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*The
Zelmenyaners:
A Family
Saga*

MOYSHE KULBAK

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◆◆◆ *Chapter 1*

THE ZELMENYANERS

That's Reb Zelmele's courtyard that you're looking at.

An ancient, two-story brick building with peeling plaster and two rows of low houses filled with little Zelmanyaners. Plus stables, attics, and cellars. It looks more like a narrow street. On summer days, Reb Zelmele is the first to appear at the crack of dawn in his long underwear. Sometimes he carries a brick or furiously shovels manure.

Where did he come from, Reb Zelmele?

The story told in the family is that it was from "deep Russia." One way or another, he married Bubbe Bashe—who, younger than she is now, began at once to have children.

Bubbe Bashe, they say, bore children with reckless abandon, one after another without stopping to count. Each child to leave her womb was tall, dark, and broad-shouldered, a true Zelmanyaner. Reb Zelmele took charge of the boys. Not being a wet nurse, he soon apprenticed them to a trade.

One, Folye, was placed with a tanner at the age of ten because of some business with a horse.

No one paid much attention when Reb Zelmele's children began having children of their own. Reinforcements arrived, sons- and daughters-in-law of varying degrees of fertility who soon crowded out the neighbors. The rooms bulged with black and rust-colored little

Zelmeles. Blonds, mostly girls, were infrequent, a thin, pale, barely noticeable veneer. In recent years, however, a growing number of them have turned up. No one knows where they've come from.

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Zelmenyaners are dark and bony, with broad, low brows. Their noses are fleshy, and they have dimples in their cheeks. On the whole they are quiet, sluggish types who look at you sideways, though some of the younger generation can be loud-mouthed. At heart, however, they too, while putting on worldly airs, remain timid descendants of Reb Zelmele. Zelmenyaners are patient and even-tempered. They are as taciturn when happy as when glum. Yet they sometimes glow like hot iron in a special Zelmenyaner way.

Over time, Zelmenyaners have developed their own smell—a faint odor of musty hay mixed with something else.

It's been known to happen that, in a railroad car packed with Jews all yawning at a frosty morning, someone opens his eyes and asks a passenger:

"Excuse me. You wouldn't happen to come from N_____, would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I would."

"You're not a grandson of Reb Zelmele's!"

"To tell you the truth, I am."

The Jew tucks his arms into his sleeves, and the train rattles on. He has smelled Reb Zelmele's odor in his sleep without realizing it. No one is consciously aware that the Zelmenyaners have their own smell.

Something else is special about them too, especially the menfolk. A Zelmenyaner likes to sigh by holding his breath and letting it out through his mouth in a soft snuffle of content such as is heard only among horses munching oats in a stable.

Which proves that Reb Zelmele hailed from the countryside.

In sum, a Zelmenyaner is no more complicated than a slice of bread. There has never been a barren woman in the family, nor an early death apart from Aunt Hesye's.

As for baldness—you're no descendant of Reb Zelmele's if you show the least sign of it, even though you smell like a hayloft.

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By the time a fourth generation had begun to sprout, Reb Zelmele was ready to take his leave. He wrote his will on the inside cover of a prayer book, hung around a while longer for no apparent reason, and died.

He was a simple man. His will was in a Yiddish full of Hebrew words that not everyone understood. Since it is lying around uncared for, it's best to make a copy:

Monday, the week of the Torah reading of *B'shalakh*,* in the year of the Creation 56. . . . [The last two numbers are illegible.]

Here's how I reckon on dividing my goods when I've lived as many years as I have to live. My children can go on staying in my *khotser*.† I own a plot of *karke*‡ that will fetch 400 rubles and my seat in the synagogue is worth 150 and there's 1,000 in the oven, under the sixth brick to the right. Split it like this: 50 rubles *livni*§ Itshe, because I gave him, my son Itshe, 150 *ad lekheshebn*|| in my lifetime. 200 *livni* Zishe and 200 *livni* Yuda and 200 *livni* Folye and 100 *leviti*# Khaye-Mashe and 100 *leviti* Matle and 100 *leviti* Rashe. I owe 150 plus 20 to Hurvitz, who lent it to me for Itshe's *ad lekheshebn*. Make sure he gets it. 25 rubles go to charity and the rest are for my expenses in leaving this world. The household belongings go to *ishti*** Sore-Bashe. When my *ishti* has lived as long as she has to live, let my three daughters divide them and give two pillows to Itshe's *bsule*†† Khayke. My sons can have my *malbushim*** Whoever wants my lambskin coat can take it. If there's more than one of you, draw lots. Just don't fight. I want it all done proper. And don't let strangers take what I haven't given them. Let

* *B'shalakh* (Torah portion), usually read at the end of winter, corresponding to Exodus 13:17-17:16. Reb Zelmele follows the custom of dating events by weekly Torah portion readings.

† *Khotser* (Hebrew)—courtyard.

‡ *Karke* (Hebrew)—land, a plot of land.

§ *Livni* (Hebrew, contraction of "laben sheli")—to my son.

|| *Ad lekheshebn* (Hebrew)—as a loan.

Leviti (Hebrew, contraction of "labat sheli")—to my daughter.

** *Ishti* (Hebrew, contraction of "isha sheli")—my wife.

†† *Bsule* (Hebrew)—virgin, unmarried daughter.

‡‡ *Malbushim* (Hebrew)—clothing.

everyone be happy with their share and enjoy it, that's what I wish with all my heart. And after I've lived as many years as I have to live, don't forget me. Remember to say kaddish* when you can.

Yours,

Zalman-Elye, the son of Reb Leyb Khvost.†

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Bubbe Bashe outlived her husband by many years. In a manner of speaking, she's still doing it. Not that she sees so well or hears so well or walks so well, but you can't deny she's still alive. She's just more like an old hen than a human being and doesn't realize that everything has changed.

Bubbe Bashe lives in a world all her own. If she has any thoughts, they're very strange. They must be made of a special material.

Sometimes, at nightfall, she bumbles about in the dark. Suddenly she asks a red neckerchief:‡

"Mottele, why aren't you in synagogue?"

Mottele, dark-haired and smelling faintly of hay, goes over to her, lifts the kerchief from her ear, and shouts:

"Grandma, I'm in the Pioneers!"

Bubbe Bashe nods. "Yes, yes. He's already said his prayers. In which synagogue did you say it was?"

She will depart this world in age-old serenity. The yard, as far as she is concerned, is exactly as Reb Zelmele left it. Each year brings forth another batch of dark, quiet Zelmenyaners

In summer, Bubbe Bashe steps outside. She sits on a stoop and basks in the sight of little Reb Zelmeles spilling from every doorway like black poppy seeds.

* **Kaddish**—prayer for the dead.

† **Khvost** (Russian)—tail (of an animal). The family's actual last name. Kulbak will continue punning on the meaning of this word throughout the novel.

‡ **Red neckerchief**—worn by Pioneers. The Young Pioneer Organization of the Soviet Union (also known as Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization), founded in 1922, was a mass youth organization for children between the ages of ten and fifteen.

A huge sun shines on a new crop of them.

That's Bubbe Bashe.

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The second generation of Zelmenyaners branched out in three great rivers and several smaller streams. The pillars of the family were, and continue to be, Uncle Itshe, Uncle Zishe, and Uncle Yuda.

Uncle Folye is a special case. Uncle Folye has gone his own hard way in life. He has nothing to do with the other Zelmenyaners, by whom he believes he was insulted as a child. He's a big eater with a weakness for potato pudding, and no one knows what he thinks because he keeps his thoughts to himself.

The rest of the family are smaller fry. Their bloodlines matter less, although they too have Reb Zelmele's stamp and go around with his smell.

A place of honor goes to Uncle Zishe, who is considered a cut above the others. A heavysset watchmaker with a four-cornered brow and beard, he is, or pretends to be, frail.

It was once the custom to ask him to read official notices. Uncle Zishe then unscrewed his watchmaker's lens, asked the visitor to have a seat, and read aloud what was given him. Afterward, he could repeat it word for word

He had a good head on his shoulders.

The high point of these sessions was Uncle Zishe's inquisitive mind, which enabled him to give advice on important matters.

He was said to have hidden powers.

Uncle Zishe's wife, Aunt Gita, bore him two daughters in difficult deliveries such as Zelmenyaners frequently have. One, Tonke, is a Zelmenyaner through and through. The other is a melancholic, a trait that Aunt Gita, though she is not to blame for it, smuggled into the family. Everyone agrees it isn't her fault, since she comes from a long line of rabbis.

Uncle Itshe is a prince of paupers. That's why he couldn't wait for his inheritance money and had to ask his father for an *ad lekheshtn*. He's a tailor, a needle pusher. His tall, thin, bizarre-looking sewing machine clatters all day.

It's quite deafening.

The many Zelmenyaners sired by Uncle Itshe are of the purest type. Some say he even outdid Reb Zelmele himself.

Apart from his family traits, Uncle Itshe has one all his own. He sneezes like an explosion.

Once a sneeze of his caused a neighbor to faint.

In the days of the Civil War, Uncle Itshe's sneezing was unnerving. Finally, Uncle Zishe went to have a talk with him.

"Itshe," he said, "do you realize that each sneeze of yours could cost someone his life?"

What was Uncle Itshe to say? He sneezed with an explosive shriek.

Various proposals were made. The most practical was Aunt Malkaleh's. Whenever Uncle Itshe felt the urge to sneeze, she told him, he should hold his nose and jump into bed. She then threw a pillow on top of him and sat on it—or else, if she was occupied, had one of the children do it. Beneath the pillow, Uncle Itshe could sneeze to his heart's content. When he was done, he brushed off the goose down and went back to work.

After the war, the danger passed.

Now Itshe can sneeze all he wants.

It's an early summer morning. Half the yard is still in shadow. Already washed and dressed, Uncle Itshe sits by an open window, clattering away on his machine. Suddenly he lets out a sneeze. With it comes an ominous howl, a shriek like a dying man's. The yard wakes with a start. Sleepers rub their eyes and jump from bed.

"What happened?"

"It's nothing," someone says. "Uncle Itshe just sneezed."

"It's nothing, nothing." The word goes around.

Windows and transoms are opened. All manner of dark-haired, rumpled, early morning heads appear. From everywhere come shouts of:

"God bless you, uncle!"

"A long life to you, uncle!"

"God bless you! A long life! To your health, uncle!"

Uncle Yuda is a different story—and a strange one. He's a carpenter, a thin Jew with a short, shiny beard and spectacles on the tip of his nose, over which he peers grumpily whenever he needs to see some-

thing. Most likely they're strictly for appearance's sake, a matter of dignity. He works and eats with them, though there is no reason to believe that he sleeps with them.

Uncle Yuda is a philosopher and a widower.

His wife, Aunt Hesyeh, was killed by the Germans at the side of the kosher slaughterer. It wasn't a nice death at all.

Uncle Yuda spent the week of mourning in the synagogue. He took a seat behind the stove and refused to get up again, having resolved to renounce all worldly affairs and devote himself to pure thought—an honorable occupation, if truth be told. Yet public opinion was against him and forced him to return to his carpentry shop.

Just how did Aunt Hesyeh die?

Our town was under an artillery bombardment. Housewives up and down the street locked their homes and took refuge in Reb Zelmele's cellar. All of a sudden, Aunt Hesyeh had a craving for chicken soup. This came from staring so long in the crowded cellar at Reb Yekhezkel the slaughterer that it was all she could think of. Aunt Hesyeh grabbed a hen, Reb Yekhezkel reached for his knife, and they went outside to slit the bird's throat.

Just then there was a huge explosion. The yard burst into flames. Not a window pane was left in place.

After a while, a neighbor knocked on the cellar door and asked that someone come out. Pale and peaceful, Aunt Hesyeh lay on the ground as if nothing had happened. Next to her, its beard sticking up in the air, was the slaughterer's head. The rest of him, knife in hand, lay by the wreckage of a fence.

The hen stood philosophizing.

Although Zelmenyaners are taciturn even when happy, Uncle Yuda's silence is morose. It's his one departure from the traditions of Reb Zelmele, to which he has generally adhered.

It's also in Uncle Yuda that the love of nature, so pronounced in the family, reaches its height. He once gave his geese the freedom of the vestibule (the hen has already been spoken for) and he traps rainwater in a barrel. Every spring he puts aside urgent work to gather sorrel for soup. His passion for wooden planks and boards comes from the same love of the outdoors. When Uncle Yuda planes a piece of wood, he does

it ecstatically. He is devoted to carpentry and frightfully fond of fiddles, songs, and all things musical.

Uncle Yuda[♦] has children of various degrees of importance. Two alone concern us: his daughter Khayaleh and his son Tsalke.

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Finally, a word needs be said about one of the younger Zelmenyaners, Uncle Itshe's eldest son, Bereh Khvost.

Young Bereh is a man among men, a tanner of few words. During the Civil War he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner* for his heroic Zelmenyaner sangfroid in the fighting around Kazan.

He also took part in Marshal Gai's† march on Warsaw.

He was almost killed there. Taken prisoner by the Poles,‡ he miraculously managed to escape and make his way home on foot.

When Bereh appeared in the doorway, there was a great commotion. The whole yard came running, even Uncle Zishe. Bereh sat down, slowly pulled off his boots, and said to Aunt Malkaleh:

"Mama, give me something to eat!"

He sat chewing his food with savage haste while staring at the ceiling. Uncle Yuda spat in disgust and walked out. Gradually, everyone else left, too. Bereh finished eating, put on his boots, and returned to the war.

* **Order of the Red Banner**—a military honor in the Red Army established during the Civil War.

† **Gai Dmitrievich Gai** (pseudonym of Hayk Bzhishkyan, 1887–1937)—Red Army military commander during the Civil War and the Russo-Polish War of 1920. Gai was arrested in 1935 on the phony charges of terrorism against the Soviet state, and executed in 1937.

‡ **The Poles**—the reference is to the Russo-Polish War of 1920.

◆◆◆ Chapter 2

IT'S SOME WORLD!

All is quiet in the yard.

Apart from Aunt Hesyeh, who died foolishly for some chicken soup, the war and revolution passed safely.

The Zelmenyaners returned from the front in stiff army greatcoats and tattered fur hats. At first they prowled the yard like wolves, gulping down whatever came to hand. Slowly they were lured back into their homes and gently talked to until they reverted to their former selves. The greatcoats were draped over doors to keep out the winter cold, and the hats languished in corners behind the stoves. Sometimes, in a bad frost, Uncle Itshe grabs a hat from the dusty back of a stove, yanks it down over his head as far as his beard, and goes to fetch Aunt Malkaleh a load of firewood.

That's all that is left of the war.

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The most stubborn of the Zelmenyaners is Uncle Folye. He never says a word, having been insulted as a child. Not that anyone wants him to say one.

Uncle Itshe's Bereh comes a close second. He's a character, Bereh, a policeman in the Second District, which is no cause for worry in the yard because he's never around. He only comes home at night to sleep on his father's plank couch.

As a rule, when the young folk spout the latest nonsense, they get a friendly talking to. A word is all it takes to put the whippersnaps in their place—or, if worse comes to worst, a box on the ear.

"It's time you had the foolishness beaten out of you," Uncle Zishe says.

"It wouldn't hurt you to be a human being," says Uncle Itshe.

Uncle Yuda declares: "What I want to know is, how much blabber do I have to put up with?"

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Uncle Yuda must be thinking of Khayaleh. It's no secret he wants to marry her off to a nice Jewish boy. Lately, he's put down his carpenter's plane and gone looking for a bridegroom in the synagogues. He'd prefer a kosher slaughterer, someone with a bit of Jewish education.

They say the following actually happened.

Once, Uncle Yuda arranged for Khayaleh to meet a highly eligible bachelor on a street corner at the far end of town. That night a blizzard struck. Khayaleh went to the corner and waited as told. Although no one, not even a bachelor, would have ventured out in such weather, she was so desperate for a husband that she huddled against a wall and resolved to stick it out to the bitter end. It's anyone's guess what she had in mind.

Lying in bed late that night, Uncle Yuda suddenly remembered her, ran across town, and brought her home more dead than alive.

"You'd think she'd have realized," it was said in the yard, "that not even a bridegroom gets married in a snowstorm."

There is one Zelmenyaner who would gladly marry Khayaleh even in a snowstorm. He's not so young any more, thirty-one if a day, a taciturn type who comes home at night to sleep on his father's plank couch. But while it might not seem a bad match, Khayaleh's love for him is unstoked by the heat of passion. That's why she continues to try her luck at blind dates.

Uncle Yuda is opposed to the match for the following reasons:

1. Zelmenyaners don't like Zelmenyaners.
2. The young man isn't Jewish enough.
3. The young man sneers at the yard.

And so he does. Just the other day he went and played such a dirty trick on his mother, Aunt Malkaleh, that it shocked the older Zelmenyaners to the core.

Just what, you ask, did he do?

Aunt Malkaleh went to visit him at the police station. "Bereh," she said, "how come you never smile? A person might think all kinds of things about you!"

As Aunt Malkaleh tells it, Bereh chose that exact moment to smile. Whether he did or not, he then sat sniffing while staring at his mother in her many layers and wraps. Finally he asked:

"Mother, do you have enough to get by on?"

Malkaleh's husband Uncle Itshe was a merry Jew who didn't think getting by called for much.

Bereh sighed, let out a soft Zelmenyaner snuffle (see Chapter 1), and added:

"I hope you realize, mama, that you can't even read or write."

As a matter of fact, she didn't. In no uncertain terms, he advised her to join the anti-illiteracy campaign.*

He even picked up the phone and registered her with the teacher's college.

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It was February. Aunt Malkaleh went home freezing and thinking:

"The less I see of that Bereh, the better."

The yard couldn't believe its ears.

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The next morning a teacher turned up, a young man with a tousel of hair sticking out from under his cap.

Aunt Malkaleh's heart began to pound. Thoroughly flustered, she washed, put on an apron, and sat down at the table. Terrified of what lay in store for her, she gave the teacher a worried look. The young man, being new at this too, blushed beneath his cap.

* **Anti-illiteracy campaign**—known in Russian as "likbez" (short for "likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti," literally "the eradication of illiteracy"), the obligatory campaign to educate all Soviet citizens between the ages of eight and fifty was launched by Lenin's decree in December 1919.

Since the pens and pencils of all the young Komsomol* members—that is, the whippersnaps—were locked away in their drawers, Aunt Malkaleh found an old inkwell that had only flies and blew into it until assured by the teacher that this would not create any ink. A pen was produced from behind a mirror, and the cobwebs were brushed from it. When advised to test its nib on his fingernail, the teacher discovered it was a prerevolutionary antique.

Aunt Malkaleh believed in testing pens on fingernails. She thought it was a sign of cultivation.

Uncle Itshe was nervous, too. Opening a small compartment in his sewing machine, he took out a rolled-up notebook to which a pencil was attached by a string, flattened it on his knee, and handed it tremulously to the teacher.

The whole yard came running. A crowd formed. For a while it watched in astonishment, then gave a puzzled shrug.

"It's some world!" Uncle Itshe blurted.

Uncle Yuda peered angrily at him over his spectacles and said:

"Better six feet deep!"

He was thinking of Aunt Hesye, to whom the new literacy laws did not apply.

Uncle Zishe alone remained unruffled. Standing off to one side, he pulled a hair from his beard and smiled.

"A fine bunch of young folk!" he said.

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It took some getting used to. The teacher came every evening. No one could deny that Aunt Malkaleh was making progress. She had a head on her shoulders, undeniably lazy though it was.

"I just can't put my mind to it," she would say.

On the whole, she behaved like a third-grader. Given her brains, this was difficult to comprehend.

Once, when she had played hooky again, the teacher lodged a complaint with Uncle Itshe.

* **Komsomol** (Russian, abbreviation of *Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi*, or the Communist Union of Youth)—a youth wing of the Communist Party established in 1918 for children and youth older than those in the Pioneer Organization (mainly between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight).

"Your wife," he said, "is intelligent, but she doesn't apply herself."

"She doesn't?" Uncle Itshe was shocked.

He gave Aunt Malkaleh a talking-to.

"You know very well," he said, "that this is costing us money."

Aunt Malkaleh blushed and didn't know what to say. Then she thought of something:

"I don't have any books to practice with."

This was already too much for Uncle Itshe.

"What are you talking about? The house is full of books! I suppose you know them all by heart."

Thwarted, she took another tack.

"I can't see properly. There's a lens missing from my glasses."

Let it not be thought, however, that Uncle Itshe was always so strict with Aunt Malkaleh. Their love, after all, was an ancient one of forty-two years. Besides, he sympathized with her.

The following happened, too.

The teacher was due to arrive. Aunt Malkaleh was hurrying to depart for town before he did. All at once, Uncle Folye's dark little Mottele came running and said:

"Auntie, the teacher is here!"

They say Aunt Malkaleh was so discombobulated that she crawled into bed with her coat, boots, and shopping basket. It was Uncle Itshe who discovered her there. He folded his arms on his chest, cocked his head to one side like a true Zelmenyaner, and said sorrowfully:

"My wife is indisposed. Just sign the attendance chart, Comrade Teacher. We'll make up for the lesson another time."

Nevertheless, Aunt Malkaleh is definitely making progress.

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A midwinter night. The windows are coated with snow. All the young comrades have gone to their activities. Aunt Malkaleh, spotted with ink, is plying her pen. There's an old No. 8 kerosene lamp* on the table, the kind tailors use. The wind whistles down the chimney. Uncle Itshe

* **No. 8 kerosene lamp**—known in German as *Acht-Linienbrenner*, a kerosene lamp manufactured in Germany or in Russia based on the German design; "No. 8" refers to the thickness of the wick.

sits on one side of the table, ripping out seams and resewing them. Aunt Malkaleh sits on the other, surrounded by piles of paper. The pen scratches away. Beaming, she hands Uncle Itshe a piece of paper. He holds it up to the lamp. Uncle Itshe has to read at arm's length.

Aunt Malkaleh has written:

"i feel gud wen u get upp go too the stov and put upp the ketel and weel hav tee yor beeluvd wif malkeleh khvost."

Uncle Itshe smiles with satisfaction. Over tea, however, he has a serious talk with his wife. The little mistakes don't bother him. It's her style of expression.

"You shouldn't write like that," he says. "It's all right for talking, but writing needs to be more refined."

Aunt Malkaleh is crestfallen.

"Here," he says. "You wrote 'I feel good.' That's not the proper way to put it."

"What should I have said?" asks Aunt Malkaleh.

Uncle Itshe shuts his eyes. "You should have said, 'I am in the very best of health.'"

Aunt Malkaleh realizes he's right.

"Get yourself an old copybook," he says. "No one writes worth a damn any more. You have to read the old books. That's what makes a person smart. There was once a writer named Shomer,* you could learn a lot from him. Just keep away from the modern kind. They're all stardust and moonshine."

Outside, in the dark, the winter is a cold silver bowl.

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The cold is fierce—thirty-five below. The white roofs keel to the ground. At night the snow glistens and the blue air burns like alcohol.

The streets are already empty, though the night is still young.

Who is that couple out walking on an evening like this? Why, it's

* Shomer (pseudonym of Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch; 1849[?]–1905)—a Yiddish writer of sentimental novels, which were widely popular with readers. Shomer's name became synonymous with *shund* (trashy) literature.

Uncle Itshe's Bereh and Uncle Yuda's Khayaleh! They've slipped away down the slope at the back of the yard and out to the street.

It's high time they did. Bereh doesn't mind the cold. Khayaleh pulls her collar up around her neck and stomps in her high boots as if bound for the gallows.

What kind of young lady, asks the yard, goes out with men only in frosts and blizzards?

Aunt Gita, the rabbinical blue blood, breaks her customary silence to tell no one in particular:

"She'll give birth to a water carrier, that girl!"

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Bereh and Khayaleh walked in silence. He kept a step ahead of her, the better to concentrate. It was easier at the battle of Kazan.

"Khayaleh, do you like me?"

Uncle Yuda's Khayaleh was expecting such a gambit. With a smile she answered:

"That's no way to ask."

"Why not?"

Now he smiled, too. The winter, like a silver fish, flip-flopped in Khayaleh's heart. She had the Zelmenyaners' love of nature.

"Do you like me?" she parried cunningly.

Bereh smiled and smiled.

Now what?

Suddenly, Khayaleh seized Bereh's head with a thick, frozen hand and kissed him all over the lips, the nose, and the hard pockets of his cheeks.

That's what.

Things were now clearer. The strangest part of it was that they went on standing in that crazy cold and kissing. It was so cold that an old man walking down the same street that night ended up with frostbite in one foot.

They walked on and on while it got colder and colder. At last they reached a corner with a streetlamp. Shivering coachmen stood in a pool of electric light, trying to warm themselves in the hot breath of their horses. It was as quiet as a meadow.

Bereh glanced at his watch and ordered a sleigh. "There's still enough time to get to the marriage bureau,"* he said.

For Uncle Yuda's Khayaleh, this was a bit too much. The evening was already full. She wanted to go home, lie down in her warm, quiet bed that smelled of her father's wood shavings, and reflect. Love was pounding in her brain. Her thick Zelmenyaner blood needed to digest it.

Yet the sleigh pulled up beside them.

Bereh helped her get into it and covered her with an ice-cold blanket. With a lurch they set out down the broad street. Khayaleh nestled against Bereh with Zelmenyaner directness, his broad, cold shoulder as solid as an oak tree.

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Uncle Yuda's Khayaleh headed home. All around her, the frost was as green as old glass. Her solitary footsteps rang in her ears. She walked up the street to the yard and let herself in. In the first house, Uncle Itshe was still up with Aunt Malkaleh, sipping tea while discoursing learnedly.

"You should use a copybook. Letters need to look stylish. You can make a neat loop on a C or an F. L's can be done something with, too. Do you remember, Malkaleh, the letter I wrote you before we were married? I hope whoever read it to you showed you my handwriting. What a pity," he sighed, "that I haven't held a pen in my hands for years."

* The marriage bureau—marriage in the Soviet system had to be performed before representatives from the Bureau of Registration of Acts of Civil Status (ZAGS).

◆◆◆ Chapter 3

THE GREAT TO-DO

In the morning, there was a great to-do. The yard seethed like an anthill. Despite the icy cold, the Zelmenyaners ran from room to room in their slippers. They talked all at once without bothering to take a seat.

"Just think of it, in Reb Zelmele's yard!"

"Without a rabbi, yet!"

"Why does it always have to happen to us?"

The elder Zelmenyaners went around with their beards jutting out, sighing and shrugging. The young whippersnaps peered from beneath their caps, sniffing the charged air. Uncle Yuda, beside himself, stood chewing his beard at home. In the next room lay Khayaleh, red with shame. Uncle Yuda blew on his carpenter's plane and worked feverishly while grumbling to a plank:

"The silly cow! What was the big rush? Why kick over the traces?"

Uncle Yuda was one of a kind, a widower and a philosopher. All at once he laid his plane on a bench and stood glumly reflecting that, since the time of Reb Zelmele, weddings had been celebrated with music.

His fiddle hung on the wall. He took it down, went to the plywood partition beyond which Khayaleh lay, and tuned the instrument. Then, smoothing his glossy beard, he shut his eyes and played.