

The World to Come
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Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.
-- Isaiah 26:19

Yoel Grunbacker had narrowly missed death. He had been in Paris on business when Hitler invaded Poland, and some Zionist connections had persuaded him that to return to Crackow was suicide. So with their help he fled to Lisbon, and after a lengthy delay as his travel papers were prepared, to Palestine. It was only after the war that he learned the fate of his beloved wife, Frydka.

By chance he met a survivor who hailed from the village of Podloz, where he and Frydka had kept a summer cottage. The man told him that Frydka slipped out of Crackow after the invasion and fled to Podloz, only to be quickly rounded up with the Jews of that village. The man was forced to dig a large pit with some of the other Jews of Podloz. He told Yoel he saw Frydka Grunbacker led to the pit with two dozen other women, where she was forced to strip. Then she was shot and fell in the hole. The testimony of the man was enough to convince a Rabbinical court that Frydka Grunbacker was indeed dead. The Rabbi who wrote the paperwork told Yoel: "You are free to marry again." But for a long time Yoel held out hope. What else could he do? He had lost everyone in the war: his mother, his two sisters, a score of cousins. Every day after the

war he scanned the names of survivors entering Palestine. Perhaps his mother, sisters, or Frydka would be among them? One day an F. Grunbacker was on the list, but on further inquiries, Yoel found that the Grunbacker was a man. So, with the passing of time, Yoel lost hope.

Of course, Yoel had heard stories of miracles. Of husbands, sons, brothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts or uncles suddenly appearing in the doorway, seemingly revived from the dead. But five years had passed since the conclusion of the war. The DP camps in Europe were empty. The remnants of European Jewry were either in Israel or America. Yoel began to date a woman named Rochel who worked in the government office where he had a mid-level post. She was a petite blond who was born in a kibbutz but had moved to Tel Aviv at eighteen, weary of life in a barracks and its free love. They both worked in the Rationing Department. Yoel supervised the distribution of cheese coupons in Tel Aviv and Jaffa, and Rochel was an auditor.

In a short time, they fell in love and were married. It was difficult to find good apartments close to the office, so before Yoel and Rochel could fully appreciate the seriousness of their actions, they began to siphon off some of the cheese coupons to the black market. Yoel sold the coupons to Dov Bar Israel, the famous black market fence. With the extra money, they could afford a large flat. They were cautious, and were careful not to be overly greedy, yet even so, Yoel was scared. Every time he was out on the street, he suspected he was being followed. Usually, it was a man in a suit, but sometimes it was an old, squat woman following him hurriedly in a crowd, which only heightened Yoel's sense of paranoia. Since landing in Palestine, he continually saw

familiar faces in the crowds of Tel Aviv: a glimpse of his mother rounding a corner, or one of his sisters purchasing a loaf of bread. Of course, these could have been just Jewish faces reproduced, with variations here and there, in the Jewish state. But Yoel still found it unsettling. He wondered if the dead were laying blame on his life --- placing a claim on him for surviving.

“We could be imprisoned,” Yoel said to Rochel about the cheese ration coupons in a tremulous voice, “and the prison sentence would be long – five years – such crimes are viewed as unpatriotic.”

“You worry too much, Yoel,” Rochel answered from the kitchen, rolling out some dough on a board. “Everyone deals in the black market. If they didn’t, no one would have a bean in their pot or a hat on their head.”

Despite Rochel’s assurances, Yoel felt a persistent sense of dread, as if a terrible event was impending. As he sat in his office, he constantly worried that the corpulent form of the Chief Auditor would darken his doorway -- or worse yet, a policeman. He sat hunched over his work in nervous anticipation of some dreadful event beginning to unfold beyond the range of his perception.

One day, Yoel, bending over a ledger, sensed a presence in the office door. A woman stood there, concealed in the dim light of the hallway. Out in the street, he could hear two men cursing each other. Further down the hall, the clatter of the typing pool. It was all so loud that at first he could not hear what the woman was saying. Then she stepped forward, and he realized she was saying his name in Yiddish. As she stepped completely into the office, Yoel looked fully into her face. He felt the floor suddenly drop out beneath him, and a tingly sensation of vertigo seized his body. The walls

appeared to lean toward him, threatening collapse. The woman was the spitting image of his dead wife Frydka, except she was rail thin, whereas his Frydka had always been pleasingly plump.

“Are you Yoel Grunbacker?” the woman asked in Yiddish, using the formal second person pronoun. Her voice sounded hollow and reedy, like her body, which was thin and spectral. Her black dress and brown sweater clung to her body like rags on a scarecrow. Her brown eyes were sunken in her face, as if pulled down by an inward force. Her black hair was pulled tight against her skull, revealing, in places, the blue tint of her scalp.

“Yes, I am,” Yoel answered slowly, in Yiddish, barely able to move his lips.

“Yoel Grunbacker, from Crackow?” she asked falteringly, her voice raspy, like the rubbing of two dried leaves. “Who was formerly with the firm Shapiro and Flickmann?”

“Yes,” Yoel answered quickly, “Yes... yes... for heaven’s sake, who are you?”

“Yoel,” the woman answered, “I’m Frydka Grunbacker, your wife.” When she finished speaking, Yoel found himself standing on quaking legs.

“How can that be?” he asked, although with each passing second, he realized that this woman may indeed be Frydka. She quickly told the tale of her murder, just as it was related by the eyewitness from Podloz.

“It’s true,” the woman continued. “I was shot, in the shoulder,” and she drew her hand up to touch the spot, but her hands grasped her neck instead. “I fell into that pit, and all these bodies piled on top of me. But I wasn’t dead. The bullet went right through me. When the Germans went away to bring the next group of people to the pit, I pulled

myself out of the hole and hid in the forest. Later, I joined some partisans. I was almost killed a thousand times. So many died around me, but somehow I survived. After the war I found myself in the southern Ukraine. I stayed there for a year. I had problems getting out. Of course, I had no papers. But then I got a break and sailed for Turkey. I remained there for three long years, trying to get papers to come to Palestine. For the last month I have been traveling here. Now here I am. A man in Odessa told me that you were alive in Palestine – I mean Israel.”

“But you are dead!” Yoel said, his cheeks flush, his body cold. He raised a hand to his face, but couldn’t feel a thing. The woman took a few steps closer to him, as if to catch his swaying body, but it was too late. Yoel had fainted.

Someone was slapping Yoel’s face. When he opened his eyes, he realized it was a colleague from down the hall.

“Should I call a doctor, Yoel?” the man asked. A tight knot of people were standing over Yoel, who was prone on the floor.

“There was a woman here? Black hair? Thin?” Yoel did not at first realize he was speaking Yiddish to the man until his colleague answered in Hebrew.

“What are you saying, Yoel?”

“A woman? Was a dark haired woman here?”

“Yes,” someone else answered. “She called us in here after you fell and told us she had to leave. She left this for you, Yoel.” He was handed a folded piece of paper: Frydka G. 14C Hagadol Street, Tel Aviv.

“You should go home and lie down,” another man said. “Do you want us to call you a cab?” Yoel stood up and politely declined. As quickly as he could, he shook himself free of the people and was out on the street.

Yoel quietly knocked on the door. He constantly had to remind himself to breathe. His eyes were dry from not blinking. It was as if the involuntary functions of his body had become voluntary. He knocked on the door a little louder and it opened. He found himself standing uncomfortably close to the woman who claimed to be Frydka. He asked himself: so now I have two wives? The woman sensed his discomfort, and took a few steps back. She beckoned Yoel into the room. She was unpacking.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stay. I left my baggage outside, and was afraid someone would take it.” Yoel didn’t say anything. He leaned against the pitted wall of the shabby room and watched the woman fold some shirts.

“I haven’t been in Israel long. I was in a Hebrew training course in Haifa for a week. The teacher told me I have little aptitude for the language. You know me; I never was one for the synagogue. He told me to marry a man who speaks Hebrew.”

“You aren’t married?” Yoel asked, confused. The woman turned to fully look at him.

“I’m married to you, Yoel. You are disoriented, of course. You thought I was dead all this time, whereas I knew I was alive. We have not seen each other for eleven years. I knew you were alive all that time... I could just feel it. I knew you were too smart to come back to Poland to be murdered. Of course you thought I was dead, everyone is dead now... but I’m here, and it is a shock.”

“A shock,” Yoel repeated quietly. “I still don’t fully believe you are Frydka. You look too different. So pale and thin.”

“What proof do you need?” the woman asked. “Verbal or physical or both?”

“I don’t know,” Yoel said, and then just picked one. “Physical.”

“Do you remember that diamond-shaped mark, just to the right of my, well...” she hesitated. “You used to kiss and tease it, and call it my God-made wedding ring to you?” On hearing this, Yoel swallowed hard. He noticed that the room was very warm. Wordlessly, the woman hiked up her skirt. She was wearing garters and tattered hose. She unhooked the garters to pull down her underwear. When she did, Yoel took a slow step forward. He looked down at her exposed skin and sunk to his knees and nuzzled and kissed the diamond-shaped blemish. The woman ran her hands through his hair.

“Frydka...” was all he managed to say.

“I still love you, Yoel... but so many years have passed. I know you remarried. I followed you to your office yesterday and saw you with your young wife. She is very beautiful...” Yoel nuzzled Frydka closely, and his face moved more toward her center. “You shouldn’t,” she said, but without force. “You are married...” But it was too late.

Later, Frydka spoke as Yoel dressed. He was slowly buttoning his shirt.

“What should we do?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You can’t be married to two women.”

“No,” he answered quietly. “I can’t.” Now Frydka sat up in the bed. Her loose black hair fell around her thin, white shoulders. A white raised scar the shape of an index finger ran the length of her left shoulder.

“Has anything like this happened before?” she asked. “I mean after the war, with all the confusion, and so many survivors scattered to the four winds...”

“I’m sure it has,” Yoel answered, seeming to remember reading a story about it in the newspaper *Haertez*, but unsure of how it was resolved, if at all. “My mother? My sisters?” Yoel asked after a lengthy pause.

“I saw all three the week of the invasion,” Frydka explained. “It was such chaos, you can’t imagine. But after I fled to Podloz I never heard from them again. They are probably just like all the others...” and her voice trailed off to nothing.

“I have to go,” Yoel said, now fully dressed, only his tie drooping loose in his hand. “I have to go home...” he stumbled on the last word, “to my wife. She works with me – but she had to go to Haifa today. If she comes back to the office and finds out I fainted and rushes home and discovers I’m not there, she’ll call the police.”

“Of course,” Frydka answered tightly. And then: “I still love you, Yoel. More than a decade has passed! We both have changed, and not just our looks. There have been men since you. But I never stopped loving you. I always dreamed of returning to you and resuming our marriage...” she stopped, for tears were streaming down Yoel’s face. She started to cry too.

“You should stay with your wife Rochel,” she continued, a little more composed. “I’ll move to Jerusalem.”

“No,” Yoel answered. “Stay here. I lost you for eleven years; don’t go anywhere now. Stay in this room. I’ll come by after work tomorrow.”

When Yoel returned to his apartment, he caught Rochel hurriedly heading out the door. She looked alarmed.

“I returned to the office to drop off my report,” she explained breathlessly, “and they told me you fainted. I rushed home, and you weren’t here.”

“I stopped at a café for a cup of tea,” Yoel answered weakly.

“You look as pale as death. Go to the bedroom and lay down. I’ll bring you a compress.” Yoel obeyed Rochel and lay on the bed. In a few moments she returned with a cloth smothered in Witch Hazel, which she placed on his forehead. She removed her shoes and curled next to him and spoke of her journey to Haifa. Her small hands roved around Yoel’s body. Despite himself, he felt aroused. She kissed him.

“You smell funny,” she said, but before he could say a word, she was kissing him again, and hoisting her small body over him, unbuckling his trousers.

At the end of the next day, Yoel went to Rochel’s office and told her he had to drop off some papers at the Head Office. A vexed expression crossed her face, which Yoel was too distracted to notice. He rushed to Frydka’s room. She was there, waiting quietly for him, as if she had not moved much since yesterday. She sat on a wooden chair, erect and alert, but looking weary, as if she hadn’t slept a wink last night. She smoked a cigarette and a plate of butts were beside her on the bed.

“Well, Yoel?” she asked, raising her narrow, thin face to him, as if to willingly take a blow from his fist.

“I have to stay with Rochel,” he said quickly. “We will quietly get a divorce... or whatever has to be done. I’ll go to the Marriage Registry tomorrow and make inquiries.” She turned her face away from him, but Yoel could see she was quietly crying.

“You were dead, Frydka. I had to move on and I can’t go back now. Eleven years! It isn’t fair to Rochel. She is innocent in all this. Our lives were turned upside down, but we can’t do that to her.”

“Of course,” Frydka turned to him once more. Her face was firm now, but still flecked with tears. “I thought you would say that. It is the right thing to do, but after last night...”

“I was overwhelmed. I had you dead and buried. A pile of bones in Podloz. And then there you were, in front of me, alive...”

“Sometimes I feel like that pile of bones in Podloz...”

“Nonsense,” Yoel took a few steps toward her. “You are still an attractive woman, you can remarry...”

“I’m forty-one, Yoel, who will have me, especially with what I have been through?” Yoel had reached out to hold her hand, which was cold as ice, and she took it. She looked at him with tired, brown eyes brimming with tears, her lips down-turned.

“I must ask you one thing, Yoel, and you must answer me truthfully.”

“Anything,” Yoel said.

“Do you still love me?”

“Yes,” Yoel answered without hesitation, moving his other hand up Frydka’s arm until it rested on her exposed neck. They kissed. They shed their clothes and began to make love. Minutes went by, and the door suddenly burst open. Rochel stood in the threshold, her jacket closed, her mouth wide open.

“A woman! A woman!” she screamed. “I knew from the Duty Roster that you had no business at the Head Office. So I followed you here,” Rochel said, and began to hyperventilate. “A woman! I thought you were getting greedy and selling someone besides Bar Israel ration coupons. But a woman!”

“Rochel!” Yoel screamed her name until he got her to stop repeating, “But a woman!” She was finally silent, gazing at them both, who in their shock had not even covered their nudity. “This is Frydka, Rochel.” On hearing the name, Rochel furled her brow toward the low ceiling.

“Frydka?” she asked blankly. “Your Frydka? Dead Frydka?”

“Yes...” was all Yoel could say, before Rochel swooned to the ground.

Frydka and Yoel laid her down on the bed where they had just been making love. It was an objectionable choice, but the only one in the small room. Frydka put on a robe and went to the hall lavatory to get a towel and some warm water to revive Rochel. But when Frydka returned, Rochel was already sitting up, blinking heavily, her eyes roving slowly about the small room. She looked at Yoel, her beautiful face blank with incomprehension.

“What happened, Yoel?” she asked, and he told her, as quietly as he could, from the beginning. He even told her that he had slept with Frydka on the same day he had

slept with her. As he spoke, Frydka put down the basin of water and sat on the edge of the bed. As Yoel continued, Rochel kept looking from Yoel to Frydka and back again. When Yoel finished, she looked squarely at Frydka.

“You survived... after all those trials? My God!” Rochel said, and started to weep. To Yoel’s surprise, Frydka reached out and took Rochel’s hand, and Rochel let her. With the other hand, Frydka gently stroked Rochel’s disheveled hair. Yoel had no idea if Rochel was crying because she was pleased that Frydka was alive or not. Yoel had told her, on more than one occasion, of his great love for his first wife. But he had no time to calculate the balance of Rochel’s emotions, because it seemed she would faint again. She leaned forward a little, mumbling, “The dead do not return to life... the dead...” and Yoel pressed her to lay back down.

“No, Yoel, take me back to our apartment,” Rochel said, gazing around the room, bewildered. “I can’t stay here another second.” Rochel quickly stood, but her legs buckled from beneath her. Yoel held her up, but couldn’t carry her and her parcels home with him.

“I’ll carry them,” Frydka said. “You’ll need my help, anyway.”

Frydka put Rochel to bed. Frydka had been seeing a doctor in Haifa who prescribed little green pills for her nerves, and she gave Rochel one so she could rest. Most of the night had already passed, and now the sun was just rising, pale yellow through the square kitchen window.

“She’ll sleep like a baby for five hours,” Frydka explained as she sat across for Yoel. He offered her a cup of tea. She picked up a spoon with trembling hands, but

quickly dropped it. She tried again and stirred in sugar and the spoon tinkled in the cup, like a toy chime.

“She is very beautiful, Yoel,” Frydka said after some time. “And very young.”

“Yes,” he said to the first, and to the second, “but mature for her age – a former kibbutznik. Her kibbutz was very egalitarian. At twenty, she’s had more lovers than I have fingers. And she is stronger than me... she’s fired guns and had them fired back at her.”

“So, what do we do now, Yoel?” Frydka asked, the Yiddish trilling off her tongue. Yoel just raised his brows and flipped through a ration book which was lying on the table. He looked to the kitchen clock as his savior.

“I need to get to work.”

Yoel tried to be busy, but got little done. His mind was sore with distraction. In just two days, he had gone from having one wife to two, had ceased being a widower, and had suddenly realized that the dead could rise to life. Indeed, death seemed to him little more than a conceptual trick. Six million had perished, of course. But for him, the most important of those six million had walked through his door. He had even made love to her. Now she was at home with his other wife, doing God knows what, while he sat here at a desk. Yoel could not imagine what the two women would say to each other. He hadn’t a clue what he would find when he returned home from work. Would he discover one or both of them dead on the floor from a violent argument? More than once, he had to restrain the urge to return home early. Only his sense of fear and confusion prevented him from rising from his chair and storming out the door. He didn’t even eat lunch.

He decided to leave work an hour early and visit Dov Bar Israel, his man in the black market. With two wives, and little chance of losing one (Yoel now could not envision jettisoning either Rochel or Frydka) he would need more money.

Dov Bar Israel was a decorated hero from the War of Independence. He had lost his right hand fighting in the Palmah – the Haganah’s elite fighting unit. He had picked up a tossed grenade and started to throw it, but the thing went off, taking Bar Israel’s hand with it. His flesh muffled the explosion, saving the lives of the six Palmahniks surrounding him, who were only slightly wounded. He was given a citation. Bar Israel spoke of it with contempt to Yoel: “I picked up something bad and tried to throw it away. It wasn’t heroism. It was instinct. Like kicking away a piece of shit!”

Bar Israel was seated on a packing crate when Yoel entered the warehouse. He was berating a man in slangy Hebrew as he looked over the contents of a clipboard. When Bar Israel saw Yoel approach, he thrust the clipboard back at the man.

“Go away, Effi,” he said derisively, “and find my crate of oranges. I don’t give a God damn that it is just one! You pilfered it to pay for your son’s *bris*, you brigand! Don’t trade my oranges for a foreskin. If it isn’t here in a half hour, I’ll skewer you with my hook.”

Bar Israel stood and embraced Yoel. Since fencing coupons to him, they had become close. Yoel could feel the cold metal of his hook grazing his back.

“What’s wrong, *habibi*?” Bar Israel said as they pulled apart, studying Yoel’s downcast face. Yoel quickly told him what had happened over the last few days, and Bar Israel’s mouth opened ever wider with each new revelation.

“Back from the dead. Good Moses in Heaven. It must be the birth pangs of the World to Come. The Messiah will arrive soon, wanting to fence his crown for some imported tea. You know, I knew a man who had this happen to him, but it was a mother, not a wife. You think you have big problems with two wives! My friend had nothing but headaches from a resurrected mother! Once you’ve buried a mother, it’s hard to have her stroll through the door again and start berating you for trifles, I’ll tell you.

“So now you have two wives,” he continued, stroking his chin with his good hand. “Do you think you are a Patriarch? You know the holy Rabbi Gershom banned polygamy, don’t you? What will you do?”

“I have no clue,” Yoel declared. “I’ll let the women decide.”

“They will anyway,” Bar Israel interjected. “In a marriage with one woman, a man’s opinion means little. With two, it will mean nothing.”

“How can I leave Rochel?” Yoel continued. “I love her dearly. I have started a life with her. We’ve been trying to have a baby, though so far with no luck. But how can I just abandon Frydka? She’s been through hell. She has lost everything in the world. She lost me once, and if I throw her out, she will lose me again.”

“But you must leave one of them... or one of them must leave. Most men can’t bear being married to one woman -- how will you survive two? You’ll be crushed like a flea. And it isn’t natural. You can’t have two women... at least not as equals. One must be a wife and one must be a mistress -- that is the natural order.”

“But they are *both* my wife,” Yoel exhaled, and cradled his face with his hands.

“Maybe she’s really dead,” Bar Israel mused, as if to himself.

“Who?” Yoel asked, confused.

“Frydka, who else?”

“What the hell do you mean, Dov?”

“You know those stories from the Old Country,” Bar Israel began to tease, raising his hook for emphasis. “My grandfather would tell me them in Poland. A man or a woman dies, usually from foul play, and isn’t properly buried, and comes back to the living. The body refuses to lie in its grave, and demands its life back, and makes a nuisance of itself. It acts like a petulant child who can’t face facts.”

“That’s absurd,” Yoel spat, lowering his hands from his face, gazing at Bar Israel’s broad face, which was all prominent cheekbone and small, tartar eyes, and split in half by a sizable moustache, neatly trimmed.

“Why is it absurd for a Jewish corpse to return to the Jewish state? Where should she go, Timbuktu?”

“I actually didn’t come here to discuss this,” Yoel explained, exasperated.

“Really? What then?”

“Business,” Yoel answered.

“Its all the same, *habibi*,” Bar Israel chuckled, “marriage, business... in the Old Country when we had arranged marriages we were more honest. Marriage is an economic union... the rest is window dressing. So, what do you have in mind?”

Yoel sat on the crate next to Bar Israel and in whispered phrases explained how he could triple the amount of ration coupons that made their way to Bar Israel’s hand. Bar Israel clicked his hook in evident approval.

Yoel stood with the knob of his apartment door in his hand. He did not want to go in. What was going on in there? Which woman would he find? Rochel? Frydka? Both? His biggest fear was that both would be gone, both equally crushed by the burden which chance or destiny had placed upon them. Yoel took a deep breath, turned the knob, and entered. Rochel was at the stove frying something for dinner. He looked quickly about but did not see Frydka.

“Oh, you are home a little early,” Rochel exclaimed lightly, turning from the stove and smiling at Yoel. He took this as a good sign and took a few steps toward her. But when he was closer, he saw Rochel had been crying. Then relief: she had just peeled some onions and poured them into the skillet.

“Is Frydka here?” Yoel asked heavily.

“Yes,” Rochel smiled and wiped her hand on her apron. “She’s sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” Yoel asked. “Where?”

“In our bedroom. I didn’t think you would mind. She can’t sleep out here on the couch with me banging away in the kitchen, getting dinner on the table,” Rochel explained, pointing to the table, set for two.

“No, of course not,” Yoel answered. “Will Frydka eat?”

“Not right away,” Rochel answered. “Poor woman. Her nerves are all frazzled. She quakes like a leaf sometimes, and she is always so cold. I put every blanket we have on top of her. She took two of those green pills and fell into a deep sleep.”

They sat and ate in silence. Yoel was waiting for Rochel to say the first words, but they did not come for a long time.

“You know, Frydka is a remarkable woman,” Rochel finally said. “Just like you said she was when you spoke about her... before you knew she was alive. But she is even more remarkable than I imagined. We spoke all day long. My Yiddish has improved already! She told me all her stories from the war and after. She survived a thousand trials. Every day she fought to save her life to live one more day, to one day live a normal life. And now...”

“Now what?” Yoel asked.

“Now there is nothing left,” Rochel placed her small hand on her face, palm against her cheek, as if checking her temperature. “Now she has little strength to live. It’s all gone. She fought tooth and nail to save her life, and in the process, destroyed her ability to live.” On hearing this, Yoel shook his head lightly.

“She’s been through hell, Rochel. But in time, she will recover.”

They finished dinner. Rochel reached out and grasped Yoel’s hand.

“You should go in there and see her,” Rochel said, looking up at the kitchen clock. “Those pills will be wearing off soon. She will be so pleased to see you when she wakes up.”

As Rochel washed the dishes in the sink, Yoel slowly opened the bedroom door. Rochel had left a small stub of a candle burning in a saucer. The sweet smell of tallow lingered in the air, like perfume. Yoel closed the door behind him and looked down at the bed. He heard the rhythmic breathing of those who are drugged into slumber. Yoel knew Frydka was alive, but a part of him still feared her – still believed that she was dead. Bar Israel’s words returned to him: Perhaps she was one of the dead who think

they are alive and come back to the living, eating, sleeping, making love, and working, but never really fitting in with the living, and causing all sorts of terrible woe.

He reached down and placed a hand on her head. She stirred, and in the dim light, he saw her eyes open.

“Yoel?” asked a small voice deep in the pillow, still muffled in sleep.

“Yes, I’m here,” he answered. She sat up in the bed. Frydka’s hands roamed over Yoel’s lap. He bent over and they kissed. They made love, and when they finished, Yoel fell asleep beside her. Frydka’s hand cradled his neck. As he dozed, he felt another weight on the other side of the bed. Rochel had silently crept in the room. She slid her hands over Yoel and kissed him. Yoel moved on top of her.

When Yoel awoke in the morning, both women were gone. He looked at the clock. He rose to go to work, and then remembered it was Saturday. Yoel glanced at himself below the covers. He was nude. He rose out of bed, put on a robe and slippers and walked out to the kitchen. Rochel and Frydka were sitting in their robes, a sizeable pot of tea, a stack of toast and a tin of jam before them. Both women looked tired and nervous but their voices, raised in lively conversation, were strong. Yoel was surprised to hear Rochel’s Yiddish, which, despite years of neglect, was supple and lively. As Yoel sat down, Rochel poured him some tea while Frydka spread jam on some toast. They greeted Yoel with casual intimacy, as if such domestic encounters were commonplace. It was at this moment that Yoel realized that both women intended to stay.

Yoel, Rochel, and Frydka slept in the same bed, ate at the same table, and took strolls down to the beach together. As word of Frydka's survival spread, the three became a curiosity in Tel Aviv. People asked: Did Yoel sleep with both women? Did he treat them as equals? Did Frydka and Rochel get along, or was their home the scene of conflict and jealousy? No one could imagine that such a domestic arrangement would be harmonious. People heard of such things among the Oriental Jews, but how could European Jews abide by such an arrangement?

Soon, newspaper men arrived. They tried to force their way into the apartment to take photographs, but Yoel blocked them from entering. He even thought of changing apartments, but good flats were hard to find.

All the clamor was bad for Frydka's nerves. Every time there was pounding at the door, she started to shake and weep. She needed rest, and the attention was frazzling her nerves. She took to the bed for long spells, racked by chills, taking her green pills, then waking, eating, talking, and making love to Yoel when she felt fit, often with Rochel in the bed. Even when she was ill, Frydka enjoyed watching Yoel and Rochel make love. Yoel began to think that such unorthodox sexual behavior was bad for Frydka. Then she grew seriously ill. Yoel and Rochel felt as if they were caring for an invalid, or a sick child. She thrashed about and demanded things from them. She sometimes seemed to forget where she was, and who Yoel and Rochel were; Yoel thought she was losing her sanity. Yoel and Rochel began to quarrel.

"Perhaps we should put her in an asylum," Yoel suggested one day from sheer desperation. Rochel glared at him.

“How can you say such a thing? She is *your wife*, after all. You can’t just throw her in a hospital like some foundling.”

Rochel began to nurse Frydka around the clock. She took a leave of absence from work, and when matters took yet another turn for the worse, Rochel resigned.

“What shall we do without your income?” Yoel asked gravely.

“I think you know what you should do, Yoel. Go see Bar Israel. Do what needs to be done,” Rochel had just returned from the bedroom with some plates of food which Frydka had hardly touched. Her appetite was always poor. “Frydka wants to see you.”

“What?” Yoel asked wearily, understanding Rochel’s intention. Since Frydka had taken so ill, Yoel slept on the couch, while Rochel remained in the bed.

“She is feeling much better today,” Rochel explained. “I haven’t seen her feeling so chipper in weeks. You should go in there Yoel, and make her feel good. She wants you to.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Yoel answered sternly. “That is a sick woman in there.”

“All the more reason to give her some pleasure, Yoel. She is still your wife, after all, and she wants her rights.”

“Yes,” Yoel answered, “and you are my wife too, but you don’t seem keen to redeem *your* rights.”

“I’m too tired from caring for her, Yoel. Go to Frydka. She’ll give you what you need. And she needs you, she is so weak.”

“She’s not a child, Rochel. She doesn’t need parents.”

“Well,” Rochel spat, “we seem incapable of having a child. How long have we been married, and nothing! You may as well have one with Frydka.”

“Ridiculous,” Yoel muttered, moving toward the door. “I can’t believe my ears.”

“What, now you are a yeshiva boy? You enjoy this arrangement when it caters to your pleasure, but then when it gets rough, you want to pull out.”

“Something is wrong with her, Rochel.”

“Of course,” his wife answered, her tone clipped. “She’s been through hell. She’s sick...”

“I think it’s worse than that – I think she’s...” But Yoel could not say the words, for he did not believe them himself. How could he expect Rochel, a young woman brought up by atheists and socialists, to subscribe to such Old Country superstition? He moved to the door and opened it.

“Where are you going? You are leaving? You are going to leave two wives... I have more to say...”

But Yoel did not hear. He was already on the street.

Yoel sat down at a café and ordered a drink. In his jacket pocket were two large stacks of ration coupons, enough to support him and his two wives for a month. He was going to hand them over to Bar Israel, and as he started to walk toward the warehouse, he noticed a man following him. He was dressed in a pale gray suit, and had a newspaper pressed beneath his armpit. Is he following me, Yoel wondered? So Yoel turned unexpectedly down a side street and the man followed. Yoel tried the trick again: he turned around, almost circling back to his former position. Yoel glanced back. The man was still following. He had close-cropped hair and a narrow look of nonchalance. He must be a policeman, Yoel thought, quickening his pace. The man quickened his steps in

turn.

Yoel rushed off to the market in the old city, which, despite the cold and drizzle, was bustling with people making purchases before the coming Sabbath. I'll lose the man in the crowd, Yoel thought. A familiar face walked by him: is that the postman from Podloz? Yoel swore it was the man, although he knew that he was long dead. Yoel rounded a corner. A woman in her twenties carrying a parcel spotted him and quickly turned away toward the beach. She bore an uncanny resemblance to his youngest sister Shayndel. Yoel raised a hand to hail her, but she was already too far gone, a small figure moving with great haste toward the sea.

Yoel followed her toward the beach. The day was overcast and gray. A stiff breeze blew off the water, ruffling the waves, stirring up choppy whitecaps. A vendor was selling ices in a push cart beneath a battered red umbrella, but had no customers. Yoel pushed past him to the municipal pier. There was not a sign of the woman who resembled poor, dead Shayndel. He stood out on the edge of the pier near the rail. In the far distance, a tanker was heading out to sea. Its smokestack left a smudge of black in the low, gray sky. As Yoel leaned over the railing, a few gulls swooped down, thinking he was about to toss them some bread.

He took out the two bulging coupon books and grasped them in shaky hands. He held them over the frothy waters, about to toss them in, but something stopped him. Someone was calling him. The policeman? No, it was Yiddish. Once again, someone was speaking to him in Yiddish, here in Tel Aviv. He turned around slowly, but the man in the gray suit was not pursuing him. No -- a short, squat woman was tottering toward the pier, her head wrapped in a dark blue kerchief, her body huddled in an old brown

men's coat, which was ripped and worn and riddled with holes, and several sizes too big even for her rotund shape. Somehow, her gross form was familiar. She was trotting to him with difficulty, her small boots thudding the planks of the pier like the muffled claps of distant thunder. She came to a halt two feet from him, breathless.

“Yoel... Yoel Grunbacker?”

“Yes... but I don't go by that last name anymore.”

“From Crackow?” the woman continued through heavy breaths. “Born on January 9th, 1910? Went to school at the Frankel Academy?”

“Yes,” Yoel answered, a creeping sense of revelation dawning upon him. “And who are you, madam?” The woman began to cry, and the cry stretched out into a piercing wail.

“It's you... you...” she cried.

“Who are you, madam?” Yoel asked again; he was blankly fearful, although he suspected who was in front of him. He refused to believe despite Frydka's resurrection – or because of it. There was no more room in his life for the dead.

“I'm your mother, Yoel... your mother...” she gasped. She was literally frothing at the mouth and shaking from head to toe. She raised her hands, palms up, to the low gray sky, as if it was about to fall down. “I survived Ravensbruck, God knows how... Those bastards thought they killed me, but somehow I survived. I just arrived here after terrible troubles... alive... alive...” The woman rushed and hugged him. Yoel did not even have time to stuff the coupons back in his pockets. He just held them at the woman's sides, unsure what to do. The woman prayed in Yiddish, and pressed her cold

face against his chest. Yoel could feel her liquids saturate his cotton shirt and wet the skin of his chest.

He looked out beyond the woman to the gray sky, and the vast, green, broken landscape of the sea. The waves piled up against the dock. A piece of flotsam the size of a board rattled against the pylons beneath him. To Yoel, it sounded as if the earth was groaning beneath his feet, hurling up its dead.