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ADVENTURE ENOUGH FOR A BINDLESTIFF BOYCHIK

—from *Yiddish for Pirates*, a novel

1491. MOISHE, A YOUNG LITVAK sailor, seeks a traitor who has betrayed the true identity of a group of secretly Jewish conversos to the Spanish Inquisition. He travels with his parrot. The parrot tells the tale.

So nu, if you hadn't seen the great Cathedral of Seville you might mistake the residence of the Archbishop for the actual house of God.

If God had a proclivity for bull's-blood red and archways.

But, takeh, it must be said, throughout the world there's little evidence for divine preference in design, architectural or otherwise, though, at least on the basis of quantity, He seems to have an enthusiasm for the myriad blues of sky and sea.

For the skewbald arch of heaven.

And God must be very large and quite the big macher if his infinite self requires such a home beside the world itself.

I've often wondered where he might go to hide, to perhaps take a metaphysical load off his spacetime-wide feet, and have a quantum shloff.

The Torah says that after six full days of truly original, world-class, creative exertion, He naps for only one day. So no wonder, if, throughout history, He occasionally nods off and His infinite chin hits His dimensionless chest and for forty long and blind winks, another log is sawed from Eden's first-growth forest.

Did I really expect Him to always be at the centre of every crossroads, directing traffic, clouds, and souls?

Or to be those souls, clouds, and traffic?

Or the roads which cross themselves?

Or the idea of roads—or of centre?

Fyneh.

In the Heavenly City, He's always tailing someone in the fast lane, driving a flashy yet invisible Italian sportscar, talking loudly on a cellphone to no-one, the stereo blaring—I imagine Josquin or Black Sabbath or Euro-pop—and ignoring the rules of the road.

Ach. That's not Him in the car. It's His chauffeur.

But nu, where does one thing leave off and another begin? Moishe and I: two brainboxes filled with thought. Two buckets of grey water drawn from the same well. The single animal that therefore we are.

Where does the Jew leave off and the converso begin? What separates the Chosen from the choosing people?

If there was only one tree in a forest and it falls, can you call it a forest?
And does a Jewish forest need to be made of Jewish trees?

Feh.

Again, I'm fermisht by my own beak, such a shmegeggie that the words speak me instead of the other way around.

You could as easily find me in the dictionary as high on a thicket tree.
Nu, look under "gullable."

But my picture is there. Made of at least a thousand words. My coat of many colours.

But, emis, inside every bird is another bird wondering how it ended up wearing such a coat. And where they came from: Christian, Moor, Jew, mensch, moron, or featherduster. An Icarus of words.

But, vershtay? You understand.

Where was I before my words left me behind?

The residence of the Archbishop Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, the Palacio Arzobispal. It's a very large building, nu?

And in such a home, Moishe and I had to find a single treacherous Jew. A nebbish in a haystack.

We had been told that, hidden from view like a Kabbalist's God, there was an almost-forgotten door at the back of the building and far from the main gate. A small star in the tuches of the night sky. A secret entrance to the rectory.

Behind the Palacio, a rumplike hill. Moishe and I crawled up the slope. In such situations, my legs were as good as his. I'm not always a clavicle rider. We scanned for an opening and found a door tall as a dog, wide as stern of a cow. If the stern of cow were threshold-wide, and Rover, door-tall. Moishe,

creeping serpentine on his belly to avoid surveillance, reached for the handle. A door in another part of the wall opened. A grave's worth of light was thrown on the grass. A man stepped into this bright tomb. A priest carrying a lantern. We lay flat and silent as roadkill on a high street. Sometimes, there's nothing as good as two dimensions.

The priest turned and our backs were striped with lantern light. A beam o' nine tails.

"The light of God is upon you," he said, looking in our direction.

We remained still as the bones of the dead. Maybe he didn't mean us.

Maybe he was rehearsing a sermon.

Maybe he meant those Jewish elf dybbuks dancing an estampie near us on the lawn.

"I see you," he said. "Do not move."

Definitely the dybbuks. *We* were not moving.

It would not be long before we would not be able to move even if we had wanted to.

Because of death.

Because of fear.

The one not necessarily the result of the other.

He walked toward us. "Speak with me and I shall not speak of you."

Moishe stood. "We are lost," he said. "We are hungry. We look for help." Soon he would be telling the priest of the seven little Moischelets, his rope-thin younger brothers who were even more lost and hungry than us.

"Come inside. I will give you food," the priest said. "And you shall tell me your story."

He set his lantern on a large table and we sat around in its fringes.

"When they are angry and seek 'Padre Luis Dos Almos,' I am the one that hides. What name do you hide from?"

"Miguel," Moishe said. "Miguel Levante." He would hope to pass for this name.

The Priest set out bread and wine. The official nosh of the church.

And some pieces of cheese.

"I have not seen a parrot before, save in a painting," he said. "Who's a pretty boy?" He thrust some bread at me.

Pretty boy? Feh! I should have taken his eyes for grapes, his tongue for a red scarf. But then blindly, and without saying a word, he would have cooked me and I would be soup.

“What is your name, pretty boy?”

“Goy,” I spat, naming both him and myself. I had been too long speaking only the mamaloshen to Moishe, and I was angry.

I knew my name could not be “Aaron.” We were not wearing those feathers. Moishe became Miguel, I’d intended to baptise myself Christian, but not in Yiddish. A Yiddish baptism is hardly a baptism at all.

“Goy?” Padre Luis asked.

Moishe smiled at me slyly. What mishegosse, what mischief, was he up to?

“Yes,” he said. “He speaks but little and with limited sense. His name is Goya—in full, ‘Christian Goya’—for when he was the bird of the Goya Family in Zaragoza, if they were not ever vigilant, he would dine upon Eucharist wafers stolen from the chapel. Indeed, it is because of this excess of devotion that he resides no longer with that noble family.”

I smiled sheepishly.

If a parrot could be said to be sheepish.

Or to smile.

A person regarding the scene would not have known that though the bread and wine were only what they were, there had been a transubstantiation of two of the three at the table.

We had named ourselves Miguel Levante and Christian Goya.

For the Padre, our Christian names were Lost and Hungry.

As we ate, I reflected that I must not again permit such an outburst of temper, or no matter the names we were known by, we would not be able to hide, would soon find ourselves tempered by fire.

What tale should Moishe relate of our history—for the priest would want details, names beyond Lost and Hungry?

He was a prince who had exchanged his crown, his clothes, and his chest of golden maravedis for a parrot, some rags, and the open road.

He came from a world beyond sky, a cloud-lapped island above the rain where they dined on the bright fruit of stars and the wispy meat of human souls.

He ran from his father, a Caliban who would soon beat his body beyond repair, would soon gouge his brain—and the brains of his seven poorly nourished brothers, pallid, mouse-like creatures with weak eyes who wailed for milk from their dead mother’s tsitskehs—piercing their heads with a smooth-handled marlinspike.

He was fourteen and had left the dreary shmatta-cart road ruts of an insignificant shtetl armed only with a questionable book and a taste for the brine-tart air of the horizons beyond the horizon, only to be whipped as a cabin boy, and find driftwood-escape from trade as a slave after shipwreck, then kill a priest, entomb a sexton, liberate what was bound—four sacks of heresy—and now had designs on the traitorous life of a Marrano spy working for the Archbishop and the Holy Inquisition itself, may—ptuh, ptuh, ptuh—devils make a coracle of his kishka guts, his slime-white spine for a mast.

Each seemed as likely, and as equally scaffolded by cloud, as fanciful as the second invisible horn of the unicorn.

Though only the last were true.

Yet the priest would not believe it, even were it to be scrubbed of stain in bucket water, its heresy drowned in a pail like a scrabbling kitten.

Still, of the megillah of tales which he might tell, Moishe had a sense that, spoken plainly, the authority of the truth, though shaped, sculpted, tailored and trimmed for the church, might speak most authentically to the priest.

Truth sounds most true when it is spoken bespoke.

And it could save our lives. We were, after all, sought by the Inquisition and had been caught crawling up the leg of the Archbishop's, attempting entry at his back door. This would, we acknowledged, cause him considerable discomfort.

Moishe began:

A cabin boy from the east, he had wandered without design across water and into the history of Spain. There had been whipping, a shipwreck, bandits, the execution lessons of the Auto da Fé, warm heaps of soft soil to sleep on, kindly farmers offering sour milk and the desiccated crusts of old bread.

Yet he should not neglect to recount the assistance of priests and the safe harbour, soft beds and fresh bread of churches.

And his faith.

Padre Luis Dos Almos sat for a while chewing on some of that soft church bread. Tongues of lantern light worried the stumps of shadow in the kitchen's dim maw.

"An excellent tale," he said, finally. "Adventure enough for a bindlestiff of a lad in possession of but a meagre assortment of years. And what you say of history interests me. For it is true, we wander the alleys like *fâneurs*,

sometimes finding ourselves on the main street amidst the chaos of traffic, dodging to avoid becoming flesh shoes on history's great hooves."

He poured more wine into both his own and Moishe's cup. "I observe, also, that you have, perhaps, also wandered from the narrow path of truth into the broad thoroughfare of invention. 'Miguel'—is that a name from the East? And what of the Goyas of Zaragoza and their parrot? I was born on some day's yesterday, but let me be clear that that day was not today."

Which way to run? I saw flight in Moishe's eyes.

"I requested a story and you have provided a good tale," Padre Luis said. "I warrant it is a painting with more colour than the pencil-outline of the actual. Tonight you will sleep here. When the sun returns day, you will return home, returning to your parents both yourself and their sleep."

"Yes, Padre," Moishe nodded respectfully. Sculpted and trimmed, the truth was not as distant as Moishe might have imagined. Sleep and his parents likely had not shared a bed for some time.

Padre Luis poured himself another cup of wine to water his ripening cheeks. "I myself have been the wandering I of many adventures," he began. "I was born in the city of Palma on the island of Majorca. From there, I have travelled much and seen more. The iridescent arbour of the peacock's tail, the grizzled hump on the ape's back. Great battles and tender love. Silver-hearted heroes and the mewling of cowards, though often each mistook himself for the other. I have known the jealous turnscrew of the human heart and the incomprehensible round dance of kindness. Jews, Infidels, pagans, and Christians. And those in between."

He paused to drink again, and this seemed to inspire him. "I am drunk from the jagged edges of life's broken bottle. I have tasted the sweet black-currant wine of a woman's lips. But, these last several years, I have become a ghost." He imbibed now with less inhibition and more gusto, spilling wine down his cheeks and onto his cassock. "I have become a ghost."

He did not appear to be so, though at this point, it was clear that he was comprised of a high percentage of spirits.

"This Inquisition. This Tribunal of the Fercockteh Holy Office. Shh. We must not speak with such vigour if we are to speak plainly." He leaned conspiratorially over the table and then continued in a hiss. "I am a ghost. How can I be a man? I am hollowed out by such haunting. Watching. Waiting. Not all who wander are lost."

Then he placed his soft red face on the table and closed his eyes "How great is the darkness," he said and passed out.

If I, as Christian Goya, had supped too devoutly on the sacred body, this unconscious holy ghost of a man had too greatly sipped of the blood. Likely quarts of it before we'd arrived.

We crept into the dark hallway and were gone.

There'd be time to wonder at Padre Luis's use of a Yiddish word. I was certain that Moishe had noticed, too.

It was fercockteh.

We could barely tell left from right in the dim light of the hall.

"Left," I said.

"No, right is better," he said.

"Lokhsen putz." Noodle dick, I said.

"Smeckle crab."

"Shmuck dreck."

"Seagull."

Those were fighting words, but he whose legs are on the ground decides which way to walk. We went right.

A long hallway. The dark shapes of doors.

Our quarry was behind one of them, asleep, we hoped, on a pallet, his nose guttural with snores, his dreams radiant hot with the burning sanbenitos of those he had betrayed. All but our prey would be in the red cassock of a priest. But soon, he, too, would be robed in red: we would slit his duplicitous throat and he would become kosher meat for worms.

Behind two doors, no one. Behind another, a sleeping priest. The creak of the moving door caused him to stir and so we quickly withdrew.

The last door before a turn in the hall, a larger room, empty but for a table, a chair, and a large bookcase filled with books. A small sconce on the wall, barely alight. A sound from down the hall. We slipped into the room, a place to hide.

There was a narrow sword, more like a skewer than a blade, resting against the wall. Moishe took it in his hand, raised it for protection. Footsteps. Some murmuring. Where could we hide?

Moishe did not yet possess the brawn of adulthood. His pisher-thick frame fit behind the shelves. And with room for a bird.

So, I hid, too.

There was no back to the bookcase. We had to rely on the books for cover. It would not be the first time that books had been used to obscure what might otherwise be clearly seen.

The fluttering of orange-yellow candlelight entered the room. Then a man. He put the candleholder down on the table and looked thoughtfully at the shelves. It is impossible to know if one is invisible without asking, and we weren't going to ask.

He moved closer to the shelves, either to distinguish us from shadow or to read the title on a book.

It isn't clear how the book felt, but winter came suddenly to my spine. Now we could see the man clearly. It was the very man that we sought. Abraham. The traitor. He stood in front of the books and reached out.

It happened in a single moment.

Abraham pulled a book from the shelf. As the space opened, the birth of a gapped-toothed grin, Moishe manoeuvred the skewer between the books and drove it into the soft flesh between the man's ribs. Incisive literature, the bookcase had a venomous stinger filled with revenge. Abe folded in half, clutched his chest, and then rolled to the floor. He lay on the ground in fetal position, and died. He made no sound, before or after.

Moishe stood behind the bookcase for a few minutes, his hand still protruding from between the shelf of books.

As if waiting to greet a bibliophile with a surprise handshake.

Then, waking, he retracted the hand and we quickly left the room, Moishe creeping on the toe-ends of his shoes in a silent elven-dance. We would not disturb the fathers in their beds, nor Padre Luis's wine-fuelled table-top shloff. We were soon through the door, down the rectory's sloping hill and free again to creep like shadows along the walls of Seville's sleeping streets.

Moishe returning home after another night playing Michael the Archangel, converting the living to the dead. Protecting Jews from the fiery furnace.

Who knew it wasn't the angel who had wings, but rather, his trusty sidekick?