

# BURNING GIRLS

In America, they don't let you burn. My mother told me that.

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When we came to America, we brought anger and socialism and hunger. We also brought our demons. They stowed away on the ships with us, curled up in the small sacks we slung over our shoulders, crept under our skirts. When we passed the medical examinations and stepped for the first time out onto the streets of granite we would call home, they were waiting for us, as though they'd been there the whole time.

The streets were full of girls like us at every hour of day and night. We worked, took classes, organized for the unions, talked revolution at the top of our voices in the streets and in the shops. When we went out on strike, they called us the *fabrente maydlakh*, the burning girls, for our bravery and dedication and ardor, and the whole city ground to a halt as the society ladies who wore the clothing we stitched came downtown and walked our lines with us. I remember little Clara Lemlich, leaping to her feet at a general meeting and yelling, "What are we waiting for? Strike! Strike! Strike!" Her curly hair strained at its pins as if it might burst out in flames, the fire that burns without consuming.

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I was raised in Bialystok. I was no stranger to city life, not like those girls from the *shtetls* who grew up surrounded by cows and chickens and dirt. Though I had my fair share of that as well, spending months at a time with my *bubbe*, who lived in a village too small to bother with a real name, three days' journey from the city.

My sister, Shayna, she stayed in the city with our dressmaker mother and shoemaker father and learned to stitch so fine it was as though spiders themselves danced and spun at her command. Not me, though. I learned how to

run up a seam, of course, so that I could be a help to Mama when I was home, but my apprenticeship was not in dressmaking. Mama could see from the beginning that I was no seamstress.

Mama didn't have the power herself, but she could find it in others. Eyes like awls, my mama had. Sharp black eyes that went right through you. When I was born she took one look at me and pronounced, "Deborah—the judge."

When Mama saw what I was going to be, she knew that I would have to spend as much time with my grandmother as I did with her, and so when I was four years old, my father rented a horse and cart and drove me out to my bubbe's village. That first time, I sobbed all the way there as if my heart would break. Why would my mama and papa send me away? Why could I not stay with them as I always did? I imagined it had something to do with my mama's rounding belly, but I did not know what.

My bubbe was a zugerin in her village, one who leads the women in prayer at shul, and after only a few hours by her side I was so happy to be with her that I barely noticed when Papa left. Over that summer and the ones that followed, she kept me by her side and taught me not only the proper rites but how to conduct myself toward other women, how to listen to what's not being said as well as what is. She was a witch, looking after the women of her village, because the kinds of troubles women have are not always the kinds you want to talk to the rabbi about, no matter how wise he is.

If her village made Bialystok look like a metropolis and we had to be afraid of the Cossacks, it was as close as a girl like myself could get to cheder, the Jewish schools where little boys began their education in Hebrew and reading Torah. Every day my grandma set me to learning Torah and the Talmud and even some Kabbalah. None of these are for girls, say the wise rabbis, but for the working of pious magic, what else can one do? I studied the sacred words and memorized the names of God and his angels, and I liked that best. Within a few years, I was able to help my bubbe as she wrote out amulets to preserve infants from the lilim and prayers for women whose men were wandering out in the world, peddling in each little town in order to keep their families in bread. I couldn't get away from the sewing, though. Still I had to sew simple shirts of protection to preserve those same peddlers from harm, and every time I pricked my finger and bled on the fabric, I had to start over again.

When I returned home after that first summer, Bubbe came with me, the first and last time she ever did so. She did not like the city, though she admitted it was safer for us than a town exposed to the wild like hers. And so the first birth I

ever witnessed was that of my little sister, who from the very beginning was wreathed in dimples and golden hair. She blinked her green eyes up at Mama and smiled so bewitchingly that Mama smiled back and whispered, “Shayna meydle.” So Shayna was her name.

I did not get the golden hair or green eyes, but then, Shayna did not get any of our bubbe’s powers. When I examined myself that evening in my mama’s hand mirror I saw sharp angles, even at four, coarse black hair, and eyes like Mama’s. Eyes like ice picks. I was not an attractive child, not like Shayna.

But I had the power. I knew already that I could be useful.

The following summer, when Papa drove me to Bubbe’s, I bounced up and down in my seat as though I were one of the horses and could speed the cart on its way. I did not like to think of pretty Shayna at home with our mama and not me, but my bubbe’s house was where I was the favorite. My fondest memories are of sitting at her kitchen table writing out the names of angels and symbols of power while she praised my memory and confided that there was no shame in making up names and symbols when one ran out of traditional ones—for is it not true that all things are held in the mind of God, and so anything we create has been created already?

Less to my taste, but even more practical, were the lessons I learned from watching Bubbe’s visitors. Women from the village came to see her, both the shayna yidn and the proste yidn. They came in and my grandmother would offer them coffee and talk to them as if they were old friends just come over to pass the afternoon. Then, usually, just as they were leaving, they would turn and say, as though they had almost forgotten, “Oh, Hannah, a puzzle for you,” and my grandma would usher them back to the kitchen and listen intently as they poured out stories about sick children, women’s illnesses, being with child when one more would be more than a woman could ever want. Most problems my grandma could solve with a jar of her broth, seasoned this way or that, but this last was always trickier, and was when Bubbe welcomed another pair of hands most. I could not manipulate her instruments as well as I liked with my smaller hands, but I could boil them and watch and learn. And when it was time for a baby to come, my smaller hands were a great help.

What was hardest for me to learn was tact.

Once when I was eight and I was studying the holy symbols and how best to combine them with the various names of God, a local woman, a nobody to my mind, a maidservant home for a visit, for heaven’s sake, rushed into my grandma’s cottage and stood there looking around her. I did not like her at all.

Her stupid stuttering interrupted my thoughts and she looked like a lost cow as she stood there blinking, unable even to articulate her need. I scorned her, knowing in my child's way that I would never be at a loss for words like this, no matter my trouble.

"Well?" I asked her.

Nothing. She said nothing for a long minute and then she stuttered out my grandmother's name.

"Fine," I said. But instead of running to fetch my bubbe from the other room, I just stuck my head in and hollered, "Bubbe, another pregnant maid for you!"

Two things happened. One was that the girl burst into tears, and the other was that my grandma appeared in the kitchen and slapped my face so hard that it felt as if one of God's angels had smitten me. I landed on my tuchus.

"Dry your eyes, my darling," said my grandma to the girl, while I stood rubbing my jaw like an idiot. "And please forgive my granddaughter. She is sharp enough, but there is no heart in her chest, only a steel gear."

I ran out of the house and into the garden, where I climbed into my favorite spot in an old birch tree that my bubbe used for tea leaves and tar. Not pretty and no heart, only a steel gear. There was not much future for a girl like that, I thought. No marriage, certainly, and thus no children. No wonder my mama did not delight in me as she did in my sister. Papa loved me best, in his quiet way, but he did not have my mama's sharp eyes; most likely he just could not see my emptiness. I wept, feeling sorry for myself, but only a little. Well, I thought, if I cannot be pretty and I cannot be kind, I can be powerful. I *would* be powerful, and make everybody see it. More powerful than Bubbe, even.

Despite my renewed vow to study, I was not to learn anything for a week. Instead, I had to keep house as well as I could while my grandmother stood over me and harangued me.

"You think you are somebody special, a queen, maybe, to be so cruel to someone coming for help? Smart you are, and a witch you may be in time, but a zugerin, never, never so long as you keep like this! You will never command respect, and you will never be able to practice your skills, for nobody will come to you! People must come to us with trust, and if you must speak sharply to a girl you do it in private, so that she understands that you do it for her own good! Not hollering contempt like a Cossack!"

"I was not like a Cossack!" I said. "I hurt nobody!"

"So that girl was crying because she stubbed her toe? She's not the first to be taken in by the master of the house and she won't be the last, and anybody who

comes for help should get a hearing and not be scorned by a child too young to lace her own boots!”

I cannot say that, after this incident, I felt kinder toward those visitors of my grandmother’s whose problems were, I felt, of their own making, but I learned to school my face and my tongue and even to feel some compassion for their suffering. When I was at home, though, I would pull Shayna aside to tell her the gossip of Bubbe’s village. She would have been about four or five then, the age I was when first I went to my bubbe’s, and she always wanted to know what it was I was doing.

“What am I doing?” I would toss my head. “What am I doing indeed but cleaning up the mistakes of dullards who should know better!”

Shayna’s eyes grew wide. “What kind of mistakes?” She was at the age when she was always spilling her milk or tripping over nothing, and she had great sympathy with those who made mistakes, but I did not. After all, my grandmother rarely had to correct me more than once on the same matter.

“Foolish girls!” I told her. “Foolish girls who watch the horses and cows but don’t know enough to keep their own legs closed if they don’t want to foal or calve.”

Shayna chewed on her lip. “Well,” she said, “you can’t keep your legs together while you’re walking, or you’d fall. Do they fall a lot, like me?”

I tossed my hair again, annoyed to be talking to such a baby. “You don’t know anything,” I said. “Just like them.”

But it was only to Shayna I would whisper such scornful things. To everybody else, and especially to my bubbe, I listened patiently and even kindly.

And so almost eight years passed, with Shayna learning to sew dresses from our mother and me learning how to use my powers from our bubbe. And then one evening, in the middle of winter, my best friend, Yetta, banged on the front door of our house, and when I answered, she pulled me out onto the street.

“It’s Rifka,” she said. “She’s in trouble.”

Rifka was Yetta’s older sister, and I did not wonder what kind of trouble she was in. She had been almost engaged to a butcher’s son, but they had fallen out over his attentions to another girl.

“Poor thing,” I said, unthinking, and then Yetta smacked me, just lightly, but enough so that I paid attention.

“Don’t give me ‘poor thing’!” she said. “Everyone knows how you spend your summers, and I will not go to anyone who might tell Mama or Papa. If you are a friend to me, you will come help Rifka now!”

Of course, I was only too pleased to be asked. I collected my bag of tools and herbs that I had put together under my grandma's green eyes and set out, telling Mama that Yetta and I were going for a walk. Rifka was not far along—anxiety had made her careful, and I could have mixed up the powders she needed blindfolded, but she clasped me to her and wrung her hands as though I had moved heaven and earth. When she miscarried the following day, tears of joy ran down her face as I held her hand.

She did not tell her mama or papa, but she did tell her friends, and soon enough I was called upon for various illnesses and childbirths and other women's matters. It got so I could no longer go to my bubbe's for more than a month every year, for the women of Bialystok's Jewish Quarter could not do without me. I missed the idyllic months with my bubbe, but I was proud of my learning and new status. And I do not regret this! Learning and skill are things to be proud of; they are the stars that light the sky of one's lifetime.

By sixteen, I was bringing in as much money as my mother and sister combined. For not every family can afford dresses, but every family will have a sick child, or a distressed daughter.

When I did go to my bubbe's, I took over more and more of her work in order to give her some rest.

"I *do* manage without you," she'd say, as I'd come home late from sitting up with a child with whooping cough.

"Yes," I'd say, "but you shouldn't. I can hear your bones creaking from here."

I don't think she minded such comments as much as she pretended to. I think she was proud of me. She called me her good right hand. I was there with her when she fought the lilit at the bedside of Pearl, the butcher's wife. It was a strong demon with wild long hair and claws that stuck out from her fingers like nails from a plank of wood. She raged and raged outside our circle of protection. I knelt at Pearl's hips, supporting the coming baby with my hands while my grandmother chalked stronger and stronger charms of protection on the wall.

The lilit howled like a livid wind.

"Don't look!" I shouted to Pearl. "It's unclean! Think of your little one!"

Pearl shut her eyes tight and clutched the silver knife we had placed in her hands when labor started. She added her own voice to the whirlwind in the room while I slipped my hands inside to loosen the cord around the baby's neck. I felt it straining tight against my fingers.

"May the foolish woman who brought clothing for the new babe into her

house before the birth be left with nothing but an armful of cloth!” shouted the lilit. “May she claw at the dirt like a dog, searching for her baby’s bones! May she—”

“In the name of Eloë, Sabbaoth, Adonai, let your mouth fill with mud and your voice be stopped!” said my grandmother firmly, putting herself between Pearl and the demon. As she cut off the lilit’s words, the cord loosened, and my grandmother went on to bind the lilit with the names of the heavenly host. Finally all was quiet and Pearl’s baby spilled, healthy and ruddy, into my arms.

I held him up in triumph to the new mother, but Pearl’s face was a mask of terror.

“What ails you?” I asked her. “All is well.” Then I turned to follow her look and saw that although my grandmother had bound the lilit, she was deep in conversation with the creature when she should have been doing the work necessary to banish it. I handed the baby to his mother and turned to my grandmother.

“Look to your own children, Hannah,” said the lilit, cutting her eyes at me. “You think she will thrive here? Trouble is coming to your daughter and her family in Bialystok.”

“Bubbe, what are you doing? Banish the unclean thing and be done with it!”

My grandmother pursed her lips. “Deborah, tend to Pearl and her son. This creature and I are speaking.”

“Then speak outside!” I told her. “Speak outside if you must speak to it!”

“Very rude,” said the lilit, clacking her claws at me.

My grandmother held the door open pointedly, always keeping her body between the demon and the new baby. I waited for half an hour before she came back.

On the way home, I exploded in a way I only ever did with Shayna and with Bubbe. “What were you thinking, listening to a child-killer?! What filth did she pour into your ears?”

“All creatures have some knowledge,” my bubbe said patiently, “and it’s as well to find it out.”

“Very wise,” I said sharply, “but perhaps now I should find it out, too? What were you talking about?”

“The future,” said my bubbe, and she refused to say any more.

I returned from that trip and found that my mother and Shayna had not been having an easy time of it. Business was slow. One day I found them together pinning up a dress onto a pattern. They didn’t know I was there, and they were



talking in low voices, intimately, in a way I'd shared with my bubbe but never with our mother. I became green with jealousy, and lingered in the doorway to listen.

"Pass me that pin, darling—ugh," said my mother, sitting back on her heels to look at her handiwork. "You know, when I was a girl, with a needle in your hand your life was golden. Always you would have work, always you could support your family."

"And so I shall!" said Shayna sunnily. She had long ago grown out of her clumsy phase and now everything she did was graceful and delicate. "Already you see the embroidery I do, Mama! The stitches so tiny, only an ant could see each one."

Mama pressed her hands to the small of her back. She was starting to show, and I was not the only one who'd noticed. "Well ... no. Not anymore. Already you see us scraping and scrimping for business. The new factories open up and machines can do more work for less pay, and the factories do not hire us. I begin to think that my mother is right ... perhaps we should send you and your sister over to America. They say there that Jews can work in factories as well as gentiles—indeed, that without us there would be no factories."

Shayna's face turned pale, and I was sure mine had, too. It was rare not to know a family that had sent a daughter or husband over to America, *di goldene medine*. Yetta's family owned a sweetshop, and even they had sent over Rifka. I had always thought it was because they had found out about her disgrace, but perhaps it was not. Money came every week, and letters, too. In America, Rifka wrote, children went to school together, Jews and gentiles, with no fees to pay and no limits on the number of Jews. There was not gold on the streets, and she lived with a family that had her sleep on a board placed on two chairs and made her do most of the housework, but still she sent home more money in a week than her parents could make in a month.

"Bubbe would not want that!" I cried. "How could you say so? How can you talk about sending away your own daughters?"

Mama was so surprised to see me that she nearly swallowed a pin. She coughed and said, "But she wrote to me about the idea. She didn't say anything to you?"

"Not last I saw her, and that was only a month ago."

"Well." Mama sighed. "My mother keeps secrets. She keeps secrets and she makes plans and catches us all in her net. Her own feet, too, sometimes, she tangles." She looked at me tenderly. "I have wanted to warn you sometimes,

darling. You need to be careful of my mother's plans. Once when I was young she decided—"

I did not wait to hear what my bubbe had decided. "Bubbe would not send me away! She needs me!"

Mama frowned. "Well, I would never force either of my girls to go. But you should think hard about it, both of you. Bubbe has sent me a letter and she is unhappy with what she sees in store for our city. I shudder to think of any danger, and between that and the money.... Now, you go away, Deborah, go chatter with Yetta or brew up some broth. Your sister and I have work to do."

I wandered out into the street. It was true what Mama said, that business was not good for her and Shayna, but to go across the sea! It was not as if we lived in one of those places where, as Bubbe said, they killed you after every bad harvest. Bialystok was modern and the chief of police was a man of decency, who did not hold with the killing of Jews. Besides, our young activists had formed a self-defense league, and I would not have wanted to be on the wrong side of those knives and guns. I thought we were safe; at least, we did not fear every moment of every day.

I kicked sullenly at rocks until I wandered over to see Yetta, and then we played at singing games, which we could only do when Shayna was busy, because her voice sounded like a sick cat.

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Later that year, Cossacks killed my grandmother.

My grandmother's village was too small for word to reach us before we visited. Papa and I found most of the village's houses destroyed. Just cottages, built of mud and straw. Easy to kick apart. Easier to burn.

Papa had grown up in a village like this one, and his face twisted as he surveyed the wreckage.

"Back into the cart, young one," he said. "We leave now." He didn't raise his voice, just spoke as if what he said was fact.

"Without burying Bubbe?" I said, trying to match his calm.

"Where is there to bury her? The shul and graveyard are destroyed. We will take her back with us. This is not a good place to be."

"Papa," I said. "Let us at least say Kaddish—surely we have enough time for that?" The wind blew my hair in my face.

We went inside and I laid my bubbe on a ragged old blanket, too worthless to