

A Dybbuk

By Amy Bernstein

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I think that my family's mental illness may have begun back in Old Russia.

When my sister and I were little, my grandfather told us the family story. He lay stretched out on a deck chair while we sat on his chest playing with the flowers we had just picked. His grey and red chest hairs tickled my legs and his bald head shone in the sun. His old face was lit up with the pleasure of having his two granddaughters piled on top of him. He tickled me, but he did not tickle my sister. He knew she hated to be tickled, and he was the kind of grownup who showed respect for individual feelings, even the feelings of children. He cleared his throat in a theatrical manner and fixed us seriously with his widened, grey eyes.

"This is the true story of our family, of how our family came to be possessed by a Dybbuk. Of why we are the way we are. So, listen well, my little ones."

I didn't know the story was important. How could I? I was four years old. But my sister, she knew. She was healthy back then and four years older than I. She has made sure to tell this story to me over and over again as I grew up, so that it would be forever locked in my memory. And it is. It goes like this:

A long time ago, in a back corner of Russia that was sometimes Poland, there lived a little girl, and her name was Roz. Her family lived and worked on the estate of a powerful and rich aristocrat. Roz was curious and interested in everything, so her mother called her klug eyner.

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Roz's mother was a brilliant seamstress. She made stitches so tiny that they couldn't be seen with the naked eye. She embroidered flowers so natural that everyone thought real flowers had been sewn onto the gowns. The lord of the estate employed her to make all the fine clothing for his family. Not the every-day items, but the beautiful, embroidered silk dresses for his wife and daughters, and the waistcoats and shirts for himself and his son.

The girl's family lived near the estate in the shtetl of Vitebsk, where the houses leaned in close together for warmth and blocked out the sun. Buildings were made of bare unpainted wood, covered by thatched roofs and had shutters instead of glass windows. Children ran barefoot in the cobblestone lanes until they were old enough to be put to work, and everything was covered in dirt and soot. People froze in winter, never finding enough wood for their stoves in the denuded forests, and the wolf of hunger was always at the door."

"Is hunger a wolf, Papa?"

"Sush, you want to hear the story?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Now, whenever there was a great party or ball on the estate where she worked, Roz's mother was called upon to be present in case a piece of the delicate finery had to be repaired during the evening. Sometimes she brought Roz along and let her sit up on the second-floor landing at the top of the grand curved stairway to watch the arrivals and departures of the guests in all their finery. Roz peered down between the stair rails as each carriage pulled up the long, curved driveway and the footmen ran out to open the doors.

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Roz was amazed by the ladies who tip-toed out onto the steps of the carriages each dressed in a gown of such length and with so many flounces and ruffles that the little girl couldn't think how she had squeezed all of it with her into the carriage. The young ladies had waists as small as the neck of a cat and their dresses had enormous ballooning sleeves and layers of velvet edged in lace that cascaded to the floor. Their hair was piled high upon their heads and jewels glittered from their combs, earrings, and necklaces.

After each one paused on the carriage step for a moment to be admired, a footman helped her down and snapped open her parasol so that the pale sun wouldn't scorch her fair skin for even a second. Then the man came out of the coach in his cinched waistcoat and tall shiny hat and took the arm of the lady and into the great hall they advanced.

From her perch, Roz could see into the grand ballroom with all the dancing, and into the dining room where platters of fish and roast meats, mountains of fruit in giant bowls, and cakes and sweets of a dozen different sorts awaited. At home she was lucky to see meat or fish once a month, and sweets were an unknown luxury to the children of the shtetl. If the little girl was quiet and good, which she always was, her mother would sometimes sneak up to her a slice of one of the wondrous cakes. They tasted like magic, light as lace but sweet like syrup.

Roz loved music. When the dancing began, she stood at the top of the stairs tapping her feet and peering down upon the dancers as they promenaded in time to music played on the balalaika, the garmon and the duduck by three men. She watched avidly until very late at night when she often fell asleep with her little face wedged

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between the stair rails. Her mother woke her up so they could walk back across the fields together in the chilly glow of almost dawn.

It so happened that one day, when Roz was sitting alone in the upstairs hall, being as good as she knew how to be in the hopes of cake and tapping her fingers on the bannister in time to the rhythmic dance music that sashayed its way up the stairs, a boy her own age came skipping along the hall. He was richly dressed in a smaller version of what the men from the carriages wore, a short Kelly-Green silk vest, and a dark blue velvet jacket over a boy's short pants. He even wore a miniature blue silk necktie. All in all, he was the most magnificent boy Roz had ever seen. Ashamed of her drab skirt and plain shawl, she leapt to her feet to run and hide as if he were a royal personage. But he stopped her with a gentle request for conversation. It became clear as they spoke that he was just a regular boy, except that he had manners and a voice much finer than those of the boys in her village.

First, they talked about music, which they both loved. He was learning to play the balalaika, but he said he was not very good at it yet. She loved to listen to the musicians perform down below. Then they played a game of hide and seek. By the end of that night when Roz's mother came up, she and the boy were friends. Roz insisted on sharing her slice of cake with him, even though her mother said he could have as much cake as he liked downstairs for, she said, this boy, whose name was Zusa, was the son of the lord of the mansion.

He soon began inviting her up to the house. The first time she went, she felt shy and overwhelmed by his family's greatness and wealth. But over time she became used to magnificence and began to behave as if she had a perfect right to be there. Her

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own little house in the shtetl, with which she had been quite happy before, began to seem to her poor and mean and she no longer felt quite as much at home there.

Both children grew. One day, when they were each twelve years old, for they were the same age, Zusa declared that he was in love with Roz. Zusa was soon to become a man at the upcoming Bar Mitzvah ceremony, for his family were Jews like hers. He vowed that he would marry her right after that.

When Roz's mother heard of this vow, she was torn between elation and fear for her daughter. Elation because if Zusa did marry her, she would be secure and rich, and fear because she knew that the lord of the house would not support such a marriage. But the vow had been made. And a vow, even one made by a not-quite-man, is sacred before G-d.

Over time, the seamstress saw that her daughter truly loved this boy, that she didn't care about his riches, and that Zusa in turn loved Roz. She began to hope that when the lord of the estate witnessed their deep love, he might bless the marriage despite the difference in estate between them. She knew that Roz was a bright, virtuous, and pious young woman and she secretly thought that Zusa's parents could do far worse than to have her as the mother of their grandchildren.

But Zusa's father had other plans for his only son. As soon as the boy became Bar Mitzvah, he was promised in marriage to the daughter of one of the other wealthy Jewish families in the area, a girl whose father was a gentleman farmer, with a great deal of land and many animals. Zusa argued with his father, saying he was promised before G-d to another, but the father declared that the vow was meaningless, since it

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had been made without the blessing of Zusa's father. There was nothing Zusa could do, and, eventually, he agreed to the other match.

When Roz learned what he had done, she could no longer eat or sleep. She began wasting away in front of her poor mother, who knew that her worst fear had been realized. Roz filled all her days with prayer and all her nights with weeping. She would no longer go up to the big house, to listen to the music or watch the people dance. Everything that had made her life a joy before, was now as dust in her mouth. She tore her dress, as one does at a death.

Her mother made every effort to convince her daughter to release Zusa from his vow and go on with her life. Roz's father arranged for a match for her with a sweet boy from the village, but it did no good. Roz paid no attention to the boy, only turned her face to the wall and recited the mourner's kaddish. She slowly pined away and finally died of her sadness and grief. That day her mother declared that her daughter's death was the fault of Zusa and his heartless father, and that they would someday pay the price.

Time passed, and the day came when Zusa was ready to marry. A great wedding party was planned, and Roz's mother was required to make the dresses, including the wedding gown for the bride. She made this raiment, and it was perhaps the most beautiful garment she had ever created, covered as it was with silken flowers and tatted lace, but with every stitch, the mother cursed the bride who would wear it.

On the morning of the wedding, the bride dressed in her beautiful white gown with the orange silken flowers, white lace, and green grass embroidered all around the hem. In it, she stood for a moment looking radiantly lovely. But after a bit, as she

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stood there she began to sway, and throwing up her arms, she screamed and fainted dead away. All her friends and family came running, and her maids tried in vain to revive her, but she would not wake.

Everyone was called in, including the village's doctor. They surrounded her and fanned her, they wafted smelling salts under her nose. Finally, she awakened. But something had changed. Her voice, which had been high-pitched and piping, had grown to be low and lovely, and her words were someone else's.

"Where is my groom? I have waited for so long, so very long. I wish to be married at once to my beloved Zusa." The people all around recognized that the voice of Roz was issuing from the mouth of the bride.

"A Dybbuk," someone shouted. "The bride is possessed." And so, it was. The spirit of the dead girl had taken possession of the bride, perhaps through the hateful wishes the mother had sutured into the bride's dress with every stitch.

"Bring me to my husband," the Dybbuk shouted. "I wish to possess him at once."

The father of the bride was called in. In shock, he agreed that this was not the innocent daughter he knew, that the girl was indeed possessed by a malevolent spirit. He sent messengers at once to the Rabbi, who was waiting to perform the marriage. Rabbi Smoth was an old, old man. His beard was long and grey, and his shoulders drooped. He walked with a stick. When he came into the courtyard where the girl stood, he asked her directly,

"Who are you?"

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“I am Roz, betrothed to Zusa and today we will be married at last! Bring me to my groom that I may lie with him at once. I have waited far too long.”

“Spirit, you may not lie with the boy, for he is mortal. “

“He is promised to me, he vowed to be my husband. His father made him break his vow. Nonetheless, he belongs to me now and forever!”

The Rabbi drew himself up to his full height.

“Bring the boy’s father here.” He spoke with surprising force and volume for such an old man.

When the boy and his father arrived, they were struck dumb with horror at the sight of the lovely bride possessed by the Dybbuk.

“Oh, what have we done?” the father asked.

The father of the bride spoke, “You had promised your son to another?”

“Not me, my son made his own vow. But it was only to a poor servant’s girl, so I made him break it. Rabbi help us. Send the spirit out of this girl so that we may have the wedding, our children can be married, and someday give us grandchildren.”

“A vow is binding. The groom belongs to the spirit. How can I make it leave without him?”

The girl, meanwhile, seeing her beloved, threw herself upon him and began to kiss and stroke him while bitter tears rolled down her cheeks.

“My darling, at last we will be together.”

The boy was confused and saddened. He saw that what he had done, agreeing to marry another when he was promised to her, was wrong. He should not have broken his vow, even though his father ordered it. Her voice re-awakened his love for Roz.

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He said to the Rabbi, "Marry us."

"You cannot marry a spirit. A spirit cannot have children, and what about the innocent bride? The spirit has taken her place and she has no life."

"Help us, Rabbi," shouted the father. "Help us."

The Rabbi asked for his books to be brought. He told the people the bride and the groom must be separated while he decided what to do. He went apart, to be alone and to think.

Many hours passed and the boy and the bride and the families all waited. Finally, the Rabbi returned. He observed the mother's joy at being with her daughter.

"Stop, this is not your daughter. Your daughter is dead."

"Yes, she is dead, and all because of the boy's father who made him break his vow, and the young man who broke it. I cursed the dress with every stitch, and my curses worked. Now my daughter will marry her beloved, and I will have my grandchildren, of whom I was robbed by these men."

"What must we do, Rabbi," asked the families.

"I have thought, and I have examined the scrolls. Here is my decree. Because you are promised to two women, you will be married to two women. Most of the time, the bride will be her normal self. But sometimes she will be taken over by the spirit of the Dybbuk and because you broke your vow, you will have to live with a wild spirit at those times, in whatever way it manifests itself, whether it be happy or sad, violent or peaceful. And your children will be partly human and partly spirit. Some of them may also be possessed at times. And so on down the generations. This will be your punishment."

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“It is too hard,” the boy’s father wailed. He tried to argue with the punishment, to disagree with the conditions. But the son said, “No father. It is right and fair”

And so, the two were married, and, just as the Rabbi had said, most of the time the girl was sweet and quiet and modest, but sometimes, the spirit possessed her and she became lascivious, or angry or terribly sad about the wrong that had been done to her. And at those times, her husband understood and comforted her, or bore up under her anger, or endeavored to satisfy her seemingly endless desire. And down the generations, some of the children were alright, and others were similarly possessed. And the family endured the curse because they had to.

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My grandfather gave us each a guzzle. He was a wonderful storyteller.

“Papa, is there really a Dybbuk?” asked my sister.

“Of course, there is, child.” Still, we didn’t, at that time believe in the family Dybbuk. Humans had not, after all, reverted to ancient, magical beliefs. But I remembered the story. Since then, over time, I have begun to wonder. The way the Dybbuk made the bride behave? It was so uncomfortably close to the behavior of my mentally ill sister and some of my sick ancestors whom I have visited in my time travels.

I have traveled back in time to trace the strangeness that has dogged my family through the generations and to save my sister and the others. Alright, yes, the truth, calling what my family has “strangeness,” is like calling a wolverine that stalks its prey for weeks watching it weaken and then tortures it while it’s dying, “the family

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pet.” Each person in our line who succumbed to this nameless mental illness was slowly and unstoppably destroyed from the inside. It didn’t matter who they were before, or what they had accomplished, whom they had loved or been loved by, it took everything from them. It always ultimately destroyed the person who was possessed by it, and severely wounded everyone who cared for that person

I was beginning to think a cure was impossible, that I had traveled and risked my own sanity for nothing. Time travel is taxing on the mind. It tears at your sense of what is real. This trip, however, this was the last one. I can tell the Geneotempusts that I am done. No more nasty concoctions to drink. No more shots in the arm.

Because this time, at last, I have found the cure. And I hope that in the future, my family’s history will refer to me as klug eyner, “clever one,” in the same way that her mother once spoke of Roz.