

"Well," mutters Oyzer again.

"If I do come," says Mendl, "I will sleep on this sofa. It's such a fine sofa."

1894 (translated by Goldie Morgentaler)

THE DEAD TOWN

Once, while traveling through the provinces in connection with a Jewish census, I came across a Jew trudging along a sandy road. He was dragging one foot after another as though each step were his last, and I felt so sorry for him that I offered him a ride. At once, sitting himself down beside me with a "How do you do?" he began to inquire about the latest news from civilization.

"Where are you from, my friend?" I asked him.

"From a dead town," he replied.

I assumed he was joking.

"Exactly where is this town?" I asked. "In never-never land?"

He smiled. "As a matter of fact, it's here in Poland."

"You mean there's such a place in this country?"

"There certainly is. It's just that the Poles don't know about it and haven't given it a name. It's a hundred percent Jewish."

"You don't say!"

"But I do! I suppose you've studied geography and think it's all-inclusive. Well, you're wrong. There are Jews who don't live in geography at all. You won't find the place I'm speaking of listed anywhere, but people come to it from all over and travel from it all over too. Why bother with geography when any coachman can take you there? . . . You think I'm making it up? Ask me anything you want to know about it."

I remained silent.

"It's an honest-to-goodness place. Our rabbi corresponds with the greatest talmudic scholars in the world. He doesn't make a major decision without consulting them. It's never too late with him. Not long ago, for example, he declared an abandoned woman eligible for remarriage even though she was no longer alive. Well, why not? The point wasn't the woman, it was the reasoning behind it."

1) Intellectual life divorced from reality

After a pause he continued:

"Every child knows about our town. We have lots of visitors. No one comes away disappointed."

"And here I've never even heard of such a place!"

"Amazing, isn't it? I suppose you're not from these parts. But it's a real Jewish town, and a good-sized one at that. It has everything a town should have, even a couple of certified madmen. And it's a place for doing business, believe me!"

"You mean stuff comes and goes?"

"What's that?" he asked uncertainly. "Oh, you mean merchandise!"

I nodded.

"Of course. We export tfilin and import earth from the Holy Land. But all that's just on the side; the main thing is what goes on locally. We have taverns, inns, an old-clothes trade—it's your typical Jewish economy."

"I suppose you have poverty too, then."

"What's poor and what's rich, I ask you? We get by. Whoever's hard pressed can always count on some help from town or nearby. Usually, it's from someone in town. Stick out your hand and it won't stay empty for long. And there are all kinds of odd jobs around too. If you don't mind working on commission, you can pick them up right in the street. God sees to it that no one's left out in the cold. Every orphan is assigned a house to eat in and has his studies paid for; if it's a girl, she can always find work as a cook or a housemaid, or, in the worst case, try her luck out of town. Widows, divorcées, abandoned women (there seem to be a lot of those lately!)—they may dream of a world where fresh rolls grow on trees, but they do it while snoozing in a kitchen full of steaming pots. We all live quite respectably, I assure you!"

"But from what?"

"From what? From the same things everyone else does! Our poor folk live on hope, our merchants live on air, and our gravediggers make a living from the soil. . . ."

Was he putting one over on me, this skinny bag of bones with a strange gleam in his sunken eyes? And yet there wasn't a hint of a smile on his gaunt face, which resembled a piece of yellow parchment. Nevertheless, there was something decidedly odd about his voice.

"But just what sort of town is it?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'what sort of town'? It's a town like any other! There's a synagogue that once, or so they say, had paintings of fabulous beasts on the walls and of King David's harps and lyres

2) Economic commerce

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living dead

3) Religious

on the ceiling. That was before my time, of course, but I've heard the old folk mention it."

"And now?"

"Now? It's full of dust and spiderwebs. All that's left is a chain carved from a single piece of wood that hangs down from the ceiling to the ark, whose curtain was embroidered by some old women. No one knows who made it, but he must have been a master. It's something worth seeing!"

"As for the congregation," continued the Jew, "it's mostly made up of simple workingmen. Except for the tailors, who pray by themselves, and the butchers and coachmen, who rented a place of their own this year. Hardly anyone who attends services there knows the meaning of the words in the prayer book. The better-off and better-educated Jews pray in the study house. It's quite a big building—why, you should see all the books in it! And the Hasidim, of course, have their own little places to pray."

"I suppose you fight a lot among yourselves."

"I'll say we do! It won't stop until we're all in our graves, because the cemetery is the one place that belongs to everyone. Plus, of course, the bathhouse and the ritual bath."

"Is there any other communal property?"

"What else do we need? Once we had a hostel, but it isn't kept up anymore. Travelers can sleep in the study house if they like. There's no one there at night. And we also have a sick ward."

"You mean a hospital?"

"I wouldn't call it a hospital. It's just a room. It used to belong to the bathhouse keeper until it was decided that two rooms were too much for him and that one should be set aside for chronic cases—I believe there are three women in it now. One is a bedridden paralytic; one can't use her hands; and one is a madwoman whose husband ran off and left her. Each has a corner with a bed in it, and in the fourth corner there's a heating stove. Sometimes, when we find an unidentified dead body, the room serves as a morgue too."

"You're pulling my leg, my friend," I interrupted him. "The town you're describing is Tsiachnovka.¹ In fact, it's Tsiachnovka to a T, with all its goings-on and good deeds! Why call it a ghost town?"

"Because it is! It's a place that hung from a thread from the day it was founded—and now that the thread has been torn, it's hanging in air. There's nothing supporting it at all. It's a ghost town, all right—if you'd like, I'll tell you the whole story."

"I wish you would," I said.

...

Meanwhile, it was getting on toward evening. In the west, where the sun had set, the sky turned red as blood; in the milky east, like a bride beneath her veil, a full moon swam into sight, its pale, shimmering beams blending with the flickering phantoms of the silent, melancholy night. . . .

It was an eerie sight.

We entered a small forest. The moon shone down through the trembling leaves. Little circles of light danced like silver coins among the fallen leaves and branches on the ground. There was magic in the air, in the quiet rustle of the woods. . . .

I stole a glance at my companion. His face seemed different now, so sad and earnest, simple, yet utterly dependable.

Could he be some kind of demon or troll?

He was speaking again:

"The place hung by a thread from the start, because it was built on an illegal site. As soon as there were ten Jews living there, enough for a prayer group, they got together on the fiction that that they were a suburb of another town nearby and proceeded to build a ritual bath, a synagogue, and a bathhouse, and even to buy some ground for a cemetery. It was only then that they remembered to hire an operator to try to register them in the right places."

"To which he came hat in hand!"

"Don't we always come that way? When haven't we?"

"You've got me there!"

"Anyway, that's what happened. It wasn't quite as difficult as you might think. You see, there was a rich Jew there who, like a lot of rich Jews, happened to have a few connections, or maybe it was a lot of them—anyhow, he was someone important. Everything was registered in his name: the synagogue, the bathhouse, the ritual bath, even the cemetery. The police kept their mouths shut—I already told you he was a big shot. The idea was that once the papers came through he would make everything over to the community, which could then stop paying out bribes."

"At which point, I'll bet your rich Jew decided to remain sole owner and proprietor!"

"No, my good man, he did not. Rich Jews like that weren't the fashion then. They never even thought of such tricks. But listen to what can happen in this world of ours nonetheless!"

"It wasn't the rich Jew who caused all the trouble, it was the operator. On his way to the right places, you see, he suddenly had the bright idea of running off with all the money and the papers."

equality

7/21

Punch-line

He ditched the town and left it in the lurch like a man who leaves a wife with little children."

"Wasn't a second operator sent in his place?"

"Not so fast! By the time the town found out he'd absconded, the rich Jew had died and left behind, among other things, a small son. The boy couldn't put his signature alongside his brothers' until he turned twenty-one."

"Wasn't there some way of speeding that up?"

"The best that could be done was to have a new operator, maybe even two, ready to start out the day the boy reached his majority."

"I hope the town at least kept good records."

"That's just it! The records were fine—it's just that they couldn't be found. Rumor had it they'd been burned. They were kept by the president of the congregation, who, it was said, spilled some brandy on them one Saturday night and set them on fire with a Havdala candle."

"Meanwhile, the place grew; we Jews, praise God, have a knack for multiplying. And Jews came from other towns too: one brought his son-in-law, another his daughter-in-law—in a word, the town kept getting bigger. As luck would have it, though, the rich Jew's heirs began to disappear. The widow remarried and moved away, the sons took off one by one for God only knows where—no one was left behind but the little boy, who was now a young man. The townsmen appointed a legal guardian for him, married him off to a girl from a good home, and even found him an experienced partner to go into business with."

"And to lead him around by the nose."

"But good! The young man didn't get along with him, and he got along with his wife even less. To make matters worse, he signed a bad note, didn't have a cent to pay it back with, and cleared out of town in a hurry. Was there ever a stink! The case went to court, and the court appointed a bailiff. Well, the estate had no cash and the widow had taken all her husband's personal possessions—what could the bailiff do but attach the synagogue and the cemetery?"

"The town was thunderstruck. And it all came out of the blue, you see, because no one had known anything about the whole business, which had been kept a dark secret until the last minute. Suddenly, without warning, the town found out that it was hanging, as I've told you, by a thread."

"What could be done? Lawyers were called in, but the only advice they could give was for the bailiff to auction off the attached property so that the town could buy it back. Needless to say, that was an

expensive proposition! And to complicate matters further, the town couldn't even prove it was a town, since all the records had been lost. The best solution was to find another rich Jew and again put everything in his name. This time, though, the town wouldn't wait to register until he either dropped dead or disappeared.

"At first glance, it didn't seem a bad idea. The town was used to shelling out. The only problem was that by now there wasn't just one rich Jew living in it, there were several, to say nothing of all the operators! In whose name should the property be bought and who should get the town registered? Everyone wanted the honor and would be insulted if he didn't get it. A public meeting was held at which the matter was discussed, and discussed, and discussed for so long that it turned into a feud. And with us, you should know, a feud is more easily started than ended. Every time it finally begins to die down, along comes some peacemaker, pours fresh oil on the fire, and the whole thing blows up again!"]3[

The Jew wiped his pale brow and went on.

"But meanwhile, something else happened that could make your hair stand on end. It's really too much to expect you to believe, except"—he smiled at me—"that this is a night for the animal we call 'Faith.' " He pointed up at the moon. "It's so quiet out that a person could believe anything."

"It is indeed," I admitted reluctantly.

"It's a real ghost story. One day the bailiff went to have a look at the cemetery before selling it. The dead heard he was there and panicked. Gravestones began rocking back and forth—before long corpses were crawling out from under them. Can you believe that?"

"I'm no freethinker, God forbid," I replied. "I believe in an afterlife. But—"

"But what, my friend, but what?"

"What I mean is, I believe in the immortality of the soul, which goes to another world, not in that of the body, which rots—and however you look at it, without the soul the body can't move an inch, let alone rise from its grave."

"Bravo!" my fellow traveler praised me. "I couldn't have put it better myself. I'm glad to see that you're an educated Jew. But you've forgotten something, my friend—and what you've forgotten is the World of Illusion. You say the soul goes to another world—agreed. But what world does it go to? If it's been good it goes to heaven and if it's been bad it goes to hell, am I right? Each soul gets what it deserves: the righteous soul feasts in paradise on the flesh of the Leviathan and the wine of Creation, and the sinful soul gets a barrel

of hot pitch! Of course, all that's just in a manner of speaking, but reward and punishment do exist. And why do they? Because as long as a man is alive, he is free to choose. If he chooses, he can do good, and if he chooses, he can do evil—and once he's made his bed, he has to lie in it, don't you think?

"But what would you say about the case of a man who has slept away his life, so that he was never really a man, his life was not a life, and nothing he did was ever done, either for good or for bad, because it all happened as though in a dream? What happens to a soul like that? Should it be sent to hell? But why? It never harmed a fly! Should it be sent to heaven? What for? It never even got its feet wet."

"What really does happen to it?" I wondered.

"Nothing, that's what! It goes right on living in the World of Illusion. It never leaves its body at all. The only difference is that before it dreamt it was living on the earth and now it dreams it's living in the earth!

"No one in our town ever really died, because no one in our town ever lived, or did good or evil. We had no saints or sinners, only daydreamers in the World of Illusion. And when such a daydreamer ends up in the grave, he goes right on dreaming. All he's done is moved from one home to another."

"That's why dying was such a joke with us. Why, in our town you could put a feather beneath a living man's nose and it wouldn't stir! No one even bothered to chase away the flies. Of course, you can't expect a man to put his heart into everything, but what kind of a man is it whose heart doesn't beat? After a while none of us even worried about making ends meet anymore. And it wasn't just in our town either."

"The same waking dream, the same World of Illusion—it began spreading to other towns too. We weren't the only place where corpses crawled out of their graves and completely forgot that they had already made their last confessions and died. The minute the shards fell from their eyes, they went straight to the synagogue, or to the bathhouse, or home to have supper, as if nothing had happened at all."

< I don't know if it was just the moon or if I wasn't my usual self, but I believed every word and even asked: "Did all the dead rise in the cemetery?" >

"Who knows? Nobody took attendance. Maybe there were a few freethinkers who thought it must be Judgment Day and decided to stay put on principle. But there certainly were a lot of people. They

picked themselves up and took off for the woods to escape the clutches of the bailiff."

"Why for the woods?"

"They couldn't go into town in midday because they were all wearing shrouds and would have given the pregnant women such a fright that they would have given birth to corpses themselves."

"Of course. And the bailiff?"

"What can you expect of a goy? He didn't notice a thing. Maybe he was drunk. He made a few notes, and that was that."

"And the cemetery was sold?"

"Don't be in such a rush. There weren't any buyers for it yet."

"What about the dead, though?"

"The dead? Ah, yes!"

He paused to rest for a moment and continued his story.

"As soon as night fell, the dead came into town. They all headed for home, slipped in through a door, a window, or even a chimney, went straight to the closet, put on their pajamas, yawned, lay down in bed, and fell asleep. The next morning they were all over the town."

"And the living didn't say anything?"

"They were too busy feuding to notice—that's all they had room in their heads for. Besides, how do you tell the difference between a living man and a dead one wearing clothes? It's not so easy. If a son saw his dead father, for example, he spat three times against the Evil Eye and said, 'Tfu, tfu, tfu'—and here I'd dreamt that I'd already buried you and inherited all your money! May all my enemies have such dreams.' Or if a wife saw her dead husband, she gave him a box on the ear for playing such a practical joke on her. Why, she had even been foolish enough to spend good money on brand-new shrouds!"

"But what if she had remarried in the meantime?"

"How could she remarry? By then the feuding had gotten so bad that the synagogue and study house had been burned down, along with the wedding canopies that were kept in them. It was a regular free-for-all. There was hardly a soul in town who hadn't been booked at least once by the police."

"Well, what happened then?"

"Nothing at all. The dead went back to their old lives and the living kept on dying—from the squalor, from the bad air, and most of all, from hunger."

"You mean there was nothing to eat?"

"No less than anywhere else. But now there were extra mouths

to feed, because the dead took their place at the table and expected to eat too. And suddenly spoons were missing: when you tried helping yourself from the serving bowl, there weren't enough spoons to go around. Since every housewife knew she had exactly one spoon for every member of her family, someone was obviously stealing them—unless (as some of our more pious folk thought) they were being spirited away by black magic. But one way or another, once everyone realized that it was happening all over, and that no one had enough food anymore, it was decided there must be a famine in the land, in which case there was no choice but to go hungry. And that's what we've been doing ever since.

"Before long the dead took over. Today they're the bulk of the community and its leaders. Naturally, they don't bring children into the world; but whenever anyone dies, they steal the corpse from its deathbed or its grave and there's one more dead person in town.

"After all, what more could they want? They don't have a worry in the world—and best of all, they're not afraid of dying; they eat in order to say the Lord's blessing, but it's not as if they suffer from hunger, or for that matter, from thirst or congestion; a hundred of them can live together in one room, since they don't even need any air to breathe.

"Nothing bothers them at all. The more knowledge, the more sorrow, it says in Ecclesiastes²—and they know nothing and are happy knowing it as long as they can stay asleep in the World of Illusion. The problems of life don't concern them. They ask no questions, have no doubts, feel no anguish, never eat their hearts out over anything.

"You think our rabbi is any different? He may once have been an active, living man, but today he's just a ghost. He walks around in the World of Illusion regarding life as though in a dream. And the judges of our rabbinical court are all corpses too—which doesn't keep them from handing down decisions for the living as well as for the dead, let alone presiding at circumcisions, officiating at weddings, and reciting blessings on public occasions.

"Who leads the prayers in our synagogue? A corpse! He's perfectly well versed, though he looks dead and sounds dead and drops everything and runs if a rooster crows.

"Our most prominent citizens, our public benefactors, our communal leaders, the whole who's who of us—they're dead men, every one of them, who were buried long ago.

"That's why, wherever you go, there's such a stench in the air—

in the synagogue, in the bathhouse, in the street—there are corpses all around you."

"And you, my friend?" I asked. "What exactly are you?"

"I'm only half-dead," answered the Jew—and jumping out of the wagon, he disappeared among the trees. . . .

1895 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

The Dead Town

1 / The name of this town, Tsiachnovka, is fictional.

2 / "The more knowledge, the more sorrow"—Ecclesiastes 1:18.