

The River Midnight

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

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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 Blaszkas 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

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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 Plotzk. 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

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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 Blaszkka, 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 "p.łnoc" also means north, the P.łnocna so named because it enters the Vistula River from the north.

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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.

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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

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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 Blaszká. 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

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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

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driving around in their carriages and telling you what's what? That's the kind of village Blaszkas are. 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 Blaszkas leaves the village square, following the Połnocna River down to the Vistula where it meets the highway that runs from Plotzk 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

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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

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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.

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"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 Blaszk. 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.

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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 Blaszka? 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.

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PART I: THE WOMEN

Chapter 1

MUSHROOM SOUP

THE SHORT FRIDAY IN DECEMBER

In the bath house the old men sighed as they sat on a bench, steam rising from the hot stones. A Friday night was the time for certain things. All of them had fulfilled the mitzvah of being fruitful years ago, but that didn't relieve them of the obligation to satisfy their wives. No, that was sealed by the marriage contract. And it wasn't true that a woman lost interest after the change of life. No, they said, you know what's written about the marriage bed -- it's a woman's right and a man's duty.

Across the bridge in the village square, the noise of women in a hurry was as loud as a dispute in the court of heaven. Everything had to finish by sundown. Darkness came early on the last Friday in December, and only the expectation of long hours of Shabbas pleasures got the women through the rush. Instead of the grainy dark bread of

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everyday with its smear of fat and the sweaty smell of tallow on a bare table, Shabbas came with the honey scent of beeswax candles. Syrupy red wine. Not one, but two braided loaves of white bread plummy with raisins. Carrots and sweet potatoes. Golden soup. Meat. On a white cloth where brass candlesticks gleamed with a ruddy glow. The wine and the bread and the children would be blessed. There would be singing. And the leisurely pursuit of Shabbas mitzvos, particularly of the kind foreseen in the bath house.

It was no surprise, then, that Hanna-Leah, the butcher's wife, was more sharp tongued than usual, knowing that for her the early darkness would, unless a miracle occurred, remind her of her loneliness.

“Strangers. Every week someone else sleeping in the guesthouse,” Hanna-Leah said, shaking her head at the women in their shawls and quilted coats dripping melted snow onto the sanded, earth floor of the butcher shop.

She herself was wearing only a shawl over her dress, though the shop was cold. Hanna-Leah was always warm, like a pot kept at boiling heat by a quick-fire. Tall and curvaceous, blonde under her kerchief, self-conscious about

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her hawk nose, she scoffed at the women's envy of her beauty since it had no practical use. She was thirty-four years old, had been married to the butcher since she was nineteen, and was childless.

The women leaned toward her, elbows resting on the counter beside string, paper, and slabs of red meat.

"Strangers coming from who knows where and going to some place worse," Hanna-Leah said. She pointed at the window. Outside in the village square, a horse and carriage were tied to the post in front of Perlmutter's tavern. "I heard that The Golem Players are running from the Tsar's police, and where are they leading them? Right to Blaszkka. And if the pogroms start again?"

It's been more than ten years since the pogroms, the women said. When the old Tsar was assassinated, of course they blamed the Jews. Who else? But things are different now.

"You think what happened in '81 couldn't happen, again? Don't you believe it. My Hershel still has a scar on his shoulder. And my father . . ."

Don't speak of it, the women said quickly. May God

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protect us from such a fate. Now tell us. Did you see the actors performing in front of Perlmutter's tavern? They've been there half the day already.

"Singing and juggling in the village square, who needs it? Beggars at least have a use," Hanna-Leah said as she wrapped some soup bones with a good bit of meat left on them for a woman whose coat was more patches than cloth. "How could you fulfil the mitzvah to have a beggar for Shabbas dinner without one? And who would you give alms to? You know what they say. Wine is stronger than fear, sleep is stronger than wine, the angel of death is stronger than sleep, but charity is stronger even than death."

"That's from the Talmud," Hershel the butcher called out from the back room.

"Listen to him. He can hardly write his name, but he thinks he's a sage. So tell me, Mister Genius," she called back, "What does it say in the Talmud about strangers?"

"Remember that you were also a stranger in a strange land."

"A stranger? Me? My family lived right here in Blaszkas since the time of King Krak."

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The woman in the patched coat reached into her pocket to take out some change for the bones. "Don't insult me. What am I going to do with left-over bones, bury them?" Hanna-Leah asked. "So, look who's coming with her nose in the air." Through the window they watched the women's prayer leader, the zogerin, approaching the butcher shop. "I heard she crossed the bridge."

Her? No, I don't believe it, the women said. In Blaszka when they talked about a woman crossing the bridge, they meant that she was carrying on with a man, and not her husband, either.

"Believe what you want. Just open your eyes."

The door swung open with a rush of wind and snow as the zogerin, with her fancy braided wig and her silver prayerbook, sauntered into the shop. So nobody should miss it, the young zogerin swung her gold chain with the double case watch on the end.

"Look what I have for you. The best," Hanna-Leah said, whipping out a two kilo, purplish brisket crawling with fat. "For you, our zogerin, one rouble," she said, half-laughing at the ludicrous price.

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"Very good. Wrap it." The zogerin wore a long string of pearls over her flat chest and it wasn't even Shabbas yet.

Hanna-Leah shook her head. "She doesn't even bargain. Like stealing milk from a blind cow."

"Should I bargain? Before Shabbas? I have to think of higher things."

"Oy, oy. The zogerin has to think of something higher than pearls. It isn't easy," Hanna-Leah said.

Well, she's still young. And no one makes a bargain like you, the women said. Not even Misha.

"Well, let me ask you." The women leaned forward as Hanna-Leah's eyes narrowed. Even the zogerin, taking the brisket from the counter, paused. "Did you hear that someone saw a pair of man's pants sticking out from under Misha's bed?"

Who do you think they belonged to? the women asked.

"Anyone she wants," Hanna-Leah said. "She wouldn't hesitate. You see her sitting at her stall with the women hanging onto her every word, peasants and Jews, too,

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like she knows the cure for death. Listen to me. A woman who's divorced and isn't ashamed of it must have plenty to hide. When I was young, we were friends. Misha danced at my wedding. Can you believe it?"

What about your other friend, the one who went to America? I remember how she could dance – like a feather. But now she's buried over there and who will visit her grave? Even her children are on their way back to Blaszka. You'll have them come to you for Shabbas, won't you, Hanna-Leah? A boy and a girl, I heard. But who knows what kind of children they make in America?

"They probably don't speak a word of the mama-loshen," Hanna-Leah said. "They'll be trouble, you wait and see."

When the shop was quiet for a few minutes, Hanna-Leah put her shawl over her head and slipped out to the village square. The pressed earth was slick with melting snow, and in her hurry, Hanna-Leah fell, bruising her hip. I should have stayed in the shop, she thought as she got up and brushed the mud off her coat. But do I have a choice? A

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woman doesn't do what she wants, only what she has to. Not Misha, of course. No, never Misha.

When Hanna-Leah was a girl, there were four friends who played together, picked mushrooms and berries, told secrets and walked arm-in-arm through the woods. The villagers called them the vilda hayas, the wild creatures. One of them was Hanna-Leah. She became the butcher's wife and had no children, though she was the best cook of all of them. The second was her best friend, Faygela, who was hungry for books and married the baker and had so many children that she had no time left for Hanna-Leah. The third friend was Zisa-Sara. She taught them to dance and never had a bad word to say about anyone. Zisa-Sara married a scholar and left them all to go with him to America, for which they could not forgive her. Zisa-Sara's best friend was Misha, the fourth of the vilda hayas. Misha swore that she would never marry, but just the same she did. Hanna-Leah had thought that marriage would straighten Misha out. A wife has to cover her head and know what it means to work. But Misha's husband had divorced her, and instead of moving away, she had grown her hair long again. It blew about in the wind like a

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living thing and Misha was a vilda haya, still.

Now Misha stood behind a table laden with bottles and powders, creams and herbs, her head uncovered, black hair floating under a veil of snowflakes while she laughed with the women crowded around her stall. "And what about you?" she was saying to a young woman, the baker's oldest daughter. "When are you going to marry yourself off and have a proper Shabbas like the rest of the women?" The girl blushed. "And look who's here. Hanna-Leah. Listen to me, women, you'd better go to her shop before Shabbas. Get a nice piece of meat for your man to give him strength."

And you, Misha, when are you going under the wedding canopy again? the women asked.

"Never. There isn't a man who could tempt me. Not even the Evil One himself." Her large hands were busy, picking a pinch of this and a leaf of that, wrapping it all in a square of brown paper. "You know what I say? Have a little pleasure and don't worry about tomorrow. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Hanna-Leah frowned as Misha bantered with the women. Every month Misha made up a remedy for her.

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Every month it failed, and she had to come back for another.

"You have something different?" Hanna-Leah asked.

"What I gave you before didn't help?" Misha spoke in a low voice, but Hanna-Leah looked around, anyway, to see if anyone were listening.

Someone was laughing. Why was she laughing? Maybe Misha had said something. No, she wouldn't. Everyone knew that Misha could keep a secret. If she wanted to. But who could tell what a woman like Misha wanted? Was she like anyone else? "Just give it to me," Hanna-Leah said. "I don't have time to stand here all day."

"Put it in the soup," Misha said.

"Fine. Good." Grabbing the package, Hanna-Leah thrust it into her pocket, slapping a few kopecks onto the table. As she returned to the butcher shop, she saw a cart crossing the square. Behind the driver, a boy and a girl held onto each other, pale from their journey. Strangers. Did they look at all like anyone Hanna-Leah had known?