

They say that nothing would have come of it anyway. For there are loves that from the earliest are condemned to defectiveness and “cripplehood”, and that beget only sorrow and suffering. Everyone can see this, apart from the lovers themselves.

When Kóba finally dragged himself all the way to the inn, he knew things were bad. The dilapidated inn was writhing before his eyes, doubling and whirling, as if wicked devils were twisting it. Then there was a black hole, and momentarily flashing inside it, the worried face of Old Myszka.

In the distance, Rubin Kohlmann was jabbering something about Shabbos, that now he'd, *ayneklaynemiteshmok*, take a rest. It even sounded funny, but Kóba couldn't laugh, because he thought it would make the top of his head fall off. It went dark again, though it was probably because night had fallen. Kóba wanted badly to fall asleep but somehow wasn't able to. Sleep circled him like a wary dog, afraid to approach closer. So the young man was adrift on a choppy sea of darkness, and sometimes Myszka would emerge out of the blackness, as wrinkly as an old apple – and sometimes he wouldn't.

'Go to sleep, won't you,' grunted the old man. 'It's fine for you, tomorrow you can sleep in, but I gotta work at the crack of dawn. Here, I'm leaving you some water and some linen, change the compress during the night. Oy, you'll cough up a lung, I'm gonna sleep in the pantry, I ain't getting any shut-eye with you here.'

'*Ayneklaynemiteshmok*,' croaked Kóba, with a stupid grin.

Someone's hands caressed the young man's face, from the base of the ears to the neck. They were the smooth hands of someone who did little labour, and they definitely didn't belong to Old Myszka. They smelled of aniseed and carnations.

She slipped in beneath the covers. She interlaced her toes with Kóba's – they were freezing cold, as if she'd been walking around barefoot for a while. It tickled, but pleasantly. She snuggled all the way up to Kóba, a little warm, a little cold, smooth as muslin and seemingly totally naked. The farmhand started feeling blissful and as if his fever was draining away. He fell asleep with his face nestled in the sea of black, fragrant hair spread over the pillow.

In the morning he felt a little better, though he remembered little of the previous night. He was surprised that the mattress smelled of spices, like the Jewish incense Kohlmann smoked up the whole house with every Shabbos. Then Jakób found a hair on the pillow – thick, dark and curled. He sat for a while on the bed and twirled it in his fingers, and felt peculiar things inside.

He was still weak, but the illness had left his chest and he wasn't even coughing so hard. This was certainly helped by the thick chicken broth Chana gave him to drink. Meanwhile, old Kohlmann gave him lighter jobs, like sprinkling water over the inn's dirt floor or

wiping down the tables; the innkeeper knew he had to look after his farmhands, even if they were goyim. That night, the moon again shone bright and at midnight Chana went out onto the roof once again. As Kóba struggled his way up to lead her back down, she peered at him completely lucidly and smiled strangely. 'You're going to fall, Chana.'

'No I won't.'

'Let's come down.'

'It's fine here.'

And Chana slid one hand over her nightshirt. And then the other. And then she undid a few upper buttons and stood like that in front of Kóba, naked from the waist up. She had beautiful shoulders and unattractive breasts – triangular, their nipples too large and too dark. Kóba was just, *just* about to say 'no', he didn't want to, he couldn't, but the laws of the night are different from the laws of the day. And he didn't say anything, because he knew that 'yes', he did want to, and he knew he could.

But the girl just reached between her breasts and pulled out her heart – small, fluttering and feathery.

'This is for you,' she said.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



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