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The Wise Women of Chelm

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THE WISE WOMEN OF CHELM

By

Beth Amy Lurie

B.U.S. University of Maine, 1999

A THESIS

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
(in English)**

**The Graduate School
The University of Maine
December, 2002**

Advisory Committee:

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By Beth Amy Lurie

Thesis Advisor: Constance Hunting

**An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)
December, 2002**

My Creative Writing Thesis is a collection of short stories. This original collection, THE WISE WOMEN OF CHELM, reflects an older, oral and written tradition of folk tales known as THE WISE MEN OF CHELM. I grew up with these older tales and have been inspired by their humor all my life.

Many authors have added to the Chelm tradition, spanning centuries and including contemporary times. My tales occur in the late 1800's, and my twist on them is the focus on women. I like to describe them as mock-feminist since they involve women who, in their way, are often fighting for the privileges only men enjoy. However, the readers find out how difficult life can be when you have it all, and it is up to these readers to understand the true "wisdom" of these exceptional women.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All stories in this volume are my own original tales, with these recognitions:

"Mrs. Minsky and Mrs. Pinsky" is loosely based upon a joke I've heard my father tell all my life affectionately known as "Feldman and Friedman."

The concepts for "Salted Fish" and "Two Loaves of Bread" came from my son, Max Lurie.

The following stories were first published in the WINTER/SPRING 1999 issue of "Puckerbrush Review," Puckerbrush Press, Orono, Maine:

The Wise Women of Chelm

Little Grubba

Almond-Shaped Nuts

Katchka Goniff

Salted Fish

Serele the Meeskeit

Two Loaves of Bread

Mrs. Minsky and Mrs. Pinsky

A Trip to Lublin

Esther Reads the Torah

The Gontzeh Megillah

The story "Chanukah Candles in Chelm" was published in
The Waldo Independent, December, 2000.

Special Thanks always go to my father,
Paul Blasenheim,
for a lifetime full of delightful information and jokes.

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In the Village of Chelm

When angels were assigned to distribute souls among the world, a single soul from the sack of fools was meant to be dropped one upon each town. High above the Village of Chelm, the angel carrying the bag of fools got caught upon a mountain peak.

The sack was torn, and all such souls descended into Chelm.

Mish and Tish

In Bubbeh Rose's house hung two exotic Spanish oil portraits. One was a man, the other a woman. Both had straight dark hair and rounded eyes that looked at you no matter where you stood. For as long as her grandchildren could remember, the paintings were always known as "Mish and Tish."

"The girl is Mish, the boy is Tish," Little Fanny said.

"No, no, you got it backwards," claimed her brother Manny. "The BOY is Mish, the girl is TISH."

Every day, Fanny and Manny came to Bubbeh's house and squabbled over Mish and Tish. Every day, Bubbeh heard the cries and shrieks of arguing.

"The GIRL is Mish!"

"The BOY is Mish!"

After a while, Bubbeh Rose couldn't stand it anymore. She lay awake night after night trying hard to think of how the Wise King Solomon would resolve such a situation. Finally, one day, she had her solution. The children came by bright and early.

"*Shaina Bubeles*," she said. "You each want your favorite portrait to be Mish. Why must they be called 'Mish and Tish?' Tell me, what can stop us from naming them 'Mish and Mish?'"

Fanny looked at Manny. Manny looked at Fanny.

Manny smiled. Fanny smiled.

But suddenly a frown passed over Fanny's face.

Another frown crossed over Manny's face.

"Then we would have no Tish," Fanny said.

"Our Mish would HAVE to have a Tish," Manny agreed.

"The GIRL is Tish, the boy is MISH," Fanny said.

"No, no," Manny cried. The BOY is Tish, the GIRL is Mish."

So much for playing Solomon, thought Bubbeh Rose.

The Wise Women of Chelm

On the Friday afternoon that the stranger came walking through the town of Chelm, the women were busily preparing for *Shabbos*. They hurried along, bargaining and marketing for the evening meal, carrying heavy parcels while keeping their eyes on their scurrying children.

The stranger stopped as she approached the most crowded stand at the marketplace. "What are you all doing?" she asked. "Where are your husbands? Do they sit at home while you slave yourselves to buy their dinner?"

A communal gasp was heard among the kerchief-headed women. The stranger stood tall and strong with her dark, free-flowing hair and her thick, questioning eyebrows. Her form was slender and erect, proud and self-assured.

"Our husbands are hard at work," Esther said, "deciding on the plans to build our children's *shula*."

"I understand Chelm's *shula* has been in the planning stages for many years now," said the loose-haired stranger.

"It is true," said the youngest wife, Rachel. "As far as I remember, they have only SPOKEN of the *shula*."

There was a moment of silence, after which the stranger spoke up once again. "You women have been doing everything: cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing and caring for the children. And what do your husbands do in return? They sit and discuss, they plan and reorganize. Meanwhile, no *shula* is being built." A larger crowd of women formed around this stranger.

"What should we do?" asked Esther, an elder woman. The crowd inched in closer.

"For a start, you should not cook for the *Shabbos* meal tonight." The women shrieked and covered their mouths. "You should tell these men that until you have your *shula*, you will not cook, wash, sew, clean, nor lay yourselves open for bearing more children."

"But that is everything we do," pleaded Rachel. "And I have no children as yet."

"All the better for you," said the stranger.

"She is right," Esther said. "Not cooking for the men will make them build our *shula*."

"Or perhaps you women should build the *shula*. You are the real workers in this town."

Half the crowd walked away, shaking their heads. "Who should listen to a free-haired *meshugah* stranger?" one of them said, laughing. But half the crowd stayed another hour. When they finally dispersed, those who finished marketing reluctantly carried home their parcels. Some left empty-handed. At the hour before sundown, half the men of Chelm heard from their wives they were getting no meals until they built a *shula*. This sent them rushing to the sizable home of Gronam Ox, Chelm's oldest elder. The women fed themselves and their children, leaving no warming plates for their husbands.

The men returned from the home of Gronam Ox convinced they couldn't build a *shula* without food in their bellies. Their wives began cooking for them in the middle of the night, all except for Rachel Lutz.

Rachel had invited the free-thinking stranger, whose name was Rifka Bellin, into her home for *Shabbos*. The two women talked most of the night, even when Rachel's young husband, Grubba Lutz, returned very late with his stomach grumbling.

"Rachel," he growled. "How can I help build the *shula* without any food?"

Rachel looked across to Rifka who shrugged her shoulders. "The men always meet with the elders over such matters," Rachel said. "Why not let our wisest women also meet to find solutions?"

Rifka agreed. "Would Esther have such a meeting at her house?"

Rachel pictured Esther's home. It was big, but smaller than the home of Gronam Ox. However, women are smaller than men, she thought, so maybe it could work.

"Rachel!" Grubba's voice interrupted her imaginings. "I'm very hungry."

"I have to go to sleep after all this thinking," she said. Grubba glared at Rifka Bellin and followed his wife to bed.

Within a week, the women met regularly at the home of Esther Zatz, the richest woman in Chelm. Esther had inherited her fortune and the women treasured her strong opinions. Esther had a soft spot for Rachel, her greatest admirer, and was willing to hear what Rachel's houseguest came to say.

"Where I come from," Rifka slowly began, "women can do whatever the men do. We study and teach the Holy Books, dress as we like, take apprenticeships at interesting jobs and sometimes choose not to marry."

"Not marry?" several voices yelled at once.

"Not unless we want to," Rifka added.

The first meeting had to break at this point. Even Esther had nothing to say. The idea of a woman not wanting to marry was more than any of them could bear.

But still, they came to the meetings again and again.

"I can teach you to build your *shula*," Rifka offered. "The men are never going to do it, so who will join in?"

This was the shortest meeting. Esther watched in horror as the women filed out her door. Rachel and Rifka stayed to talk with her.

"They will come back," Esther said as her maidservant cleared away the *latkes* and sour cream. "They like it here."

"They like what they are hearing," Rifka said. "They need to think about it now."

Rachel giggled. "Thinking is new to us," she said.

But working was not as new to these women. Within a week, half the women of Chelm were taking Rifka's lessons on laying the foundation for the *shula*. They were soon planing wood, hammering, measuring, framing and setting windows. They worked well as a group, carrying heavy boards in pairs. More and more, the rest of the townswomen joined in the project, steadily accomplishing much by each day's end.

“My work here is done,” Rifka announced to the women one day. “Now yours must continue. If anyone should travel through Chelm, they will marvel at your magnificent woman-built *shula*, almost taller than the home of Gronam Ox.” And she left as suddenly as she had come.

When she left, the women were working almost every job only men used to do. Though with these changes, none would dare to give up marriage, stop bearing children or, if married, display comely hair.

In addition to this extra work, they constantly shop, prepare for holidays; and of course, still wash, sew, clean, cook and tend to all the children, crops and animals.

Only now the women often meet at the home of Esther Zatz to ponder questions and congratulate themselves on the splendid common sense they gained since Rifka Bellin came to Chelm.

Little Grubba

Ezra Lutz was born a chubby, hungry baby. Rachel nursed and nursed and nursed him morning, noon and night, and still he wanted more.

One night, Rachel nursed him all throughout a meeting of the women of Chelm at the home of Esther Zatz.

"Does he EVER stop?" Esther asked.

"No. And it is ALL MY FAULT," Rachel sighed.

"But he is *zofrig* and healthy," Esther said. "He must be getting enough."
Rachel frowned and shook her head.

"How is it your fault?" another woman asked.

"Remember the day Rifka Bellin came to Chelm?" Rachel switched the baby's mouth to the other side as his hands kept grabbing underneath her shawl. "I never cooked for Grubba that night. He came to bed hungry, taking ME instead of food. And that is how my Little Grubba, Ezra, came about."

"Aaah," said the group of women. It all made perfect sense.

Esther Reads the Torah

Harry Zatz, the husband of Esther, was a learned man. He had a great big study full of leather-bound books. Harry read his Torah day and night. Its corners were worn and the pages were beginning to fall out. Harry ordered new books whenever this happened -- he could well afford to.

One day, through the mail, Harry's new Yiddish Torah arrived along with a second book of identical size. The engraved titles of both these new, brown-leather books were barely visible. Harry placed the books on his special shelf, and took his older, Hebrew Torah. He hugged it close to his heart.

Two rooms away from Harry's study, Esther and the women of Chelm were meeting to devise a plan for women's education.

"We need to stretch our brains. We work like men, let us now THINK like men!"

"Books! Books are the key," said Ada Resnick, a most respected Elder, second only to Esther.

"But we never learned to read in Hebrew like the boys," said Ada's daughter Leah.

"Aah, but many books have been printed in Yiddish. Even the Torah."

The women rubbed their chins while very deep in thought.

"I have it!" Ada announced. "Why not begin where it all began? We should read our husbands' and fathers' Torahs, then discuss amongst ourselves!"

Esther jumped right in. "My Harry, he is VERY smart. He reads his Torah so much, his eyes bulge at night and he mumbles in his sleep."

"Oooh," said Leah. "He must STILL be thinking when he sleeps!"

And so, the women agreed to study the Torah. Later that night, Esther crept into Harry's study and reached for his brand-new, shiny leather, heavy book. It sat beside the one which looked the same. "THIS must be the Torah," Esther said, pulling down the first from the shelf. "Only the Torah would hold such a place of honor."

Esther settled herself down in her favorite feather-bedded guest room of her spacious house and began to read. She read and read and read. A bird chirped. Esther read some more. A rooster crowed and it was light outside. And still, Esther couldn't put her Torah down.

I had no idea, Esther thought, this man whose name I never heard before could be important to the Jews. He is not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. He is not Moses or even Aaron. This book does not seem like the Torah, but, I HAVE been wrong before. Maybe, just maybe, I could be wrong again.

So on and on she read.

Oh my, Esther said to herself. This book is too exciting. Why have the men in Chelm never mentioned such adventures, with windmills yet? And why does it not begin with Adam and Eve? Where is the garden? The timing seems somehow wrong.

Oh, it must be me, it must be me.

Esther read some more. What is this, she thought, a Spanish knight, with a broken helmet and a horse? He hardly seems JEWISH to me!

But, I could be wrong, I could be wrong.

And on and on she read.

The Torah According to Women

The women of Chelm held their first Torah *midrash* at the home of Esther Zatz. Esther quietly allowed the others to speak first.

"I knew these stories very well," Yetta bragged.

"I could recite them in my sleep," Rita gloated.

"You probably WROTE them," Rachel the admirer said to Esther.

At that, Esther had to speak. "I think the Torah must be losing something in the translation."

The womens' faces went blank.

"From the Hebrew to the Yiddish," she explained.

The blank faces slowly smiled.

"And how would YOU know, Esther? You have never understood a word of Hebrew," Rita said.

"And is that how you would like your girls to grow up, never knowing Hebrew?" Esther asked.

"She is right," said Rachel. "Our daughters must learn Hebrew."

"We came here to discuss the Torah, no?" Yetta said. "Let us discuss. Girls learning Hebrew, we can review at another meeting."

Yetta, from that point on, was considered very wise.

"Where would you like to begin?" Esther asked the group.

"Genesis, where else?" Yetta asked. "And I can give you TEN reasons why the Serpent and Eve were not to blame."

The women gasped. Esther scrambled through her first pages of Torah, not finding Adam, Eve, or the Serpent.

"TEN!" Rita cried. "Maybe two or three, but TEN."

"Yes, ten," Yetta insisted. "Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam."

"Oh come now, Yetta," Rachel argued, having found in herself some confidence as a reader of Torah. "How is Adam the one to blame?"

"YOU tell her, Esther!" Yetta cried. "YOU know."

"Adam," Esther said. "Adam was a man, no?"

"Aah," Rachel said nodding her head. "And women, when in doubt, can always blame the man!"

"Exactly why we all need husbands," Rita said.

And that was the *midrash* for the day.

Yeshiva Girls

At the very next meeting of the women of Chelm, the topic was girls learning Hebrew.

"Now we have had our own *midrashic* discussions. Do we wish our girls to grow beyond our knowledge? To grow wiser even than we?" Esther asked. The women agreed they did.

So the girls' yeshiva was neatly arranged in the upstairs room of the *shula* built by the women of Chelm. Five days a week, after secular classes, the girls were expected to work two hours more on their Hebrew, Jewish history, and cultural practices.

"Hebrew is harder than Yiddish," young Elkie complained.

"I like writing the little dots and dashes on the letters," said Elkie's best friend, Anna.

"You WOULD like it, Anna, you like to draw," said Deborah. "As for me, I like the history, especially when it comes to Deborah, the warrior judge."

"Yes, so you remind us every day," Elkie said. "But tell me, what good would becoming a warrior do you in the task of catching a husband?"

"It may help her to KEEP one," Anna said.

The yeshiva girls all laughed.

"In fact, Deborah the Judge was the wife of Lapidot," added Deborah.

The girls thought quietly for a moment.

"Perhaps," Anna said. "Perhaps it makes good sense to study more and understand these matters of which we speak."

The girls agreed.

Over the weeks, the girls reviewed and analyzed all that they were learning. So much so that their Hebrew teacher, Mrs. Beeber, brought the issue to the women of Chelm.

"The girls, they discuss Talmud and Torah so much, they sound like scholars to me."

“*Oy Gevalt*, they must not sound like scholars,” the women cried.

“It will scare potential husbands away,” Esther said. “This we simply cannot have.”

Mrs. Beeber scratched her head. “I must tell them ‘no more questions’ then?”

“And certainly no more heated arguing,” Esther added.

So the women went home well-satisfied with Esther and Mrs. Beeber’s solution.

The next day as the girls’ yeshiva met, Mrs. Beeber made her solemn announcement.

“There will be no more arguing in here, no more analyzing Talmud and Torah, and certainly no more constant questioning. This was decided by the elder women of Chelm, your mothers, grandmothers, aunts and neighbors. This is a final decision, and it is for your own good.”

The girls looked at each other and then down at their stark wooden desks.

“Open to page forty-four,” Mrs. Beeber ordered. “Deborah, read to me.”

Deborah read her Hebrew as well as any Bar Mitzvah boy. As did Anna, Elkie, Deborah, and all the girls.

“Very good,” said Mrs. Beeber. Next, she had them quietly practice their writing. She shook her head “no” every time a student raised a hand with a potential question.

As the girls were walking home, they remained quiet until they were sure to be out of Mrs. Beeber’s earshot.

“This is war,” Deborah claimed. “We can never let our mothers or teacher hear us speak this way.”

“They will not hear us now.”

And so, the *midrash* began.

“I was thinking,” Anna said. “What if many people wrote the Torah?”

“You mean, if it came from WRITERS rather than the voice of God through Moses?” Elkie asked.

“Why not?” Deborah said. “Look how long it is. Have you noticed the many different voices, and different types of writing styles?”

"I was also thinking," Anna said, unaware of the three older boys observing her from behind the hedges. "Just what would it mean if these many writers of the Torah had a political agenda?"

"Of course! That makes perfect sense. We would all have to follow the laws which would suit the political purpose of their time," Deborah added.

"What if they left some history out, so no one would know certain things?" Elkie asked.

"Oh, Elkie, that brings up so many questions!" Anna said.

The girls walked away, philosophically engrossed.

The brothers Lenny, Benny and Gimpel, coming out from behind the hedges, spoke with tears of laughter rolling down their cheeks.

"Imagine, religion mixed with politics!" Lenny cried.

"The Torah," Benny laughed. He held his holy book half an arm's length from his eyeglasses while the three walked on. "Many writers!"

"What luck we boys of Chelm enjoy, to have such silly, foolish girls to one day marry," Lenny said.

"As well we all know," added Gimpel, "how right it is that we should be much wiser than our future wives."

Another Midrash

"Everybody knows the *schlemiel* is the one that spills the soup, and the *schlemazel* is the one who gets the soup spilled upon him," said Deborah.

"Yes, but how does this apply to David and Bathsheba?" Anna asked.

"Do you not see what a *schlemazel* Uriah was?"

"He was a good, honest husband," Elke said.

"Yes, but what did it get him?" said Deborah. "A front position in the war, a sure death, thanks to King David."

"I do not see it," Elke said. "Uriah was a good man."

"A dead man!" said Anna, agreeing with Deborah.

"Are you saying only Uriah, but not King David, was not a good man, Elke?" Deborah asked.

The girls were early for their Hebrew class; their teacher would arrive in fifteen minutes. Their books were piled neatly on their desktops and the other girls would not be earlier than Mrs. Beeber.

"King David was King David. He saw her bathing. What else could he do?" Elke said.

"So you say lining up Bathsheba's husband for the slaughter was an honorable action?" asked Anna. "Tell me, which was the better husband?"

"Uriah began as the better husband, though he did not live to see her through," said Elke.

"So now you say it is Uriah's fault he died?"

"Whether he died or not, David was there as her lifelong husband, and that is what really matters." Elke was thinking this through for her first time.

"No," Deborah said, "I believe it was all King David's doing, he caused Uriah's death so he could have Bathsheba, and that is what makes King David the *schlemazel*."

"You must be wrong," Anna said. "David must be the *schlemiel*, he spills the soup on Uriah's lap, has him killed. Uriah is the *schlemazel*."

"David is no *schlemiel*," Elke said. "He planned the death, this was not an accident." Elke paused a few seconds to think. "David was the better husband."

"But Elke, you yourself said that Uriah was the honest one," Anna argued.

Elke laced her fingers through her bright red thickly curled hair. "Anna, I would think that you would understand."

"I am trying, Elke. Explain yourself."

"The husband that lasts, the one who really takes care of the wife, is the better husband."

"Oh," Anna said, "but what about honor?"

The girls all looked out the window. Collectively, they caught a glimpse of the boys Lenny, Benny and Gimpel rushing away from their peeking.

"They are watching us again!" Deborah said.

"Well, at least WE are not bathing," said Anna, and they laughed.

Then all was quiet. The girls thought and thought and thought. Beloved time-honored King David. His honor questioned. After all, this is what a *midrash* is all about.

Finally, Deborah spoke.

"I have it all set in my mind now," she said. "King David is the REAL *schlemazel*."

"How?" asked Anna.

"He has Uriah killed. He marries Bathsheba, but he is out of favor with G_d. Their first child is dying."

"Yes?"

"Then, you see, he prays and fasts, and still the child dies. It is his punishment. The soup has been spilled upon him."

The girls were in awe of Deborah.

“But still,” Elke spoke. “He lives with Bathsheba happily after that. They have another son.”

“Solomon!” Anna cries. “The one who builds the Temple.”

“Yes, Solomon,” Deborah said. “But David himself could never build the Temple.”

“Why not?” Elke obviously had not read as carefully as Anna and Deborah.

“Blood.”

“Blood?”

“Blood.” Anna and Deborah exchanged knowing looks. Anna smiled, then spoke. “King David was a warrior, and no one with blood on his hands could build the Temple.” Anna saw a look of satisfaction on Deborah’s face.

Mr. Beeber entered the classroom, followed by the rest of the Yeshiva girls. His nose was so straight that his glasses wouldn’t stay put at the bridge. He settled himself at the head desk and began class impeccably on time.

“Girls,” he said. “Today we will be discussing the vowels of the Hebrew alphabet.” The girls opened their books quickly and quietly, and Mr. Beeber said, “Good. I am pleased you are learning so well how to behave in the classroom. Perhaps one day you ‘scholars’ may begin to read the Holy Books.” All but three girls giggled. Mr. Beeber smiled at his joke.

As they worked their way through the *aleph-beth*, several girls began to giggle again. Mr. Beeber frowned.

“Girls, a little bit of encouragement and you behave like children?” he said.

“Look,” said the one closest to the window. “Gimpel is making a fool of himself again!” Outside, Lenny and Benny were rushing away from the schoolyard, but Gimpel stayed behind, peeking in at the girls. Caught!

“Just one minute,” Mr. Beeber announced to the class. “I will deal with this promptly.” And he left the room.

“How many of you have read through ‘Samuel?’” Deborah asked. And the *midrash* continued until the satisfied Mr. Beeber returned from disciplining Gimpel.

Anna's Art

Anna had been drawing again when her mother Gilda came upon her in the yard. Gilda watched for half a minute without admitting her presence.

"I know you are there, Mama," Anna said, her hand not skipping a beat. "Would you care to see my work?"

"Work? You call this work? Laundry, now that is work. Cooking is work. Sweeping the floor is work. And milking the cows. Black charcoal all over your hands, clothing, and papers, you call work?"

"Mama, look at this pad. See the image I have drawn? This is my work." Anna placed the charcoal into her basket. She wiped her hand on a rag which hung tucked from the top of her dress pocket.

Gilda said, "*Feh.*"

Anna blew charcoal dust from the surface of her drawing. "Look, Mama. See what I have done." And she held up the picture for viewing.

"I see what you have done. You have made a picture of your brother crouching in the grass. Not a very flattering pose at that. Anna, why is he crouching?"

"Look, Mama, and you will see."

Gilda looked again. "Your brother is crouching for his hunting game. I tell him again and again to do his chores and to end his silly slithering in the grass like a snake. But does he listen? No, he does not. And where is he, what is he doing now?"

"Mama, please see how closely this resembles my brother Hymie lurking in the grass. Do you not realize how difficult it is for most people to draw this well?"

"Does drawing well solve the problems of the world? How does your drawing help get supper on the table?"

"Mama, I may not solve the world's problems, but I am able to draw. Many people admire artists. Some even pay money for work like this."

"Earn some money with your drawings, and then I will admire them," Gilda said.

"For now, I need you to help in the kitchen."

Anna slowly carried her things into the house, carefully placing her new picture onto her cluttered shelf nearby. She met her mother in the kitchen and began to work.

Gilda was quiet.

"Mama, you seem angry with me," Anna said.

"Angry? Should I be angry? You are peeling potatoes, cutting onions so that I need not cry, and you accuse me of anger?"

"Mama, please excuse me for saying so, but you usually *hok* me a *chynik* when we cook. Today, you are quiet. I think you do not like for me to draw."

"Not when we have food to cook," Gilda said.

"Mama, I mean all the time. You always seem unhappy with me when I draw my art."

"Art!" Gilda cried. "*Feh.*"

After supper, Anna cleared and cleaned her family's dishes, then retreated to her alcove of a room from which she could see her mother tidying some more -- replacing pots into the lower cabinets. Gilda was bending and twisting at times to put the larger pots away.

Anna grabbed her sketchpad and pencil and, unnoticed, quickly caught the changing poses of her mother.

Hymie rushed in and took a look at the sketches as Gilda banged noisily away with her pots and cabinet doors.

"This MAMA one is good, Anna! Sharpen it up and you could enter it into the Plotnik Contest at *shula.*"

Anna had forgotten about the Plotnik Art Contest. "Thank you, Hymie," she said. "I think I will."

For several days, Anna worked upon her brother's favorite drawing. She copied it onto a new sheet, smudged it some in the reworking, almost gave up entirely, then went back to "sharpening up" the original as her brother had suggested. It was ready just in time for entry into the Plotnik Contest.

On Monday morning, the three Plotnik judges, formally dressed in black suits, arrived in Chelm by train. Minutes before being met by Harry and Esther Zatz, and escorted to the children's *shula*, the shortest judge spoke up.

"This is our final town, but I CANNOT imagine the Plotnik winner to be a child from Chelm."

"No! Besides, I heard this *shula* was built by women," said the tallest and heaviest of the judges.

"Remember, fair is fair," said the third. The judges all agreed they would remember.

Drawings from all the classrooms were pinned upon the four walls of the *shula*'s largest room. Many were stick figures wearing long, dark robes, carrying books. Some were exercises in perspective -- long corridors narrowed at the farthest end. Others were charcoal drawings of unidentifiable household items. Most looked quite alike.

"Um hum, um hum, um hum," said the tallest judge, nodding at each and every picture.

"Yes, yes, yes," said the shortest.

"I see, I see, I see," said the third.

Suddenly, the giant judge yelled, "Oy! Look at this."

"I see what you mean," said the short one.

"The detail is spectacular!" claimed the third.

And so, they pinned a blue ribbon onto Anna's drawing.

"So, where is this winning picture to impress me with?" Gilda asked Anna as they entered the *shula* Monday evening with the other families of Chelm.

"Mama, I am afraid you will not like it much," Anna warned.

"What is not to like?" Gilda asked. "You have won a money prize, a tuition to the Plotnik Art School, and now you say I may not like the picture?"

Anna cast a meaningful look at her brother Hymie.

"Look, Papa has already found it," Hymie answered.

Gilda, ahead of her children, made a path through the crowd and approached the winning picture.

"A day to be proud," her husband said to her. "What a bright, blue ribbon!"

Gilda stared at the drawing. In it she saw, as the most prominent point of interest, the very large bottom of a shapely woman. The woman was bent over an open oven door. She was placing pots for storage inside the oven. Her pose was such that her face did not show, only the top of her shoulders, her big behind, and the flowing wrinkles of her ankle-length skirt.

For once, Gilda was speechless. The people around her crowded close to the drawing.

"What wonderful lines!"

"An obvious talent, a winner indeed!"

"Such an eye for detail."

"I see this every day," said one man. "Who would have thought it could be turned into beautiful art?"

Gilda remained quiet. She turned to look at all the surrounding faces. No one seemed to be interested in her.

Anna inched in closer to her mother. "Mama, are you all right? I hope your feelings are not hurt. After all, it is only art."

"All right? Me? ME!" Gilda began to yell towards the crowd. "This is ME at the oven! LOOK!"

And she proudly stuck out her rump at all the critics.

The Boy Who Would Not Read

"Stop all this *mishegoss* and READ already, Hymie!"

"No," said Hymie, and he ran out the door.

"But he is such a wise boy, such an intelligent boy," Gilda said to Anna. "Why can he not read?"

"He knows his Hebrew letters," Anna said. "I taught him myself."

"You?" Gilda asked. "And not the *melamed*?"

"Yes, Mama, me, many months ago. The *melamed* taught him nothing."

"And is teaching him nothing NOW," Gilda said. "So tell me, if you teach him so well, brilliant Anna, why can he not read?"

"It is not that he CAN not, it is that he WILL not," Anna said.

"Oh," said Gilda. "So this is better?"

Later that night, Gilda lay in bed with Anna and Hymie's Papa. While Papa snored, Gilda turned and tossed and tossed and tossed some more. She lay there thinking, our Anna taught him his letters. His *melamed* teaches him nothing. Anna Anna Anna. I see. Anna knows how to handle Hymie. But the boy still will not read. Anna says it is not that he cannot read, it is that he will not read. Anna knows this while the *melamed* has yet not figured it out.

Papa's snoring reached amazing heights. It had changed from a short-winded intake breath followed by a long-winded outtake breath, to a short-winded intake breath followed by a broken up hiccup-sounding outtake breath.

This disrupted Gilda's thinking. Where was I? Anna? *Melamed*? *Melamed*? Anna? Oh, Hymie, Hymie, Hymie. What to do about a boy who will not read? How will he ever have his *bar mitzvah*? It is so confusing. This is a question I must bring to the women of Chelm.

And so it was that Gilda took her problem to the women of Chelm at the home of Esther Zatz.

"The boy is only eight," Esther said. "He will be reading long before it is time."

"My boys were reading at six," added Yetta.

"And my boys at three!" bragged Raina Haskalah.

"And what good did it do them? They flubbed their *haftorah* lines!" Esther could not help herself. She never liked Raina Haskalah or her bragging. "But we must get back to Gilda's problem -- what to do about Hymie."

"What does the *melamed* say?"

"*Melamed schlelamed*," Gilda said. "Anna tells me the *melamed* has Hymie sit in the corner when he refuses to read his words."

"And when that does not work?"

"He has him ride around the room on a broomstick -- for embarrassment -- but it turns out Hymie likes that, Anna tells me."

"And how does Anna know all this?"

"She has taken a sisterly interest in Hymie, somehow, she gets him to tell her everything," Gilda said.

"And what does your husband say to the boy?"

"Hymie runs away from his Papa, as he does when I try to speak with him."

"And the boy is not caught by his Papa?"

"My husband, he just throws up his hands and says, 'Children are children, he will grow up in good time.' "

"Aah," Esther said. "So it is up to Anna, you, and Hymie to make sure that your husband is right."

Gilda went home convinced that her son and herself were not blessed with the brains of the family. She saw that Anna was hanging up the laundry outside on the clothesline. What a good girl, Gilda thought. She also saw that Hymie was crouching in the bushes, rushing out at Anna to shock her every few minutes. What a naughty boy, Gilda thought.

"Tremble!" Hymie yelled. He grabbed his sister's ankles.

"AAAAaaaaah!" shrieked Anna, pretending to be frightened.

Gilda liked something about the way Anna was handling the clothes while keeping Hymie happy. She would have watched her children longer if Hymie hadn't spotted her.

"Tremble!" he cried again, tugging at the bottom of his mother's dress.

"Enough with the *mishegoss*," Gilda scolded a little more softly than usual. "Come, let me pinch those cheeks." And before she could begin to reach him, all she could see of her children was the girl hanging a billowing white sheet on the line. She addressed her daughter, "Where are those cheeks?"

"Those cheeks are unavailable, you can be sure," Anna said. "Be more concerned about those hands."

"Hymie's hands?" Sometimes Gilda thought she barely knew her son at all.

"Shake in your boots!" Hymie yelled, suddenly gripping Mama's great big feet. Gilda, remembering Anna's good-natured manner with the boy, hoped she might train herself to do the same. She tried to wiggle in her shoes, but the best she could do was some awkward stepping to the side.

"Aaaah," she feebly cried, playing up a fear that didn't exist.

But the game had fallen flat for Hymie.

"Your scream does not seem real to me," he said. His head turned towards Anna -- she was carrying the wicker basket back inside.

"Whaa?" Gilda asked, bewildered. She hardly remembered how to play. Hymie darted away from her, disappearing into the house after Anna. Gilda looked up to the sky. "That child really, really scares me, but not the way he wants to," she addressed to G_d.

After a too-quiet supper, and after all the evening chores had been accomplished, Anna retired to her bedroom to draw more of the pictures she'd begun that morning. Papa was now complaining about his day at work while Gilda faithfully listened. She gave little grunts and groans and empathetic glances from time to time, but never got to speak. She knew this was not a time to bring up her problems with Hymie. As Papa spoke, his wife simply wanted to talk with their daughter. Why does Anna have such a knack with Hymie? What is her secret? Why does he do so well with his sister, but with nothing and nobody else?

Papa never noticed her inattention.

Meanwhile, Hymie had entered Anna's room to watch her draw. Silently, they shared the room, Hymie mesmerized by his sister's accomplishments. Hymie spoke.

"Trying to win another contest?"

"This is not about winning."

"No? Is not everything about winning?"

Anna made a curve where previously there had been a rubbed-out straight line.

"How do you mean 'everything?' "

"You know. Every little thing. Everything people do, they win or lose."

"I do not see it that way," said Anna, drawing another long curve.

"They all want me to read. Read or you lose everything, they say."

"Who says?"

"They."

Anna knew where this was going.

"You are now up to Phase Two of your studies, no?" she asked her brother.

"I do not like Phase Two. I liked Phase One better. As YOU taught me."

"Ah, but Phase One is already placed in your brain. You have no need to learn that again."

"But I liked it better. I liked seeing the ox in the *aleph*, and the wide-opened mouth of the *beth*. These things were fun to learn."

Anna was quiet. How to make Phase Two as much fun for Hymie, she wondered. Now he must learn syllables, whole words, phrases, even sentences in Hebrew. Not to mention getting him ready for Phase Three, when he must learn his prayers.

"Anna," Hymie said. "How did you learn such things?"

Anna thought back to her days of peering into the heder, the room where the boys were learning Hebrew. These were the days before girls had their own heder in which to study. She didn't have the heart to tell Hymie she'd had to fight to learn; here was a boy fighting against it.

"Think of soldiers lining up for battle," Anna said, "planning a sneak attack."

Hymie flashed his dimples. "Yes?"

"Picture these letters as your soldiers, merging together." And she took her skinniest piece of charcoal and wrote a Hebrew word:

Hymie said, "So?"

הגדה

Anna said, "*Yingele*, you know your letter sounds and your vowels. Blend these together -- it is only three sounds in this word. Tell me, what do you get?"

"*Hah?*"

"Yes! Go on."

"*Guh?*"

"Yes!"

"*Dah?*"

"Yes! Now say it all. You know this word."

"Haggadah!" Hymie yelled, very pleased with himself for having gotten through his first multi-syllabic word. "The telling, for Passover?"

"Yes. Now let us do another," and she wrote a longer, slightly complicated word.

Meanwhile, Papa and Gilda were having their long-awaited discussion concerning Hymie and his education.

"I pay the *melamed* his fees," Papa said. "I trust he will teach the *yingel* in due time."

"He is merely six years of age," Papa said. "Boys his age should be able to run."

"Papa," Gilda said. "This is his learning, what is valued more in Chelm than wisdom?"

"Ah, but is it not wise to allow the boy the dictates of his body? If he needs to run, let him run! I wish my Papa had allowed me to run from my *melamed*. Oy, what a *mamzer* he was."

"And then where would you be?" Gilda asked. "Sitting on the ground to dig potatoes like the *goyim*?"

"So, what I do is any better?"

And Gilda had to put up with another hour's harangue regarding her husband's difficult day in the business world of Chelm. Finally, she broke in. "It is time for bed, I will tell the children."

"Do not worry so, my Gilda. I did not mention this to you, but I have spoken to the *melamed* today to tell him I would have a word or two with the boy. Bring the *yingele* to me. All will be settled."

At this moment, Anna was working her way up to phrases with the boy. Gilda stepped into Anna's room. Hymie quickly turned his head towards the doorway. His body just as suddenly scooted out into the direction his sight had taken him.

"Wait," Gilda called after him. "Papa wishes to speak with you."

But the boy was gone. Gilda had no time to look upon Anna's papers as she clumsily rushed out after the boy. She looked in the cabinets, slowly bending her body down to her knees. Repeating the action, she looked under the table but to no avail. She even considered going out into the dark to inspect the child's favorite bushes. Instead, she gave up and decided to wait in his room where she'd say a little prayer.

Upon entering Hymie's room, Gilda heard a very familiar sound. The source of this sound was Hymie's bed.

"Snort, snort, hummmmmmm. Snort, snort, hummmmmmm," said Hymie's sleeping nose.

"Just like his Papa," Gilda said. She kissed her *yingele's* warm forehead and plodded on towards her bedroom.

"Hum, hum, snooooooort," said Papa's nose as Gilda settled into bed.

In the morning, however, Papa had his two words with his son. "Study well," he advised, and Hymie rushed out the door with his satchel.

At the *heder*, the *melamed* was surprised to see Hymie arrive ahead of the other boys. With this opportunity to begin one-on-one with the child, he posed a commonly asked question:

“Why are you here, graceful child?”

“I am here to study Talmud,” Hymie answered.

“And how do you propose to study Talmud?”

“By learning Hebrew,” said the boy.

At this, the *melamed* strayed from the routine questions, making it slightly more personal.

“And you will sit still and pay attention, no more running away, Yingle?”

“No more running away. I wish to learn to read,” said the student.

The *melamed* scratched his head and pulled at his beard. “Ah,” he said as Hymie helped himself to a seat on the backless bench.

The *melamed* watched the boy while deep in thought. I remember now. His father was to have a word or two with him. Our men of Chelm are wise indeed, as all it took for this troublesome *yingle* to settle down was a couple of words from his Papa.

Almond - Shaped Nuts

Shlomo, the eldest son of Esther and Harry Zatz, was about to marry into the Rothschild family. The wedding would be held in Chelm, at the Zatz estate. Esther loved to do the specialty marketing, leaving the more routine tasks to her cook and servants.

One crisp marketing day, Esther presented the well-established nut vendor -- who had little competition in Chelm -- with a problem.

"My cousin Basha from Bucharest is coming all the way to Chelm to see my Shlomo's Rothschild wedding," she said.

"That's nice," said the nut man, ready to say "that's nice" many times over throughout his morning.

"She is PARTICULAR about the nuts she likes."

"That's nice," he said musically. "So WHAT does she LIKE?"

"I cannot remember exactly. I know the nuts are almond-shaped."

The man had many portable nut bins. "Let me see," he began. "Besides almonds I have cashews, walnuts, even pistachios."

"No, no, no," Esther said. "They have to be almond-shaped."

"Yes, yes. All right. I have pine nuts."

"Too small."

"Then how about filberts?"

"Too round."

The nut man was stumped. "Peanuts?" he asked hopelessly.

"Pshhh."

"Beechnuts? Hickory nuts? I have nothing else!" he cried. "I can get you litchi nuts or ginkgo nuts next week."

"Oh, no," Esther said, unhappily making some purchases. "What Basha is like, not getting what she wants, you would not like to know." She left the vendor rubbing his beard and probing all his nut bins trying to discover the mysteriously almond-shaped nuts lurking from somewhere within.

The wealthy families of Chelm prepared to rejoice at Shlomo's wedding. Hannah, his bride, was the most beautiful daughter of all the Rothschild family, and Esther had complete faith in her cook and servants that every last banquet detail was perfectly prepared. Guests arrived in droves while soon after, Esther and Harry had to oversee the solemn ceremony. It was long, and all were getting hungry. Shlomo stomped on the glass and the celebration began.

Stuffed helzels were abundant. Piping hot on their appetizer trays, they spread their crispy meaty smell all around the grounds. The sweet and sour meatballs, *knishes*, and spinach puffs were flawless. The wedding cake and non-dairy pastries at the end table looked so good, one would think they were made with butter. All was elegant; the best China was laid out, the silky lace tablecloths used at Esther and Harry's own wedding sparkled under the family's finest silver. However, Esther couldn't help worrying about facing up to her cousin Basha from Bucharest. Would she expect her particular favorite among the delicacies?

Basha, dressed in her finest black Persian-lamb coat, rushed up to Esther while fondling the white mink collar with her slender, brightly-ringed fingers. Her eyes darted around the landscape, scoping out the guests. "Esther, my Esther," she cackled happily, having never seen any actual Rothschilds before. Basha's beady, greedy eyes drew in the goodies laid out on the various tables -- a bowl of cashews mixed with raisins and walnuts, pistachio macaroons, an enormous hazelnut torte.

"Oh, Esther, my Sweet!" she shrieked. "You remembered my passion for nuts, my little Cousin!"

Esther gulped.

In her high-strung, bossy way, Basha continued. "I see MANY delectables I will get to later. But where ARE they, my dear?" Basha screeched. "WHERE are you hiding my ALMONDS?"

A Ghost in Chelm

"Serele, Berele, *kindele*, come!" screamed Mitzie Hertz. The boy and girl fled from their mother and hid under a table. First they giggled, then they shushed themselves. Then they giggled some more.

The tablecloth which hid them was two inches below ground level. The breezy afternoon on which the first wedding anniversary party of Schlomo Zatz and his Rothschild bride was taking place forced Esther's silky white fabric to periodically expose the children in their lair.

But Mitzie Hertz didn't notice. Instead, she wandered around the grounds, asking everyone and anyone she encountered if they'd seen her children.

"I have not," said Mrs. Brill, "perhaps the Ghost of Chelm has taken a liking to them."

"Yes, I have heard tell of this ghost," added Mrs. Zuckerman. In fact, Morty thought something very strange had occurred at the Dry Goods Store."

Mitzie Hertz did not believe in ghosts, and was convinced that her boy and girl were simply being naughty. However, Mitzie's curiosity always got the best of her. "So, what was this strange occurrence?"

"You must ask Morty," said Mrs. Zuckerman. "He will tell it best."

Torn between finding her children and HAVING to know what had happened at the Dry Goods Store, Mitzie consented to take the bait and asked, "So, where is Morty?"

"MY Morty?" said Mrs. Zuckerman. "Why, he is drinking wine, in the company of Sidney Hyman over there." As Mrs. Zuckerman pointed out the way, the silky tablecloth blew in an upward direction from the lair, and Serele and Berele began another round of giggling.

But notice, Mrs. Hertz did not, so she plodded her way towards the men drinking wine. This left the children able to peek brazenly out from under the cloth and watch the goings-on.

"Morty Zuckerman!" Mrs. Hertz exclaimed. "You must immediately stop what you are doing and tell me of the strange occurrence at the Dry Goods Store."

Three men looked up at once. Morty was gulping down his wine and couldn't figure out how to stop immediately in mid-swallow.

But no one really listened to Mrs. Hertz, so Morty swallowed happily.

"Morty!"

"Yes, Mrs. Hertz?" Morty knew her name was Mitzie, he'd known her all her life, but wanted to address her formally after she'd so publicly bossed him around by his first name. "You have a question for me?"

"Mrs. Zuckerman tells me a strange thing happened at the Dry Goods Store, and I demand you tell me what it was."

"So, you are making demands upon me, and you are not even my own Mrs. Zuckerman."

"MORTY!" she yelled.

"Yes?"

"What happened at the Dry Goods Store?"

"When?"

"Do I know when? No, I do not. All I know is Mrs. Zuckerman was *hocking* me about a ghost, and said you could tell of an amazing occurrence at the Dry Goods Store."

"Oh, THAT occurrence." Morty poured himself another glass of wine, from which he began again to gulp.

"Morty. . ."

Morty finished his swallowing. "Yes, yes, I remember. As it happened, several people were saying it involved the Ghost of Chelm; otherwise, nothing so strange could ever take place at the Dry Goods Store."

"No?"

"Or anywhere else for that matter."

The two men Morty's table were now pulling at their beards, waiting to hear about this strange occurrence. They looked across at Morty, hopefully.

"As we all well know, a ghost cannot be seen or smelled, or even heard. True?"

"True," said Mr. Hyman.

"True," said Mr. Levinson.

"True?" asked Mrs. Hertz. "What does anyone really know of ghosts? What can we know about something that does not exist?"

Again, the men pulled at their beards.

Meanwhile, Serele and Berele stealthily pulled themselves out and away from the table to find a closer spot from which to eavesdrop on their mother.

"The wine-drinkers' table," suggested Berele.

"Too close," said Serele.

"The table next to them, with the poppy-seed cakes?" Berele asked.

"Maybe, maybe," said the girl. "If we can safely get there."

"As we all well know," Morty was saying, "Chelm has never had a successful Dry Goods Store since the days of Barry Schlesinger. *Nu?*"

"No," said Mr. Hyman.

"No," said Mr. Levinson.

"So?" asked Mitzie Hertz.

"So!" she says," said Morty Zuckerman. "So perhaps this ghost does not wish to see the Dry Goods Store succeed. Perhaps this ghost is Mr. Schlesinger himself?"

Mr. Hyman pulled at his beard. Mr. Levinson's fingers fluttered upon HIS beard.

Only Mitzie Hertz spoke then. "That is not quite right," she said. "Mr. Schlesinger always ALWAYS wanted the Dry Goods Store to do well. Why, even as a ghost, would he not wish it well today?"

Mr. Hyman and Mr. Levinson studied Morty for an answer.

"Why?" she asks, " said Morty. "And why would he want a store to do well that was finally bought out by his competitor, Aaron Zimmerman, and inherited by his good-for-nothing son-in-law, Stanley Lesky?"

The bearded men turned their gaze to Mitzie.

"But Stanley Lesky has since turned it over to his businesswise younger brother, Melvin Lesky, and now the Dry Goods Store is almost doing well. To me, it seems a good decision was made by Stanley Lesky," said Mitzie Hertz.

Mr. Hyman and Mr. Levinson nodded their heads at each other.

"At this, we must agree," said Mr. Hyman.

"Aah, but which of you is in the know about what happened in Stanley Lesky's Dry Goods Store the day before yesterday?" Morty asked.

They all shook their heads.

"This is what we demand for you to tell us!" Mitzie cried.

"And tell you, I will," Morty said.

At this declaration, Mitzie's children, after having quietly walked behind others at the party, took particular care to situate themselves under the table of the poppy-seed cakes. A larger number of Chelmites had gathered around Morty's table where it seemed something worthy of hearing was taking place.

"As I was entering the store to try on a pair of shoes, not that I was going to buy any, mind you, I was only going to try them on," Morty said, "I looked at the pairs offered on the rack and noticed none of the shoes matched each other."

At this, under the table, Serele and Berele smiled at each other.

"So I said to Stanleys, '*Vuss iss duss*, Stanley, none of these shoes seem to match up with each other.'"

"What you talking?" Stanley said to me, annoyed. "How can it be that my shoes are not matching up?" But he did not come over to see for himself, as he was busy arranging his cash box for the day's business. So I checked all the shoes over myself, one brown with a black, another black of different size with a brown of differing size, one lady's shoe with a man's shoe, another man's shoe of a different style together with another lady's shoe of a differing style, and on and on, all of it *meshugah* like that."

The boy and girl under the table had to stifle their giggles.

“ ‘Stanley,’ I said, ‘you really had ought to come and look at this.’

‘Oy, just a moment,’ he said. And he glared at me as if he wanted me to leave the store. As if he did not even want me to make any purchase that day. As if my being his customer was more an annoyance than a subject for joy.”

“As it may well have been,” Mitzie mumbled. “So where does this Ghost of Chelm come into the story?”

“I will get there, I will get there,” Morty said. “So finally, Stanley gets up off his *tuchus*, and comes over to the shoe rack. And finally he sees, one brown with a black, another black of different size with a brown of differing size, one lady’s shoe with a man’s shoe, another man’s shoe of a different style together with another lady’s shoe of another style, and on and on, all of it *meshugah*!

“‘What did you do to my shoes?’ Stanley asked of me! Me, honest Morty, imagine, ME, messing with a rack of shoes!”

“Go on,” Mitzie ordered.

“‘I did nothing to your rack of shoes,’ I said to Stanley. ‘Nothing at all, only notice the problem for you.’ At that, Stanley began to believe me, and said, ‘Morty, I will tell you something that happened this morning, and it may be connected to this problem with the shoes.’”

More and more celebrating Chelmites were gathering to listen to Morty’s tale. They were talking, sometimes gasping, during Morty’s pauses, which helped cover up the sounds of the children giggling at the nearby poppy-cake table.

“‘Morty,’ Stanley told me. ‘I think I have been visited by the Ghost of Chelm. When I first came into the store this morning, I noticed nothing was amiss. I thought this a good beginning for the day. But then, after wedging open the door and putting up my Open for Business sign, I went to the back room to pull my cash box out of its hiding spot. I keep no cash in there overnight, but hide it I do, since a cash box is still a cash box.’

“‘Yes, I understand,’ I said.

“So, after coming back to the storefront, I noticed some boxes had been moved around, boxes of new supplies I had recently acquired and not yet had the time to properly arrange. These boxes were simply not in the pile I had stacked. There was one on the shoe rack, one on the shelf at the window, and another one flat on the display counter. Then I remembered people speaking of a ghost in Chelm, and I wondered if maybe I had been visited.’

“‘Oh, but Stanley,’ I said. ‘Your front door was wide open when you went to the back room, how do you know you did not simply have some mischievous children entering your store and moving goods around?’”

Serele covered Berele’s mouth, and Berele covered the mouth of his sister.

“‘This could not be the work of such children,’ Stanley Lesky insisted. ‘I will show you something,’ he said, ‘something that mischievous children would never begin to understand.’”

Serele and Berele had regained control of themselves, and uncovered each other’s mouths.

“So Stanley Lesky went to the back room of his Dry Goods Store, and returned with an old framed portrait of the previous owner of the store.

“‘Look,’ he said. ‘This is Barry Schlesinger, the man who founded this Dry Goods Store. He died of a heart attack after my father-in-law Aaron Zimmerman bought him out, but was later replaced by me. I think, it may not be right, but I think I maybe am being haunted by this Barry Schlesinger.’ As Stanley turned the portrait around to show me, I felt shivers go up and down my spine.

“‘I remember, as a boy, the face of Barry Schlesinger. He was handsome, dark, with a strong nose and fine brown eyes. His portrait looked at me as if the man was right in the room. Not a drop of the oil paint had ever been dissolved. The portrait was in perfect condition. His face was just as I always remembered.

“‘So, what is it about this portrait that worries you?’ I asked.

“‘Stanley Lesky stared at it. ‘Do you not see?’ he asked. ‘Do you not see how perfectly intact this is?’

“‘Yes, I do see,’ I said. ‘So what is the problem.’

“‘The problem, Morty Zuckerman, is I did not inherit this painting in this excellent condition. The oil was peeling, the face was a blur. I have not one clue as to the reconstruction of this work of art.’”

Serele gasped. Berele gasped. All had been so silent that Mitzie Hertz, at last, discovered her children and screamed at them, pulling each one by an ear all the way home.

The rest of the Chelmites listening to this tale became so stricken with curiosity as to the goings on at Stanley Lesky’s Dry Goods Store that, thanks to the wedding and subsequent anniversary party of Schlomo Zatz and his Rothschild bride, the once languishing store began again to flourish in the town of Chelm.

Salted Fish

Selma the cook could never oversalt her husband's food.

"More salt," Howie ordered one evening as he sat down to eat.

"But Howie, I rolled the fish in salt before cooking it, I salted it while it cooked and I just now added salt again at the table."

"More salt!" he repeated sloppily, his mouth full of fish.

"Howie, Darling, you know I cook all day at Esther's house. This is professional work for me. No one there has ever, ever complained.

"I have even cooked for the Rothschilds one time, receiving many, many compliments."

"More salt!" Howie cried, cutting himself another piece of fish.

"But Howie, please understand, I salted your fish not once, not twice, but three -- three times I have salted this fish for you!" Selma handed Howie their newly purchased ceramic shaker of salt.

"Howie, Darling, here is your salt. Put on as much as you like."

Howie grabbed the shaker and opened up the stopper, checking the contents. It was only half full.

"More salt!" he cried again.

Selma left the table, soon returning with a large blue bowl brimming with Kosher salt. She poured the lumpy grains into the shaker until it almost overflowed. She handed the shaker back to her husband.

"Good!" Howie said. "Now I can eat my meal in peace."

Serele the Meeskeit

To be a *meeskeit* is a terrible, terrible thing. Even as a baby, no one can say to you, "What pretty eyes you have." A *meeskeit* doesn't have pretty eyes. No one can say, "What soft, pink lips you have." A *meeskeit* has misshapen, dry-looking lips. If someone should say to a *meeskeit*'s mother, "What a blessing," claiming nothing whatsoever about her baby's looks, that mother would soon suspect she has a *meeskeit* for a baby.

Serele the *meeskeit* was just such a *meeskeit*. Her mother Sadie knew it, her father Abram the Tailor knew it. Her sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and cousins knew it. When Serele was born, all of Chelm quickly knew another *meeskeit* was in their midst. Some people whispered among themselves, "Wait and see. Any baby girl can grow into a BEAUTY." But as Serele grew, they began to add, "Not THIS baby girl." As she grew some more, they couldn't help but shake their heads and mumble, "Oy vey, such a *meeskeit*."

Serele's hair had no color. Her shoulders drooped and her nose was too small for her boxy face. As a young girl, she followed her father, Abram the Tailor, everywhere. She watched and studied every detail of his sewing and began to stitch for him at a very early age. Sadie warned against this saying, "Abram, you can't work the girl so hard, she'll strain her eyes." Abram just shook his head, quietly thinking no pair of eyeglasses could hurt his daughter's looks.

As Serele came of age, the women of Chelm met at Esther the elder's house to discuss the girl's limited prospects for marriage. They had to mince words when Sadie arrived, carefully avoiding the obvious issue.

"I hear the matchmaker is fully booked for the year," said Mrs. Minsky.

"I heard that, too," confirmed Mrs. Pinsky just as Sadie settled in.

"Are we here to discuss my Serele's future?" Sadie asked. The women agreed they were. "My Serele is such a good girl, she does her chores and sews like an angel."

"I'm sure she IS, I'm sure she DOES," Esther agreed.

"She may one day take over my Abram's business."

"I'm sure she COULD, I'm sure she COULD," Esther said.

"She designed a dress to pad and shape up the shoulders," Sadie bragged.

"I'm sure she SHOULD, I'm sure she SHOULD," Esther repeated as the women looked away.

"A designing school in Lublin has asked to see her work!"

"They did, they DID?" Esther asked, getting excited.

"She has a train ticket and is leaving for Lublin next week," Sadie said triumphantly.

The women at Esther's house sighed in relief. No one ever had to mention the difficulty in marrying off this Serele.

As the months and years went by, news of Serele's success in the fashion industry spread over Chelm like a *mitzvah*. Photos of models wearing her clothes got printed, captioned with Serele's name in the newsprint. Sadie and Abram were often heard boasting about their daughter's home in Lublin.

"The size of a mansion, with servants yet!" Abram cried. No one dared to ask if there was a husband in that mansion.

When the women of Chelm met at Esther's one evening -- making sure Sadie was out of earshot -- they marveled that such a simple idea as padding the shoulders could make a person rich and even famous.

"And to think, Chelm's very own little Serele."

"Fame!"

"Mansion!"

"Servants!"

"Poor thing. "

"What a shame. "

"Such a *Meeskeit*!"

Favorite Tree

"My daughter Hannah has fallen in love with a tree," Sophie sadly announced at the long-established Chelmite women's meeting.

"What?"

"A tree?"

"In love?"

Poor Sophie was led to Esther's softest easy chair.

"Sit," she was told. "Take your time. Explain."

Sophie dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. "Ever since that terrible, terrible storm last winter, she has not given me a moment's peace or quiet. 'The tree, the tree, take me to my favorite tree,' she cries."

"And what has a storm to do with favoring a tree?" Esther asked.

"This tree, it had an enormous branch on it. The branch was covered up with ice. It was weighted down so heavily that by the end of the storm, it had torn away from the trunk."

"And a fallen branch makes a tree so special to the girl?"

"The tree has a big hole where the branch used to be." Sophie looked at the women as if she were suddenly the only bright one in the room.

"And this hole," Esther asked. "Is this what makes it special?"

Sophie shook her head. "No, no, it is not the hole. The tree itself. My Hannah, she simply loves and adores the tree. 'Mama, Mama,' she cries, 'I must see my favorite tree today. Take me to it, please.' And she throws a tantrum fit if I do not take her there."

The women looked at Sophie with a show of sympathy.

"So, what do you do?" Gilda asked.

"What can I do? I take her there of course."

The room was quiet. Finally, Esther had the courage to ask.

"And?"

"And, what?"

"And what happens when you take this girl who has fallen in love with a tree -- to her tree?"

"My Hannah, she likes to hug the tree," Sophie said.

"So, she hugs the tree. And is that a problem?"

"Then she likes to take away a little piece of bark."

"So she hugs the tree and takes away some bark. Is this really a problem?"

Sophie dabbed her eyes some more. "Yes, yes. This is a problem. Hannah cries again when we get home."

"You are telling us that she cries to see the tree, you take her there, she hugs the tree, picks off some bark, comes home and cries yet again?"

"Now you are getting the picture," Sophie said. The women smiled at themselves for understanding.

"But why does she cry again?" Gilda soon asked.

"She says, 'Mama, Mama, why did I pick off this bark? Did I hurt my favorite tree? Mama, Mama, please take me back to my tree.' "

"And, I suppose, you take her there again." Esther said slowly.

"I try not to. I tell her, 'Hannah, your tree has very much bark. A little piece missing here and there will not hurt that tree.' Then she cries again.

"Mama, Mama, you must take me back. I have to give atonement to my favorite tree.'

"But you have not hurt your tree,' I try to tell her. 'You have nothing to atone.'

"Just take me back,' she cries. And over and over and over again, she will throw a tantrum fit until I take her back."

"Yes, now we clearly see your problem, Sophie. This girl is in love with a tree. She needs to be with it, take some of it with her, and return again. Perhaps we wise women of Chelm can come up with a solution for you," Esther said.

The group of women thought and thought.

"Where is the fallen branch?" Gilda asked.

"The owner hauled it away to burn."

The women thought some more.

"Does Hannah know of its burning?" another woman asked.

"I, I am not sure. Perhaps she does. Perhaps not."

Another round of quiet took over the room.

"I have it!" Gilda shouted. "If the girl does not know the true fate of the branch, why not bring her a branch of a similar tree and let her keep it in her room? Then she will be happy to stay home, she will not have hurt the tree, and you will enjoy some peace and quiet."

Esther and the other women gasped in amazement. They took turns congratulating Gilda on her excellent solution, for Gilda, newly accepted, was indeed a very wise woman.

Sophie came back to the following meeting, once again in tears.

"It did not go well?" Esther asked.

"No, not well at all. I took to Hannah a branch from another large tree. It did not fit through the door to her room. I had my husband cut it small enough to ease through the doorway, both of us thinking Hannah would be very pleased."

"She was not?"

"She cried the worst cry we ever heard. 'Mama, Papa,' she screamed. 'You have brought me the branch of my favorite tree. It has been hurt by the storm, and now you hurt it even more, just to bring it to me. It is all my fault, all my fault,' and she cried and cried and cried all night long."

"Oh," Gilda said.

"Oh," Esther said.

"Oh, oh, oh," said the women of the meeting.

"This is becoming serious," Gilda said, hoping to regain her status. "What if you were to tell the girl it was the wrong branch after all?"

"She would say we lied to her."

"What if you told her it was the wrong branch by mistake, and the real branch of her favorite tree had been used for fire, warming up a family?"

"My Hannah, she is not like that. She does not care about warming a family."

"Aha," said Gilda. "So this is a selfish girl of which we speak. This changes things."

The women looked upon Gilda as if she were a rabbi.

Gilda took her time. She stood, she paced, she rubbed her chin like a beard.

"A selfish little girl," Gilda said. "What do do in such a case, I wonder." And she rubbed her chin some more.

"Wait!" Sophie called. "This is not fair. My Hannah is not so very selfish, after all, she can love such a thing as a tree."

"Ah, but why does she love a tree? Is it, in fact, for selfish purposes your daughter loves this tree? Does she really love it, or does she want it all for herself?" Gilda asked.

"She loves the tree because she loves the tree," Sophie said.

"A selfish child only loves when it is convenient to love. What if it became inconvenient to love the tree?"

"But it has already become inconvenient, for me, to have her to love this tree."

"Just my point," Gilda said. "It is bad for you, but good for her. That is why she loves the tree."

The women of Chelm gasped again at such words of wisdom.

"So, what shall I do, what shall I do?" Sophie begged.

And again, Gilda came up with the answer. "Until you make this selfish child into an unselfish child, she will always love the tree. You must turn this Hannah into an unselfish child. Then and only then will all your problems be solved."

Sophie went home charged with advice in her head. All my problems will be solved, she thought. I simply have to change my darling Hannah to another type of girl.

Yes, I will do just that. I must. All my problems will be solved.

But first I have to take her to her favorite tree.

Two Loaves of Bread

Rachel Lutz gave birth to a baby girl when her Ezra was just under six. Visitors stopped by to visit, bringing soup, bread, macaroons, fruit, and baby clothes. When the baby was a month old, the Chelmite visitors and gifts dwindled down to nothing. Ezra had gotten used to the bread. He wanted more. Rachel, with her baby girl, was very happy. She had energy. She baked bread every day and planned to have an extra loaf for the day her baby's Bubbeh and Zeyda were coming to meet her.

"This loaf looks stale," she said to Ezra. "Taste it. Tell me what you think."

Ezra was glad to obey. His eager mouth chomped off the rounded edge of the braided loaf. "Mmmm" he said, and ran to play with his wooden train.

"This tells me nothing," Rachel said to her daughter. "I must go to the women." So Rachel bundled up the loaf and the baby, grabbed Ezra by the hand, and sought out her friends for their opinions.

"Hard to tell," Esther claimed. "Maybe it is stale, maybe fresh. Mrs. Minsky is a freshness *maven*. Try her."

Once again, Rachel bundled up the loaf and the baby, took Ezra's hand; and off she went to Mrs. Minsky's house.

"No," Mrs. Minsky said after a leisurely bite. "I cannot say if this is stale or fresh. Better ask Mrs. Pinsky. I rely on her."

And again with the bundling. However, this time Rachel got some good advice.

"If the bread is stale," said Mrs. Pinsky, "throw it to the fishes. They are very dumb and sure to eat anything you give them." Then she took a bite. "Difficult to say," she said after sluggishly chewing. "May I have another?"

And so it went with Rachel's friends until the loaf was gone. Rachel took home her girl and her boy and braided and baked another loaf of bread. Once it was cooled, she bundled up the baby and the loaf, clutched Ezra's hand, and walked to the river.

"Here," she said, unwrapping the loaf and throwing it into the water. "You fishes waited very, very patiently."

Mrs. Minsky and Mrs. Pinsky

Mrs. Minsky was tall.

Mrs. Pinsky was short.

Mrs. Minsky was fat.

Mrs. Pinsky was skinny.

Other than that, you might almost mistake them for the same person.

Mrs. Minsky had wide, brown eyes.

Mrs. Pinsky had wide, brown eyes.

Mrs. Minsky had greying, dark-fluffy hair sticking out from under her kerchief.

Mrs. Pinsky had greying, dark-fluffy hair sticking out from HER kerchief.

They spoke alike. They thought alike. They were the best of friends.

One day, Mrs. Minsky heard that her short, skinny daughter-in-law was expecting a baby. I have no fitting clothes to lend her, thought Mrs. Minsky. She looked down upon her big, husky frame and scratched her chin. I know, she thought, my good friend Mrs. Pinsky is the size of Yoshe's wife. She must still have some clothes for this special occasion.

So off she trudged to Mrs. Pinsky's house.

Along the way, Mrs. Minsky started having doubts. What if Mrs. Pinsky never saved her pregnancy clothes? *Feh*, she thought, of course she saved them. Mrs. Pinsky saves everything, like I do. And on she walked.

But what if she saved them all and chooses not to lend them out to Yoshe's wife? Yoshe will have to spend his money which he should be saving for the baby. No, no, I cannot think this way. Of course Mrs. Pinsky will let me have the clothes.

Now she was walking up the hill that led to Mrs. Pinsky's house. Yes, yes, she thought. Of course Mrs. Pinsky has such clothing, of course Mrs. Pinsky will lend them out to my Yoshe's tiny wife. Mrs. Pinsky has known me forever. She could NOT refuse me anything.

Or COULD she? HOW could she? thought Mrs. Minsky. She would have to know how poor my Yoshe is, investing everything in his dairy business and starting this new family. She would HAVE to know how important it is for him to save here and there, like I taught him to do.

Besides, Mrs. Pinsky already has her fill of grandchildren. In fact, she has ten or twelve of them by now, with no more on the way. She must have used those clothes over and over. Those clothes must be very worn, very faded and weak in the threads.

Come to think of it, those clothes must be *shmatas* by now. Rags! Not worthy of putting onto Yoshe's pretty wife!

Oh, dear me! What can I be thinking? Of course the clothes are still in good repair. Mrs. Pinsky always sees to such matters meticulously. She would never lend a *shmata* to her daughters or daughters-in-law. For them, only the best. And for me, her longtime friend, only the best as well.

Only, what if she thinks she may have more grandchildren on the way? If my Yoshe can do it, at age 31, why would she think her Moshe, at 32, would stop after HIS six children? The wife of her Moshe, Mr. Feldman's girl, is small like Yoshe's wife, Mr. Friedman's daughter. Naturally she would give the clothes to that Feldman girl before she would to ME!

Mrs. Minsky was huffing and puffing by now while reaching the crest of Mrs. Pinsky's hill. Her face was borscht-red. She took a deep breath and knocked on Mrs. Pinsky's door. She knocked hard.

Mrs. Pinsky opened the door and smiled at Mrs. Minsky. "Hello, my good friend. I was not expecting you today," she said.

"Yes, well maybe not!" Mrs. Minsky yelled. "You just keep your tattered *shmatas* for yourself!"

Doctor Klutz

The affluent Klutzes of Chelm were privileged to raise four sons and a daughter.

"Of all our sons," Mr. Klutz told Mrs. Klutz, "there has to be at least one future doctor."

"A doctor we will raise," said the wife.

But Lenny, the eldest Klutz boy, jabbed his elbow into his brand-new microscope, knocking it over and breaking all its glass.

Mr. and Mrs. Klutz shook their heads in agreement.

"We still have three potential doctors in the family."

When Benny, the second-eldest Klutz, complained that his studies hurt his eyes and it was all he could do to learn his Hebrew, the parents shook their heads again, and together looked towards Gimpel.

Only, Gimpel couldn't stand the sight of blood.

With all their hopes hanging on young Pinchus Klutz, they agreed to let their daughter, Ima, help her younger brother with his studies.

First, Ima convinced the Klutzes to replace the glass in the family microscope.

The microscope fixed, she showed Pinny how to slide his sample "just so," looking down and really seeing into it.

Pinny said, "Ima, YOU should be the doctor." And he ran off to play.

Ima smiled. "Yes," she said. "I should be."

Mrs. Klutz and Mr. Klutz were shocked.

"A doctor in the family, yes, but YOU?"

"Am I not a Klutz?" she asked.

"Well, yes," said her mother.

"And am I not studious?"

"Well, yes," said her father.

"And are there not any women doctors in the world?"

"I suppose there are," said her mother.

"I suppose there could be," said her father.

And so, the wealthy Klutzes sent their daughter away to study at Medical School.

When Ima returned eight years later, she hung up her shingle and opened her practice in the center of Chelm.

First, she set up her examining room.

Next, she set up her laboratory. It was there in which she spent her unappointed time.

During the day, many patients arrived.

"Dr. Klutz," said Mrs. Minsky. "Nothing is right with me. Have you a cure?"

"Dr. Klutz," said Mrs. Pinsky. "Nothing is wrong with me. Can you find something?"

"Dr. Klutz," said Gronam Ox. "I have never seen a woman doctor before. Now I have. Good day."

The doctor was glad at the end of each day to see the end of her patients.

"Back to my experiments," she said.

Her laboratory had been carefully arranged. Shelves loaded with scientific books and notepads, perfectly organized, looked as neat as her filing system. Her refuse can sat beside the desk. On the far side of the room, she kept her works-in-progress.

"Moldy bread," she said, taking up a sample.

Ima picked up a large pair of metal tweezers. She deftly placed a speck of the moldy sample onto a rectangular, tiny piece of glass. She slid the glass to study it under her microscope.

"Ah yes. The mold is eating that ugly bacteria from Mrs. Minsky's throat."

Someone knocked at Ima's door.

"That knocking is my favorite brother, Pinny," Ima said. She looked at her project. "*Feh*. Even a doctor like me could never get moldy bread down Mrs. Minsky's throat."

"Coming, Pinny!" she called.

She removed the mold from the microscope and dropped it, glass and all, into the refuse can as she rose to answer the door.

A Trip to Lublin

Sadie, Ruth, and Zora boarded the train to Lublin early one bright summer morning. They were planning to stay with Chelm's successful dress designer, Serele.

Along with their overnight bags, each woman carried something special.

Sadie, Serele's mother, brought a basketful of home-baked miniature yellow cakes. She hoped the basket would return full of new, exciting clothes.

Ruth, Sadie's sister, took along a laundry bag. "I am not so sure I will like these new styles," she said. "With this bag, I will have the choice to wash my clothes or purchase new."

Zora, Sadie's best friend, carried a notebook, bottled ink and feather pen, in order to record every new adventure.

So off they journeyed on the train, watching everything through their window with Zora busily writing down what she saw.

"Cows," she wrote. "Sheep," she said aloud while writing.

"But, Zora, we see cows and sheep every day in Chelm," Ruth pointed out while looking over Zora's shoulder.

"Yes, but these are cows and sheep on our way to Lublin."

"You are right, you are right," Ruth agreed.

"Goats!" Zora suddenly shouted, then wrote it down.

The trip was long. The train stopped more often than they expected. At every stop, the three jumped up, thinking they'd arrived.

"Not Lublin yet," the conductor got used to telling them. "Eight more stops. Seven more stops, six more stops, five, four, three, two, one.

"Lublin!" he shouted happily. "Your stop in Lublin, ladies!"

The three snatched their belongings and descended from the train. A horse-drawn coach was waiting to meet and deliver them to Serele's mansion.

"So, she did not arrive on the coach." Sadie complained.

"Come now, Sadie, she must be at home in preparation," comforted Ruth.

"Of course, of course. My Serele would never disappoint me."

Seated in the coach, Zora wrote, "Coach, driver, horses, train tracks, road, street signs, trees, people, people. Many, many people."

Sadie took care of her pastries, covering and recovering them with the tablecloth she planned on giving to her daughter. Ruth neatly folded her laundry bag over her lap.

"Here we are," the driver announced. He helped two women down from the coach, and waited patiently as Zora, absorbed with her notebook, stayed a little longer.

"Mansion," she wrote. "Estate. Long drive."

The three were led to Serele's front door. A servant opened it up to greet them.

"So where is my Serele?" Sadie demanded.

"Our mistress Serele has asked me to apologize -- she cannot be here for your visit. She was sent away to Paris for a fashion consultation."

Zora quickly opened her notebook. "Paris," she wrote. "Fashion consultation."

"Paris!" Sadie cried. "Is Paris more important than her mother?"

"With deep regret," the servant said. "Mistress Serele has instructed us all for you to have a lovely visit here in Lublin. Allow me to lead you to your rooms. Tomorrow, Carol Klein, Serele's chief assistant, will take you to the showroom where you will see the new advances in the industry."

Zora once again took out her pen and dipped. "Advances in the industry," she wrote.

Every guest room had a curtained four-poster bed. Each also had a walk-in closet, a private bath with indoor plumbing, a writing desk with a chair to match, and an ornate chaise-longue sofa. On both sides of the beds stood night tables topped off with glass. Beneath the glass lay white lace doilies, perfectly fitting the rounded table tops.

Sadie's room, and Sadie's room alone, possessed a glass-tiered, rainbow-producing chandelier and a balcony with a view of Serele's extensive rose gardens.

"Such a room is fitting for her mother," Sadie said aloud.

Ruth happily found a hook in her walk-in closet on which to hang her bag.

I was right to bring along this bag, she thought.

In her room, Zora rushed straight to the desk, and set up her notebook and ink bottle just so.

"They knew we were coming," she said, patting her book.

Meanwhile, Sadie emptied her small pile of clothes in the middle of the four-poster bed, carefully folding every garment, but hesitated to place them in the dresser drawers. Putting off the task, she remembered her basket of cakes.

"I need to find the kitchen," she said to the startled maidservant walking by with starched-fresh linens.

In the kitchen, there were eight, maybe nine cooks walking in and out of the cooking area. Sadie stared at the enormous counters and wondered where she might place her long-traveling pastries.

"So you must be from Chelm," said a man dressed in white.

Sadie hadn't seen him enter. She jumped.

"You need not be ashamed. Mistress Serele, she is from Chelm, and look how well she does!"

"Ashamed? What kind of ashamed? I am indeed from that town of well-renown. And before you say anything more, you should know I am the mother of your Mistress Serele."

"So it seems," said the man. "And what have you there in your basket?"

"These cakes are for my daughter. I am afraid they will go to waste." Sadie opened the cloth to reveal the fluffy yellow cakes, squeezing one to check for freshness.

"We have a cooler where these will keep nicely until my Mistress' return," said the man dressed in white. He folded a large cheesecloth around the cakes, and was carting them all away before the staring mother could protest.

Such a cooler belongs in Zora's notebook, Sadie thought.

Zora was sitting in her room with her notebook on the desk.

Ruth was admiring the way her bag looked hanging on the fancy hook.

Sadie returned to her room carrying the tablecloth and emptied basket.

And so, the first night in Lublin passed.

Bustling sounds awoke the three houseguests in the morning. Each of them poked her covered head through the open doors into the hallway.

“Breakfast in the Dining Room!” called a servant.

Sadie thought how strange it was not making breakfast herself.

Ruth meticulously picked out the dress she would be wearing.

Zora rushed to her desk to write, “Breakfast. Dining Room.”

After a breakfast fit for queens, Serele’s overseer/assistant, Carol Klein, invited the women to the showroom.

“This will please you all,” she said. Carol was an eager, friendly woman -- young, but comfortable with her elders. They all walked through a longer hallway, down a wide staircase, and into what Carol called The Lobby. “Wait until you see all this!” she said.

Zora wrote, “The Lobby.”

Ruth folded her bag as small as she could get it.

Sadie said, “Hmpf.”

Carol opened the ornamental door with a flourish and the women stepped over the threshold.

Serele’s showroom had been built to be the mansion’s ballroom. Wall to wall racks of dresses -- every color of the rainbow -- still left room for visitors to walk through spacious aisles. The four corners of the room were equipped with three-way, full-length mirrors; and catty-cornered beside them stood dressing screens for privacy, adorned with Chinese artwork.

Zora dropped her pen and notebook.

Ruth dropped her bag.

Sadie dropped her lower jaw.

Carol Klein rushed to help the women gather themselves and led them to the aisles.

“Ladies, sweet ladies,” she said. “You need not be afraid. Dig in.”

Zora looked at Ruth.

Ruth looked at Sadie.

Sadie looked at Ruth and Zora.

"You are family," Carol continued. "I am instructed you may all pick out some items, on the house, of course!"

Zora tried to write "On the house," but her pen was out of ink.

"Some items?" Ruth whispered to Sadie. "So tell me, how many, exactly, is this number 'some?' "

Sadie laughed. "Oh, my Serele, she has always been such a spoiler. See how she spoils her Mama!"

The women took hours getting used to the idea of trying on dresses and skirts, silken scarves, blouses, petticoats, jackets and outerwear.

Carol Klein thoughtfully gave the women plenty of time before she spoke again.

"I see you ladies are quite enjoying yourselves. Have you chosen anything?"

Somewhat sheepishly, Sadie turned to the mound of clothes she had accumulated.

Ruth pointed to a modest pile that would easily fit into her bag.

Zora had fallen in love with a straight-cut, black woolen dress. She stood up proudly, wearing it with its matching overcoat.

"I see you like the outerwear," Carol said. "Now, it is time for you to view the underwear."

"Underwear?" the three of them exclaimed.

"Yes, underwear. In fact, we call it 'lingerie.' You will be quite impressed with Mistress Serele's innovations in this line of work."

Zora scrambled out of the coat and dress. "Is any of it black?" she asked.

Carol led them to another showroom, smaller than a ballroom, but large enough to continue such a party.

The women were shocked to see a roomful of mannequins sporting the kind of clothes that are worn beneath the clothes.

"My husband, Zvee," Zora cried. "What would he think if I wore such a thing?"

"He would not be thinking," Sadie teased.

“He would love it,” Carol said assuringly.

And the women took hours again, trying items on, putting some aside, only this time, they were laughing and giggling and telling some off-color stories to each other.

The train ride home from Lublin was much like the trip’s first day.

Only, Sadie covered the contents of her basket even more carefully.

Ruth sat upon her bag, ensuring nothing could fall out, or, even worse, be seen.

And Zora could not care less about her empty ink bottle. Instead, she secretly kept her hand beneath the hem of her skirt, feeling the smoothly black fabric slide on her leg underneath.

Zora's Notebook

Ever since girlhood, Zora loved hearing stories. "Read to me, Papa," she begged every night. "Tell me more about the milkman and his daughters."

As Zora grew, her place in life was set. She married, raised four children and never learned to write until the year the women of Chelm began the children's *shula*. Zora's children were grown. Zora was, in fact, a grandmother, and still, she had to learn to write.

"I wish to become the new Sholem Aleichem," she told her husband, Zvee.

So off to classes she went, carrying her roll and butter and a special notebook given her by Zvee.

Libby Peretz, the girls' *melamed*, greeted Zora at the door. "It is never too late to learn," Libby said. "Have a seat where you wish." Zora took a front row seat.

The girls piled into the school. Zora was two heads taller than them all. Two girls giggled behind her back, then complained they couldn't see from there.

"Do not laugh at Mrs. Shooler," Libby warned. "You must admire her."

The girls stifled their giggles, but Zora moved to the back where she wouldn't block their view. She opened her notebook and waited patiently to mark her name.

Libby came around to every student and wrote the Hebrew-looking Yiddish characters of their names into their books. Zora was thrilled to see her name in handwritten print. "Copy this," Libby said to her, "and you can write your name."

Zora copied the characters again and again, filling up her first, entire page.

As the school days went by, Zora became accustomed to sitting in the back and writing her newly-learned letters, later whole words, while the girls became quite used to her. She wrote so many letters and words that Zvee had to purchase for her another notebook.

"I am a writer now," Zora said to him. "Not quite a Sholom Aleichem, but a writer I am. I need not go to classes any more. I will take this special notebook with me on my trip to Lublin. You will perhaps be proud of me, Zvee."

One day, Libby took sick and the girl students had a substitute *melamed*. Zora, returning from Lublin, heard about the new *melamed* and wanted to meet her for herself. She walked to the *shula*, deliberately late to catch the end of the school day.

"I came to meet with you," Zora said. "I have learned how to write as a student here, and this is my notebook to prove it."

The substitute *melamed* looked upon the notebook. Opening randomly, she saw isolated words such as "Breakfast. Dining Room. Lobby."

"What is this?" the *melamed* asked.

"It is my note collection from a very special trip to Lublin. You may use it in the classroom if you wish. However, I will be needing it back."

"And how would I use this in the classroom?" asked the substitute *melamed*.

"Perhaps as an example. The girls I studied with have moved up a grade or two. I think my work can help your girls to learn their Yiddish."

"Thank you," said this new *melamed*. "I will surely see fit to use this."

"You are welcome to it, as long as it is duly returned."

And Zora walked home, happily satisfied to be a writer.

" 'Cows, sheep, goats,' " the surrogate *melamed* was reading to the girls in the morning. "See for yourselves. 'Paris. Designer. Underwear.' " The girls became alert.

"Girls," the *melamed* was saying. "Look at this notebook and learn from it well. This is a very good lesson for you. This is a laundry list, not writing. This is NOT the way in which to write."

"Zvee," Zora said at breakfast the next morning, "I cannot thank you enough for buying me my notebooks. And thank you for putting up with all the time I took for schooling. You know, I have children reading my work today. I do believe I am the new Sholom Aleichem."

Chanukah Candles in Chelm

It takes forty-four candles to get through all eight nights of Chanukah. Each night, the main candle called the "*shamis*" is lit in order to light the other candles. On the first night of Chanukah, one candle is lit by the *shamis* so that two candles burn upon the menorah. On the second night, two are lit by the *shamis*, so that three candles burn. And so on, until on the last night of Chanukah, nine candles burn.

As winter approached the year before, despite Stanley Lesky's blossoming Dry Goods Store, Tanta Lydia's was the best spot to get candles in Chelm. Her home was at the edge of town, so that many Chelmites would sometimes encounter each other in a bottleneck situation.

"Oh, so you are going to Tanta's today?"

"Yes, and you?"

"Yes, and you, too?" people would say to each other while pushing their way through the traffic.

Once at Tanta Lydia's, it was even harder to get through the door. Tanta, you might say, was a collector.

"White vases, green vases, yellow vases, what color will Tanta think of next?" women would ask each other.

"Thanks to Tanta, that *nudnik* peddler Rubin Pesky stays in business, no?"

Tanta also kept her home extremely warm.

"One has to remove TWO coats to stand around at Tanta Lydia's," people said.

The heat in Tanta's home was conducive to her candlemaking. She melted the wax, then needed to keep it warm so as not to let it harden up. Tanta took her wick strings and dipping materials and meticulously measured everything out to make the perfect-sized Chanukah candles.

Tanta herself was a feeble woman in many ways. She walked with a cane and could no longer manage herself on stairways. Her grandchildren and even her great-grandchildren became old enough to help her walk through town to acquire the ingredients she'd need to make her candles. Her nephews and nieces and great-nephews and nieces had become her secondary helpers in this endeavor. But they all somehow managed to shy away from spending much time inside her home.

Besides the vases and cheap, unuseful items from Rubin Pesky, Tanta Lydia kept her house full of *chatchkas* loaded in wooden crates. They lined the entire hallway. To get from one room to the next, one almost had to walk sideways through the narrow pathway to Tanta's candle room.

Candles of every size, style, shape and color filled the rest of the already diminished spaces. If it weren't for her beautiful work, the people of Chelm would either make their own candles, or put up with Rubin Pesky for a long afternoon and try to acquire Chanukah candles through him.

One day, as Rachel's daughter was honored to perform her first solo errand for her mother, the girl endured the babbling bottleneck on the way to Tanta's house, only to find all the stories she had heard about the woman to be true. A slim child, she easily managed her passage through the cramped hallway and into Tanta's candle room.

"Tanta Lydia," said the girl. "I am here for 44 Chanukah candles for my mother."

"Good for you, *shayna Bubele*," Tanta said, pinching the little girl's cheeks.

"Would you like to see how these are made?"

Between the heat of the wood burning inside the wax-melting stove, and the overly-pungent, mingled odor of beeswax and the mildewed crates, the girl could barely breathe. She hadn't worn a second coat to remove, and had no desire to stay one moment longer than necessary. She also remembered the crowded Chelmites waiting outside the door to quickly get in, then out of Tanta Lydia's.

On the other hand, the girl did not wish to appear rude. Her parents had raised her well.

"Tanta Lydie," she said with a growing affection. "I would love to watch you make your candles." She looked around the room to see if she could find a good excuse to leave without hurting any feelings. She saw thousands upon thousands of candles and wondered why Tanta was even in the process of making any more. "May I ask you a question instead?" said the girl.

Tanta pulled up a pair of candles attached to each other by a single string. They had been cooling for hours after their final dipping, and were ready for the cut. "Anything, *Bubele*, anything." She held, with one hand, her newest candles up in a vertical line, and reached with the other for her scissors. "Ask."

"Why is it that you have so many candles, and yet you are still making more?"

"Watch, and you shall see. Hold this lower candle while I cut." The girl curled her fingers around the bottom candle as Tanta Lydia cut the string between the two. "Now you will only need forty-three more."

"But why, Tanta Lydie, did you give me only ONE of these newest candles?"

Tanta held the rejected candle in position while the girl looked upon a shelf housing hundreds of perfectly-formed, varicolored candles.

"My standards are of the highest order," Tanta said. I cannot sell any SECOND candles from each pair, silly girl. They are upside down."

Katchka Goniff

It all began with the onions.

"A *goniff* is in Chelm," Gilda cried to her neighbor one afternoon. "I put my onions out to cure in the sun, and now I cannot find them. We have, in Chelm, a *tsibele goniff*!"

"No, no, how can that be?" Rozzie asked, petting the head of Sidney, her family dog. Sidney had followed her from home and was sniffing at her knees. "Why would someone wish to steal your onions?"

"Why? Does one ever know what motivates a *goniff*? First they take this, then they take that. They take whatever they find."

"They?" Rozzie scratched her kerchief. "What kind of a 'they?'"

And so they bantered while wandering around outside of Gilda's house. Rozzie spotted something in the shade.

"Look here," she cried. "Are these your missing onions?" The crate had been placed in an early-morning, sunny spot.

"Aha," said Gilda. "Indeed, Chelm has a very CLEVER *goniff*! He thinks to move his spoils around."

"*Feh!*" answered Rozzie. "*Goniff* my eye."

The next day, it was laundry.

"Rozzie, Rozzie, come quickly," Gilda ordered, having barged through Rozzie's door. "The *goniff* has returned, and now he took my drying laundry!"

"What?" Rozzie sat busily hand-feeding table scraps to Sidney. "What kind of laundry?"

"Just look at how you spoil that mongrel!" Gilda said. "What kind of 'what kind of laundry!' MY kind of laundry, the good kind! I hung up all our holiday clothing to dry and now it is gone. The *goniff* has returned!"

"*Goniff, shmoniff*, there IS no *goniff*. Unless you see your only daughter as a thief!"

And surely enough, out through the window could be seen, at Gilda's house, Anna, her daughter, holding the overflowing laundry basket in her arms, sticking her nose into the top, smelling the freshness of her wind-blown blouse. Gilda hurried home.

"Anna, what EVER has possessed you to do such a chore unasked?" Gilda said.

"This is very, very unlike you, my dear."

The third day was the beginning of the *Sukkos* holiday.

It had almost been a perfect day when Rozzie heard shrieking from the house next door.

"OY VEY IS MEIR! THE GONIFF HAS STRUCK AT ME AGAIN!" Gilda screamed. She threw open her door and yelled some more outside.

"*Goniff*, you hear me? *Katchka goniff*?"

"Oh, my," Rozzie said aloud, though her dog had not been there to hear. "I had better go and comfort Gilda once again." And she left her house, unfollowed.

"So, my friend," Rozzie asked at Gilda's doorway. "*Vuss is duss*?"

"My *katchka*, my roasted duckling made especially to eat in the *Sukkah*. It was to look so splendid, to be laid out between the *esrog* and the *lulav*. I purchased it just yesterday from Rubin Pesky."

"Oy, not THAT Rubin Pesky, the *nudnik* peddler?"

"Of course THAT Rubin Pesky. How many Rubin Peskys could Chelm bear to contain? So there I stood, arguing all morning with that *nudnik* over the price of a little *katchkele*. As you well know, Rozzie, after an ordeal such as that, this is a meal one really wants to eat!"

"Yes of course, of course," Rozzie agreed, slightly disconcerted at the absence of her Sidney.

"So, this morning, I began to roast the *katchka*, hearing it snap, smelling the fat, turning it, basting it, filling in the stuffing. And when it was done, I placed it on my favorite platter, the one my mother gave me on my wedding day.

"So I said to myself, Gilda, this is one *Sukkos* meal to remember. You have roasted for your family the perfect *katchka*!" Gilda straightened up her shoulders as if she'd won a prize.

"And?"

"And, you ask. And then, I leave to check the decorations on the *Sukkah*, I return to my kitchen, and what do I see? My famous platter, empty; with a trail of grease running down the table, across the floor and out the door, disappearing in the grass."

"This is bad," Rozzie said. "A *katchka goniff* is in Chelm for sure."

"So what kind of help are you? Are you here to tell me something I did not know before you came along?"

"I need to go home and cook my own *Sukkos* meal," Rozzie said, slightly offended.

And home she went. She sat at her table, pondering, when she heard a chewing sound coming from below. She looked down.

"Sidney!" she cried. He was chewing and crunching on a clump of meat and bones.

"What have you there? Is that a *katchka* carcass?" Rozzie smiled.

"I see our Gilda finally has her unimagined *goniff*. But I think for now I may not want to tell her."

The Nudnik Peddler

The widow Pesky threw the first handful of earth upon her husband's coffin. Her eyes were clear and dry.

Earlier, at the Synagogue, Rabbi Greenbaum had led the *minyan* in reciting *Kaddish*. Now at the grave site, before any dirt hit the coffin, the people of Chelm impatiently waited for the rabbi to stand beside the widow Pesky.

"Rubin's pushy peddling could drive a woman crazy," whispered Ada.

"Such a *nudnik*," Ruth whispered in return.

"He simply NEVER let up," said Mrs. Minsky.

"ALWAYS, you had to buy just to get rid of him," said Mrs. Pinsky.

"I cannot think of anyone that liked him," Zora said very quietly. "Not even Zvee, and Zvee likes everybody."

"Anybody who likes everybody still could not like Rubin Pesky," added Rozzie, to which all the whisperers agreed.

Slowly and solemnly, Rabbi Greenbaum joined the graveside Pesky party. All was quiet when he began to speak.

"We will now pay our final homage to our friend and fellow Jew, Rubin Pesky."

A woman coughed.

"Beloved husband, son, father, and citizen of Chelm," the rabbi continued. "He was a good man and a good Jew."

Two other women coughed.

"The entire Village of Chelm will dearly miss him."

Four people sneezed.

"This man, this honorable man," said Rabbi Greenbaum, "has added quality to all our lives."

One of the coughers began to hiccup. Often.

"What this man has given of himself, no single man can ever measure."

Mr. Minsky burped.

The hiccupping got louder.

Mr. Pinsky burped.

Chelm's most respected elder, Gronam Ox, straining forward to lean upon his cane, passed gas.

"The quality of our lives," said Rabbi Greenbaum, ignoring the cacophony of bodily functions, "has been greatly improved by the persistence with which Rubin held his ground in selling his wares to Chelm. Goods he struggled with, went out of his way to acquire, beautiful ceramic dishes, imported fruits and delicacies, oil lamps, fabrics for the ladies, up-to-date farming tools, things we Chelmites might never see, never mind own, without a peddler such as he."

The coughing, burping, sneezing, hiccupping and such suddenly stopped.

"And so we lay to rest, a hard-working man, a deservedly peaceful soul, Rebbe Rubin Pesky. May he peddle his wares in a better place than Chelm."

And the rabbi motioned to the Pesky party to begin the throwing of the dirt. After the widow Pesky's turn came Rubin's mother. Then his father, his brother, sister, son and daughter. The rabbi's handful was the last, leaving the rest of the work for the undertakers.

Back at the house, the Pesky mirrors had been covered with sheets. Neighbors not attending the funeral busily prepared enough food to last the Pesky family all the seven days of mourning. Several low wooden blocks had been set for sitting *shiva*.

Only two days before, Rubin had been walking among the living, pestering this one, annoying another.

"Beautiful toys, toys for the children," he'd called out. "Save them for Chanukah, beautiful toys for the children."

Selma groaned. "Howie," she said, "Chanukah is many months from now."

"So?"

"So why is Rubin Pesky selling toys NOW?"

"Why is Rubin Pesky selling toys in the summer, she asks? Rubin Pesky is selling toys now because he is Rubin Pesky. He got his toys from another district, and he needs to dump them off on us."

"Dolls, dolls for the girls," Rubin wailed. "Beautiful dolls, hair of gold, eyes that roll back in their heads. Dolls your daughters cannot resist."

In a neighboring home, Bubbeh Rose looked up from her knitting.

"Perhaps his dolls are worth taking a look at," she said to her husband Harry.

"Our granddaughter, Basha, may like one for her birthday."

"Rosie, please. Do not start," Harry begged. "We will never see the end of him."

"Dolls, beautiful dolls," Rubin called.

Bubbeh Rose went back to her knitting.

Rubin's wagon made its way to the end of the road, where the borderline of Chelm ended at what seemed like the world's steepest cliff. Rubin stopped at that spot where his most susceptible customers often gathered around the wagon.

"Boats, wooden boats for the boys," he called out. Two people came out of their homes.

"Go away, Rubin, we want nothing today," Chaim Lev said rather rudely.

"Take off," said Beryl Ruderman.

"Take off? Take off where, over the cliff?" Rubin asked, moving up towards Beryl and pushing her slightly as he walked beside her.

"Did you not buy your glorious platters from me, Beryl? How was that dinner party you had with them, the one to which my wife and I were not invited? Was it a bawdy success? Was it, Beryl, was it?"

Three more Chelmites, including Chaim's wife came outside, as Rubin's voice was booming louder.

"Rubin, our baby is sleeping, go away!" Hanna cried.

"Would not your baby like a wooden boat or a dolly?"

"My baby is too young and only wants to sleep. Please."

"But your baby will grow and need a toy or two to play with," Rubin said. "Come, Hanna, look at what I have for you."

Hanna came closer to the wagon and began to look.

"You never saw a doll like this, have you, Hanna?"

"No, but my baby is a boy," Hanna said.

"So, what about this sailboat?" Rubin asked, hurriedly replacing the doll and pulling out another toy.

"Toys, toys, toys," Chaim Lev yelled. "What we need in Chelm is peace and quiet, to hell with you and your toys."

"Chaim, look," said Mrs. Lev. "This doll, her eyes are watching you."

"So, let her watch me walk away from this wagon and never see Rubin Pesky again," Chaim said.

"But look at how your wife admires the dolls," Rubin added. "Could you deprive her of such a lovely pleasure?"

"My wife has grown too old to play with dolls!" Chaim grabbed Mrs. Lev by the arm and started to pull her away. She was still holding the doll with the movable eyes.

"That will COST you," Rubin sang. "And what might I have for you?" he asked, turning to Hanna.

Chaim grabbed the doll away from his wife, rushed up to the wagon, and slammed the doll down hard, smashing her delicate cheeks.

"That will COST you," Rubin sang again, "we have WITNESSES."

Chaim began to chase Rubin around the wagon.

"Witnesses, shmitnesses," Chaim called. "I remember you when we were still Yeshiva boys," Chaim said. "Asking, always asking the *melamud* questions, keeping us late, no scholarly questions, mind you, simply asking asking asking and never letting up."

"So, what is wrong with asking questions?" Rubin asked.

“What is wrong with YOU?” Chaim screamed, chasing the peddler around the wagon again. “When you married, your poor wife had no idea what she was getting into. I hear you make your children eat the leftover food you bring home, forcing them to eat what they do not like, simply because you could not sell it.”

“So?”

“And you come around here, forcing us to buy things we would not think to need.”

“So?” Rubin asked. “I am a peddler. This is what a peddler does for a living.”

“And do you know you are called ‘the *nudnik* peddler?’”

“So, what is wrong with a little *nudging* once in a while?” Rubin asked. “‘The *nudnik* peddler,’ I could grow to like that.”

Hanna, Mrs. Lev and the rest of the witnesses began to leave.

“Wait,” Rubin cried out. “You have not seen my specialty of the day.” No one stopped to look.

“See this, I have learned to do some acrobatics,” Rubin called. He rolled over onto his hands, did a cartwheel, flipped a few times, and looked around to see if they were watching.

“Show us your tricks near the cliff!” Chaim yelled. “You will do anything to keep your audience.”

Rubin did.

And the widow Pesky threw the first handful of earth upon her husband’s coffin.

The Four Questions

Passover in Chelm puts every family into an uproar. Children have to clean the kitchen shelves, counters, and floors. They search out each and every speck of bread crumbs -- for no leavened matter may be present at *Pesach*. Roasts roast in the ovens, whole sets of *Pesach* dishes replace everyday dishes, and the youngest males of the families stay busy learning or reviewing their particular role in the *Seder* ceremony -- asking/singing The Four Questions.

The Blashke home was blessed only with daughters. Yetta, Hanna, Lena, and Gabi were scrambling to help their Mama prepare the *Seder* meal. Many relatives were coming. Gabi, age five, was the youngest Blashke girl.

"Why may *I* not sing the Four Questions tonight, Mama?" she asked.

"Oh Little Gabi, do you not know? The *Feer Kashiss* are to be asked only by boys. Your cousin Jacob Shrei will have that honor tonight."

"But Cousin Jacob would NOT sing it well," Lena piped up.

"Whether or not he sings it well, Jacob is the youngest male of the family."

"Jacob Shmacob!" Gabi cried. "*I* want to sing The *Feer Kashiss*."

"Sing them all you want today," Mama said. "But tonight at the *Seder*, you will be quiet for Jacob's turn."

Gabi's sisters, still sponging out the cabinets, looked at each other and shook their heads.

When the sun was going down, Papa Blashke stood outside. His mother, Gabi's Grandma Lydia, hobbled in on Uncle Leo's arm. His brothers, Leo and Bernie, and his sister, Ruthie Shrei, came every year with their wives, husband, and children. Papa led them all inside. The dining-room table's sliding leaves were stretched to capacity, the table squeezed between the narrow archway of two rooms.

Smells of Mama's matzoh-ball soup, boiled chicken with leeks (never onions -- they make the chicken soup taste bitter!) and roasted lamb and beef filled the air. Papa smoothed the hair away from Gabi's forehead as she held up a brittle piece of matzoh.

"May I *shmeer* some butter on this, Papa?" she asked.

"Tonight is a *Seder*, Gabi. A meat meal."

"So that means no milk or butter?"

"Yes, of course. Anything else?" Papa knew her well.

"Let ME ask The Four Questions," she begged, pulling under Papa's sleeve at his warm, hairy arm.

"Let you whaaaaat?" he laughed. "Since when am I raising a boy in this house? Do you want to take off your pretty dress, wear a *tallis* and a *yarmulke* and become a boy, Little One?"

Gabi looked down at her specially-made dress with the layered skirt. Cousin Serele had it sent to her from Lublin. "I want to be a girl, AND sing The *Feer Kashiss*."

Just then, Aunt Ruthie breezed past Gabi and Papa. Ruthie's son, Jacob, quickly disappeared under Mama Blashke's floor-length tablecloth. He stayed hidden there most of the evening, pulling at the white linen while tickling feet.

"What naaaaughty, naaaaughty chiiiiil-driiin," said Uncle Bernie. "Ruuuutheeee, you should diss-i-pliiin hiiim." This was Gabi's least favorite uncle. Wine was being poured. "Heeeere, pour me thiiiss," he said to his brother's wife. He held up a dark-labeled bottle. "Miiine is MUCH better wiiine. It comes from Fraaaaaance." Bernie only drank his own.

Then the Seder began. The men stood up. They slowly sang and repeated their parts from the *Hagadah*. Smells of the roasted meats and boiled chicken were making everybody hungrier by the minute.

Ruthie pulled Jacob out from under the table. It was time for The Questions. Jacob straightened out his *yarmulke* and held his *Hagadah* before him.

“Ma nish ta naw cha lay law chazeh,” Jacob slowly struggled, kicking his older brother under the table. Eli whispered to him. Jacob continued. *“Michol cha lay los,”* and so, throughout The Four Questions, he fought with the Hebrew.

Across the table from him, Bernie was shaking his head in disapproval. Ignoring him, Jacob managed to reach the part where he could ask in translation.

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” each one began. “Why on other nights may we eat leavened or unleavened bread, but on this night, only unleavened bread?”

Gabi wished again that she could have a *shmeer* of butter on HER unleavened bread.

Jacob scratched his head, making his *yarmulke* crooked.

“Ma nish ta naw cha lay law chazeh, . . .” His singsong, nasal tune was improving. “Why on all other nights may we eat any species of herbs, but this night only bitter herbs?”

“Ma nish ta naw cha lay law chazeh, . . . Why on all other nights do we not dip even once, but on this night twice?”

“Ma nish ta naw cha lay law chazeh, . . . Why on all other nights do we eat and drink either sitting or reclined, but on this night we all of us recline?”

After the fourth question, Gabi felt ready to sleep on her newly pillowed chair. But her insides growled. Jacob was done. Now she would eat . . . or could she? Her uncles were back in full song, describing in Hebrew the rest of the Exodus out of Egypt. Would it take another forty years to get to this meal?

Every once in a while, they could bite a little something if it was part of the ceremony. Hard-boiled eggs, dipped in salt water for tears, lettuce, horseradish. This wasn't a meal. Gabi wanted FOOD.

More history, more explanations, more singsong. Gabi was glad to see Old Uncle Leo skipping several pages while Grandma Lydia wasn't looking. And finally, it was over. The Jews were freed. Moses himself would now allow the Blashke family to eat.

The matzoh balls bobbed lightly at the top of the tub-sized bowl of Mama's chicken soup. Boiled chicken, parsnips, carrots, celery, and turnips made their way into individual bowls. Mama carefully scooped out a matzoh ball for every bowl. All served, Mama sat.

Gabi watched as Aunt Hedda strutted off to the kitchen, returning with a giant bowl. She grabbed Mama's soup ladle at the head of the table, loaded up the bowl with no fewer than ten tasty off-white, almost yellow matzoh balls. She headed back to Bernie.

Gabi turned to Lena. "Why does Uncle Bernie get a bowl full of matzoh balls when we only get one each?"

"Shhh," Lena warned. "Do not let them hear you."

"Why?" whispered Gabi.

"It is rude."

"Is SHE being rude?" Gabi wanted to know.

Hedda sat down next to Bernie, handing him the bowl. Bernie shoved his smaller bowl aside. "Theeere," he shouted out. "Now thaaat is a bowl of *knaaaadelach*." And he slobbered up his soup.

Gabi whispered to Lena again. "Why is Uncle Bernie such a *chazzer*?"

"Gabi, stop it." Lena was almost giggling. She glared at their sister, Hanna, helplessly about to laugh.

"Why does Aunt Hedda DO that for him?"

"Gabi!" Hanna chimed in. "Stop asking questions now and eat."

Later, after everyone went home, Yetta, Gabi's oldest sister, was tucking Gabi into bed. "I know why the youngest boy, and not a girl, has to ask the Four Questions," she said. Gabi's sleepy eyes suddenly got as big as her ears.

"A reason?"

"Yes, a reason," Yetta said, smoothing back Gabi's forehead hair, like Papa. She quickly kissed her sister's tender skin. "If The Four Questions were asked by a girl like you," she said, "they would be The Forty Questions!"

"Oh," considered Gabi. Then she had to ask one more. "And Uncle Bernie wouldn't wait that long to eat?"

The Match

It hurt her parents to say it. It hurt the girl to hear it. It especially hurt the mother to say what had once been said of HER by her own, and even her then-future husband's parents. But it had to be said once again.

"A spring chicken, our daughter, you are not." True, the girl was hardly a girl any more. And there was no marriage in sight for her. "A husband must be found."

The not-young girl sulked. She turned away from her mother in order to look at her father.

"True is true, my Pretty," he said. "By now, a husband must be found." The daughter ran to her room crying into her apron.

"I fear we may not live to enjoy the day of becoming a *bubbeh* and a *zayda*," said the mother. "It makes no sense. She is pretty, she cooks, she has the handsome dowry we have saved throughout her life. Yet still, at her ripe age, she sleeps alone. I do not understand the men of Chelm!"

"True is true, my dear wife. Like the girl, growing younger we are not," said the father, pulling at his beard in serious thought. Then it came to him. "We must hire the matchmaker! We will dip into the dowry and employ Gertie Myrtle's services at once."

"You," said the mother, "are the only man in Chelm I understand."

"And I am difficult," he said, smiling at his well-worn wife and pinching her soft, fleshy bottom.

Upstairs in her room, the daughter stopped her crying. She sat upon her bed and forgot about what had been upsetting her. She sang a lullaby to herself and promptly fell asleep.

By Tuesday, Gertie had already made the match. He was not a native Chelmite, but had settled in quite well the year before. Everyone agreed how pleasantly he had taken to Chelm, and Chelm to him. As he was setting up in business, several calamities had befallen him, but he took them in stride and carried on just as a true Chelmite would. This boy of thirty was now to come and meet the girl, he was told, of “twenty-nine” that next afternoon.

The table was set with four glasses of tea and a Yellow Cake the daughter baked that morning. It had always been her specialty. The four of them sat. The father of the not-young woman stared at the not-young man. The not-young man stared at the never-having-been-young-as-a-mother mother. This never-to-be-young-as-a-*bubbeh* stared back at the not-young future father of her grandchildren.

The future-not-to-be-young-as-a-mother alternated gazing from her elderly, handsome father to her *zoflig* mother, to her not-young-but-somewhat-bearably-handsome, doubtless future husband. Then she cut and handed each of them a piece of Yellow Cake. They ate. They drank their tea.

Then the not-young man began a round of stares again. All of them gaped and ogled and studied and stared until the soon-to-be-bride sang a lullaby and the whole group of them promptly fell asleep at the table.

They soon became known as the happiest family in Chelm.

Shabbos Shiksa

Rudolf Schmidt, the resident gentile of Chelm, was sick one Friday afternoon. He would not be able to function as Chelm's dependable *Shabbos Goy*.

"You must lie down until the fever passes," ordered Katya, his wife.

"No, no, I must light up the Synagogue for the Jews. They always count on me."

Katya laid clean sheets onto the bed, then pushed her husband down. "Here, put this cloth on your head. I will be the *Shabbos Goy* tonight. You rest, all will be fine."

"But Katya, there are many tasks, you know not what to do," Rudolf insisted.

"Hush and be quiet!" she said. "I will know." Katya's busy hands tucked her husband snugly into bed.

"You must light the Synagogue fire," Rudolf began.

"I know, I know."

"But first, you must gather the wood."

"Yes, I know, I know. Jews are not unlike us -- are not their systems much the same?"

Rudolf shifted in his bed. "Not exactly," he answered. "That is why they need a *Shabbos Goy*."

Katya put on her overcoat and headed for the door. "You rest. Tonight, the Jews have Katya Schmidt! I will be their *Shabbos goy*," she said, and slammed the door behind her.

Rudolf worried and sighed thinking she does not even know she is a *shiksa*.

Roof

Fanny and Manny were playing indoors with Bubbeh Rose's ancient dollhouse.

"This dollhouse has no roof," Fanny said.

"*Meshugah* Fanny," said Manny. "If this dollhouse had a roof, how would we get our hands in it?"

Fanny looked at the dollhouse. The front and back doors and all the windows remained unopened, existing just for show. Tiny furniture and dolls had been placed inside through the top.

"It needs a roof," Fanny said. "The family is at home inside. What if it rains? Their lives would be too shaky without a roof."

Manny considered his sister's words. Tending never to agree with her, he thought for an extra long time.

"You know I am right!" Fanny cried. "Hah!"

Manny frowned. "When she is right, she is right," he sighed. "We have to build this house a roof."

They went outside. They found some twigs and some fallen branches still with leaves on them.

"We will use the twigs," Manny said.

"We will use the leaves," Fanny argued.

"We will use the twigs and leaves," Manny said, losing his fighting spirit.

"We will just use the leafy branches," Fanny said decisively.

Manny gathered as many branches bearing leaves as he could. They returned inside -- arms loaded and sticky with the sappy branches -- to begin their work.

"These leaves will make a perfect roof, like a *Sukkos* hut," Fanny said, carefully applying a smaller branch to the top of the little house.

"But if they have a windy day, the leaves will blow away," Manny said.

"*Meshugah* Manny," Fanny said. "This dollhouse is indoors!"

Ezra's Bar Mitzvah

All he ever wanted was the food. He got through his *hoftorah* oh so very smoothly, knowing it almost by heart. Ezra Lutz eloquently concluded, saying as expected, "Today I am a Man."

Rachel and Grubba Lutz were not wealthy Chelmites. Several friends pitched in to bring the food. They knew Ezra's favorite dishes. Others brought and set the decorations, and the rabbi even charged his lowest rate.

Today I can EAT like a man, Ezra thought. He licked his lips as he stretched to reach for a piping hot, fried chicken dumpling carried on a tray by one of Esther's servants.

"Ezra Lutz!" Grubba yelled, grabbing the boy by the wrist. "You will NOT have grease running down your new suit. Come. It is time for the photographs."

Ezra groaned, following his father's lead. He saw Phil the photographer trying to balance an awkward tripod. The legs of the contraption would not cooperate. One slid outward, another inward, while Phil manhandled the third, yanking it to work.

"There," Phil said. "Now for the cam-e-ra."

Another tray, this one loaded with *knishes*, passed them all by. Ezra looked to Grubba, but Grubba told him, "No!"

The camera was huge. Ezra hopelessly thought it would take at least an hour or three to set it right upon the tripod. And still, his Papa kept him put.

Mrs. Minsky waddled by. She pinched Ezra's cheeks between her chubby fingers.

"I made stuffed *kishkas* for you!"

"Ooh, my favorite favorite!" Ezra cried. "Where are they?"

Mrs. Pinsky rushed over to the boy. "Such a *mensh* he is today, a *mensh*. Look at him. Look at the CHEEKS!" And his face got pinched again.

The smells, the smells, Ezra thought. I want it while hot.

Phil the photographer busily forced the camera onto the tripod seat. This caused that third, unhappy leg to buckle under. Phil splayed his own legs to catch the camera seconds before it would have hit the floor.

"Lucky!" Grubba said.

"Yes very," added Ezra, thinking now it will take forty minutes more to get this undertaking finished.

Phil restood the tripod as two more servants from the Zatz estate passed by. One tray was piled up with *kasha varniskas*. The other, bite-sized bits of beef-stuffed cabbage.

Ezra could hardly bear it. "Papa," he began.

Grubba glared at his son, and the servants moved elsewhere.

Phil the photographer grappled with his camera again. "This time, you will stand!" he commanded, placing every angle just so. "Now where is my subject?" He looked at Ezra. "Aah. The happy Bar Mitzvah boy. So smile already."

"Wait!" Rachel Lutz interrupted. "This should be a family pose." Rachel held onto her daughter Lila and patted her pregnant belly with her other hand. "The entire family."

Eleven minutes passed as Grubba, Ezra, Rachel, the belly, and Lila settled into the perfect pose of the day. A mild explosion brought lights suddenly glaring into Ezra's eyes.

He blinked. He tried to look around. He saw blue and black and red and yellow balls in the air. He smelled smoke, not food smells any more. This was fire smoke.

"Shall we take another for good measure?" Phil was asking.

Rifka Returns

The morning of Ezra's baby brother's *bris*, there was a loud knock on the door. Ezra was formally dressed. Having become a man, he would stand proudly with the *minyan* within the hour.

Rachel wiped her tears as she asked Ezra to get to the door.

"It is I," Rifka announced, staring at Ezra.

"Rifka!" Rachel cried. "How many years has it been?"

"How many babies, I should ask? And this one." She pointed to Ezra. "Hardly a *bubele* any more."

"Oh Rifka!" Rachel spread out her arms for a hug. "So much to tell you."

"But Rachel, you have been weeping. Tell me what terrible fate has brought you to these tears."

"No, it is nothing terrible. It is wonderful, wonderful. Of course it has to be done." Rachel turned her eyes away as they were welling up again.

"What is so wonderful it makes your eyes wet on this beautiful morning?"

Rifka's once long-flowing black hair was now cut to her ears and greying at the sides.

"I have three children now, Ezra, my first-born, Lila, my only girl, and here you see Daniel, only eight days old, today, becoming a Jew."

"Becoming a Jew? But I thought you and your husband, Grubba, were already Jews?"

"Of course we are!"

"How, then, is it little Daniel must 'become' a Jew?" Rifka asked.

"Today he will be circumcised," Rachel said, unsure of her strange old friend.

"Aah," Rifka said, swaying her head back and forth. "Now I understand the tears."

"They are happy tears," Rachel insisted. "Tears of joy."

"Then why do they not look that way?" Rifka pressed.

Rachel pulled little Daniel up to her face and kissed both his cheeks. Daniel cooed.

"He is such a happy baby," Rachel said. "And I cannot help but wonder why he needs to have his privates cut, and bleed. He will cry all day and night in my arms, as Ezra did."

"Yes, now I see, but do you see? Do you know what you do?"

Rachel was puzzled. "I am not doing it. Chelm's greatest *mohel*, Vladimir Kramer, will perform the *bris*."

"No, dear Rachel, I mean that you are Daniel's mother. Why do you not SAY something? Why do you let this go on?"

Rachel threw back her shoulders in shock. "Not let this go on? Daniel MUST be circumcised, how else can he become a Jew?" Daniel gurgled at his mother's quick movement.

"But he was BORN a Jew. Was baby Moses circumcised? Do you think his mother had his foreskin cut before hiding him, disguising him as an Egyptian?"

"But little Daniel needs not to be disguised."

"If Daniel grows up and decides to have himself so cut, as Moses and Abraham did late in life, that would be HIS decision."

"HIS decision?" Rachel yelled. "Today he is eight days old. Everyone knows this is the day to have it done."

"Rachel, I came here to see how things have been for you all these years. I came back to see if the women of Chelm have learned how to speak out for themselves, how to take work that interests them, how to think.

"Think woman, think! What did Nature give boys a foreskin for? If it is there, it has a purpose. Why cut it off and make these babies cry and scream and never again have a big piece of skin they were born to enjoy?"

"Enjoy? *Feh*, now I know you are talking rubbish, Rifka. Look at you. Your hair is gone, your body is thin, you do not look as if you live a good, happy life yourself. What about YOU? What do you know from babies? Have you ever HAD one?" Rachel placed Daniel down on her folded shawl slightly harder than she meant to.

"No, I never had babies, and for that, I am sorry. I would have liked to raise one child. But Rachel, I can also see that mothers do things people MAKE them do, not for the good of the child, but only for the good of the group. And questionable good at that."

Rachel waved her arms at Rifka. "I will not discuss this with you. I must be ready now to take Daniel and Ezra to the *bris*. Grubba is already there. Lila and I will wait outside the room. When all is over, we will celebrate with our greatest friends in Chelm. If you must add to the doubts in my mind, I prefer you to go away."

"I need to ask this before I go," Rifka said. "How do you REALLY feel right now?"

"Feel? I feel happy, happy that my Ezra had his bar mitzvah last year. Happy that my Lila is not a *meeskeit* and will find a wonderful husband someday, and happy that my Daniel today will become a Jew."

"But Rachel, how do you really FEEL? Is Ezra mature enough to really be a man? If Lila finds this wonderful husband will she not also find herself in a painful dilemma about hurting their eight-day-old son? Is Daniel going to be a happy, gurgling child tonight?"

"Maybe not, maybe, maybe not. But I know I have become wiser since you first came to Chelm. My eyes have opened up. I have read the Torah myself. One day, I will be considered one of the wisest women of Chelm. My feelings hardly come into this, they do not change the Holy Covenant God made with Abraham. They cannot change the way we are Jews. I am only a woman."

"Yes, only a woman," Rifka said. "And the only time a woman can ever change a male is when he still wears diapers."

No More Swearing

When a match was finally made for Beryl Fried, she was already past her prime, “*oise gedakt*,” all played out, as people said. Her habits were well set, including her vulgar language.

“*Gai platz!*” she would often yell at the nudnik peddler. Go split your guts. “*Gai shlog dein kup en vant!*” Go bang your head against the wall.

When Jacob Ruderman relocated from America, he bought out Chelm’s flourishing Dry Goods store from Stanley Lesky. When Beryl, the foul-mouthed-but-pretty old maid, caught his eye, Jacob arranged for himself the match before Beryl could think fast enough to tell him, “*Gai shoyen en dreht mit anderer tzizmommen.*” Go to hell together with another.

It was her favorite expression.

But they were quickly and quietly married.

“What a *schlemiel!*” said Rozzie of Jacob Ruderman. “His parents escape with him from this *shtetl*, make good in America, and then what does the boy grow up to do? He comes back to settle, where else, but in Chelm?”

“Once a Chelmite, always a Chelmite,” Esther said. “After all, Chelm is not just any *shtetl*.”

It took a few years for Beryl to bear a child, and by the time the boy was ten, Beryl was well into her forties. She had painstakingly trained herself over the years to speak more politely around the boy, except, of course, if she happened to lose her temper.

“*Dybbyk!*” she yelled at him for spilling his *Chanukah gelt*. His pouch had been filled the week before, by his Papa, with a hefty handful of silver American dollars.

“Mama,” Elliot cried. “I am not a *dybbyk*. Please, do not be upset with me. These are not YOUR silver dollars from Papa, but mine, and I will be the one to pick them up.”

“You are right, my darling one. I should never use harsh words with you.” Beryl reached out to comfort him with open arms.

Elliot tearfully cringed away from her. “*Gai vrai du vansen*,” he said under his breath. Go bother the bedbugs.

"What is this?" Beryl asked. "A boy cursing at his mother? I WILL not have it! Your Papa would NEVER approve. Where have you learned such offensive words, my son?"

The boy hung his head. "From you, Mama, ALWAYS from you."

Beryl covered her ears. "Oh no!" she cried. "This is all wrong. There shall be no more cursing and swearing. From now on, I give you one of my shiny American dollars for every curse you hear from my lips. That should stop me."

"And I will do the same for you, Mama. To be fair."

"Good boy," Beryl said, and the boy gave in to her hug.

In Chelm, the *shul* is a school, and is also the synagogue. The *shul* is respected as a place of learning, but as the synagogue, it is holy. Ten months after *Chanukah*, the Hebrew month of *Tishrei* comes around. Reconciliations are made all week long in advance of *Yom Kippur*.

Now the Chelmites everywhere were asking forgiveness of their friends and neighbors. Any offense committed the year before required amends to be made; and any Jew NOT forgiving an offender after three such attempts would be considered cruel. Therefore, it also cleanses the one who forgives.

On the holy day itself, one must atone for any sins committed, not against people, but God. People come to *shul* in their best, most formal clothing. On their feet, however, they may not wear the skins of slaughtered animals. Asking forgiveness of God with leather shoes on one's feet, would be, well, just not quite right.

So it was with Beryl. She wore her cloth-made shoes from Jacob's shop. Walking up the stone steps leading into *shul*, she was sure it would be the longest service of the year. Her husband, Jacob, walked up ahead, while Elliot stuck by her side. Beryl was looking around, wondering which of the women from Chelm wore items from the Dry Goods store.

She missed a step and badly stubbed her toe.

"*Khahlerye*," she quietly cried in her practiced, well-controlled manner. Only Elliot had heard. They reached the entrance to the *shul*. It was crowded inside.

"I owe you a silver dollar," Beryl whispered to the boy.

"No, Mama," he said. "I will even it out. *Putza vatta!*" shouted the boy in *shul*.

Giant schmuck!

The shocked and newly virtuous Chelmites stared and glared at Jacob, Elliot, and Beryl.

"Such an angel, such a good boy," Beryl said.

The Rabbi's Daughter

Miriam Greenbaum knew she was beautiful. She also knew herself as the most desirable match for the prominent sons of Chelm. As Rabbi Greenbaum's daughter, she became studious and a lover of books at a very young age. Miriam often overheard the Chelmithe women refer to her as the "future wise one."

Miriam thought, If I read the secret passages from Papa's *Kabbalah*, I will know how to keep my future husband -- lucky man he will be -- tending to me hand and foot. But if I neglect my great gift of beauty, I may never catch that perfect husband.

Most days, Miriam chose her mirror over books. She spent entire mornings brushing her lustrous brown hair until it shone to her satisfaction.

"Miriam!" her mama called one day. "I am going out to meet your papa at the *bris*. Watch your brother for me."

"But Mama, I am doing my hair! Can you not see that?"

"Your hair will wait. Take him." And with that, she plopped the tubby-chubby little brother into Miriam's room.

Miriam almost threw her brush, but thought better of it.

"What do you DO with your hair?" the chubby child asked.

Miriam gritted her teeth into her best-known phony smile. "Let me show you," she said, leading him to the mirror.

Mrs. Greenbaum shook her head and left.

The gilded, gold-framed mirror stood centered on a painted dressing table. Miriam had insisted that all her furniture be painted gold. Rabbi Greenbaum rarely resisted his daughter's requests.

Two faces now looked back at them from the gilded mirror. One was male, meaty, and cute; the other, classically, beautifully female. Miriam took up her brush.

Her brother flinched in the fear it might be hurled at him.

"What?" Miriam asked.

Her brother didn't answer.

"My hair," Miriam told him, "is my greatest feature."

"Feature shmeature!"

"Look how it shines."

"Shines shmines!"

"Look at its waviness."

"Waviness shmaviness!" her brother cried. "I want to play with you."

"I keep it pretty," she said, "by brushing it a hundred and twenty strokes. They say a hundred, but I do a hundred and twenty."

Two fat little hands rushed at Miriam's hair, mussing it all up.

"You *mamzer*!" she screamed. The boy was off -- through the door and out of sight. Miriam chose not to chase after him. I must do my hair, she thought, and counted her strokes all the way.

The portly one had gotten into the rabbi's study. Books were soon strewn across the floor, some opened, with their pages bent or tucked. When Miriam came after the boy, she found him with the *Kabbalah* hooded over his head.

"Give me that!" she ordered.

"My hair, my hair!" he cried.

"You!"

"My shiny, wavy hair!"

"Give it here!" she yelled, chasing the boy around and around the room.

"My greatest feature!" he taunted.

"Your swollen *tuchus* will be your greatest feature," she threatened, grabbing at him repeatedly, never quite reaching him or the *Kabbalah* upon his head. "I need that book! Give it here!"

"I need, I need, I need," he mimicked.

I need to outsmart him, Miriam thought. Throwing up her arms in exaggerated defeat, she pushed the open door and left the rabbi's study. She clattered down the hallway as loudly as she could, then returned without her shoes. She lurked outside her papa's study, listening, planning, waiting.

He is too young to read, she thought. What can he be doing?

Slowly, Miriam peeked. She saw the clutter of books across the floor and felt a pang of sorrow. And then there was the shadow of a movement.

"Aaaah!" her brother screamed as he charged out the door. But he didn't make it down the hallway. Miriam had tripped him. He fell flat on his tubby chest -- unhurt, but clearly the loser. Miriam grabbed the *Kabbalah* from where it had landed and rushed it to her room.

After hiding the book beneath her two feathered pillows, Miriam returned to the scene of her crime.

"Are you all right?" she asked her prone, *zofitig* brother.

"No," he flatly said.

"Neither are Papa's books. What will he say?"

The boy raised his head. "He will say, 'Girls dare not read *Kabbalah*.' "

"And if I help you clean up the wreck, who will tell him I have it?" she asked.

Together they worked, shelving dusty books. The boy's pudgy hands smoothed out the folded pages and created neat little piles.

This is very good practice for me, Miriam thought. Later, I will read my hidden book and find the clues to love in marriage. If it works like brother and sister, I am already ahead.

Ahead. A head. My hair! The dust on those books must be in my hair!

Oh, yes. Tonight, I will begin a new routine and add a bedtime brushing.

Doubles

Yetta Katz was walking home from the market when Sunny Slavatsky rushed up to her, completely out of breath.

"Yetta," Sunny gasped. "How did you get here so fast?"

"Fast? What kind of fast?"

"I saw you on the train to Minsk last night."

"The train to Minsk, where I have outcast cousins? No, I was home with my Irving, minding my own business."

"But Yetta, my Murray, he was traveling to Minsk on his annual business trip. I kissed him goodbye, we embraced, I refused to let myself cry, and we kissed goodbye again."

"So, a public display with your husband means I went to Minsk last night?"

"Yetta," Sunny said. "Murray, he stopped kissing me."

"And then he started again?"

"Not this time. He said, 'Sunny, is that Yetta Katz at the front of the car?'"

"I looked, and there you were. You sat up front with your green tasseled shawl around your shoulders, beside a handsome man, oblivious to the world around you."

"And did you speak to me?"

"What could I say?"

"Anything. To let me know you were there, watching me on a train to Minsk I never took."

"Were you there?"

"Not that I know about," Yetta said.

The next day as Yetta was raking her yard, her neighbor Britta called out to her.

"You must be tired from all that *shlepping* yesterday, Yetta dear."

"What kind of *shlepping*? All I carried yesterday was my light-weight market basket."

“What do you mean, what kind of *shlepping*? Did you forget you carried that *groiseh* mattress, the one for the double-sized bed, to Gronam Ox’s house just before sundown? My Artie, he said he saw you working as Henny the mattress man’s assistant. ‘*Shlepping* and *shvitzing* like a man,’ is what my Artie said last night about you.”

“And did your Artie say a word to ME?”

“What could he say? ‘*Sholom Aleichem*, Yetta!’ and make you drop the mattress?”

“If he had spoken to me, I might have told him the woman *shlepping* a mattress and *shvitzing* like a man, was not, indeed, this Yetta Katz you see before you.”

“If not this Yetta Katz, which Yetta Katz could you have been yesterday?” Britta asked.

“THIS Yetta Katz, of course. I was not the other Yetta Katz, this double people have been seeing in and out of Chelm all week.”

And with that, Britta turned around to mind her own business.

But only two days passed when Yetta heard of yet another incident. She’d gone out to an evening meeting of the women of Chelm at Esther Zatz’s house. The issue of the day was white bread.

“Why, why must bread be white?” Esther asked. “Refined flour, what for? Give me wheat and rye and pumpernickel any day.”

“But Esther,” Mrs. Pinsky said. “This new style bread, it lasts much longer and looks much better as it ages.”

“Ages? Why should anyone want their bread to age?” asked Mrs. Minsky. “As for me, I like it fresh. Straight from the oven.”

“I agree,” said Shirley, the baker’s wife. “We have customers who turn their noses up at bread that has no warmth left to it.”

“And so they should,” said Mrs. Minsky.

“But what if one lives alone and needs her bread to last an extra while?” Yetta added.

All the heads turned to look at Yetta.

An uncomfortable silence overcame the room.

Finally, as hostess, Esther broke the quiet.

"Dear Yetta," she slowly began. "Tell us, Sweetheart. Has your Irving left you?"

All the women gasped.

"Irving? Leave ME? Why would you say such a thing?"

Esther looked at Gilda for help.

"Oh Yetta," Gilda said. "Last night, I saw you strolling arm in arm with the man with a big black cane."

"And this man you saw, you suggest was not my Irving Katz?"

"Excuse me, Yetta, but when did a person from Chelm ever see your Irving with a fancy cane? A cigar, yes, a little limp now and again, I will give you that, but a fancy shmancy cane with a wooden carving at the top, your Irving never carries," Gilda said.

"This man you saw, was he so much taller than Irving?"

"No."

"Was he shorter, fatter, skinnier?"

"No, no, no."

"And did you see his face?"

"Come to think of it, this other man's actual face, I may not have seen last night," Gilda said.

"You assume you saw me with a man who was not Irving. And due to that, you think my Irving knows I see another man and so has left me. Tell me, Gilda, how did you come to believe this woman with that man was me?"

"The shawl," Gilda said. "Your green tasseled shawl you bought last year from Rubin Pesky, may he rest in peace. I was with you when you bought it."

"And Rubin Pesky never duplicated any of his goods?" Yetta asked.

Gilda thought, closing her eyes and rubbing her chin. "He may have," Gilda said. "But, Yetta, I do believe I saw your face last night."

"And so did I on that train," Sunny added. She proceeded to describe the events of several nights earlier.

"If you both saw my face, you both saw my face. Only, I happen to know no face of mine was EVER on a train to Minsk, and that I go nowhere near a man who is not Irving Katz."

"Of course not, Yetta. There must be some mistake," Esther said, glaring at Gilda and Sunny.

When Yetta climbed into bed next to a snoring Irving Katz that night, she tried to imagine herself with another man. A handsome, wealthy man with a stylish cane. She pictured herself strolling through the main thoroughfare of Chelm on a clear, bright day. She pictured Irving getting wind of such a thing. She thought of Irving leaving her and how it would be to live alone, eating aging white bread.

She dreamed about train rides to Minsk. In the dream, there were walls of mirrors in the cars. In those mirrors she saw hundreds of Yetta Katzes, all wearing her favorite green shawl, all hanging onto the arms of mysterious wealthy men. Suddenly, in the dream, the faces of all the Yettas were erased by a smoke-induced fog that smelled like Irving's cigars.

The smoke cleared and Yetta saw herself hauling an enormous mattress across all of Chelm, heaving it up upon her shoulders, sweating and cursing and using her anger to carry it all the way to Gronam Ox's house.

Yetta slept well. In the morning, she saw everything plain as day.

My conscience is clear, she thought. If I carry mattresses, I am a good hard worker. Even if I see another man, it is Irving Katz I find myself in bed with.

And if someone in Chelm looks like me, soon enough the answer will be told. There is nothing, nothing for me to fear or be ashamed about.

"Yetta," Irving said, stretching his feet to try to reach the floor. "Did you know your second cousin, Mary from Minsk, has married Henny the mattress man?"

"MY cousin Mary from Minsk? The one my family never speaks to any more? The one who has the nerve to look EXACTLY like my sister Hedda Platz?"

The Gontzeh Megillah

At a certain point every winter, he says the same thing once.

“This is it, the whole *gontzeh megillah*.” He carries in the firewood and looks out at the frozen snow as more is coming down. He prepares all spring, summer and fall, cutting the wood, laying it out to dry, stacking neat, accessible piles. And when the winter comes, he says it just the once.

“This is it, the whole *gontzeh megillah*.” Year after year.

Shimon Lemke is a hard-working man. And a *mensh*, as everybody knows. It has even been rumored he was seen working on *Shabbos*. Not that he would willingly break the Law, but then, he has to feed his family.

In Chelm, it is always Shimon people come to for help.

“My wagon is stuck in the mud, I know you have a hook and a rope,” Rubin Pesky said to Shimon in the wet early spring.

Without hesitation, Shimon stopped what he was doing to help Rubin Pesky retrieve his wagon from the mud.

“My plants are failing, my back is not strong enough to haul all this water,” said Hedda Adler. So Shimon carried her well-water to her garden one summer afternoon.

“My mother is sick. I must stay to take care of her, but I need to get the special medicine from Minsk,” cried the apple vendor one fall day. Sure enough, Shimon made the trip to Minsk for the apple vendor’s mother’s medicine.

“Shimon, Shimon, Shimon,” cry all the people of Chelm.

But the worst is when the cries come from his wife.

“Shimon,” she starts off softly. “I know you work very hard, but could you make a new table for me? I am sick of the wobbly one our sons must always eat upon.”

To her, he sometimes says no. “I am simply too tired.”

One early winter, his wife cried, “Shimon, my Love, stop working so hard and let me smooth your brow and rub your body.”

“What good will it do? I will just hurt again after working once more.”

"It will do you some good, let me show you."

So Shimon gave in and let his wife smooth his brow and rub his aching body with her oiled hands. First, she took extra care to see that the children would not interrupt. Shimon began to enjoy himself and relax.

With a knock on the door came another request from Chelm.

"Do not go," said Mrs. Lemke.

"I must. Mrs. Hersch, next door, has had a heart attack and died. Only I have the soothing voice and friendship with her husband, Heshy. I must find him in Pinsk and break to him the terrible news."

So on with his overcoat and out the door he went with his half-aching body.

Mrs. Lemke knew not what to do about Shimon. He was always nice to her, but a little too nice to everybody else.

She took her problem to the wise women of Chelm.

"Shimon was indispensable in building our house!"

"He helped us too!"

"He was helping us today!"

"I must remember to ask him to stop up the leak in my basin."

"And he promised to fix our leaky roof next week."

"He is truly a *mensch*!"

"A *mensch*!"

"Yes a *mensch*!"

"A *haimisher mensch* like Chelm has never known!"

How could Mrs. Lemke argue with that? She went home to her boys. The eldest, almost twelve, was playing with the youngest.

"Did you not bring in the firewood for us?" his mother asked.

"I am busy," he said.

"It will be very cold tonight, and your papa has had to go to Pinsk. We simply must do this ourselves."

The boy ignored his mama and ran after the little one in his hiding place.

Mrs. Lemke sighed. "The boys need to play. I am strong, I can do it myself." So out she went to haul in the stack of wood that would warm them up for the night.

I must get one pile for cooking, and another for keeping the fire, she thought. She felt something icy fall upon her nose. She looked up at the sky. Snow. Sudden, fat flakes came rushing down at her, covering her feet and walkway. She'd never seen it come down so quickly or accumulate so ferociously.

She carried in one heavy pile of wood and returned for a second load.

"I wish Shimon were here," she said to the boys. "I do not like him traveling in this."

"In what?" said the almost twelve-year-old.

"In this weather. Look outside," she said.

The boy opened the door and saw the current of snow.

"Mama," he said, "this could be bad." He put on his coat and carried in some extra wood. He brushed the snow off the wood before adding it to his mama's pile.

"This is it," he said. "The whole *gontzeh megillah*."

Hard Times for Chelm

The women blamed the men. The men blamed the world. Children in Chelm often went to bed hungry.

"Things are bad everywhere, but worse in Chelm."

"Political unrest."

"Men and politics," the women at Esther's agreed.

"We need food on our tables!"

"Jews are suffering."

"It is all due to the outside world," agreed the men at Gronam Ox's house.

"I have it!" cried Gronam. "We will simply keep the 'outside' out of Chelm!"

When the women heard the plan, they concluded they must grow their food indoors.

"Bread will rise," said Mrs. Minsky.

So the Chelmites grew their bread, and all hard times were over.

EPILOGUE

At age ten I began learning Yiddish. My parents enrolled me in a class at the Jewish Community Center in Spring Valley, New York, in the early sixties. The teacher, Libby Zaretsky, made it fun from the start. A whole different alphabet, reading backwards, and letting out strange sounds with multi-blended consonants, all made *shula* more exciting than school. We were learning Bible stories, histories of the Jewish holidays (there *are* others besides Chanukah and Passover!), and how to celebrate these festive occasions with objects such as branches and lemonlike fruits.

Learning Yiddish began with a hard-covered blue reader we were allowed to write into, sounding out the letters with English counterparts. My copy was lost some thirty years ago--in an attic or basement--and I'd give anything to recover it. The book began, "Duss iss Serele, Duss iss Berele," This is Serele (a girl's name, or Little Serel), this is Berele (a boy's name, or Little Berel). It continued with "Serele gait, Berele gait," Serele walks, Berele walks. The lettering looked like Hebrew, reminding me of our Matzoh boxes at Passover, and we soon had to learn how to transcribe these words into our personal Yiddish handwritings. We learned how to write our Jewish names. After a good Sunday's work, Libby would reward us with a tale from the oral tradition of *The Wise Men of Chelm*. She never named any author.

"K-k-kh-Helm," she would say surprisingly smoothly.

Libby would read the main thrust of the tale in English, then throw us off by finishing the last few lines, or a simple punchline, in Yiddish. She would hesitate, watch our faces, then give the translation in English. She always hoped we'd understood the Yiddish well enough to laugh.

These ancient Jewish folk tales involve a town of fools. Chelm's elders, bigger fools than the rest, were considered the wisest of men. They would often be consulted for the town's most confusing problems. These highly respected men would scratch their beards to do their heavy thinking. In hearing their deductive reasoning, as Libby's students,

we would scratch *our* heads to try to deal with their idiotic solutions. At times we hated the stories' endings, often feeling dissatisfied when we were supposed to laugh. Something about the Chelmites' different ways of thinking would leave us without a feeling of closure, without an expected type of ending.

In spite of forgetting most of my Yiddish throughout the years, I never forgot my enjoyment of those stories. In 1977, while taking a creative writing workshop in Binghamton, New York, I began a story for John Gardner, tentatively calling it "The Wise Women of Chelm." I wanted to show that the Chelmite women are just as capable of foolishness as men. At that time, I believed that Chelm tales were so obscure that no one besides myself and students from Libby's class could possibly have any idea what they were. Unfortunately, I never never got past the first few paragraphs, and never finished my project for Gardner by the time I left SUNY Binghamton.

Twenty years of homesteading, waitressing, and raising children in Maine removed me from my Chelmite women, although they were always somewhere in my heart and mind. By 1996, after returning to school, I searched for Chelm tales on the internet and found that Sholom Aleichem, of course, wrote such tales. I flashed back to "Fiddler on the Roof" coming out in the 1960's, and the thrill I'd felt at seeing a photo of the three sisters with their brooms in *The New York Times*. *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, written by Sholom Aleichem in the late 1800's, contains stories from which *Fiddler on the Roof* derived. These entertain us with Jewish humor, but are not quite as light-hearted as the Chelm tales he wrote. I remember staying up late one school night with my dad to watch on TV "The World of Sholom Aleichem." Zero Mostel, the original Tevye in Broadway's "Fiddler," acted out an unforgettable Chelm tale about an extremely frustrating and tricky purchase of a goat. My story, "Roof," by nature of its title, is my little way of honoring "Fiddler."

Isaac Bashevis Singer, another of my favorite writers, translated many traditional Chelm stories from Yiddish into English. Singer himself could not refrain from writing originals, but it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference. His book, *Stories for Children*, is a collection written between 1962-1984. It includes many Chelm tales, but the truth is I prefer Singer's other books such as his novels, *Shosha* and *Meshugah*.

I've become very picky about Chelm. Other, less-than-favorite writers I'd found through my research sometimes refer to contemporary appliances in their tales. I don't enjoy these very much; I simply appreciate a more old-fashioned setting for Chelm.

By a stroke of luck, I came across *A Renegade And Other Tales*, by Martha Wolfenstein. It was published by The Jewish Publication Society of America in 1905. I began reading these non-Chelm tales, which in turn have affected my style more than the others, especially in the way Wolfenstein presents her dialogue.

In 1997 at The University of Maine, inspired by Welch Everman, I finally picked up my story again believing that my original first lines for the tale still worked. Also, I found that my writing wasn't coming from me, it was pouring out of my fingers from thoughts I'd carried throughout a lifetime. As the collection grew, I often consulted with my all-time favorite, trustworthy, all-knowing Yiddish authority, Paul Blasenheim, my father.

Paul was raised in the Bronx, and his parents had come from parts of Poland and Hungary. Paul is the epitome of joyful Jewishness, and he loved the idea of my writing about the women of Chelm wanting the privileges of men, but of course ending up *doing* the work of men in addition to the workloads still always-to-be-expected of them as women. He told me my idea fit right in with Chelm.

However, in consulting with Paul on the actual Yiddish language, I've run into some problems. An uncle of mine, raised on a Russian version of Yiddish, read my "No More Swearing" tale and immediately emailed me to the effect that my Yiddish made no sense--he seriously questioned where I'd acquired such peculiar Yiddish. I answered that my consultant had been Paul. My uncle, Gene Vasilew, wrote back, "Well, that explains everything. Paul speaks 'Galitzianer' Yiddish, which no one but fellow Galitzianers understand."

I have decided to stick with my father's Yiddish since it is the most familiar to me. I hope no experts will be offended by my usage--these tales are meant purely to entertain, rather than to create an authoritative version of language, lifestyles, or even customs of these people. One of my original hopes for my tales was that one day a laughing, happy reader will fully translate this collection into Yiddish where it really belongs. Whatever form of Yiddish she should choose.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Beth Lurie was born in Peekskill, New York, on November 27, 1951. She was raised in Spring Valley, New York, and graduated from Ramapo High School in 1969. She attended Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York, for two years, and later Binghamton University in New York, for a year and a half. Her major was Literature and Creative Writing.

Beth returned to college in 1996 and received a B.U.S. degree from The University of Maine in 1999. Beth is a candidate for The Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in December, 2002.