

Un monstre et un chaos
A Monster and A Chaos

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Zulma

1.

At night, Shaena sometimes laughed for no reason and, close to tears, would sing softly to herself. She said nothing of the searing pain or destroyed hearts, of being wrenched from one world into another when a distant church bell rang midnight. Up there, above the workshop, the twins were sleeping in the same bed under a skylight large enough to see the shining stars when the ocean of clouds parted.

“Are you sleeping?” one of them asked, his pale green eyes reflecting the crescent moon. “This morning, the Rav’s daughter said you looked more like me than a dybbuk. Do we also think the same things?”

“What are you talking about? First, it’s not very nice to ask someone who’s sleeping if he’s sleeping.”

“We look as similar as a couple of mice or sparrows, don’t you think?”

“You look much better than me, little mouse! Leave me alone, I’m so tired.”

“Except for Shaena who can’t see so well with her bad eyes, people mix us up all the time. Especially since we’ve gotten bigger. We are the same...”

“No, you have the face of an angel. All golden. With smooth, girlish skin. We can’t have the same soul.”

“The same soul?” Ariel repeated thoughtfully as he drifted off.

Alter, now completely awake, followed him into his dream by watching his brother’s fluttering eyelids. The only mirror Alter had was his brother. In Lodz, as he remembered it, they had been inseparably alone. Neither he nor Ariel had been able to distinguish themselves from those around them. There had certainly been other faces, young women and older ones, men with gleaming eyes, and many children. He remembered a one-eyed cat that wandered in the shadows, always on the look-out, with spiderwebs stuck to its whiskers. Can a cat be more important than a crowd in the depths of memory? Kiti was its name and it had the same pale green eyes flecked with blue as his brother. Nothing can see better in the dark than a one-eyed cat, whether in the streets, hidden cellars, or old carriage garages, or behind the stable doors of a funeral home left open by mourners.

The moon had disappeared from the skylight; the wind could be heard blowing through the chimney. The house’s frame cracked twice amid the constant murmur of insects chewing at the wood. Shaena’s rough breathing, coming from the other end of the attic where she was sleeping behind a heavy curtain hung from a beam, seemed to respond to the groaning of the elements. It wasn’t too cold; even in the middle of winter, the heat from the forge spread to the attic thanks to the ash-covered coals.

Ariel suddenly gave a stir. Panting, he pushed off the covers and cried out.

“*Nisht, nisht!*” he howled. “I don’t want to!”

“It’s nothing, stop!” said his brother. “You’ll make the devil mad.”

Alter was used to his nightmares and held his shoulders to try to calm him, like coachmen do with an animal frightened by a storm. Shaena too quickly rushed over. Half-asleep, sitting at the foot of the bed with her bare legs showing, she sang her eternal lullaby:

*Shlof, kindele, shlof,
dort in jenes ho
iz a lempele vayze,
vil mayn kindele bayse,
kumt der halter mit di gaygn,
tut die shefelekh tsuzamntraybn,
shlof, kindele, shlof.*

How could this story of a sheep that bites and a shepherd who gathered his flock with a fiddle ever reassure this double child in the attic? Ariel no longer remembered his dream. He liked to hear Shaena’s forlorn voice, similar to the wind and the rain against the closed window.

No one knows exactly when reality shifts. Alter was afraid that he would disappear forever if he lost his footing. Why do people return from dreams? Many years ago, in this world or another, something unimaginable had been burned into his memory. You cannot keep what has destroyed you, even with memory. Enclosed within the din of his ringing sparks, Uncle Warshauer probably knew this as well as an inscription-encrusted marker over a dry grave. At night, Alter tried to escape the pull of the mirror, but his reflection very quickly drew him right to the bottom. Ariel’s dreams caught hold of him and he succumbed to the mysterious circling of illusions and symbols...

The next morning was bright with new snow. What had happened? In a city of ice and smoke, every morning they were again separated by the great sword of light. It is said that real twins live in the present of future events. That their heart is one and the same and beats in several worlds. Such is the spell cast by the mirror made of flesh; how can you know yourself when you are transported outside of yourself? Even when saying nothing in order to give nothing away, Alter and Ariel were able exchange very ancient thoughts. They had their own language of shakes and echoes, a kind of shimmering. They were now years away from Kiti, the one-eyed cat from Lodz. On the other bank of the Vistula River, in the shtetl lost amongst the marshes, bald hills, and bleak forests, they had completely forgotten the dark events that had exiled them. Nothing had changed; night prolonged the night. Ariel, half asleep, blinked slowly.

“Listen to me, I’ll talk very quietly...”

But he was asleep, unaware of what he was saying. Everything is forgotten in the eyes of your brother.

32.

Alone on the stage of the Fantazyor theater, the young puppeteer recently hired by Adam Poznansky seemed to fill up the bare space lit by a dust-filled cone of light. He cast worrying glances towards the dark corners of the still empty room, into the archways and stage wings. But it was not yet time. He needed to overcome the sense of emptiness that came after experiencing the cold material during rehearsals.

Sitting a little below the stage, Rebecca was his sole audience and, just by being there and watching him, she secretly gave him a way to respond. For months, she had been by his side, listening to his few words. At times, he would become lost and confused, as if he were arguing with someone else, and she would try to bring him back. His absent-minded stupor, she knew, came from an almost insurmountable distress caused by the dual role he was supposed to play. Rebecca watched over the teenager with thoughtful attention, constantly seeking to understand the strange spectacle he was trying to present and embody. It was a mix of pantomime and ventriloquism that evoked or suggested a kind of frustrated practice of silence. Without the beauty of the performance, the sparkle of the postures and faces, and the captivating enigma of the words from a distant dream on the lips of either of the twins of flesh and wood, she might have been concerned about her employer's true motivations.

The current director of the Fantazyor theater had apparently discovered the extraordinary Ariel, also known as Jan-Matheusza, in one of the ghetto's hospices – or so he said. Here and there, artistic workshops to keep the sick and the insane busy still existed. People were dying of hunger, various plagues, and murder, but at the same time they did all they could to be entertained, act, and enjoy concerts playing the music of Felix Mendelssohn or Cristiano Giuseppe Lidarti. Relatively well-represented, caregivers and teachers helped out in infirmaries and nursing homes. Rebecca, for her part, dedicated her day off to a municipal clinic's maternity ward. How was it possible to give birth at the gates of hell? In the shelter of the theater, she suppressed all of that horror. And Poznansky left her in peace, as soon as she put her whole being into acting. He no longer bothered her as he had when she started, with that shiftiness of men who disdain women even as they praise them. Father Bolmuche, forever haunted by the enigmatic insanity of Shakespeare, was instinctively accepting of the new arrival, unlike the dwarf musician they called Dumpf, who couldn't look at Rebecca without almost fainting. Love that transfixes a person doesn't always exclude a desire for precedence. Over time, the theater became like a ship and was able to overcome human ups and downs without capsizing, gradually bringing its crew closer together.

When the director hired the very young puppeteer along with his effigy, he had also had to promise to find stage names for himself and his puppet, the shorter the better. Rebecca remembered Jan-Matheusza's distress, caught off-guard as if he

were being asked to change memories or faces. Amused, Adam Poznansky had gone on to recount how the Javanese referred to themselves with a single one or two-syllable word, adding jokingly that from birth to the slaughterhouse, calves and sheep are only given a number tattooed on their ear or hindquarters.

Seated in the middle of the second row, Rebecca now watched as the most fascinating sequence of scenes developed in the circle of light. Ariel – the name he had chosen for himself – sat with his hip against his life-sized model, like they were Siamese twins. What would he name his double? Wearing the costume of a Cossack from an operetta dug up from the store of accessories, he had dressed the puppet in his drummer’s coat he’d repaired in the sewing workshop backstage. Gold metal buttons taken from the livery of a synagogue usher completed the outfit with a brand-new yellow star that hid an amulet, the fragment of a Mezuzah parchment gathered from the ruins. In fact, he no longer wore the star himself. It was normal for artists, whether actors or jugglers, to not show allegiance to anything when playing a legendary or historic character. Can you imagine Hamlet or a Cossack wearing the ignominious star?

In the end, after posing cautious questions and receiving partial responses in riddles, Rebecca had managed to understand the inquisition-like persecution the unnamed child had undergone for so long. At the institution in Lowicz that had taken him in, he had been arbitrarily given the name Jan-Matheusza because they hadn’t been able to learn his real name. And the orphan’s *short memory*, unattached to anything, had adapted. But Poznansky had reopened a sense of a dislocated and detached soul by insisting that he and his linden-wood partner be able to address each other by name on stage. Are cats and foxes asked to exchange calling cards? For weeks, he had rehearsed vacantly as a mime twice mute, unable to articulate the words that brought the act to life. However, after sounding the depths of oblivion, his silence diminished and muffled music filled the space. As usual, he had been sitting on a little stool, looking distressed as he glanced at his puppet twin and the shadows behind it. Opposite him, in her second-row seat, Rebecca, troubled by this pair of moonlike Pierrots, had encouraged him. “It has nothing to do with sorcery,” she was saying. “Why not Dan and Doy, Fischel and Faivel, Yuri and Yurriel, Yoel and Yona?” His mirror needed to reflect him, even if it didn’t answer him. No one knew at which school the young puppeteer had been trained, and he wasn’t a badchen, one of those comedians at weddings or Purim games, or an entertainer from the Gimpel theater. He was acting out a strange drama that was as yet unfinished. Nothing is more evocative than a new artist whose eyes sparkle with treasures from an unseen world.

Suddenly, breaking through his tense silence, he had cried out:

“Ariel! My name will be Ariel!”

“It’s one of the seventy-two angels!” applauded Rebecca. “The lion-angel of God...”

“It’s a spirit trapped in a tree!” retorted a booming voice from backstage.

“Be quiet, Bolmuche!” she had replied.

“If he is freed,” the old actor continued, “he will bring about a terrible storm and our vessel will sink...”

“Don’t listen to him. This isn’t Shakespeare. Ariel is a beautiful stage name.”

However, the young boy had turned towards his creation made of wood, fleece, and resin.

“He will be Alter, the sick child,” he said. “Will I be able to take care of him?”

At that moment, after he’d said these words and the dwarf Dumpf had begun to play the main melody of the song *A Yidishe Mame* on his violin, screeching out the macabre dance, Rebecca knew that he had been freed, that Jan-Matheusza had dissipated like an uncircumcised dybbuk in the words that birthed the lovely Ariel.

Now, under the bright clarity of the projector, the tilted face of the aspiring puppeteer could be distinguished from that of his puppet by the flow of a higher life. Together they formed a secret world. Cracks in a vase allow the light to filter through, Rav Lipsky used to teach. How many dissimilar pieces, like the pieces of a three or four-dimensional puzzle, would have to be glued back together to regain the peace and perhaps also the happiness from before?

Rebecca climbed up on stage to help the performer.

“Should I also call you Ariel?” she inquired, pushing back the blond lock of hair covering his eyes.

“There is only one world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything. That’s why I made Alter.”

“Your puppet speaks through you!” said the young woman, feigning surprise. “His hair is a little blonder than yours...”

“It’s really my hair,” said Ariel. “For a year, I’ve been cutting off some of my locks. For the eyes, Master Azoi found ones for me made of glass...”

“Who is Master Azoi?” asked Rebecca.

The teenager curled up; his eyelids blinked. His wariness imperceptibly diminished and the attention he had been giving to everything around him folded inward like butterfly antennae. With his hands resting on his knees, more absent than his puppet, he began to sing a little song:

A cherry

A cherry

And two pits

And two pits...

Very slowly, like a sunflower at the end of the day, Ariel turned away and remained slightly bent, as if he had fallen apart next to the puppet whose glass eyes reflected the entire stage of the theater with its decor depicting a palace in ruins and a dark forest.