

Praise for *Mourning and Celebration*

"David Brody has carved a story with grace and sensitivity about a subject that some of us, still to this day, cannot even whisper: homosexuality. This deeply affecting story about a man trying to find his place in a world that has no place for him is a triumph. By writing this book, the author has made this story human and personal, making it impossible for us to ignore or shun gays and lesbians. From a perspective of a hundred years ago, we see just how far we have come to accept sexual orientation within society and religious constructs, but sadly, it reveals how far we need to go. More importantly, this novel transcends the barriers of religious denominations because the book is doing just that, breaking down barriers. It is not only a book for the Jewish faith but for all religions. David Brody has written this story with honesty and love, and I was very touched by it."

Cary Lawrence, actress, Montreal, Canada

"Well written with sensitivity. An enjoyable albeit heart-rending account of the ignorance shown in the past that has given way to the acceptance and liberal views of the present day. Although I have finished the book, Yankl's torment continues to live on in my mind."

**Irene Chipchase, homemaker and booklover,
Cambridge, UK**

"I have just read your book. I couldn't leave my computer - and I cried again! Thank you for sharing this with me and indeed the world. God bless you, dear friend."

**Carole Rocklin, fund-raising professional, Montreal,
Canada**

“David Brody in his new novel, Mourning and Celebration, vividly recreates the world of Eastern European Jewry in the nineteenth century before it was decimated by the Holocaust. With an authenticity that reminds us of Isaac Bashevis Singer, he draws readers into his narrative. Brody holds their interest by asking the following questions:

“What if a problem that we think of as new and modern has actually existed for a very long time? How did people who could not fit into the traditional societies of old find a place for themselves in the world?

“Today we are used to seeing gay people in all walks of life and we assume it is something new and characteristic of our own time. But what if gay people were finding a place for themselves in society for centuries? How might they have done this?

“These are the questions that Brody has answered with a story that is beautifully conceived and gracefully written.”

Rabbi Howard Handler, Solomon Schechter School of Westchester, New York

“An elderly holocaust survivor once shared with me that when he was a boy his father took him to shul on Yom Kippur, and in the last row of the pews he saw a number of strangers, men without talesim weeping. He asked his father who those men were, and his father said, “they are the reshaim”, wicked men. His portrayal of what it was like for Jewish gay men in 1930s Poland has made me hungry for stories like David Brody’s. We are in need of a history that cannot be recovered. He has broken that silence with the first of stories that can only be imagined.”

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Director of the Diversity Project and Senior Teaching Fellow at CLAL (National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership), Scholar-in-Residence for Hazon, a Jewish Environmental organization, and for Keshet, an organization dedicated to GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) inclusion in the larger Jewish community

"I am sure Mourning and Celebration will be a great success. The story is amazing and brilliantly devised. It has both meaning and a message relevant today."

**Lily Frank, former National Executive Vice-President,
Canadian Hadassah/WIZO**

"This story is an intelligent and soulful insight into a conflicted world that most neglect to imagine even existed. It is a story of pain and exploration, and it is a story in which the deeply human struggles are, tragically, timeless. I am grateful to consider the author a friend and my teacher in the implications of what transpires when deep emotional longing meets moral blindness."

**Rabbi Adam Scheier, Congregation Shaar
Hashomayim, Westmount, Quebec, Canada, the
author's congregational rabbi**

"This book is truly a gift bestowed upon its readers. One can only be grateful to the author for his generosity of spirit in sharing a journey so rarely revealed. Love propels us through time and tradition, all the while exacting a terrible price on wonderfully endearing characters. I read this book very slowly. I didn't want it to end."

**Pauline de Waele, Administrator, Health Services,
Montreal, Canada**

"Danny (Rabbi Prof. Daniel Sperber, Chana's husband) and I are truly impressed by your writing. The story is so powerful and touching and sensitively told in exquisite English. I hope to see Yankl on screen soon. It would be amazing and a real mitzvah as a movie."

**Chana Sperber, counselor to the parents of gay men
and lesbians, Tel Aviv, Israel**

"I read this book with extreme pleasure and great interest. I admire the warmth and dignity of the writer expressed so well on a theme with which he is so familiar."

**Muguette Myers, Translator and published poet,
Montreal, Canada**

"David Brody has, in 'Mourning and Celebration,' attempted to fill in one of the many silences of gay and lesbian history, and in so doing has written a stirring tale that can open hearts. Brody imagines a counterpoint to himself: a young man in the shtetl whose love is denied him by the conventions and strictures of his time, and in this way calls us to ponder the thousands - perhaps millions - of people who are similarly bound today. Like the movie "Trembling Before G-d," this book gives human form to their struggle."

**Jay Michaelson, Executive Director, Nehirim (USA):
GLBT Jewish Culture & Spirituality, and author of
"Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual
Judaism"**

"David Brody has written a powerful and sensitive story about human love as it was and is experienced by gay men with a vibrant spirituality, shaped by the traditions of the Jewish faith. In a most imaginative way, David imagines an encounter between himself today and a Chassidic Jew named Yankl, who lived more than a century earlier. Yankl's story of his wrestling with the conventions of his day, with his family's expectations, and with the demands of his orthodox faith, while refusing to deny his own sexual leanings, is fictional but totally believable and emotionally moving. And David Brody's own contemporary musings as a gay man and practicing Jew show that, in many ways, the struggle goes on. Though written from a Jewish perspective Mourning and Celebration has insights of great worth for anyone, gay or straight, who is struggling to remain faithful to themselves and to the spiritual tradition to which they may belong."

**The Rev. Dr. Donald F. Bell, Minister, The United
Church of Canada, Toronto, Canada**

Mourning and **Celebration**

*Jewish, Orthodox and Gay
Past & Present*

K. David Brody

 *Transcréation*

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If you would like to invite the author to speak at an event for your organization, please contact him via the website.

Author's Note

The writing of *Mourning and Celebration* has been a fascinating experience. The work is the birth child of two sources: a sense of self-awareness and a response to a historical dilemma that, to this day, has not been satisfactorily resolved – the place of homosexuals within Orthodox Jewry.

The characters in my book illustrate this dilemma. In the process, they seemed to take hold of my imagination and emerge on their own, my words serving merely as a mouthpiece for their description and development.

I had several objectives in embarking on this project. The first was to use the story to reflect the alienation felt by a young gay man growing up within a closed community. Although in today's world, at least in the West, there is far more openness and acceptance of homosexuality, being different and the target of bullies can still lead to suicide among our young people. I recount one such incident in the book, where pressure to marry results in tragedy.

As an outcome of this first objective, *Mourning and Celebration* presents homosexuality as a variant in the human condition, not as a deviance, and is intended to elicit recognition and understanding of this fact. Once that is achieved, minds much wiser than mine can devise a solution that promotes acceptance. That is my hope and prayer.

Another objective was to describe and demystify, especially for the non-Jewish reader, some of the beautiful Jewish rituals still practiced today at home and in the synagogue. In recent years, there has been an upsurge of anti-

Semitism with many of its proponents ignorant of the true nature of the religion. Without wishing to seem pretentious, perhaps my words can, to some small extent, deflect those hostile attitudes.

Finally, I made great efforts not to judge the positions adopted by the parents and rabbis in the narrative. Our worldviews all emerge from the social environment into which we are born. I did not feel that I had the right to condemn behavior that appears out of kilter with our modern set of values. One of the eternal values cultivated and held in high esteem by the rabbis in *Mourning and Celebration* is respect for the feelings of others and caring for their welfare, regardless of the morals of the day.

In order to explain the Yiddish and Hebrew words essential to the telling of the tale, I have added a glossary that redefines each word or phrase after it is first mentioned.

I would like to acknowledge with much gratitude the people who helped me produce this work. First, my sincere thanks to the clergy, professionals and friends kind enough to provide the testimonials validating my work. I am most thankful for their time and encouragement.

The ongoing, constructive comments of the Creative Writing Group of Westmount, Quebec, led by Alexina Scott-Savage, were much appreciated and had a radical effect on the shape of my novel.

My editor and publicist, Danny Iny, also made a major contribution by correcting my language and creating the book. It was Danny who designed the brilliant website for *Mourning and Celebration*, which has even developed new friendships for me.

A word of thanks, too, to the many friends who read the work before I decided to 'go public', and who made suggestions that sparked the progress of the story.

Finally, a wish: that you enjoy reading *Mourning and Celebration* almost as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you.

K. David Brody

Prologue

“Hey, *Lady*, catch this one!” The fair-haired boy stood arrogantly with two leering schoolmates. He bounced a tennis ball hard on the ground, its drumming on the asphalt a violent challenge in itself. He turned to his friends. “Let’s see the little queer squirm.”

“See if you can hit him where it counts,” said the one with acne all over his face.

“Yeah,” parroted the third member of the trio. “Where it counts.”

“C’mon, then. Catch it if you can,” yelled the fair-haired boy at the butt of his scorn.

He made a feint of hurling the tennis ball at his flinching target a few yards away in the schoolyard, and then flung it with all his strength. I, the object of his venom, scarcely had time to brace myself and turn away before the hurtling tennis ball struck me hard on the left shoulder blade. I winced with pain as, to the jeers of my tormentors, I slunk to the side of the schoolyard, once more the damage to my dignity more painful than the bruise to my back.

I recall the incident with dread whenever bullying is mentioned in the news or in newspaper articles. It is so far in the past, yet such grotesque memories still surface in my mind’s eye as I relive those awful moments and remember my hurtful nickname. With a dislike of sports and a feeling of abhorrence at the very idea of competition – sports and competition being the fundamentals of grammar school culture in the London of the 1950s – I was humiliatingly dubbed *Lady*.

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All I wanted was to be left in peace, and the only form of competition I sought was to surpass my own past record.

As I expel the unwelcome memory from my consciousness, I reflect on how circumstances have changed in my own lifetime. My youth was characterized by a sense of alienation from the society and values in which I grew up. Mine was the second generation of Jews to be born in London, England, my paternal grandparents having hailed from Poland and my maternal grandparents from the Ukraine. Life had been a struggle for my parents and their generation, born into poverty but rising through their efforts and some calculated risk-taking to a position of relative comfort. Yet the ghetto values of my grandparents had withstood the economic and social pressures to attain material success: what mattered most were family and the practice of Orthodox Judaism.

From the age of nine, I knew I was different. By the age of twelve, I realized what the difference was. With fear and horror I admitted to myself that I was attracted to my own sex. I desired boys. I had crushes on boys. Yet I felt most at ease around girls with whom there was no sexual tension and no fear of exposure. At the same time, I had little in common with them. Isolation and loneliness were the only option. Worse still was the terror of discovery, not to mention my parents' high expectations of me. How would they react? How could I ever fulfill their greatest hope for me – marriage and children? There would also be little chance of being accepted by others for what I was, a homosexual. At school I was persecuted for being different and for my feminine ways. I made great efforts to change those gestures and attitudes by practicing what I took to be masculine mannerisms. Indeed, I have succeeded to such an extent that, as an adult, I project the image of a typically straight male. I'm a closet heterosexual – a thought that creases my face into a grin.

Casting aside the memories, I realize that I managed to change my life. In 1968, by exchanging my place of birth for Montreal through emigration to Canada, I achieved liberation.

For many years, I enjoyed emotional satisfaction with a lover and a certain professional and economic success. And within my short lifetime attitudes have changed, from oppression and suspicion of gay people to quasi acceptance. Years ago, Jews were subjected to the same process: from the ghetto to emancipation, at least in day-to-day life. On a superficial, social level, being Jewish is accepted, despite some underlying anti-Semitism. And now, being gay almost does not matter. It's just a detail in one's personal character, a reality accepted as a normal part of life, especially in the province of Quebec.

Sometimes I wonder what kind of a person I would have been had I been born at another time and in another place. I'm quite sure that I'm not the first person to have made this conjecture, but that does not make the hypothesis any less intriguing. In fact, although my parents were London-born Jews, had they been Hindu Indians, how would I have grown up and developed? Or Mayan Indian? Do those societies accept a man who is homosexual? Completely homosexual? There are endless possibilities: a Lapland family? Inuit? Chinese? Then there is the time consideration. The worst-case scenario would have been as the only son of a Viking chieftain, obliged to perpetuate the family name. I imagine myself leaping off a cliff in a gesture of defiance. How dramatic!

It is an existential question, but there is one possibility well within the realm of the imagination. Had I been born 100 years earlier, at a time when my ancestors lived in ghettos or in *shtetls*, Jewish villages, to parents with a similar worldview to that of my own parents, how would I have reacted? How would they have reacted? Shtetl society was a fortress against external influences. Conformity was the rule – anything less would have been considered a threat to the status quo. Everyone dressed the same and thought the same – along strict Jewish religious lines. Non-conformity was anathema. How would I have survived in that totally closed, totally conformist society?

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From my own chair in the comfortable living room of my apartment, I contemplate the social progress that has been made during my own lifetime. In my teenage years in London and in most other places in the world, the practice of homosexuality was illegal. I remember contributing small sums to an organization dedicated to law reform called the Albany Trust. It was founded after the Wolfenden Commission recommended amendment of the law in the UK prohibiting homosexual acts.

The Albany Trust issued a newsletter, sent in a plain brown envelope. I dared not receive it at home for fear that my parents would question me about it, and my secret would be revealed. So I asked a female friend at the college I attended to take delivery of the newsletter. She was consumed with curiosity as to the envelope's content and years later I regretted not having taken her into my confidence.

In Canada, I myself was involved in changing the status quo. When Yves, my lover of 23 years, passed away, I and three other gay men in the same situation sued the provincial government for the survivor pension, an allowance already granted to the surviving spouse in a common-law relationship. We were represented by a lawyer from the Quebec Human Rights Commission. After an eight-year legal battle, and with the case finally being considered by the Quebec Court of Appeal, the province's highest legal authority, we won our case.

Not bad, I think as I look across at the armchair facing me. Yet I'd give anything not to have had to claim the pension. The chair I'm looking at is the one Yves used to sit in, often waving his hands in animated conversation with me or our guests. It's just one of the many furnishings that carries a memory in the space I conceived. The style, Queen Anne, with a high back covered in velvet stripes of blue, ivory and olive, reflects both Yves' taste and his character, easy and elegant. Almost every other article in the décor represents a souvenir of an event or a mood, the earliest being a crystal egg I noticed by chance in the

store window of Liberty's on Regent Street, London as I sheltered from a downpour. Love at first sight. It cost me the third of a week's salary, an expense I never regretted. It has accompanied me wherever I resided in the three countries I have lived in.

The massive sofa with its plush, blue cushions is another of Yves' pieces I inherited. Taking one's seat in it is to sink into a cloud. Elsewhere, placed carefully in the corner cabinet is my mother's Japanese tea and coffee set, hand-painted on paper-thin bone china, all too fragile ever to use.

My paintings, my loves. The calm riverside scene by a French painter from Provence, its magic light reflecting even in darkness. The rich fall colors of a Canadian forest, a watercourse trickling through it, by an artist from the Outaouais region of Quebec – the hues fade or glint with the intensity of the light shining on it. The stark lines of a mountain waterfall and lake portrayed by a European immigrant who, like me, forged his future in the New World. A still life hangs above the dining table by a young man from China. The beautiful 19th-century print of a man's head, discovered on a vacation in Burgundy. Knick-knacks on the piano, each echoing its innate occasion and its own beauty. My Sabbath candlesticks and my *chanukiyah*, the eight-branched candelabra, lit on the festival of *Chanukah*, to celebrate the rededication of the Temple after the Hasmoneans' victory over the ancient Greeks.

Taken together, my very own refuge.

Sometimes, on a sleepless night, I come into my sanctum, switch on one or two picture lights, sit in Yves' chair and contemplate the peace that permeates the place. When I first set eyes on the apartment, before I purchased it, there had been a full-sized pool table in the room with its overhead light, two little tub chairs and a small television suspended from the ceiling next to the French doors leading to the balcony. Nothing else. The walls had been covered in wallpaper with a dark green stripe. It was a depersonalized space more akin to a

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club than a residence, more suited to an amorphous group of guests than a homeowner's nest. I had changed the wallpaper for one with soft columns of winding brown leaves set against a beige background, lending height to the eight-foot ceiling in the front part of the room. However, the element opening up the space is a cathedral ceiling over the dining area, elevating the room from what would otherwise have been a box-like hutch.

Memories. Inanimate objects, each with their own history, relevant to me alone. When I am gone, they will have to survive on their own empty esthetic, subject and victim to others' tastes. When I am gone, my history, too, will be gone. Some friends and family will recollect events and occasions we shared. Then, they too, will vanish with time.

I suddenly become aware of my own thought process. Until recent years, I was almost exclusively preoccupied by my personal life situation, my daily problems insignificant as they may have been, and the long-term challenges that I have now learned to face and accept as part of my being. I realize that, in spite of my concerns, I have reached a certain comfort level, a serene plateau where the peaks and abysses of existence have been eroded to a flat plain. It is not a disturbing realization. I now have the space to observe and absorb other realities, the realities of others, and even other times. I cannot imagine what a projection of my life might hold for me 100 years hence. But the past? I have acquired enough knowledge to visualize that.

I close my eyes, picturing an ancestor sitting there, someone just like I had been years ago – lonely, isolated, alienated and desperate as a result of being gay. I'm sure someone like me must have existed and I feel an overwhelming affinity with this stranger from another world, this long-lost cousin.

I open my eyes. The chair is no longer empty. Sitting there is a Chassidic Jew, long-legged and lanky, dressed in a white shirt and black pants under a black smock. Around his waist is a black cloth belt, the *gartel*, separating his spiritual upper body

from the lower part containing the bodily functions. His head covering is a *shtreimel*, a wide-brimmed, round fur hat. His face is framed by a trim beard with curly side locks swept back over his ears. His soft brown eyes are frightened, the eyes of a hunted animal. I know that feeling and that look, for before the western world changed, I had felt and looked the same way.

I stare at this apparition in disbelief. "Who are you?"

"*Mein nomen is Yankl* (Jacob) Bradawka. Or at least, Yankl was the name given to me at birth." The Yiddish accent is thick. "I am your cousin... I was your cousin," he corrects himself.

"My cousin? That's impossible."

"*Nein*, it is possible," says this cousin from another century and another culture.

"You mean we're from the same family but from a different time and place?" I pause, mulling over the intriguing situation. "Strange," I continue, "how could that be? Yet I always wondered whether you existed. I have often tried to imagine what it must have been like to be you. How different our lives must have been! Was it as awful as I think? Tell me what it was like."

Yankl removes his hat and places it in his lap. Beneath it he wears a black *yarmulkah*, the skullcap worn by religious Jews. Despite his strong Yiddish accent his English is clear and correct.

"It's quite a story. Quite a story," he muses. "I grew up in Rypin, in north central Poland, but I was not like the other boys there. I looked the same and dressed the same, but was not the same. Nobody knew how I felt. Nobody could see how I felt. I had secret desires, forbidden urges – strong sexual drives that I prayed no one would ever discover. I felt unique, worse than unique. A freak. The only one of my kind on earth. How was I to make my parents, sisters and friends happy? They expected so much of me that I could not deliver. I lived in a 19th-century shtetl but I desired other men. Yet another man could never give me a home and children. It was hell on

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earth." Yankl's face freezes as he relives the memory. He lifts a hand to his face, covering his eyes, as if in mourning for his own life.

My heart swells with compassion. What can I say to comfort this man? Can I explain that things will change a century and a half in the future? That the civilized world finally realizes what we both always knew: that 'choice' in our sexual orientation is not an option? Would that even be comforting? Perhaps just offering an empathetic ear might help.

"Please, Yankl, tell me about it. Tell me how you survived," I say.

"I lived a nightmare," Yankl replies. "It started in the local *yeshiva*, the seminary for Jewish boys." Yankl casts his mind back to those days of study, when he denied reality. He thought he was sick, and that like many sicknesses, it would just go away. In every other way, he functioned normally, but occasionally he still dared to hope that somehow, someone could feel as he did. As his teen years slipped by, he felt increasingly isolated. It seemed there was nobody with whom to share his feelings, nobody to whom he could speak openly.

Chapter 1

The hum of the students in the study hall wafted to the ceiling, the sound combining with the musty smell of old books and the slightly acrid aroma of young male bodies. The study hall or *yeshiva* was the place where nearly all the young men of Rypin spent most of their waking hours. Weak light filtered into the large room from windows set high in the walls. Oil lamps shed light on the Talmudic texts studied by the students, and all the young men of the village were there because nobody would have thought of going anywhere else. Some of the young men took time off in the afternoons to learn their father's trade, but all educational and social contact was centered around the study hall.

The young men studied in couples, each partner known as a *chevrusa*. They read passages from the Talmud, discussed them, cited different sources, and even tried to draw conclusions on how to lead their own lives from the words on the page; and everything was recited in the peculiar sing-song typical of religious study.

Yankl's *chevrusa* was Eliyohu. The two were the same age, 18, and had grown up together although they lived at opposite ends of the small town. Together, they had attended the *cheder*, the Jewish school for children. Later, aged thirteen, they had marked their *bar mitzvah*, the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, in the same year, chanting the Torah portion of the week before the congregation; and then they had graduated to the *yeshiva* where they became *chevrusas*.

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As Eliyohu grew, he became more attractive. Unlike most of his peers, his hair was a sea of blonde waves, spilling over his forehead. He had green eyes and an aquiline nose topping full lips that curled upward into a constant smile. His face was covered in a light blonde down that would soon develop into a full beard. Every day, Yankl looked forward to seeing him with far more enthusiasm than he had for study. He watched him, swaying gently as he intoned the sacred text of the Talmud.

“Rav Shimon says...” Eliyohu chanted. Yankl tried to concentrate. The text was something about a partnership between vintners. “Rabbah said...” Eliyohu continued. Yankl’s mind drifted. How he would like to hold that head in his hands, kiss the forehead, the eyes, the nose and the lips! Walk hand in hand through the nearby forest.

“Yankl... Yankl!” Eliyohu was calling him. “What are you thinking about?”

Yankl jumped out of his daydream. “Nothing, nothing. I was miles away. Where were we?”

Eliyohu reached over the desk and turned Yankl’s volume of the Talmud toward him, searching for the place. The print was so small that he had to put his finger on it for Yankl to see where they were. He returned Yankl’s book to him, his finger still pointing to the relevant text. Yankl took the book and used his own finger to mark the place. Their hands touched. Yankl looked up; Eliyohu quickly withdrew his hand and turned away. He, too, had been aware of the moment when their fingers touched. But for him, touching another man was permissible only in terms of Chassidic dancing in the synagogue or at a wedding. Had he mistaken the feeling? Perhaps. Study was the only answer. He returned to chanting the text, his voice slightly too loud, his swaying slightly too energetic. “Rav Shimon says...”

Yankl noticed the change. There was no hope. Loneliness engulfed him as he took over reading aloud. His eyes absorbed the Aramaic text and his voice spoke the words. But there was no meaning to them. No sense. He read by rote, seeing himself

in his mind's eye flying upward and backward, away from Eliyohu into blackness, while Eliyohu continued to immerse himself in the abstruse dictates of the Talmud.

The day of study drew to a close with the fading light. The young men gathered for the afternoon and evening prayers. As he stood with the others, Yankl looked around. Was he completely unique? Did anyone else in the entire world feel as he felt? Where were they, people like him? Did they exist? How to find them? Would they dare? Would he dare? What to do?

Yankl's eyes returned to his prayer book, the *siddur*. The *sh'moneh esray*, the silent prayer, recited standing, had begun. Yankl intoned the verses quietly, his mumbled words joining those of the young congregants, rising toward the ceiling. He reached the prayer for the healing of the sick. As always, he changed the words...

"*Ribonnoh shel olam*, master of the universe," he whispered, "make me well. Take away this curse that you have cast upon me. Why did you not make me blind, or deaf or dumb? People understand that. But this, they cannot. Give me, I beg of You, a desire for women. Answer my prayer, not for my sake, but the sake of my dear parents who have such high hopes for me. Grant me a wife and children to continue the name of our esteemed family. And give me peace of mind."

He had to speak to someone about this. Perhaps Eliyohu. Yes, given the right circumstances, Eliyohu. Yankl could talk to him about it.

Yankl walked home, passed the humble wooden dwellings of the shtetl, smoke curling skyward from the stoves cooking the evening meal. He considered his predicament. Isolation was his major problem. Perhaps God would help him change and learn to desire a woman. Impossible to confront his parents with such a situation. If he dared to do so, they would be in despair, seeing their family suffering instant shame, being ostracized and even cast out. Indeed, Yankl felt that, to them,

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the family mattered more than he did as their oldest and their only son. Impossible, impossible, impossible.

Yet not everything was negative. Yankl possessed one gift that enabled him to escape his oppressive situation: music. When Yankl was only six years old his father, his *Tatteh*, had brought home a violin for him. A wandering musician, an elderly man, had fallen sick in Rypin, and following a brief illness, had passed away. Having shown the stranger some kindness in his last days, Mendl Bradawka, Yankl's father had inherited the violin.

At first, the instrument was almost as big as the child, but Yankl struggled and persevered. He soon discovered and exploited his innate talent for music. With the help of the occasional traveling violinist who showed him some of the more intricate fingering techniques, he had become an accomplished performer. As with all other things, music, too, was set in a Jewish context. Jewish celebratory music was his specialty. At bar mitzvah parties and weddings, Yankl's playing was a favorite, accompanied by men of his father's age on the clarinet and the *tsimbl* or dulcimer. He was even paid for his playing, giving half to his parents, and keeping half for himself. Yankl poured all his frustrated passion into his music, closing his eyes and imagining himself accompanying a handsome young singer, male of course.

Yankl's violin became his best friend. He talked to it, polished it and communicated with it, and he could make it communicate back to him. Yankl could make his violin laugh, cry, complain and beg for more. It was a human organism to him as well as his greatest comfort in his social isolation.

He delighted in taking his instrument into the woods and performing for the trees and birds, an audience that was never dissatisfied. This became a habit every Friday afternoon, when yeshiva classes ended early in preparation for the Sabbath.

On arriving home one Wednesday evening, he greeted his parents, his *Tatteh* and his *Mommeh*. His two younger sisters, Esther and Rivka, also ran up to him as he came through the

door. He was their hero. The girls had been born many years after him although their mother, Leah Bradawka, in common with many other women at that time, had given birth to two baby boys after Yankl. One had been stillborn, the other passed away shortly after his birth. Esther, the older of the two surviving girls, was six and Rivka, four. Each grasped one of Yankl's legs so that, as he strode into the room, they were lifted with each step he took, to their squealing delight.

The fragility of life made their children even more precious to Leah and Mendl Bradawka. They contemplated the young ones' playfulness with a tenderness and pleasure untainted by any fear of a possible threat to the security of their home.

"Yankl," said Tattch, "This coming *shabbes* we'll have guests." Shabbes, the Sabbath, was the hallowed seventh day of the week, the day of rest, its strict observance being the fourth of the Ten Commandments. He continued, "My old chevrusa's son and his family are coming to stay with us on their way to Warsaw. You'll like them. They're a pleasant young couple just slightly older than you, and they have a little girl and a baby boy. They're on their way to a wedding in Warsaw."

"You should only be so happy, Yankl," Yankl's Mommeh added.

"I have plenty of time, Mommeh," Yankl responded, picturing with dread the unhappy day of his marriage.

"Just make sure you don't end up like my uncle, Aaron," she said. Aaron was Yankl's great uncle who had never married. He had left home in his twenties and emigrated to America where he made a comfortable living as a dealer in dry goods. However, he lived alone in New York.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be alright."

Following the evening meal, Yankl went to his room to practice his violin. His nimble fingers and skilful bow danced over the strings, making them sing. Yankl based the melody on a Sabbath table song, *Yoh ribbon olom*, God of the world, but he

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improvised, taking the tune from minor mode to major and adding musical ornaments of his own. The notes swept upward and dove downward as the boy put all his passion and prayer into the music. Downstairs, his mother sighed.

“He plays with such feeling,” said Mommeh. “It seems with abnormal feeling. I can almost sense something’s wrong.”

Tatteh grunted. “Ach, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“A mother knows, Tatteh.” The whole family addressed him by this name. “Something’s not right. You’ll see.”

Chapter 2

Friday was a special day in the shtetl. As the men hurried to complete their work tasks before the onset of the holy day, the women scrambled to prepare the delicacies few of them could afford during the week. Some had already prepared the main dish, *cholent* a stew of beef, beans, egg and dumpling, carried to the baker on Friday afternoon, before the start of the Sabbath, cooked overnight in his oven, and eaten at lunchtime on the Sabbath day. Others, less well off, prepared a simple roast chicken and soup for the Friday night meal, the chicken leftovers being served cold at lunchtime the next day. Yankl's tatteh was the kosher butcher. From early morning until midday on Friday, he supplied the housewives of Rypin with chicken, tongue and beef, all sold specially for the shabbes meals.

Mommeh was a wonderful cook and baker. Her chicken soup with its hint of dill that made it uniquely delicious and her *knaidlech*, her matzah balls, were made with love. And the desserts – flans, pies, cakes – were something her entire family anticipated eagerly, from Sunday morning till Friday sundown.

As the summer sun lowered in the sky, Yankl hurried home from the study hall. He loved Fridays. If the weather was good, he would take his violin into the woods in the afternoon for his weekly performance in the midst of nature, God's creation. Then, on returning home, he would have his weekly bath in a tin tub in the kitchen, filled with heated water from the well. From there, he proceeded to the *mikve*, the ritual bath,

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where he immersed himself in the water in order to be ritually pure for the holy Sabbath.

This Friday, as he entered the house, he inhaled the mouth-watering aromas of the Sabbath meal, including the sweet smell of the *challahs*, the braided egg loaves that were part of the Sabbath meal ritual, and roast chicken with potatoes and vegetables, the typical menu for Friday evening.

Waiting to meet Yankl were the weekend guests. Avrum, the young husband, was in his late twenties, a handsome, strapping man with dark hair who worked as a woodsman. His wife, Eva, was on the short side and quite dumpy. She carried their two-month-old child in her arms, while their other little daughter clung to her father's hand.

"Yankl, this is Avrum, my old chevrusa's son," said Tatteh.

Avrum clasped Yankl's hand firmly.

"And this is his wife, Eva."

"I told him we should have left earlier," said Eva to nobody in particular, "but no, he had to deliver a load of wood at the last possible moment. He had to drive our trap here as if the devil himself were chasing us. I thought we'd never arrive in one piece," she complained. Eva practically ignored her introduction to Yankl. Clearly, she was not a woman to be trifled with.

Sunset was approaching. The three men left the house for the *shul*, the synagogue, where the service was held to welcome the Sabbath. The shul was the grandest building in the village, located adjacent to the study hall and towering over it. It was the only stone building in the village, its façade supported by two round columns. Inside, the cornices were decorated with painted symbols of the Jewish religion, including a *mezuzah*, the ornamental casing containing a holy text placed on doorposts; a *menora*, the six-branched candelabra reminiscent of Temple times in Jerusalem; and the palm branch with its myrtle and willow leaves and the *esrog*, a citron, the four species used symbolically at the festival of

Tabernacles. The Holy Ark containing the Torah scrolls was made of beautiful carved oak enhanced with a dark stain. Topping the ark was an artistic representation of the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. The men's section was on the ground floor while the women, who attended only on shabbes morning, and then not every shabbes morning, had their own section in the upstairs balcony, hidden from the men by a lace curtain so as not to distract them.

Yankl found the arrangement ideal. He had no interest in looking at the women, but he could survey the men on his level at his leisure, imagining that the better-looking ones were not even married.

His father sat between him and Avrum. The three men sang the melodies of the Sabbath prayers with gusto, giving thanks for coming to the end of a successful work week. At the close of the service, the men greeted each other with the traditional *Gut shabbes* before walking home to their respective families for the meal of the week.

The home ritual for the Sabbath eve proceeded as usual. The men sang *Sholom Aleichem*, a traditional melody sung on arriving home after shul on Friday evening, and as legend has it, accompanied by angels. Tatteh and Mommeh then both blessed their children, placing their hands on the head of each in turn, in order of age. Tatteh reached up to put his hands on Yankl's head. "May God make you like Ephraim and Mannaseh. May the Lord bless you and watch over you. May the Lord shine His face upon you and show you favor. May the Lord be kindly disposed toward you and grant you peace." For the girls, the parents each said: "May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah," ending the blessing with the same words as those for Yankl. This was followed by the singing of *Ayshes chayil*, a tribute to the wife, mother and homemaker of the family.

Next came the blessing chanted over the wine at the start of the meal. Finally, after everyone had washed their hands, Mendl Bradawka, as head of the family, blessed God for

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providing them with bread, the two sweet egg challahs. After he had distributed a piece of the bread sprinkled with salt to everyone present, the meal itself began.

Between courses, the men sang table songs in honor of the Sabbath. Avrum had a rich baritone voice that melded well with those of Yankl and his father. They harmonized as they sang the familiar tunes, taking pleasure in their own music-making. Eva drummed her fingers on the table in accompaniment. By religious convention, she was forbidden to join the men in song for fear that the men might become sexually distracted by the voice of a woman. However, quite obviously this was a situation that frustrated her, and as the men began the fourth table song, she began to hum along tunelessly. Yankl exchanged glances with his frowning father, but Avrum seemed oblivious to his wife's breach of etiquette. Worse was yet to come.

Following dessert, Tattah asked Yankl to lead the grace after meals. Yankl's sweet voice began the opening anthem, *Shir hama'alos*, joined by the men. Mommeh sat silent while Eva, taking advantage of a situation where nobody had taken the initiative to hush her, hummed more loudly. But singing in unison was something quite beyond her capacities. The sound emanating from her throat was raucous and, to varying degrees, out of tune.

Nothing could have had a more disastrous effect on Yankl who was leading the prayer. Somebody singing out of tune without being aware of it provoked an uncontrollable desire in him to laugh. And this was a woman's voice, a phenomenon with which he was totally unfamiliar. As he intoned the introductory verses for the men alone, he could feel the panic rising. If Eva continued to sing as the grace continued, he knew that he would be unable to control himself. His father shot him a warning glance across the table and slowly shook his head, knowing what might happen.

As the singing continued, Eva's humming seemed to grow louder. She scratched her head, slightly tilting her *shaytel*, the

wig worn by married women out of modesty. She looked and sounded quite ridiculous. Yankl tried to look away. He thought of his own personal tragedy. It did not help. He thought of his poor *Booba*, his father's mother, who had died the year before, and with whom he had felt so close. That did not help either. He thought of death but not even that helped. As he led the prayers, he felt his cheekbones freeze, his eyes ached, his chest heaved.

He stopped singing, stifling a giggle. The blood rushed from the soles of his feet to the roots of his hair like an accelerated sunrise. His hand went to his mouth. The company fell silent. "Excuse me," he muttered as he jumped up from the table and ran through the house and into the small backyard. He collapsed on a bench in a paroxysm of laughter, holding his sides, totally helpless. He felt so ashamed as his hysteria brought him to tears, but not even that could stop his peals of laughter. One or two neighbors came out of their houses to investigate the cause of the uncontrolled amusement, only to hear Yankl gasp, between the gales of merriment, "It's alright. I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Back in the dining room, his father took over leading the grace after meals, apologizing for his son's rude behavior. He, his family and the guests concluded the prayer and the women rose from the table to clear away what was left of the meal. Tatteh and Avrum remained at the table, each with a glass of lemon tea.

"Does this happen often?" asked Avrum. "Would you like me to go and talk to him?"

"Please do," responded Tatteh. "Perhaps you can drive some sense into his head. Sometimes he can be so immature. See what you can do, and I thank you."

Avrum left Mendl pensive at the table and walked through the house and into the backyard. The full moon shone on Yankl who, by then, had recovered his composure. The harmonies of neighboring families singing table songs in honor of the Sabbath filled the air.

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"I'm sorry, Avrum," Yankl said. "There are times when I completely lose control and things get out of hand. I can't help it."

Avrum sat on the bench next to Yankl. "I have a wonderful wife, Yankl, but unfortunately, she doesn't realize the effect her singing can have on people. And it's not an effect that makes me either proud or envious." He smiled. Yankl noticed the whiteness of his teeth. "Come, let's take a walk together. You can tell me a little about yourself and you'll feel better."

They stood and walked to a gate in the fence at the back of the yard leading to an alley that ran between the houses. Avrum and Yankl went into the alley, walking slowly, their shadows preceding them in the moonlight. They made small talk, Avrum telling Yankl about his work, cutting wood, making planks and even doing a little carpentry. Yankl told Avrum about his life in the yeshiva, and his passion for music and the violin.

"I sometimes play music at weddings," he said. "Whose wedding are you going to in Warsaw?"

"It's my first cousin's, on my father's side. There's nothing quite like our weddings, as you know Yankl. And I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

There was a silence. Suddenly, Yankl blurted out: "I don't ever want to get married. Marriage is not for everyone."

"But you must, Yankl. Everyone marries and everyone expects it of you. A handsome young man like you. Any girl would be honored."

Yankl did not respond. "What shall I do?" he mumbled, almost to himself.

"Listen, Yankl," Avrum said. "With your great future in music and your good looks, you'll see. Everything will work out."

Yankl felt the firm grip of the older man's arm around his shoulders. It seemed to him as if a flash of lightning passed between Avrum's hand and his own arm. "I'm not so sure. I

wish I could find someone who understands me," he said. "It's difficult to find someone to talk to."

The two men were approaching a large tree. The trunk emerged from a backyard, but the leafy branches overhung the alley, casting a deep shadow. Avrum stopped. He turned Yankl to face him and took his face between his hands. "You're a fine boy, Yankl, and you'll make a fine man," he whispered, and his lips gently brushed the tip of Yankl's nose. Yankl's hands went haltingly to Avrum's arms and held them. Avrum took Yankl in his arms and gently drew their bodies together. Yankl felt the hardness of his father's guest against his own rising excitement.

"It's alright," said Avrum in Yankl's ear. "It's alright to feel this way." His hand dropped to Yankl's aroused member. Yankl was in a dreamlike state. He heard a loud hissing in his head like a snake poised to strike, but he knew he could not draw back now. The two men exposed themselves, and gripping each other in a strong embrace, they quickly erupted in a violent ejaculation. Yankl reeled backward from the effect of the physical release and all his pent up emotion. Avrum put his arm around him to steady him. "Shh," he whispered. "Everything is as it should be..."

It took Yankl a few minutes to collect himself. As he adjusted his clothing, he had a flashback to the weeks before his bar mitzvah, when Tattah had explained the facts of life to him. His father had been so matter-of-fact about it. But what Yankl remembered most was his father's emphasis on the sanctity of sex within marriage. The holiness of the act. So was this what he wanted? Sex with a married man in a back alley? With a man bound by holy matrimony to his wife?

He turned to face Avrum. "But how can you make love with me and love your wife?" he asked, naively.

Avrum pondered the question. "Well," he said hesitantly, "I do love my wife."

Yankl felt hot tears stinging his eyes. He felt betrayed, as isolated as ever. Yet what did he expect? What right had he to

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expect anything? This was to be his destiny. Furtive sex, condemned by the Torah as a forbidden act, 'an abomination'. It was all so clear and so completely unfair. To have been given everything in life – loving parents, a comfortable home, friends, family, music, a secure future – and ultimately to have nothing. He had no more to say to Avrum, but pride prevented him from giving way to the tears of frustration and anger that brimmed up in his eyes.

They walked back slowly to the house, each returning to his own world. When they arrived, the house was silent, everyone having retired for the night.

"Go to bed, Yankl," said Avrum. "And let's forget about this."

Once in his room, Yankl lay on his bed, looking at the waning moon through the window. There was nothing and nobody to look forward to. But, at least, he knew the desires he felt were not only his own.

Over shabbes, Yankl had no opportunity to speak with Avrum alone. Indeed, Avrum seemed to avoid him, as if he were ashamed of what had occurred between them. Yankl observed Avrum at the shabbes lunchtime meal, passing dishes to Eva, his wife, with great solicitousness, almost fawning over her, as if to prove to Yankl that their nighttime encounter had been no more than a passing fancy and meant absolutely nothing. Yankl felt disgusted. His conversation with Avrum had obviously been Avrum's ploy to obtain no more than his own physical release.

Nevertheless, on reflection as he rested later in the day, Yankl realized that the incident with Avrum was entirely natural for him. It was what he had yearned for ever since puberty. He could no more think of it as a sin, an 'abomination', than the act of eating or any other bodily function. The thought of having relations with a woman, on the other hand, seemed as unnatural to him as doing so with a household pet. Yet he felt no hostility toward women on a day-to-day basis, not that he had any connection with them apart

from his Mommeh and his sisters. In the shtetl, even social contact with members of the opposite sex was forbidden outside marriage. Yankl considered the prohibition quite artificial: half of the human race was beyond his range of experience. What an odd, even unnatural situation!

Avrum and his family left on the Sunday. After thanking the Bradawkas for their hospitality, Avrum turned to Yankl. "I look forward to dancing at your wedding, Yankl," was his final comment. It took all Yankl's effort to prevent himself from sneering.

"Did you ever see Avrum again?" I interjected.

"No, nor did I want to. I felt used by him. Abused by him. The experience also made me realize that attraction to one or the other sex sometimes comes in shades of grey. While I never felt any physical desire for women, Avrum was clearly capable of being aroused by both women and men. It is something I cannot understand."

"And I fail to understand it, too. But it's a fact of life that I accept, although I don't believe it happens often. And it can be the cause of greater pain to others, as you yourself discovered."

"I only hope that Eva never learned of that particular aspect of her husband's character. It would have destroyed her," said Yankl.

Chapter 3

Having had his first physical experience with a man, Yankl felt trapped. He needed not only physical relief, but an emotional outlet. His daily routine became oppressive and he felt that he was inevitably destined for tragedy. Once again, the urge arose in him to confide in someone, to share his pain. And Eliyohu was the obvious choice.

One Friday, when the study hall closed at noon in preparation for shabbes, Yankl steeled himself to speak to Eliyohu.

“Could we, perhaps, take a walk and talk after our study session? I have something I want to discuss with you.” Eliyohu nodded his consent.

The morning seemed unnaturally long to Yankl. He tried to concentrate on reading from the convoluted text that had been assigned, his mind constantly wandering to what he would say to Eliyohu. Could he trust him? How would he react? Would he just listen, or would he be disgusted? Finally, the studying came to end. The students greeted each other with *Gut shabbes* and, at leisure, wandered off to their homes.

Eliyohu and Yankl walked to the edge of the shtetl and sat on a low wall enclosing a yard. Inside, on the patch of grass, some young children, freed from their own heavy study schedule, were finally able to give vent to their childish impulses by playing a game of tag.

“What do you want to talk about, Yankl?” asked Eliyohu.

Yankl was silent for a few moments. “Give me a minute. This is not easy for me.” He took a deep breath. “Eliyohu, what

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I have to say to you must remain between us. I want you to take my hand and swear to me that it will never go further."

Eliyohu looked into the distance. "Are you sure you want to talk to me about this?"

"Yes," said Yankl. "I really need to talk to someone and you're the only person I can think of. So, please give me your hand... and your promise."

Almost reluctantly, with a feeling of foreboding, Eliyohu held out his hand, which Yankl seized and gripped. "Thank you," he said. "You don't know how much this means to me."

"Well?" said Eliyohu, as Yankl paused once again.

"Do you have feelings for women, Eliyohu?"

"Yes, of course I do. In fact, next week, my Tattah has arranged for me to meet a girl who will probably become my wife. She comes from a good family, and I'm told she's not bad looking."

"Is that what you want?"

"Of course. What else would I want?" said Eliyohu, almost brusquely.

"Well," Yankl took a deep breath, "It's not what I want for myself." Eliyohu looked startled.

"But everyone wants to get married and have a family. It's only natural."

"Yes," Yankl hesitated, "but it's not natural for me."

"What do you mean?" asked Eliyohu, as his thoughts tried to avoid what he expected would come.

"I'm not attracted to women, physically I mean."

"Oh," said Eliyohu. "Then what?"

"I can't help it, but I have feelings for men," said Yankl.

Eliyohu stood up. "You can't. You mustn't. It's a sin. It's an abomination. It says so in the Torah."

"But I do," Yankl protested. "It's not something I chose. It's not something I would choose. It's just the way I am. What can I do?" All the despair Yankl had felt in the past suddenly surfaced as he covered his face with his hands and rocked

backward and forward as he did in the study hall, but now out of hopelessness. "What can I do?" he repeated.

"I don't know," said Eliyohu. "Change. Try and force yourself to like a woman. To love a woman and have children. Otherwise what will become of you? You will end up alone, with nobody to take care of you in your old age. No children, no grandchildren. People will avoid you. Yankl, you must try and change," pleaded Eliyohu.

"Could *you* change, Eliyohu? Yes, you. What if the world were different. What if men married men? Could you force yourself to marry a man?"

"But it isn't and I couldn't," said Eliyohu. "This is the way things are and you must adapt to them."

"I can't," said Yankl with a sense of finality. "I just want to be what I am."

"Yankl, you are my friend. But a Jew cannot stand by and let another Jew harm himself. For your own good, for the sake of your future happiness, I beg of you, try and change."

"Eliyohu, if I marry, I will cause only unhappiness to my wife and family. I cannot lie with a woman."

"Then I'm sorry for you," said Eliyohu, turning away. "Look, I promised I'd keep your secret, and I will. But I cannot approve of you with a clear conscience. This is the way of the world, and if things are not as they should be, it is our job to put them right – *tikkun olam*. Try to understand."

Yankl felt he was being patronized. For how long had he himself tried to understand? Nothing made any sense. This is the way God had created him, and although he would have given anything to change, he could not. This was the way of *his* world.

With resignation, he said: "Eliyohu, I do understand. Thank you for listening to me. I'm at least happy that someone knows how I feel, even if you don't sympathize. I am happy that you are going to get married, and I will share your happiness. But perhaps you should forget this conversation. I will deal with my situation as best I can, with God's help. I'm

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going home now, and I wish you a *Gut shabbes*." He stood up. Their conversation had been useless.

They shook hands. Yankl's conversation with Eliyohu would remain as secret as the incident with Avrum. Both had been fruitless episodes, with no past and no future. Yankl walked through the village to his parents' house, where he took his violin and went back out into the woods. As his bow slid over the strings, he felt his familiar sense of isolation smother him like an evil cloud. Then, in spite of his best efforts, the tears started coursing down his cheeks.

A few weeks later, Eliyohu was married. As usual, the ceremony was simple and beautiful. Eliyohu looked very handsome under the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy. For the ceremony, he donned a white smock, a *kittel*, which he wore over black pants and a white shirt, a sign of spiritual purity. His bride walked slowly down the aisle in the synagogue on her father's arm. She was dressed in a straight-cut white dress, her head concealed under a white veil, and a bouquet of daisies in her hands. Leaving her father standing under the *chuppah*, she walked around her groom seven times, as is the custom. A specially gifted cantor had been brought to Rypin from Warsaw for the occasion, and his rich melodious baritone added color to the ceremony. As the bride's mother lifted the veil for her daughter to drink wine from the silver wine cup, then shared by her groom, Yankl was surprised to see how plain the bride was. Such a handsome groom, he thought, with such an ordinary-looking bride. She must have a beautiful soul, he thought, smiling to himself. The ceremony ended with Eliyohu crushing a glass underfoot. This part of the ceremony is a sign of mourning for the destruction of the two holy Temples in Jerusalem. No joy can be complete in Judaism without the rebuilding of the Temple. As the goblet shattered, all present shouted "*Mazel tov!*" for good luck.

The wedding party and guests then adjourned to the study hall for the festivities. It had been cleared of the usual desks and chairs and converted for the occasion into a reception hall.

Sumptuous food was laid out on the tables, prepared by the local housewives. The men and women sat in different sections, separated by a thick curtain. Only the musical group, of which Yankl was a member, was visible to both men and women and, after the meal, which was followed by grace, men and women danced in segregated sections of the room to the traditional wedding music. Men never danced with the women; even here, there was very little social contact between the two sexes.

Yankl played his violin with gusto. He tried to imagine his own wedding. How romantic it would be! And then he imagined his wedding night. Instinctively, he tried to blot out the thought, running the bow over the strings with even more zeal.

Once married, Eliyohu could no longer be Yankl's chevrusa. First, he had to earn a living to support his new wife and the children that were bound to come, so he apprenticed with his father part-time, learning the trade of shoemaker. And then, when he attended the study hall, he sat in the *kollel* section, a room set aside for students who were married. Inevitably, he and Yankl drifted apart.

"And did you miss him?" I asked. "I have always found it so difficult to let a relationship go, especially when there is such a strongly shared past."

Yankl answered: "When Eliyohu was so inflexible with me, I immediately felt a distance grow between us. Our past meant nothing to him. He could never accept me for what I was, for my true nature. I would always have been obliged to play a part when I was with him. His marriage just sealed the end to our friendship. Otherwise, it would have drifted away slowly. In a way I was relieved not to have to deal with him every day and pretend that everything was as it should be."

"Thank God, attitudes where I live have changed. I no longer have to hide and be ashamed of the way I feel."

"And where do you live?"

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"I live in Canada. It's the country north of the United States of America, almost as big as Russia and just as cold. But if I were to tell my best friend what you told Eliyohu, and if he were an educated person, he would probably shrug his shoulders and say 'So what!'"

"But what does that mean?" asked Yankl.

"It means that today, in Canada, people who love others of the same sex are generally not treated as outcasts or sick. In fact, they can actually marry."

"Marry?" Yankl was astonished.

"Yes, marry. Two men or two women can marry."

Yankl laughed. "But that's absurd! How can two men or two women marry?"

"It's not so absurd. You, yourself, when you made your confession to Eliyohu, asked 'What if men married men?' Well, here they can. The ceremony is usually non-religious, although some clergy, mainly non-Jewish do officiate at ceremonies for gentiles. The marriage is what we call a civil marriage, one with all the legal rights as in a contract, but without any religious content."

"So people like you and me are like everyone else?"

"Yes, in the eyes of the law. But of course, it will take time for everyone to accept this. They have to overcome centuries of prejudice inherited from past generations. But once they see that our values are not so different from theirs, they'll understand."

"It's something I have difficulty in understanding, too," said Yankl.

"How could it be otherwise?" I said.

Chapter 4

Shmulik Belman was round. Everything about him was round, from his face to his body to his arms and legs. At rest, even his little mouth was round although he often stretched his lips in a smile or gave one of his frequent little giggles, revealing his white teeth, also round. Shmulik had an engaging character, always wishing to be of service to others.

Perhaps it was because he suffered from a feeling of inferiority that he sought general approval, which he won easily, although few of the yeshiva boys sought him out either as a chevrusa or as a confidant. They considered him, with his almost constant smile, to be slightly simple, and his knowledge of Talmud was far from profound. His arguments on the texts were always facile and unsupported by relevant sources.

Rabbi Levy, the head of the yeshiva, assigned Shmulik the task of setting out the volumes on the study tables and putting them back on the bookshelves when the yeshiva boys had finished with them at the end of the day. For this, Shmulik received a small stipend. He came from one of the poorer families in Rypin and the rabbi wished to give his family some support in his own small way. Shmulik's father, Dov Belman, was a carter, delivering goods, foodstuffs and materials to the general store in the shtetl, and transporting people to nearby villages where they could pick up the stage to travel farther afield.

Dov Belman and his wife, Tzeitel, had four daughters as well as Shmulik, their only son and the oldest child in the family. By some miracle, they had managed to find a match for

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him since he was neither physically attractive nor endowed with any skill that would render him capable of supporting a wife and family. Yet from the day when his betrothal had been announced in July to the approaching wedding day in August, Shmulik's smile had faded and was rarely seen on his usually jovial face.

One Tuesday morning in the dog days of early August, Shmulik was nowhere to be seen in the yeshiva. Another boy distributed the volumes of Talmud, everyone believing that Shmulik was unwell or that the humidity of the previous night had left him exhausted. The morning began as usual with the boys settling down to their day of study when a male passerby entered the study hall asking for the rabbi.

"Mrs. Belman is outside," he said to one of the boys. "She wants to speak to the rabbi urgently."

Rabbi Levy came to the large double doors at the entrance of the study hall. He saw Mrs. Belman, a short, stout woman, with an anxious look on her face.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Belman? How is Shmulik?" he asked.

"Rabbi Levy, is he not inside? I'm very worried. He didn't come home last night." Mrs. Belman had difficulty coping with life. With four young daughters, her husband and Shmulik to take care of and feed, and with little money to buy the household necessities, every day was a struggle to survive.

"You'd better come in," said the rabbi, not happy to have been distracted from his teaching duties. "Let's go into my study."

Mrs. Belman sat in the guest chair facing the rabbi across his wide desk. In her hand was a kerchief that she twisted ceaselessly in her anxiety.

"Where can he be?" she said. "He hasn't been himself in the last few weeks, moody, and snapping at the girls. Rabbi, I'm so worried. He should be so happy that we found a wife for him."

“Come, now, Mrs. Belman. Let’s not allow things to get out of proportion. Perhaps he was in a deep discussion with a friend and spent the night with his friend’s family.”

“Rabbi, you know that’s not my Shmulik. He gets along with all the boys but he has no close friendship with any of them.”

“But it is a possibility. Wait for me here. I’ll go into the study hall and ask if any of the students have seen him.”

The rabbi left Mrs. Belman in his study. She was visibly shaken at the thought of all the possibilities – an accident, perhaps an attack by anti-Semitic youth out for blood at the edge of the shtetl. Such things had been known to happen.

Rabbi Levy marched into the study hall, clapping his hands loudly to attract the boys’ attention. Their singsong as they studied died down as all the students looked at him expectantly.

“Has anyone seen Shmulik?” he shouted. The boys shook their heads and looked at each other. “Are you sure?” Silence.

The rabbi stood at the edge of the hall uncertain as to what to do. He could not ignore Mrs. Belman’s suspicions especially since he, too, had noticed the change in Shmulik’s demeanor, putting it down to nerves. He walked back to his study, the boys’ droning starting up again as they went back to their books.

“Mrs. Belman, no news,” he said. “What can I do?”

“We must look for him, and look for him now, rabbi. Perhaps he’s had an accident. He may have been attacked by wild animals in the woods or fallen somewhere and can’t move.”

Reluctantly, the rabbi agreed. A day of study might be lost, but a life could be saved. He marched back to the study hall.

“Gentlemen,” he said formally. “Shmulik may have had an accident or lost his way in the forest. So close your books now and we’ll go and look for him. Those of you to my left will go through the shtetl and ask whether anyone has seen him.

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Ask people in the street. Knock on every door. Those of you to my right will come with me and we will look for him in the forest.”

The students left their places and went outside. Mrs. Belman stood at the exit to the yeshiva, leaning against the doorpost. “Please, please find him, safe and sound,” she said almost to herself. She raised her hand to the *mezuzah* on the doorpost, that small ornate case containing a parchment with Judaism’s holiest prayer, and touched her fingers to her lips.

The woman’s obvious distress affected the boys and stirred their motivation. They all liked Shmulik in an impersonal way and would not have wanted him to come to any harm. The two groups set out in different directions, one to question the villagers, another to search the forest, frequently calling his name. Yankl joined the group searching in the woods.

The heat and humidity of the day added to the boys’ discomfort and anxiety. The group that remained in the shtetl asked everyone in the street if they had seen Shmulik. They knocked on doors, always receiving the same negative answer. The group in the forest fanned out, calling Shmulik’s name as they advanced deeper into the trees.

Yankl had a passing acquaintance with Shmulik. On one occasion, shortly after his betrothal, Shmulik had even asked to speak to him confidentially. For days, Shmulik had hovered near Yankl’s desk in the study hall, seeming to want to speak to him. Finally, Yankl had said to him: “Shmulik, can I help you with anything? Is there something you want?”

“No, no. There’s nothing. Nothing,” came the reply as Shmulik hurried away, placing the books he was carrying on the tables. It had taken days for Shmulik to raise the courage to even approach Yankl. Shmulik had never given much thought to his own sexuality until faced with the prospect of marriage. Then, as he envisaged the physical implications of wedlock, a sense of revulsion had overtaken him. He just could not do it.

He felt like a fox surrounded by yelping hounds. Perhaps talking about it would help.

Shmulik had no more than a feeling about Yankl and the aura of empathy that he exuded. But how could he broach such a delicate subject? Fear of rejection and ridicule gripped him. But fear of marriage tipped the balance in favor of speaking to Yankl. He had to do something, anything to face his dilemma.

A few days later, Yankl looked up from the text he was studying to find Shmulik standing in front of him.

"Yes. Yes, there was something. There is something I want to talk to you about," Shmulik blurted out, his face flushed.

"Well then, let's meet after *ma'ariv*, the evening prayer, and we can talk about it."

But at the arranged time, Yankl waited in vain. Shmulik's apprehension about Yankl's reaction had proved stronger than his dread at the thought of marriage. He made a hasty escape from the study hall after the evening prayer. When he failed to appear, Yankl, half suspecting that Shmulik had more in common with him than he cared to admit, did not pursue the matter, nor did he take the opportunity to do so in the next few days. He felt absolutely no rapport with Shmulik although, had Shmulik confided in him, Yankl would not have hesitated to listen to him and offer moral support.

As the boys wandered through the woods calling Shmulik's name from time to time, Yankl hoped and prayed that Shmulik had done nothing to harm himself. If, indeed, his *yetzer hora*, his evil inclination or, in this case, his sexual drive, was the same as Yankl's, Shmulik, with the looming prospect of marriage, may have seen no escape and decided on the ultimate solution.

Slowly the boys walked forward, calling and looking around for any sign of life. For an hour and a half they searched in vain. Then a shout went up.

"Over there." It was one of the boys on the extreme left of the line of searchers. "Up there," he cried again. "*Oy gevvalt!*"

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Everyone looked up. Hanging by a rope round his neck from the limb of a large tree, its trunk inclined, was Shmulik's lifeless body. The group gathered around the tree as Rabbi Levy hurried over.

"Does anyone have a knife?" he shouted. "We must cut him down." One of the boys always carried a pocket knife after having been attacked by a street gang, long ago. He climbed up the sloping tree trunk to the branch from which Shmulik had hanged himself, and as the rabbi held Shmulik's body, he severed the rope Shmulik had used as a noose. His body was a dead weight and Rabbi Levy asked the boys nearest him for help in lowering it to the ground.

They laid him in the undergrowth at the foot of the tree. Pinned to Shmulik's shirt was a note, visible to the rabbi and to all his former classmates gathered around.

It read:

Forgive me. Marriage would have been an even greater sin.

The older boys looked at each other. The note was somewhat of an enigma. How could marriage be a sin? Would it have been a sin for Shmulik in particular? And if marriage were a sin, what could possibly be the lesser sin mentioned in his note? Slowly the light dawned on them. Shmulik had been quite depressed of late instead of reveling in the joy of his forthcoming wedding. Perhaps he was not looking forward to it, even dreading it. They recalled his simple, almost silly smile. Recently, it had faded, then vanished. Perhaps he was not attracted to women at all and the lesser sin could have been an attraction to men. Could that have been his sin?

Meanwhile, the younger boys were staring at Shmulik's prone, motionless body, laid out on the grass. One or two of the younger boys who had barely reached the age of bar mitzvah started to cry. The rabbi quickly muttered the blessing

to be recited when faced with death: Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, the true Judge. He then took control.

"Help them. Comfort them," he said, addressing some of the older boys who put their arms around the shoulders of the youngsters in distress, still children at heart.

"Yankl, Eliyohu, Mendl and Sender, carry the boy back. But let me go ahead and prepare Mrs. Belman. And may the Holy One Blessed be He give us all strength."

Rabbi Levy hurried off as the four young men gently lifted the stiff corpse onto their shoulders to take it back to the shtetl. Yankl was consumed with guilt. Perhaps, had he taken the initiative with Shmulik, he could have helped to avert this tragedy. Life, the highest value in Judaism, had been destroyed, in itself a sin. Now the family could not even sit *shiva*, pass a week of mourning with visits from friends and family. As for Shmulik, his body would be buried at the edge of the cemetery, an outcast. Tears welled up in Yankl's eyes. This body, whose weight he was bearing, could so easily have been his own.

Never, he told himself, never can things get so bad that I will take my own life. Whatever fate lies ahead of me, I vow that I will live out my life. It is too precious a thing to surrender to the will of others. I will not let them do this terrible thing to me.

That night, the humid weather broke with a thunderous storm that prevented anyone in the shtetl from enjoying a restful sleep. Yankl drifted in and out of wakefulness, seeing Shmulik's smiling face before his eyes, and then his more recent look of despair.

Early the next morning, the humidity had cleared and a dank mist rose from the sodden earth toward a watery sun. Rabbi Levy and Shmulik's father followed four of the yeshiva boys, Yankl being one of them, bearing Shmulik's body on a wide plank. He was wrapped in his *tallis*, his prayer shawl, and covered with a sheet used as a shroud. They trudged through

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the cemetery, past the other graves to an empty space near the fence.

There, the grave having been dug overnight, Shmulik was buried in the presence of his father, the rabbi and the four boys, their number insufficient for a *minyán*, the quorum of men required for Dov Belman to recite the *Kaddish* for his deceased son, the mourner's prayer for the dead. Nevertheless, Rabbi Levy intoned the *El molleh rachamim*, God full of mercy, the community prayer for the occasion. As Dov Belman turned away from the grave, his eyes streaming with tears, he said in a low voice: "He was a good boy. A really good boy," the only eulogy that Shmulik, his only son, would be allowed.

For weeks following the tragedy, the boys and young men in the yeshiva still expected Shmulik to appear to distribute and collect their books, without hope. They missed his simple smile and his silly giggle and mourned him in their own way. As for Yankl, he finally came to terms with his own lack of response to Shmulik's shy approach. It had been Shmulik's decision to end his life and whatever advice Yankl may have given him might not have saved him. Yankl did not even know how he himself would have reacted, faced with a similar situation, one that he realized was a distinct possibility in the future.

"When I think of Shmulik, I remember how helpless I felt. I was unwilling to seek a solution to his problem, perhaps because I had a premonition that, one day, I would have to face exactly the same predicament."

"Yet," I said, "you were so aware of your own isolation. Don't you think that just by encouraging Shmulik to talk to you, you could have given him some comfort? A problem shared is so much easier to bear."

"Look," said Yankl, defensively, "we are all guilty of not acting as we should in some circumstances, either by doing something or not doing it. Of course, I feel guilty for not having responded to his

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approach. But I never thought for a moment that he would take his own life. I didn't think that he would be brave enough. But he was."