

The Reluctant Conductor

PROLOGUE

7 July 1922 — My papa is flourishing his pipe like a conductor's baton. Smoke wafts through the dining room as he finishes his usual diatribe with: "It's all about family," then stares at me. I squirm like a violinist who has lost his rhythm. "Are you with us, Elazar?"

It's Shabbat, Friday evening, I'm twenty-two years old, and I'm home in Kalarash poking at the sodden remains of my chicken and matzah balls. I unloaded boxcars full of rocks, bricks and lumber all week with my brother Herschel and I hurt all over. Mama gives me a calming smile as she rises to clear the table. Sarah snaps to and helps.

"It's a complex arrangement," I say.

"Keep practicing," he says.

When I was three, we lived in Kishinev, about fifty kilometers to the southeast. During Passover/Easter weekend that year, the Christians waged a pogrom on the city's Jewish population. In our case, that means they ransacked our store, set our house on fire, murdered my sister, and my baby brother and they threw me off the roof.

For real.

While pogroms have happened for hundreds of years all over Europe – from Barcelona to Prague – this happened in the 20th century. Initially, it was a global scandal wherein politicians from America and all over were outraged and demanded justice. But punishment for the perpetrators came to little or no avail, and because countless, more outrageous atrocities have since occurred, to most of the world, the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 has been swept under the carpet.

Not to us.

I don't know how or why any of us survived but that's why papa and mama, Toiva and Polina Gershovich, uprooted our family, packed up the business, and fled to this shtetl—this Jewish prison.

In Kalarash, life is simple. Most people are Jewish. We speak Yiddish. Herschel and I went to *yeshiva*, Jewish school, where we studied Hebrew, the Torah and Talmud, from which the rabbis taught us to live every day like it's your last. To that end, they say number one: have some fun, two: try to do some good, and three: don't screw anyone over too badly, as you may be meeting your maker that evening. So that's what we do. We go to the Synagogue, we celebrate Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, Passover, whatever, and nobody tries to kill us.

Not everybody here is Jewish. It's only been in recent memory that it's become a shtetl. There are a couple of monasteries nearby that were built in the 1700s, even a cathedral, and with that, amicable *goys*, non-Jews, who speak our region's book-end languages: Romanian and Ukrainian. Unlike in Kishinev, papa maintains a low-key presence here—he's not politically active. But with the farmers, dairymen and former vintners, our family is respected, and we socialize amongst one another.

Papa is fifty-three, and while he finds solace here, giving up our store, our house, our horses, and his whole life in Kishinev has taken its toll. He has trouble sleeping, he has a stiff lower back, and he treats Herschel and I like strivers. Yet, in nineteen years he's fought and clawed his way back. We still don't have horses, but we own our properties—our house and the store—and we pay taxes to the King of Romania.

Mama is fifty-one, and to this day I don't know all the details, but there is no question that the pogrom and the exodus from Kishinev scarred her for life. She looks old for her age and while she's loving and ultra-protective, there is deep-seated pain in her facial expressions, the

husky tone of her voice and the hunched over way in which she walks.

While our family has managed to rebuild our life out here in the heartland of Bessarabia, the big downside for me is there are very few girls my age, and I've known all of them since I was a child. I've dated several, gone through the usual coming-of-age milestones, but now dating any potential female mate in Kalarash seems incestuous.

In my life there is percussion in day-to-day work, the rise and fall of the sun, the coming going of the seasons. There is rhythm in family, eating meals, and celebrating holidays; but alas, there is no beauty, no high notes, no intimacy... no melody.

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FIRST MOVEMENT

CHAPTER 1

11 July 1922 — After yeshiva I knew one thing: I didn't want to become a rabbi. I wanted to move anywhere fun – Kishinev, Odesa, Bucharest, or Kyiv.

“And do what?” papa asks. “Become a furrier? A jeweler?”

“A musician,” I say.

“Right,” papa says. “And play weddings, birthdays, and bar mitzvahs?”

Our family actually is a band. Papa plays accordion and conducts, mama's a dynamo on the clarinet, I wail on the violin, Herschel beats the drums, and we all sing. After dinner, we entertain each other playing Jewish klezmer songs—Hava Nagila and the like.

“That's not a job, Elazar,” papa says.

“And you have to work nights,” mama adds. “Don't. You'll thank me when you have a family.”

“Let's all move back to Kishinev... Move the store back,” I plead.

Mama and papa both glare at me and shake their heads.

“It's a much bigger market,” I say. “We could make more money. The Rezniks moved back and they're not dead.”

“Forget it,” papa decrees.

I'm tempted to go on my own, to pursue my musical ambitions, but it would kill mama and I'd feel guilty for the rest of my life. Papa's words ring in my head, “*It's all about family.*”

I must stay in the shtetl, get married, have kids, grandkids, great grandkids... and spend Shabbat—and every other holiday—with my family. Oy.

In the four years since I finished yeshiva, I have worked for papa at *Gershovich's Hardware and Tack*. We have a great location. The back of the property sits next to the railroad track, which is perfect for receiving supplies. We're just southeast of downtown near a busy corner where the road from Bravicea meets Strada Alexandru cel Bun, the main road through Kalarash.

Back in Kishinev, family lore has it that papa was all things to the community: a steward, railway agent, fertilizer salesman, social adviser, character reference, politician, lodge master, and general community 'obliger.'" The front doors and porch pillars served as bulletin boards. There was an open area around the stove where the patrons gathered for gabbling, yarn spinning, chewing, and smoking.

Maybe that's why some goys hated him; he had too much power, was too enviable, and too many people owed him money.

Here in Kalarash, we focus on "hard" lines, including lumber, bricks, and stones, as well as builders' hardware including tools, agricultural implements, machinists' supplies, cutlery, and saddlers' hardware. We accept Romanian leu, but we also barter with everything from gold, gemstones, beeswax, or alcohol for all goods.

Papa manages the store, does the buying, and attends to important clients. Like on the accordion, he plays rhythm and melody and, in every way—manifested mostly in facial expressions, gestures, and vocal inflection—conducts our family and the business.

Mama cooks, cleans, runs the cash register, and keeps the books. For her, being a clarinetist and an accountant are a good match because she likes details, she's bright, loves a good laugh under the right circumstances, and hasn't minded a few squeaks along the way to mastering her instrument.

Herschel, who is twenty-four—two years older and now two inches shorter than I—is consistent and content to sit in the back of the orchestra. He has thinning, reddish hair, is married to his childhood sweetheart, Sarah, and they have an adorable son, Shimon, who is one year old. He’s happy to be a husband, dad, and the family percussionist; he’s always there keeping rhythm and at crescendo moments, comes in with a crash of the cymbals.

Sarah? She’s twenty-three, a bit plain looking, and has no voice and no musical talent, but she’s a meticulous housekeeper, a good cook, and a loving mother. All bands need solid stagehands.

Between her, Herschel, and me, we do the heavy work. We unload supplies as they come in on the train, we stock the shelves, help customers load their buggies, and we keep the place clean.

I used to be the underling, but as of late it has become clear that I am, literally and figuratively, the first-chair violinist in the family. Not only am I more physically able—my brother Herschel has a bad limp; one of the marauders in the pogrom deliberately snapped both bones below the knee on his right leg and it never healed right. Moreover, I have a better mind for business and more charm dealing with customers, so I’m the lead performer up front with papa, who is grooming me to become the conductor.

But the thing is, that grooming could go on for decades, and in the meantime, papa can be a real prick. I can’t do anything right. No matter what I do, he tells me to do the opposite. I turn right, he tells me to turn left. I look up, he tells me to look down. I stock a shelf one way, he wants it another. I play my violin, but it’s never right. Sometimes, I want to shove my bow up his ass.

It's afternoon, our cherry tree is in full bloom, and Herschel and I take a break from chopping firewood all day in preparation for winter. Herschel goes on an extended visit to the outhouse doing God knows what, and I go into the house to quench my thirst.

Mama greets me with a glass of lemonade. The postman came earlier, and as I drink my beverage, mama lingers over a printed card.

I have found that the biggest moments in life, the ones that change everything, usually catch you by surprise. You might not even recognize them as they happen. Mama's eyes sparkle as she says, "This came this afternoon."

She hands me the open envelope, which is addressed to the Gershovich Family.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Read it," she says.

I pull out the card. "You are invited to the wedding of Leonid Reznik and Anna..." I look up. "Cousin Leo? Mazel Tov! I didn't know he was engaged."

Leo and I have been best friends for forever. His papa—mama's brother—had a furniture manufacturing business in Kalarash, and papa supplied them with materials. A couple of years ago, his papa's business bought out another furniture company and they moved back to Kishinev.

"Do you want to go?" mama asks.

My mind flits like a swarm of titmice. "Yeah," I say.

"Weddings are a great place to meet girls," she says.

"I love Leo. So, are we all going? As a family? Where will we stay?"

"Woah, slow down," mama says. "I already ran this by your papa. This is a busy time of year, and someone must run the store. In case you never noticed, Toiva doesn't cook. Herschel

and Sarah have their new baby.”

“So?” I ask.

“You could go by yourself. Stay with the Rezniks.”

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