

The
Doctor's House

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ORCHARD

CHAPTER ONE

My father was a Russian deserter. He was trying to get to France. Tall, with a long, carefully tended moustache, and a beautiful bass singing voice.

I learned about him only from Vladislav the carpenter who worked in the village near the farm. Vladislav had one eye, the other had been taken out by a broken bottle in a fight. He wore no patch over the fleshy hole.

When she was sixteen, my mother came into Vladislav's shop to have a wooden pail mended. My father happened to be in the shop. He still wore his Russian army boots. My mother was just the opposite in build to my father, tiny and plump. No one could understand how she stayed so round when neither she nor her eight brothers and sisters ever had enough to eat. Father called her "my little Moscow sparrow." Two weeks later he disappeared from the village, owing money to all the merchants. And nine months later I was born.

CHAPTER TWO

My mother carried me all over Poland, from the German to the Russian border, begging for a few groszy, a heel of bread, a day's work. Of my earliest years I remember roads, open sky, long clouds ribbed like feathers. I remember cold, sputtering fires in the rain, huts with leaking roofs. And hunger.

CHAPTER THREE

When I was five or six my mother returned to her village. From Vladislav she heard that Reb Mendelsohn, a Jew, needed a housekeeper. Reb Mendelsohn was the only Jewish farmer in the district. We set off walking and did not reach the farm until sunset.

We came to a white-washed house standing upright on the land. On either side stretched fields, one of ripe wheat, the other grass in which cows grazed. A barn and a chicken coop. And behind the house, rising up a hill, rows of low trees with thick trunks. From their crooked branches hung unripe apples, peaches, pears. My mother held my hand as we walked up to the house. Reb Mendelsohn's wife came to the door. She hired my mother.

Reb Mendelsohn had five children, all boys. Like their father they wore caps and fringed garments and black coats. Reb Mendelsohn had once been the manager of the farm and it was said in the village that he had swindled the owner, a Polish nobleman, by talking him into signing some papers while he was drunk. But later Vladislav told me that the nobleman squandered his inheritance and to escape prison let the Jew take over the farm and the debts. A few years later the nobleman was cleaning his favourite gun, the one he always took hunting, and blew out his stomach.

CHAPTER FOUR

My mother helped Madame Mendelsohn with the household chores, milked the cows and fed the chickens, served the meals, did the washing and sewing, and accompanied her mistress to the village on market days.

I did not play with the Mendelsohn sons. They had their own teacher who lived in the house and who taught them the ways of the Jews. On a hot day when the window was open I could hear their droning voices. What did they learn up there? How to speak the language of demons, to change burning coals into diamonds, to turn a man into a goat?

I was a wild boy and I lived among the trees of the orchard. Each tree began with heavy roots, breaking out of the ground like stiffened elbows. Then the trunk, a hundred years old it was said, rising up into the tangle of branches. But I learned to climb those trees and to rise into the branches. From there I could see smoke winding from the kitchen chimney and peasants in the fields.

Soon I could climb any tree in the orchard, faster than it took to look away and back again. The branches were my cradle and the leaves a curtain that hid me from the world. When my mother came out of the house and called, "Josef, Josef!" I wouldn't move, but watched her as she shielded her eyes from the low sun and then turned around and went back inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the late fall the peasants came with their buckets and ladders and Reb Mendelsohn ran about while they filled the buckets with apples and peaches and pears, late into the night. At sundown fires were lit. In five days the trees were bare and the ground littered with bruised and worm-holed fruit.

And so ten years passed.

CHAPTER SIX

Dusk. Cold and the sky dark with clouds that rumbled and sparked. My mother, busy in the cellar making preserves, had told me to stay in the kitchen, but I slipped out, drawn by a three-quarter moon that played hide-and-seek behind the clouds. Then I ran behind the house, so fast that I was out of breath when I reached the first row of trees. I climbed to the highest branch that could hold my weight and heard it creak under me.

Night came.

An owl circled the chicken coop and beat its wings across the face of the moon.

I heard them before I saw them, coming along the dirt road toward the house. Then the flickering light of torches in a ragged line. They shouted and shook staves in their hands. It seemed to take them a long time to reach the house. A lamp went on in an upstairs window. A horse and rider came galloping down the road and almost trampled some of the marchers who dispersed, shouted, and swarmed together again. The rider clutched the horse's mane as if he might fall off. When the torch light caught the rider's face I recognized him as the son of the nobleman who had once owned the farm.

At the front gate the mob stopped and grew quieter, as if not knowing what to do. Then someone threw a stone or a brick and the kitchen window shattered. Laughter. A moment later

the door opened and Reb Mendelsohn came out. He walked slowly, his long black coat shining in the moonlight. At the gate he stopped and I guessed that he was speaking. And then the rider on the horse brought his whip down on Reb Mendelsohn's head. The sound of the crack didn't reach me for a long moment. The mob rushed forward and the gate caved in.

A torch landed on the roof. People ran everywhere, the Mendelsohn sons in their night dresses, the villagers with their staves. The horse jumped the broken gate and flew across the yard. A cold rain began to fall. In a second-storey window flames grew, subsided, and grew again. Then the window blew out.

Somewhere in the house my mother screamed.

As I scrambled to get down from the tree I slipped and fell onto my knees. I got up and ran to the house. The son's teacher lay on the ground as a man kicked him. I slipped on the wet ground, reached the kitchen door, and pulled it open. Smoke billowed out. Inside I could hardly breathe. A kitchen chair was made of fire. My voice choked in my throat. The ceiling throbbed in and out and then, just as it fell upon me, I saw the black Polish sky.