

THE YEAR OF THE ZOP

THERE WERE QUITE A FEW he-goats in Lipkiew, as in every honest little Jewish town. But there was only one Zop, Reizle Rozhinke's, a he-goat with a majestic gait and broken horn. And a whole year was to be named after him: the Year of the Zop.

Everybody knew he was a king. People came from far and wide to bring him their she-goats. For us, it was as though he had always been there, like Chaim-the-Noseless, Zeida Feldsher, or Tsherphwa, the local whore-house keeper. We would tweak the twins', Elka's and Etká's, braids—"Zop" in Yiddish—and think of him. When they caught sight of him, the maidens of Lipkiew would tug their skirts, to make sure they covered their feet. When he breaks away from his rope and gets loose, Velwale, Reizl Rozhinke's little husband, runs after him; but the Zop has already joined the priest Seraphim's procession, with its holy images and crosses, or is trying to butt his way through the wooden garden fence of the lovely whore, Kuka. The night I became a man, I dreamt of the Zop nibbling the roses in Kuka-the-Whore's garden.

Those were the joyful years of Lipkiew. Most people were poor, but the youth was full of vigor and there wasn't a single movement in the whole world that had not set up a branch in our town: Zionists and Socialists and Territorialists and Bundists and all their splinter groups and factions, all of them looking forward to the arrival of their Messiah—by tomorrow, or at latest the day after. And the Zop, with his piercing gaze, his horn high, when he breaks loose and takes a little walk round the town, something happens to the she-goats and to the milk in their udders. Lipkiew's goat-cheese became famous all over the country, from Beltz in the East to Novoselitz and the great city of Tchorwitz in the North.

Then it happened: Etká, one of the twins, got pregnant and the town was shocked.

Suddenly we would see Etká walking all alone, when we had been accustomed to seeing her with her twin sister. Well, she still talked in her singing voice, but on her own, and she laughed on her own, all the way up to her lovely dancing little breasts that swelled overnight like the rose bushes in Kuka's garden. Only her eyes deepened, with bluish rings round them.

“You needn’t run away. I haven’t got leprosy.”

Perhaps I stepped back, but it was just fear, not shame. I blushed like a fool, as if I had never tweaked her braid.

Etka stretched her neck and threw her head back, with a terrible and heart-breaking pride, as she turned to go.

For all the street to see!

Now she wore tight skirts. Her little belly, charming as usual, only now beginning to round just a little at the hips, gave her walk a wild kind of grace. I wanted to pull the pointed beard of Reb Noiah, her father, a man I esteemed. I knew that he had thrown her out of his house. That her mother Pessya was torn between husband and daughter. That her sister Elka, now finishing on her own the sweater they had begun to knit together, brought it to Etka and said: “Take it. You are alone. You may feel cold.”

“I am not alone,” said Etka and pointed to her belly. “Besides,” she said, “Nathan will come.”

“What? That cheat? And you believe it?”

And everyone in the little street and all the customers in the inn opposite, and the Zop and Reizl, the Zop’s owner, all of them saw with their own eyes a lovely blue sweater flying through the air—out!—and after the sweater came Elka, stepping tall and proud, her mouth shut tight, all the way home, holding back the tears that welled up inside her.

“Proud and stubborn like their father,” said Pessya, wringing her hands.

It all began like one of those funny yet shocking little pieces of gossip that Aunt Bliumtshe dispensed so generously, while she combed her hair. His name—Nathan Apharsmon, a resplendent young man with piercing eyes and a soft velvety voice, and with a face bronzed by the sun of Eretz-Yisroel. My brother brought him from the Krishnietz pioneer farm where he had stopped for a while during his tour of the Jewish communities. And, in one night, starting in the early hours of the evening, he took our town by storm, and especially the loving hearts of our town’s housewives and maidens. The lionlike voice of Yankle the Bundist, bellowing warnings against imposters, thundered in vain. By midnight, we had all been swept into an ecstatic horrah dance, hopping about and stamping our feet. We were on fire. The dust rose up to heaven. The grown-ups, my brother heading the way, bore him aloft through the streets, up to his hotel room. And even there he still

spoke to us in dulcet tones, of the “pangs of redemption” and the wonders of self-fulfillment and of the dark clouds that were massing on the horizon, and the duty of every upstanding young man, and above all the joy of giving all and everything, to the very last breath—at which moment, it so happened, his gaze fell on the twin sisters, Etká and Elka, and his body began to shake all over. In our fear, we too shook, but Nathan Apharsmon calmed everybody, saying that it was nothing, just a touch of fever, and that he didn’t want a doctor, since he had everything he needed, that is quinine pills, and all he would ask was to be left alone.

“Only . . . perhaps a glass of water,” he added, pointing to Elka.

Or was he pointing to Etká? Since the two of them were so alike, it really made no difference that it was Etká who went out immediately. And when she came back with the glass of water, everybody was already on the other side of the door. That was what my brother told me. And really, she didn’t stay there longer than was needed to drink a glass of water. Not like “drinking a glass of water”—my brother was joking—as some of the free love devotees of Nachman Wenshanker’s tribe would put it. My brother himself accompanied both of them, Elka and Etká, to their house. They were the same as always. And Etká even said to him that Nathan Apharsmon was feeling better already.

The day after, my brother returned to the Krishnietz farm; Nathan Apharsmon stayed on in Lipkíev a few days. He didn’t show himself in public and left instructions for no one to be allowed in. Yet we knew he was among us. That is how it is with distinguished men; even when they hide, everybody feels their presence.

Well then, where did the rumors start? It seemed that the night watchman had seen them coming from the alley where the inn was, arms entwined, but it could as well have been two others. Women, whose blood had been inflamed by Nathan Apharsmon during that unforgettable night, passed the rumor on from one to the other. They have been seen coming out of the woods, hand in hand. They have been heard laughing together. Their laughter and whispering was heard in every shady place: Father Seraphim’s orchard, Tsherpohwa’s garden, the dark wood on the way to the gypsy lands. And Reizl Rozhinke’s Zop—why did he stand by the hotel entrance and refuse to move? Until Reizl Rozhinke herself came up to him and whispered something in his ear.

Also the story went, that the very day Nathan Apharsmon was to go

to Reb Noiah's house to ask for Etká's hand, he disappeared, the handsome bridegroom, as though the earth had swallowed him up, and the town was deeply moved. So deeply, that the jealousy was forgotten. And so, in the end, was Etká.

Or almost so. Her belly was round enough for everybody to see. At dusk, when she is out for her daily walk, her sister Elka accompanies her, walking just a little behind.

As they walked along Tomozhenna Street, they looked like a pair of rare birds, with eyes big and serene as though in a dream. Marl Lerner, Lipkíev's painter, was to depict their faces in years to come, like the holy images in icons. The people of Lipkíev, lovers of "*Tshulemt*" on the Sabbath and of sausage with a sip of vodka and a spicy joke on weekdays, turned their eyes the other way.

And Reb Noiah sank into himself. Now, not even his chanting can be heard. He doesn't sleep at night, just sits bent over the Books, his lips moving. Pessya runs from one to the other trying to persuade, to arouse pity, to pacify, to shock. She grows thinner day by day. She had hoped to convince Etká to go to Tchortwitz and stay there with some relatives until she had had her baby, but Etká smiled and said: "I have to stay here, so he'll find me when he comes." When Pessya brings her some food, or "*lekach*," from grandmother Mirale's table, after the traditional "*Gutshabbes*" family gathering, Etká doesn't touch it and doesn't raise her voice. She just says: "You need it yourself." And just like her father Reb Noiah, who gives his rooster all the good people's leftovers that Pessya brought wrapped up in a handkerchief, Etká leaves it all in the yard for the birds. Only there was very little left for the birds, because Reizl Rozhinke's Zop got there first. Pessya stopped bringing him food, but the Zop stayed; and he stood there, at the entrance to Etká's little yard, stiff as a sentry, until Reizl Rozhinke came and dragged him away.

What did Etká eat? A slice of black peasant bread with radishes. Her face had become marvelously delicate. There was a translucence about her, so powerful that Reizl, while dragging her Zop along, began whispering magic spells, and spitting. And the carters, standing on the steps of the inn, swish their long whips through the air, laughing:

"Velwale! Velwale!"

Velwale, Reizl's husband, was hiding in the Zop's shed, collecting

the dung in a bucket and spreading straw on the animal's litter. His clothes hang loose on him, and he almost drowns in them, when Reizl's voice rings out. As for Reizl herself, well, from the start her life hadn't been easy either. So eager were all the good people of the town to help the poor orphan girl, that they had married her off to Velwale. Under the wedding canopy Reizl broke out into a loud wail and everybody believed that she was crying in happiness. One day after the wedding she bought a Zop.

They had no children and the Zop was quite a fortunate acquisition. Reizl became known as Reizl-of-the-Zop, and Velwale as Reizl-of-the-Zop's-Velwale. When a she-goat is brought to the Zop, Velwale holds on to the rope and Reizl takes the money. In a good season, the line of she-goats stretches from the little alley where Reizl Rozhinke lives, to the marketplace, the air heavy with bleating, the thump of hooves, and the smell of animals in heat. Lipkiev grew and prospered. Barren women bought she-goats to bring to the Zop. One of the Zop's two horns—the other got broken when he tried to butt through Kuka's fence—kept growing, so that even the dignitaries of the town could no longer ignore it; they passed by, quite by chance of course, just to cast a sidelong glance at the celebrated creature. It was on some such occasion that the Zop trod on the prominent rich man, Dov Ber Ginsberg's, foot—which caused Aunt Bliumtche to make the following pronouncement: "This fellow Ginsberg has never let anyone tread on him, and here comes a goat and treads on him."

People came to see the Zop at his owner, Reizl Rozhinke. And where do they find him—by Etká's yard. Reizl Rozhinke mutters magic spells and grumbles, so that everyone can hear: "Isn't it enough she conceives in harlotry! May he turn her belly inside out! Like the devils in her bed every night, gottenyoo!"

As for Velwale, a strange wonder begins to waken in his flesh. And at night, sheltering in the Zop's shed, he dreams that he is walking out of his clothes naked, just like that.

"Look," said my mother. "How great the suffering! Pessya. Noiah. Etká . . ."

She gazed at me.

I was proud. I knew that I had earned her confidence. She had never complained of *her* fate. Suddenly, while kneading the dough, her hands

would drop, and she would stand and listen. She heard horses' hooves. She didn't expect anyone else to hear them. We sang songs together, mother and I, and when the summer was nearing its end and the first autumn winds descended on us from the hill, I also began to hear them. We argued. I heard them coming from the Golden Hill, where Reb Yosela Mekubal's Noman had torn up the Rock. But mother heard them close by, just outside the window, and she would jump to her feet and shout out in joy. Once she even put on her funny white hat, with the red and blue cloth flowers round it, and embraced me happily.

"Do you hear?"

I heard. The entire Golden Hill trembled under horses' hooves.

And after a while:

"He's passed. But he'll be back."

At the start of the winter, her confidence began to wane. She gazed silently out at the heavy autumn rains. Now she turned her gaze inward, she even drew the heavy curtain, and she sang. She sang in a quiet voice, almost under her breath, about people sick and lovely, about misery and longing. I knew that she wanted to say—Love.

But she didn't say it, and I was afraid to say it for her. Sometimes I do the singing. She holds my hand in hers while I sing her songs. My new songs, songs about pioneers and builders, which I have brought from the youth movement, she receives in silence. I sing about a stony land, and she dissolves the stones in her pity, with her simple songs. Suddenly, as if on their own, her lips will begin to move. I was her spy, tracking down people in need of help. Dressed all in black, like a raven, she would traverse the rain and the dark, veiled to the eyes, with a black umbrella over her head and a basket crammed with things on her arm. They fell into each other's arms, my mother and Etká, two waiting women, talking their hearts out to each other. Mother of her *doctorl* and Etká of Nathan Apharsmon. They dream together, and laugh together and sing together. Sometimes even the Zop would join in their singing, with an excited snort.

And the sweet nocturnal sing-song, coming from Etká's apartment, turns the heads of the people in the inn.

Winter and the white gloom.

The snow brightens the alley even at night, and a person slipping will hear laughter bursting suddenly from a window.

I helped my mother to get up and to brush the powdered snow from her dress.

“It’s dreadful,” said mother, “a real volcano.”

I knew. It was her heart.

I was lucky. The summer before, for the first time, I had hired myself to work (sorting and packing eggs), secretly of course, to keep the shame from my family. Yankele the Bundist gave my hand a strong squeeze, a worker’s hand, and so doing, baptized me into the Workers International. I spent my first wages on a pair of hobnailed boots. My friend Hirschel and I celebrated the occasion but we didn’t put the boots on, because we didn’t want to dull the shine of the hexagonal nailheads on the soles and the triangular nailheads around them. Now they dug into the frozen snow like pivots, and my mother leant on me. I had always felt her to be much taller than she really was, but that last summer I had grown up quite a bit, and now in my new boots I almost reached her ears.

My mother pinched my arm. It was a signal. In two leaps I had crossed Skin Street, and sneaked inside Pini-do-me-a-Favor’s bicycle-repair shed. All I had to do was to poke my head through a gap in the roof and wave my hand.

“Do me a favor.”

It was Pini. I laughed. I didn’t mind. I had already signalled my mother that the road to Etk’a’s apartment was clear, that the Zop was there but Reizl wasn’t, and that there was no one on the steps to Shura Reinish’s inn.

I knew that Pini would do me no harm. At school he copied from me, and in exchange he repaired my bicycle. Last summer, when the gypsies came, we went to them to hear about our fortunes. The fortuneteller told me that I’d marry a woman with black hair and pink eyes. Beenale, my girlfriend, had black hair and pink eyes, and she was there with me. To make sure, we looked into each other’s eyes, and we could see that the gypsy woman was right. Pini was silent as a rock. I think it was because he couldn’t really hear when he was talking. When he did hear he couldn’t concentrate. His hands would mend things by themselves. Anyhow, when he talked he was not dangerous, but he talked so little his fist would fall onto the face of some noisy bore quite unexpectedly, as if by accident. He wouldn’t even raise his eyes.

That summer was full of excitement and promise. Even the gypsies came in a different way. They left their caravans in the valley, and the

drums—empty wine casks decorated with feathers—were first to arrive. Then, as if out of nowhere, a wild and picturesque horde of cavorting bats descended upon us, and with them hopping and screaming, little black devils with tails and horns. Lipkiev closed its shops and its schools and its library and its public bath and everyone, men, women and children, gathered in the market-square to behold this wonder. When the hopping bats began pulling hats out from under their feathers and making a collection, we moved over to the edge of the market-square, where an old gypsy woman, seated on a reed mat, was shuffling cards and telling people their fortunes.

“Take care!” she said to Pini. “You will kill a man!” And I said to Pini: “Look, in matters of life and death the cards don’t know a thing. Only in matters of love.” And Pini said: “Do me a favor and bite your tongue!” A whole year passed before Pini disappeared, but not before his heavy hammer, the one he used to straighten out bicycle handlebars, bashed in the head of Fiddusye, a giant we nicknamed Goliath, and leader of a band of young Katzapps who at the time were beginning to invade the Jewish quarter, in short violent sallies.

Later we saw Motale, his young brother, holding a letter with a stamp from Argentina. “Do me a favor, keep your questions for Pessah,” he said blankfaced, already beginning to look like his brother.

How lovely was the singing of the two women, my mother and Etká. And tender, as if coming not from the flesh but out of the earth itself, from under the snow. So much so, that I was surprised it didn’t melt the snow. And Laebale Lamb, the butcher’s apprentice, Chonneh Otker, the carter, and with them but slightly apart, Doctor Prozdorov himself, all of them faithful customers of Shura Reinish’s inn, already standing there on the steps, totally besotted, holding each other up and staring, staring. As if one could touch the sounds.

Reizl Rozhinke has her explanation for this nocturnal singing: “It’s from her womb . . . Creatures . . . Black as night . . . Lilith . . .”

And Velwale lends his support: “Quite right. Beautiful, like Lilith, that is . . .”

“Velwale! What a clever man!” Reizl silences him.

“Look upon the Covenant and not on evil,” sings Chonneh Otker, the carter, to himself in the chanting accents of the Day of Atonement, while Laebale Lamb opens up his trousers, rocking from side to side,

and raises a perfect steaming arc that lands on the other side of the alley, at the Zop's feet:

"*Ideho! Ideho! Viauh loshik!*" he shouts and groans.

Doctor Prozdorov is in principle against prejudice of all sort, but the moment he laid eyes on Etká, with her pure beauty, like a church icon and her swelling belly, a strange thought entered his head: suppose a little Messiah was growing there? Those Jews!

For ten days, like a common man, he waited for her on the steps of the inn. And on the eleventh day, he pulled himself up, gave his moustache a tug and said to his dog: "Sit!" And then he addressed Etká in a honied voice:

"Please excuse me, but am I not a physician, after all, with a diploma. Let me introduce myself . . ."

Laebele Lamb, riding Reizl Rozhinke's wooden gate, used a more straightforward approach:

"Beautiful as a queen you are! Let me only touch your crown!"

And when she didn't respond, he said:

"The thread's already pierced the needle."

Laebele Lamb, the heaviest handed man in Lipkiev, was actually a little afraid of Etká. What he was afraid of, he couldn't say. Drunk as a fiddler, he would gaze after her, spellbound. What's she got, this damn woman, that pulls more than a team of horses! Maybe she is Lilith, as Reizl says . . . Hell! Suppose the Devil comes and knocks his eyes out and leaves him with two black holes . . . Damn it! Just shut your bloody eyes and carry on butchering. *Tphooo!*

Only Chonneh Otker, the giant, stands there behind them, quiet, his head protruding, as if he wants to see what the others are looking at. From time to time, he goes out into the yard to change the horses round and, while he is about it, to have a drink. Sometimes with a prayer, always with a blessing. Chonneh Otker was not just a carter, he was also a nice, homely person, but since he took to drinking and beating his wife, he got very angry with himself and went to the Rabbi. The Rabbi ordered him to stop drinking, but Chonneh said to him: "And what about '*Pikouah Nefesh*,' the commandment that sets life over everything else? When my throat is dry, I am dying." Then the Rabbi gave him permission to have a glass, but only one, and only when changing the horses. Now, when he is asked why he was changing the horses while still on the road, Chonneh Otker answers: "To God what is God's, and to horses what is horses." Chonneh Otker has now parked the cart and

the horses at the back of the inn, and between one journey and the next, he stands at the bar or behind the door, opened just a crack, and stares.

And every day at dusk, Etká walks past the inn dressed in a gown as white as snow.

It was all very tempting. The smells, the danger, the racy tongues. At least twice a day, the main door of the inn is flung open and a man thrown out, dropping into the snow like a bundle. And Prozdorov's dog at the head of the steps, staring, black as the devil, in his eyes the contemptuous look of his master.

I was well equipped. Hobnailed boots with soles two fingers thick and in my pocket a scout's knife with blades I honed on the fountain stone. I ran into the inn, taking the steps in two quick bounds, so as not to give myself time to change my mind. And in a voice I tried to make sound confident, I asked for bread and sausage. I was shaking. I spread my fingers to make my fist look bigger as I passed the coins over the counter.

I didn't turn my head right or left. I knew they were there, all of them, but if not I, who was to defend Etká? The long loaf of bread I held like a sword, after tearing out its soft inside and thrusting the long sausage into it, the way I've seen Laebele Lamb's hoodlums doing it. Then I felt the cold eyes of Hlippov, the customs officer, on me.

My eyes stung. I was hungry and proud, and full of my errand. I hadn't eaten a thing since morning. And, perhaps, nothing then either. Father had asked me the day before: "Aren't you hungry?" It was then I first discovered the mysterious relationship between hunger and pride. I was full of wonder, and tried to find a suitable song. But I had none. I had sold all of them to Shalom Pshemishler, from the city of Pshemishl that is, who now lived in the Kokes Hotel and bought folksongs. Two coins apiece. I felt like a whore—not like Kuka—and starved myself. Actually, I was ashamed. If I had said: "Yes, I'm hungry," father would probably have said: "And your mother?" How could I tell him that mother was all tied up with Etká now, day and night. Now even her *doctorl* took second place, to be more exact, he had moved to Etká's place. They talked to each other and made confessions to each other and sang songs, all four of them, mother and Etká, and *doctorl* and Nathan Apharsmon.

Mother now baked and cooked and sewed and ironed all day long. Then, at dusk, she would put on her crow-black gown and scarf, but

not before hiding the exultant glow on her face under a thick layer of powder.

“Look after yourself, my child! Great days!”

Strange food she prepared. Angel food, perhaps. I couldn't touch it. By dusk, all of it would have been moved to Etká's place, and mother with it. They were celebrating.

I was not angry. I had to use cunning to get something to eat. For example, tea and bagels with my friend, Binnale, at Binnale's tea-house, listening patiently to Yankel the Limp's speeches on the burning issues of the day. Here is one: how many of the naked could be clothed and the hungry fed on just one day's profits of my Grandfather Reb Srul Rosner's woodware business. I ate quietly and said: “Good.” I refused to swallow big mouthfuls. I had to be careful not to give away our little secret, that Mother and I were immersed in a grand undertaking. Every minute of every day.

My mother's hands were never really good at cooking. They were more the hands of a dreamer. Her fingers would move cautiously as though touching some mysterious substance. All the dough her hands kneaded ended up as the same thin, dry wafers we called “*pletzel*,” and all her stews as a brown mass and a red-bean porridge which looked like jam, in the flask she put it in.

What did the two of them eat, and the Zop after them, and the Tcherpochwe's fowl after the Zop. Anyhow, the Tcherpochwe's chickens began to stretch their necks like geese, and her geese like turkeys. The Zop had lost the brown marks round his ears and grown completely white, like mother's wedding gown. His horn projected at an angle and tufts of stiff hair appeared suddenly on the backs of his knees and hooves. Of course, they had always been there, but only now did we see them. And Prozdorov's dog growls at the Zop, and backs away in fear.

“Well, well, if it isn't the black raven's son.” Hlippov whistled through the side of his mouth. “Come and tell us, what a black raven's got to do with our Lilith?”

“Pig!” I threw my bread and sausage in his face. I was faster than he was. The hunger, the anger. And now—pride. I recovered my breath in Binnale's teahouse. Everybody there was concerned, and I told them what had happened. I was a young warrior. I couldn't keep things to myself anymore. I told them about the bread and sausage, how I hadn't even had one bite of it. Now they fed me on plain red beans, completely red, that special red of Essau's red food in the Bible. Yes, I was a young

Essau. More than Essau. Hairy from top to toe, like the Zop. The first bristles had already begun to make my face itch. Suddenly I was ashamed, seeing Yankele with his crippled body, yet so full of strength. And I said to him, "I'm scared. Something terrible is going to happen. Who will protect Etka?"

"Who!" screamed Yankele.

There was no one. At the beginning there had been Pessya, her mother. Then grandfather's messengers, including the town mayor himself, nominated by uncle Nachum. Etka rejected them contemptuously. Her beauty grew from day to day, and her swelling thighs, when on her regular evening walk down Tomozhenna Street, drew all eyes. Her benefactors all tired. Elka, her twin sister, didn't give up; she followed Etka like a shadow, grieving, blaming herself, growing ugly, while Etka's beauty kept increasing. Now, Nachman Weinshenker's revolutionaries tried their luck with her. They came to her with big books, each one a gospel. They read together and she ate their food. But when they tried to make her join their ranks, she asked in wonder, why me? And when comrade Weinshenker himself explained to her the marvels of the social revolution and even whispered in her ear a personal promise of free love, she rejected him softly but firmly: "What about Nathan Apharsmon?"

Finally, Nachman Weinshenker's men also tired of it and left her alone, declaring that the social order was to blame.

I alone remained. Strange. My mother too, of course, but that was different. I mean the danger. Reizl kept whispering horror stories in everyone's ear. A black devil, disguised as a goat, visited Etka every night. And look how the Zop is sticking close to her fence. Now Reizl doesn't even try to drag him away. Not to speak of Velwale, who is spending more and more time in the inn with the others, waiting with them, and staring, till his eyes water.

One day the sun broke clean through the haze, flared up, and veiled itself again, leaving little puddles in the snow, and first scents wafting up into the air from the patches of bare earth. That night a scream was heard, then a thumping, as of cattle's hooves. In the morning, Etka was found lying in a pool of blood and fluid, with mother's wedding robe close by her breasts torn as though ripped by hyenas. She was still breathing when Doctor Prozdorov took her in his arms and drove her

in his beautiful carriage to his house. Later, his housekeeper (he was a bachelor) was heard to say that Etká wanted to die. That she refused to open her eyes, refused to eat, refused to talk. That Doctor Prozdorov fell on his knees praying, partly to her, partly to the sticky thick-red image of the Savior painted on the wall.

Then he cursed and emptied a bottle of vodka at a single gulp, and collapsed.

Doctor Prozdorov recovered. Etká did not. Hanging on to the drain-pipe like a bat, I peeked through the window. Her face was pure and translucent, but there was no forgiveness on it. Rumor had it that Doctor Prozdorov himself was in the inn that night, together with the others. His deep voice had been heard chanting a church hymn, and Laebale Lamb's voice giving out in a wailing *kina*, in the cantor Bunim Kittel's style, as if each meant to pray in his own tongue and it was the devil's vodka that turned their prayers into a drunken clamor. Then the scream was heard.

The same morning that Etká had been found raped and bleeding, the Zop disappeared. Later, his mangled parts were found on the seven roads leading into Lipkíev: The Yedinitz road and the Pritzems road and Novoselitz road and the River Bug road and the Wood road and the Cemetery road and the Golden Hill road. A rumor from the craftsmen's Synagogue claimed that when Laebele Lamb realized what they had done to Etká, repentance and a terrible fear seized him, and that same night he took the Zop, hacked him into pieces and scattered these pieces all over Lipkíev's seven roads—a scapegoat for our sins.

Only a few of the better people of the town accompanied Etká, the defiant daughter, to her resting place. Simple people came, some out of curiosity. And of course her father Noiah, who said Kaddish, his face lifeless as a stone. And Elka, her twin sister, who veiled her face to hide her ugliness. Pessya lay close to death. I wanted to cry out, but my mother was first, she sang. It was so unexpected that at first it seemed as though her voice was rising out of the earth itself. She sang in two voices, or that's what I heard, her own and Etká's. Wonderfully sweet and soft. I knew the song. When she got to "For my soul is longing to be free as a swallow" she stopped and fell silent. And didn't cry. It seemed as if the tombstones were trembling. People were afraid to raise their eyes and look at each other. And the grave-digger, Chaim-the-Noseless, who generally kept his eyes to the ground, now raised them to gaze in wonder on the woman who was my mother, and the two little holes, all that was left of his nose, quivered.

Reizl Rozhinke became pregnant. "It looks as if that night did something to Velwale's blood," said Shura Reinish, the inn-keeper, slapping her lips with her hand, so God would forgive her. And Reb Gerson Tam, Reizl Rozhinke's neighbor, of whom people said that the voices of the Talmud were more real to him than the voices coming from next door, was summoned to testify in court. When he returned, he was full of astonishment and confessed that all his life he had lived in error. All his life he had believed that the judge had the loudest voice in court, but now he saw that it was the court usher.

Elka remained a virgin. And every year, on the anniversary of her sister Etká's death, she puts on a white dress, some of Lipkiev's maidens join her, and together they walk up the Yedinitz road to await the coming of Nathan Apharsmon.

*translated by the author with Daniel Weissbort*