

ITSIK KIPNIS

"Dear Buzi, what do you think? Wouldn't it be something if we lay down here and spent the night and it turned out when we woke that nothing had happened?"

And Buzi nodded her head and agreed.

"But do you know what, darling, sleep in your dress, just as you are. Just take your shoes and socks off."

"And you'll sleep fully dressed, too?"

"Yes, dear. I'll just take off my jacket and my shoes."

"Is it alright to put out the lamp?"

"Yes, it's alright."

And we put it out. And all was well for us in the house-- for Buzi and me. And it may well be that there'll be no holiday tomorrow and I'll have to go to work, as I always do. I'll get up early in the morning and go to work with Hershke. And after all, I know very little about pogroms. Though long ago, when I was a child...(when I was about five years old) I seemed to dream that we were having a pogrom. It was winter and the shopkeepers had built white inner doors. And on the other side of the doors, the shopkeepers' wives stood, wearing masks and holding pistols in their hands. And they knew how to shoot. This was all in the center of the marketplace, in winter. And the market-

place was filled with bloody lumps. There was no way to get past them. They were entirely covered with frozen blood. I wandered about all by myself in the dark and couldn't make my way past the bloody mounds. And at home, my father stood holding bottles of sulphuric acid in his hands and would not let Timukh and Pavel pass because they wanted to make a pogrom against us.

It was a bright night. It was winter. And fear spread from heaven to earth. When I woke, it was to a cloudy morning and to snow falling outdoors, deep enough to require galoshes. Somehow or other I recovered from that dream and I felt better again.

"It may be, Buzi, that tomorrow we'll wake up as if from a bad dream. Just let's sleep through the night."

"When? Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. Tomorrow, darling. Now sleep."

"Then you sleep too."

The lamp went out, and all was well in the room-- except I was troubled by my thoughts. "Good night."

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I was the first to wake. I thought it was raining. An annoying rain. There was something wrong with the thunder machinery-- the thunder sounded incomplete. But no. I was hearing shouts and the sound of crow-bars banging against metal. And there was gunfire, too.

"Buzi, darling. Wake up. Wake up at once."

"Huh? What is it? What is it?"

"Nothing. Nothing dearest. Just get dressed. Here

are your stockings. And put your shoes on. We have to go somewhere."

And Buzi did what I asked. But I told her not to hurry, so that she wouldn't let things drop from her hands.

My wife is dressed, frightened, silent and wringing her hands as if there was a nearby fire, and we go to the wheatfield. No doubt our people are spending the night there and don't know what's going on."

"How will we get there?"

"That way, through the gardens."

And we started off, just to be moving away from all the violence. We passed the well and arrived at the first of the gardens. As we went, our careless footsteps disturbed everything that grew around us. I trod on the stem of a watermelon. Too bad. The vegetation was damp, gorged with dew. We climbed over the second fence. One garden after another. Buzi's teeth were chattering. Because of the cold, perhaps; or perhaps because of our haste, and our fear. We walked through fields of tall hemp that reached to our throats. We were like two children moving through the hemp, hidden from all the world.

Still, we went on, making many a false turn. One had to be careful not to wake the dogs in the nearby farmsteads, though we could hear the howling of dogs far off at the edge of town. Behind us, we heard the sounds of axes and hoes; and voices-- human voices they seemed to be. Perhaps someone was gambling there. Perhaps someone was tearing up heavy

stones.

"Who's first? Who's faster?"

It was bright there and there was the sound of someone shouting "Hurrah."

"Where are we going, Buzi? We're off to wake our people up."

"Alright, then. Let's go."

Then all at once, there we were at my father's house. In the middle of the night, like two lost children. But in fact, we found no one there. And how did they get away?

What, you don't know how they did it. Through there, through the window, and off to the wheatfield. And abandoned such a faithful home to abuse.

"Come on, dear." And we started off to the wheatfield.

And there we heard hushed voices. But there was nothing to be afraid of. They were speaking Yiddish. Softly. Whispering among themselves. A flock of geese herded together in the middle of the night. They ran; kept a wary eye out; were excited. They sought some place to lie down.

Buzi felt more cheerful. We joined the flock.

"Is that you, Khin<sup>e</sup>?"

"Yes, and who are you? Ah, it's Ayzik. And where's Buzi?"

"She's right here?"

"Why of course, there she is. What a mess, damn it all. Where is one to hide in a disaster like this?"

"And what's happening in town?"

"In town? Beatings, robberies, fires."

Khine was carrying several children at once. One of them she had before her, the other was on her shoulders. She was the wife of Shloyme, the Shoemaker. Shloyme, too, was somewhere in this flock. It was midnight. We walked, some twenty people in a line, like geese. A straight line. Where? Nobody knew. We went at random. Buzi wanted us to be silent. "We have to be quiet."

We left the field and were now in the wheat, continuing to walk. But someone in the wheatfield whooped at us and drove us away. Perhaps whoever it was was nothing but a gentile boy. But we couldn't risk staying there. We discussed the matter briefly, then the geese turned back.

"Where back? Into town?"

It wouldn't do.

"Then let's go our separate ways."

But Buzi didn't want to be separated from the others.

"What a child you are? Are you afraid to trust me? It's my wheatfield, after all. I know every inch of it."

And so she trusted me-- and we went off to one side together. We crossed a fence I knew about then we came to a clump of trees where Buzi and I sat down-- two lost children. It was actually cool-- but in the very middle of summer. And it was pleasant for just the two of us there in an absolutely unfamiliar garden. We needed to think for awhile about our families, mine and Buzi's. Where could they be just now? And soon, it would be dawn. It was,

after all, no more than a summer's night.

At a distance, we could see other clusters of people between the trees. Was this a time to be embarrassed with each other?

No, but perhaps it would be better not to talk with each other for a while. In an hour or so, we can get up; in an hour or so it will be broad daylight and we can go into town to see what's happened.

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"Burned. There was no smoke any more, and no fire burning." This is what my father's neighbors said as they stood in a cluster before my father's house. And now we had arrived, Buzi and I; wet with dew from having spent the night "in the fields of Sloveshne". She had on a dress and wore shoes over her bare feet. And I had on no more clothes than just barely covered my body.

At any other time, the way we were dressed would not have been tolerated in town, but now we were greeted almost with joy. "Good morning! How are you? And where have you spent the night?"

"In Lyevin's wheatfield," we replied cheerfully. Because, as it is said, the day is smarter than the night-- and smarter means cheerfuller. God bless daylight.

And just then messengers showed up: Melekh and Yoss<sup>l</sup>.  
"Are you here?"

"Yes, we're here. And where are you? At home? And where did you spend the night? Good, we'll join you." And all of us were pleased with each other. God bless daylight.

And our peasant neighbors? What were the neighbors doing in the vicinity of my father's house? They were bringing pillows back to their Jewish neighbors.

"Here, darling, your cushions. We took them to hide them; to keep them from being stolen by wicked folk." And she blushed as she spoke.

Another neighbor, "So, Leah. You'll take back your pots. You know how it is? I saw people grabbing things up, and it happens I needed a couple of pots. Go on, take them back. There's that tall neighbor of yours. Leah, he's taken all of your flour. Make him give it back. Never mind. It won't hurt him. It's not right to eat up someone else's goods."

And a third one said, as if sharing a secret, "Matess, I saw with my own eyes who it was who broke your windows. He's a no-good. I'll tell you who it was, by name. But not now."

And the very same friend who was whispering to Matess was pointed out by another neighbor as having been the one who carried leather away from Matess' house all night long. So how could you tell which of them had done what? But the Jews, who were not used to pogroms, replied spiritedly to their neighbors, "Of course you have to bring things back." And, "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You ought to be ashamed to the very marrow of your bones." And the Jews said among themselves, "Ah, the things that can happen. Peasants are peasants. Thieves and dunderheads."

2way from?  
 So they replaced the cursed pillows in the dishevelled beds, and, for appearance's sake, pulled the shutters over the windows. The women looked after the cattle and drove them out to pasture. And someone stood watch before every house from early in the morning on. Everyone was up and near the house. As if each house was, as it were, a village, and there had been a theft in every village. Everyone was tense, but generally it was said that things were calm-- though disordered.

"Last night, the cap maker was badly beaten."

"Who? Yankev-L<sup>e</sup>tyb, the cap maker?"

"Ah, ah, how dreadful. The poor fellow was a sick man to begin with. What had he done? What had poor Yankev-L<sup>e</sup>tyb done?"

"And Gedalye, Yehoshua's son...he was running on the Antonovich Road...near Zalman's inn; he was trying to escape and someone shot him."

"What happened?"

"He lingered on until dawn. Then he died. There's such grief in that house-- the very walls are sobbing. No doubt his funeral will be soon."

"Just wait a minute. What was it like, from the very beginning? What about the military commander?"

"Kublinik? There's some suspicion that he was mixed up in the whole thing."

"What do you mean?"

"It means that he promised to send twenty riflemen to town, and when the time came to give the order, he



played dead."

"Then what happened?"

"It was like this: At eleven o'clock, each militia man armed himself with as many as five guns; he told the younger folk to carry sticks. Around midnight, someone began to shoot. And people began to gather from every part of town. Everything was dark. The troops distributed guns to the scum. The Jewish watchmen ran away."

"And the commandant of the militia?"

"That bastard? But he was the one who stirred up the whole mess. He and Kosenko-- and your neighbor, Marko Lukhtans. He's not home, even yet, they say. But that's a lie. He's in disguise and is being hidden by the local swine, near the river."

"So there's nothing we can do to spend the night at home?"

"Who knows? We'll see. For the time being, it's quiet in town. They've crawled back into their holes. Many shops were broken into and there are only peasant children creeping about in the debris."

"Well, let's go into town."

"Alright, let's go."

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Our mother came to greet us, delighted. She gave us her usual cheery smile, and wanted to know whether we would eat something. She had just milked the cow.

"And where are Melekh and Rokhl?"

"But I sent them to you. I was at your place three times today and never found you there."

And we told mother what we had done and how we had spent the night. And mother, in her turn, recounted what had happened to them.

"And what's happened to our room?"

"It's not too bad. It's a little tumbled, but still tolerable."

"Is the landlady there?"

"Yes, she's there. Well, will you take a couple of glasses of milk?"

"No, I think we'd rather be getting home."

The streets had a disarrayed pre-Passover or after-the-fair look. Dust and garbage before every door. Scraps of paper and broken glass. As if devils had scattered them. Every piece of paper seemed to have its own agenda; every piece entirely self-absorbed. And there was the sound of weeping on the street where Gdalye's Yehosh<sup>u</sup><sub>h</sub> lived. And in the club, it was said that at Basye's there had been every sort of violence intended to wipe out every trace of the commune.

Buzi and I went about together, as if we were sewn together. And we gathered news.

It had been that way since yesterday. We looked as if we were tightly sewn. And it was nobody's business to separate us. And we were very anxious to find out what was happening to our room. Though even if we wanted to, there was very little we could do about it.

The doors, twisted roughly off their hinges, were open as at a hasty wedding. But inside, there was silence. The landlady was leaning against her nightstand. She looked as if she was praying, but in fact she was scolding her Mordkhe. As she saw it, he should have known what was happening here, and ought to have been home at a time like this. She was, moreover, unhappy about the furniture and the house. She felt every scratch on the nightstand or on the painted floor as if someone had pressed red-hot spikes against her flesh. And those bastards had tumbled or broken or scratched every bit of furniture.

In the kitchen, we found an old peasant creeping about on the oven. He groaned as he climbed up.

"Serhei, what are you looking for? Have you mislaid something?"

I grabbed up the scorched handle of a pitchfork and raised it threateningly over Serhei.

He was a huge peasant from a nearby village. An old man, but without a grey hair on his head.

He felt very uncomfortable; at the same time, he did not really want to leave with empty hands. I touched him with the stick. "Are you going to get down?"

"Don't get so excited. See, I'm getting down. I was just looking... I was hunting for a block of salt. And people were already taking things."

I poked him with the stick, but he went on with what he was doing until I yanked him down hard from the oven.

He scratched himself, "What are you doing? I was just looking for some salt." And he went off without a backward look, like a dog with his tail between his legs.

At first, Buzi had not wanted me to have anything to do with him, but now she laughed. The landlady was pleased at what I had done, because the way to the attic was through the trapdoor over the oven. As for what the attic looked like-- no need to ask. Though some while ago, she had taken things down from it and sent them away-- guess where? To Hanetshke, the daughter of the rabbi's wife. Some partner! Another serpent. You might do better leaving your keys with thieves for safekeeping.

And where are our cups; the pretty cups that were on the sideboard. That I bought for Buzi not more than a week ago. Now the sideboard was bare, and the beds were shoved every which way.

The landlady said, "Timofeiko took the cups. He was the only one who had anything to do with them."

I know Timofeiko. He's a man about my own age. A young man, like myself. And, like me, married a year to a pretty young woman. He's building himself a house at his father's, in the courtyard. Everyone else took something that suited them. And he grabbed the cups from the sideboard so that when he moved into his new house his wife would have something to decorate her sideboard the way we had decorated ours. No doubt he has a point. It may be that he looked over other things in our bedroom that would suit his bedroom. He has a point. Still, he's a pious young fellow,

crosses himself often. And his young wife, too, is a member of a very pious sect. Unless I'm wrong, they call themselves "Shtundists". Such very young people to be so involved in piety. So one wonders how such pious folk will make use of Buzi's cups?

For the moment, our room was not really our room, but a mess. Not, in any case, our room. We had nothing to do with it. If there was anything to which we still had ties, it was to mother's things, and not to anything of ours or of the family's. All the families, anyhow, were looking after themselves.

"Will you eat something, children? You've had a hard night of it. It's time to gather your strength. We may have to be on the move.

Mother smiled. She was right. All reason was on her side. It was clearly time to eat something. And yet what was one to do. We could not swallow a mouthful. It wouldn't go down. Our very mouths refused to open.

"Eat Buzi, dear."

"And what about you?"

We laughed bitterly at our griefs.

"Then lie down, children, and rest for a while."

"Now that's a good idea. Let's take as much rest as we can."

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Around midday, as we were going to Mother Khaytshik meaning to go from there through the wheatfield, to my

mother's, we met Mother Khaytshik standing at the outer door. She carried a pot of scalded milk for us. "We have to talk things over."

"Mother and Nokhem and Aunt Freydl and others will start on the road to Behun, going first to Aunt Rasle in Milchen and then, if it's possible, they'll go on."

"What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure," mother said, a serious look on her face-- the way she looked when we discussed our marriage... Buzi's and mine. When she was concerned because Buzi was too dependent on me. She was serious and thoughtful now, as well. She still had three small children, and it was no doubt quieter in Milkhen. But what was she to do with us? Her two large children. Ought she to keep us with her, or should we join the folk in the wheatfield? "I don't know," she said. "They say that when night comes there'll be trouble again. And if we're to go, one has to leave town soon. And that's what I want to discuss with you."

"Mother, where are the children?"

"The children are already at Nokhem's."

We went off to the wheatfield to discuss the matter. And it was left-- and who could say in advance whether it was the right decision or not-- that we would not go with mother. We were invited to join the folk in the wheatfield. Reluctantly, we parted from her, and mother, a scarcely perceptible tear in her eye, left, confiding us "first to God and then to the people in the wheatfield".

And she went off, with a lighter heart than if we had

been with her.

That was Wednesday. During the day. And mother and various others in the family were on their way to spend the night at Aunt Rasle in Milkhen. That is, if the roads were clear. And from there, if necessary, they would travel farther.

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Has Gedalye's funeral taken place yet?

It was said that it had. Meanwhile, the day slowly declined. It was already two or three hours after noon.

We got very little news from town. As for our neighbors, it was as if now they regretted their generosity of the morning. They held themselves aloof, and looked at us narrowly. Well, there was nothing to be done. Meanwhile, we had to think of where to spend the night. Normally at this hour, we would have had our hot meal, but now we were like creatures who, in the evening, were scattered, rendered powerless. Such creatures have to take timely thought about where to spend the night.

That night, it turned out, there was a misunderstanding of where we were to spend the night. Father sneaked away from the rest of the family and hid himself in the hollow of a tree (evidently it is the nature of hiding that the deeper one burrows the more terrified one is). Tonight, it was important not to let something like that happen again. Wherever we were, father would be also. Now we were on our way to spend the night in Shmayle's barn.

"Shall we take the children to Shmayle?"

"Yes, and the adults can go there later, when it's dark."

Mother had made up some piles of coarse cloth and rags and had led the first group of people to Shmayle's stable. But Shmayle, good friend that he was, advised against it. "It puts my house and my animals in danger. At night," he says, "it's going to get grim in town. I myself am going to leave. See I'm moving the unharnessed wagon. I'm greasing the wheels." As for us, we could do what we liked, but he wouldn't recommend that we stay the night near the town exposing our throats to the slaughter.

Shmayle's eyes, too, were narrowed. That night, my people in the barn heard how his withered pious old mother who reeked of ten years of incense, scolded him and his wife: "Lazybones! Stick-in-the-muds that you are. People are grabbing all sorts of good things, and you're just going to rot here, too lazy to get up off the ground."

Who could have expected that from the old hag. Such a pious old carcass who had been dying for the better part of ten years. She too opened her filthy mouth when she heard that people were stealing from her neighbors. If you talked with her, and you'd think she'd never killed so much as a fly on the wall, and there was no end to her gentility. Yes, her son's eyes were narrowed now and we were left without a place to spend the night.

Shmayle says that when night comes, the whole town will go up in flames. Other neighbors say that whoever hides



Jews will be killed along with them.

So, that puts the matter quite differently.

"Harness our horse, we'll go on to Petroschi."

Since yesterday, our horse has been hidden at Avdei's. And the wagon; and the harness. Evidently it's easier to hide a ring than a horse. But there's no help for it. If the command is "harness", it has to be harnessed.

And so we ride, all of us, toward Petroschi. The road going uphill is crowded with Jews, men and women, boys and girls all going to Petroschi. Such calm unworried movement, with no bundles to carry. I've only seen peasants traveling this way when, on some holiday, they go to visit another village. At such times, they too go all together, young and old, with nothing to worry about, and nothing to carry except a kerchief in their hands, or a bottle in their breastpockets in which to bring back holy water. The only difference between the two crowds is that the peasants are dressed in their holiday best and intend to return home in the evening while we are dressed worse than in our weekday clothes and we are wondering where we will spend the night away from our homes.

And it seems to me too bad that my father has his own wagon and team. Would that we had gone together, on foot. The way these people are.

Now we begin to meet clusters of peasants in the fields. They look strange. We've never seen their likes before. What will we say if they suddenly talk to to us?

But they don't say anything.

They move along the paths at the sides of the fields.

They seem embarrassed by something.

Evidently, they're not used to what they're doing. It may be the first time in their lives that they've done such a thing. It may be that they've been incited to it, or that they are envious of the more prosperous towns.

Embarrassed and grey, their heads lowered, they come from every direction, like flocks of hungry crows gathering at our sad Sloveshne.-- -- --

to Leyke the Squeaker who lives in Bokejevscine ( a verst from Sloveshne.)

A good friend of hers hid her. Leyke is a widow, a valiant woman who has many dark children. And when she talks her voice squeaks, which is why she's called Leyke the Squeaker.

And so there she was with her children hiding at Mikhalke's and the other peasants would not tolerate it. "Give us the Jews. There's a smell of Jews here," they said. "It'll be better for you."

Mikhalke, however, was a good friend of the Squeaker's. Mikhalke is small as a hen, and always very busy. And the Squeaker's a valiant woman, too, so Mikhalke would not turn her over. "Don't bother me, neighbors," he said. "Even if I had Jews here, I wouldn't give them to you."

"No," they said. "Let us have them. It will be better for you."

"No," he said. "You want dead Jews, and I, for my part, want one living Jew. As for you, do what you like with your Jews. Go in good health. Go to Sloveshne. There are still plenty of Jews in Sloveshne.

And Leyke the Squeaker-- she was not about to be scared. She cursed the pigs under her breath, "May they drop dead. Just see what sorts of tricks those pigs are up to. May they die an ugly death. They'll be sick to death before I'm through with them. They'll beg for mercy. Let the cholera take them. Let them drop dead."

Her children pleaded with her to stop talking. They

were frightened. "Momma, be still," they said, tugging at her sleeve.

And she, "Go to hell together with them. Stop bothering me."

Mikhal knocked at the door. "It's alright, Leah. I've driven them away. You're behind two sets of locked doors. I'll guard you. You have nothing to worry about."

"For which God send blessings on your head, Mihal.<sup>k</sup>  
I'll be damned if I ever let them into my house."

And Mikhal too begged, "Yes, but hush. They said they would burn the house down. Well, never mind. Even if they kill all the Jews, I still won't give you to them. I get to do what I want with my share. -----  
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