

## THE JOURNEY

Reb Alter opens his one good eye and watches the dark. *still night before the birds begin their angel songs.* He pulls the rough wool covers back and sits upon the bed in night shirt and in socks, and placing the *kipah* from under his pillow on his head, whispers the morning prayer for his soul's return.

*another day begins, another string of hours, waiting. perhaps today, perhaps before the nightfall. be ready at all moments. be ready for His glory.*

Reb Alter reaches for his cane's worn handle and eases himself to the floor, right foot first. The floor's wood is cold from the late autumn night. He taps unerringly the straight path to the open toilet. Reb Alter raises his nightshirt and pulls at the withered appendage that once brought pleasure and children to the world and, waiting patiently, feels the familiar trickle spatter into the porcelain pool between his legs. Once that stream was strong and loud, a signal for Rivkele waiting in the feather bed. Muscles harnessed, he was powerful as blood until the deed was done and dreamless sleep enveloped them till dawn. Twenty-four years now the toilet's empty flush is heard by him alone. *Rivkele.*

Reb Alter turns in the dark toward the sink and reaches for the place the faucet will be. A distant rumble precedes the spouting of icy water. Arthritic fingers welcome the coolness as he cups his hands and bathes his eyes and cheeks and toothless mouth. *she drew water for Abraham's servant at the well, and he drank.* He takes the towel and dries his face and long white beard, then whispers, "Blessed art Thou, oh Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast hallowed us by Thy commandments, and has commanded us concerning the washing of the hands."

He reaches for the cane and taps his way to the table with the kerosene stove. He feels for the box of matches, removes one with his knotted fingers and strikes for the light. The match breaks. *and darkness was upon the face of the deep.* He casts the broken match aside and, fingers trembling, removes another one. He strikes again. This time a flame. *and there was light.* It reveals a small garret room with a slant roof and a battered window at one end. His own shadow dances ghostlike on the walls and ceiling. He turns the knob at the base of the burner and warmth rises toward his beaked nose and drooping eye. He places a tin kettle on the flames. *Blessed be the Name of the Lord.*

He walks across the room to the closet that stands on its end like an upright coffin. He struggles to pull the nightshirt over his head, hangs it on a hanger, and, mouthing the appropriate prayer, places his four-fringed *tsitzis* over his shoulders. Then his shirt, more gray than white and fraying at the sleeves and washed more times by Goldie downstairs than she had lain with her husband, a shirt missing two of the seven buttons it had once boasted, a shirt that was as comfortable on him as his own eighty-three-year-old skin.

The kettle begins to gurgle. He pulls up the pants given to him by Mottele the tailor who died last year. *must not be late, Shacharis soon.* He sits on the wooden chair by the table and bends over his shoes. He struggles with the right one first, then the left. Then the tying of the

laces. He stands up crookedly just as the kettle blows its fierce whistle. He removes it from the fire. Silence returns to the shadowed walls.

Reb Alter pours the steaming water into a glass cup. Black shredded leaves and one sugar cube mix and swirl to make his morning tea. He shuffles to the wooden counter by the window and opens the breadbox. A cockroach scurries unseen across the counter and down the wall. Reb Alter removes the bread. A quarter loaf is left. *must bring another loaf today.* He slices the yellow slab of butter and spreads it thinly on the bread. He sits on his chair at the table and, lowering his head, he prays, "Blessed art Thou, oh Lord our God, King of the Universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth," and eats the buttered bread and drinks the steaming tea and feels at peace. *i believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah and though He tarry, i will wait daily for His coming.*

Reb Alter gathers the remaining crumbs between his fingers and swallows them greedily, then washes them down with the last of his tea, sweeter at the end than at first. He turns to the closet and pulls down the old wool coat, now worn with age but once a prize, a gift from Rivkele for his fiftieth birthday when he read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur, his voice melodious and the congregation listening intently as the ancient prophet rose from the pages *now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai* this coat now faded and thinning at the elbows and the lining torn, but still enough of a coat to keep the cold away even on winter nights when he sometimes sleeps in it. He pulls the coat over his shoulders and buttons its four buttons and places a tired black hat over his *kipah* and without looking back, opens the door and enters the dark hallway, tapping softly with his cane.

Reb Alter lives on the fourth floor and from the head of the stairs it is sixty-five steps to the bottom. *sixty-five steps.* Descending is more dangerous than climbing. The knees can fail. A fall would mean the end.

*don't fall. perhaps today He'll come. it could be today. the times are bad, we need Him now. don't fall. don't miss the moment.* The banister in his left hand, his cane in the right, Reb Alter descends right foot first, then left foot, counting. *one, two.*

The stairs coil down the building in the cold and the dark. The apartment house is filled with the poorest Jews, the bakers, the barbers, the shoemakers. Peeling plaster reveals the underlying brick, the crumbling mortar. *twelve, thirteen.* The staircase circles downward as Reb Alter passes the battered apartment doors, each door guarding its tales and tragedies. The Feldmans, the Rottenbergs, the Katzes. All with children and families and illnesses and noise in the afternoon. *twenty-seven, twenty-eight.* Now it is quiet. All are sleeping. Only the sound of his own old shoes on the stairs and the cane tapping in the dark. *forty-two, forty-three. right foot first, then left foot. don't fall, don't hurry.* The building is old. A home to many families and one widower—himself. *Rivkele, my sweet, why did you have to leave me? almost there. sixty-three. sixty-four. one more. sixty-five. Blessed be the Name of the Lord.*

Reb Alter looks into the courtyard from the landing. There is the first hint of light, and his right eye makes out the old oak tree, its trunk as wide as three men. His left eye sags in weariness, a milky film covering it like a dead man's shroud. The garbage bins are in place, two black cats guarding their nocturnal treasure. The grass around the tree is lifeless from children hiding and seeking. Reb Alter takes a breath of the chill morning air and crosses to the passage leading to Walowa Street. The street is waiting for him, as it always has.

The old rabbi now moves steadily down the sidewalk, his goal approaching like the dawn. Alone on the narrow walkway he taps his way past the dark tenements of T. Here and there a window dimly glows, a housewife already awake warming her family's room with a fire

in the kitchen stove, baking fresh rolls for her slumbering children. He passes Lebowicz's shuttered store where he buys his bread and butter and tea. Walowa Street meets Krakowska at the corner, and the sidewalk becomes smooth and the street is cobbled and wide. *Krakowska Street. how many times Rivkele and I strolled here on a Shabbes afternoon and looked into the windows with their chocolates and dresses and fancy hats and looked down the street toward the dome of the new railway station and the other Jews walking with their families in the park and we met them and nodded our heads and the women talked and the men too and the summer afternoons drifted by. T. was a good town then, before the great war.*

Reb Alter makes his way up the hill of Krakowska Street. He pulls at his collar as a hollow morning wind wanders through the streets. He reaches another corner and crosses the rounded cobblestones, cane tapping, avoiding the grooves between the stones and enters the empty open square. There at the far end stands the great cathedral, its pointed spire piercing the sky. *why do they build such towers? Babel. do they think this is what He wants? towers and bricks and idols? He wants the heart, He wants mercy, compassion.*

Reb Alter crosses the broad square, a place for markets and fairs, now empty at dawn and he a solitary old man with a stick and a hat and a worn black coat. Wanderer with white beard and one dead eye. The shrill caw of a single crow calls him and he sees the black wings circling the sky, watching with evil intent the weak old Jew crossing that sea of cobblestones. *you again. every morning, it is you again. waiting for me to fall, waiting for death. i know you want my flesh, black beak tearing at my heart, but you will have to wait one more day, Amalek!* Reb Alter looks up once more at the circling wings. His pace quickens and finally, at the eastern end of the square, he enters the safety of Ulica Zydowska—Jews Street, an alley made craftily narrow by forgotten city fathers. He moves

down the twisting alley, balconies perilously balanced overhead, barred windows shutting out an unfriendly, cold world.

Reb Alter now sees his goal ahead on the right. His frail heart beats faster. He crosses toward it, tapping his cane harder now. It is a small structure, only one story high with planked wooden walls and a shingled roof and two windows glowing in the dawn. The door hangs crooked between the windows, a door he has entered ten thousand times. He approaches the entrance and turns the well-worn handle to enter the ancient synagogue once more.

The handle does not turn. The door stays shut. He tries the stubborn handle again. Locked. He raises his cane and raps the crooked door. No answer.

"Meyer!" he calls out with a cracking voice, rapping harder. "Meyer-Leib," he repeats the name of the *shammes*, preparing for morning prayers. "It's me, Alter-Yitzhak. Open up. It's time for Shacharis."

A window from above rolls up and a fat woman shouts something at him. He pounds the door with his fist now, demanding entrance. *it is time for morning prayers, the door must open. the door must open now!* He feels a hand on his shoulder and turns. It is a stranger in a leather apron. With a black beard and a *kipah*. *a Jew.*

"Reb Alter," the man says, lowering the elder's cane to the ground. "Reb Alter, the *shul* is closed. The shul has been closed for ten years now, don't you remember?" He looks at Reb Alter's drooping eye.

Reb Alter stares at him blankly, his rage fading, not comprehending the stranger's words. *any time, He will come at any time. be prepared.*

"Look." The man points to the windows. "Don't you see the windows are shuttered? There is no one inside." The man's words are gentle, caressing. "If you want to pray Shacharis, I'll take you to the new synagogue. Come, let's go," he says, turning Reb Alter around. "Come, I'll help you."

Reb Alter looks back at the wood shutters where a light was glowing just moments before. A memory passes through him like a melody.

*Rivkele.*

“Rivkele?” Reb Alter questions the stranger, who leads him down the curving street.

“Where is my Rivkele?”

Reb Alter turns the corner as the harsh morning sun strikes his face.

Somewhere, he hears the cathedral’s bells echoing, calling for the faithful to rise and give thanks to the Lord.