running around after meat! That's what I call a loser, that's what's called a woman who runs around in the streets!" Mendl let loose.

Rivke stood there petrified.

The things that she had heard today: "Serves you right"...and "loser"...and "streetwalker"—it's beginning, she thought, it's just now beginning. Something between them had been torn in two, she thought, and one of these days he would drag her by the shoulder to the rabbi.

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