

Settled

by Mark Cecil Stevens

Zusman snored on the sofa as Motel gathered his belongings in the dark. He moved quietly as had become his custom in the mornings. Initially he had tried not to wake his nephew on his way to work in the plant, but after production had ceased he still woke early, haunting the common room until the sun's first skittering rays teased the younger man from his sleep. Then he would make tea and they would tell stories.

"The worst thing about the war," Zusman told him one morning, "is the travel restrictions. I can't make a living in this town."

"Who can?" Motel replied. "There is no more factory work, either."

"So we sit?" Zusman wiggled in his chair, and the legs squeaked across the floorboards.

"Is there something else you can think of?" Motel was still then, waiting for an answer.

"We could leave somewhere," he suggested, looking up at a crack where the wall should have met the ceiling.

"You go ahead. Let me know when you get there. I'll be here, in this chair." Motel didn't even indicate the chair with a gesture. He just let out a breath, slowly and quietly, at less than a whisper.

But on this morning, they were going. Somewhere. Just as Zusman had wished. They were unsure where, but they had read the signs ordering them to report to a crossroads near the old cemetery. That would be the point of departure. Motel didn't like it. A cemetery was unseemly as a meeting place for a journey. But it was settled. They had threatened to shoot anyone who didn't comply.

Motel gathered up his papers and put them in his breast pocket with the silver watch that his father had given him. He had three bundles of books that he wanted to bring, but he doubted that

he could carry them all. Perhaps one of the boys would do it. He also had an old prayer shawl, but he decided to wear it under his clothes. It was sacrilege, but it would help keep him warm. His coat was already turning out to be too thin for September's morning frost.

Zusman stirred when the kettle clattered on the stove. He rubbed his nose and coughed, a rumbling that grew to a wracking that only stilled when a bloody clot broke loose. He sat and looked for a place to spit, but finding none, he swallowed with an exaggerated noise that served as both a plea for a cup of tea and a complaint that he had been roused.

"The tea will be ready in a moment." Motel pulled two teacups from the cupboard. He made up his mind to leave them unwashed when they went. They were chipped and there was no point in bringing them.

Zusman sat up and waited for his tea. When it failed to present immediately, he moved to the table in the kitchen. He had slept in his clothes, and they rumbled in a wave that swept up his left side, cresting in a black splash of hair. He watched Motel move around the kitchen and marveled that the man could occupy himself in so empty a room. Motel selected items from the cabinets, leaving each empty as he assembled a small meal.

"Thank you." Zusman's voice was hoarse. The bread was so stale that he had to dip it in the tea to soften it.

"Leave some for the boys. I'll get them up before we go." Motel himself sat down at the table. He bit a crust and worried his gums with it.

"Well, I'm all packed." Zusman dipped his fingers in the tea and smoothed his hair down with it.

"Yes, I see. You have your amulet?" Motel was still sucking at that first bite. Zusman had an amulet that he told people was from the Ruzhiner rabbi, and that it could work wonders on the sick and unfortunate. He prized it singularly, and spent every dollar that he earned with it immediately. Motel, like the others from Kiev,

had no faith in its power. Besides, it was too chintzy to be the Ruzhiner rabbi's.

Zusman stacked his empty dishes and patted the breast pocket of his coat. He motioned with his hands that Motel should hurry, but the older man was just starting on his second bit of crust.

The boys came in together, rubbing sleep's grit from the corners of their eyes and split the last of the bread.

"Must we go?" asked Yochel, the older boy, wiping at his broad cauliflower nose. Motel marveled that there was nothing in that face to remind him of the boy's mother. That was his nose, and the boy carried his fat chin, doughy cheeks and buried eyes.

Schlom, the younger boy, looked like nobody. His features were fine to the edge of breakable, with cheeks set broad that diminished to points that were eclipsed by his doe's eyes. Motel was sometimes tempted to think of him as a changeling, but his wife's inconstancy and desertion had left him with other suspicions. And pities.

"We get to go, sweet one," Zusman chided, "This we leave behind." He made a sweep with his arm that seemed too grand for the tiny apartment that they were about to vacate.

"I am bothered, going." Motel said. "Something bothers me about going. The sign said *Zhydy*." He paused and scratched thoughtfully at his cheek. "That's a bit of an insult in Russian. Where will they send us if we are just *Zhydy* to them? Something bothers me about the deportation."

"Don't say 'deportation', Motel. Call it 'resettlement'", Zusman corrected. "You are deported *away* from a place, but you are resettled *to* somewhere. It makes a difference how you speak. It makes a difference how you think." He tapped at his temple with a crooked fingertip.

"Well, I don't know just how to think," Motel replied, "but I think we had better go. If there is a wagon, I don't want to be hanging from the back of it."

They had left early enough. The signs had said that they should be at the crossroads at eight o'clock, and they were just a few miles from the cemetery. The sun hinted at rising, and as they

walked Motel wished that they had stayed at the table just a little longer to give his stomach time to settle.

The two men walked just ahead of the boys, and though Zusman's clipped gait was much faster than Motel's long strides, their pace was evenly matched. Zusman's coat was half open, though the morning was brisk, and it looked to Motel as if he would jump out of it. Although the quiet made Zusman nervous, it was Motel who spoke.

"When she was little, her mother said that she felt too light, as if she had the bones of a bird. That's why they called her Taybl. Her father said that she was always reaching up, even after you lifted her. Her cradle was like a cage to her. She shrieked if she were left in it, raging against the bars. She was only consoled in the open or at a window, when she could see the sky."

Zusman thought that his uncle had a rather sentimental view of his wife. He had heard the stories before—she was not strong enough or tame enough to be confined.

"She insisted as well on that apartment, at the top of the building. She always complained that there was no balcony, not even a small one where she could sit if the boys were still. She would throw open the windows in the middle of winter and tell me that the air in that place was too close.

"Of course I bring it up because of the irony. You know when she left she told me, 'You aren't going anywhere Motel.' She said that. I told her that she wouldn't be able to ask for a divorce, that she wouldn't see the boys. But they couldn't hold her either. She still went. And then she turned and she gave me the only really cold look that I had seen from her. The pity just fell away and she said, 'You'll die here in Kiev.' It was like a curse. But now we're leaving."

Zusman half smiled, and when he saw the look of mild shock and curiosity that Motel wore he decided to tell his own story.

"I was in Smile, an old widow asked me to work a wonder, to give her more time with her family. She had a bad heart, even as a child, and it was already a wonder that she had lived so long. She

had a good deal of money, and a small bit of that came into my hands for the magic." Zusman held his thumb and forefinger just so slightly apart and gave Motel a wink with his bright, sharp little eye.

"I had enough to stay in the inn for a few days, and the innkeeper went to every length to see to it that I was attended by his daughter. She was no great beauty, but she was tender, and she quivered when I touched her, which was a thrill I had not known before.

"It was only a few days, mind you, but I found myself looking into the face of the innkeeper, and looking for myself in it. I thought that perhaps I could sell the Ruzhiner amulet and buy a piece of the inn. I could amuse the guests with my travels and settle in with the daughter—I've forgotten her name somehow—and just stay. It had been such a long time since I had stayed that it seemed homely, even seductive." He chewed at his lip as they walked and looked off up the road.

"But you didn't stay, Zusman," Motel prompted.

"No, the old widow died. I had to slip out at night. The innkeeper's daughter helped me to pack and hide in her wagon. She teased a promise from me that I would come back and take her away. At first she wanted to run together, but I told her to wait until it was calmer."

"But you didn't return." Motel found himself compelled to egg the story on.

"No, not that either. There were other widows. And other daughters."

"But not like that one."

"No, not like that. I didn't settle down until I stayed with a fat old one." Zusman tickled Motel under his ribs and they laughed for a cursory moment before they fell into their separate reveries. It took a moment before they realized that the boys were talking.

"She would let me kiss her, Yochel, just not on the face," the little one protested. "Only on the hair. It smelled good, too, so I did it when she let me."

"You didn't want to kiss her hair." Yochel spoke the authority that an older child wields against the younger. Schlom could not have argued, regardless of the truth of the assertion.

"Well, I always tried to brush her hair against her cheek, but she would turn away. Sometimes she would slap at me, a little, when I tried that. But she laughed. So I don't think she was very mad."

"You should have held her and kissed her on the...." Yochel trailed off into a mumble, afraid to show his uncertainty of the anatomy of a facial kiss. "Girls like that, when you do that." He tried to look certain, but was overshot into cock-sure.

"But I stopped when I saw her down under the bridge with Hersch."

"The cobbler's boy?" Yochel made a face to punctuate his disgust.

"Yes, and she let him kiss her all on the face. He was even kissing her lips." The last words came out at a hoarse whisper that connoted surprise and anger and awe, expressed as a single feeling.

"So what did you do?"

"Nothing. I went home and I cried." Schlom looked at his brother and assessed his disdain before he amended, "A little."

"There, that's why you can't kiss her face. You just run when you see something you don't like. You have to stay. Girls like that." Motel brought his open hand down over his fist, slapping a cadence to the sermon. He let out a deep breath and repeated more quietly, "You have to stay."

