EDIE MEIDAV

The Christian Girl

That morning, I had not exactly been spying on the Christian girl taking her bath outside in the strange area my father had rigged up for her, because though it had been permissible for him to get by the women of the house the idea of this young girl who lived with us and who ate with the children, who helped us for some vulnerable reason everyone protected which I didn't understand, no one let her bathe where other women did or use the same small chamberpot since both her bathwater and waste were to be poured out elsewhere and so avoid any mixing with ours. In this way we stayed apart: otherwise her muslin dresses and water-harshed hands were ours as were her apples, jokes, and tendrils of hair escaping her bun. Because of this tender reason that had to be sheltered, she had her own place to sleep and bathe. If you stood on the hill just above at the right hour when no neighbor was around, you could see the care she took, putting the animal-fat soap she used, different from ours, on the stone wall my brothers and I dedicated ourselves to dismantling.

She had a way of undoing her hair with a kind of trick so it fell down around that snub face, followed by a bit of shadowy movement through the slats. While watching her, I could not help my own little body-trick on its own starting to perform and could not also help the feeling she knew about my body-trick. Discovery! Or almost and so I panicked, dislodging a piece of rubble toward where she bathed.

To see her through slats was not so different from how she had first appeared among us, stepping down the path, wearing a brown dress of a kind we had not seen, something that might as well have been made from potato sacks and then belted. Never had I seen a person like her, so soft and foreign yet unhidden.

Our mother was proper, a person cited often for her propriety, and though I understood this meant her airs were great and that many failed in their liking, they always spoke of her education, it meant she could read French, Russian, Polish, German, Hebrew, her skirts sheaths long as this education, highwaisted black affairs with tiny complicated buttons up near her waist that fascinated me, since when I was young, I could not imagine ever having come from that concave belly sheathed by those

skirts, and at least those mysterious buttons made me cite my origins or at least offered the hint of a clue. During that time, my mother did not walk so much as sweep through our house, two levels, with an assortment of aunts and others upstairs, but if I watched her swishing too much, a little rush of something flooded my chest as if I had just punched a pillow and only air puffed out.

My job as the youngest was to lie in the beds of each of the women at night, to warm sheets for them, what they always laughed about: that is what he is good for, little Henryk, I heard them saying, he'll make a good bedwarmer, though I never wished to pursue that laugh, one more of those items adults left in their wake which could steal your attention and then vanish like a small fluff of goose feathers I was sure kept following me everywhere in life and not just when our pillows were truly being beat on one of our stultified summer afternoons.

My father scared me, a big man named David respected in the town for his great timber enterprise which in retrospect now seems not so great, just a bit of land outside town where he judiciously planted trees and cut them but called himself captain of the enterprise, an odd unjew-like thing to do for many reasons, I later understood mainly because jews did not usually get to own land, but my father was tall, part soldier and part tree, and perhaps this broad-shouldered stance got him favors not granted to others, such pride in his bearing and in how he would tell anyone he trusted enough that he'd descended from a line of rabbis all the way back from the Baal Shem Tov and before that the Maharal of Prague and Rashi and someone they loved to discuss named Dreyfus in the town of Troyes all the way back to a humble sandalmaker in second-century Palestine.

That order I never could get straight, I just heard the names so often they whined as an incantation. Once my father beckoned me alone to his study, really more a cramped alcove behind the stairs, there to take out a metal box in which the crumpled papers of our genealogy remained, the papers that followed us from town to town, wherever our grandparents had been asked to leave, through Lucca and Troyes, Girona and Casablanca, with some hint of what the adults called rape either in Africa or among the Cossacks infiltrating the family line before we ended up in our town with its pretty spires and wild forest in which my father's grandfather, blessed be his memory, had seen our future. With him had come the rest of the family and so we were settled into a street in the shadow of the church tolling the hour.

Other families arrived as well and from among them my father chose my mother for being the best of the herring, as he said, from among those his own parents had wanted for him, a dark narrow woman with a beak-like nose you can still see casting such shadow in photos, the knowing in her eyes a predictor of prudent values which might spread grace over the large family my father wished to have carry forth his line.

That our mother bore him three boys seemed a good promise at the start, you are so lucky, people said, the family business will work out with sons and my father's prospects were good, especially since he knew how to take unpopular stands in the community as when someone wanted to dig a well far from the gentiles and my father stood up and said if we are building a well it should be for everyone, not just jews, in this way doing what he could to shine the reputation of our community's jews, but what did I know, little pisher as the aunts called me, but I overheard everything, how in our town jews were better and gentiles more tolerant, leaving each other space, and how especially here jews bothered to master the language in their homes if not at cheder. True we did keep to our own butcher and baker but apart from that, if you walked the weekday marketplace, you could see everyone, including my mother, sidling through the narrow corridors eyeing apples, cabbage, beets with the same scorn, the same roughened hands of everyone turning over the same beetle-ridden onions.

My mother had a way of walking like a sentinel through any crowd, sometimes an exquisite sight as when I was lost and looked to find her, her movements bearing a certainty to which you could cling, the angle of her nose such that she never seemed to stop judging so that when she smiled it was not like it is with some people, the sun cutting through but rather more a quick evaluative flash, nothing you could rest on or bask in for long, hers being more a winter sun.

And this is why the Christian girl did something to me as I watched through our one window as she made her way down the small rutted path where my older brothers sometimes hid, their favorite barricade from which they threw stones to chide me for walking up to the road so late in the morning, because I was always late, the youngest and dreamy besides, and in their frustration, because I made them late for cheder, they threw pebbles. Not that they were the most eager students once we got to the one-room schoolhouse for boys where we bunched around the table made from my father's timber learning to read the book from every physical angle, like the famous story of Hillel who got cold lying on the snow-covered roof and looking through a hole because he wasn't rich

enough to study and hence learned the alphabet upside down, or maybe it was Akiva, this was how my young mind made all stories one, especially those involving the threat of discomfort. Not eager students, my brothers, just allies and bullies who loved the whole act of getting themselves orderly, glossy and bundled up to get to cheder on time, a place I knew to feel fortunate about since our mother had the habit of reminding us that we had the good luck of education only because people liked giving favors to our father, a man who thought himself lucky to employ jews and gentiles alike, seeing no distinction in who could get to be ennobled by manual labor as he liked to say and so doing all he could to be generous and openminded. In his neat shirt, laboriously ironed by one of the women in our house with the heavy steam iron, he nonetheless had the air of a messy scholar, something always misbuttoned or else bearing telltale splotches on his knees, sawdust from where he had needed to assist one of his men, leaning on the lumber cart bringing logs, so many giant striking trees cut down before their prime. As he liked to tell us, the key is choosing when you cut, all the logs brought to the larger market in the capital, since in everything he did lived instruction, the kind of lesson I should heed, especially that a man could be larger than his surroundings, that the stateliness with which you carry yourself makes all the difference.

So that when the Christian girl was making her way down the path, because I was the dreamy one most prone to marveling I saw her first and for a second with the selfishness the others liked to accuse me of as well as whatever gave me the nickname of Cloud, I watched her rather than tell anyone, lacking the dignity our father sought to instill and all because her face had a sweetness I had never seen, a roundness, both her snub nose and mouth twisted to the side under some light in the eyes that asked if you were in on some joke, and only later I learned the light came from a sympathy ready to spring up at all the unfairness of life.

When the Christian girl knocked at the door, I hesitated before opening it. Once I did, she did not so much as look me up and down as take me in. Well, she breathed, and in that she avoided the usual formulas of politeness. The exhale described a world. Which she followed, this snub-nosed sweet-faced girl with light brown hair and a bad scratch down her cheek, her hands bruised, with something even more astonishing: Well, Henryk—she knew my name, a flabbergasting fact. I am so glad to see you, she said. Is your mother in?

With her strange access to memory and background, I found it even odder that they all also knew her, that she would be offered a chair at our

fancy table, my mother pouring her a glass cup of cherry tea, and there we had this gentile eating from our best glass plates and cups.

She was something I did not understand at first, a wet-nurse now and in the past, for the two eldest, that strangeness I could find acceptable, the two of them always off in their own adventures but also for me: I had nursed from this girl who still looked so young to me but I could not understand how had she gotten to have milk in her breasts and my mother none?

I stared at her throat and no lower, another mystery, but when she felt my eyes, we both blushed and turned away. Was she older than she looked? In my mother's voice I heard a kind of softness she had not much chance to show around three boys whom she had to spend so much time scolding.

Given my mother's propensities, I see now, she would have been happier to have had girls with whom she might have spent hours tutoring French, teaching them to sew buttons or crochet, rather than having to scold three boys forever late for cheder.

That said, it is probable that I was, as my brothers accuse me, her favorite. I was the one to whom my mother told a little story when I was sick about three fish swimming through a sea, the one to whom she sometimes sang a lullaby in our home language gargling in the back of her throat like the swish of gills, my bird-fish mother who may have liked me most, maybe, since part of my bedwarming duty meant it was always her bed that I warmed last, which meant she was the one whom, if I fell asleep in my duties, would cradle me in her arms, bony but strong, and carry me as gently as she could down to the bed I shared with my brothers. On some nights she let me stay the whole night so that I awoke uncertain in a torporous dream, the light muted, finding my mother with her tight bun undone and my feet not affixed to my body until I finally understood time had come for me to pad away downstairs.

The Christian girl also had known an enforced time away, that much was clear, and she too like me had come back, I tried telling her once, but she didn't understand. I was merely to swallow this new fact of existence. We did not have much room but two of the upstairs aunts were made to double up and the Christian girl was given her own room, though there came some small grumbling in the pantry about this. We were to be very kind to her because she had been a great help to my mother when she had gone through a difficult time and she too had gone through her own hard time, and then all evaporated into a hush, leaving me unclear: who

among us three boys had been that difficult to cause the hush? Was it the eldest, mostly kind but lacking the decisiveness our mother must have admired once in my father? Was it the middle one, a great idealist who always fought against my father regarding principles of justice, whether or not we should go to school six days a week or get to ride out with him to his forest? Or was it me with my furtive ways?

My father especially treated the Christian girl kindly. He made it clear he did not like hearing my mother give her chores around the house, asking her to lug in kindling, principal among the many tasks my mother hated, much preferring to be upstairs reading one of her books in French or German, and also something about having to stoke the woodstove meant bringing the mess of my father's business into the house, given the pride he had about his timber's quality, his appreciative inhale when smoke filled the living room while the same fumes made my mother cough. And yet bringing in the kindling and wood became the Christian girl's first task. My father cautioned my mother: be kind, he said, give her time, let it go slowly. There was so much I did not understand, though once I thought I might have understood her snub nose and rounded features by looking into the mirror on a silver brush my mother kept on the dark chest in her room, a softened triangular mirror in which I could see downward sloping eyes blue over the same rounding of lips but then just thought I was fooling myself.

The day that some of whatever balance we had was upset came in the spring, after the holiday I realize we disparaged by calling Kretzmacht which might have actually been Easter, though calling the trimmed-tree holiday that was really the same as calling someone pig in the manner of my educated mother, who, when upset about someone barring my father always exploded in German: *Schwein!*

In those first months of the girl among us, whenever my mother's voice grew harsh as she could not help, flying into a rage at disorder, going around the house whisking after all the female relatives, the ones she called useless, the ones whom my mother's bitter whispers called freeloaders on the hard work of father and mother both, I liked to imagine I was no child of hers but rather arisen from the soft rounded belly of the Christian girl.

We had been told to call her by the familiar name Kir, fitting with the curved mouth as well as the cherry tea my mother had offered her that first day, the slope in her shoulders and walk. Once I saw her outside near the woodpile fastening her hair up in the late afternoon, bright like fire, and horror caught my throat because really there was no way I could

leave staring at her and also no excuse if someone caught me in the act, ready to tease me mercilessly. This was how the brotherly teasing went, light at first and then narrowed, making me awkward, clumsy, a long trail of broken china and glass cups behind me. And despite my ungainly ineptitude or whatever it was their humor to accuse me of, sometimes alone among the boys I was pressed into service, going to the market with both my mother and the Christian girl though increasingly my mother failed to go, and there we would be, the Christian girl and I in the market, fingering items, between us sharing great understanding with no wheedling needed.

Everyone around us had their ways of being together, two men with arms swinging in gentle rhythm together or arguing with the same concert of gesticulation. Even the trees grew in pairs, even the rattle of horse brought the scent of sawdust and within these pairings the Christian girl was for me a spot of grace and bringer of good things beyond just the tart apples she slipped me from a tree it seemed only she knew about. She had a way of taking me in no one else bothered to try since I was youngest and lesser in everything, at cheder especially and only like my mother in that I was good with languages, the one who asked the most questions, always failing to do the kind of brilliant thing our middle brother did, what came easily to him, putting together two concepts the teacher had just introduced. Our eldest brother was not so interested in school, more involved with machines, liking to watch a special blade our father had in his factory going round: when I'm older, I'm going to have a factory that makes machines like this, he said, and we laughed since he was clearly going to be a rabbi, the job our family cut out for eldest sons, as my mother had explained, a long line going back epochs.

A giant lowering force in the sky occasionally pointed toward us and sometimes, like a compass still visible in the clouds, the needle slanted over the spires toward or away from our home and then too my throat would tighten: the adults spared the children most of the stories but their attempts were feeble and you always ended up knowing more than you wanted around the rim of things. Others also saw the needle, even those who moved in among us having heard that in our town of pretty spires the gentiles let you be despite the rumors of people bearing firebrands. We pocketed that information among other dusty keepsakes as if from other countries, though my father kept having difficulty with one man named Kristof, not just jealous but with some power in town, friends with the aldermen and so we were always hearing how Kristof was cutting

off one section of forest, but Kristof lived in a world different from our home world, our sellers and our baker, a woman with a great heartshaped face and a warm salute for any one of our family, and our father had his timber, we were placed very securely, no one had to fear, the needle slanted elsewhere.

In the moment I watched the Christian girl with her soap and dark movements through the slats, that was the entirety of what could be seen but a disruption came from our front yard, someone pushing open the fine sturdy gate made with the best of my father's timber to whack the ground with a strange tool, a mallet on one end, an axe on the other.

So surprised I was that I slipped fully on the hill, I came down, landing on my rear not far from where the girl bathed and she looked at me, so startled, eyes peeking above the slats, Henryk! she let out while from the front yard we continued to hear a great commotion, someone yelling.

The Christian girl grabbed around herself the cloth that would protect her, shoulders bare in that paschal light of an unseasonably warm spring, everyone said as much, how early the warmth had come, and then we were there from our different corners, the Christian girl and I on two different sides of the house but staring at the intruder, a young man swearing in a Polish so foul and thick I could only hear a few words. When he sighted her, he did the strangest thing, coming at her to grab her wrist, our Christian girl.

As luck would have it, it was the lunchtime hour. On most days my father returned home to eat borscht the Christian girl prepared the way he liked, an island of cream floating in its center, and as its crown a sprig of dill from the small patch I got to tend alongside our house. Before the Christian girl had come to live with us, the borscht was the one way my parents showed whatever might have brought them together, whatever craze induced them to stand like stiffnecked marionettes in their wedding photo, dignified and unreachable.

Once it had been that my mother both made and served my father his borscht, a ritual unchanged until the advent of the Christian girl, part of the mystery that went less with my mother's buttons and more with that rounded bosom, my mother retreated from her lunchtime service so that when my father was home, rather than sitting with my mother prattling to him of events, my father telling her of the timber or some problem he had with the nearby tenant farmers who like Kristof were not jews and so resented his holdings, instead my mother stayed upstairs reading one of her books in the room she had to herself.

On the day of the disruption, my father came from his solitary borscht out from the house with a speed that astonished me to take in what was going on, lighting immediately upon the boy wielding his axe-mallet so that he dropped the Christian girl's wrist. My father's usually watery eyes were pure steel, asking in clipped Polish what he meant by this display and with his head indicated that the Christian girl should retreat back to the house, that he could handle the situation. What followed was a long series of entreaties and rebukes of which I could only make out part, pretending to fix my eyes on the mottled wood of the nearby birch, my favorite tree in our front on which I had spent many hours climbing to sit and, in some strange union of the activities of both my parents, sitting there, in the tree, reading a book.

The young man kept on and yet my father managed to back him out of the gate which he then firmly bolted. From the front door came the voice of the Christian girl who amazingly had not covered herself yet. Is everything alright, she asked, that sweet face over the insouciance of the soft white shoulders, the flush always in her cheeks, the nose torqued to the side as if emphasizing the question.

Don't worry over such foolishness, he said before shockingly coming to her and, with the back of his hand, the slightest of gestures, rubbed the roundness of that cheek, more closeness than I had ever seen my father and mother exchange. It will be fine, don't worry. From the upstairs window where apparently my mother had been watching everything as well came her voice, a high whistle caught in it: You see what I said?

THIS WAS NOT the last of the troubles coming from the Christian girl. It was already the full blast of summer, we boys no longer needing long pants, and far behind us was the terrible sabbath that spring when a magic snowfall had come so that we avoided temple to instead go sledding down a hill on a piece of wood one of our father's friends had given us only to mistakenly skid past the window in which my father prayed with other men, foreheads and upper arms binding them into a place it seemed impossible for us to ever reach, though it was where we should have been and in a way our only destiny. Our father knew everything. Especially that we were capable of great sin: on the sled I sat in the middle, the eldest behind, the middle in front, and our father looked up and caught of all eyes only mine, his belt later the hardest on my backside.

All that was history lost to snowmelt since in the summer everyone grew kinder, even my mother who nonetheless, ever since the incident

with the boy and the Christian girl's shoulders, took on being cold around the house, her entries into rooms less swish and more a glacial whiff, something that made you feel how bitterly she was being compensated for whatever initial cost had been hers. She had a good head for figures, my mother, another of the traits which those around her, the aunts living off her, always praised and yet it was as if this talent for figures meant she often could not help speaking in the language of accounts, that my father with his watery gentleness had incurred an unrepayable debt by dint of his stepping forth to protect the Christian girl, bare-shouldered, and perhaps for more than that. My brothers took none of this in, it seemed only I was the one cursed with memory for what people said or what I thought they said, alone in watching the dance of gazes and the news they brought.

The second time, the boy came to our gate not wielding a mallet but with his hair oiled into a strange part and with his peasant parents, the mother in a belted dress and worn shoes, face identical to those dried apple dolls I had seen at the outskirts of market, sold by an old man in a red cap whose arms were strangely short, just as the boy's father's arms were, making them all of a piece as I sat there openly gaping from my perch in our birch.

This apple doll family came to yell and gesticulate and make meaningful glances toward their boy who this time stood silent, hands opening and closing as if he were pumping air into himself, as if he tried to stay afloat in the presence of these parents who kept on with their weathered dried faces gesticulating and then, most surprisingly, they pointed at where I sat stilled in the crook, where I had been eating an apple and pretending to read one of the picture books my mother loaned me from her childhood. And then the question seemed to involve something with my pulling down my short trousers. But most horribly, this marked the one time in my life my father apologized to me, which made me know something grave could be happening. He took me with the other man to the back where brooms, mops and axes were kept, and there I did not understand what was expected.

Pull them down — my father said, the soul of gentleness after a minute in which it was clear that I didn't know.

And there they looked, the man reaching out with great crudity I still cannot fathom, taking my small bit to turn and examine it until to my horror it did its little trick. In the corner of our yard, a dog which had followed the family choked down what might have been the remains of a dead bird, looking around guiltily as if someone would come for it. I

was nowhere I could imagine as the man did his work, unable to reach my father's gaze given the stature of the man of timber so instead watched the dog choking down its food. The argument seemed to do with whether or not I had been nursed by the Christian girl and somehow this matter could be resolved by looking in my trousers. Thus was the way of the adult world, nothing I could master, not like the word families we mastered at cheder.

Apparently whatever I had done or not satisfied the unhappy family or satisfied them enough that all of them went on their way, my father pressing some meaningful coins wrapped in a handkerchief into their hands, the timber of the door creaking shut behind them, and afterward, my mother and father exchanged a look which I could not understand.

You need to get that gate fixed, she said.

But when the firebrand people wanted to come in the real Christmas of that year for my family, when all of us would need to leave, the people who first gave us the message were those of this same apple doll family, and so we made our way out, only the Christian girl on the hill with her goodbye an unchanging glance as we left before dusk and in my mother's market sack only the metal box with the story of all of us. We could take nothing but what we were wearing, seven layers of clothes on each so that even my tall mother became as round as the Christian girl. And because my father believed the apple dolls, we survived, and because they didn't, all the rest of my family, our stubborn aunts and cousins and friends, those who lived with us and those who did not, those who worked for my father or nearby, all of them stayed so that they might be killed and because of this I gained strange faith in the power of all that my trousers dropped had been able to do for our family so does it really matter for how long I remained such a dreamer?