

# THE DYBBUK DOLLS

**Jack Dann**

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Chaim Lewis had opened the store early. He did not especially mind Undercity, even though Levi Lewis, his half-brother, told him he would become sterile from radiation (which was nonsense) and lose his eyesight. So after two children, why did he need to be potent, and what eyesight? If he went blind—which couldn't happen; Dr. Synder-Langer, his eye doctor, was a state affiliate and went to seminars—what did he care? He could get a cheap unit in Friedman City (Slung City they called it)—or if he had saved enough, he could plug a room into the self-contained grid built into Manhattan City. A bright façade of metal would be much better than the Castigon Complex. Shtetlfive, located in the qualified section of the complex, was a very nice upside ghetto, very rich, semi psycho-segregated, and sensor-protected. But Chaim would only move into a shtetlsection; he needed the protection of familiar thoughts and culture. That wouldn't be so bad. He could still visit Shtetlfive—it would not move for a while, maybe never. Business, unfortunately, was too good.

Above Shtetlfive was the tiny Chardin Ghetto, poor in material wealth but high in spirit. They gave all their money (which was considerable) to

their colony on Omega-Ariadne. Koper Chardin ran one of the best pleasure houses in Undercity with impunity. He even advertised organ gambling, “for those who want to experience the ultimate gamblers’ thrill.” In fact, it was located on Chelm Street—which was rented by the Shtetl-Castigon Corporation at an exorbitant exchange—and had been built on mutual contract to better serve all business interests. Its overflow (and the poor that could not afford it) provided a moderate part of Chaim Levi’s business. But most of his money was made on collectors.

“Collectors they call themselves,” Chaim said to no one in particular as he studied the afternoon trade sheet on the fax hidden behind his waist-high counter. The small room was dusty and badly lit, but it was expensively soundproofed so that only a low level of thoughtnoise could penetrate and influence his customers.

A young woman, dressed in a balloon suit, turned from a display of magazines on the wall and said, “Those ‘Stud’ magazines. The price?”

She’s got to be upside, very much upside, he thought as he closed his eyes in mock contemplation. And she’s older than she looks. That’s a falseface, he told himself.

“Well?” Her balloon suit changed color to fit the surroundings. This front room, the showroom, was dingy for effect. A dingy shop was a lure for the passing bargain hunter. Magazines protected by shock fields lined the soiled white walls, and plasti-glass cabinets displayed small telefac units, pornographic tapes, and assorted self-stimulation devices: second-hand handy-randies—robots designed and programmed to caress—and vibrators complete with controlled frequency and amplitude of vibration, variable size and surface texture, and temperature control. And a small sign above Chaim’s counter read non-telepathically: DOLLS IN STOCK.

“Those magazines are very rare.” Give her time, Chaim told himself.

“Price now, no bartering,” she said, walking over to Chaim’s counter. Her face was red and smooth—taut synthetic skin over a wire frame.

“Well,” Chaim said, “twentieth-century porno, why the paper is itself worth—” He paused the proper amount of time. She did not respond properly. Instead of demanding price-by-law, producing a recorder, and then haggling within the well-known parameters determined by her own collectors’ guild council, she pursed her lips and scanned the wall above Chaim’s head. Perhaps this is a new touch, Chaim thought, but his concentration was broken by the shouts and jeers of new customers. A boy of about nineteen, naked to the waist and obviously proud of the male and

female sex organs implanted on his chest and arms, led a dozen people into the store. He wore his long blond hair in braids and his face was rouged and lined. He sported one large breast to prove he was a male. That was the latest fashion. The other six boys also flaunted sex organs on their arms and chests, but the women were modestly clothed, so Chaim could only guess at what was concealed.

“Where’s your hook-ins?” asked the blond boy in undercity gutter tongue.

“In the next room,” Chaim said. “But mind yourselves. There are plenty of sensors in there.” Another thrill family, Chaim thought. Kinkies. He guessed from their accents that they were from one of the nearby manufacturing undercities, although one of them—a spindly girl with a large mouth and flushed face—spoke with an affected upside accent. All the undercities were identical spheres, one mile in diameter, buried one thousand feet below topground. But Undercity was the first; the others were named after such families and personages as Ryan, Gulf, Rand, Lifegarten, and other lesser luminaries. Lifegarten was the most powerful. It connected twelve spheres and had to be governed as a state with its own undergovernor.

The girl with the upside accent nervously shook her head—another upside affectation, Chaim thought—and flirted with the blond boy. She wore her long blond hair in greased ringlets that left tiny stains on her dress. “Dolls,” she said. “This is the place that sells dolls. Herbesh was talking about—”

“Shut up,” said another girl, her accent thick with factory twang. “When you’re slumming with us, shut up.”

“That’s all right,” said the blond boy, laughing. “She’s not even a collector, much less a creep.”

The woman in the balloon suit stiffened, but ignored the kinkies. They left to try the feelies, and the room was quiet once again.

So she is a collector, Chaim thought. But she doesn’t want porn, she wants a doll. For the grace of God and less comments by that unsympathetic holy man, the *Baal Shem*, he would have to try to dissuade her. Chaim would have to hurry, though, for Levi would be here soon, and he did not believe in divine religion—he was trained by atheists in the army. Now he’s a spy, Chaim thought. And my own bloodspirit.

“You do, I believe, sell dolls,” said the woman in the balloon suit. “I wish to purchase one, and I’m willing to stand here and bicker for as long as you like. I know price-by-law doesn’t apply to alien goods.”

“You seem to know what you want. But why want this—”

“Make it fast, but I’ve made up my mind.”

“Then you know about dolls?” Chaim asked, his thoughts drifting. Something about the kinkies bothered him, but he couldn’t decide what it was. Perhaps it was something they said. “It’s a perversion,” Chaim said. “You cannot satisfy yourself with dolls.”

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?” she asked.

“But sex is not supposed—”

“Sex doesn’t concern me.” She rested her hands on Chaim’s counter. Her suit was changing color, affected by the shifting colors that streamed in through the small high windows shaped like pentagrams. “I’m a neuter—by choice, of course. You should be familiar with that. Doesn’t your church advocate neutering your young until they are ready for marriage to keep them pure?”

Chaim finished the sentence in his mind. *In the eyes of God*. He studied her face. It was too perfect a job, he thought. There were no character lines, no deviations, no pocks or scars, and her pug nose (that was the style) did not cover enough of her face and her mouth was too thin. But that’s the way it’s supposed to be, he thought. He could find no sensuality there, only bland purpose.

“So then why do you want a doll?” he asked. “It is for sex where the thrill lies. What more?”

“That’s the point; I want to experience it without my groin. I want it in my head.”

“But dolls are for frustration, to build up pleasure and then trap it inside you until it becomes pain. Unbearable pain. Nothing can get out.”

“Must we continue this? I have enough credit. You’ve done your duty. What more do you want? You Jews want to make money.”

“We just want to live,” Chaim said, thinking about the kinkies again. Something they said. He had been through this conversation too many times.

“Doing this?”

“This is all we’re permitted. It’s a long story, and like everything else, all politics.”

“But your sect has money, in fact it’s very rich.”

Chaim sighed and ran his thumb around the reinforced edge of his

pocket. *Live in Gehenna or be separated. The Diaspora of the rich.* But almost everyone is rich, Chaim thought. *To overthrow Satan you must know him. Know him, yet not be corrupted.*

“Money is only good for certain things,” Chaim said. “That is part of Paskudnak’s plan. You have heard of that?” It was working. She might not buy a doll yet.

She laughed, her mouth twitching at the corners for effect. “That’s a myth, a fairy tale. There’s no test. No one is trying to corrupt you. No game. That’s made up to scare your children.” She’s intent on having that dybbuk, Chaim thought. “Well,” she said. “The doll. Price.”

“If you even look at a new doll, it will take something away. Something good that lives inside you.”

“Yes, I know.” She grinned. “Price.”

A fool, he thought. “It will actually take the shape of your frustrations.”

“Price.”

“It is not even known if the doll is some sort of mechanical toy, or if it is alive. No one knows.”

“Price. Pricepriceprice.”

So you win, he said to no one in the room. *Herbesh*. That was the word that upside girl used. Where had he heard it before? *Herbesh*. Something about...

“Your time is up,” said Levi Lewis, stepping in from the street. For an instant the small showroom was bathed in a lurid yellow light. Old magazines turned yellow, silver handy-randies glittered, and Levi’s face—framed between a red-and-silver beard, curled earlocks, and a black hat with a fur brim—looked withered and pocked. Then the door closed and the room became dim again. Levi was dressed exactly like Chaim. He wore a black caftan that reached to his knees. His pants were red, pleated and cuffed. A glitter belt separated mind and heart from his most corrupted parts.

“You’ve worked your requirement,” Levi said. “That’s the law.” He winked at the woman in the balloon suit. Another yellow glare as a couple entered the store and browsed in the corner. Both wore sequined cloth dresses, lightbeads, and metal dangles in the form of stars and grotesque faces. “See,” he said. “More customers to be titillated. My turn, Chaim. Go away.”

“It’s another *nechtiger tog* outside again,” Levi said. “Day is night,

morning is noon. Feh. They're using headlights and that lousy hoof-foof thoughtnoise to make more business. And everything is yellow. I hate yellow. It hurts my eyes. May I help you?" he asked the couple in the corner, who were examining the poor selection of pornographic telefactapes. They ignored him.

"So the street will earn its name," Chaim said after a pause. "Chelm, Chelm, a foolish place."

"Go get her doll," Levi said, suddenly serious. "You will not talk her out of it."

He's right, Chaim told himself. What matter; she's only a balloon. Although the room had returned to its former dusky state—the small pentagram windows could not offer much light and the lamps were turned low—her balloon suit was radiant. It seemed to bulge. Chaim could not look at her face. More *tsores* for me, he thought. Every day brought its share of troubles. Sticks to make a holy fire.

Chaim tried to shut out the thoughtnoise that was blaring in his head. The thoughtnoise had to be coming from somewhere inside the store, he thought, because it was too strong to be just echoes from outside. It was giving him a headache.

"Well," the woman said. "I'm waiting."

So wait, Chaim thought. The fax screen was blinking. No one could see it but Chaim. It was set into a dead spot in the glasstex counter.

*:Attention. Intruder FaChrm#4. Police notified/Sil. Pro.:*

The kinkies set up a mindblock, Chaim thought. That's why I couldn't hear the alarm. Chaim was mindlinked with the store's alarm system. They must be rich, Chaim thought. Rich enough to disrupt with their own equipment the most expensive alarm and control system he could afford. He daydreamed for a few seconds. *Herbesh*. That same word swam in his mind. He remembered: Herbesh was a powerful member of a Chartist Clan. The shtetl had many political enemies, and the Chartists were the most rabid. Many money feuds had been lost because of anti-Semitism. But the Chartists were more than just political enemies; they derived their strength and community from hatred and thus gained Machiavellian access into high-level politics.

Herbesh, Chaim thought. A Paskudnak. They're one and the same. Paskudnak was a Jewish myth, an ongoing legend born and maintained out of paranoia. He was considered to be the focus of evil, "the mount of darkness." Some said he was deformed and called him Shimen

Hunchback; others said he was ugly as sin, but seduced all the beautiful women that came his way. Fruma, Chaim's wife, thought he must be beautiful, a misled innocent. A *nefish*. He was the imagined superman-conspirator who took on different faces at different times to frustrate the Jewish alliance. Chaim half believed in Paskudnak. After all, he would tell himself, there obviously is a conspiracy against the shtetl.

One of the kinkies said something about Herbesh, Chaim thought. So they must be related to him. They have the money to steal, and buy mindblock equipment. They must want the dolls. *Gottenyu*. The kinkies would stuff themselves with the dolls and begin another scandal, another feud. But why steal the dolls? If they could afford mindblock equipment, they could simply buy the dolls outright.

Then it must be a setup. What else? Chaim thought. And a setup could only mean scandal. Herbesh's kinkie clansmen would be psychologically deformed for life—that's what the fax would read. He could already see tomorrow's scandalfax. Herbesh's *Reyakh*, who knows only one tune, will make up a new song. And Paskudnak, who forces our lives, will win. That would be too much for the shtetl's weakened morale. They certainly had *chutzpa*, Chaim thought.

"Red light," Chaim said to his brother. Levi shrugged. There could be no blame on him: he wasn't officially working. Attempted robberies were common, and Chaim had made it a rule not to upset the customers. It was all routine. The sensors would mindscan every customer, deactivate any heat weapon, throw up a shock field if necessary, and notify the police. Since concealed projectile weapons were by law denoted "Civilian Punishable," it was the proprietor's choice. Chaim could not remember whether he had programmed paralysis (temporary) or mindshut. It didn't matter now, he thought.

"I'm going to see what's going on," Chaim said to Levi. The police were probably around the corner. It was probably too late to get out with the dolls.

"For what? It will be finished in a few minutes."

That's what I'm afraid of, he thought, as he walked across the room.

"But you place yourself in danger..."

He should care, Chaim thought. He would lie with Fruma. He should be glad I'm not telling him. What could he do, anyway, but ruin everything? Mumbling a prayer, Chaim stepped into the feelie room. Both telefac units were being used, as were the less exotic cerebral hook-ins. A boy and girl, both naked, were strapped into the telefac stirrups, their backs resting

against the supporting pads that stimulated their spinal nerves and activated the pornotapes. A network of microminiaturized air-jet transducers provided them with tactile information, and they also received audio, visual, and motion feedback. The girl's knees were buckling. The spinal pad quickened her heartbeat with a rerun of "Bestial Love." Her friend in the other telefac was in the throes of orgasm. The ultimate vicarious thrill.

Chaim looked away from them. The others, plugged into the small hook-in consoles, were dazed. But the blond boy and the upside girl were standing beside the back door. The door was open, revealing part of the sensor-protected storeroom. The dolls were hidden in a lockup at the far end of the storeroom wall. He hoped they had not been able to open the lockup and find the dolls.

"The police will be here soon," Chaim said. He tried to stop his shaking.

"We'll wait," said the blond boy. He reached for the upside girl's hand.

"So it is a setup," Chaim said.

"No," said the girl. "It's for fun. We're just doing this to pull on your parts and have a good time. As children we're entitled to a little fun."

"Are you part of Herbesh's clan?"

"He's my uncle," the boy said. "Aren't you afraid of Paskudnak's wrath?" The girl giggled. "If he found out you were selling dolls to children, swamping their innocent souls with alien filth, it would make scandal. And then where would you work?"

"Hungry Jews," said the girl.

"You may be from Herbesh's clan," said Chaim, "but you're not children." Chaim knew they had him. Herbesh would call for a literal interpretation of the black-letter law, fold the courts, and denounce the shtetl on every fax channel for peddling filth to innocents. But if there were no dolls, there could be no proof.

"Police will be here soon," the boy said. "It's all set. You just might"—he slipped into guttertongue—"have enough time. Just a game."

"You know the commercial," the girl said. "Today's newsfax is tomorrow's scandalfax."

"Are the dolls opened?" Chaim asked. The boy and girl laughed at him.

"That's for us to know and you to find out."

"*Azzes ponim*," Chaim mumbled in a last effort at pride. They laughed as he walked past them into the storeroom. The storeroom had been



ransacked: ancient magazines had been torn apart and left on the floor with streamers of telefac tape and broken plug-ins. A kinky girl (Chaim wasn't sure, since he or she was undressed) huddled against the wall, hiding whatever organ was between spindly legs. Chaim hoped she was not cradling a doll against the wall.

The lockup was closed. But Chaim had no time. His ears burned. Like an animal, he thought, I'm running from these children—they should be running from me: they've broken the law. What's the difference? he asked himself. Eat dirt now, turn to dust later.

He had to get the dolls out of the store. A chill went through him—could they have done something with the dolls? What if they've tampered with the lockup? he asked himself. What could he do but close his eyes and pray. The police should be here by now, he thought. No time. So let it be finished. Could they have fixed that too? Sure, with the *Shtot Balebos*. What does he care.

Chaim slipped his fingers into a coded depression in the lockup cabinet. A soft burst of light and the door opened, revealing glasstex trays of neatly placed dolls. And each doll had taken the shape of a distorted human face. Chaim's face.

*They've unpacked the dolls,* Chaim thought. Plasticine packages were neatly piled on the top shelf.

Little tongues wrapped around little teeth, squinting porcelain eyes, wrinkles, and bald heads.

Petrified screamers.

All looking at Chaim from their glasstex trays.

Chaim screamed, pressing his palms against his eyes so the dolls couldn't reach into his head. But it was already done. Even with his eyes closed, he had "imprinted" each and every one of them. Within a fraction of a second he was transferring his every impulse and emotion to the dolls, namely fear. They drank it up, transmogrified themselves into a pattern best fitted to frustrate and titillate him.

"Dybbuks have entered me," he shouted, trying to exorcise the spirits. He could feel each one burrowing into his mind, confusing his thoughts, tasting his most sinful desires. Chaim could hear the kinkies laughing. Like tinkling bells, he thought. Let them laugh; it should be on me if it's God's choice.

"Scandalfax," the girl said. "You'd better gather up your dolls and take them with you. No time"—a slip into guttertongue, an upside affectation.

“The police will be here soon, and the kids are hanging from the telefac with red faces and erections and sitting on the floor with hook-ins plugged into their pink heads. Looks very bad.”

“Very good,” the blond boy said, pinching her cheek.

It was probably a ruse, Chaim thought. There would be no police. But he couldn't take the chance. Herbesh would not stand for opened dolls anywhere near his kin. The hook-ins and telefac would only incur small punishment. Let Levi worry— that *loksh* spy.

“And we say you imprinted us with those dolls,” said the boy, “while we scream and make obscene gestures and laugh and hold our heads. Alien thoughtscum, you know.”

They must have used a mindblock to unpack the dolls, Chaim thought. He fantasized that the blond boy and upside girl were naked. They stood in the dark, heavy cloth stretched tightly over their puckish faces, and meticulously opened each package. *Gottenyu*, he thought. The dybbuks are changing me already, soiling my thoughts. He gathered up the dolls—they were the size of his large hands—and dropped them into a carrybox. They'll melt together, he thought. So let them. They'll suck out my soul. What black soul could you have? The girl is pretty, not fat and earthy like Fruma, but delicate and shriveled like Raizel the wet nurse.

“Take them home with you, sleep with them,” the girl said, twisting a greased curl around her forefinger.

What small breasts she must have, Chaim thought. He felt strong unnatural urges welling up inside him, filling him up, beating against the inside of his skin to be free. His body was no longer a holy vessel, and he felt dispassionately removed from it. He drove it like a car toward the back door. His glands secreted the wrong juices, anesthetized him, fooled him with oceans of sexual sensation — all directed toward the kinky girl, always ebbing instead of reaching new heights. Frustrating him. But there was sickly-sweet beauty in that frustration.

He could not, would not, have her. So the dybbuks pushed against him, sandpapered his delicate conscience against his flesh to produce guilt. That heightened the sensations, strengthened the brew. Chaim turned for a last look at the girl as he pressed against the door, and then stopped himself. No, he thought. God shouldn't see me brimming with filthlife. The dolls were not mechanical; they were alive.

The door opened and Chaim was in the street, squinting his eyes in the strong yellow light. “Not even a look behind,” he said to the dolls in his hand and the dybbuks in his head. Chelm Street was to his right, bustling

with people, a river of rollers and slidewalks rushing in-town and back on the other side. Like boats on the water, platforms and movetels drifted slowly down the middle of the street. Beyond Chelm Street, and to his left, drawing an arc around him, the skyscrapers rose out of the yellow thoughtfog, sparkling like glass stalagmites in a crystal cave. Tiers upon tiers of fenestrated glasstex, studded with sunlights, reaching like inverted roots toward the bright surface of the dome above. Set into this glass landscape was a circular park, barely visible in the settling fog. Its boundaries were only a few yards from where Chaim was standing. A few feet from him was a transpod rut that extended as far as he could see to his left and descended into the ground a few yards to his right. Chaim felt giddy. The fog was a lure. Its fumes and the hoof-foof thoughtnoise excited him, made him feel glamorous, a part of the partycrowd. A small transpod stopped in front of him. The silver egg was computer controlled and driven by a propulsion system built into the narrow rut. Chaim climbed into the transpod with some trouble, intoning the eternal *oy-oy-oy*. He punched out the coordinates to go home, called the shtetl to tell them of his dilemma, and by the time he settled into a comfortable position he was almost topside.

He tried to compose himself. Just as I thought, there were no police, he told himself. Looking at the carrybox on his lap, he thought: I should throw this filth into the disposer. But who knew what would destroy it? By throwing it away, he might be putting the dybbuks out of his reach forever, and their spirits would remain inside him, corrupting him, until he was only a hollow shell filled with dybbukfilth. He needed the dybbuks' flesh to exorcise them.

Chaim's heart was pounding. The car seemed to be getting smaller. (You're making this up, Chaim told himself. Stopit.) He was afraid of closed spaces again, like when he was a child locked in Makher's closet with Dvora Shiddukah.

"So this is the way it is to be," he said, trying to ignore his fantasies. He braced himself, arms outstretched, fingers touching the silver side panels, and murmured the *Shema Yisrael*. The air was suddenly filled with noxious smells. (Stopitstopit, Chaim told himself. This is a dream. Don't set the stage.) He tried to pray. It was difficult to breathe. Too hot. Chaim was sweating. (You are dry as a mat.) His *talis koton*, a fringed cloth undergarment, was soaked through, defiled, he thought, by his dreams. He found himself with an erection.

He dreamed about Dvora, sweet skinny Dvora with her bumps for breasts and squeaky voice. The closet was dark and Dvora was naked and

making mouse noises. Air, Chaim said to himself, gagging. Too small. Can't breathe. (Liar. Dybbuk-dreamer. You're smiling and breathing clean recycled air.) Chaim reached forward to dissolve the gray walls, but couldn't touch the switch. (Stop acting and press the button.)

And then he was pushing the switch and screaming. He was an actor without an audience. But there was no release. His throat hurt and his head ached. Now there was too much air and space. The city was all around him, and he was being swept through a glass tunnel, one of the billions of transparent cables that linked up the city, toward a canyon formed out of glass and steel and light. Above him was a rush of perspective lines drawing together in the distance. A roof covered this part of the city, melded all the buildings into a ceiling. Below him were slide-walks and runshops and millions of people dashing about, spoiling the clean geometrical lines of the city ways. But Chaim was too high to see them.

He hoped for a rush of relief. He was close to home now. But the exhilaration was too much for him. It became bone-crushing pain. And then just fear. He had only been afraid of heights once in his life, when he climbed onto a parapet on a dare. He slipped and almost fell. That's how he felt now. He was falling again, grasping for a transparent edge.

Before him was a glass wall. Then he was inside it. The trans-pod followed its course to a lift-rut where it rose like an elevator toward the upper levels of the largest living units in New York. Castigon Complex consisted of two risers, each a thousand stories high and linked together by hookwalls and emergency pass-tubes. The uppermost stories looked down upon the smooth snow-covered surface of the city's roof and swayed very slightly. But from Chaim's position, the building was too large to be seen as anything other than interlocking linelevels and arbitrary shapes. It was as if these were risers that had been set into a glass template, which was itself another building.

As the pod slowed to a halt, Chaim's head cleared and he sighed and closed his eyes. "Thank you, *Kvater* of both demons and angels." The door opened onto a platform strewn with plastipaper, but Chaim made no move to get out of the pod. A few people rushed by. He prayed. Thank you, Chaim said to himself. Let me rest a moment. A familiar face leaped out of his mind and dissolved before his mind's eye. It was Dvora. Her deep-set eyes were tiny blue stones set into the caverns of her bony face. He dreamed that she was lying on the glass parapet. She was waiting for him, breathing in short gasps, exposing her worm-white body to the chill wind. There would be no respite.

“But it’s all illusion,” Chaim shouted at the air. This is false as a telefac or hook-in, he thought. I’m drawing on my filthpile of carnal thoughts and experiences. But they’re not real. (Yes they are.) I’m suffering for forgiveness. (God will punish. Liar.)

A group of children, dressed in knee-length caftans, heads shaved but earlocks untouched, all wearing *yarmelkehs* or black hats with imitation fur tails, were on their way home from *Kheyder*, where they had spent the morning studying Torah. They hooted and sang. High-pitched voices echoed. Translucent walls became mirrors of sound.

“Stop that,” Chaim said. “It’s a sin.” Their echoes would dissipate their fragile souls.

“Bim, bim, bam,” they sang. “Sleep soundly at night—

“And learn Torah by day. And you’ll be a rabbi—

“When I have grown gray.”

They walked backward past Chaim. For each step they took, so the legends told, their guardians or watchers would burn a year in Hell. Technically, at that moment, Chaim was a watcher. So he closed his eyes, but the children had taken at least five steps. They should play with shadows. *Sheyneh* loafers. (Stopit. Dybbukfilth.)

A buzzer sounded, reminding Chaim that he was taking up space. He tried to ignore it. Soon the pod would direct enough thoughtnoise at Chaim to make him leave. Think. Something about those children on the platform, he told himself. They were dressed like *Sheyneh*, the rich, but they had the red faces of the *Prosteh*, the poor. He felt a coldness in his groin. Think-think. Something familiar. (Another lie.) Something beautiful. (Dybbuktalk. Close your ears.)

Chaim squeezed the carrybox on his lap, felt a thrill radiate down his legs. A flame was coloring everything he thought and saw, dulling the ever-present frustration that glowed like coals on his lap. There was no rush, he told himself. He had to remember something. That’s it, he thought. Those children all look like me. (Dreamer. Liar. Make-up-man.) Like my children. (Dybbukspawn.) Again, the coldness. His lap was wet. He shook off the dark things crawling in his mind and found himself kneading soft flesh, holding it between his large palms. His hands were inside the carrybox.

“*Gottenyu*,” he cried, pulling his hands out of the box and closing the lid. “Now they have my flesh, too.” He watched the people rushing past the pod. Although there were a few women hurrying about in old dresses and

work aprons, the men— dressed in knee-length caftans and sporting full, untrimmed beards and carefully curled earlocks—were clearly in the majority. There were several other pods backed up behind Chaim. It was still early, workers hadn't returned home yet, and housewives were in their rooms, frantically preparing for *Erev Shabbes*, the Sabbath eve. It was called "Short Friday," because after sundown no work could be performed. Any woman found in the building's ways on Short Friday became known as a *yideneh* and was shunned by the other women of her shtetl level, unless she had a good excuse. *Shabbes* was a time for the family, a time for prayer and study.

Chaim found that he could block out most of the thought-noise easily. He was having fantasies that Raizel the wet nurse looked just like him. Fearing for his life with every movement, he was making love to her on a parapet. He was a glutton, pulling the life juices out of her frail, skinny body.

"So what are you waiting for?" asked Feigle Kaporeh, an old woman wearing a rumpled ankle-length dress, a kerchief around her thick neck, and a wig over her cropped hair—she was known to be senile and still considered herself beautiful enough to attract sinful glances. "How much noise does the pod have to make before you get out?"

Still thinking about Raizel, Chaim swung one of his legs out of the pod. Feigle Kaporeh can't look like me, he told himself, as he pulled the carrybox along behind him. (Onanist.)

"Oy," she said. "It's you. Get away from me. *Tatenyu.*"

"*Yideneh,*" Chaim mumbled and rushed across the platform, pushing through the few people that were in his way. He could smell the sweet fragrance of *challah*, the Sabbath bread, mingling with the stale air of the transpod tunnel. Chaim felt himself being pulled into a knot that would explode, flinging the trapped juices out of his corrupted body. I have to be alone with the dolls, he thought. Just for a few minutes. (Fight them.)

An arch decorated with golden lions and tablets of the Ten Commandments led into Shtetlfive's ways, a maze of hallways running parallel and perpendicular to a defunct rollway. The low-ceilinged rollway was the size of a small street or alley, and had become the neighborhood meeting place. It was poorly lit and poorly ventilated, but in an area where space was at a premium, this free tunnel was a luxury. It was hoped that the authorities would not be quick to turn the rollway into transients' space. Located nearby were the auditoriums and meeting rooms that functioned as synagogue, *besmedresh*—a study and prayer center, wailing

room, Bundcongress, and local schools such as the *Talmud Toyreh* and *Gemoreh Kheyder*.

But there were few people about, only visitors, early workers, tardy gossipers, and children returning from trades and rich *Kheyders*. The “Queen-Bride” of the Sabbath had to be escorted in; there was no time for dallying. The *shammes*, a synagogue functionary, was going about his duties early. He walked along the rollway calling, “Jews to the bathhouse,” for the ceremonial *mikva* of purification.

“Hey, Chaim,” he shouted. “We have news of what happened. Go quickly. Rabbe Ansky has found more than enough men to make a quorum. And, he-should-be-blessed, the *Baal Shem* from Menachem Ghetto will preside.”

Chaim ignored him and stepped into a small corridor that would lead to his rooms. I must be alone, he thought. Just for sucking at his thoughts and memories. But he had lost too much of himself. I can’t stay outside. (Then open the door.) I can’t.

The lights went out. Chaim paid no attention: he was drowning in his own thoughts. (Listen. The door.)

“Quickly, before he soils himself,” said the *Baal Shem*, “remove him from that *thing*.” The doorslide was stuck at an odd angle, and the men had to pull in their stomachs to squeeze through. Fruma and the other woman watched from the other room. The men lifted Chaim out of his chair and braced him in a standing position.

“Can you hear me, Chaim?” asked the *Baal Shem*.

“Yes,” Chaim said. His heart was beating faster. A spot of goodness grew larger, then was swallowed by alien thoughts. He dreamed of Fruma, how she smelled and the noises she made. Fruma Dvora. Panting together. Like me. They smell like me. Taste like me. He reached for Fruma, but could only find himself.

The *Baal Shem* began to pray. He rocked back and forth on his heels, sang, and raised his eyes toward the ceiling. “We must draw the dybbuks out of him,” he said to the other men, who were praying with their hands over their faces. “You must not be afraid. Look at it. Destroy it. We will take it into ourselves, but with God’s help we are strong.”

As the men looked into the carrybox, the *Baal Shem* read the Ninety-first Psalm aloud. At first his words were strong and clear, but as he went on he began to falter. He gripped his prayer shawl until his knuckles turned red. “Look at it,” he whispered to the others as he bent

over to stare into the box. “Draw it out. God will protect.”

Chaim could feel everyone’s presence. He tried to pray, but his jaw was locked and the words were jumbled in his mind. The lump of dybbukflesh was changing. Sometimes it looked like the face of the *Baal Shem*, only wicked and full of lust, and at other times it looked like Rabbe Ansky, afraid and trying to become a woman. Chaim could see the faces of all the others in the clay lump. He knew their fears and thoughts. Yudel was spitting up blood and Yussel was trying to run away from a man that he hated. The others choked quietly on everyone’s memories.

“ *He will cover you with his pinions, and you shall find safety beneath his wings.*”

“Help me, Mayer Ansky,” said the *Baal Shem*, as he dropped the holy book. But the Rabbe, like the rest of the men, could only stare catatonically into the carrybox.

“*I will satisfy him with long life,*” said Chaim. He had to fight for every word.

“*... To enjoy the fullness of my salvation,*” intoned the *Baal Shem*.

“Dybbuks,” the *Baal Shem* shouted, “vacate the body of Chaim Lewis and the other members of this holy quorum. In the name of the most holy, go off to eternal rest.”

The lump of clay was changing color. It would soon turn into dust. Chaim felt the darkness leave his mind, but the sour memories remained strong. The others had destroyed the dybbuks by making Chaim’s sins their own. Now they were all stained. They would share each other’s sins. They would always be bound together. The *Baal Shem* would never become a martyr. Chaim could almost hear everyone’s thoughts.

“*Mazltov,*” said the *Baal Shem*. “*Shabbes* has come.”

But Chaim and the others had fallen asleep. The *Baal Shem*, finally giving in to weakness, fainted. The “Queen-Bride” of the Sabbath would be escorted into Shtetlfive by sleepers to the trumpets of snorers.

## The End