

Three Giants

30 January 1939

Hitler declares: "In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet and have usually been ridiculed for it.... Today I will once more be a prophet. If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

Reuven kissed his finger, touched the near-invisible scar above his brother's left eyebrow, and opened the front door to leave.

"Benjamin is my new friend," said Asher suddenly. "But you are my brother, and I still love you." Reuven smiled at his brother's words, at once credulous and wise, like Asher himself.

Reuven felt no jealousy of Benjamin's relationship with his brother, he thought, enjoying the crunch-crunch-crunch of his footsteps in the mud-and-ice of Ulitza Poniatskiego, which would lead him shortly to his fellow klezmerim. Instead, he felt a greater closeness to them both.

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Reuven smiled broadly as he continued along the narrow, twisting street, remembering the first time—*ten weeks ago already!*—that Benjamin knocked on their door, only to be greeted by a screaming eleven-year-old boy, petrified by the sight of the long-haired stranger who surely had come to kidnap, maul, or consume him. It was Benjamin's reaction to Asher's screaming, however, that made Reuven now laugh aloud: He screamed back. Asher then responded to this odd new development by screaming yet louder. Then Benjamin crouched to match Asher's height, so that the screaming match might be more equitable.

The crunch-crunch-crunch of his footsteps in the mud-and-ice of Ulitza Poniatskiego became a brisk, cheerful rhythm as Reuven relished every detail.

By the time their sisters arrived at the front door, each at her own level of panic, Benjamin was holding Asher upside-down by one ankle and tickling him under his arms. Asher's screams were now screams of laughter.

"Benjamin, put him down," Reuven had said calmly, to assuage his sisters' fear of the unannounced intruder who stood tickling their brother. "Just one more minute," said Benjamin, now alternately tickling Asher's belly and neck. "I can see doing this for quite a *whaaa*—" Asher had punched Benjamin in his groin. Benjamin went to his knees, placing Asher gently down as he brought his hands—far too late—to protect himself. Asher ran outside, giggling. Benjamin lifted an index finger to Reuven to indicate "one moment, please," and with great effort rose to his feet. He turned to see Asher standing like a boxer on a patch of grass in front of the house. Benjamin raced toward him, dodged a punch, and tackled Asher. He pinned both of the boy's tiny wrists in the loop of his thumb and forefinger and pointed to Asher's face. Reuven and his sisters followed—he laughing, they fretting. "No cracking the walnuts, little man. Do you understand? That is the unspoken commandment among men."

"Then no tickling!"

"Deal," said Benjamin, releasing Asher's wrists, standing, and extending his hand to help him up, unaware of the foot on its way to

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his abdomen. Again Benjamin went to his knees. For the next twenty or so minutes, Benjamin and Asher continued to wrestle, Asher ignoring his sisters' fruitless pleas not to ruin his new shirt, each boy consenting to treaties and immediately transgressing them.

For the next several weeks, Asher's first question upon waking was: Is Benjamin coming today? If the answer was yes, if Benjamin was coming for lunch or for Shabbes, Asher insisted on knowing *exactly when*. Then, with the benefit of surprise, he would wait by the door a full fifteen minutes before Benjamin was due, giggling and jumping in place. If the answer was no, the next question was: So when is he coming next?

And each time he saw Benjamin, Asher grew more comfortable with him, talking first about his day, then about his hypothesis that his sisters were born only to punish him, then about his poor mathematics grades in *cheder*—and did Benjamin think it was all right if Mama never knew about them? And when Benjamin played an impromptu concert for Reuven's family one Saturday night after Shabbes, an hour of rollicking Yiddish melodies, Asher was convinced, unequivocally, that Benjamin was the greatest man alive. "I love you, Benjamin," Asher said to him that evening, sleepy-eyed and in his bed shirt.

Startled, Benjamin returned, "I love you too, little man."

I remember, thought Reuven, smiling now at the mud-and-ice, that Benjamin's eyes welled with tears.

"Hitler is coming to get you, you fucking Jewish shit." Reuven spun around, almost slipping on the mud-and-ice. The three Ukrainian boys. The ones who had taunted him since he arrived in Rovno a year ago. But since Kristallnacht, they were more menacing somehow—their strides longer, their countenances more stern. Their hatred keener, more focused.

Reuven walked faster, toward Chichego Maya, the crunch-crunch-crunch of mud-and-ice faster below and behind him. If he could reach Chichego Maya, he thought, he would be safe. Ulitza Poniatskiego was too narrow, with too many twists and alleys.

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“Hitler has a special plan for *you*, you ugly Jewish shit,” said the same boy, his voice strangely deep for his age. “In fact, he told me himself, ‘Be sure to take care of that ugly little Jewish shit in Rovno.’”

The other two Ukrainian boys laughed. Again Reuven quickened his pace. The crunch-crunch-crunch behind him quickened as well, now faster than his own. Now faster still.

A fist-sized rock struck the back of Reuven’s neck, so sharply that he cried out. He began to run.

“Why the hurry, Jew?” called deep-voiced boy, the three of them chasing him, the crunch-crunch-crunch closer, closer, then just behind him.

A hand pushed Reuven forward, throwing him headlong into the mud-and-ice. He tried to rise, but a boot pressed into his lower back and held him down. The shock of icy water caused his body to recoil, then stiffen.

“What’s the password, Jew?” Lifting his face from the mud-and-ice, Reuven saw one of them “praying,” his body rocking back and forth, his face contorted, muttering nonsense. Moved by his joke, the boy punctuated each word of gibberish with a kick to Reuven’s ribs. The two others laughed and joined in, kicking Reuven’s legs and hip. Reuven fought to curl his body into itself but could not. He could see the deep-voiced boy rearing back to punch his face. He closed his eyes and braced himself.

The *oof!* of someone being tackled. Curses in Ukrainian. The thud of a punch in the abdomen and a groan of pain. More cursing, the slosh-slosh-slosh of running—running away. Reuven lifted his head and wiped the mud-ice from his eyes.

Benjamin straddled the deep-voiced boy, his knees pinning his arms to the ground. He held his fist above the boy’s face, now a black-red mess of dirt and blood.

“Please,” the boy wheezed, suddenly a child, “let me go.”

“If you or your idiot friends ever touch him again I will fucking kill you. Do you understand me? I. Will. Fucking. Kill you.” The viper-eyes

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were sharper than Reuven had ever seen them. The boy nodded frantically. Then, realizing that he had been freed, he rose and ran.

At a safe distance, the deep-voiced boy stopped and faced Benjamin and Reuven. “You fucking Christ-killers! You’ll be sorry for this, you fucking pigs!” The boy turned and disappeared into the twists and alleys of Ulitza Poniatskiego.

When Aron joined Benjamin and Reuven on the Oeste Bridge, he pointed confusedly to Reuven’s drenched trousers. “The man can’t control his bladder,” said Benjamin, placing an arm around Reuven’s shoulder, leading the way along the cobblestones of Chichego Maya.

* * *

“I am getting closer, Dvorah,” said Meyer Marguiles, stepping back from his painting, stretching his neck and hands, inhaling deeply, slowly. For three hours he had demanded pinpoint focus of his eyes and fingers, and now—exhaling, slowly—he would allow them to rest.

His mind, however, had no interest in idleness. It would instead return to *the question*, the question that for nine months, since the day on the staircase with Bubbe, had obsessed him.

Baby Dvorah, delighted by the sound of her brother’s voice after so much quiet, crawled toward him. Grateful for the distraction, Meyer picked her up, her papier-mâché bride doll in hand. “Look, Dvorah,” he said, pointing to the painting. “Look how far it has come. Picasso would be proud. And Cézanne, of course. I should *never* forget Cézanne when talking about artists who influenced my work.” For a moment they were both still, watching it.

Every stage of its development, Meyer knew—from the initial series of graphite sketches, in which he established the basic composition, to the short series of charcoal sketches, in which he determined tonal values, to the longer series of pastel sketches, in which he established a color scheme—was a step forward and upward. An inexorable ascent.

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“One thing it does *not* have, however,” Meyer said to Dvorah, his voice low, his mind stubbornly returning to *the question*, “is a title.”

“How about, ‘I Wish I Could Paint, But I Can’t,’ by Meyer Marguiles?” offered his younger brother Chaim, who lay on his bed, studying his hands as they opened and closed.

“That’s funny, Chaim, I don’t remember asking your—”

“Papa is home.” Shayna entered her brothers’ room without permission, this being the only circumstance in which it was permitted.

“*She’s alive!*” called Chaim, leaping from his bed and joining his siblings in their well-practiced procedure to hide Meyer’s “wasteful obsession” from their father. Dvorah, back on the floor, watched them, rapt.

“I’m alive enough to pinch you black and blue, Chaim Marguiles,” said Shayna, placing the cover on Meyer’s porcelain palette. Meyer saw that his sister was stung by their ever-sensitive brother’s reference to her months-long lethargy.

“You just act like you’re dead because you stopped playing the piano, Shayna,” said Chaim, collecting Meyer’s brushes into a stone jar. “It got too hard for you.”

“Quiet, Chaim,” she said.

* * *

He’s right, she thought.

Just then, as Meyer carried the easel and painting to the corner by the closet, angled so that Papa would not see them were he to enter, Shayna glimpsed the image of the two men’s faces.

That night, as she lay dreaming, the strain of “Für Elise” meandered pleasantly through her.

* * *

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Against the blur of storefronts and the cotton-edged silhouettes of passersby, the three of them—Aron, Benjamin, and Reuven—alone were in focus. So striking had they become—if not individually, then the sum of them—that no one who saw them was unaffected.

A five-year-old boy pulled at the skirt of his mother's dress, pointed at the three young men and said, "Look, Mama," though he did not know why. His mother looked. She glanced at her husband to make certain his attention was elsewhere, then enjoyed a long, luxurious stare at the three young men. She would not know that he too had been averting his eyes, realizing that his stare might betray his beguilement.

That night, the boy, the father, and the mother would dream of the three young men.

The boy dreamt of them as three giants and himself a bird—or a bee or a butterfly or some other flying thing—that told the giants secrets that made them laugh. The sensation of flying and of pleasing them would define for him perfection.

The father dreamt that each of the three was a version of himself, and that he could transform into whichever he chose at any time, so that he could vicariously experience the pleasures—and in his dream there were many—of all three.

The mother dreamt that the three men were her lovers, all of them sucking at her breasts and neck, the warmth of their breath torturing her. When she woke up with her husband inside her and whispering to himself, she kept her eyes closed and imagined it was they.

* * *

"Tonight's the big night, brother," said Benjamin as he leapt onto the stage—the very one they would perform on, if all went well—during the recital on 20 April. "Just you, Dreikoph, and a dark theater."

"It will be *a* night," said Aron, pulling a chair from the rear of the stage to the front. "I'm not sure how big it will be."

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Benjamin had stolen the key to the *schola musichna's* back door during his short tenure as a student at the school, thinking it might someday come in useful. When last week Drummer had advised them to go to the school's main stage to familiarize themselves with the theater and its environs, Benjamin congratulated himself on his foresight.

"Are you hearing this, Moses? Mere hours from heaven and all he does is make jokes. I am disappointed in you, brother."

"Quiet, Benjamin," said Reuven. "Ch-Ch-Chernobulski might still be here. Let's do this quickly." No one disagreed.

The musicians placed the chairs as Drummer had directed: Reuven's at stage left, Benjamin's at stage right, Aron's at center stage. They sat and looked out into the chasm of empty seats, ghostlike under the weak yellow bulb that dangled above the stage. Equal doses of fear and anticipation conspired to quicken their heartbeats.

* * *

Levi Chernobulski had last seen Eliezer the Drummer in 1932, when he identified the street musician to the police lieutenant, who was pleased to receive such an uncomplicated—and remunerative—bribe: Make it clear to the old Jew that he is neither to see nor communicate with any student at the *schola musichna*.

"If you do, you will be arrested," the lieutenant had told Drummer.

"On what charge?" Drummer had asked.

"Something serious," the lieutenant had replied. "I'll decide exactly what when the time comes."

Since that day, Chernobulski had imagined—*hoped*—that when he saw Eliezer again he would have his hands out and empty, his face filthy. He did not envision what Eliezer might be wearing, or what they might say to each other—only the empty hands and the filthy face. The image had festered in Chernobulski's mind for so many years that the face had become grotesque, sometimes emaciated or leprous, but always, always filthy.

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“My friend,” said the school director, rising as Drummer approached his mammoth mahogany desk. “Please, sit down.”

Damn, thought Chernobulski, seeing that Eliezer’s face was clean.

“I prefer to stand, Levi. I will not be staying.”

Yet the man is not whole, Chernobulski saw. His back was bowed, his voice the croak of a man with one foot in his grave.

“But it has been so long since we’ve had the opportunity to reminisce. Please, stay for a drink. Or a cigarette.”

“I am here to discuss the April recital.”

“Aren’t you a bit old for an amateur recital, my friend?”

Drummer opened his mouth to speak.

“Eliezer,” Chernobulski said, shaking his head. “You must know that it is our policy that all musicians who wish to play at any public recital apply through the *schola musichna*.” He looked at Drummer as he might an insolent student. “That means me, Eliezer.”

“That is why I am here, Levi. I have come to apply on behalf of the young men. And I expect that you will accept the application.” Drummer’s vocal cords were already pained and tired. He began to wheeze.

“The young man made a commitment, and he reneged,” Chernobulski said, returning to his chair. He stroked the surface of his mammoth mahogany desk with his fingertips, as if to demonstrate his affection for it. “Perhaps it would be better for him to pursue a more... *regular* profession. Like his father. Street music is no real profession, Eliezer. Surely you agree. And without proper sponsorship, what chance is there to develop a proper reputation?” Chernobulski leaned forward. He waited, allowing his rival’s wheezing to be for a moment the only sound in the room. “I have no intention of permitting Aron to play here...*Drummer*.” He pronounced the name as if spitting.

“I believe you will, Levi.”

Drummer reached into his coat and pulled out a tightly rolled document. It resembled an ancient communiqué, one that a messenger might have delivered to a foreign king. Usually bad news. He placed

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the document on Chernobulski's mammoth mahogany desk. It opened as if under its own power.

The handwritten music, inked with a calligrapher's pen to differentiate the heads of a thousand black oval bubbles from their fine, fragile stems, was immediately and nauseatingly familiar to Chernobulski. It was a page from Moshe's sonata—a duplicate transcription, or perhaps an earlier draft. He shook his head slowly in disbelief—first to the left, then to the right—as he saw the words “Composed by Moshe Zindel the Klezmer” in bold, purposeful strokes at the bottom of the page.

“Embarrassing, I would imagine,” said Drummer, “to have your ‘greatest work’ exposed as a forgery. I imagine it would cast doubt on your entire career.”

“My God,” whispered Chernobulski, staring at it.

Six years had passed since Chernobulski supplanted Drummer as Aron's teacher. In those six years, not once did Drummer consider publicizing the evidence that would ruin his adversary. Yes, he knew, the benefits would be many: Aron would be returned to his tutelage, Levi would receive justice, and Moshe would be, finally, redeemed. But Levi would fight him—with lawyers and judges and reputation. He would repeat the lies of “inappropriate conduct,” and Drummer would be a pariah. Perhaps even arrested. Then all hope of someday returning to Aron's service would be lost. As would all hope of protecting the lineage of the great klezmerim.

Not yet were the words he had used to mollify himself. *Not yet.*

And now, at the end of his life, when he could do no more for the boy than this, Drummer knew that the time had come.

As did Chernobulski.

The school director thought to reach quickly and take it, to crumple it, to shred it beyond repair. But that would make no difference, he knew; if there is one, there are a hundred. Instead, he sunk into his chair and stared as Drummer rolled the document and placed it in his coat pocket.

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There is a reason for the saying, Drummer thought as he pushed open the heavy wooden door of the *schola musichna*, “When your enemy falls, don’t rejoice. But don’t pick him up, either.”

With that, Drummer’s work was finished.

* * *

Aron dug his hands into his trouser pockets and wondered how much money he would pay not to be blighted with the world’s sweatiest palms. One thousand zlotys is my highest offer, he thought, holding one hand up to dry while the other remained warm in his pocket. An elderly woman across Chichego Maya “waved” back. Aron returned his hand to his pocket.

What are the chances of Lilia touching my hands tonight anyway? he wondered, stepping to the movie poster tacked inside the glass case beneath the “Tonight at Kino Birn’s” sign. Three silly-looking men, one of them with a giant mustache and a cigar, another with curly hair and a horn in his hand. The poster was in English. “A Night at the Opera, starring the Marx Brothers.” Chances were not good. Even in the best possible case, if she were moved to take his hand and avow her love for him right there on Chichego Maya, their romance could not blossom—not with palms as sweaty as these.

What time is it? Seven twenty-six.

Maybe he could explain that he had just washed his hands, and they had not yet dried. But where would I have my washed his hands on Chichego Maya, he wondered, and why would they become increasingly wetter? He placed his forehead against the glass case and studied the poster. If he tried hard not to think about the sweating, maybe it would stop.

The picture was released in 1935. Almost four years ago. Not bad for an American film in Poland. He had heard a little about these American comedians, who were Jewish, too. Or at least that’s what Lilia had written in her most recent note, the fourth one, the one that

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had confirmed her invitation from the third one, that they should meet at seven-thirty on Monday night at Kino Birn's, which had confirmed her second one, which had confirmed that yes, it would be nice to see each other again, and yes, perhaps they could be friends, which had confirmed the sentiment in her first note to him, which had declared that her first official act of liberation from her father would be to go to the movies with his least favorite ex-prodigy.

Seven twenty-eight. All final arrangements must be made now. He checked his face and hair in the reflection of the glass case.

He began to sweat as the import of the moment struck him. He would see her, at any moment now, and then they would go into the theater *together*, where they would watch a picture *together*. He and Lilia. Alone. In the theater. Sitting next to each other. So much to think about. He wondered if it would be dark while the picture was playing, then slapped his forehead with his sweaty palm, realizing what a stupid thought that was. Of course it would be da—

“Careful, you might shake something loose.”

“Lilia.”

“Shhh!” she said, lifting her index finger to her lips. “I’m trying to make people think I’m a spy. You don’t want to give me away now, do you?”

She wore a long charcoal-black coat with large, gold buttons from her chin to her knees. Her hair was dark and delicate, each curl a secret passageway to the nape of her neck. Her eyes were big, chocolate, warm.

“It is so good to s—”

“Shhh!” she said, placing an index finger close to his mouth. “Headquarters has instructed us to be sly and secretive.”

After a moment of confusion, Aron joined in. “Shhh! We don’t want to draw unwanted attention to ourselves.”

“Shhh!” she said. “We must be careful. Headquarters frowns upon excessive shushing.”

“Shhh!” they both said, their heads coming closer together in their game, too close, then apart again.

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“I hear the picture is very funny,” said Lilia before the silence became awkward. “My friend Chaya saw a matinee yesterday and swore she was laughing the whole time. She said that one of the actors is a harpist, and that there’s a scene in the picture when he plays.”

“Really? I’d like to see that.”

“Well, it looks like you will. If we get tickets, that is.” The box office had opened, and a line had formed. It amazed Aron that the theater had come to life without his noticing.

“Now? I mean, you want to go inside now?”

“Now would be good,” said Lilia.

“So then yes, then?”

“Yes then.”

“Well, I’ll just buy the tickets and we’ll be on our way.” He walked to the box office, ignoring the line. Lilia laughed and covered her mouth as patrons began to complain. “We need to wait in line,” he said upon returning to her. Her expression was almost motherly in its affection.

He did not place his right arm on the armrest so that she would have it for her left arm. But she kept her left arm to her side. Maybe that meant, he thought as they waited for the newsreel to begin, that she would rather our arms not come too close, which means that she is not interested in anything but humoring me, perhaps as a favor to Reuven. Or maybe she is thinking the same thing, that she does not wish to appear too forward or unladylike by placing her left arm on its armrest and therefore assuming that she should have the right to it. In that case, perhaps right now she is agonizing over how best to convey her intentions, worrying whether the arm on the armrest is the best way to go about it. But I *must* place my arm on the armrest. It is the only way to gather even an inkling of what she is thinking. To only know what she is thinking!

“Cheese,” she said, looking up at the blank screen. “I need to remember to buy some cheese tomorrow. Do you like cheese, Aron?”

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Aron felt himself relax.

“The scene with Harpo playing for the children was my favorite,” he said as they walked along Chichego Maya, his hands stuffed into his coat pockets, her gloved hands around the crook of his arm. “Not only his technique and skill, but his demeanor—so light, so carefree! And they were all *very* funny.” His voice was loud, animated. “I didn’t understand a lot of the English, though. Especially during that scene when Groucho and Chico were tearing up the contract into little pieces. The subtitles went way too fast. Did you catch all that English?”

Lilia smiled at him and shook her head no. Her silence goaded him to continue. “But subtitles didn’t matter as far as the music was concerned. The music was great. Just great.”

Neither of them spoke as they crossed the Oeste Bridge.

“Which was your favorite brother?” he asked.

“Harpo, I’d have to say.”

“How come?”

“Because he is the perfect man,” she said, looking at him.

“But he doesn’t even talk.”

“Precisely.”

Lilia dropped her arms and stopped. Aron stepped in front of her, facing her. She looked as if she were about to speak, but did not. Aron thought for a moment that they might kiss. But in her eyes he read that there would be time for that, that from this moment onward, there would be nothing but time. She took Aron’s arm again, and they continued along the cobblestones of Chichego Maya.

Both of them hoped that the walk would be a long one.