The First Day

At around the same time that my mother, the rebbetzin of a town poor in deeds, gave birth to me, the landlady of the estate, that forceful woman, gave birth to her first son, who also turned out to be her only child. This little gentleman would become a thorn in my side more than once in my journey through life.

The very first time we met—it was a summery Sabbath afternoon and I was a frail little girl, making my way with the last of my strength through the pine forest next to the estate—he set the courtyard dogs on me from behind the gate.

The sound of my shrieks must have been chilling as I stumbled between the dank and impenetrable walls, because both from the main gate and from the nearby gardens the servant boys came running, hushing the dogs as they ran; and then, as I leaned against the gate, which would have been beyond my powers to climb, I saw him, a son of the gentry, standing there in his silk ankle socks, his shaved head bare and a flash of malice on his well-fed face—and I hated him.

But all that happened later on and will perhaps be described in detail somewhere else. This time I just wanted to tell the story of what happened to me on the first day of my life, a short, meaningless winter day with low and utterly dispiriting clouds in the sky over my shtetl.

At twilight of the previous day the estate carriage, which had come to pick up my father to be the godfather at the circumcision to be held the following morning, had already stopped before our house.

The harness bell, whose ring tinkled very pleasantly in the stillness of the dusk, made the most hideous impression on my paternal grandmother, the rebbetzin of Tokhanovka, who was visiting us now.

She looked at the gentile coachman practically with abhorrence when, entering, covered with snow, his whip under his armpit, he announced that he had no foot blanket with him in the carriage since the lady had apparently forgotten to provide one.

"We can find a blanket ourselves, it hasn't come to that yet," she wanted to make sure he informed the young lady, who was, unfortunately, her cousin and one of the family—against her will, but there it was, she was in fact a member of the Tokhanovkan family, and there was nothing that could be done about it.

Actually, the matter was much more complicated than you might think. Years ago she, the aforementioned landlady, had turned down a proposal to marry the man who would later hold the position of rabbi of Zhuzhikovka, that is, my father.

The matchmaker, who had traveled the entire distance between Tokhanovka and Zhuzhikovka by foot, crossing the river

twice in the process, returned in a few days' time with an absolute refusal, bringing with him for his efforts a single ruble and an almost new woolen coat, which was the disgrace of the entire family for a long time afterward.

All this I heard years later from my sister, who also told me a few other things about the past, which was as interesting to me as it was to her.

That same evening, when my father had left for the estate and a dim pewter lamp, hesitant and wavering, had been lit at the corner of the stove, a silence settled in the house that was not broken again for the rest of that evening.

A workaday supper, with just the women's grace after meals at its conclusion, was eaten at the end of the table on a tablecloth folded in two—and the rebbetzin from Tokhanovka, taking off her distinguished fringed headdress, for which she could find a place of honor among the poor furnishings only after an assiduous search, extinguished the lamp with one vigorous and ill-tempered breath, and by the creaking of the bed, which shook beneath her as she lay down, one could guess that the image of her cousin's house on the estate outside town rose before her eyes with perfect clarity:

The plush embroidered ballroom chairs arranged regally on the carpet, the silver chandelier glittering overhead with all the colors of its crystals, the brass pots shining in the kitchen across from the blazing oven and the warm honey dumplings, which the lady would roll flat with her rolling pin, the abundant strings of pearls around her neck quivering with every movement.

In short, is there any dearth of visions that might pass before the eyes of a rebbetzin, lying in the room of the practically

destitute daughter-in-law she did not love and reciting her bedtime prayers?

In about three hours, after the lamp had been lit once more—and then extinguished again—and the flurry of activity incited by my birth had ceased, a silence arose in the house stranger than any I had ever known in any world.

Oh, this first night in the house of my ancestors, deep in the harsh winter, when the oven had been stoked so stingily and the flame of the lamp had no confidence in its own power.

Between the sixth and seventh hour, when, from somewhere, a few pale and sickly rays of morning light managed to penetrate, I was able to see in some detail the backside of the stove, which rose naked and exposed across from my cradle, and whose sad and naked chimney, also without plaster, gazed hopelessly toward the empty space into which it leaned—but did not fall.

Amazing and touching as well was the rusty and crooked screw that stuck out of the rafter above me, and which, in its enormous solitude in the wide expanse of the ceiling, unemployed, purposeless (though obviously someone must have screwed it in there once), was for many years a symbol for me of everything unhappy and superfluous in this life.

But most amazing was the squeak of the felt shoes that reached me from the other side of the wooden partition, and which grew increasingly cross as the day brightened.

What's the point of beating around the bush? In short, my paternal grandmother, the rebbetzin of Tokhanovka, who was now visiting our house, was dissatisfied with my entry into the light of this world.

Girls, she said, she already had enough of from her daughter-

in-law the rebbetzin of Khmilovka and also from the other daughter-in-law, the rebbetzin of Borisovka, and she had reached her limit, she said, with these girls. This wasn't the reason she had left her yeast business and her house in Tokhanovka and come to sit around her son's house in Zhuzhikovka—and in general: "Now what were they going to say in the courtyard?"

It's embarrassing to relate, but the events should be written simply, exactly as they happened: at an early hour of the morning, just when it had become light enough to write, she sent for the neighbor boy, the bookbinder's son, and recited to him the things he should write in her name to her husband, the rabbi of Tokhanovka.

In place of the distinguished headdress, the one with the fringes, a woolen kerchief now covered her head, tied under her chin with an aggressive, almost menacing knot.

All the eternal hatred of an aged mother-in-law for her young daughter-in-law was concentrated in her glasses, which peered down at the table to see whether everything had been properly written with regard to her bad luck in the matter of her sons' matches. And when the boy, embarrassed, finally got to his feet, in their oversized men's boots, and tried to escape—she ran after him with the sheet of paper in her hand, her glasses slipping unchecked off her face.

At approximately ten o'clock, as the chill in the house deepened and the oven remained unlit, a conversation like this one could be heard between the two rebbetzins, from their opposite sides of the partition:

"Mother-in-law," sighed the rebbetzin of Zhuzhikovka, "the baby has to be given some sugar water."

"Sugar water?" shuddered the rebbetzin of Tokhanovka.

"Why yes, sugar water," the voice of the rebbetzin of Zhuzhikovka fell, "and also she should be covered with another robe, so she doesn't catch cold."

"Did you hear that? Big deal, so she'll catch cold," squeaked the rebbetzin of Tokhanovka in her felt shoes, gathering the various pastries that had been prepared for the circumcision to return them to the bakery.

Absolutely, she looked just like a tigress, sweeping around the room like that in her wide-striped apron.

Having spent her life in the vicinity of learned men, listening to their conversations, my grandmother also knew some sayings from the discourse of our sages in the matter of a daughter and her value in life. Thus, for example, she knew that if the son is compared to wine, then the daughter is nothing but vinegar; if a son is as wheat, then the daughter is like barley. True: there is a need for wine and a need for vinegar, but the need for wine is greater than for vinegar; so too, one needs both wheat and barley but—the need for wheat is greater than that for barley.

The erudition of this old rebbetzin was awesome. Like giant boulders the sayings rolled from her mouth, one heavier and more frightening than the next—and the rebbetzin of Zhuzhikovka lay on the other side of the partition with her white childbirth kerchief around her head, pale, shaken, with not a word to say in response.

In her brain, exhausted after the sleepless night, nevertheless wandered fragments of thoughts and arguments, which some other time she might have been able to seize upon in her own defense. After all, it would be enough to bring up the day her first daughter had been born, when her husband, the

rabbi, reading aloud from the letter he had written to his father, explained to her explicitly that what was meant by the verse "And God blessed Abraham in everything" was no less than that God had given Abraham a daughter whose name was "Everything."

In fact, there was no doubt that if he, her husband, were here now, he would find in his kind heart something similar to say regarding this daughter, the second one, as well—the young rebbetzin sighed, raising her head to the window and seeing that the sky was already darkening and he, the rabbi, had still not returned.

The short winter day passed, in the meantime, and approached its end. The shadows, rising and falling in turn, lapped slowly against the slats of the cradle, the wooden partition, and the mother's bed beside it.

When things had finally reached the point that even the stove and its chimney lay in deep gloom, forming a frightening, towering mass across from me, I tried in my anguish to roll around and shake myself free of my prison, but I had been swaddled, alas, by a tyrant's hands, the old woman's hands, and so, twisting my head back and forth and seeing that only darkness and silence enveloped me, I did the one thing that any person would do if they were miserable and lonely and salvation was distant: I raised my voice—and I wept.

And suddenly, a miracle (later I was informed that all rescues, by their very nature, arrive suddenly and miraculously): from out of the darkness all around, far from the house, a sort of tinkling sound could be heard, and before anyone could get to the window, the door rejoiced in being opened and into the house stepped a man who—I knew, although I had never met

him before—would be dearer to me in the course of time than all life's pleasures.

With the swinging of his sheepskin coat as he took it off, a special smell, a delicious smell that could only belong to Father, had already wafted toward me, but when he came over to the wooden partition, drew the two half-curtains apart and called in his clear voice "Mazel tov"—I caught my breath in excitement and within a split second had hushed right down.

Is it necessary to go on and tell what happened next? After that the lamps were lit on both sides of the partition, my side and the other, and warmth and well-being spread through the house.

With a ringing sweeter than anything I had ever heard, the silverware clattered onto the tablecloth as the table was set, and a smell pervaded the air, the smell of the evening's dish that had been hidden in the oven since morning and which they know how to make only in Zhuzhikovka, Lithuania.

My father, who was walking back and forth across the room and asking about the progression of the day's events, was very sorry when Mother told him that the letter to his old father had already been written that morning without him. He stood beside my mother's bed with a radiant face and his hands tucked under his rabbinic sash (no doubt exactly as he had stood four years earlier, the day my older sister was born), and lectured to her on the contents of the letter that ought to have been written to his father, telling her, in the course of the lecture, about what had happened to Rabbi Simeon Bar-Ami, on the day his daughter was born, when he met the Babylonian, the great Rabbi Hiya, who said that now the Holy One, blessed be He, had truly begun to bless him . . .

"Those were his words, his exact words," he stressed with his clear voice, watching as my mother's cheeks grew rosy and her eyes misted over.

As for my grandmother, the same thing happened to her that happens to an ice floe when it is suddenly struck by the rays of the sun.

At the sight of her son's glowing face, the angry creases in her forehead smoothed themselves out and the knot underneath her chin moved and noticeably loosened. And when my father finally turned to her and said that the son who had been born there, on the estate, had been given a family name and was to be called after the uncle from Tokhanovka, Reb Shmulik of blessed memory—her kerchief came undone all at once and its two ends remained untied for the duration of that evening.

The water splashed under her hands with a completely different music now as she scrubbed the earthenware dishes, and this time, the bowls were displayed on the shelf in a neat row, face-down, as if they were burnished brass.

Her train of thought went something like this:

If over there they named the boy after the uncle, of blessed memory, Reb Shmulik, then it would only be proper that here they should name the girl after the aunt, may she rest in peace, Hodl, and God willing—they'll be the ones who come begging to us, and then we'll be the ones to decline—she sank, in the glow of revenge, onto her bed, after having exchanged her woolen kerchief for a white night-kerchief, and the murmured bedtime prayer, which had ceased for a whole minute, flowed peacefully and quietly again like a stream in the wake of a storm.

For a long time my father continued to walk back and forth

on the other side of the partition, singing to himself an offhand, casual tune, the sort of tune that might be sung to soothe someone or put them to sleep, and which flows easily and fluently from every father's lips. His own tune, the extraordinary one, the one which in the course of the years, during those nights in my bed, would mix with my sadness like blended wine, came afterward, a few hours later, as he sat over his books at the table by the light of the lamp, no longer pondering the fate of sons or daughters on this earth but rather that of humanity in general.

Reproachful, piercing, laced with gentleness—as if with a magical wand he lifted the veil from my future for an instant, and I peeked: gloom and grayness, with no passage or exit, like those stone walls between which I reeled years later, chased by the hand of an invisible oppressor, between the very fangs of dogs—and I was shaken.

At the sound of my cries Father came from the other side of the partition and rocked me, going back, in an instant, to the tune from before, the offhand one, the one every father knows by heart.

"There, there, it's nothing, it's nothing," he soothed me, soothed me and sang, until I indeed calmed down and, exhausted—fell asleep. So ended the first day of my life.