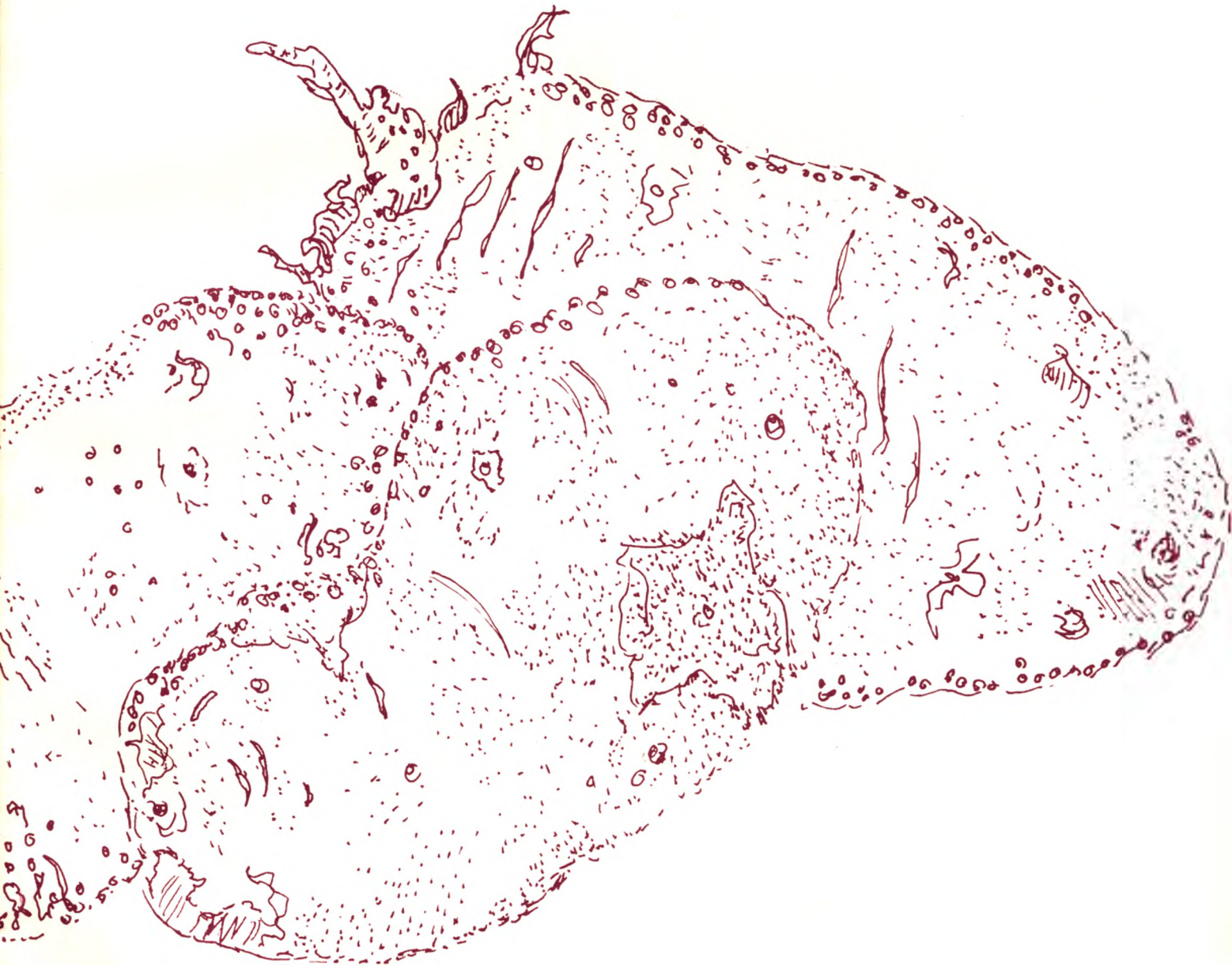


MENKE KATZ

# FOREVER AND EVER AND A WEDNESDAY



**FOREVER AND EVER  
AND A WEDNESDAY**

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**in English**

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MENKE KATZ

**FOREVER AND EVER  
AND A WEDNESDAY**

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by arrangement with Horizon Press

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**To my wife Rivke  
who has always been  
a genuine inspiration**

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# A WORD OR TWO

---

The village of Michalishek where my unknown forefathers, the fortunate poor of Lithuania, lived, laughed, cried hundreds of years was a tiny dreamful island, embraced by the Viliya River, its bosom friend forever and ever and a Wednesday.

To get out of the village, we had to shout ourselves hoarse to reach the ears of the barefoot captain, across the river, until we could finally hear the old barge sighing, propelled by tide-worn dragropes.

The fare for carrying the folks across the river was half a penny per family. None of the captains could afford to lower the price, but neither had they raised it since the birth of the barge, ages ago, when its logs were still fresh with the scent of cut-down birch trees from the nearby forest.

The forest across the river seemed to have no end, dense with bush and jungle where bears with long shaggy hair, with clawing toenails, large powerful beasts with the proud blood of their family Ursidae moved slowly, awkwardly, when they ate fruits, nuts, berries, acorns, bird's eggs, or honey of ripped bee hives but they could run at awful speed at a stray woman, man or child. It was said that left of the women were only twisted strands of their braids and the shock of a bear hug; left of the men were fistfuls of beards which fluttered in the wind like broken wings. It was said, children were quickly devoured leaving only the terror of their lost footsteps.

Hungry robbers lived in the underworld of the forest and died in the hollow trunks of ancient trees.

There was a forbidden path in the depths of the forest which no one dared to enter. The folks of the village named it Blood Alley. Bentke, the old fibber of the village, said he remembered when the trees were princes. He had seen the sorceress, Malke Lokshendrei, transform the princes into trees. It was rumored that if anyone dared to raise the head of an ax against a tree so much blood would flow from the crown to the roots, it would drown the tree chopper.

The wise storytellers saw the summers like blooming fools, the true blossoms unfolding during the below zero winters. For only then did the princes sneak out of the forest, armed with frostbows, and sail to their castles, in boats built by frostwork on the icebound windowpanes of the village.

Michalishek was the Isle of Potatoes. The tall singing folks lived mostly on potatoes. The crooked alleys always echoed with songs about



love-starved maidens, about dews which are the tears of fallen angels, and many potato songs which poked fun at themselves, such as: “Sunday potatoes, Monday potatoes, Tuesday potatoes, Wednesday, Thursday potatoes; Friday, in honor of the Sabbath, for a change, again potatoes.”

The potatoes of the village were not as prosperous as the Idaho potatoes, the green mountain potatoes or the King Edward VII potato apples. Many of our potatoes were lying ill (as if in pain) in beds of stingy earth, attacked by early or late blight. O the earth of Lithuania is a wretched miser.

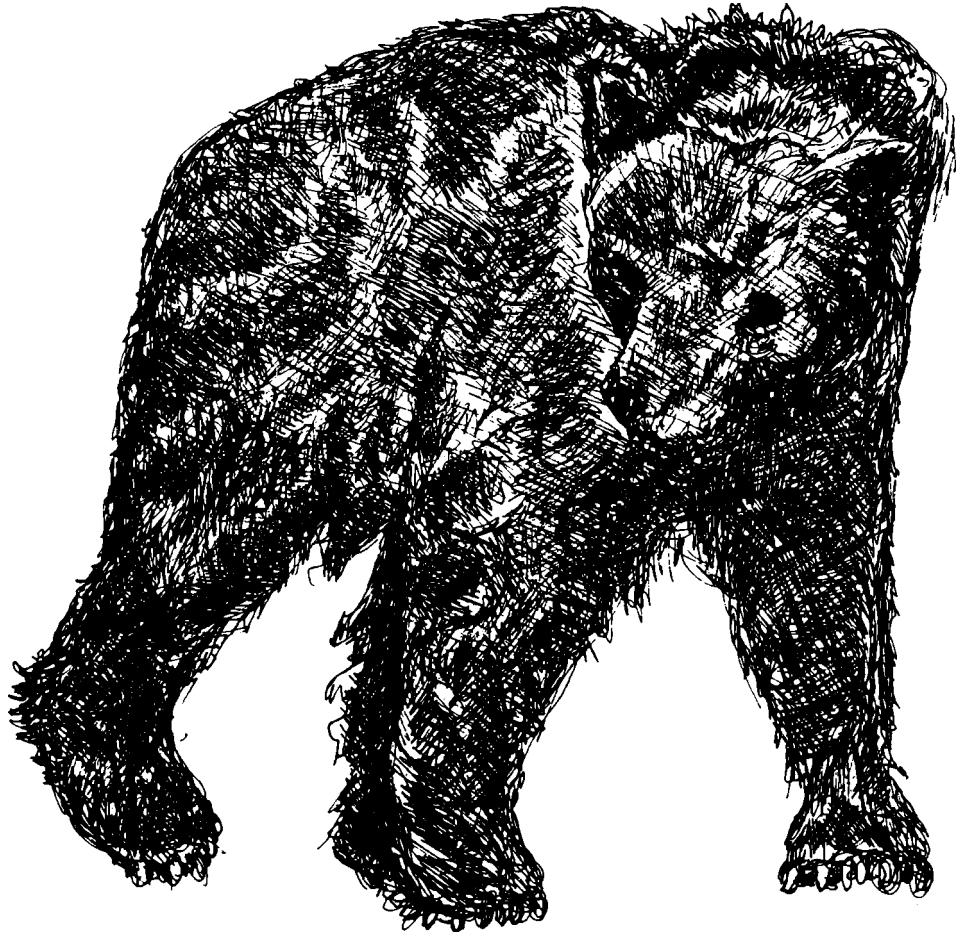
The most welcome guests were the wandering beggars (their aged clothes gave the village the appearance of an outlandish rag fair) with beggar bags on their shoulders filled with crusts of bread, with skeletons of herring, with faded onions (some were gnawed by larvae of the onion fly) and many other such dismal delicacies.

At the midnight blues, when sleepwalkers were led by the moon over the roofs made of straw, rushes, reeds, the clusters of huts resembled a bit Sleepy Hollow, the village which still stands safely in the dreams of Washington Irving.

The poor folks of Michalishek were among the richest on earth, for their hearts were always filled with thankful prayers, contented with their potato goodies which were handed to them by the good will of their destiny. Their riches were their legends which they loved so much that they thought they were gifts of God, given to them like invisible wings with which they could fly back to Adam or to the end of all life on earth.

Aunt Beilke was crowned as the champion storyteller of true stories as well as of enchanted brides who can live only in legends, where their beauty had been tested through the ages by all the neighboring towns and villages.

During the long winter nights she heard winds – soloists, lonely winds; winds – invisible singers and dancers in concert with the songs of the folk which they named dainos. She heard winds – forlorn nomads in snowbergs and winds which tell of the days when the land of Lithuania (as large as South Carolina with half as many people) was a proud empire.



# DANDELIONS

---

In Spring when the night cradled the children and the dandelions to sleep, the actual life of the village vanished, and the world of legend took its place.

Aunt Beilke explained why the dandelions on Beggar Alley are the prettiest on earth. The first dandelions were born at the beginning of time on Beggar Alley on the third day of God's creation of the world. All the angels, spellbound, gathered in late twilight on the Evening Star to admire the beauty of the dandelions just before they were about to close their blossoms. Then a host of the angels fell down on Beggar Alley and turned into dandelions. This is why the folks nicknamed dandelions fallen angels.

At the end of the last Spring on earth, Aunt Beilke assured her listeners, the dandelions will turn into the same angels, just as they were before their fall, but by then Beggar Alley will also fly to heaven and be populated with angels resembling these dandelions with heads of yellow gold.

The dandelions grew everywhere on Beggar Alley, took root in almost every crack of the old wooden huts, on every mudheap. Beggar Alley was so crowded with dandelions that it seemed they were runaways who took



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refuge here from the wrath of the neighboring farmers who saw them as enemies which must be burnt alive, before plowing, so that they would not plague the cabbage, potatoes, onions and the corn, which the farmers believed was discovered by Columbus (they considered the corn more important than the discovery of America).

The poor folks ate the inner leaves of the young dandelions (before they blossomed) raw or cooked, made wine from their flowers for the Sabbath. The herb healer sliced only the surface of the long roots of the dandelions to encourage their growth.

The folks walked cautiously on Beggar Alley not to hurt any of the dandelions which scattered themselves so extravagantly as if they were overburdened with their wealth of kindness, beauty, charity.

Velfke the mystic saw the dandelions, in moonlit ruins, nurse baby angels with their milky juice.

Night, wind and legend lived here in full harmony in every season of the year. Legend was a reality, a next door neighbor in the village of Michalishek.

# THE PRINCE

---

The prince of the village of Michalishek is a beggar, a dreamer and the husband of three dead wives who moved out of their graves to live with him.

Every night he prepares for himself, and for each of his dead wives, a heap of straw on the earthen floor of his shack. He imagines that they live in heaven in ease and luxury, that they might sleep in beds of gold, on sofas made of tusks of elephants or divans of tortoise shells. Nonetheless, he sees them sneaking out of heaven to sleep here on a heap of straw, because they prefer his rude shack to Paradise. He believes that marriage must last also after death, until the cup which he smashed as a bridegroom under his foot will be put together again by the angels.

Some folks nicknamed him The Prince of the Beggars, some The Dreamer, some just called him The Prince.

Now let me introduce you to his three dead wives. They are all glad to meet you.

Meet Pinkie, the tiny beggar-wife, small-framed, elflike, earns her alms by singing heart-rending folk songs, serenading anyone who may give her a kind look.

The Prince still sees her at the night-jasmine, known here as the tree of sadness, her little hands outstretched for alms, long after the mothers lull their children to sleep in their wooden cradles.

Pinkie did not go to heaven without the village of Michalishek where her forefathers (all daughters and sons of beggars) lived half a dozen centuries; she took the village with her to Heavenland. Even in heaven she will stand forever at the tree of sadness, listening to the timeless silence of the nearby cemetery.

Meet Giantess Og, towering above the tall men of this Lithuanian village. She is huge-jawed, thick-voiced; her braids are at times arranged like a fright-wig, at times braided into one long strand like a mare's tail.

Giantess Og is an organ-beater, a street musician. She strikes the keys of her rude-made instrument with fists like hammers, as if she were a rock splitter.

Pranksters gang around her, follow her through the stabbing meadows of spines, cat-briars, thornbushes as she walks with the hard-slapping steps of her large bare feet, sounding like an unshod horse.

The Prince left her, years before she died, but she never left him. Now that she is dead, an inhabitant of the only true world, she returns

evil for evil.

In moon-mad nights, she leaves her heap of straw, drags him out of his princely sleep into her iron bed (which Chaim the Charitable Blacksmith made for her – nine feet long, seven feet wide) and roams through his dreams, sitting on his chest until he hears goatsuckers flying with jarring cries, sucking the winds, after milking dry the udders of every goat.

Meet Lucky, his third dead beggar wife with three ones: she has one arm, one eye, one toe on each foot.

The Prince named her Lucky because she always has more crusts of bread in her bag than any other beggar, though some resent her biting wit as she cries away the four seasons of the year with the same cutting catch-phrase over and over again: “Help a beggar, help a cripple, so God may help you as he helped me.”

Lucky saw thirty summers live and die in the muds of Beggar Alley, which the folks named Pig Street. She always heard pigs squeal and grunt as if they were scratching their itchy backs against each other since time immemorial.

Lucky left the light of her only eye to illuminate the haunted gloom of Beggar Alley.

The Prince finally escaped from his three dead wives when he saw the Angel of Death coming. He went into hiding, into the mouth of a rock on the forbidden path of the forest of Zaborchi, where no one dared to go because it was known as enchanted forest. He carved the word **Shaddai** on the face of the rock, which frightened death away from his hideout, and there he was immortal.

He was immortal as long as he was in the mouth of the rock – three dawns and three sunsets. Let us see what life was like during his three nights and three days of immortality.

His only love here was Sorele whom he met in the wondrous stories, fondled through the ages by the greatest story spinners of the village of Michalishek. Sorele cannot die. She entered heaven alive playing on a harp, God’s reward given to her for playing, dancing, singing around the tent of Jacob:

**Joseph is alive!**

**Joseph is alive!**

Sorele came into his daydreams whenever he invited her but he was eager to have her real, heavenless. For this he was ready and prepared. He did not come into the mouth of the rock empty-handed. He came with a wonder ring given to him by Bentke the Trickster. The ring was, the old master of pranks told him, a magic monger, old as Genesis, made of the gold of the first sunrise on earth which Eve gave to Adam on his 629th birthday.



The old fib-teller confided to the Prince that he sneaked the ring out of the witch bag of the sorcerer Malke Lokshendrei. He swore the ring would work all miracles. The Prince just had to turn the ring right on the sixth finger of his left hand (he had six shocking fingers on each hand) and Sorele would dance down from heaven. He was warned not to turn the wonder ring left, or else he would suddenly reincarnate into a toad, Sorele into a ladybug.

He turned the wonder ring right once, twice, three times and waited for the miraculous Sorele to appear. Alas, the wonder ring fooled him, it changed into a tin button.

He turned the tin button from dawn to sunset, from sunset to dawn, until he saw the button circle like a rolling curse, a tin plaque.

He still continued calling her with a small voice, like Elijah seeking God in the wilderness. Sorele was not in wind or fire but in a small voice. He murmured long as a rivulet on its way to nowhere:

**Come O come, Sorele, out of my daydreams. Two immortal lovers will live here forever in the mouth of a rock in this evil-proof nook. Every moment we will live forever beyond night and day, beyond Adam, beyond time, in the heaven of heavens.**

The Prince was driven out of the enchanted forest by hunger, fear of robbers, bears, and by the giant Ishbi-benob, a brother of Goliath. Armed with storm, like a thunderbolt he could strike any unwelcome guest.

In the distance, he saw the maidens of the enchanted forest wave goodbye to him. Approaching the village, he saw the maidens who were born and raised by the Viliya river greeting him: **Welcome home prince!**

The Prince returned to Beggar Alley – a trodden beggar, alone as if he were the only one left on earth, sinking in guilty meditation, reaching out with closed eyes for death, groping blindly for a last prayer:

**“O bless me God that I may die now with this sunset. King of the universe, inflict upon me my earned punishment. I wanted to lure Sorele out of heaven against your will. Condemn me as a sinner, for whom even the gates of hell shall be closed so that when I die I will not even know that I am dead; neither life nor death shall exist for me. Death lived with me while I was alive. When I die, before the stars pave this unpaved beggar alley, I shall change into nothingness as if I were never born.”**

The Prince heard the waves of the Viliya river calling him: **Come O come into us, you will not vanish, you will turn into a wave.**

And he heard Sorele playing in the wind on her harp, charming the strings with the fingers and thumbs of her comely hands, serenading him:



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**Come O come lover, our first date will be in heaven. You are all mine,  
I am all yours.**

# THE STREET MUSICIAN

---

Avremke Boof was the most beloved street musician in the village of Michalishek. Wandering organ-grinders, who roamed through the village almost daily, were poor competitors. Some folks called his weird music box a barrel organ, some a hurdy gurdy.

Avremke Boof assured everyone there could not be such a wondrous street organ anywhere in the world. It was invented ages ago by one of his forefathers and was handed down from father to son with pride, for none of his kin considered themselves beggars but entertainers who amused the village from dawn to dusk. He revealed only to his son, Shmerke, the technical secrets of his street organ because he thought Shmerke was best fitted, of his six sons and three daughters, to continue as a street musician after he will join his ancestors at the nearby cemetery.

Shmerke was all ears when he listened to his father tell how to reach the most yearning melodies through the music barrel. He showed his son that inside of it there was an arm and a hand composed of thirty bones of various animals, including an elastic bone taken from the upper jaw of a whale. (The design imitated the human arm and hand which consists of thirty bones.) The arm held all the musical parts together, the hand opened and closed the homemade valves to control the flow of music, to make the pitch higher, lower, deeper, many-toned through the vibration of ditch reeds, which he thought grew only in the swamps around the Viliya River that embraced the village roundabout, an island isolated from all the evils of civilization.

However, it was too difficult for the yokelish Shmerke to learn how to operate the street organ with the skill and grace of his father. When he cranked the handle of the music barrel with the strength of a clumsy bumpkin, some folks heard the deafening drums which they believed will be used at the end of days to wake the dead out of their graves, when Messiah will arrive on a white donkey.

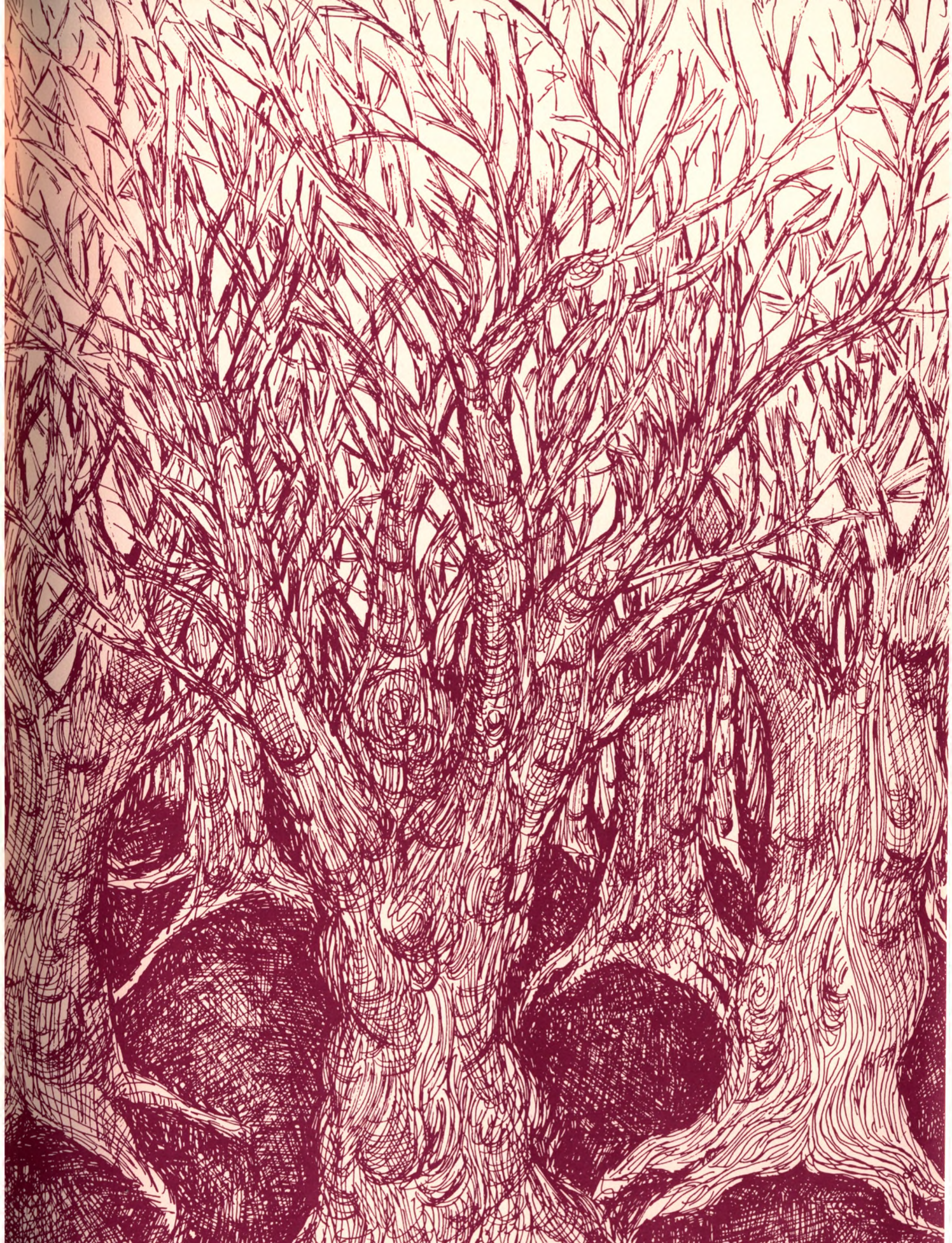
Only his father, Avremke Boof, the virtuoso of the music barrel, knew how to mystify the melodies after removing the pith from the center of the reeds, leaving them hollow, so that even when the music barrel was resting at night on Beggar Alley, it was music-mad. The wind played through it as on a haunting flute or as if, somewhere inside of it, was hidden the first harp, invented by Jubal, or the harp on which David played. The melodies, heard beyond the village seemed as if they were sung by the maiden who had pined away for her lover, leaving only a

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wailing echo of her self.

Like most street musicians, Avremke Boof had his music barrel in partnership with a monkey who helped him ask for alms so skillfully as if she had been born only to beg. She took off her dilapidated hat whenever someone threw a half penny into it, then she bowed, thanked and wished the kind giver longevity, in her monkey language.

The monkey obeyed Avremke Boof with unlimited devotion. After sundown, dressed like a clown, she danced to the handclaps of her admirers. The whole village applauded as she leaped from tree to tree, from roof to roof. The monkey was the circus of the village.



# STINGY BROOK

---

I would not be telling you anything new if I told you that the folks believed that somewhere in the nearby forest of Zaborchi was an enchanted brook because all the neighboring villages across the Viliya River were also known to have enchanted brooks. There was only one difference. Every other enchanted brook could only return youth to old people but could not give eternal life. But anyone who would drink the water of this brook could live forever.

Aunt Beilke insisted that there isn't anything to be proud of our enchanted brook which gave indiscriminately eternal life to anyone who drank its water. It was not as generous, she said, as other wonderbrooks of the surrounding villages which could not only make people young but also heal the sick and give light to the blind.

Aunt Beilke noted the shortcomings of our own enchanted brook which babbled of eternal life as it hurried somewhere through the tangled underbrush of the frightening forest. For instance, if children would drink its water they would remain forever children, old – forever old, sick – forever sick. The sick, the blind, the crippled who lived in the free flophouse of the village called it the **Stingy Brook**, some nicknamed it **Shmagege the Miser**, after the richest man in the village who had a horse, a cow and a flock of goats who almost chewed away all the straw roofs of the village during their long fourteen-year lives. It was said that **Shmagege the Miser** had arranged in his will to sell his horse, his cow, all the goats and bury the money with him in his grave.

Few but the young people were eager to drink the water from our enchanted brook so that they could remain forever young. Most of the old, sick folks would rather die than live forever.

It was rumored that anyone who tried to reach the enchanted brook never returned. **Velfke the Mystic** hoped to succeed with the help of **Roza Rabba** (the great mystery) and the ten emanations of the Cabala to go through every danger to the enchanted brook and return alive.

He made his plans at the huge rock which was always sunk in meditation on why it is chained to its fate, why it is cursed to sit here thousands of years, waiting in vain for doomsday. It seemed to him that the rock, like his thoughts, was craving for motion, for wings; that the rock suddenly remembers it was once upon a time a sandstorm.

**Velfke the Mystic** told of his planned adventures to all his friends – every living being of the village. His friends were all men, all women, all children, all animals, all birds, all fish, all homeless dogs, all owls who

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lived in ruins, in old nests of hawks. He heard the owls hooting fortune – instead of misfortune, as the folks believed. He even trusted the kind wolf, whom he saw leaving the forest to visit the village, not to scare anyone but to prove it is a friend of everyone who does not annoy him.

He believed even the wolves considered him a friend. He was welcome to their dens or in the hollow logs between rocks. He played with their cubs and heard them cry like all little children do.

He dreamed of friendship between all creatures on earth, he even tried to make peace between cats and mice.

When Velfke the Mystic was finally on his way to the enchanted brook, after nights and days in the endless forest, he reached an orchard only about a mile away from the enchanted brook. He had been told that every tree in this orchard was loaded with the same fruit which grew in the garden of Eden, but when he tried to shake down the fruits they turned into bats, hanging from every branch by their hind feet.

Suddenly the bats fluttered down to surround him. At first, harmless bats came down. Some baby bats, like blind winged mice, sucked the milk of their mothers. Then bats with long snouts, with heads like horses or bulldogs, flew overhead – not to attack him but to frighten him.

Then he saw vampire bats stealthily flying out of old graves, twittering with terror as with voices of spectres, spooks, wraiths. They tried to suck the blood of his neck to transform him into a vampire bat. But as they reached for his feet to knock him down, their own large wings blocked their way. Velfke the Mystic was able to escape.

After running for hours during the panic-stricken night, he fell, drowned in sleep. He saw in his dreams a fire-breathing Goliath who said: “I am the chief guard of the enchanted brook and . . .” Before Goliath had a chance to continue, little David rushed out of the Bible flinging one of his five stones from his shepherd bag – a quick-witted stone, smooth and fresh from the brook and it seemed to kill him, yet the monster quickly rose again, ready to swallow not only Velfke the Mystic but the whole village with one gulp.

Velfke the Mystic, shaken by the terrors he had witnessed, fled back to the village of Michalishek, warning everyone never to try to reach the deathful brook.

# MALKE LOKSHENDREI

---

The witch, Malke Lokshendrei, claimed to be the only one to creep unobserved under the jaw of every monster, sneak under the wings of vampire bats and reach the enchanted brook. She assured everyone as well as herself that she would live forever, that she could make anyone defeat death with the assistance of her witchcraft. If anyone agreed to be killed for a while, then she would safely take the heart out of her victim, place it in one of her magic pots; then the heart would grow into the same human being. At first it would be as tall as an index finger. After three days it would jump out of the pot, grow exactly to its own previous height, retain its own identical looks and live forever.

As much as many of the folks wanted to live forever, it was utterly impossible to find anyone who would agree to be killed by the witch with the hope of attaining eternal life.

Velfke the Mystic was the only one who was willing to take a chance with his life, but on one condition only: he or the witch Malke Lokshendrei had to flip a coin, tails, would be the winner, the one to be killed, heads—the loser, the killer. This is how fate would decide who would be lucky enough to be killed, then live forever.

The witch agreed because she was certain she could make the coin fall as she wished. Fate outsmarted her. It fell heads. She was the winner, the one to be killed. The witch was confident that the water which she drank from the enchanted brook assured her eternal life, no matter what happened. Nonetheless she made him swear to keep the following oaths:

1. He had to swear that after killing her he would immediately take her heart out, place it in the magic pot.
2. He had to swear that no human being would touch the pot for three nights and three days.

Velfke the Mystic did exactly as he swore. He quickly killed the witch, instantly took her heart out, placed it in the magic pot.

At dawn, he saw the same witch, of course, at first like the tiniest human being on earth, but through the snout of the pot he saw her grow hour by hour. She could talk immediately, repeated constantly that he must keep his other oath that no human being would touch the pot.

However, during the night, Velfke the Mystic could not sleep. His conscience plagued him mercilessly. He asked himself over and over again: is it right that a human being, particularly a witch, should live forever? She would be able to kill anyone with her witchery, no one would be able to kill her. But he was oathbound, how could he break his

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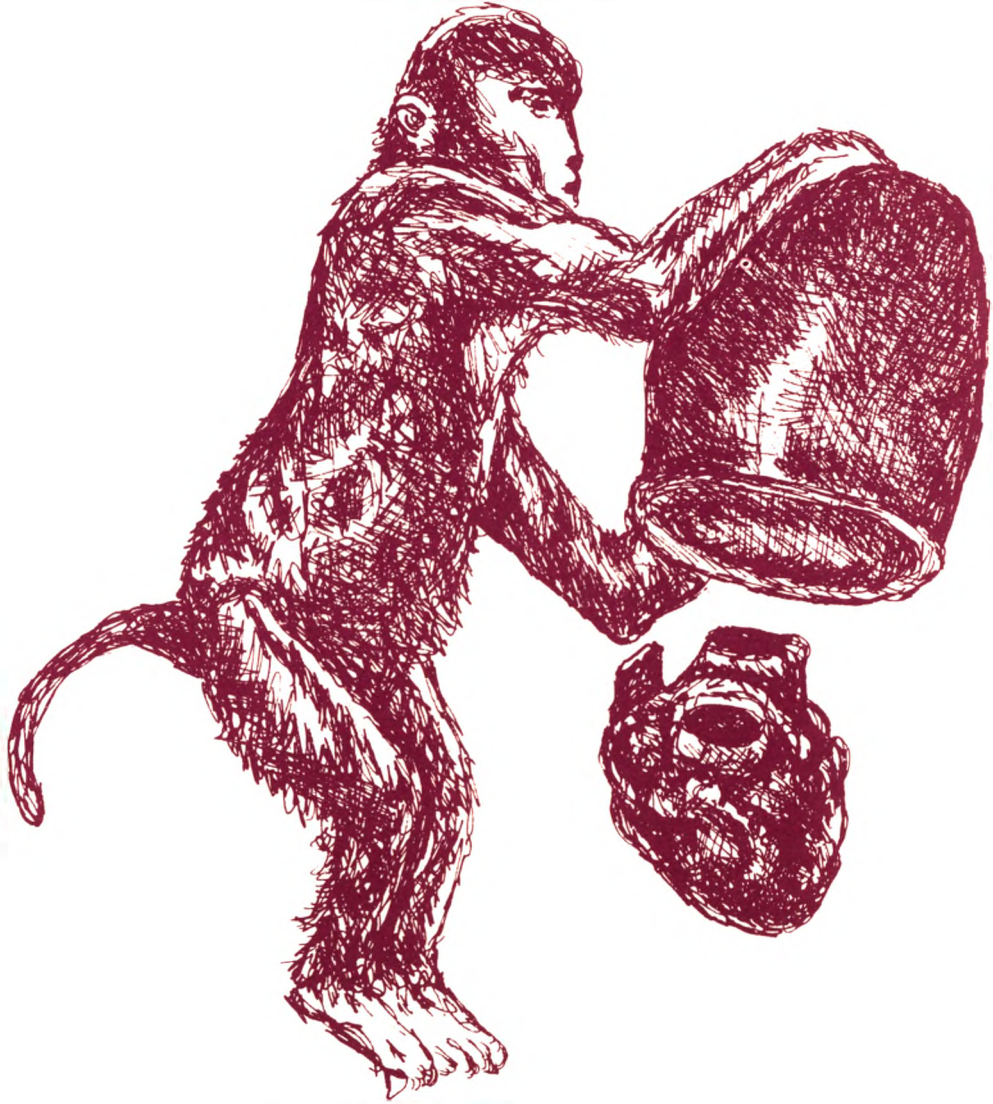
sacred oath? He could find no solution.

Suddenly, a thought struck him like lightning. He swore that no human hands would touch the pot, but he would not break his oath if an animal touched it. Which animal could do it? Of course, the monkey, the assistant street musician! He borrowed Avremke Boof's monkey.

As the monkey watched curiously, Velfke the Mystic placed a similar pot just opposite the pot where the witch, Malke Lokshendrei, was holding on to the edge with a toenail. It seemed the pot held its mouth wide open for the tiny witch to leave.

Velfke the Mystic quickly turned over the empty pot on the nearby table. The monkey which Avremke Boof, the street musician, taught to imitate everything a human being does, dropped the magic pot, and the witch turned immediately into a dead heart.





# SAMSON THE SECOND

---

Among the many listeners who heard Aunt Beilke tell her stories in the village of Michalishek was Marguita, the lady dog that belonged to everyone. Marguita took turns herding the sheep of the farmers and, after a day's hard work, seemed to enjoy joining the folks every twilight to listen to the stories on Beggar Alley.

Marguita sometimes resembled a wolf or a jackal, sometimes a shepherd whose sheep she kept together during the long summer day.

I was a little boy and remember sitting next to Marguita when Aunt Beilke told the story about Chaim Treitl who was nicknamed Samson the Second because he was the strongest man who ever lived in the village of Michalishek.

Chaim Treitl was so similar in strength, looks, courage to Samson the First that it was believed he was his double. He had seven long locks like Samson the First. When he walked, his locks struck one another and chimed like bells which warned any enemy – man, beast or devil – that Chaim Treitl, Samson the Second is here.

One winter night when a hungry wolf sneaked into the village and dragged a little girl out of her crib, he caught the wolf with one hand by its pointed muzzle, with the other by its thick tail, smashed it and returned the child to her mother unharmed! The dying wolf cried with such terror that the starving wolves shivering in the below zero weather ran in panic, across the Viliya river, throughout the forest of Zaborchi.

Here is another story about Chaim Treitl which proves that he well deserved his title, Samson the Second.

After Yankel, the hoarse cantor, nicknamed The Screech Owl (because he was owl-eyed) had cursed the czar in the synagogue, instead of blessing him as was the custom, bands of cossacks rushed into the village with orders to massacre every man, woman and child. Chaim Treitl bound all the three hundred cossacks, hand to foot, emptied the kerosene of all the lamps, poured it over every one of them, set them afire and drove them like burning torches, until they fell one by one, leaving heaps of ashes throughout the village.

Some skeptical storytellers of the village claimed that he killed the cossacks with the help of the robbers of the forest who were as famous as the English Robin Hood, the Mexican Pancho Villa, the American Jesse James. But Aunt Beilke assured the folks that Samson the Second killed them singlehanded.

The folks considered the cossacks more vicious than any animal on

earth. Hence they saw Chaim Treitl even stronger, more heroic than Samson the First who bound three hundred foxes, tail to tail, put a firebrand between their tails, and made them run through the corn, vineyards and olives of his enemies.

After the victory over the cossacks, Chaim Treitl was surrounded by so many storymongers that he himself seemed more thrilling than legend. When Bentke the Fibber saw two huge clouds collide, in autumn, when clouds were closer to the earth than to the sky, he convinced some yokels that these clouds were mountains which Chaim Treitl brought here and knocked together, forcing mountain to fight against mountain.

His downfall, as with Samson the First, began when he fell in love. The beautiful Adeluite was just as treacherous as Delilah. Like Delilah, she lulled him to sleep with his head in her lap, cut off his seven locks of hair for a few handfuls of silver from the cossacks. Adeluite looked on joyfully when his enemies bound him with brass chains, made him blind and celebrated their victory over him. He was kept alive with bits of bread, water and torture.

However, when it seemed that he was near death, his enemies did not notice that his hair – his supernatural strength – grew back. Like Samson the First, he pulled down the central pillars to which he was chained – the columns holding up the roof. The cossacks were killed while they wined, dined and gloated over their victory. All died except Adeluite, who escaped just when the walls started to shake as if an earthquake were beginning.

Unlike Samson the First who died together with his enemies, Chaim Treitl crawled out alive from under the bloody wreckage – jubilant, triumphant, a blind giant dancing on his toes over the body of their heathen idol brought in honor of their victory which now lay beheaded by the glass of the shattered windowpanes stoned by the fallen walls.

Adeluite tried to recapture him by locking the gates. She hoped to be able to hand him over to another gang of cossacks. But he tore the heavy gates down and carried them away like toys.

Chaim Treitl was now a blind Samson. The folks took turns to lead him wherever he wished to go. They vied with one another, particularly on Friday nights when they could treat him with their favorite dish in honor of the Sabbath, lentils and potato dumplings.

He helped everyone with his miraculous strength. If anyone wanted to move his hovel out of wretched Pig Street, Samson the Second just picked it up with all its ragged belongings and brought it wherever one wished.

Suddenly, one of the homing pigeons, an airmail carrier of Michalishek, flew into the village with a letter from Adeluite attached to

its right leg, addresssed STRICTLY PERSONAL TO CHAIM TREITL.

Chaim Treitl, my blind lover, come to me so that I may atone for my sins, for selling you to your enemies. Come to me so that I may live and if necessary die, for you, my imperishable lover. I am awaiting you in the forest of Zaborchi. Come, shout my name, and I will answer you and prove to you that no man ever had a love as true as I will be.

Chaim Treitl was thrown into confusion. Though he feared foul play, he was anxious to go to the forest, to meet his treacherous love.

He was warned that Adeluite flew into the forest like a snake on false wings to carry him away to his enemies, to lure him into a trap. Nevertheless Chaim Treitl wished to believe her and asked the villagers to help him find her in the forest. He told everyone that he would soon return with her to the village.

Some of the bravest men, ready to fight any traitor, led him to the forest to meet Adeluite. He called her name many times but heard his own echo reecho with doubt and fright as the only answer. He now thought that some prankster had attached the letter to the right leg of the homing pigeon. He called his love's name again and again with the yearning of a lover who imagines his love to be in a world which does not exist.

He missed her so much that it seemed to him he could not live without her. He crawled on his hands and feet like a blind animal, trying to find perhaps one of her footprints. Just then, he felt her hands caressing his blind eyes and heard her say:

“Chaim Treitl, my eternal lover, this is I, Adeluite. The only way to prove my love for you is by asking you to kill me whenever you suspect the slightest disloyalty to you. I will follow you, hand in hand, step by step, constantly on the alert to warn you of your enemies.”

Adeluite told him that the cossacks were now her enemies too, that they had burnt her whole family at the stake and that she was the only one lucky enough to escape.

She said: “I swear, not even death will separate us. I will be forever light in your blind eyes.”

It was a very hot summer day. It was the feast of Vanikas, when the Lithuanians go to the forest to make wreaths out of wild flowers. They saw Adeluite walking with Chaim Treitl, hand in hand, at times, mouth to mouth, locked in a long kiss. No one interfered. He felt tears of joy rolling over her pretty cheeks and he kissed away her every tear.

He was very thirsty and asked Adeluite to help him get some water in the forest. She led him to a spring at the foot of a cliff where the water rushed down fresh and cold, from some great distance, filtered through layers of rock. He drank the water with an almost scorched mouth. It

seemed to him she saved his life. He drank the water as if it were a drink of the gods.

He did not know that Adeluite had paid a witch to enchant the spring with mischievous love. He did not know that from then on he would speak and do exactly the opposite of whatever he would want to say or do.

When he heard Adeluite whistle, he could not imagine that this was a call to his enemies to come to kill him. He thought her whistle stirred the air with mysterious music, that she turned the roar of the beasts of the forest into a song of love. He even heard the wings of hawks sing in flight.

As his thoughts were wandering through an Eden created by his love for Adeluite, he suddenly heard the voices of a gang of cossacks around him. He wanted to kill them all as he did before, but pitifully bewitched, when he thought he was hitting them, he embraced everyone of his enemies.

One of the cossacks raised a heavy log of wood to kill him, but because after every blow he said Thank You, the cossacks decided it would be fun to keep him alive as a slave, to listen to his endless thanks for every wound.

He wanted to tell Adeluite, **So you are the same dirty traitor as you were.** Instead he said, “You really prove to be the truest love, my darling.”

Adeluite told the cossacks that they now had a constantly smiling slave: so why kill him – slave him to death. The cossacks agreed. He thanked them for every slap on his cheek, for every punch in the nose.

Some folks of the village of Michalishek who knew every hideout in the forest of Zaborchi did not tire of the search for Chaim Treitl, even through dangerous nights when the eyes of wolves sparkled from dens, rocks and hollow logs. They could not find a trace of him.

When they thought he was lost forever, one of the wandering beggars brought great news to the village that he saw him alive, a slave in the brutal hands of the cossacks. He told them how the traitorous Adeluite led him to a spring that had been enchanted by a witch, that Samson the Second says and does the opposite of what he wants to say or do.

The sorceress of the village, skillful as the witch of Endor, left immediately with the wandering beggar until she finally reached Chaim Treitl, luckily at a moment when he was slaving alone, unseen by the band of cossacks. He recognized the voice of the sorceress. She said, “I have come to disenchant you Chaim Treitl. You have been spellstruck by a witch.”

She raised her divining rod, made of the forked twigs of witch hazel. It

## SAMSON THE SECOND

was October, the leaves of witch hazel had already fallen, the rod was blooming with golden clusters of flowers, she hit the devil with her rod three times, spit at his evil eye seven times. Chaim Treitl was made spell-proof.

Meanwhile, the homing pigeon, sent by the villagers of Michalishek arrived, flying over Chaim Treitl's head with a big spool of thread attached to its back.

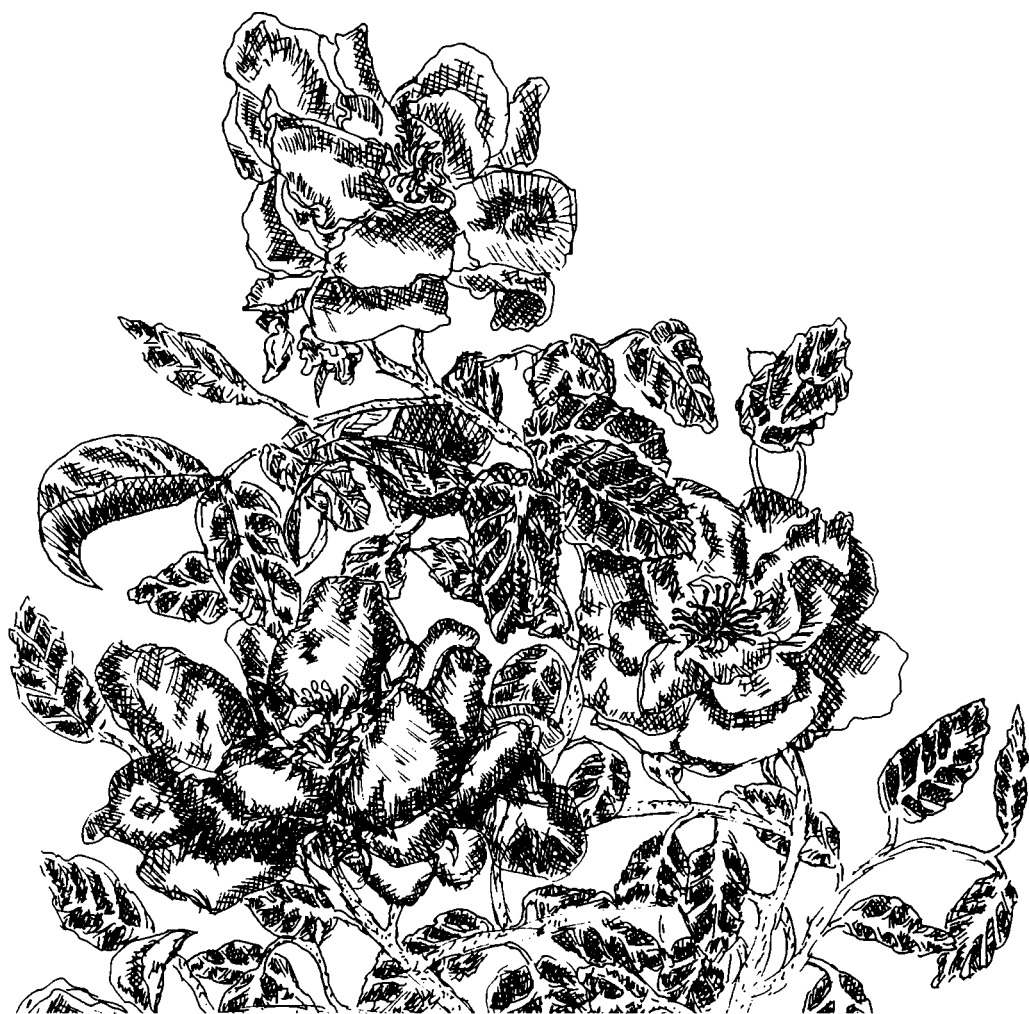
Before the sorceress left in a hurry, fearing the cossacks might notice her, she wrapped the thread around his index finger and told him to unravel it slowly so that he would be able to follow the homing pigeon as it flew back to the village.

When the cossacks realized that their smiling slave had escaped, they galloped after him, armed with sabers, on their best horses of their famous cavalry. Their horses were speeding with flowing manes, flaring nostrils, but could not find him as he followed faithfully the homing pigeon, unravelling the thread of the spool until he reached the village of Michalishek at midnight.

Marguita, the beloved lady dog of the village, was the first one to greet him – a sudden barking which sounded like an explosion. Marguita would never bark in the middle of the night unless something of great importance happened. Therefore the whole village quickly awoke.

Chaim Treitl was carried from shoulder to shoulder. Marguita, the children, the pigs of Pig Street, everyone joined the midnight singing, dancing, rejoicing. Bentke the Fibber counted a thousand cheers, ten thousand hurrahs and a million hoorays, shouting in unison: **Welcome home, Chaim Treitl – Samson the Second!**







# ELCHIK AND DVEIRKE

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Velfke the Mystic found a donkey in one of the forsaken ruins of Beggar Alley, dying against a sunset which gave every beggar more gold than any wealthy man on earth ever had. The donkey was so skinny, almost fleshless. It was dying of hunger. He shared with the donkey his fortune of food-gifts which almost filled his rich beggar-bag: black ryebread given to him by kind women as soon as it was taken out of the oven with a wooden paddle, also tasteful morsels with such names as latkes, kugel, babke, but all made of raw, grated potatoes baked on a three-legged griddle.

The donkey still seemed to be hungry, so he asked his charitable beggar-friends to help with whatever food they can. The beggars were vying with each other to give the donkey the very best of their beggar-bags. One beggar donated some of his experimental delicacies, which he had kneaded with flour and root-pulp still bearing the signs of the stones used to squeeze the poisonous juices out of it. (The donkey refused to eat a dead, cooked chicken-head, with the dream of life closed under its ghastly eyes.) Almost every beggar offered handfuls of crumbs of white-challah glazed with eggs, fashioned like a woman's braids, in honor of the sabbath, crowned since the beginning of time as the eternal bride.

After such a generous meal, the donkey rose, nodding its head to its savior. Velfke the Mystic was shocked out of his wits when he suddenly heard the donkey talking, braying with a human voice: **I am the donkey who was born on the sixth day of the creation of the world. God gave me the gift of speech which I may use whenever I have to announce his message. I am the same donkey that spoke to Balaam, many centuries ago, when he was sent by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Jews, but instead he had to bless them. Balaam whipped me, demanded that I walk ahead because he did not see, as I did, the angel who stood in my way with a sword drawn against him. I have been resurrected here again to tell the world that Messiah is on his way though he will arrive somewhat late, in the year of two thousand and seven. To the surprise of all who await him in Jerusalem, he will come to this village of Michalishck, from here he will ride me through all corners of the earth, followed by every ant, elephant, cat and mouse (who will be true friends then), serpent, man, skunk, eagle. O he will lead all living and dead creatures on earth to heaven.**

Velfke the Mystic and the donkey spoke to one another as close friends. He did not ride the donkey. How can you ride on the back of a

friend? The donkey followed him up and down the hills and dales, in and around the village.

The children, mischief-makers, did not see anything mystical about the donkey. As soon as Velfke the Mystic left it alone for a few minutes, they pulled its long ears, the short mane, tore the long hairs at the end of its tail. When he returned, he could not understand why the donkey was suddenly so stubborn, why it would not budge, why it would not talk to him. He did not know that this donkey, like all donkeys, would become very obstinate after bad treatment. After patting it gently, caressing and soothing it, he could converse with the donkey again. He heard the donkey say:

I have a message from the angel who announces future marriages. Go immediately to the parents of the ten year old Elchik, and tell them that their son is destined to marry the nine year old Dveirke when he will reach the age of eighteen, she, seventeen.

The parents as well as Elchik and Dveirke were delighted to hear the good news of the angel, for they were not only close neighbors but still closer friends. Everyone in the village already saw the children as future man and wife

The Rabbi in the chayder, the old village school, told Elchik that, because of the message from the angel of the future marriages, he must be a particularly good boy from now on so that he and his bride Dveirke would be worthy of going to heaven. But Elchik feared heaven more than anything on earth. Being so close to God seemed frightening to him.

He heard from older boys who were already learning Aramaic, the language in which the Cabala was written, that he may choose any one of the seven heavens in which to live after death. But they didn't yet know what these heavens were.

Soon, Elchik also began to learn Aramaic. He studied it so diligently that he was nicknamed the Gemora-monger (Gemora, the part of the Talmud written also in Aramaic.) He was now very eager to begin a search for the seven heavens in the Cabala. The problem was how to get hold of these mystical books, kept under heavy lock because young people are not allowed to read them.

It seemed to Elchik that luck was kind to him when the Rabbi asked him to bring the key which locked away the Cabala books to his uncle, Chaim the Blacksmith, for some repair. Uncle Chaim was famous in hundreds of villages and little towns as such a fantastic blacksmith that it was said he could shoe a horse while it was galloping full speed. His horseshoes were so much admired that some horsemen called them shoe-flowers; some, China roses.

When Elchik brought the key to uncle Chaim the Blacksmith for



repair, he asked him to make a similar key just to play with. At first uncle Chaim hesitated, but when he thought of the saying that there are as many toys for the poor children in the village as there are teeth in the mouth of a bird, he gladly made the key. It did not dawn upon him that his beloved nephew, Elchik, could commit such a sacrilege like opening the closet where the forbidden books are kept hidden.

Elchik ran with the key to Elbow Alley, truly bent like an elbow, where his ten year old bride-to-be lived near the *hekdesch*, the flophouse which was always crowded with wandering beggars. Elchik was almost breathless when he reached her:

“Dveirkele, this is the key to the closet where the seven heavens are locked, in the Cabala books.”

They embraced each other and jumped for joy, though Elchik still didn't know how to open the closet without anyone seeing. There was almost always someone in the synagogue, reading the Talmud or Cabala or praying for all the misfortunes on earth. Nevertheless he managed to sneak to the closet quickly when the synagogue was briefly unoccupied, grabbed some Cabala books with the hope of finding out about the seven heavens. He meant to return them before anyone noticed they were missing.

The news that Elchik had the key to the forbidden books spread like wildfire among most of the older pupils of the *chayder*. Everyone wanted to know about the seven heavens so that he could go to the heaven of his own choice. They all followed him. Dveirke was the only girl among the boys. They went into the ruin where Velfke the Mystic had found the talking donkey. This ruin was also the home of homeless dogs and birds called goatsuckers, and was also a hideout for ghosts of Cabalists who died hundreds of years ago.

Barefoot Dveirke, her long braids ornamented with wild flowers, was standing on her tiptoes, eager to listen to the mysteries of the Cabala. Some of the boys doubted a girl could get into one of the seven heavens, but Elchik assured her he would be able to sneak her in.

None of the boys, even those who had studied Aramaic several years, understood the difficult books of the Cabala. Even grownups who knew Aramaic fairly well found it hard to understand its occult philosophy of God, man, beast and the universe.

At first, the children could read only the names of the Cabala books which they had “borrowed” from the synagogue. They could only find a glimpse, a spark, a fleeting idea here and there.

Dveirke held the smallest book tightly, as if she were afraid it would fly away without leaving a trace of the seven heavens.

Elchik told Dveirke in a whisper that the name of the little book which

she is holding is called Sefer Yetsiro which means the Book of Creation. This book was so thin that she counted only one thousand and six hundred words in it.

Elchik said that he had heard Cabala scholars saying Isaak the blind, whom they considered the father of the Cabala, had found in this little book the inner light of Genesis and the same darkness before God created heaven and earth. Elchik had also overheard old Cabala scholars saying that to know God is to become God.

Nearly all the boys eventually found some idea in these forbidden books (the Rabbi would punish them unmercifully if they were caught). One of the boys translated for the group (standing in a circle, ready to run at the sight of some unwelcome guest) that the Torah which they learned is not the same as that which God wrote before he created the world, that Moses translated God's words into the language of the people, that since then the Cabalists have been digging deeply into every letter of the Torah, trying to learn God's language.

Another boy found in one of the Cabala books the most daring thought that God did not create the world; if He did, it would be perfect. God sent ten sephiroth to create heaven, earth, man, beast, bird.

None of the boys understood what the ten sephiroth consist of, but they did learn how to combine letters (every Hebrew letter is also a number) into mystic meanings which are called Gematria. They learned how to use the complicated system of the Hebrew alphabet as a code to find new interpretations to the old ideas.

It seemed to Dveirke that even the homeless dogs who lived in this ruin were listening to everything which was said there, without ever barking, as if they understood the importance of keeping their whereabouts secret.

Finally Dveirke became very impatient. She said, "I want to know now all about the seven heavens. We must now decide which heaven to choose, a heaven where Elchik and I can live, where all of us could be eternal friends."

Suddenly Elchik shouted a ho – ho – ho which Dveirke thought was heard throughout the village:

"I found the seven heavens! Let us all shout Hoorah!"

Dveirke pleaded with him: "Please Elchik, change your shout to a murmur."

Elchik lowered his voice. Everyone listened with great amazement as he began to explain each of the seven heavens:

"The first heaven blindfolds the day so that night may come."

"No," replied everyone. Dveirke said, "Why go to a heaven that makes the light of the day blind?"

“The second heaven connects all the heavens and we may walk from heaven to heaven as in our village from alley to alley.”

“No,” replied everyone! Dveirke said, “All we could do in such a heaven is walk.”

“The third is the Heaven of Manna which fell in the desert where the Jews wandered forty years.” Elchik used a bit of his imagination when he said that Manna may be anything you wish:

“Could I wish that Manna may be ice cream?” asked Dveirke. The children heard of a wondrous thing called ice cream but had never tasted it.

“Yes,” said Elchik, “It could be ice cream, potato pancakes, marzipan, even choice chocolates which only kings eat.”

“Wonderful! wonderful!” marvelled all the children, “Let us all go to the heaven of Manna.”

“Great!” rejoiced Dveirke, “We will eat manna ice cream, sing, play jacks with stars, be friends, forever and ever.”

Elchik was ready to stop at the third heaven where everyone was so eager to be. But some children insisted: “Continue reading, maybe there is still a better heaven.”

Elchik continued: “Jerusalem is the fourth heaven.” The children did not know that there is a Jerusalem anywhere on earth, except in the Bible.

“No, no,” replied the children. Dveirke meditated a while and said: “If we can bring our village into heaven, we would go there. It would be better than Jerusalem.”

“The fifth heaven is where all the angels fly.”

Everyone remained silent out of fear that the angels might punish them if anything bad was said against them. Only Dveirke dared to say:

“Let us leave the angels alone. I would be afraid to be so close to the angels. We don’t want to be angels, we want to be people in heaven.”

“The sixth heaven is where the judges judge the sinners on their way to hell.”

“No, no, no!” exclaimed everyone, forgetting that it is dangerous to shout.

Elchik ended by explaining that the seventh heaven is where all the unborn children live.

All the children shouted the last answer in a chorus:

“No, no, no!” The children left the ruin suddenly as if they were rushing to their new home, to the Heaven of Manna.

Only Elchik and Dveirke still remained in the ruin. As Elchik clapped his hands in exultation, Dveirke began to cry: “Could be the angels will not let me in because I am a girl.”

“Don’t cry Dveirkele,” Elchik consoled her. “I promise you, I will not go to the third heaven without you.” But Dveirke kept sobbing until Elchik swore and the homeless dogs in the ruin were witnesses that neither life nor death will separate them.

From then on, Elchik and Dveirke met almost daily in the forsaken ruin where he read to her from the forbidden Cabala books, opening and closing the closet carefully with the secret key, taking and returning the mystic books without anyone noticing.

Elchik and Dveirke were seen walking together day in, day out, until Elchik reached the age of seventeen, Dveirke – sixteen. Everyone considered their love divine. They were always seen whispering to one another. There seemed to be a lip-alliance between them which had no beginning or end. And though none of the gossip mongers succeeded to overhear even an echo of an echo, rumors were flying throughout the village: Elchik is telling his love Dveirke all about Roza Rabba, the great mysteries of the Cabala; that he is confiding to her how to reach the unknown, before the creation of the world and about life beyond the last man on earth.

It was said that they secretly met the tallest angel, Sandalphon, who weaves their whispers into crowns to present them to God. Hence, some of the folks saw them as sinners because everyone knew that no Jew is allowed to study the Cabala until he is forty.

Only God and Dveirke heard Elchik say: “Dveirke, my only-only one, look far-far above us until you see the Heaven of Manna, where we will live after our last kiss on earth.”

After saying good-night to Dveirke, Elchik saw angels walk on Elbow Alley. The cobblestones seemed to him like fallen stars, a shower from the solar system. He serenaded her on his mandolin at her little window. It seemed to her that his heart-rending melodies turned her crudely built hut into a castle where she was a princess, carried by the arms of her lover Elchik into far away worlds.

He loved to play songs which he composed himself. Sometimes he played late into the night until, at first Dveirke, then almost the whole village got out of their beds to dance to the rhythm of his mandolin.

Some folks danced polkas with three steps and a hop, in double meter, some danced in groups, locked hand in hand, each group vying to encircle Elchik and Dveirke in the middle of the dance.

It was believed that whenever Elchik and Dveirke passed Butcher Alley whispering the ten emanations which are the voices of God, the tough hearted butchers stopped throwing curses at one another: as if under a sudden hypnosis, they became love-stricken, shouting together,

“I,love! love! We are all born to love, to bless, not to hate or curse.”

At the sight of Elchik and Dveirke, Bashke the Chicken Plucker stopped plucking the dead chickens because she suddenly saw every chicken like a featherless ghost, fluttering through the nightmares of its killer with wingless arms, squeaking: “Why, oh why did you cut my throat, return my only life so I may live again in joy and sorrow like all God’s children.”

After this horror-vision Bashke did not pluck the feathers of dead chickens any more, but picked mountain sorrel, schav. She dug potatoes which were left over for the poor by kind owners of the fields, hers were the berries of the forest. The keepers of the orchards allowed her to take the apples which were blown down by the wind. It seemed to Bashke that she was now as rich as Eve, for she ate the same fruit which grew in the garden of Eden.

Bentke the Fibber swore that when Elchik and Dveirke passed Pig Street, he saw a hog which had been knocked unconscious by the blows of a hammer between its eyes, rising from its hell and chopping the killer into pork chops.

Elchik and Dveirke loved to walk in moonlit nights with Velfke the Mystic and his donkey to enchant the forest of Zaborchi. They made friends with all the animals. The bears ate out of their hands – nuts, berries, fruits.

Velfke the Mystic showed them how a she-bear stole a lamb from a nearby farm, carrying it with its grinding teeth, suddenly freeing it when the donkey brayed: “Thou shalt not kill, love your victim.”

They were in awe as they watched the she-bear licking the lamb’s wounds with the love of a mother who found her lost, maimed child. Then the donkey, the bear and the limping lamb danced together, accompanied by a joyous howling of wolves as if it were a celebration of wild beasts. Some wolves were afraid of the donkey and hid themselves in the hollow trunks of ancient trees.

As Elchik neared the age of eighteen, Dveirke seventeen, the village of Michalishek began to prepare for the greatest wedding they ever had, but just then, Elchik and Dveirke disappeared. No one could find even a shadow of a shadow of their existence until Velfke the Mystic sent one of his homing pigeons to the families of Elchik and Dveirke with the following message attached to its left leg (written on a leaf which was dropped from one of the trees of Eden).

“Elchik and Dveirke flew to the Heaven of Manna, only angels will be at their wedding.”

In clear summer nights, Velfke the Mystic advised the folks of the



**FOREVER AND EVER AND A WEDNESDAY**

**village of Michalishek to look long at the stars, to listen long to every breeze, until they hear Elchik and Dveirke calling them, asking to join them in the Heaven of Manna.**

# LORD YOORKE

---

Yoorke the Great, named after his great pigbelly, was the land pirate of more than half of the shacks of Pig Street. It was rumored, he was once the chief of a bandit band who served him in return for a share of the loot, plundered from the rich as well as from the poor.

He titled himself Lord Yoorke. He lived on Pig Street in the grand style of a feudal lord. He controlled with evil skill the lives of his perpetual debtors. The poor folks crossed themselves, knelt in prayer whenever they saw Lord Yoorke.

He instigated quarrels between his tenants just for the fun of it. He so much enjoyed their feuds that it seemed the folks were willing to kill each other just to amuse their lord. Some men fought with fists, some with their three legged stools. Some women threw at each other earthen bowls (made of baked mud), wooden spoons and other crude tableware. Some tried to claw each other's eyes out. No one except Lord Yoorke knew how and for what reason the feud began.

The villagers had to take turns to produce for their lord five of their comeliest daughters as concubines. The less alluring girls were usually changed in autumn when the peasants crossed the Viliya river on the ancient barge to the forest of Zaborchi to cut logs for their winter fuel.

Of the five concubines, Natasha was the prettiest but also the most deceitful, sly-eyed like a shrewd serpent. Her mouth was always bubbling with doubletalk. She was heard everywhere swinging her words, in a high-pitched voice, to and fro like a loose door knocked back and forth by the wind. Whenever the other concubines saw her they always shouted down her treacherous laughter. She was idle, boisterous, wanton.

Maria was the tallest of the concubines, longnecked with a keen scent and sight. Natasha nicknamed her after the tallest of all animals: the Giraffe Maid.

Maria was the Goosegirl, she spent her days with a flock of geese which consisted of two breeds: the Toulouse geese with proud heads, thick bills, gray feathers and the Embden white geese with orange bills and toes. Maria admired the necks of the geese, gracefully curved like the necks of legendary swans. She walked them through the fields, swam together the waterways, jumped with them short hops in the air to shake off the drops of water, against the sun, like cut crystals.

Natasha complained to Lord Yoorke that Maria saves the lives of the oldest tendereyed geese (some of them over sixty years old), that she

honored the old age of the geese with illumined love as if they were her own grandfolks, instead of killing them to make exquisite meals for him out of their tasty livers, to stuff his bridal pillows with their plucked feathers. Lord Yoorke nodded his pig-jaw in agreement.

Katia the most voluptuous concubine was a graceful pigherd, her unaffected manners were down to earth, a wholesome robust peasant girl. She washed her clothes from the apron (with shoulder straps) to her undershirt, in the nearby rivulet.

The folks nicknamed her the Queen of the Hogs, but Natasha said that Katia's nose is like a snout, that her eyes are small and often bloodshot, and because no one saw Katia barefooted, Natasha assured everyone that each of her feet had four toes like a hog and that she grew constantly fatter, gaining a pound a day like a hog.

Katia liked the pigs, she listened to their long conversations as if she understood their squeaking language. Her eyes dimmed with tears as if she were in mourn whenever she saw a hog turn into pork, its intestines into sausages. She heard in the wind the only things left of every hog – its squeal, its pitiful cry.

On Sundays, in a dress with brilliant colors and fanciful embroidery she resembled a rustic goddess.

Veritshka and Pastushka kept the hogpens clean, helped the mother pigs to rear healthy piggies, but Natasha grumbled that they did not remove the manure soon enough. She blamed them whenever a baby pig was born with closed eyes, whenever it was too weak to follow its mother pig within a few days, or when the piggies still nursed after two months, or when the mother pig removed the guard rail and accidentally killed a piggie child.

Whenever there was a hog cholera, when the noses and lungs of the hogs became inflamed, when the hogs had to be doomed, burned, buried, Natasha blamed the concubines and Lord Yoorke ordered the folks to replace their daughters with younger, more hard working concubines. Natasha made their lives wretched.

But Natasha could not convince Yoorke that Marusah was unfaithful. He compared her loyalty to a wall which could hold any slippery slide of earth, rock or ice from falling.

Marusah was a goatherd. She led the goats through meadows and pasture grasses, combed the beards of the billy goats, chased the hornflies which clustered around their twisted horns, around their bodies where their short tails could not reach them, soothing the backs of the does and the kids with her fine fingertips.

Lord Yoorke was kind to Marusah. He was a bellyful of horselaugh when she sucked the nourishing udders of the goats, as the sweet milk rushed into her mouth.



# TSIGANE

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Who is Tsigane? Where did she come from? No one knows. She appeared barefooted on Beggar Alley as from out of nowhere, throwing burning torches into the air, flying to catch them as on rainbow wings.

She was jeweled from head to toe in pinchbeck splendor, all her fingers and toes, ringridden, sparkled with illegitimate gems, unmothered pearls; translucent glass reflected a fraudulent imitation of opal. Bangles and hoops resembling beryl dangled from her ears, her ankles embraced with anklets of sham emeralds. It seemed even the cobbles of Beggar Alley changed into scintillating jewel mongers. Overwhelmed as by a great wave of awe, the folks saw Tsigane as a one-girl enchanting festival who came here to thrill the gods.

Tsigane seemed so fabulous it was rumored she was never born out of the womb of a woman, she merely walked out of the yearning daino songs which the folks sang as they carved their wooden Jesus out of pine, fir or birch.

The old chums of the village were betting to their last half pennies that Lord Yoorke would change his five concubines for the one and only Tsigane. Everyone knew that his voracious love for the beautiful newcomer would devour her alive, if he only could.

Tsigane was a miraculous runner, it was said, she could outrun storms, horses, lightnings. No wonder then that Lord Yoorke hunting her with his five concubines as with a pack of dogs could only catch a fleeting glimpse of her.

Nonetheless, he finally lured her into a castle-like cabin. The roof was covered with oak and the hemlock barks, the floors and doors made of logs split lengthwise, the walls of red brickwork with pillowed shutters to protect the triple windows from the harsh Lithuanian winters, also a veranda for the cool summer evenings. The fantastic dwelling had been especially built for her, and she thought it fit for a queen.

Lord Yorke ordered his concubines to crochet for her a dress with diverse scenery: a winterized cabin in castle-style, an imitation of the one he built for her, made in satin weave of damask stitches with window panes dazzling with frost patterns, the blouse down to her graceful hipline, decorated with gemmed buds about to burst into blossoms which could remain forever June.

When the concubines finished crocheting the dress for Tsigane to the last fine intertwined loop, it seemed a river of manifold colors (every color borne out of a single pass of a needle in furious contrasts fought to

be among the first to show its grandeur).

She performed wild fire dances not only for Lord Yoorke but also for the goats, the concubines, the pigs and for all the folks of the village. Her long braids interlaced into many strands with madonna lilies with ribbons of silk spun by varied races of industrial silkworms. The necklaces around her full neck, made of tiny sea animals, danced along in rhythmical succession.

Tsigane was warmly greeted by the hospitable goats, which the folks called poorman's cows, some of them with ghastly scars, penalties inflicted for grazing away the straw roofs.

However, Tsigane was unwelcomed by most of the concubines and by the pigs which overcrowded Pig Street. The hogs, the sows, the boars wagged their short curled tails with scorn as they were digging roots with their snouts, mouths, nostrils, gnashing against her their canine teeth, reminding her that they are proud descendants of the swine of the wilds, grumbling and squeaking: **Get out of our Pig Street, you strange pigless creature!**

Only the unweaned little pigs were friendly like all children with hearts free of prejudice.

Lord Yoorke, lovesick, rocked Tsigane to sleep whispering: "Sleep my beautiful little lady, night is the dreamtime for you, angels and dolls."

Tsigane seldom spoke, she sang with her wistful soprano voice the Jewel Song. She sang jolly gypsy songs or sad longing hymns to her lover whom she could not reach, whom she met only in her dreams. It seemed song and dance were the only languages she understood.

Her superhuman charm enticed the sorcerer Gedaminas, the commander of all witchcraft. He lived at the foot of the old Christian cemetery under a dark star. He heard Tsigane sing at midnight like a moon-goddess. He saw the dead rise from their graves to listen, he heard all his demon friends applaud. He fell in love with her up to his ears.

Lord Yoorke was panic stricken, overpowered with fright that the sorcerer might witch his wondrous Tsigane away from him.

As usual, whenever Lord Yoorke had a problem to which he could not find a solution, he went to Velfke the Mystic who lived like a hermit in one of the foresaken ruins of the village, waiting for his last sunset to carry him off like Elijah in a chariot of fire to heaven.

To the amazement of all his concubines, Lord Yoorke was always kind to Velfke who was a beggar, a Jew and a mystic who tried to convince him that the whole earth is a lonely wretched place, that true life begins in heaven where all good people live after death. Lord Yoorke believed that Velfke the Mystic had a supernatural power to defeat Gedaminas the Sorcerer.

Velfke the Mystic was known as a sleepwalker who rides at midnight with arms like wings over the straw roofs to drop the nightmares of the village flophouse like falling stars that he can shock a sleep-loving rock into a storm.

Hence Lord Yoorke rejoiced when Velfke the Mystic promised to help him save Tsigane from the claws of the sorcerer Gedaminas, who assured every child of Pig Street that he would turn Lord Yoorke into a goat whom any child could harness to a pretty little wagon which he would supply.

Velfke the Mystic believed that he could unriddle all witchcraft with the letters of God's name, that he could reveal all life beyond the unknown. He communed with the great dead men of long ago as well as the simple still unborn folks of the farthest future.

King Solomon was among the many guests who came to visit him in his day and night dreams. He heard the king speak to lizards, turtles, snakes, birds, alligators, crocodiles. He heard the king speak to all life, before Adam was created of light (not of dust).

Velfke asked King Solomon to teach him the languages which animals speak. But the king refused, saying that if he who was taught by God the languages of all creatures on earth would teach it to any human being, he would be afflicted with sin like Adam and would be driven out of the Garden of Eden.

But Velfke the Mystic continued begging the king to tell him at least one secret word of any animal, insect or reptile, until the king advised him how to learn it from a black carpenter bee.

At first, only Velfke the Mystic, Lord Yoorke, Tsigane and the carpenter bee knew the secret word. A bit later almost all his concubines sneaked it out of Yoorke's mouth, for he did not suspect that any of his concubines was capable of a breach of trust.

The secret word was confided to Tsigane with a warning not to let anyone in without it, though the man may look identically like Lord Yoorke, for it was believed that the sorcerer could change so that he may look like anyone he wished. Everyone in the village knew that Gedaminas was a lover of all evil, the enemy of man, beast, God.

Gedaminas the Sorcerer could not find the secret word even with all his demonic servants, not even with the assistance of all his evil spirits, including the devil Ramirat who roamed with crazed terror through the jungles of the forest Zaborchi where stray wanderers saw him at dusk as the ruler of the fires of Gehenna.

So he went to the false Natasha, Lord Yoorke's favorite concubine, and told her: "As you know, I am the sorcerer Gedaminas, I will order the Leviathan to dive down to the bottoms of the five oceans and bring you

all the hidden treasures. I will order Satan to kill a thousand and one queens and bring you all their gems to throne you as the queen of jewels. Prince Charming will divorce Cinderella just to be your personal servant to lead you to every dreamland. All this and much more will I give you if you can tell me the secret word, if you can help me to steal Tsigane away from Yoorke the great pigbelly.”

In the hideaways of the forest when the late twilight echoed with the loud and pensive songs of the sedge warblers, when the village dogs were barking at the new moon which had just entered the pigpens, Natasha stood before Gedaminas the sorcerer like the goddess of victory: “I brought you the secret word Gedaminas, almighty king of the underworlds. I shall be your angel and your demon until you have Tsigane safely in your arms.”

When Gedaminas the Sorcerer said the secret word while knocking gently at Tsigane’s door, the treacherous Natasha shouted: “Let him in Tsigane, Lord Yoorke is here.”

But the trustworthy Marusah whispered convincingly: “No, Tsigane, whenever your true lover comes, I hear nightingales singing, now I hear snakes hissing.”

Tsigane kept the door locked, and Gedaminas the Sorcerer left spitting devils at himself.

**P.S. If you are interested to know what the secret word is you will have to watch (as I did) a black carpenter bee two or three weeks when it is busy digging with its jaws a tunnel through the eaves of our old village house, worn down by dripping rains and snows of a hundred and one summers and winters.**

**You will have to wait until the carpenter bee visits many of the wild flowers in and around the village and fills with nectar and honey the nest built of pieces of wood and glue of its mouth. (I counted seven cells of the nest, above one another when I was a barefooted boy and the carpenter bees were among my closest friends.)**

**You may have to wait a bit longer until the bottom egg hatches first as a hungry grub, until all the pupae turn into carpenter bees and the mother leads them into flight.**

**If you will listen as vigilantly as I did, you will surely hear some of the carpenter bees zoom the secret word.**





# HONKE THE FELDSHER

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The folks of the village of Michalishek never saw a doctor throughout their long history. My forefathers, tall and rooted as the trees of the nearby forest, got along hundreds of years without a doctor. Of course, there were always spooky, old women such as the sorceress Malke Lokshendrei who claimed to be able to heal with home made witchery (enchanted sayings, spoken charms) any illness, not only of the villagers but also of their living possessions as the staggering gait of a sick goose, the saddle sores on the back of a horse, goat-fever which caused immature birth in pregnant mares and in other beasts of burden. It was said she drank the milk of snakes, ate the eggs of a golden bird which only she knew its whereabouts.

In rainless thirsty summers when hot winds crumbled, carried away the fertile topsoil, dried the wells, streams, ponds, Malke Lokshendrei ordered invalid gardens to open their withered buds in full boom. Poor anemic potato plants were forbidden to die before the tubers matured so the underground could bear rich potato apples, after she spat seven times at the fiend of the desert who always brought the plague of drought at his every evil visit.

At her ninety-ninth birthday, she fascinated the imagination of her believers by telling them that when she will reach the age of Methuselah, nine hundred and sixty-nine years, she will cut the wings of the Angel of Death, will turn him into a tiny crawling animal without a backbone which anyone may trample underfoot.

However, most of the folk depended on the authentic healer Honke who achieved superiority over all supernatural powers by holding the title Feldsher. He learned the healing trade from his father, his father from his grandfather and so on throughout centuries.

Honke the Feldsher had a low estimate of his curing abilities, limited to such minor ills as the bruise of a toe-biter which gripped the toes of a swimmer on the Viliya river, the sting of a kissing bug, or a sneezing attack, the gift of the sneezeweed.

The folks believed he could conquer all their ills with his get-well herbs, with heated cupping glass which drew blood to the surface of the body, with leeches which were supposed to suck the bad blood out of any ailment.

Honke the Feldsher was an expert on leeches. He never used land leeches which attach themselves to people and cattle, but he picked and chose among the leeches which lived in swamps which could suck the

poisons out of the sick with the discs at the ends of their heads. Before he used a leech he made sure it had at least half a dozen pairs of eyes, three white sharp teeth in its mouth like tiny saws. He used so many leeches, dillying and dallying with everyone of them, that some of the sick folk whom he could not cure nicknamed him The Leech.

He also used other various remedies. For instance, he tried to relieve the internal congestions of the brains of the mentally cursed with the odor of the sticky, hairy leaves of poison-tobacco which some called insane root, but the brainsick unfortunates continued roaming through the twisted back alleys thinking they died ages ago. Barred even from hell, they were thrown here by the Prince of Darkness to yak-yak forever with the winds. Their minds were void of life. It seemed they wandered through an eternal night which exists only in the graves. Through their daymares and nightmares they strayed out of their own selves, reincarnated into homeless cats, fallen stars, whipped dogs. It was rumored they were goatsuckers sucking the milk out of all the goats, leaving at times, the village milkless.

Velfke the Mystic, the hungriest beggar who considered it a sin to beg crumbs of bread from the breadless, said: "The leechy Feldsher is impelled by malice to cure the sick because if God refuses to heal them how dare he deny God's will?" Velfke saw him as a sinful miracle man, worthy only of the love of evil spirits.

Honke the Feldsher was resentful of anyone who called him the miracle man. He believed there is no greater miracle than being alive. He was a down-to-earth healer who tried to guard the well-being of the sick with whatever means he knew. He was well aware, his means were so skimpy, it was even difficult for him to deal with the pulse which he could not easily find among his patients.

Bentke the Fibber said he overheard Honke saying to the Feldsher from the adjacent village of Svir:

"Why do we pretend we feel the pulse? We know there is no such thing as a pulse."

# BEGGAR ALLEY

---

Chaim-Mayer was the only hated beggar on Beggar Alley. He was not allowed to pass the threshold of the synagogue because he babbled about Jesus as the King of the Jews, neither was he allowed to open the door of the church because he called Jesus by the nickname Yoske Pandra. He was even chased out of the hekdesch, the poorhouse of the beggars. On cold nights his pitiful fate shrieked through his rags and tatters, in the teeth of the wind. Jews as well as Christians believed that he could not even enter hell after he died, that he would hover forever between heaven and earth, with all evil souls. Neither Jew nor Gentile would ever give him even a crumb of anything though his empty hands were always outstretched for alms.

Chaim-Mayer always chummed with the dogs around the butcher shops where kind butchers would throw bones from time to time. If he failed to catch a bone he would stand on his knees begging alms from the homeless dogs.

One day he vanished. He returned to the village after he was considered dead many years. To the bewilderment of the folks he emerged suddenly on Beggar Alley in fancy clothes, as the Yiddish proverb says "dressed in vinegar and honey." High and mighty, he carried two heavy bags on his broad shoulders. He opened one bag filled with goodies from hallah to halvah, from tart to marzipan. It was a party to which every beggar was invited which the poor folks thought fit for kings and queens.

The second bag was filled with choice gems: sapphires with every color of the rainbow, bluish green aquamarines resembling the sea in late twilight, beryl dug out of granite-rock, rich-green emerald which Aunt Beilke, the champion story teller assured that once upon a time the fourth foundation of Jerusalem was built with it.

Now the folks named him Chaim-Mayer, the King of Beggar Alley. When asked where he had been all the vanished years, he told a hundred and one weird tales. In one tale he dared to enter the forbidden Blood Alley of the forest of Zaborchi where, he said, he saw goats chasing frightened wolves or carrying them on their twisted horns. In another tale he swam through the Tigris River on his way to Ninevah in a raging storm and was swallowed like Jonah by the same whale which God had created at the beginning of the world. Inside the whale he found all these gems of rare excellence which he brought here to share with everyone to make Beggar Alley rich. The gems inside of the whale produced so much



day that it seemed to him there never was such a thing as night.

The eyes of the whale served him as windows through which he could see the beginning as well as the end of time. He saw the angel Gabriel sent by God to gather the dust from the four corners of the earth to create Adam but the dust refused to be used for the creation of man. The dust attacked and almost blinded the angel Gabriel. God had to go himself throughout the whole earth to force the dust to yield so that he could create the first man on earth.

Chaim-Mayer told with relish how he saw God, like Moses did, face to face, through the eyes of the whale. He saw God showing Adam all the future generations, among them David who was destined to live only one minute, but generous Adam was contented to live only nine hundred and thirty years instead of a thousand so that he could donate seventy years to David. When God was about to show Adam the end of time, a huge wave suddenly rose, the spit and image of the Leviathan which scared the whale so that while it opened its mouth in terror he was able to escape. These are just a couple of the hundred and one stories which Chaim-Mayer never tired of telling.

Bentke the fibber called his stories fibble-fable nonsense but Velfke the Mystic believed, and listened with awe to every word. Chaim-Mayer and Velfke the Mystic became indivisible friends.

It was just before Passover when the Song of Songs is read to add King Solomon's wisdom to the emancipation of the Jews from hundreds of years of slavery.

Velfke the Mystic confided to Chaim-Mayer that he is deadly in love with Shulamite that she came to him in a dream to tell him that she is tired of living so many centuries in the Song of Songs, tired of the old lover King Solomon, tired of the magnificence of the king's castle. Now she is yearning for the love of Velfke the Mystic. Now she would rather be a thorn among lilies instead of a lily among thorns.

At first Chaim-Mayer argued that King Solomon would be struck with grief when Shulamite would leave the Song of Songs that the king would feel as if a giant enemy of God carried his kingdom away to some cursed catacomb and left him all alone in the deserted castle perfumed with myrrh and frankincense but jailed, love-sick in solitude.

Finally, Chaim-Mayer agreed to help him to carry out his plot to lure Shulamite out of the Song of Songs with the help of the Shem Hamforesh, the unutterable name of God.

They both heard Shulamite saying, "May you fare well King Solomon. Good day, my lover."

Chaim-Mayer, the King of Beggar Alley and Velfke the Mystic saw King Solomon leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills with

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a cry which outdistanced all distances: "Return, return Shulamite. O let me hear your beautiful steps in sandals. I am your love bound in your braids," but he heard Shulamite answer only in the echo of his own voice, "I am gone forever and ever, not me, my love, but you may caress the wind."





# DOCTOR WATCHMAKER

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Avremke the Watchmaker was the first man in the village of Michalishek to be honored with the title, "Doctor," unless we consider as competition the title which was given to the dragonfly: Doctor of Snakes. No one knew why the green, brown or blue dragonfly was named Doctor of Snakes, it was just as puzzling why some folks named it: Devil's darning needle.

Avremke was named Doctor Watchmaker because he treated like patients the watches and clocks which were brought to him for repair.

If a clock struck seven at midnight he would say: "The clock suffers from a brain-disorder, on the verge of a nervous breakdown." Though it was an instant operation, he just moved the hour hand to the midnight hour and the clock was out of danger.

If a watch limped, crawling with an irregular tick, he would say: "The watch was probably wounded in a fall, it requires a thorough examination to determine how serious its illness is and what is to be done to cure it."

And he would add a philosophical knot: "The watch drags the nights and the days, retarding time, if all the watches were as slow and clumsy they would delay the coming of Messiah . . ."

If a watch was in a rush, running a mile of time in a minute, he would say: "It looks like it is in a race with falling stars, lost in the great beyond." Finally he gave a down-to-earth judgment about the impatient watch, accusing the crooked hairspring of confusing the motion of the balance wheel. He straightened every twist of the hairspring, rounded in perfect circles, equally distant from one another. Then the watch was benzined, brushed, oiled, starting life anew, spick and span, traveling through time in measured pace to a faraway future – all smiles.

He gave the wheels names out of his rich imagination. He named the center wheel the **big attic wheel**, the third wheel the **small attic wheel** because these wheels resembled tiny attics. If one of the attic wheels broke a tooth, he felt its unbearable toothache. He cut the rotted tooth out with a tiny saw, made bright yellow brass by melting copper and zinc together, soldered a tiny piece into the wheel, filed it as tenderly as a painless dentist, until it seemed a new tooth grew into the wheel as if by Mother Nature. After such an operation, a new title was added in his honor: Dentist of Watches.

He diagnosed a watch with an injured balance wheel as a heart attack and spoke in the manner of a Christian Barnard:

“I will try to cure the damaged heart of the watch, if it will not be possible I will have to fit into it a heart from a dead watch though it may reject a strange heart so I can’t guarantee the life of the watch.”

Whenever he made a dead watch live, he felt like the Cabalist who gave life to the Golem of Prague. It seemed to him he delved into the mysteries of Life after death. He listened long to the heartbeat of everyone of the watches. Every watch seemed to have its own language which he thought only he understood. He heard every watch asking God: **Did time exist before heaven and earth were born? Will time live on beyond the end of all life and death?**

Every sick watch or clock, his patients, received the healing treatment of an idealistic doctor who did everything possible that every watch or clock should live a long healthy life, without losing or gaining the smallest intervals of time.

He saw the wheels starting to move like the dead bones of the visions of the prophet Ezekiel.

He weeded out all the watch and clock diseases with tools skilled as his fingers which seemed to command the tweezers, cutting pliers, round and flat nosed pliers to give life to the dead watches. Every tool was struck with wonder at the touch of his hands over his work bench, which he called a laboratory where he performed experiments, test theories.

He invented his own loupe, a magnifying glass through which the tiniest wheel of the smallest watch was magnified so large it seemed the wheel of a wagon. When he looked through the insides of a watch with his homemade loupe, he was inspired as Galileo looking into the skies with his telescope.

One of his devices could weigh the tiniest particle of a watch, a sort of a scale which was so sensitive in conveying sense-impressions it could distinguish the difference in weight of a piece of paper after a word was written on it.

Avremke the wizard of watches gave the tin watch cases the color of the bluebird, blue sapphire or blue sky. This is how it was done:

The watch case was rubbed thoroughly with sandpaper, polished smoothly with something called diamond-dust, bathed in oil, held with grasping jaws of small pincers over a burning wick, until the oil was well fed with smoke. The watch doctor waited for the case to cool off, then wiped the smoke away with a soothing chamois. He returned the works of the watch into its case, it seemed the watch had the color of a summer dream.

If anyone preferred the watch case to be dark as a starless night, he applied the same process again (except for the use of sandpaper) and the

watch turned black as Poe's Raven.

Avremke the Watch Doctor taught many of the farmers, shepherds, woodsmen who did not have watches or clocks how to tell time by the shadows of trees. When the shadows were short they knew it was about noon, when the shadows were long it was the end of day.

On cloudy days he taught them to tell time by two pots, one half filled with water was so knee-bowed that drops of water fell into the empty pot which was marked with black number circles; every hour reached another circle. It was easy to tell time until nightfall.

At night a tall lit candle served as a watch by similar marked circles. As the candle dwindled to a new mark, it was a later hour. The end of the candle meant the end of the night, dawn was nearby.

He loved to entertain one of the wandering beggars who passed through the village of Michalishek well-supplied with the news of thousands of villages, dreamful little towns and roaring cities. The wandering beggar named himself Star Sage, explaining to him that we are all tiny as fly specks as we face the many worlds of the universe, that the village of Michalishek like the whole earth is spinning in constant circles around the sun, that the earth keeps time like a perfect watch which just left his masterful hands.

Doctor Watchmaker argued that even if what the Star Sage says is true the earth of the village of Michalishek is motionless, unchanging as its life.

The folks named the self-proclaimed Star Sage "Star-Struck" or "Star-Skunk" because his concepts were not in the Bible or the Talmud, also because he was a close pal of the deranged village beggar Itchke (nicknamed Itch-Mite) who dared to say that God creates only fools who come like trapped guests on earth, damned to turn into dust that God is a Fool-Killer.

Even though Avremke the Watch Doctor believed that the star-sage is a sinner on his way to Gehenna he listened to him with searching ears. He even accepted from him one of his mysterious drugs in exchange for an old clock with chimes to strike the hour, a drug made of saffron, garlic, the yolk of an egg and blue-purple bell flowers of the deadly nightshade, a remedy which was supposed to cure all diseases.

Avremke the Watch Doctor began to see watches like stars. He imagined that stars get sick like watches. God can heal stars like the Watch Doctor can heal ailing watches. Only God can take apart a star and put it together like a watch, ticked and toyed. God is the watchmaker of stars.

Doctor Watchmaker heard the watches say: **We are on our way to unknown, endless destinations.** Nonetheless he reckoned there must be

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an end to everything on earth. Even watches stop because they get tired of the repetitions of the four seasons of the year. The wandering beggar told him about a land where there is only one season, only summer. Such a land seemed to him to be a pitiless bore. He thought even time will one day reach the end, only the dream is endless.

He dreamed of inventing a watch which will make time go backwards as well as forward. When summer will reach autumn it will return to April, old people will return to childhood, again and again, will bypass death like the morning star after a long night, dawn in, dawn out.

However, on second thought he feared people could not bear such tedious repetitions, would pray for death to free themselves of eternal humdrum.

Velfke the Mystic advised him to destroy all watches, ripping time to shreds so that he would be able with the **Shem Hamfoyresh** – the unutterable name of God, return life to the beginning of all beginnings.

# BLOOMKE AND BOOMKE

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Two little girls, Bloomke and Boomke were the most vowed friends of the village. They both braided their long hair in three strands, twined with ribbons left of their mothers' handmade dresses. Their cheeks dimpled bashfully alike. They were both twin friends with the same name, Bloomke. To be able to tell them apart, one was named Boomke.

One winter day Bloomke and Boomke were sent to the boot cobbler of the village to have their woolen snowboots fixed to reach from their ankles to their hips. The cobbler had his antiquated boot-shop only one alley away from their two little houses which stood so close together they almost embraced each other.

They should have returned in a few minutes, but when the day hit its dead end, there was not a trace of the two little girls.

The sorceress Malka Lokshendrei predicted misfortune. She pointed to the late twilight where the sun fell over the village like a bloody head, guillotined by a she-monster with the face of a lion and the body of a goat.

Three long nights passed, the unpaved alleys were paved with stars as if to illuminate the search for the two little girls. Where could they be? They couldn't have drowned, the river was frozen. The folks of the village told all kinds of scary tales. The prince of the beggars said they were kidnapped by the king of the devils, guarded by his slave hunters, the phantoms of the forest. Bentke the old fibber claimed he saw Lilith roaming through desolate ruins with a sackful of children, among them – Bloomke and Boomke.

The parents of the two little girls went into the old synagogue, opened the holy ark, cried night and day, at the scrolls of the Torah; sometimes prayed, sometimes demanded of God to return their lost children.

Time moved so slowly, moments were creeping like ghosts through all the bygone moons of the ancient forest.

Even the earth was destitute of hope. The winter barley, planted in autumn, seemed to be expecting in vain, to be harvested in spring or early summer. Even the red berries of the holly shrubs, which the folks believed foretell goodwill and rejoicing, looked like red rot.

A searchful night again: no one slept, everyone was busy looking for the two little friends everywhere, even in every moonlit chimney nook.

Some saw hope in the cherrybirch standing between Bloomke's and Boomke's little houses, beaming through untouched snow, adorning itself with diamond sparrows. Some saw despair in the bare branches

which hugged the many ages of the village as with dead arms. Some heard the wind howling for help choked with snow and ice.

Suddenly an anguished cry was heard from underneath the snow on and off, as if someone sobbed oneself to sleep and then woke up again with a weaker stifled shriek. Men of the burial society started digging until they reached a terrifying well like a mouth of the Valley of Hinnon.

Only one little girl, Bloomke, was standing on the edge of a rotted board which swung down and up, about to break and throw her into the well. A last stirring of life of her friend Boomke could still be seen. Restless water bubbles showed that Boomke had just fallen into the well.

A stepladder was hurried into the well and Bloomke was brought home haggard and almost frozen but still alive. The herb-healer ordered to rub her frostbites with ice until she was out of danger. Then she told the following story:

“When Boomke and I were on our way to the boot cobbler, the sun must have melted the snow, softened the earth over the well where we fell in. We never knew there was a well which was used long-long ago. Luckily, we did not fall into the water but on a wide board which hung over the depths of the well but the board kept on breaking so we were forced to keep moving nearer to the wall.

“Finally, there was not enough room for both of us to stand, we reached the last piece of the collapsed board.

“I stood behind Boomke with my back to the wall. We could not exchange places, otherwise I would rather be the first one to die. When there was not a foot of wood left for her to stand, I held her in my arms as long as I possibly could. Then I said:

“Boomke, Boomele, I have no more strength to hold you any longer. Now I must drop you into the well. I will follow you in a few moments, as you see, even the last crumb of wood is crumbling. Just a few more breaths after you fall into the well we will both meet in heaven. We will be even greater friends in Heaven.’

“We both thought we were kissing each other goodbye just for a while and she fell into the well.”

Frostbirds flew overhead as if to escort Boomke to Heaven. The children of Pig Street tried to stone the Angel of Death to death.

A turtle of the land of Tartarus, driven out of its winter sleep as it dreamed of its old race which outlived even dinosaurs, stood naked, staring pitifully at its broken shell, its shattered home. The sun told her that it would hatch her eggs in Spring, that her baby turtles would dig their new lives out of the wood of a rotting log, but the dying turtle did

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not seem to understand.

Twilight in, twilight out, the folks came to Boomke's grave to pray, to mourn, to remember.

# WINTER IN THE VILLAGE OF MICHALISHEK

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O the long, cold-cold winter in the village of Michalishek! If anyone asked the weather forecaster of the village how cold it will be tomorrow he would always answer: "The same as today, zero below zero."

Jack Frost cracked the heartwood of pine, birch, oak, spruce (from which alley fiddlers made their sobbing fiddles) in the frightening forest of Zaborchi, across the Viliya river. The beards of robbers in their ghastly hideouts of the forest were hoary with frost. It was rumored that the forest of Zaborchi was born by winged seeds which reached here from the ends of the earth, floating over oceans, carried by storks, storms and soaring windmills. Packs of wolves were busy building dens in hollow logs, in holes of frozen rock, their heads decorated with ice crowns, their heavy tails drooping with snowfall, their ears alert to prey.

Even during the dark dawns of winter, some folks knew a new day had come when they heard Ivan Dory, the new captain of the old barge (awaiting Spring to give it liberty out of the prison of ice) praying not to Jesus but to the sun and morning star.

The Jewish children met the first man on earth personally in their "chayder," their old fashioned school, where they came in the morning and left at night with crude lanterns, with flickering wicks which could fight winds, dragons, snowstorms.

Whenever the children wanted to return to the beginning of time, they built a man from the snowdust gathered from the four corners of the village, with ribs of icicles. They named him Adam, hoping that from one of the ribs a new Eve would be born.

The children made snow camels and imagined they were riding through the deserts where the Jews ate manna forty years.

O the village of legends, potatoes and nearby heavens where my cradle stood and my mother lulled me to sleep with songs of a white little goat who will bring me raisins and almonds.



**Forever and Ever and a Wednesday  
is printed on Caress Smooth, 80 lb. stock,  
in the Tiffany font.**

In *Forever and Ever and a Wednesday*, poet Menke Katz's first book of stories — or "true legends," as he describes them, we are led by the heart into the time-lost village of Michalishek, Lithuania, where the poet's forefathers lived hundreds of years. Michalishek is more than a place; it is a state of mind in which "Jack Frost cracked the heartwood of pine, birch, oak, and spruce," and in which the children "watched crude lanterns, with flickering wicks, fight winds, dragons, snowstorms." Yet these legends of potatoes and nearby heavens reach out to the grey-haired as well as to the young of limb, with their songs of the white little goat that brings raisins and almonds.

