

# EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

INTRICATE IN STRUCTURE, FANTASTICAL IN ITS  
STORY, AND IRREVERENT IN 100 DIFFERENT  
WAYS... TOLD WITH UNWAYERING  
CHARM AND WIT  
—NATHAN  
ENGLANDER

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# EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

a novel

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER



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A portion of this book previously appeared in *The New Yorker*.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, except in the case of historical figures and events, which are used fictitiously, and, of course, the case of JSF himself.

Visit the author's Web site: [www.theprojectmuseum.com](http://www.theprojectmuseum.com).

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## AN OVERTURE TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF A VERY RIGID JOURNEY

MY LEGAL NAME is Alexander Perchov. But all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!, because I am always spleening her. If you want to know why I am always spleening her, it is because I am always elsewhere with friends, and disseminating so much currency, and performing so many things that can spleen a mother. Father used to dub me Shapka, for the fur hat I would don even in the summer month. He ceased dubbing me that because I ordered him to cease dubbing me that. It sounded boyish to me, and I have always thought of myself as very potent and generative. I have many many girls, believe me, and they all have a different name for me. One dubs me Baby, not because I am a baby, but because she attends to me. Another dubs me All Night. Do you want to know why? I have a girl who dubs me Currency, because I disseminate so much currency around her. She licks my chops for it. I have a miniature brother who dubs me Alli. I do not dig this name very much, but I dig him very much, so OK, I permit him to dub me Alli. As for his name, it is Little Igor, but Father dubs him Clumsy One, because he is always promenading into things. It was only four days previous that he made his eye blue from a mismanagement with a brick wall. If you're wondering what my bitch's name is, it is Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior. She has this name because Sammy Davis, Junior was Grandfather's beloved singer, and the bitch is his, not mine, because I am not the one who thinks he is blind.

As for me, I was sired in 1977, the same year as the hero of this story. In truth, my life has been very ordinary. As I mentioned before, I do

many good things with myself and others, but they are ordinary things. I dig American movies. I dig Negroes, particularly Michael Jackson. I dig to disseminate very much currency at famous nightclubs in Odessa. Lamborghini Countaches are excellent, and so are cappuccinos. Many girls want to be carnal with me in many good arrangements, notwithstanding the Inebriated Kangaroo, the Gorky Tickle, and the Unyielding Zookeeper. If you want to know why so many girls want to be with me, it is because I am a very premium person to be with. I am homely, and also severely funny, and these are winning things. But nonetheless, I know many people who dig rapid cars and famous discotheques. There are so many who perform the Sputnik Bosom Dalliance—which is always terminated with a slimy underface—that I cannot tally them on all of my hands. There are even many people named Alex. (Three in my house alone!) That is why I was so effervescent to go to Lutsk and translate for Jonathan Safran Foer. It would be unordinary.

I had performed recklessly well in my second year of English at university. This was a very majestic thing I did because my instructor was having shit between his brains. Mother was so proud of me, she said, “Alexi-stop-spleening-me! You have made me so proud of you.” I inquired her to purchase me leather pants, but she said no. “Shorts?” “No.” Father was also so proud. He said, “Shapka,” and I said, “Do not dub me that,” and he said, “Alex, you have made Mother so proud.”

Mother is a humble woman. Very, very humble. She toils at a small café one hour distance from our home. She presents food and drink to customers there, and says to me, “I mount the autobus for an hour to work all day doing things I hate. You want to know why? It is for you, Alexi-stop-spleening-me! One day you will do things for me that you hate. That is what it means to be a family.” What she does not clutch is that I already do things for her that I hate. I listen to her when she talks to me. I resist complaining about my pygmy allowance. And did I mention that I do not spleen her nearly so much as I desire to? But I do not do these things because we are a family. I do them because they are common decencies. That is an idiom that the hero taught me. I do them because I am not a big fucking asshole. That is another idiom that the hero taught me.

Father toils for a travel agency, denominated Heritage Touring. It is for Jewish people, like the hero, who have cravings to leave that ennobled country America and visit humble towns in Poland and Ukraine. Father's agency scores a translator, guide, and driver for the Jews, who try to unearth places where their families once existed. OK, I had never met a Jewish person until the voyage. But this was their fault, not mine, as I had always been willing, and one might even write lukewarm, to meet one. I will be truthful again and mention that before the voyage I had the opinion that Jewish people were having shit between their brains. This is because all I knew of Jewish people was that they paid Father very much currency in order to make vacations *from America to Ukraine*. But then I met Jonathan Safran Foer, and I will tell you, he is not having shit between his brains. He is an ingenious Jew.

So as for the Clumsy One, who I never ever dub the Clumsy One but always Little Igor, he is a first-rate boy. It is now evident to me that he will become a very potent and generative man, and that his brain will have many muscles. We do not speak in volumes, because he is such a silent person, but I am certain that we are friends, and I do not think I would be lying if I wrote that we are paramount friends. I have tutored Little Igor to be a man of this world. For an example, I exhibited him a smutty magazine three days yore, so that he should be appraised of the many positions in which I am carnal. "This is the sixty-nine," I told him, presenting the magazine in front of him. I put my fingers—two of them—on the action, so that he would not overlook it. "Why is it dubbed sixty-nine?" he asked, because he is a person hot on fire with curiosity. "It was invented in 1969. My friend Gregory knows a friend of the nephew of the inventor." "What did people do before 1969?" "Merely blowjobs and masticating box, but never in chorus." He will be made a VIP if I have a thing to do with it.

This is where the story begins.

But first I am burdened to recite my good appearance. I am unequivocally tall. I do not know any women who are taller than me. The women I know who are taller than me are lesbians, for whom 1969 was a very momentous year. I have handsome hairs, which are split in the middle. This is because Mother used to split them on the side when I was a

boy, and to spleen her I split them in the middle. "Alexi-stop-spleening-me!," she said, "you appear mentally unbalanced with your hairs split like that." She did not intend it, I know. Very often Mother utters things that I know she does not intend. I have an aristocratic smile and like to punch people. My stomach is very strong, although it presently lacks muscles. Father is a fat man, and Mother is also. This does not disquiet me, because my stomach is very strong, even if it appears very fat. I will describe my eyes and then begin the story. My eyes are blue and resplendent. Now I will begin the story.

Father obtained a telephone call from the American office of Heritage Touring. They required a driver, guide, and translator for a young man who would be in Lutsk at the dawn of the month of July. This was a troublesome supplication, because at the dawn of July, Ukraine was to celebrate the first birthday of its ultramodern constitution, which makes us feel very nationalistic, and so many people would be on vacation in foreign places. It was an impossible situation, like the 1984 Olympics. But Father is an overawing man who always obtains what he desires. "Shapka," he said on the phone to me, who was at home enjoying the greatest of all documentary movies, *The Making of "Thriller,"* "what was the language you studied this year at school?" "Do not dub me Shapka," I said. "Alex," he said, "what was the language you studied this year at school?" "The language of English," I told him. "Are you good and fine at it?" he asked me. "I am fluid," I told him, hoping I might make him proud enough to buy me the zebra-skin seat coverings of my dreams. "Excellent, Shapka," he said. "Do not dub me that," I said. "Excellent, Alex. Excellent. You must nullify any plans you possess for the first week of the month of July." "I do not possess any plans," I said to him. "Yes you do," he said.

Now is a befitting time to mention Grandfather, who is also fat, but yet more fat than my parents. OK, I will mention him. He has gold teeth and cultivates ample hairs on his face to comb by the dusk of every day. He toiled for fifty years at many employments, primarily farming, and later machine manipulating. His final employment was at Heritage Touring, where he commenced to toil in the 1950s and persevered until of late. But now he is retarded and lives on our street. My grandmother

died two years yore of a cancer in her brain, and Grandfather became very melancholy, and also, he says, blind. Father does not believe him, but purchased Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior for him nonetheless, because a Seeing Eye bitch is not only for blind people but for people who pine for the negative of loneliness. (I should not have used "purchased," because in truth Father did not purchase Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, but only received her from the home for forgetful dogs. Because of this, she is not a real Seeing Eye bitch, and is also mentally deranged.) Grandfather disperses most of the day at our house, viewing television. He yells at me often. "Sasha!" he yells. "Sasha, do not be so lazy! Do not be so worthless! Do something! Do something worthy!" I never rejoinder him, and never spleen him with intentions, and never understand what worthy means. He did not have the unappetizing habit of yelling at Little Igor and me before Grandmother died. That is how we are certain that he does not intend it, and that is why we can forgive him. I discovered him crying once, in front of the television. (Jonathan, this part about Grandfather must remain amid you and me, yes?) The weather report was exhibiting, so I was certain that it was not something melancholy on the television that made him cry. I never mentioned it, because it was a common decency to not mention it.

Grandfather's name is also Alexander. Supplementally is Father's. We are all the primogenitory children in our families, which brings us tremendous honor, on the scale of the sport of baseball, which was invented in Ukraine. I will dub my first child Alexander. If you want to know what will occur if my first child is a girl, I will tell you. He will not be a girl. Grandfather was sired in Odessa in 1918. He has never departed Ukraine. The remotest he ever traveled was Kiev, and that was for when my uncle wedded The Cow. When I was a boy, Grandfather would tutor that Odessa is the most beautiful city in the world, because the vodka is cheap, and so are the women. He would manufacture funnies with Grandmother before she died about how he was in love with other women who were not her. She knew it was only funnies because she would laugh in volumes. "Anna," he would say, "I am going to marry that one with the pink hat." And she would say, "To whom are you going to marry her?" And he would say, "To me." I would laugh very much in the



back seat, and she would say to him, "But you are no priest." And he would say, "I am today." And she would say, "Today you believe in God?" And he would say, "Today I believe in love." Father commanded me never to mention Grandmother to Grandfather. "It will make him melancholy, Shapka," Father said. "Do not dub me that," I said. "It will make him melancholy, Alex, and it will make him think he is more blind. Let him forget." So I never mention her, because unless I do not want to, I do what Father tells me to do. Also, he is a first-rate puncher.

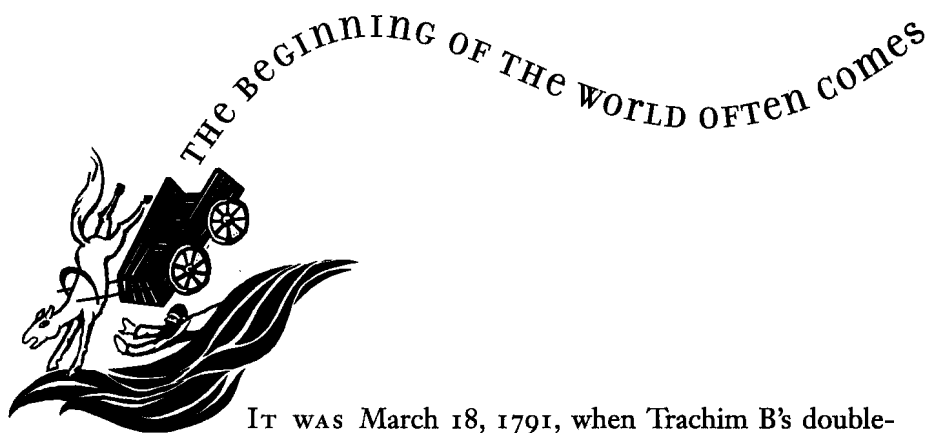
After telephoning me, Father telephoned Grandfather to inform him that he would be the driver of our journey. If you want to know who would be the guide, the answer is there would be no guide. Father said that a guide was not an indispensable thing, because Grandfather knew a beefy amount from all of his years at Heritage Touring. Father dubbed him an expert. (At the time when he said this, it seemed like a very reasonable thing to say. But how does this make you feel, Jonathan, in the luminescence of everything that occurred?)

When the three of us, the three men named Alex, gathered in Father's house that night to converse the journey, Grandfather said, "I do not want to do it. I am retarded, and I did not become a retarded person in order to have to perform shit such as this. I am done with it." "I do not care what you want," Father told him. Grandfather punched the table with much violence and shouted, "Do not forget who is who!" I thought that that would be the end of the conversation. But Father said something queer. "Please." And then he said something even queerer. He said, "Father." I must confess that there is so much I do not understand. Grandfather returned to his chair and said, "This is the final one. I will never do it again."

So we made schemes to procure the hero at the Lvov train station on 2 July, at 1500 of the afternoon. Then we would be for two days in the area of Lutsk. "Lutsk?" Grandfather said. "You did not say it was Lutsk." "It is Lutsk," Father said. Grandfather became in thought. "He is looking for the town his grandfather came from," Father said, "and someone, Augustine he calls her, who salvaged his grandfather from the war. He desires to write a book about his grandfather's village." "Oh," I said, "so he is intelligent?" "No," Father corrected. "He has low-grade brains.

The American office informs me that he telephones them every day and manufactures numerous half-witted queries about finding suitable food.” “There will certainly be sausage,” I said. “Of course,” Father said. “He is only half-witted.” Here I will repeat that the hero is a very ingenious Jew. “Where is the town?” I asked. “The name of the town is Trachimbrod.” “Trachimbrod?” Grandfather asked. “It is near 50 kilometers from Lutsk,” Father said. “He possesses a map and is sanguine of the coordinates. It should be simple.”

Grandfather and I viewed television for several hours after Father reposed. We are both people who remain conscious very tardy. (I was near-at-hand to writing that we both relish to remain conscious tardy, but that is not faithful.) We viewed an American television program that had the words in Russian at the bottom of the screen. It was about a Chinaman who was resourceful with a bazooka. We also viewed the weather report. The weatherman said that the weather would be very abnormal the next day, but that the next day after that would be normal. Amid Grandfather and I was a silence you could cut with a scimitar. The only time that either of us spoke was when he rotated to me during an advertisement for McDonald’s McPorkburgers and said, “I do not want to drive ten hours to an ugly city to attend to a very spoiled Jew.”



IT WAS March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River. The young W twins were the first to see the curious flotsam rising to the surface: wandering snakes of white string, a crushed-velvet glove with outstretched fingers, barren spools, schmootzy pince-nez, rasp- and boysenberries, feces, frillwork, the shards of a shattered atomizer, the bleeding red-ink script of a resolution: *I will... I will...*

Hannah wailed. Chana waded into the cold water, pulling up above her knees the yarn ties at the ends of her britches, sweeping the rising life-debris to her sides as she waded farther. *What are you doing over there!* the disgraced usurer Yankel D called, kicking up shoreline mud as he hobbled toward the girls. He extended one hand to Chana and held the other, as always, over the incriminating abacus bead he was forced by shtetl proclamation to wear on a string around his neck. *Stay back from the water! You will get hurt!*

The good gefiltefishmonger Bitzl Bitzl R watched the commotion from his paddleboat, which was fastened with twine to one of his traps. *What's going on over there?* he shouted to shore. *Is that you, Yankel? Is there some sort of trouble?*

*It's the Well-Regarded Rabbi's twins,* Yankel called back. *They're playing in the water and I'm afraid someone will get hurt!*

*It's turning up the most unusual things!* Chana laughed, splashing at the mass that grew like a garden around her. She picked up the hands of a baby doll, and those of a grandfather clock. Umbrella ribs. A skeleton key. The articles rose on the crowns of bubbles that burst when they

reached the surface. The slightly younger and less cautious twin raked her fingers through the water and each time came up with something new: a yellow pinwheel, a muddy hand mirror, the petals of some sunken forget-me-not, silt and cracked black pepper, a packet of seeds...

But her slightly older and more cautious sister, Hannah—identical in every way save the hairs connecting her eyebrows—watched from shore and cried. The disgraced usurer Yankel D took her into his arms, pressed her head against his chest, murmured, *Here... here...*, and called to Bitzl Bitzl: *Row to the Well-Regarded Rabbi's and bring him back with you. Also bring Menasha the physician and Isaac the man of law. Quickly!*

The mad squire Sofiowka N, whose name the shtetl would later take for maps and Mormon census records, emerged from behind a tree. *I have seen everything that happened*, he said hysterically. *I witnessed it all. The wagon was moving too fast for this dirt road — the only thing worse than to be late to your own wedding is to be late to the wedding of the girl who should have been your wife — and it suddenly flipped itself, and if that's not exactly the truth, then the wagon didn't flip itself, but was itself flipped by a wind from Kiev or Odessa or wherever, and if that doesn't seem quite correct, then what happened was — and I would swear on my lily-white name to this — an angel with grave-stone-feathered wings descended from heaven to take Trachim back with him, for Trachim was too good for this world. Of course, who isn't? We are all too good for each other.*

*Trachim?* Yankel asked, allowing Hannah to finger the incriminating bead. *Wasn't Trachim the shoemaker from Lutsk who died half a year ago of pneumonia?*

*Look at this!* Chana called, giggling, holding above her head the jack of cunnilingus from a dirty deck of cards.

No, Sofiowka said. *That man's name was Trachum with a u. This is with an i. And that Trachum died in the Night of the Longest Night. No, wait. No, wait. He died from being an artist.*

*And this!* Chana shrieked with joy, holding up a faded map of the universe.

*Get out of the water!* Yankel hollered at her, raising his voice louder than he would have wished at the Well-Regarded Rabbi's daughter, or any young girl. *You will get hurt!*

Chana ran to shore. The deep green water obscured the zodiac as the star chart sank to the river's bottom, coming to rest, like a veil, on the horse's face.

The shutters of the shtetl's windows were opening to the commotion (curiosity being the only thing the citizens shared). The accident had happened by the small falls—the part of shore that marked the current division of the shtetl into its two sections, the Jewish Quarter and the Human Three-Quarters. All so-called sacred activities—religious studies, kosher butchering, bargaining, etc.—were contained within the Jewish Quarter. Those activities concerned with the humdrum of daily existence—secular studies, communal justice, buying and selling, etc.—took place in the Human Three-Quarters. Straddling the two was the Upright Synagogue. (The ark itself was built along the Jewish/Human fault line, such that one of the two Torah scrolls would exist in each zone.) As the ratio of sacred to secular shifted—usually no more than a hair in this or that direction, save for that exceptional hour in 1764, immediately following the Pogrom of Beaten Chests, when the shtetl was completely secular—so did the fault line, drawn in chalk from Radziwell Forest to the river. And so was the synagogue lifted and moved. It was in 1783 that wheels were attached, making the shtetl's ever-changing negotiation of Jewishness and Humanness less of a schlep.

*I understand there has been an accident*, panted Shloim W, the humble antiques salesman who survived off charity, unable to part with any of his candelabras, figurines, or hourglasses since his wife's untimely death.

*How did you know?* Yankel asked.

*Bitzl Bitzl yelled to me from his boat on his way to the Well-Regarded Rabbi's. I knocked on as many doors as I could on my way here.*

*Good*, Yankel said. *We'll need a shtetl proclamation.*

*Are we sure he's dead?* someone asked.

*Quite*, Sofiowka assured. *Dead as he was before his parents met. Or deader, maybe, for then he was at least a bullet in his father's cock and an emptiness in his mother's belly.*

*Did you try to save him?* Yankel asked.

*No.*

*Cover their eyes*, Shloim told Yankel, gesturing at the girls. He quickly

undressed himself—revealing a belly larger than most, and a back matted with ringlets of thick black hair—and dove into the water. Feathers washed over him on the wings of water swells. Unstrung pearls and ungummed teeth. Blood clots, Merlot, and splintered chandelier crystal. The rising wreckage became increasingly dense, until he couldn't see his hands in front of him. *Where? Where?*

*Did you find him?* the man of law Isaac M asked when Shloim finally surfaced. *Is it clear how long he's been down there?*

*Was he alone or with a wife?* asked grieving Shanda T, widow of the deceased philosopher Pinchas T, who, in his only notable paper, "To the Dust: From Man You Came and to Man You Shall Return," argued it would be possible, in theory, for life and art to be reversed.

A powerful wind swept through the shtetl, making it whistle. Those studying obscure texts in dimly lit rooms looked up. Lovers making amends and promises, amendments and excuses, fell silent. The lonely candle dipper, Mordechai C, submerged his hands in a vat of warm blue wax.

*He did have a wife,* Sofiowka inserted, his left hand diving deep into his trouser pocket. *I remember her well. She had a set of such voluptuous tits. God, she had great tits. Who could forget those? They were, oh God, they were great. I'd trade all of the words I've since learned to be young again, oh yes, yes, getting a good suck on those titties. Yes I would! Yes I would!*

*How do you know these things?* someone asked.

*I went to Rovno once, as a child, on an errand for my father. It was to this Trachim's house. His surname escapes my tongue, but I remember quite well that he was Trachim with an i, that he had a young wife with a great set of tits, a small apartment with many knickknacks, and a scar from his eye to his mouth, or his mouth to his eye. One or the other.*

*YOU WERE ABLE TO SEE HIS FACE AS HE WAGONED BY?* the Well-Regarded Rabbi asked in a holler as his girls ran to hide under opposite ends of his prayer shawl. *THE SCAR?*

*And then, ay yay yay, I saw him again when I was a young man applying myself in Lvov. Trachim was making a delivery of peaches, if I remember, or perhaps plums, to a house of schoolgirls across the street. Or was he a postman? Yes, it was love letters.*

*Of course he couldn't be alive anymore,* said Menasha the physician, opening his medical bag. He removed several pages of death certificates, which were picked up by another breeze and sent into the trees. Some would fall with the leaves that September. Some would fall with the trees generations later.

*And even if he were alive, we couldn't free him,* said Shloim, drying himself behind a large rock. *It won't be possible to get to the wagon until all of its contents have risen.*

**WE MUST MAKE A SHTETL PROCLAMATION**, proclaimed the Well-Regarded Rabbi, mustering a more authoritative holler.

*Now what was his name, exactly?* Menasha asked, touching quill to tongue.

*Can we say for sure that he had a wife?* grieving Shanda asked, touching hand to heart.

*Did the girls see anything?* asked Avrum R, the lapidary, who wore no rings himself (although the Well-Regarded Rabbi had promised he knew of a young woman in Lodz who could make him happy [forever]).

*The girls saw nothing,* Sofiowka said. *I saw that they saw nothing.*

And the twins, this time both of them, began to cry.

*But we can't leave the matter entirely to his word,* Shloim said, gesturing at Sofiowka, who returned the favor with a gesture of his own.

*Do not ask the girls,* Yankel said. *Leave them alone. They've been through enough.*

By now, almost all of the shtetl's three hundred-odd citizens had gathered to debate that about which they knew nothing. The less a citizen knew, the more adamantly he or she argued. There was nothing new in this. A month before there had been the question of whether it might send a better message to the children to plug, finally, the bagel's hole. Two months before there had been the cruel and comic debate over the question of typesetting, and before that the question of Polish identity, which moved many to tears, and many to laughter, and all to more questions. And still to come would be other questions to debate, and others after that. Questions from the beginning of time—whenever that was—to whenever would be the end. From *ashes?* to *ashes?*

**PERHAPS**, the Well-Regarded Rabbi said, raising his hands even

higher, his voice even louder, *WE DO NOT HAVE TO SETTLE THE MATTER AT ALL. WHAT IF WE NEVER FILL OUT A DEATH CERTIFICATE? WHAT IF WE GIVE THE BODY A PROPER BURIAL, BURN ANYTHING THAT WASHES ASHORE, AND ALLOW LIFE TO GO ON IN THE FACE OF THIS DEATH?*

*But we need a proclamation,* said Froida Y, the candy maker.

*Not if the shtetl proclaims otherwise,* corrected Isaac.

*Perhaps we should try to contact his wife,* said grieving Shanda.

*Perhaps we should begin to gather the remains,* said Eliezar Z, the dentist.

And in the braid of argument, young Hannah's voice almost went unnoticed as she peeked her head from beneath the fringed wing of her father's prayer shawl.

*I see something.*

*WHAT?* her father asked, quieting the others. *WHAT DO YOU SEE?*

*Over there,* pointing to the frothing water.

In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jellyfish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum.

The twins hid their bodies under their father's tallis, like ghosts. The horse at the bottom of the river, shrouded by the sunken night sky, closed its heavy eyes. The prehistoric ant in Yankel's ring, which had lain motionless in the honey-colored amber since long before Noah hammered the first plank, hid its head between its many legs, in shame.



## THE LOTTERY, 1791

BITZL BITZL R was able to recover the wagon a few days later with the help of a group of strong men from Kolki, and his traps saw more action than ever. But sifting through the remains, they didn't find a body. For the next one hundred fifty years, the shtetl would host an annual contest to "find" Trachim, although a shtetl proclamation withdrew the reward in 1793 — on Menasha's counsel that any ordinary corpse would begin to break apart after two years in water, so searching not only would be pointless but could result in rather offensive findings, or even worse, multiple rewards — and the contest became more of a festival, for which the line of short-tempered bakers P would create particular pastry treats, and the girls of the shtetl would dress as the twins dressed on that fateful day: in wool britches with yarn ties, and canvas blouses with blue-fringed butterfly collars. Men came from great distances to dive for the cotton sacks that the Float Queen would throw into the Brod, all but one of which, the golden sack, were filled with earth.

There were those who thought that Trachim would never be found, that the current brushed enough loose sediment over him to properly bury his body. These people laid stones on the shoreside when they made their monthly cemetery rounds, and said things like:

*Poor Trachim, I didn't know him well, but I sure could have.*

or

*I miss you, Trachim. Without having ever met you, I do.*

or

*Rest, Trachim, rest. And make safe our flour mill.*

There were those who suspected that he was not pinned under his