

PROLOGUE: ANGELS AND DEMONS

Time grows short at the end of a century, like winter days when night falls too soon. In the dusk, angels and demons walk. Who knows who they are? Or which is which. But there they are, sneaking their gifts into the crevices of change. Even in a place like Blaszká, less than a dot on the map of Russian-occupied Poland.

Someone might say that so-and-so is an angel or so-and-so a demon. But make no mistake, it's just a question of style. One sympathizes, the other provokes. But their mission is the same, and so is their destination.

It's a cold day, the short Friday of winter, the 20th of *Tevet*, 5654 or you might call it the 29th of December 1893, according to the Christian calendar. Everyone's in a rush, anxious to finish their business before the sun sets. Once darkness falls, the Sabbath rules. Candlelight will have no other purpose than its beauty, and women and men will make love in honour of the Sabbath.

Listen. You can hear the excitement in the village square. "Fresh, hot, only two kopecks." Girls run through the crowd, carrying baskets of rolls, pretzels, perogies and herring cut into small rings. The herrings almost speak. Take your pick, the large smelly ones, horse herring, pickled, smoked, or packed in fat. Steam rises from the warm baskets in the winter air. The square smells of vinegar, yeast and horse dung. Men and women blow into their cold hands to warm them, pinching this and sniffing that, bargaining as if for their souls, undeterred by the crash of a stall that collapses under its mountain of earthenware. This is what keeps Blaszká together, the flimsy stalls piled high with everything, where people lean toward each other, bargaining, touching what they need, shaking it, holding it up to the light.

Hurry, the villagers say, the Sabbath is coming. Everything has to close early, today. Am I asking about money? Do I worry about money? I know that you, lady, will give it to me later, that you will pay. Look at this, straight from Plotsk, the best quality. A pity it should lie here, unused. Let me put it into your basket for you. Just a few kopecks. It costs less than air.

Fifty Jewish families and six Polish tenant farmers live in the village. But on market day, every Tuesday and Friday, dozens of Christian peasants, who farm the land along the Połnocna River, come down to Blaszk. In the village square they bargain and in Perlmutter's tavern, they drink vodka with beer and eat cheese and pickles and hard-boiled eggs.

A Jew can never be a peasant, even if he looks and acts like one, nor a gentleman either. Such categories apply only to Christians in Poland, each of them having a place on the land. But by law the Jews are townspeople. Even if they are farmers they are townspeople borrowing the land; they have no right to it. Within their towns the Jews can make their own distinctions, so long as they service the people of the land. So in Blaszk Jews buy the peasants' produce and sell goods from Plotsk. Jews are tinsmiths and blacksmiths and cobblers and tailors and wheelwrights and barrel-makers and butchers and bakers. They speak Yiddish and Polish and a smattering of Russian, on weekdays they bargain and on the Sabbath they rest.

The village square isn't paved. It's marked in one corner by the bridge, in another corner by the tavern, by the synagogue in the third corner, and where the square dips down toward the Połnocna River, by the house of Misha the midwife. Her house stands on stilts so that the spring floods flow under it, bringing a rich mud that makes the vegetables in her garden grow larger than anywhere else. If you stood on the doorstep of Misha's house, you could see the entire village, the river curling around it, the woods behind the river, the lanes leading out of the village square, the small houses, each with an eating room in front and sleeping rooms behind separated

by a hallway where the hens roost in the winter. Across the river, in the new part of Blaszką, you could see the ruins of the mill and the woods overgrowing abandoned houses.

There is a legend about the Połnocna River. It's said that a saint was martyred in the river's waters at midnight, resulting in the conversion and baptism of the local tribe. "Połnoc" in Polish means "midnight," and so the river was named. But others argue that "połnoc" also means north, the Połnocna so named because it enters the Vistula River from the north.

The Połnocna is frozen, now, children sliding on its surface. In front of her house, Misha stands beside her stall, her hands on her hips. She's bigger than any man in Blaszką. Her table is crowded with jars and bottles, powders and ointments and liquids for women's troubles, and men's, too. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she says.

All right, the women say, but you'd better watch your behind or the Evil One will send someone to kick it while you're not paying attention.

"Well let him just try to make some business with me." Misha holds out her hand, beckoning the invisible stranger. She grins, her gold tooth flashing in the thin winter light. "Don't worry," Misha says, "if someone comes from the other side, he'll soon be running out of Blaszką with his tail between his legs. You can be sure of it."

In a small house off the village square, an old woman is teaching the little girls their letters. Tell us about Misha, they beg. We want to hear the story about Misha and Manya, again. Please, please. The old woman puts down her pencil. "Well, I knew Misha's mother very well. She was so happy when she had a daughter, but she had one fear. Do you know what that was?" The children shake their heads. "That her daughter would turn out like Manya. You've heard of Manya, haven't you?" Yes, yes, the little girls say, Manya the witch comes in the night to steal away wicked children. "But you're not wicked children, are you?" The girls shake their heads,

no, no, no. "Now, listen carefully, children. Before Misha, there was Blema, her mother. Before Blema was Miriam, Misha's grand-mother. And before Miriam was?" Who? the children ask. "Manya!" The old woman leans forward, wriggling her clawed fingers at the children until they squeal. "Oh Manya was bigger than any man, and no one could tame her until they put her to death for casting spells. Blema was afraid that her baby should turn out like Manya, God forbid. So Blema named her baby Miriam after her own mother, who was a good woman. Modest and quiet. Like you girls, yes? But you can't cheat fate, children.

"Blema carried her baby in a shawl on her back when she went to the peasants' cottages. The peasants liked to play with the little one. They called her Marisha, you know that's Polish for Miriam. But the baby couldn't say Marisha or even Miriam. What came out was Misha. The peasants said it must be her true name, and that, since 'misha' means bear in Polish, the girl would grow up to be as dangerous as a mother bear. And because Misha is a man's name among the Russians, she would also be as fierce as a Cossack. This is what came to be. I'm sure you heard your mothers say so. When a woman is in childbirth, even the Angel of Death is afraid of Misha."

In the village square, the watercarrier rushes by Misha's stall, his buckets swinging wildly on their yoke. As his foot knocks against a stone, he stumbles, holding onto her table for balance. And then he's gone toward the bridge.

Across the bridge is what used to be the wealthy part of Blaszkka. There among the ruins of abandoned houses, you can see the village well and beside it the bath house with its marble columns, built with the miller's money, may he rest in peace. Beside it is the foundation of the new synagogue, never finished.

Inside the bath house, the old men sit naked on the benches, sweating in the steam that

rises as the attendant pours water over the hot stones. At the end of the room is the sunken bath, the mikva, with its purifying water. Before the men leave, they'll dip in the mikva to make themselves ready for the Sabbath.

Why does the butcher get to sit in the second row of the synagogue so close to the Holy Ark? they complain. He's just a *proster*, a plain person, like us. A man should know his place. The *proster* do the work, the *baalebatim* make the money, and the *shayner* tell you what to do, either because they're rich enough or they're scholars.

Sure, that's how it is in most places, but you can't expect it here in Blaszk. Who would sit in the second row if not the butcher? In the days before the Russians blew up the mill, we had *shayner* in Blaszk. Fine people. But now? There's just *proster*. Anybody who was anybody left Blaszk. And why not? You can walk for two hours down the road and you're in Plotsk. The capital of the *gubernia*. Twenty-six thousand people. A theatre. A Jewish hospital. Schools. Everything.

Tell me, what's a town when there's no fine people driving around in their carriages and telling you what's what? That's the kind of village Blaszk is. We have a Rabbi whose greatest friends are unbelievers -- I saw him get a letter from France, myself -- and he can't stand the sight of a lit match, either.

Never mind. It's good to be alive. A little schnapps, a little singing, something nice to eat on Shabbas, it's all right. I'm old, but I'm in no rush to leave. Tell me, if it's so good there in the next world, why doesn't anyone come back to tell us about it?

Outside the bath house, a lane leads to the bridge and across the bridge, the road from Blaszk leaves the village square, following the P.:~nocna River down to the Vistula where it meets the highway that runs from Plotsk to Warsaw. Here, at the juncture of the Vistula and the

Połnocna Rivers, there is a shiny black carriage with "The Golem Players" painted in yellow on the side. The horse snorts, flicking her tail, braided with a yellow ribbon. Crystals of breath have formed around her mouth, and the creature licks them off with her thirsty tongue.

The Director, in his top hat, sits aloft, puffing on his mahogany pipe, horns of smoke curling upward. He looks sideways at the landscape, the bare trees striped with snow like soft fur, the frozen river, the flat land. An open, unremarkable landscape. The Director's new partner is walking toward him, carrying a bag with rope handles -- a young and very earnest sort of person, the Traveller. The Director smooths his copper moustache and waves. The Traveller's hair sticks up like rooster feathers. He wears a ragged black jacket with a drooping rose pinned to the lapel. His thin nose is crooked, bending a little to the left.

The Traveller climbs up beside the Director. Sighing, he tears a strip of paper from *The Israelite*, and lines his cracked boot with the headline, *December 29, 1893: More refugees fleeing from the east*. While the Director relights his pipe, the younger man leafs through a notebook. The notes are in a small, meticulous script that shines as if the ink were made of a green fluorescence. "So many people hurt and lonely, talents going to waste," the Traveller says, his voice hoarse with sympathy. "But what about this?" He frowns. "There must be a mistake. We can't be expected to waste time on an animal like that." The Traveller stabs the notebook with his finger.

"You have your orders and the fellow is on his way," the Director says, pointing to an approaching cart. The driver is a large man in a fur coat who is whipping his horse till she bleeds while he gnaws on a hunk of salami.

The Traveller shields his eyes with his hands, gazing up the road. "I'd just like to have a choice. Is that too much to ask?"

"It's the price you pay, my boy. You knew that when you came on board." The Director rubs the bowl of his pipe against his velvet vest. "You could resign. But then it's rebirth for you. You interested? I see not. You serious types are all the same." He draws an imaginary bow across an even more imaginary violin, that nevertheless plays the opening notes to Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. Tchaikovsky has recently died of cholera. The Traveller looks from his notebook to the absent violin. He is impressed. "It's nothing, my friend," the Director says. "Anyone can do it. Even you."

"What's the trick?" the Traveller asks, looking around for a hidden music box.

"Nothing at all. Just a bit of magic."

"Magic," the Traveller says thoughtfully, studying his notebook again.

"Don't get any ideas. Let me tell you the facts. What's magic? A piece of chocolate. An almond torte. Delicious, and then it melts away. But all of this," the Director says waving his hand grandly, "is something else entirely. Open your eyes and look. Maybe you'll learn a secret or two. But you can't just sit there moping and letting the snow soak through the holes in your boots. No. You've got to look closely and pay attention. Then you'll see where you can give a little nudge and open a door. And who knows," he winks, "what you might find in there? Well, my friend, I can't sit here and talk all day. I have something to deliver in Blaszka. Would you like to join me?"

"No. I'd better wait here. You go on." The Traveller dismounts from the carriage, seating himself on a snowy log.

"Au revoir," the Director says. He picks up the reins and clucks to his fine black horse.

The Traveller pulls up the collar of his jacket as the snow trickles down his neck. "Have to get assigned here in the middle of winter," he grumbles. "Couldn't be Warsaw. Streetcars.

Electricity. Unions. Oh no. It's got to be where people still believe in witchcraft." He shakes his head. "They don't know what's coming to them." Studying his notebook, he taps his chin. "Could be an advantage, though. If you use it right." He looks down the road toward Warsaw, as if he can see the next century riding the train, trailing a line of smoke, the whistle blowing.

Time is a trickster in Poland. In Warsaw they have electric lights. On the farms peasants make their own candles. And in Blaszk? There, time juggles fire, throwing off sparks that reach far into the past and spin toward the future.

But shh, we can't talk, now. The story is about to start.