

The Lantuch



In the summers, my Aunt Yentl liked to tell stories on the Sabbath after the main meal, when my Uncle Joseph lay down for a nap. My aunt would take a seat on the bench in front of the house, and the cat, Dvosha, would join her. On the Sabbaths the cat would be given the remnants of the Sabbath meal—scraps of meat and fish. Dvosha would plant herself at my aunt's feet; she liked to hear my aunt tell stories. From the way she cocked her ears and narrowed her eyes, green as gooseberries, it was apparent she understood what my aunt was saying.

For the Sabbath, my aunt wore a dress sewn with arabesques and a bonnet with glass beads, festooned with green, red, and blue ribbons. Presently, my mother came out, and two of our female neighbors, Riva and Sheindel. I was the last to emerge and I took a seat on a footstool. Besides the fact that I liked to listen to my Aunt Yentl's

stories, sooner or later I would get from her the Sabbath fruit—an apple, a pear, plums. Sometimes she would give me a Sabbath cookie baked with cinnamon and raisins. She always said the same thing when she gave it to me, “It’ll give you the strength to study.”

This time the conversation centered on a house demon or a sprite called a lantuch. Aunt Yentl liked to talk about spirits, demons, and hobgoblins, and I heard her say, “A lantuch? Yes, there is such a spirit as a lantuch. These days people don’t believe in such things, but in my time they knew that everything can’t be explained away with reason. The world is full of secrets. A lantuch is an imp, but he’s not malicious. He causes no harm. On the contrary, he tries to help the members of the household all he can. He is like a part of the family. Usually he is invisible, but it sometimes happens that you can see him. Where do they live? Sometimes in a cellar, sometimes in a woodshed, sometimes behind the stove along with the cricket. Lantuchs love crickets. They bring them food and they understand their language.”

“Aunt Yentl, when I grow up I’ll learn the language of crickets,” I piped up.

Aunt Yentl smiled with every wrinkle in her face. “My child, this isn’t a language that can be learned. Only King Solomon knew the language of beasts. He could talk with the lions, the bears, the wolves, and with all the birds, too. But let’s get back to the lantuch. There was a lantuch at my parents’ house. In the summers he lived in the woodshed, and in the winters behind the stove. We didn’t see him, but sometimes we heard him. One time when my sister Keila sneezed, he said, ‘God bless you!’ We all

heard it. The lantuch loved us all, but he loved my sister Keila most of all. When Keila married and went to live in Lublin with her in-laws—I was only a girl of eight then—the lantuch came to her on her last night home to say goodbye. In the middle of the night Keila heard a rustle and the door opened by itself.

“The lantuch came up to Keila’s bed and said in rhyme:

*Wash basin,
soak basin,
meat cleaver,
kugel-eater,
I’ll fret
And you won’t forget.*

“Keila became so frightened that she lost her tongue. He kissed her forehead, and soon after he left. For a long time Keila lay there in a daze, then she lit a candle. Keila was very fond of almond cake. When my mother, may she rest in peace, baked almond cake for Simchas Torah or Purim, Keila would nibble half of it. Anyway, she lit the candle and on her blanket lay an almond cake still warm from the oven. She started to cry and we all came running in to her. I saw the almond cake with my own eyes. Where the lantuch got it from, I haven’t the slightest idea. Maybe some housewife happened to bake almond cakes and he pinched one, or maybe they know how to bake them themselves. Keila didn’t eat the cake, but she put it away some place, and it grew hard as a stone.

“In our town of Janów there was a teacher who had a sick wife and an only daughter who had been blind from birth. All of a sudden the teacher died and the two women were left all alone and helpless. There was talk in town of putting the two women in the poorhouse, but who wants to go to a poorhouse? The paupers there lay on straw pallets right on the bare floor and the food wasn’t good either. When the attendant came to take the mother and daughter to the poorhouse, they both began to lament: ‘Rather than rot away in the poorhouse we’d sooner die!’

“You can’t force anyone to go to the poorhouse. The attendant thought, The husband probably left them a few gulden, and so long as they still have some bread, they’ll put on airs. When they get hungry enough, they’ll thank God there is such a place as the poorhouse.

“Days went by and weeks, and the mother and daughter still didn’t give in. The town grew curious—what were they up to? The mother was bedridden and the daughter blind. There are blind people who can get around, but the teacher’s daughter—Tzirel was her name—never strayed beyond her own courtyard. I can see her now: reddish hair, a glowing face, trim limbs. Her eyes were blue and appeared healthy but she couldn’t see a thing. People began to wonder if maybe the mother and daughter had more money than had been assumed, but that couldn’t be. First of all, the teacher had been poor, and second, neither the mother nor the daughter ever left the house. Neither of them was ever seen in any store. Then where did they get the food, even if they did have the money?

“My dear people, there was a lantuch in their house, and when he saw that the breadwinner was gone and the women had been left penniless and without a stitch to their backs, he assumed the burden himself. You’re laughing? It’s nothing to laugh at. He brought them everything they needed—bread, sugar, herring. He did it all at night. One time a youth walked by their house in the middle of the night and he heard wood being chopped in the yard. He grew suspicious. Who would be chopping wood in the middle of the night? He opened the gate to the courtyard and saw an ax swinging and chips flying, but there was no one there. It was the lantuch chopping wood for the winter. The next day, when the youth revealed what he had seen, people laughed at him. ‘You probably dreamed it,’ they said. But it was true.

“A few weeks later, a shipping agent came back from Lublin, also in the middle of the night. He walked past a well and he saw the rope descending into the water and a pailful of water coming up. But there was no one around. He promptly realized that this was the work of *that* band—the creatures of the night. But the shipping agent—Meir David was his name—was a strong person and not easily frightened. He took hold of his ritual fringes, quietly recited ‘Hear, O Israel,’ and stopped to see what would happen next. After the unseen one had drawn one pail of water, he drew a second, and then the two pails began to be borne along as if an invisible water carrier was carrying them on a yoke. Meir David followed the pails of water to where the widow and her blind daughter lived. The next day the shipping agent went to the rabbi and told him what his eyes had seen. This Meir

David was an honest man and not one to make up things. A fuss erupted in town. The rabbi summoned the widow and her daughter to him, but the widow was too sick to walk. She couldn't talk either. Soon after, she died.

"The blind daughter said to the rabbi, 'Someone provides for us, but who it is I do not know. It must be an angel from heaven.'

"No, it wasn't any angel but the lantuch. After the mother died, the daughter sold the house and went to live with relatives in Galicia."

"The lantuch didn't go along?" our neighbor Riva asked.

"Who knows? As a rule, they don't stir from the house," Aunt Yentl said.

"Do they live forever?" Sheindel asked.

"No one lives forever," Aunt Yentl replied.

It grew silent. I looked at the cat; she had fallen asleep.

Aunt Yentl glanced at me. "I'll get you the Sabbath fruit now. If a young man wants to study the Torah, he must keep up his strength."

And she brought me a Sabbath cookie and three plums.

Translated by Joseph Singer