

The Calling of the Flute



Fran Orenstein

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THE CALLING OF THE FLUTE

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Chapter 1



The Nemunas River flowed through the Eastern European country of Lithuania and finally emptied into the sea. A tiny village or *shtetl*, as it was called by the Jewish people who lived there, hugged the side of the riverbank. In 1897, it was an insignificant village whose name would eventually be crushed and forgotten under the marching boots of history. Its vibrant people reduced to a fading photo in a tattered album, a collage on a museum's memorial wall, or just a pale memory, eventually fading into obscurity.

The river provided a bounty of fish for the people who lived near its shores. This included the Jews and the gentiles, or the outsiders, as the Jews referred to them. They shared the land, although no one ever intermingled. The gentiles hated the Jews and the Jews feared them and, thus, ignored the gentiles, unless something happened to set off a *pogrom*, a vengeance attack by the Cossacks, Russian cavalrymen, against the Jews. It might be nothing more than a wrong look or a rumor started by someone, but *pogroms* were the most feared form of retaliation, for they resulted in loss of homes, livestock and often people. For this reason the Jews minded their own business and the only contact was between the Jewish rabbi and the gentile mayor or sometimes an exchange of goods between merchants.

Lithuania, a beleaguered country of confused identities, had been conquered or annexed by one or another of the countries surrounding it for centuries. In 1897, it existed under the thumb of Czarist Russia, prey to Czar Nicholas II's whims and laws.

The village was divided according to religion, the Jewish section, houses and businesses haphazardly clustered around the place of worship, the *shul* or synagogue that backed onto a path along the river's estuary. Only a tiny portion of the town was Jewish and their lives centered on the *shul*. The word of the rabbi was law, Jewish law, and for the congregation it meant they would follow the laws written in the *Talmud*, the book of Rabbinical law; respect the *Torah*, the scrolls housing the five books of Moses; follow the ten commandments; and never take the name of the Lord in vain.

If the rabbi was the keeper and teacher of Jewish law, his wife, the *rebitsin*, set the example for all the girls and women; the model of how to maintain decorum and a traditional Jewish home and family.

At fifteen, Hannah Levin had reached the age of marriage. All the women and girls sat behind the screen in the balcony of the synagogue. Hannah peered between the heads of her mother, Bella, and younger sister, Rifka, trying to see through the screen of wooden strips that crisscrossed in a pattern she knew by heart. She even knew the number of spaces formed in each row, for she had sat up here for most of her young life, shielded from the wandering eyes of the young men. It was meant to screen the women from the men during religious services so they would not be distracted from their prayers but Hannah had other ideas.

Her eyes fixed on the back of one young man seated in the front row, the fringes on his *tallis*, prayer shawl, swaying as he rocked back and forth in prayer. His dark hair curled around the edges of the *yarmulke*, a cap perched on his head. She had spent days sewing and embroidering the head covering as a present for this boy, whom she had loved since she was a tiny girl. He was destined to become her husband, that is, if God heard her daily prayers and the matchmaker could be persuaded to agree.

Gershon Cohen, son of Rabbi Efrem Cohen, was expected to follow the family tradition that had been established for hundreds of years and, one day, become the rabbi of their village, God willing. This was the boy she had dreamed about most of her life, the cause of the strange feelings in her body she did not understand nor could ever explain, even if she had the temerity to talk about the taboo subject.

Hannah tried every *Shabbas*, Sabbath, to send mental messages to Gershon but, if he picked up her thoughts, he never acknowledged it. Certainly he would never talk about it were they even able to find a moment alone, an action forbidden in her protected world.

A serious boy, Gershon did not laugh often. In her moments of doubt, Hannah wondered what it would be like living with such a solemn soul for the rest of her life. Could she change him, at least in their own home, or would she eventually succumb to his moods and personality and lose her true happy self? Add to that the responsibilities of being a rabbi's wife, the *rebetsin* of their congregation, as well as a wife and mother, Hannah felt the weight of thousands of years of tradition piling on her shoulders.

Gershon had five brothers and sisters and she had three. How many would she be expected to have? Probably one every year until she became a worn out old hag by age 25, dragged down by the burdens of birthing, nursing and raising a brood of children, not to mention all her other responsibilities. Hannah marveled at how her mood could swing from light to dark and back to light again with a single thought. Even nature took her sweet time with fading dusk as the sun dropped below the horizon, sending streaks of orange across the sky, painting the clouds. Then at dawn, nature raised the sun again to cast a golden glow that grew as the sun slowly emerged from its journey to the other side of the world. Hannah wished her mercurial moods would slow down like sunrise and sunset instead of the sudden crash of thunder and the downpour of rain that seemed to come over her faster than a flash of lightning.

“Stop it, foolish girl,” she silently chastised. Having many children was an honor for a Jewish woman, especially sons to carry on the name. Still, Hannah grimaced at the thought of being pregnant every year like some of the young women in the village. She would be old before she left her youth behind, old and fat. “Stop, stop, stop.”

Hannah fidgeted between her two best friends, Leah Bloomberg and Sarah Brodsky. Leah leaned over and whispered, “Stop wiggling. Do you think he knows you're watching him?”

Her mood shifted and Hannah giggled, quickly covering her mouth.

“Hush,” Bella Levin hissed, reaching behind and tapping Hannah hard on the knee with her knuckles. Wincing, Hannah bit her lip not to giggle.

Leah's mother also turned and glared at her wayward daughter, who bowed her head to hide her grin. Hannah bit her lip harder when she heard her little sister, Rifka, stifle a giggle as Bella turned and sent silent daggers at the younger girl. Hannah and Leah shook with silent laughter.

They were in big trouble, now. Hopefully, Bella would forget this breach of protocol by the time the never-ending service was over and she had gossiped with the other women while they walked home. Somehow, Hannah didn't think her mother forgot anything, ever, but kept it stored in a drawer in her brain to pull out at some later date; like some long forgotten stocking stuffed behind the under-garments, suddenly recalled when it's twin reappeared. Bella's unfailing memory of things they wished she would forget, only added more to the weight of guilt imbedded in her children.

All the mothers talked about anyway was Malka Osterman, the matchmaker, and who would be a good match for a son or daughter of marriageable age. Sometimes they gossiped about the latest pregnancy or a new grandchild, but most of their thoughts focused on marriage possibilities, often arguing over the same boy or girl. No one ever thought to ask their children whom they might want to marry; that was just not done in this time and place. Instead, Malka Osterman with her widening waistline, ruled supreme, while gorging on delicious meals as she traveled from house to house, delivering her matchmaking decisions as though it came from a voice on a mountain in the Sinai desert; Malka's commandments.

The woman hadn't prepared a *Shabbas* dinner since her long-suffering husband had died three years ago, probably to get away from her constant nagging. Hannah hoped for his many years suffering his overbearing wife, he had gone to a better place as a reward, *olov hasholem*, may he rest in peace.

Malka Osterman lived off the largess of the families with children of marriageable age, like a tyrant beggar, traveling from house to house every Friday evening. Hannah glanced at the object of her thoughts who sat like a bloated toad, her beady eyes studying the young women in the balcony. Hannah looked away and shivered, wondering if just thinking this way could bring down the wrath of God, like a lightning strike.

After the service, Hannah and her friends slipped out before their mothers could stop them and rushed around the corner behind the synagogue.

"You girls are so bad," Sarah said, trying to keep a straight face.

Hannah and Leah giggled.

"I know," Leah said. "Wicked and evil."

Hannah sighed. "Did you see Gershon? He was wearing my *yarmulke*."

"I did see something new on his head but I was busy looking at Yusef Baum," Sarah said.

"Of course you were," Leah stated. "You are always looking at him, how could we not notice."

Sarah lifted her head and twirled her long skirt. "You are just jealous."

Leah shrugged. “We’ll see. Malka the Matchmaker is coming to our house next month for dinner.”

“She’s probably going to make a match for your sister,” Hannah said, laughing.

“Oh, be still both of you. I actually hope it is for my sister for I am not ready to be married,” Leah said.

Hannah grinned. “You’re just worried that she’ll pick someone you hate before you have a chance to choose someone yourself.”

“As if that would make any difference to my father. I think he already has someone picked out for me.” Leah announced, her expression grim.

“Who is it?” Sarah asked.

Leah shook her head. “He won’t talk about it, which makes me even more worried.”

“You asked him?” Sarah looked horrified.

“Of course not, I asked my mama and she wouldn’t say a word, but then she never tells us anything. I did hear the words New York one night when I went down to the kitchen for some water.”

Hannah grabbed Leah’s arm. “Do you think they are going to send you to America to be married?”

Leah pulled her arm free. “I told you, I don’t know anything. My parents are so secretive they would probably tell me to pack a bag the morning I was leaving.”

“That is so exciting, Leah. Imagine going to America.” Hannah saw the look of disgust on Leah’s face and said, “I mean, if you weren’t going to marry some stranger.”

“Hmph,” Leah grumbled.

“They probably want to marry off you and your sister quickly, since you are the last of the girls left at home,” Sarah suggested. “Or maybe they are planning on leaving here and taking you with them, after they marry off your sister, of course.”

Leah rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Sarah, you are always helpful.”

Sarah looked at Hannah. “What did I say?”

Hannah shook her head and turned back toward the road, “Nothing, Sarah, don’t worry about it. Come on, it isn’t worth speculating on things we don’t know.”

Leah followed. “That’s right, we’re already in enough trouble, let’s find our mothers and go home.”

The three girls walked to the front of the synagogue where the women and younger children had gathered in small groups for the walk back to their homes to eat the cold food set aside the night before. The men and older boys would soon follow and then return to the synagogue for study and final prayers.

Dinner would be served late when cooking could begin again after *Shabbas*, the Sabbath ended at sundown. Bella Levin beckoned to Hannah and she followed her mother

and sister, still focused on the boy with the dark curls peeking out from under the *yarmulke*.

Chapter 2



Hannah tumbled down the river, her nose and mouth filled with icy water, her dress sodden and heavy. Her limbs were numb and she could no longer feel her body. She knew, if she sank one more time, she would never see the sun again. Terror gripped her heart. She did not want to die before she had lived. With every tumble, she glimpsed the sky and the white winter clouds overhead then submerged again under the frigid river and the murky mud below. She knew she was being tested, teased into a decision between light and dark but she couldn't understand the choices.

Suddenly strong hands reached out and grasped her arm, pulling her onto the grass. Hannah looked up, choking and gasping, into Gershon's eyes, warm and blue like the summer sky. He bent over her and pressed his lips against hers. She opened her mouth to his kiss, her entire being tingling. He pushed up her skirt, his other hand thrusting into her blouse, cupping her breast, lightly squeezing. Hannah felt something hard pressing against her thighs and, with a mind of their own, her legs spread wide to receive this strange pulsing.... NO.

Something was very wrong. This could not be happening. They were not married, it was a sin to touch before marriage and never in public. What was happening to her? And why did she so readily open her legs to accept...what? Suddenly terrified of something she did not understand, Hannah's heart raced and pounded until she thought it would jump out of her chest.

She pushed him off and rolled to the side pulling down her skirt. Gershon quickly covered his privates and gazed at her, the eyes she knew so well, only now smaller and lighter, like the pale, cold sky in winter just before a snowstorm. Shaking, Hannah reached for the familiar face she saw every day but it felt like a stranger's face. Gershon began to fade and, in the distance, Hannah could hear the delicate sounds of a flute.

Stifling a cry in her pillow, Hannah opened her eyes to a pink dawn. She could hear Rifka snoring softly beside her and Bella's footsteps as she went down the stairs. Hannah lay there shivering with fear and delight under the quilt as the dream drifted through her memory.

Why was she dreaming of death and love? She only had a vague idea what men and women did in bed after marriage and that was from friends who were already married, who were too embarrassed to talk much about it in detail. Though she was torn with curiosity, none of it sounded very thrilling and, certainly, impossible to imagine, so why did she feel such a surge of excitement from a dream.

How could she have dreamed such a terrifying, yet amazing, dream of Gershon—an impossible dream? Who would ever do such a private act on the riverbank where anyone could see them? And why had he disappeared in the end to the sound of a flute? She knew no one who played the flute, so how could she even know what a flute sounded like, or if

it was even a flute. But, she realized, she just knew and the flute had called to her in the dream.

It was all so confusing but then dreams were always mixed-up with reality. All these questions with no answers flew through her mind one after the other, like fall leaves blowing in the wind and disappearing over the horizon. Dreams were unreadable anyway, so why waste time worrying about one silly dream. Still....

Hannah rolled over and tried desperately to evict the remnants of the disturbing dream from her mind and the delicate notes of the flute, calling and beckoning her to step onto an uncharted path. Hannah resolutely shoved aside the thoughts and focused on the realities of her home and her life as a Jewish girl in a small village surrounded by the gentiles.

The Levins lived in a wooden house at the end of the road leading to the *shul*. Everyone in the town knew his neighbor's business. The rabbi was law and to be obeyed. His wife, the *rebitsin*, set an example for all the women in the village of what a good Jewish woman should do. Boys went to the *Shule*, the lower school to learn and study and perhaps on to the *Yeshiva*, a higher school if they were destined for the life of a scholar. Girls had separate schools but were mostly taught to be good Jewish wives and mothers.

There were things Hannah didn't actually know about her parents but she had a good imagination. Her father, Samuel Levin, was a cantor or *chazan* and a teacher at the boys' school. He lived a contented life with his wife, Bella, and his four children in a house squashed among the other houses in the Jewish outskirts of the town. Samuel took life as it was handed him. He never agonized about poverty, religion, or *pogroms*, the periodic attacks against the Jews by the czar's Cossack troops. If God had looked down on him and wagged his finger in warning, he probably would have shrugged and said, "Nu, so what can I do? It's up to you."

Samuel was proud of his two young sons, Dovy and Mordecai, with their quick minds hidden under sun-bleached hair, so like their mother's. At nine, Dovy already showed a talent for music and Samuel encouraged him to sing the prayers as he himself had been taught by his father, also a cantor.

As for his two daughters, Hannah believed that Samuel secretly adored her golden-haired sister, Rifka, so like their mother, but hoped he liked her too, the different child with her dark hair and olive skin.

Her mother, Bella Levin, was a devoted, traditional wife and mother. She had decided early that children needed a stern but loving hand. She rarely smiled but, when she did, her face lit up like the sun. Her blue eyes reminded Hannah of the cornflowers in the field. Sometimes, when they didn't notice her watching, Hannah would see her father take off the scarf she always wore and run his fingers through her blond hair. Papa was the only one who ever saw her hair, which by Jewish law, she kept covered at all times. When Hannah was very small, she asked Bella why she had to cover her hair and Bella shrugged. "It's the way it has always been done."

"But why, Mama?" Hannah insisted.

"Oy, oh, my silly girl. A woman cannot be so attractive men who are not her husband will want to look at her instead of their prayer books."

“Is that why Golda Bloom had to cut off all her beautiful red hair before she got married?” Hannah asked.

“It’s what we’ve always done as far back as Sarah, wife of Abraham, mother of us all.”

In other words, the usual tradition with no real explanation. “So, it’s one of our traditions.”

Bella nodded and would not speak of it any more. Bella was a golden beauty, but, of course, her husband would never dream of telling her so, or maybe he did in the privacy of their bedroom. Hannah imagined he might have no idea how she felt about him, either. His coloring was also fair, more a light brown but Rifka, Dovy and Mordecai had inherited their mama’s blond hair and light eyes.

Hannah was different. She once heard him tell Bella their eldest child was a real beauty with her dark curly hair and soft brown eyes, just like his mama, *oleho hasholem*, may she rest in peace. The words had delighted Hannah, who had sometimes felt like an outsider in a household of fair, blue-eyed people. Of course, he would never dream of saying such a thing directly to Hannah. She imagined if her *Bubbeh* Hannah, her grandmother, *oleho hashalom*, may she rest in peace, whose name she was given, would spit on her fingers and say “pooh, pooh” at such foolishness. *Bubbeh* Hannah had already been married two years by Hannah’s age and had given birth to Hannah’s Uncle Jacob.

Samuel said Hannah looked just like her *Bubbeh* Hannah when she was born. Perhaps her father had drunk too much wine, because the newborn babies she had seen look like shriveled red prunes but then old people look like that too, so maybe he was right. Sadly, *Bubbeh* Hannah had died young, probably from having all those babies, only three of which lived, Uncle Jacob, her father, Samuel and her Uncle Joel, the baby of the family, even though he was now grown and married to her Aunt Pesha. None of the girl babies survived beyond their first year. Hannah had decided, at an early age, being a woman was very difficult and led to an early death.

Bella once said, “All stories should begin in the spring, the rebirth of life. You, Hannelah, were born in the spring of 1882 in the cellar under the house but such a birth, I hope, no one ever has to experience. There was a *pogrom*, an attack by the Cossack cavalrymen, and your Papa and I and my parents hid from the Cossacks, who were raiding villages along the river in this area. The gentile mayor warned the rabbi and all the Jews went into hiding. It was the most terrifying thing that ever happened to me. It was dark and damp and we could hear the horses’ hooves pounding along the streets above. People’s screams and the smell of the fires came right through the walls. The labor pains started and I had to keep very quiet so the Cossacks wouldn’t hear my screams. I thought your Papa was going to faint.”

“How did you ever keep from screaming, Mama?”

“I bit down on my scarf and focused on you and how much we wanted you to be born. I was not going to let the Cossacks kill you before you even had a chance to live.”

“Oh, Mama, you were so brave,” Rifka sighed. “You must have been down there a long time.”

Mama nodded. “We stayed down there for hours. Even after the *pogrom* was over, I could not be moved upstairs until you were finally born, Hannah. It was so cold and dark down there, I feared you would die from the cold. Instead, you came into the world shrieking and kicking.”

Rifka glanced at me and said, “She still shrieks and kicks, Mama.”

Hannah reached out to smack her but Rifka ducked.

Bella didn't notice, lost in her memories, and said, “Such a shame the world is so full of hatred against us because we are Jews.”

For a hundred years, the little country of Lithuania had been ruled by Russia. In the fifteen springs that had passed since Hannah was born, Czar Alexander III had died and Czar Nicholas II took his place. The rabbi said the golden age for Jews, if there ever was such a thing under Czar Alexander, had ended and the Jews of Lithuania lived on the edge of danger. With the new czar, Jewish rights under the law changed as quickly as the seasons. One year children could go to school, the next year the *Shules* and *Yeshivas* were closed and the boys met in secret in basements.

Last year they could buy property, this year they could not own land. Jews never knew where they stood with the Russian government. To most Jews, one czar was as bad as the one before. It seemed to the Jews everyone hated them. The rabbi said Jews were starving in the countryside.

Many Jews were leaving Lithuania and going to the Americas or South Africa, but only during the years the Russians said they could leave the country. During one of those times, Hannah's Uncle Jacob took his family and went to live in New York, because he said he couldn't feed all his children in Lithuania. Hannah missed her twin cousins, Bluma and Abi, who were her age, because, now, she had no one to tell secrets to, at least no one she knew who would keep the secrets. They wrote, but letters were a long time coming from so far away; the news was old by the time it arrived.

The Levin family was fortunate, for Samuel was important in the village and they had food to eat. After all, families had to educate their sons and Samuel taught them the prayers for the *Bar Mitzvah*, the boys' coming of age ceremony at age thirteen. He studied the *Talmud* with the older boys, helping them understand the laws the Jews lived by. He was often paid with chickens or vegetables, so the family ate.

Winters in Lithuania were harsh and many people starved, Russians and Jews alike. Then, one day, when the first flowers of 1897 pushed up out of the thawing earth, Hannah turned sixteen. She grew up quickly as her world rolled over and threatened to crush her.

Chapter 3



“Hannelah, Rifka, where are you?” Bella’s voice rose with her frustration.

Rifka turned toward her sister. “We had better go before she really gets angry.”

Hannah giggled. “Mama angry is not a pleasant sight.”

Rifka said seriously, “It’s really scary to watch her face get all red and puffy.”

Hannah nodded. “And her eyes, they sort of glow.”

They fell back on the ground in a fit of giggles. Suddenly a shadow blacked out the sun, cutting across their faces. They sat up and looked up at Bella. Her face was red and puffy and her eyes glowed as she surveyed them sprawled on the grass.

Stifling a giggle, Hannah jumped to her feet, pulling Rifka up. “Mama, we were just coming. Right Rifka?”

Rifka nodded her head vigorously, not trusting her voice.

Bella tilted her head toward the house and the girls ran as fast as they could. Hannah turned back once and saw her following sedately behind, her face turned to the sun, just the hint of a smile on her face. Hannah knew so little about her mother.

It was already late on Friday afternoon. *Shabbas*, the Sabbath, would begin at sundown and they had to prepare the house for *Shabbas* dinner and prepare food for Saturday, when they were not allowed to cook or do any kind of work. Today, they had to eat before sundown so her father and the boys could get to the synagogue in time for services. After all, the service could not begin without Samuel Levin, the cantor, who would sing the opening prayer. They cleaned the house and then set out the special white cloth and the dishes for *Shabbas* dinner. Bella put the candlesticks in the center of the table and stepped back to survey the results. “It’s good.”

Hannah breathed a sigh of relief and nudged Rifka.

“Shall we go dress, Mama?” Rifka asked.

Bella nodded and said. “Take special care, especially you Hannah. Malka Osterman is coming to share *Shabbas* dinner tonight.”

“The matchmaker? Oh Mama, why didn’t you warn us,” Hannah cried.

“Why? Would you have run off to America?” Bella asked.

Hannah blushed. “Of course not, Mama. I might have started earlier.”

“I called you and called you. You didn’t come home.”

“I didn’t know,” Hannah wailed, pulling at her long dark curls.

“Pulling your hair out won’t help, Hannelah, it will be gone soon enough. Go.”

Hannah froze and let her curl fall but had no time to consider the implications of Bella's words, as she turned and raced up the stairs. Pausing at the top she heard Rifka say, "You know Hannah is in love with Gershon Cohen."

Hannah clenched her fists. *I might just kill her.* Then she calmed down. Perhaps a little information could go a long way.

"You tell me at least once a day, Rifka. How could I not know?" Bella said.

Hannah saw her adjust the scarf, covering her hair, as she went out the door. Rifka turned and saw her sister at the top of the stairs and shrugged. Hannah sent her a nasty look, then went to the window and looked out.

Her father and the boys plodded up the road. Dovy and Mordecai were engaged in conversation, their blond side curls bobbing up and down. Samuel stooped down occasionally to insert a remark, his brown curls dangling along the sides of his beard. Once he reached out to adjust the *yarmulke* that threatened to fall from Dovy's vigorously nodding head.

Hannah knew Bella's heart must swell with pride whenever she looked at her golden sons. The girl watched her gaze upward and heard her mutter her daily incantation, "God, please spare them the conscription and keep them safe."

Russia ruled Lithuania with an iron fist, according to the rabbi. Everyone lived in fear of the Russian army because of the conscription, when they snatched boys out of their homes and put them in the army for twenty-five years. Most of them never saw their families again and too many did not survive the forced marches and harsh life. Everyone heard they were taking little boys of nine and ten; so many Jewish boys lost.

The rabbi said the Russians wanted to convert the Jewish boys so they would all become gentiles and, if they could take all the Jewish sons away, someday there would be no more Jews. Rulers had done that back through centuries to Biblical times, when baby Moses was left by his Jewish mother floating in a basket on the river for Pharaoh's sister to find so he would not be killed. Hannah wondered at the logic, but wise and learned men had been arguing about this for centuries and here she was, just a girl living in a tiny village in Lithuania. If these men, far more knowledgeable than she could not find a solution, she certainly had none to offer and, if she did, no one would listen, anyway.

Bella always said she was grateful for the hidden cellar under the house. It had saved the family through conscriptions and *pogroms* and had saved Hannah at her birth. Sometimes Hannah shivered, thinking about the terrifying pounding of the Cossack's horses as they rode through the *shtetl*, burning and wrecking homes and shops. Samuel said it must have been divine intervention the wooden synagogue building had survived the attacks but Hannah believed the well-bribed mayor had something to do with it.

Then there was the tale of the worst *pogrom* that ever took place in their *shtetl*, one most people could not even remember, except the two wizened, old men who sat outside the synagogue every day, telling anyone foolish enough to walk by too slowly, their tale of horror. Everyone attributed these stories to age, because nobody had ever confirmed it. Those stories became the stuff of nightmares for children who woke, screaming that everyone lay dead in the streets amid all the smoldering ruins of their homes.

When her mother was a young girl, the Cossacks did unspeakable things to one of her friends but Bella would never talk about it. Hannah wondered what had happened but the hideous secret was locked away forever in Bella's mind and the girl's family had fled within a few months to South Africa. Hannah would never dare to ask, anyway.

Pogroms had become a way of life. Fortunately, the mayor usually warned the rabbi and they would all have time to hide. He needed the taxes from the people and the bribes the rabbi gave him twice a year. It was in his selfish best interest to keep the Jews of the village alive and working.

From her vantage point at the window, Hannah could see Bella watching her husband as he came up the road. Bella had once told Hannah she wasn't surprised when Hannah had arrived in the world with Papa's good looks, only darker. Hannah once had heard Bella tell Samuel their older daughter was a true beauty with long, lustrous brown curls and dark eyes, almost seeming to see inside you. Bella caught her listening and grimly announced that eavesdroppers heard no good about themselves.

How else were children supposed to learn what was going on? No one was going to tell them anything. So Hannah continued to listen to her parent's conversation whenever she had the opportunity but her mother was right, for the words Hannah overheard came back to haunt her.

It was evening and a curious Hannah eavesdropped on her parents from an open window. Bella said, "Hannah's too vain about her looks, Samuel, especially her hair. She brushes it every day until it shines and plays with the curls. Women should not be so vain. I hope there will not be any trouble when she has to cut it all off for her wedding and wear a *shaitel*, a wig."

Hannah shuddered at the thought of losing her hair and having to wear an itchy wig, especially in the sticky summer. Perhaps, she would wear scarves like her mother and some of the other women or, maybe, she would just refuse to cut her hair, as her mother predicted.

Oy, oh, she could just imagine the reaction to that statement. The windows would shatter from Bella's screams and the neighbors would all come running to see who was getting killed. Hannah's stomach turned over and she acknowledged her mother might have been right in admonishing her for listening to conversations, which were none of her business. On the other hand, it was her business and her hair and Hannah felt she had the right to know what was going to happen. "God forgive me," she murmured.

Hannah turned back into the room and lovingly brushed the long curls, which would one day be doomed to destruction. Tonight's dinner with Malka was a formality, for with the matchmaker's help, the marriage had already been arranged between the families. Only Hannah herself had not yet officially been informed. Another tradition, of which the bride was the last to know, as if she didn't already; perhaps a wise tradition so she wouldn't run away and jump in the river if the groom was some smelly, old man with more hair in his ears and nose than on his head. Hannah couldn't help but giggle and shudder at the same time when she pictured some of the aging widowers in the village, seeking young wives who could give them more children.

She could not conceive of lying every night next to old *Chaver* Frimkin, the chicken farmer who always smelled of burning chicken feathers. Please, God, not *Chaver* Frimkin, please. No, it had to be Gershon.

Malka Osterman would come to dinner tonight and make the important announcement. Tomorrow after *Shabbas* ended, the families would meet at the synagogue and formalize the engagement and everyone would rejoice at such a glorious marriage.

Gershon, descending from a long line of rabbis, was a brilliant Talmudic scholar, well-versed in Rabbinical law and philosophy. Someday he would succeed his father as chief rabbi and Hannah would have status and respect as the *rebitsin*. They were right. It was a very good marriage for a cantor's daughter.

So why did Hannah have mixed feelings? She wanted Gershon for her husband but not everything that went with that marriage. Was she being a fool? Did all girls feel this way before their marriages? Hannah didn't have an answer and had no one to ask, for it wasn't acceptable for a girl to question her parent's decisions. You just accepted your fate and made the best of it. Of course, marrying Gershon would be a blessing, not a curse. Somewhere in the back of her brain, Hannah felt a tremor of uncertainty and shuddered, because all this depended on Malka Osterman, who may have made a deal with the smelly chicken farmer, *Cholileh*, God forbid.

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