

“... a great miracle happened there....”

THE DREYDELMAKER

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Dov trudged. Even on warm days he moved as if fettered, the effort evident in his every gesture, *shlepping* the world on his shoulders regardless whether he was heading out unladen in the morning or returning after dark bent double under a full rick of scraps and firewood. In the cold, like today, it was worse. With every shuffling step he took, his worn boots slid a little in the downtrodden snow that lay thick on the footpath, smeared and befouled by countless journeyers gone before him. His breath escaped in pale puffs from under his unkempt beard, hoarding the tips of his greying bristles. His hands, naked to the freezing breeze, tugged the lapels of his buttonless overcoat across his chest. With downcast eyes he kept scrupulous watch for ice and other hazards of the way. His eyes were the brightest part of him, piercing blue in the Silesian dusk. He briefly glanced up, then down again as his bootsoles lost purchase in the slush – and on Dov trudged.

A *shtetl* receded behind him, wan and exhausted in Kislev's waning light. It was the third through which he'd passed since his breakfast that morning of turnip and toast. He'd brought the rest of that boiled turnip along with him to blunt the evening pangs, holding off on his supper in the hope of augmenting it or maybe just finding a cozy spot out of the snow to eat it. Such luck had not befallen him, though, he admitted to himself as he made his way past the final few grim sheds and squalid outbuildings. Leaving them, he walked away from his last chance this long day to replenish himself; his destination was not far beyond the village through which he'd just traveled. None of the few faces he'd seen there had favored him with so much as a smile, much less a pickled egg or a glass of tea. The kids he saw seemed hungry; the women, tired. He saw no men, which confirmed his belief that he was near his journey's end. The men would all be at the Hippodrome, he figured. Entertainment was hard enough to find these days, and they lived too near it to resist its lure.

He walked for some time then in solitude, ruminating on his path, when he smelled it – fried potatoes and cholent and brisket wafting across snow-strewn fields, weaving

insidiously among the bare beech trunks. He couldn't see or hear it yet but he knew he was close, so he paused, pulled out the rag-wrapped turnip, and consumed it in a few quick bites washed down with a handful of snow. He decided he had been lucky not to have run into more sustenance along the way – there was only so much fortune in the world, and to each man only his allotted share. It would have been spendthrift, he thought, to waste his on such a triviality as a stoup of pottage.

The turnip gone and his mouth rinsed with frozen dust, Dov resumed his trek. With the speed of approaching nightfall he felt increasingly confident that every step drew him closer to his goal; the knowledge buoyed his spirits, which, after a day of walking, after a lifetime of working, after millennia of wandering, needed a boost. It was coming together, he realized as he saw hearthsmoke in a dusky break between the trees. It begged his beggar's belief: he was nearly there.

In short order he glimpsed the Hippodrome briefly through a forest gap beneath a plume of smoke, and his heart thrilled even as his weary, measured tread continued apace. Soon the barn reappeared off in the woods, but closer, and yet again, nearer still. It was within his sight; here was the trail that led directly to it. Now he could begin to hear activity inside, voices still indistinguishable, shouts and laughter garbled by distance and slivovitz. This was when he knew he'd start to feel nervous, and on cue his belly froze around his turnip and his hands compulsively reached to recheck the small sack he'd tied to his belt, groping the few items in it through its rough cloth. So little he carried, and so much he'd sacrificed for it. Now he was there, and the bare wooden barn seemed to glower down upon him. The future is betrothed to no one man, he reminded himself as he prepared to knock – it is a wanton, free to him who first demands it. And with that, his fist moved of its own accord and his knock on the raw wood of the door rang out though the now-fallen night.

A small window slid open in the worn boards, barely big enough for an eye to see out of it, an eye with a gleam that was jovial, suspicious, and condescending all at once. The vision greeting that eye aroused no concern, though – another *shmendrik*, holding out the two-part passport for entry – a zloty and a pony. The wooden pane slid back into place; Dov heard a derisive mutter followed by hard laughter from several throats, like hammers dropped down stairs. Then the laughter quieted and the big barn door swung towards him, pushing him away as it admitted him. As he stepped over the threshold, a burst of stale air washed over him like the breath of a glutton crowding him in a crowded common tavern bed. The air was thick with food smells, resonant with laughter and convivial conversation and the sharp ring of coins and ponies in the chamber beyond.

Dov's heart soared. It was exactly as it had been described to him, exactly as he'd pictured it. The burly *boychik* who'd let him into the vestibule extended a hand wordlessly, beard bristling and forearms bulging. Dov handed over the coin and his pony, and involuntarily held his breath.

He'd found a heavy scrap of solid mahogany, barely the size of his palm, two years ago on a roadside; it appeared to have come from a heavy table or chest that had fallen off a wagon and then been scavenged to its smallest remainders. The dreydel inside it had called out to him with an unmistakable, undeniable voice.

For months he'd just sat with it and held it in his hands, not yet daring to start to carve. When he was ready to whittle he carefully sharpened his only knife on a whetstone each evening. He had started by shaping the block. The dense fistful of wood evolved in his calloused hands into a regular polyhedron, square on one axis and identically rectangular on the other two. Lacking a lathe, he had painstakingly handworked the spindle from one square end, twirling it regularly to gauge thickness and length. After

months of work he saw it was good – the spindle was perfectly centered, perfectly shaped for his hardened hand, bulging slightly at the center before rising to a graceful point at its apex. He then reconfirmed and refreshed all four sides, marking out the letters with sinuous hair-breadth grooves, defining where the descending faces would fall away to join together in the smooth arc of the convergence. The understructure he left for last, shaping it with sand stuck with sap to a scrap of cloth, letting only a flake or two of dust descend from his handiwork at a time. The vortex was unwrought – too garish, too much potential for error. Fretwork would not have been a true expression of his self, as the rest of it was.

As he worked his way down to the crux, the distinctions between himself and his task, between creator and creation, grew indistinct for him. When, after more than a year of work, he realized his dreydel was finally, truly finished, he took it out into the woods and just sat with it by himself, basking in its simple geometric perfection and the burnished sheen endowed by countless hours in his hands. It seemed to him an object of inexpressible beauty.

But beauty is subjective, and this pony needed to run true. It had to be tested. Dov had procured for this purpose a chunk of marble, perfectly smooth, a remnant of some ruined mantel. He brought it some distance into the woods and, once he was fully cloistered by the trees, he set the testing stone into the soft earth, pressing it down gently and carefully. He made the surface as level as he was able, and then found himself with no excuse to delay the trial any further.

He hesitated nonetheless. Till that moment the carving had been a perfect objectification of his will, but if it failed upon testing, it would henceforth be nothing more than a frivolity, a waste, an indictment of the compulsion that had driven him to squander his essence upon it – or worse, an indictment of that essence itself. A weak,

wobbling trial might betoken a weakness in his spirit, a wobble in his very spark. He therefore sat quietly, afraid to do more as the sunlight slowly drained out of the sky and dusk crept down.

Soon there were no more shadows; the woods were drifting into evenshade and the moment of truth could be postponed no more. With a slow breath he hovered the top above the stone; with a steadiness that surprised him he spun it out, landing it square on its target. And there it spun, straight as an arrow, true as Torah, unwavering till it faded from view in the murk of earth and stone and nightfall. When he put forth his hand to retrieve it, the dreydel seemed to be casting vibrations and radiances from its honed edges as it whirled in place. Dov felt them penetrate his palm, filling him with strength and peace. This pony was unequivocally true. It was the kind of pony that could really take a man someplace.

Dov stood in the small vestibule of the cavernous barn and handed over a piece of his soul, to be weighed and measured and found sufficient. Though he knew well enough the protocol, it felt wrong to relinquish possession. He was encouraged, though, by what he thought was a glimmer in the doorkeeper's eye as he took the pony, a recognition that this was an exceptional piece of work. With a practiced eye he surveyed its gross dimensions, tracing the outlines of the thick lettering, running a fingertip along the spindle and down the voluptuous curve of the convergence. He took his time looking it over. It was his job to guard the doors of the Hippodrome, after all. His duty was fell and he took it seriously. He knew quality when he saw it, and Dov saw him see it here.

"Make it y'rself?" the doorkeeper asked; "All myself," Dov modestly replied. The doorkeeper looked him over once more, grunted, and unceremoniously spun the pony onto the testing table. The dreydel's edges blurred, forming a vague cylinder that

evaporated into thin air the further out from center he looked. The spindle stood proudly at attention, glinting in the dust-filtered lanternlight as if perfectly motionless.

Dov was paternally proud but hardly surprised by its performance. The doorkeeper, on the other hand, watched with wide eyes, his professional reserve abandoned in the presence of the little top's unerring performance. After some time he took it back from the table with apparent reluctance and succinctly pronounced, "True" – but then added in a quiet voice, barely to be heard over the din seeping in from the main chamber, "*Gevalt, chover* – that's a strong pony." Dov smiled in return as he retrieved his dreydel, and stepped aside to let the door to the Hippodrome itself swing open for him.

The atmosphere on the other side was almost overwhelming after his long day of snowy solitude and the closeness of the vestibule. The air was a blend of stale barnsmells – hay, wood, seasons stacked and stored – and the sharp scents of many agitated men: their overworn outerwear; their hair pomaded with goosegrease, stale and sour; their breath, panting and hungry, reeking of greed and garlic. Some gambled in sumptuous haberdash and some, like Dov, in tattered remnants of homespun. Most of them seemed to fall somewhere in the middle, though – men of petty means and limitless desire, staking every zloty they could find, a year's hoarding come down to a single night, the seventh night of an eight-night festival, the same as every year, here in this old barn, smoky and noisy and seething like a pit of serpents: the Hippodrome.

The same as every year, yes – except this time, Dov reminded himself as he weighed his dreydel in the palm of his hand, this time he was there too. He realized that he looked like the others, or at least the most indigent among them. Some well-heeled patrons scoffed behind his back, deriding the craven pauper with the *chutzpah* to walk among them, but Dov felt the slight as if it were some story he was hearing and not a matter for personal offense at all. Though he appeared to be part of things, Dov more accurately

felt himself above them, or perhaps beyond them. Though he was in their midst, they did not touch him; reality eddied around the indivisible dyad that was himself and his pony, as a stream flowing past a stepping stone. Tonight stood in utter contrast to his entire life of toil and humility. He was irresistible. He was infallible. He felt lucky.

The Hippodrome was organized into five areas: only one was truly the "Course;" the rest were ancillary. Miracle was ancillary, a stakebuilder, where a zloty or two could meet a handful of *choverim* and bring them all home – but it remained a small-time game, because any streak of real luck scared off the other players. Easy to win small, but hard to win big – and therefore forever relegated to the pit of the Hippodrome. Plus, the fact that kids played it didn't help. Twelve Miracle tables lined the front of the barn, circular tables with wells in their centers; a few men stood around them, shouting and expostulating. Beyond these stood some larger tables for Chelm, ringed with raucous men challenging each other; five Dogesh rigs; three large round Shimshon pits; and in the back, the Methuselah courses, still yet and quiet at this early hour of the evening. Dov noted the Finals Table on its high dias, a mirror angled above it for the championship yet to come, and sensed as he approached the lowest-stakes Miracle well that all was as it should be.

Dov gave one of his five remaining zloty to the attendant, and took his place among three other players. The table around which they stood had a surface about a hands-width wide, surrounding a wide circular well an arm's length across and as deep as a fist, its bottom faced with polished stone that glinted in the lantern-lit barn. Each man held a dreydel, or one lay on the table before him. Dov put two more zloty into the kitty under the attendant's watchful eye, and the other men looked him over dubiously. The attendant removed the kitty from the table and turned to Dov. "New pony rides," the attendant barked, and the other men sharpened their gaze.

Dov pulled out his dreydel and gave it a desultory flick from the hip; it leapt in a graceful arc, entering the well like a living thing returning home. Around him, jaws dropped. The cast had been effortless, casual; the pony had landed square on target and spun intently, gliding across the polished surface until with a clatter it struck the wall and tumbled to the stone. Gimmel. As if ordained. Inside his chest, Dov's heart sang. His eyes, however, remained like two blue chips of ice from the millpond beyond. No reason to celebrate yet, he thought. Just let the pony run. I'll have a lifetime to cheer him on after tonight.

"Gimmel!" shouted the attendant, handing over the kitty. Dov tipped the bowl into the canvas sack tied to his waist as the others at the table looked sourly upon him. The kitty had eaten six of their zloty, and then coughed up a nice golden hairball for Dov. Beginner's luck, they wordlessly agreed, anteing again – but then kept a watchful eye on the underfed scrapman who'd just appropriated their potential winnings.

With eight zloty back in the pot, the first man pulled out his pony, a gaudy handful of painted oak, and tried to replicate the hip-flip that Dov had demonstrated. Instead, his throw went wild and wide, his pony soaring off the table altogether and landing amid the Dogesh rigs. An outcry was generally voiced as he shamefacedly recovered it. Naturally, his turn was forfeit – a rulebook Nun, and nothing gained.

The next man took no chances with his sturdy pine dreydel, spinning it from within the well; it landed solidly and ran decently till collapsing on – "Shin!" Clenching his jaws, he paid his two zloty penalty to the kitty. The third and fourth men also Shinned, and also visibly bit back curses upon doing so and paying their two-coin dues. The kitty was loaded to fourteen zloty when the throw came again to Dov, the stranger among strangers, the last winner too, and on both scores an object of suspicion. As he began to pull his mahogany pony once again from his pocket, the man beside him, florid and

pockmarked, his nose running wetly into his mustaches, lodged a shrill challenge: "Pony check!"

The call brought attention Dov would have preferred not to have aroused, but it was all part of the outspinning of the evening and so he awaited the Emeszogger in something like repose. A knot of men gathered, a small crowd, with Dov at its center like the void at the center of a whirlpool, his pony resting cool and ready in the palm of his hand. Within moments the Emeszogger arrived, tall and finely-arrayed in the black and white of *Yom Echad*. The crowd parted. He inquired in a clear voice, quiet but easily heard: "Who challenges?"

The man next to Dov indicated himself with a small wave of his red, runny nose. The Truthteller turned to him and asked with somber gravity, "Who's challenged?" The other man *shnozz*pointed to Dov. Dov stepped forward and let the Emeszogger look right into his eyes, perfectly calm though the air all around them was charged with anticipation. A corner of the Truther's mouth crept up as Dov handed over his dreydel.

Upon the pony touching the Emeszogger's palm, the tall man's eyes sparkled. He could feel it, too. He turned, still imperious, to the table, placing in the center of its well a small glass beaker, which he filled from a flask until slivovitz reached a marked level circumference. He moved the tumbler to two or three other spots, verifying the table. Satisfied, he tossed back the brandy and, still unflinching, raised up Dov's pony and released it briskly into the well.

As it spun, everybody watched in silence. A truthing bore the possibilities of revelation and retribution, and for this alone it would already be a prominent event at the Hippodrome. But more significant still was the verificatory aspect of this ceremony, the way in which a truthing actually determined the truth. Established expertise, proof and

acclamation, this tripartite redundancy invoked total confidence in the verdict. The Emeszogger's word would be good that night and never questioned thereafter. The proof, in fact, of the truth of his truth, was that it actually constituted the historical record. He not only told truth, he personified it. Compared to such a judgment or personage, the possible ejection of a mere *gonnif* was of pale significance.

The Emeszogger had spun the pony into the well even as the vapors from the brandy shuddered through him. The rush made him limber, let him let the pony do the work, removed him from the process so the essence of other things could emerge. The slivovitz shiver released the soul of the dreydel itself, for good or ill. But this time the test felt like a formality. Not that formalities weren't important – in many ways they were indispensable. But this dreydel was true, he knew from the first. With the shabby man's eyes gleaming at him through the fumes, he felt almost as if he himself were being tested.

The dreydel spun within the well for a short eternity, erect as an obelisk. After a satisfactory interval, the Emeszogger retrieved it with a sweep of his long arm, returning it to Dov without flourish. "True. Good luck," he announced formally and firmly. But as he walked past Dov on his way back to his bench, did he whisper, "Not that you'll need any?"

Dov turned back to the table and saw that several more men had gathered there. The toss was to him – the pot went around for the new players to ante and the kitty rose to nearly 30 zloty. Till now he'd just been another *schlemeil* with a dreydel. After this throw, he suspected he'd be seen in a slightly different light. Fair enough, he resolved, sending his pony down the well with an economical flick of his wrist. The time, it seemed, had come.

The dreydel landed with a short hop and spun rigidly, sliding across the smooth disk into a side wall. It felt almost too early to reap this harvest, he thought, even as the attendant called out "Hey!" and the crowd sighed and groaned and surged a little. The attendant parceled out 14 zloty. As Dov slipped them into his sack, a new player tipped in and anted up, throwing a Shin. Shins and Nuns went around the table, each Shin kicking in two more coins, each Nun leaving the increasingly heavy kitty untouched. A handful of new players were drawn to the table, each adding fresh ante to the pot in the hopes of cashiering it. None succeeded, and by the time the throw came back to Dov, the kitty was at 22 – equal to Dov's total winnings so far. Twenty-two would do, he decided as he pulled his dreydel from the sack and fired a toss with a crispness at odds with his appearances. The pony leaped into the well and spun fiercely for a few moments before skidding into the well wall and clattering down. Dov did not lean forward to see the fall for himself, but let the call come to him like an echo awaited for a lifetime: "Gimmel."

It was a solid win, not even taking his two prior victories into account. The crowd at the table was frustrated and disappointed, but even they had to admit, this scarecrow of a man had played a magnificent game. Of course, having done so, no one would dare to stand his game at these tables again tonight. He'd have to move on, if he wanted to keep playing. And he didn't just want to keep playing: he had to. To do anything less would be to resist a phenomenon much greater than himself, tantamount to denying an eternal truth – so he moved further into the barn, to assess the Dogesh rigs.

The rigs conformed to the standards: the marks were painted on the floorboards, as long as a man is tall. Ten paces from each mark, a circular target lay painted on the floor, as broad as a leg is long, colored with bright, wide concentric rings. Between the two lay perfectly empty space. Miracles fall to lucky men, but Dogesh was a game of skill.

Dov traversed the barn to reach the furthest-off rig, approached the attendant and put in for a match. Meantime, five pitchers were lining up at the mark, all facing the target and gauging their throws, eyes distant, fingers twitching. One rocked slightly; one davened. A diminutive man at the far end was the favorite but Dov didn't like the way his lip was sweating, preferring instead the chances of a stout old fellow with a quick smile. The broker signaled that the books were closed, but not before Dov had placed a wager or two.

"Ponies ready!," the attendant called, and all pitchers brought forth their dreydels. The favorite held a roughly-carved top, painted white with gold letters; it looked like it had seen the Hippodrome before. The old man's dreydel was a curious, stubby number with a short spindle. It appeared ungainly, like some seabirds do on dry land. But his fingers held it lightly and Dov felt that it might soon take flight before his eyes.

"Hold!" The pitchers took their positions, coiled and eager; the crowd panted with anticipation. "Throw!" The incantation elicited a group response as all five pitched their ponies at once. The trajectory was, generally, lofty - one man who threw too straight saw his pony hit the target first, only to skid right off again. The other four came to the paint on a more downward path and tended to stay near where they landed. Two, however, landed off the target, to the embarrassment of the pitchers and the derision of the bettors. The favorite landed on the target but near the outer edge. The old man's chubby pelican of a pony landed last, seeming to float down gently to a spot quite near the center mark, where it stood spinning for a moment or two before toppling over. The old man had won; three ponies had flown the rig completely. Dov had placed winning bets on both these aspects of the outcome. The odds against doing so were high; his wager was returning to him sevenfold, and while he tried to mask the extent of his winnings, some in the assembly were too shrewd not to notice what he'd accomplished.

It was therefore to Dov's relief that he was among the next five called to the marker. He didn't have to try to look poor, but he did want to blunt any expectation that he was a born winner so he let a toe push through a hole in his boot and let his shoulders *shlump*. He negotiated a few more bets with the wager-takers, and then assumed his place at the marker – the far outside position, his toss the farthest from the target but the least encumbered by the other pitchers. To his left stood his four competitors: one in dirty homespun, one in cheap linen, and two in velvet and silk. One of these, immediately beside him, had been laughing at him earlier; it was clear he would have preferred now to be standing next to almost anyone else. In a way Dov felt badly for him. How distasteful must it be to him, to be confronted so overtly by Dov's poverty and valuelessness? Well, be he indictment or mere inconvenience, Dov was what he was, so he squared up next to him at the mark and pulled the pony from his sack once again.

Each man held his dreydel in his own way; Dov held his as it told him to hold it – which at this moment was upside-down, the spindle rising up like a flower's stem into his cupped hand. "Hold!" Some pitchers had been swinging their arms or shaking out their fingers; they stopped and held. "Throw!" Five ponies sailed again through the air, all arcing high, all converging on the same goal. Two landed heavily and bounced right off; two landed lightly and regained footing toward the red zone of the target.

Dov had thrown his pony with an audible snap of his fingers, without reversing it to its normal heads-up orientation. It flew upside-down into the dark of the barn's upper reaches, coming down on its spindle like a funnel cloud. It hopped a little but really didn't bounce or move from where it landed, crux tauntingly uppermost, defying gravity even in its fall and twirl, covering the black spot at the center of the target. There was no question but that Dov had fallen most fairly and the crowd groaned in appreciation of

the artistry of his throw as much as with frustration at having bet against him. Such a throw was a fluke, of course, but then again, they all had witnessed it.

His pony was still spinning, stock still on its head, almost purring as Dov stepped forward to claim his victory by retrieving his winning throw. A stranger, unfriended and unprepossessing, the odds against him had been five-to-one. His winnings came to fifteen hundred zloty, a wealthy man's income, a serious sum. It was growing to be too much to move around with him, and he had to seek out a banker to manage the physical bulk of his growing fortune for him. He'd worn out his welcome at Dogesh as well as at Nissim, but he could still probably do all right with a few rounds of Chelm before the opening of the Methuselah courses.

The Shimshon pits were heating up now, with ponies in three weight classes going down into the shallow rings, smashing each other to ground – last top standing the winner. The crack of dreydels colliding, battling each other for primacy in round after round... Dov knew he couldn't abandon his sweet pony to the cruel vicissitudes of such confrontations. Sampson was crude, a brawl that generated the excitement that violence always inspires, but brute force was not what had bought Dov to the Hippodrome. His advantage was elsewhere. So he just watched the Chelm pots rise and fall a few times, hoping to allow any recollection of his prior successes to fade from brandy-soaked memories. Some men wouldn't forget, he knew, but they'd likely keep their own counsel for whatever advantage it gained them.

After some time had passed, Dov moved casually but deliberately over to a new Chelm table. There he stood as seven men threw their ponies at once, to the full-throated accompaniment of howls of encouragement and derogation. Seven ponies spun, falling one by one as fate might dictate: two Gimmels, two Nuns, three Heys. A few spectators had bet three Heys and collected 3-for-2 on the odds; one had bet two pair and a trey

and cleaned up at 7-to-3. Most lost, naturally. Dov took his time, watched the players, watched their game. He figured he could get three or four bets down before giving up any anonymity he might still wish to retain for the main event later in the evening, so he'd limit himself to just two games. Chelm was neither quite a game of skill nor yet one of chance; a canny player could find accommodating odds for such myriad outcomes that the right bet could quickly turn a stake into a fortune.

He cradled his pony in his hand as he watched the hubbub around the table; it calmed his thoughts and sharpened his vision for significant details. The fat man across from him threw too hard; the men flanking him, not hard enough. That bright blue pony – it veered widdershins. After watching three rounds, Dov felt pretty much at home. He strolled behind the crowd to the wager-takers' bench, laid a double wager against his banker's marker (confirmed from across the barn by a nod from the banker himself) – and after a few more moments of general commotion, the attendant closed betting and called for the throw.

The payoff on quad Shins and trey Heys was 10-to-1. Dov was the only one to have wagered so accurately. He held back from collecting till the little winners had snatched up their handfuls of coins. For Dov, the banker had to come over to settle his account with another marker. "Why don't you try a little smile?," the banker asked him, handing over a new note. "You're cleaning up!"

Dov glanced at him, blue eyes dubious. "It's a work-night," he said, taking the marker reflecting his newly minted fortune. He took a deep breath, and walked slowly around the periphery of the gaming tables to the Methuselah courses. Twenty-three names had already been accepted for the evening's rounds. Dov paid his thousand-zloty course fee and made it twenty-four, leaving room for another dozen more to follow him. As he made his way back to the Chelm tables, he felt a few eyes following him, noting his

actions, tracking his movements. But mostly, he was still just a face in the crowd, undistinguished, weaving his patchy way through the smoke and noise to a fresh Chelm table, quietly waiting, watching, wagering – this time, six Heys – and gathering his winnings back at 8-to-1. His cunning had not yet failed him; he'd already acquired over 112,000 zloty, more money than his entire *shtetl* would see in a jubilee. But now it was nearly midnight, almost time to start the tournament that had really brought him to the Hippodrome in the first place. Cunning would now cede to strength. The time had come to run the courses.

The courses were stacked up against the back of the barn. First, stretched in across row of hip-high risers, were the eighteen identical tables of the First Course. Standing waist-tall on spindly legs, their tiny black tops were divided by a thin gold line into two square courts, each just a handsbreadth across with gold dots at their centers. Behind these and just above them on successive risers stood the nine tables of the Second Course, the four of the Third, the two of the Fourth, and the Finals Table standing alone on the fifth and highest riser, under its gilded mirror. Riders were beginning to strut among the tables, steeling themselves, hoping to intimidate their opponents. Names were being chalked up on the black-painted wall, odds posted next to them. *Mavens* were making their way over to handicap the field.

Dov saw himself up at 15-to-1 in the first round, against a 2-to-1 crowd favorite and Shimshon champion. It would be a short contest, Dov felt sure. But he would have to win it regardless. He was up at 25-to-1 to take it all. He grinned, just a little. He couldn't help it.

The Emeszogger was moving from table to table, painstakingly verifying each one for the impending contest; any he found false were quickly set aright with a twist or two of the millwork legs. Once he concluded his confirmation of all eighteen tables and

imbibed his spirit level, the chazzan recited the pairings and the competitors formally stepped forward. The besotted crowd ululated at each name. Dov had been assigned to Table 7, a number he considered somehow propitious; he held the out end, where he turned like all the others to face the pits below.

On the other side of his table stood his opponent, Moishe – a heavysset man with a thick beard and a large bald spot. From under a clenched brow he clenched his jaws at Dov in pointed acknowledgment, and then turned back to smile broadly to his *choverim* down in the pits. Dov couldn't make out the faces of those gathering before them but he could tell that people were getting excited.

The eager grumble of the crowd choked itself off as the riders readied themselves, each positioning his pony above the centerpoint of his assigned court, coiling his energy. "Hold!" Even the dust floating in the air seemed to pause. "Throw!" Thirty-six men simultaneously threw their dreydels, each top whirling furiously in its appointed place. It occurred to Dov that anyone who thought a fully blazing menorah to be the festival's most inspiring sight, had never witnessed a full Methuselah course by lantern light, thirty-four polished stone tables on five separate levels, each table glinting its own reflections of a barnful of candles and lamps, and thirty-six men among them pouring out their lives on the throw of a top. Even for a man with nothing riding, it was an impressive sight – and Dov had more riding tonight than he'd ever in his life imagined.

Moishe had twisted with his throw, his thumb slipping on the spindle and his feet sliding on the floorboards. All this Dov saw and more, all at once, as a wave of energy rose up into the soles of his feet, ascended his legs and shot through his trunk, picking up speed and torque as it channeled out his right arm and down his wrist to the tips of his fingers, sending his dreydel spinning in a gorgeous contradiction of speed and serenity.

The moment of release seemed infinite to Dov. He noticed everything – the men in the crowd, his opponent's overextension, the Emeszogger's eyes bright and focused on the mahogany pony that was even now coming to a soft landing on the centermark before him, standing proud and tall as a tree stands in the earth. His toss had not been so extravagant as to have attracted much attention, but his virtuosity had not gone entirely unnoticed, either. The Emeszogger, for one, was staring raptly back and forth between Dov and his pony, barely sparing a glance for the other seventeen tables. Also, several of the spectators standing near Dov had registered something when he threw, and found their attention inexplicably drawn to him.

All this was, of course, peripheral. Dov's dreydel provided the true focus. Barely touching the glossy stone, it floated crux-to-crux over its reflected image, a reciprocal entity, freed from the limitations of the world in which it had originated. It partook of a different reality, one that came with its own rules and aesthetics.

Down at the far end, a clatter and a roar: one match decided already, though it had never really been in doubt. An overgrown pink-faced manchild had blustered his way where he hadn't belonged, and now his fey little dreydel had spun off the riser-side edge. The victor, plucking his pony back up from the course, barely deigned to celebrate. Then another roar, from nearby – a fat man's dreydel had run out of steam and fallen in place to the tabletop. Two down, sixteen to go. Soon the sounds of tops falling over or off came more frequently, the cheers and wails blending in a rising wave, more eyes focusing now on fewer remaining contests, and more of those on Dov's table.

Across from Dov, a strong man grew weak before his eyes. Moishe was straining to forestall the inevitable, but the fruitlessness of those efforts was increasingly obvious. His dreydel had developed a precession and was slowly rolling its spindle in a widening gyre. In consequence, the crux had wandered from the centermark and was circling

drunkenly toward the fore-edge of the table. Dov wondered which of these faults would first prove fatal when they both did at once – the heavy oaken pony lurched down to ground itself out, just as it overedged and tumbled twirling to the boards.

Moishe's supporters groaned; Moishe himself bellowed and hurled an impotent fist at the heavens. Then he turned to Dov, face flushed, smiling. "You got me, *chover*," he growled through his grin even as Dov swept up his still-steady dreydel and held it aloft in victory. Dov tried to remain impassive, but as his dreydel returned to the palm of his hand he couldn't help but smile back at his vanquished opponent, who threw a thick arm over his shoulder and shouted into his ear so as to be audible over the crowd, "What's left of my money's on you." When they broke apart Dov noticed that Moishe's smile was unchanged, but his eyes seemed to contain a splinter of ice drawn from Dov's own pond. Moishe had lost his thousand-zloty course fee, plus whatever he'd wagered on himself – and he'd now return home as nothing more than a local champion. Still, respect had been mutually earned. That counted for something.

On the other hand, Dov had won a fifteen hundred zloty purse for surviving the First Course. He'd next pursue twenty-five hundred zloty in the Second Course, and then thirty-seven-fifty in the Third, and five thousand in the Fourth; a full ten thousand zloty would be awarded to the Finals champion. Dov had arranged to bet any purses he won upon himself, with odds tied to his original ranking. Methuselah was a long haul, but it could mean serious money.

To keep the riders from getting trapped in the madness of the wagering benches, they were prohibited from placing course bets on rounds in which they competed. They could only bet on the final outcome. Dov did notice, however, that the original 15-to-1 odds against him for the First Course had already been cut to 5-to-1 for the Second Course – the Shochet's course. He was down at 12-to-1 to win it all. He was pleased as

he took his assigned position at the second of nine tables, infacing position – he'd be able to watch all but two of his competitors without even turning his head. But it looked like he'd have his hands full with the gentleman directly across the table from him.

His opponent, Saul, was a small, dark, physically dense-looking fellow. From the gleam in his wary eye, Dov presumed him to be intelligent. His pony had an exceptionally broad radius and an ingeniously fluted convergence, designed to enhance rotational force but in turn demanding the utmost finesse to ensure stability. This was definitely not a beginner's model. Saul was running 2-to-1 to win the finals. Saul and Dov exchanged a glance and the room seemed to cool perceptibly. This man was truly the competition, Dov realized. It might all be settled right here for him.

The wagertakers closed their books, final places were recited, and Dov returned his focus to the second table on the second riser. "Hold!"

Conversation in the pit hushed down to whispers and the riders grounded themselves.

"Throw!"

Dov spun his dreydel with a snap of his wrist, a powerful but spare gesture compared to the throws of most of the other riders he could see down the course. Opposite him, Saul had taken a more flamboyant approach, trying to boost his pony's performance with a wide sweep of his arm on the follow-through. His dreydel dropped right on the centerpoint, as had Dov's, and both tops spun till their edges evaporated and only their central cores remained clearly visible. Dov stole a glimpse at Saul and saw him glaring intently at the tabletop between them, sparing no attention for anything else. Both men had thrown well. Dov looked back to his dreydel, into its profundity, its blurred

separation from the rest of the world. It was as if it was singing to him. He gazed upon it lovingly. He lost himself within it.

Two things simultaneously shocked Dov from reverie: clatters fore and aft – two ponies falling simultaneously to the floor, and the culling truly begun; and then, something else he didn't quite understand: a rekindling of his perfected spark, aroused by a hard look at his glimmering, ethereal dreydel. It oscillated with a mysterious and replenishing vitality. More than its beauty, its power seemed to fill the room. It certainly filled Dov, who straightened his back a little and leveled his gaze at Saul.

Saul remained within himself with an imploding intensity that made him seem even denser. He barely moved, breathing with slow control. He was willing stillness, invoking selective entropy, calling in spiritual chits. His eyes, however, at the heart of all that stillness, were spinning just as quickly as his extraordinary dreydel. The tension between these two unspectacular men in that grimy, smoky barn felt curiously multiplied; the resonance of their respective rotations was literally palpable.

A third pony fell, to the table; a fourth, to the floor again. Each time one fell, the victor snatched up the survivor in a ritualized gesture of triumph – one, moreover, that foreclosed speculation about how decisive the victory really had been. This was the Shochet's Course, after all. The winners of the first six tables won purses and qualified for the Third Course. Four of those had already been decided; two more remained to be determined, and then only three tables would be left in play. From those six riders, only the two longest-surviving would continue – the other four would all be dismissed from competition. Another dreydel tumbled and clattered down; another rider advanced. Finally, at the table right next to Dov, the far pony stumbled over the center line. "Fault!" shouted the ever-watchful Emeszogger, and the failing rider gnashed his teeth and

growled. He had had a good run but it was over. His opponent – and the five previous table-winners – had left him behind.

Meantime, Dov and Saul still confronted each other across their little table, as did two other pairs of riders – Tables 7 and 8, down at the far end. Dov could watch them easily; Saul did not permit himself the luxury of breaking attention to turn around and peek. Eight was fading fast – both ponies were precessing and falling rapidly out of plumb. One fell off the edge; very shortly thereafter the other one strayed across the dividing line. Two more ponies down; two more men out of the running.

The remaining four riders were all acutely aware of each other. One of the Sevens was a dandy in tall collar and bejeweled cuffs, but by now the Hippodrome and its denizens were all looking rather grubby and the dandies increasingly appeared out of their element. This fellow in particular was perspiring excessively and his refined costume served ironic counterpoint to his own obvious disquietude. His pony was filigreed with a slightly different image of a galloping horse on each side; these blurred together when spun to counterfeit the appearance of an animated steed. As they watched, his dreydel slowly sputtered and the filigree horse fell into a canter. It seemed to take forever for that horse to stop walking but, eventually, it expired. With a shrug of exhausted acceptance, the new loser retrieved his fallen top and stepped down to take solace in the generosity of his many friends in the pits. By the time he'd reached their arms he was laughing again.

Dov and Saul both looked down the line now at the remaining occupant of Table 7. He stood infacing, a gaunt man in nondescript clothes with sallow skin and slack features. Before him spun a large beige pony, not quite on center but running gamely. His eyes seemed to reach out to it, as if to keep it in place – but the pony had a mind of its own

as it slowly, so slowly, veered off course. It slid to the outside edge as if it were seeking its rider, who murmured, "No, no," as it crept toward him.

Suddenly Saul's pony dipped precipitously. Its exotic design was showing its weakness; as soon as it lost rectitude it became fatally unstable. Now it was nearly rolling off the table, headed for the edge in a wide but not lazy arc – when, as it charged the very precipice, a roar went up over at 7. The slack man's pony had finally jumped, just the smallest shred of an instant before Saul's took the plunge.

Dov snatched up his pony with alacrity upon being acclaimed a survivor of the Shochet's round. Saul had to root around on the risers to find his top, and he looked grim as he belatedly displayed it overhead. He'd survived, but only by the slimmest of margins. He had something to prove now, to the Hippodrome and to himself. Dov wondered whether that made him more or less dangerous a competitor.

Odds against the slack man had been high; no wellwishers greeted him as he left the risers. In the crowd he quickly faded away altogether, spectators closing in around him and pushing him out like the loser he undoubtedly was. Dreydels don't lie, after all.

Teams were assigned for the third course, four rarefied tables wide. Here the rules reverted to form – one winner from each table. Dov was not pleased with his assignment – the inside of Table 1, unable to watch the action on any of the other courts. He now sported overall odds of 7 to 2, as did his opponent – the Dogesh *davener*, Avner by name. He was a slight man, extremely wiry, long-fingered with wide pads. Sinews rippled in his neck as he limbered up, and in his arms as he clasped hands with Dov. Full icy were his eyes; Dov sensed, in a sense, himself looking back at him as they met at the table. Avner did not seem concerned with his placement or his competition. He was ready to throw again, with an eagerness verging on anxiety.

With all the advantages Avner obviously brought to the table, this one frailty, his over-eagerness, would be his undoing: this Dov sensed, breathing in deeply, tasting beneath stale smells and bodily stinks the crystal purity of the air itself that persisted in the merest interstices of the filth that pervaded, but could not fill, the atmosphere surrounding him. The earth, even from beneath three levels of boards, supported him and lifted him in his mud-caked boots. When he held his dreydel he felt as if light might shoot out his eyes and beam from the top of his head.

The Emeszogger's work took less time for each successive course; by the same token, he'd been on the job all night long. The toll of all those beakers of slivovitz was starting to show on him, and now they were coming even faster. Resigned to bearing his own sacrifices, he slammed back one more shot and proclaimed the Third Course ready for competition. The benches were closed, the pairings were announced, and the riders formally assumed their positions: first facing out to the assembly, then turning back towards each other. Time ground to a halt.

The chazzan chanted: "Hold!"

They held. Avner burned with searing intensity, bouncing at the knees and on the balls of his feet, his arm cranked into a tight spiral that seemed to terminate well above his skullcap. His pony, painted silver with jewel tone letters, throbbed with his energy as he held it over the centerpoint.

"Throw!"

Eight men pitched their ponies with every ounce of strength that they could muster. Avner had never quite stopped *daverning*, but his throw was surefooted and longlimbed

regardless – an act of true selflessness. He emptied himself into his throw. But he was restricted to the powers that he himself embodied, and therefore he had no hope of besting Dov.

Dov's throw was offered from the side this time, coming at the table edge-on, right arm crossed up high, left balancing low, well away from the edge – a fencer's pose, which, with his leanness, suited him well. At the call to throw he'd lunged with his right leg, driving his body downwards, bringing to the toss something roused up from a vastness both physical and temporal, a spin that was as much historical statement as personal testament. He was calling to his pony's aid much more power than he could ever have brought to the table himself, and it was as emissary for those other powers that he cast. It was their authority, not his, that energized his throw.

If Avner's pony had seemed to throb with reflected energy, Dov's blazed with its own. As it spun it severed itself into both physical and metaphysical components, absorbing light, emitting its own idiosyncratic form of radiation. It bridged worlds, and Dov stood as the bridgekeeper, standing back to let it do its job. He sighed a little at the sight of it.

The contest was decided quickly, but took a long time to play out. Avner had been too eager to make his drop and missed the target; the table's geometry was working against him. His pony was a simple larchwood cube, an old design, as much Hellenistic as Judaic. It would spin for a long time, but it would fall. A brief twitch sent his spindle off center for a moment – it recovered, but the lost energy could not be restored. Avner gradually assumed the posture of a sympathetic helix, knees bent together to one side, arms wrapped around his torso. Meantime, on the adjacent court just one hands-breadth away, Dov's pony seemed to be accelerating on its own.

Theirs was the second contest to conclude. First, the stout old fellow from the Dogesh pit had thrown neatly; his nondescript opponent flubbed the drop and off-tabled after only a short run. The stout fellow seemed pleased, naturally, but Dov did notice he had stolen a glimpse at Dov's mahogany pony even as he celebrated his victory.

Avner ultimately petered out with a strangled gasp, his spindle describing ever larger circles until it eventually fell off the front of the table. Avner literally had to unbind himself before he could clamber down to get it back from the lower risers. As he disentangled, Dov felt it appropriate to speak to him, out of their shared kinship of the dreydel. "You should have put that twist on the table," he said with an opaque voice.

Avners' eyes shot icicles at Dov. "Ought I have." It was phrased as a question but it didn't sound like one.

"It's too bad," Dov continued, unruffled. "You throw a strong pony." Avner shrugged him off and went to get his dreydel, but on his way down into the anonymizing masses, he looked back over his shoulder and gave Dov a nod that spoke of lost opportunities and common knowledge. Dov nodded back, and then stepped to the rear of his riser to get ready for the next course. Two tables were still running, and he wanted to rest if he could for as long as he could. It was late, he'd been on his feet all day, and his biggest challenges still lay before him.

At Table Four, two large men faced off over ponies that were both starting to falter. Fists clenched at their sides, necks bulging, broad shoulders hunched forward and foreheads just inches apart, they looked to be on the verge of a physical confrontation. But really they were both just anguished by helplessness, each praying for the other to succumb first to the earths' inexorable pull. One finally fell and he reared back with a shriek of anguish; the other bent his torso in a celebratory flex, chest up, head dropping behind

him, and shrieked the same shriek in triumph even as his own moribund pony dragged itself to its demise. In their opposing humors they seemed to offset each other quite neatly. From that table, where those two men were enduring epitomes of agony and ecstasy, Dov felt nothing. They were ciphers to him, two effectively identical empty orbits, identically collapsed upon themselves.

At the sole remaining table stood Saul, his back to Dov, who had himself turned fully to watch. Facing Saul was a somber, compact man with very active eyes. He was dressed well, almost elegantly, and seemed to keep himself very much under control. A technician, Dov thought – a professional. His gaze purred from one detail to another, watching his court and his table, watching Dov, watching the Emeszogger, watching himself watch everything else. His dreydel, too, was compact, subdued in color, thickspindled and short-shanked. It spun with perfect quietude, objectifying in motion the apparent character of the man who had tossed it.

Saul seemed to have gotten darker as the evening progressed. His back curved in toward his dreydel, like a retaining wall under landslide stress, holding back inertia, recycling momentum. His arms were extended over the table – a risk, Dov thought, that only desperate men would take: the tables were so tiny and sensitive that the slightest touch would end his run with an instantaneous fault. Still, his arms crooked up like batwings under his coat, and his head bent low over the surface of his court.

Saul's gesticulations discomfited his opponent, whose imperturbability was giving way to increasing irritation. Saul hadn't done anything wrong, yet, technically, and his behavior was common at some low levels of play. But this was the Hippodrome, two rounds from the Finals – no time for amateur theatrics.

Dov read this truth in the pupils of the other rider's eyes. The man hadn't yet moved a muscle, but that only confirmed Dov's suspicions. Saul leaned even closer to the table, and the other man's tension spiked. He took a step back, jerky, uncontrolled. His legs were stiff and his muscles were knotted. He toppled backwards – just a little. He easily righted himself with another small step. His foot avoided the table leg. His knee, however, did not.

Both ponies hopped in place and came down off-kilter. The crowd erupted raucously, but above the din Dov heard the other man's own anguished cry. He stood petrified, eyes screwed shut and fists to his temples, as Saul lifted his still-spinning dreydel overhead, holding it by the crux and displaying it to the hall. Saul stepped backwards smartly, up to the fourth riser. The other man opened his eyes, glaring at the court in front of him. His face contorted, flushed violently, and then he spat with fury upon the tabletop. The throng, aghast, snarled its disapproval from the pits. Much more than just causing a fault, he had now crossed a line. The Hippodrome was sacrosanct. Nothing could justify defilement of the course. Such behavior was unconscionable, unforgivable. When he walked out, back straight but head bent, the mob went silent with disdain.

The Third Course was past; it was time for the Fourth. Dov had risen to 3-to-1 for the finals, 4-to-1 to win, and betting was active. He breathed deeply, choosing which parts of the air to entertain and which to ignore. He was to face Itziq, the stout Dogesh player with the stubby dreydel. Itziq seemed like an interesting fellow who'd had a fairly easy run so far tonight. Dov was curious how he'd handle some stiffer competition. Saul had once again drawn a different track and would practice his arts against the big man who seemed to lack substance. It looked to be an uneven contest.

The Emeszogger was completing his short rounds, still an exalted and stark figure, but it was obvious by now he'd had a lot to drink. However, being *shikker* had no bearing on the diligence with which he executed his duties, setting his shot of slivovitz exactly over each centerpoint of both tables, carefully ensuring absolute accuracy by sipping a little of the elixir once or thrice to get a clean reading against the marked line. Once both tables were verified true, he again upended and drained the beaker with epicurean panache, the wagering benches closed, and the chazzan declaimed the matches. Four men, two tables, now elevated above the Hippodrome floor to more than twice a man's height. Dov cracked his knuckles. He felt strong, but he really didn't know what to expect. He stood outfacing at Table One, with Saul at his back. From behind him, Saul inhaled deeply and sighed the breath out through a constricted throat. Dov could feel the pull of him, a magnetic chill, like vertigo at a precipice. Tension was accumulating within him as it does in the sky before a lightning storm; Dov could taste the ozone. Itziq regarded him askance, ambiguously.

"Hold!" Dov positioned his fingers precisely at the bulge of the spindle, his pony pendent over the centerpoint, peripherally noting Itziq's preparation. Itziq was readying his whole body for a mighty throw, left arm rigidly straightened across his chest, legs bent, back cranked – but his eyes seemed to twinkle. Dov sensed no hunter's instinct. Had Dov time to dwell on such observations he might have foreseen his own future, but his focus was on the pony in his hand and the small court directly before him. Not even the chill at his back could be allowed to distract him. He was a wave cresting at the shore, unfurling without regard for the odd pier or promontory. All that mattered was to realize his own perfection. The rest was taking care of itself.

"Throw!" The chazzan's rhythm was by now internalized. All four riders pitched their ponies in concert, though with very different styles. Dov's action was the least obvious, whipping his arm from shoulder height with a quick twist of his hips. Compared to the

others it was understated. But in that motion was an epoch's worth of waiting, of being bound up and ratcheted down, of patiently building torque that had but sought the opportunity to be unleashed. Dov's dreydel almost moaned as it churned the air. From the pits came an appreciative sigh. And from Itziq came a tiny, satisfied chuckle.

Itziq had proffered an ostentatious toss that had spun his rotundity around in a complete circle till he came to a sudden stop with both arms outstretched like a gull banking into a gale. His dreydel, also reminiscent of a seabird, landed heavily. It seemed to Dov that something was wrong; he looked at Itziq, who was already on the verge of smiling back at him. Dov let his brow furrow infinitesimally, asking a broad question. Itziq inclined his chin to the same extent in affirmative response to the unspecified query. Both instantly returned their attention to the table separating them.

Dov's pony stood firmly in place, looking as it spun like a spear balanced on its head. Itziq's, however, was beginning to circle – first in a tiny orbit, but in short time in a larger one, swirling gracefully farther and farther from the centerpoint, without tilt or precession but with ever increasing circumference. It moved gracefully, even beautifully. The dreydel was now circling the entire periphery of its small court, brushing the front edge, the dividing line, the back edge... as it rotated back again toward Itziq, it took the plunge in a definitive, almost willful leap, into Itziq's waiting hand. As he caught it the crowd gasped and roared, and the two men at Table One locked eyes.

Dov swept up his pony, still firmly set on its golden spot, and raised it overhead – but his attention was on his vanquished opponent, not on the roiling masses cheering in front of him. With surprising agility for a man of his girth, Itziq leaned over to speak to Dov. "I'm good," he said, his faced turned to the back wall, "but Saul is better. But Saul is also a *schmuck*." Dov had moved his ear close to Itziq's mouth but at this he turned

to look him in the eye, which sparkled back at him. "Yes, a *schmuck*," Itziq repeated in Dov's ear. "A *putz*, he is. I don't know if you're any better a man than he is, but you couldn't be much worse – and you throw a stronger pony than I do. So I'll let you do what you can against him. I'd rather lose to you than to him, anyway. But beat him for me, if you can."

Dov's pony seemed to vibrate in his hand with unexpended energy, Flummoxed, Dov nodded his agreement, in neither position nor mood to question his opponent's suicide strategy. Itziq's choice had surely cost him dearly. What it might gain him, only he knew. What Dov stood to gain was yet to be seen, but his future, he knew, lay cradled in his own right hand.

Dov was now free to turn around and see how Saul was faring. The chill emanating from Saul's core made Dov's eyes cower in their sockets. Saul's opponent, Zev, seemed equally aware of the cryptlike chill that lay upon Table Two. Zev – so animated, so vapid – was bellowing and gesticulating, but he lacked charisma and his pony lacked legs. The more he roared and exhorted his *choverim* down below, the more sure Dov was that he was cheering a foredoomed proposition.

Saul stood motionless, sculptured and frigid, a glower across his shoulders and a tornado in his clenched right fist. It felt to Dov that a column of frost was rising up around Saul, enveloping his pony, reducing the friction acting on it, making it denser, making it stronger. It spun like starlight in a solar eclipse, cold and clean, spinning down into its spot from a great distance away with the certitude of a natural phenomenon. On its icy plinth Saul's pony seemed invincible. No matter how Zev shouted and waved his hands, the same could not be said for his.

It happened quickly, as if an invisible hand had come down and flicked Zev's dreydel. Saul had not moved for centuries, it seemed – until he suddenly pulled back sharply, like an angler snagging a fish, his shoulder yanking and his hip shifting sideways. They were small movements, but to Dov they felt like the calving of icebergs from a glacier and he felt their impact in his marrow. The air in his lungs shivered. Most significantly, though, Zev's pony felt it too. While Saul's top stood still and proudly, Zev's pony shrugged a little. That was all it took. Soon it began to veer from its centerpoint. Its fate was sealed.

In desperation Zev turned to seek aid from the Emeszogger, imploring him to call a foul, but with a downward glance he stoically shook his head. There had been no foul; the proof was that Saul's pony held firmly to the golden point. Zev had no recourse. He could only watch as events unfolded.

As slowly as wax dripping down a frozen candle, Zev's pony slid steadily across its court, back towards the riser-side. As it finally dropped over, Saul caught it in midair with snakestrike quickness, handing it smugly back to Zev even as he plucked his own top from its place and hoisted it over his head. The crowd erupted in cheers and curses; Zev collapsed to his knees, not even taking back his proffered pony. With hands over his face, he wept unsalted tears.

Saul left Zev's dreydel on the tabletop and turned around to acknowledge Dov, at last, with a curt nod and a pinched mouth. The two stepped up to the final riser together, but Dov felt a vast distance between himself and his competitor. They had faced each other once tonight already, inconclusively. That had been at the shank of the evening. Now time was almost up for this year's Hippodrome, and only one of the two of them could leave vindicated. In his heart Dov knew it would be himself, but his throat constricted nonetheless. It was a matter of concentration. Dov was tired, but he had to

remain focused until the finals were over. Then again, looking Saul over from heel to *shtreimel*, he knew they both shared the same commitment. The one who could dig deepest would prevail.

In the pits, betting coursed in waves with a rush of wagers, a taking of stock, an adjustment in prevailing odds, and then another rush of wagers.... Dov and Saul stood an arm's-length apart atop the fifth riser, the broad mirror above them hanging by stout ropes from beams lost in the darkness high overhead; candles and lanterns surrounded them, brilliantly illuminating the area around the small table where they stood. The host of men who had made pilgrimage to play the Hippodrome this Chanukah – from the Crimea, from Venice, from Ukraine and Istanbul – seethed below them as the sea at night, darkly flecked. The moment seemed to plummet before Dov, expanding as he experienced it.

The many small flames alight around the finals table warmed Dov's back, but as he faced Saul, that heat died in mid-air. Both men watched the Emeszogger pour his ultimate tumbler of sliv, a clean shot right to the mark. In his august authority he bent to verify the table. Saul hovered at his shoulder, arms at his sides, shoulders broad, face lowered.

The Emeszogger made a small adjustment to one leg, and then partly undid it again before he was satisfied. He finally raised up his tumbler, toasted the house, and downed the spirits, finally allowing himself an appreciative wince and a shake of his head from side to side. His eye brushed Dov's. He was telling Dov something but Dov could not tell what it was. In a flash he had already turned away and Dov was not sure if he'd seen anything at all. Whatever had transpired, it was over. The Emeszogger nodded solemnly to the chazzan, whose voice now soared higher and sang louder than it had all night, calling the assembly's attention to the main event, naming the now-familiar

competitors who each took their ceremonial small step forward to display the dreydels that had carried them so far, upon which each would take but one more ride this festive season.

By the time the brief announcements had concluded, the officiator had resumed his discreet spot on his high chair off to the right of the table, and had reacquired his impenetrable reserve. Odds on Dov were 2 to 1, and Saul was running 3 to 2. Everybody quieted down as both riders locked gazes across the table. Saul was casually stretching the web of his thumb, staring at his centerpoint as it gleamed in the cryptic darkness of his court. His eyes rose, casting across his opponent's court to Dov's dusty shapeless overcoat, his large, hard hands, his leanness, his frayed grey shirt, the hard lines carved in his chiseled face, the unwavering eyes of iridescent blue in a countenance of disconcerting serenity. Saul dug deeper.

Dov felt Saul re-double his intensity, as one might feel the outrush of an ocean before a tidal wave. They delved into each others' eyes probingly, intimately, without apology. They stood alone at the summit of the Methuselah courses, presiding physically over the now-silent crowd. The riders' breaths were like a responsive reading, each a reply to the other. Dov's dark dreydel shone, glossy on the glossy tabletop; his fingers tented gently. Saul could literally smell the open meadow on him, and was increasingly unsure what that meant. Dov felt from Saul a breath of cave air, something much larger underneath than it is on the surface. He made a conscious choice not to partake of it.

Their eyes had only just locked when the chazzan's voice rang out again: "HOLD!"

It was as if he had demanded it of the universe itself. Nightbirds held in the sky and blood held in men's veins. Dov's finger and thumb found the meat of the spindle and cocked back. His awareness expanded. Beneath him, down below the risers and under

the barnhouse floor, lay the sod of the field, the crust of the earth, the planet rolling with breathtaking speed in its celestial course, rotating and returning, a concatenation of complimentary twirlings; Dov stood at the apex of these rotations, drawing them up from deep in the ground and consolidating them into a singularity that calmly awaited the Chazzan's call. His left arm curled gracefully in front of him, his right crossed sharply to his left shoulder, the mahogany pony with gold-rimmed letters poised yearningly above the court. Dov's back arced gently and his head inclined toward the table; there was nothing else.

Saul's dreydel, with its fluted protuberances, demanded an exceptionally accurate throw; it would amplify any slight error would many times over. He took an open stance, legs bowed at the knees, back erect, shoulders broad, both arms crossed with his elbows thrust out in front of him, his convoluted dreydel held perfectly upright, his throwing grip masked from Dov by his left arm. He gazed down calmly on the table, but in that gaze he stoked dreadful fires and the air seemed to ripple darkly around him. His breath groaned like a woods in a windstorm. The doorman had come in from his vestibule to view the finals; he grinned and nodded to himself to see the matchup. The Emeszogger rocked forward on his tall chair, face flushed and mouth agape. The angled mirror overhead reflected both dreydels from above, the hands and arms holding them a study in perspective as much as in the art and science of the throw. Both men stood with perfect stillness. The cosmos acknowledged that it would remain incomplete until this contest was resolved.

"THROW!" The cry echoed off the roof far overhead and sent a jolt through every soul in the room. On the instant, Saul vigorously uncrossed his arms, right to left and left to right in dual sweeping motions, settling his top with a perfect drop and striking Dov sharply across the meat of his nose.

Dov had produced a throw that gave little away: with a lithe motion he had straightened his arm, shoulder to fingertip, his spine carrying the motion up from his hips, a ripple, reptilian, angelic. He, too, had landed the pony squarely on center, where it spun confidently. As he placed the dreydel, he had bowed toward the table from the waist, deferring to it, driving down into it. Saul, as both his arms extended across the table in his follow-through, caught Dov with the back of the knuckles just under the bridge of his nose. The crack of his breaking bone elicited gasps; Dov's blood sprayed the small table and he clutched his left hand to his staunch it, but remained attentively silent.

Saul took a small step back, rubbing his knuckles, beading his eyes at Dov with irritation. A faction in the crowd called for an outright fault, but the Emeszogger laid those interests to rest with a shake of his beard. The ponies were both spinning properly and without interference. The slap in the face was probably unintentional, even as Saul stood unrepentant. It neither sought nor created any unfair advantage. Despite the harm to Dov, there was no foul.

Before Dov and Saul there spun two dreydels. Dov's gleaming pony stood on its mark, rearing up on like a chess knight. It oscillated at a rate that Dov could feel rather than hear; it made his blood tremble, on the tabletop and in his veins. The vibration was yet too high for anyone else to notice it, but Saul had begun to eye the dreydel suspiciously. Dov had wrenched up all his downtwistedness, used it to channel the motion of the heavens and the cosmic *kavanah*, had transmitted it all to a spindle that in turn turned a block which retracted as it descended, making ever-smaller circuits as it approached the identity of its crux, the point of infinite speed and non-existent mass, the connection between a realm of unimaginable extremes and our own. A single bolt of energy cycled continuously though this point, with Dov as its conductor. He could feel the torque rising up from below his feet, coursing through his body, streaming from the still-outstretched fingertips of his right hand into the twirling spindle, sending even

more power down through it, power that intensified as it descended the convergence and shot out the bottom of the crux, straight through the tabletop and the sod below and down to the living core of the very earth, as a beam of focused energy that lashed down to orbit the furnace that fills the center of our sphere, circling that center and then homing up through Dov's feet again, whiplike, increased and accelerated, and through Dov's body again in glory to the rampant pony. It was a complete, self-perpetuating system. The dreydel spun like a living thing, expressing itself. And it was picking up speed.

Saul had slowly worked his way back from his outreaching opening posture to a more withdrawn pose, his arms raised and his fingers interlaced behind his head. His black overcoat belled out around him, and he looked at his dreydel down the length of his nose from all of his height, stretching himself, endowing himself with superhuman loftiness, reviewing the table from an impossible distance up in the unlit reaches far overhead. His dreydel rumbled like a herd of wild horses, a horde, invading, overrunning. Dov slowly wiped blood from his dripping nose.

Saul spoke. "That last contest proved nothing."

Dov replied without lifting his eyes from the table: "History is what they say about things."

Saul sneered. "Platitudes ill-suit you. Where did you steal that pony, anyway?"

At this, Dov raised his eyes. Saul was not so tall as all that, after all. Dov bore frozen holes through Saul with glacial and bottomless eyes. His face was alarming in its impassivity, in the power he husbanded under his skin. He spoke softly: "A stolen pony never runs true." Saul felt foolish. He'd never be able to shift Dov's axis, get him off

balance. He'd known that at the outset, knew better than to try. Why had he, then? Dov radiated a power, but one easily mistaken for a vulnerability. It was almost an unfair misrepresentation, certainly a deceitful advantage. When Saul gained the upper hand, you knew it, but with Dov, he thought, the advantage was never where one sought it. Well, here at the Hippodrome finals, there was no place for either of them to hide. Dov had brought his strongest game; for Saul, it was just a matter now of beating it.

Saul's dreydel held fast to the centerpoint; so did Dov's. Dov's elegantly-proportioned top oscillated lightly; Saul's optimized version rumbled from the gut. The mirror overhead rocked slightly. In its gently swaying image, a tabletop sat motionless; upon it, two dreydels ran for their lives, stock still in that overhead vantage. The sea of faces below watched the mirror; even if, from where they stood, its angle revealed nothing to them, they gazed into it anyway – out of habit, out of respect. Saul's wide, fluted design appeared as a cylinder with reasonably crisp edges, broad and firm; Dov's reflected a dark smudge of varying opacity, areas of greater or lesser probability that a dreydel existed at any given instant at any given spot, edges lost in the darkness of the court itself, its physical vagueness given counterpoint by the small glistening puddles of blood, black on the black tabletop, and by the apex of Dov's spindle, carved to a point that, from above, shone like onyx. Saul's spindle, with its flat top, looked in the mirror more like a die-punched circle. In this circle was Saul's downfall first revealed.

Dov's dreydel's vibrational cycle was moving from an inaudible pitch to the upper reaches of what men call sound, with periodic pulsing intensifications that caused the tone to grow more piercing and clear. Saul's pony began to respond sympathetically. The effect could be seen in the mirror, as the clean circle at the top of his spindle phased out of clarity. The circle grew fuzzy edges. Saul's dreydel was starting to dance to Dov's tune.

Of all people, Saul saw it first, and he did what he could about it. He glowered at Dov's pony, thrust a palm toward it, rolled a shoulder. He fumed, but to no effect. Dov's dreydel was singing and he could do nothing to silence it. Most of the assembly could hear it by now, a crystalline chime, tickling the hairs at the napes of their necks, echoing in the big barn's upper reaches, a single, heartbreaking note. Saul's gesticulations increased, he drew low to the table, he cupped his hands and shook his arms, but the more frantically he responded, the more compelling was the song of Dov's dreydel, floating in its unknowable dimension.

Saul's pony was not responding well to the harmonic overtones. Its spindle visibly trembled as the sound grew sharper, and when it eased back afterwards the first glimpse of precession appeared. Saul's pony was engineered for power, but at the price of stability. It was now losing that critical centeredness even as Dov's spun more purposefully, amplifying its vibrations till they rang through every joist in the barn, every eardrum and molar. Opposite it, Dov's dreydel stood somehow even more still than before. The letters he'd traced on its sides began to catch the lantern-light and glow discernibly from within the dark blur of its body, centered, slowly shifting from one to the next – Nun Gimmel Hey Shin, a Great Miracle Happened There – the letters' slender golden outlines gleaming in the darkness, blinking through at a steady pace, each successively replacing the last. The pits couldn't see it – the mirror couldn't show it. Only Dov saw it, and his heart rejoiced.

Saul had turned from the pony to his opponent. He pointed and shouted, fingertips wagging in his anger. He turned to enlist the aid of the Emeszogger – one look at the truthteller's enraptured brow sent him onwards again, but there really wasn't anyplace else to go. The tone being sung by Dov's dreydel had reached every man in the Hippodrome. It was not a novelty but a true resonance, a chord sounded on the bow of

the earth itself. It insinuated itself into the sinews of every man in the Hippodrome. No one was going to make trouble for Dov's dreydel. No one wanted its song to end.

Saul returned his attention to his dreydel, now spraddled and ponderous. The tone seemed to jangle it, stole its focus, sapped its strength. As Dov's dreydel rang out again with particular vibrancy, Dov could see Saul's dreydel rock to the side, away from his own. The resonations grew yet more piercing, filling the Hippodrome with vibrations. Saul's dreydel slid off the centerpoint, kicked to the outside. The louder Dov's pony sang, the faster it seemed to spin. This, of course, only made its tone yet louder and more insistent, pushing harder against Saul's dreydel, shoving it even further from the golden point. In short but unmistakable increments, the broadbeamed top was sliding to the outside edge.

The court was but a handsbreadth across; Saul's dreydel was already more than halfway to desolation. Eyes anguished, he pushed back toward it with both hands, but his anxious shouts were lost in the richness of the single tone surrounding them all. It was all-pervasive, overwhelming him, clouding his focus. The sound rose up yet again, and Saul's pony fell back another short distance. Dov stood on point, a rock, a lodestar; another crescendo rang out, peaking one final time. That was enough. Saul's dreydel was knocked off the table toward him. He snatched it from the air involuntarily; he didn't really mean to catch it at all. It was a losing pony, wasn't it, meaningless, worthless, and he, its rider, was nothing more than a loser who had lost.

Dov reached down one final time to retrieve his dreydel as the crowd surrounding him burst into cheers, but then stayed his hand. After having waited so long to hear it, he wanted to let that clarion voice sing for a few moments more. So clear, so pure... Saul crumpled beside the table, his dreydel cradled in his hands, now spent and defunct. He curled up around it, his face turned toward the corner of the riser, seeking shadow and

escape. Dov, on the other hand, finally snatched up his pony when the crowd swarming around him began to jostle the table and he feared it might actually be trampled.

With his pony in his hand again he stood straight and tall, almost audacious in his uprightness and unboundedness. Without well-wishers on hand to seek his company, he found the Emeszogger on his right hand and the doorman on his left, two professionals, seasoned and unaligned, happiest when their game is played at its best, and very happy now. Not far away, Itziq was accepting sympathies with deep respect; he caught Dov's eye and winked warmly. His banker swam up through the throngs of new old friends and opportunitistic landsmen, his face a fountain of smiles as he thrust a fistful of slips of paper into Dov's hands. "Never before," he babbled happily. Dov smiled back at him. He could hear the chazzan officially cantillating his name, but that was superfluous. The truth was known. He was champion of the Hippodrome, tonight, forever. He had persevered. He had prevailed.

His dreydel lay resting again in his palm, still aquiver, still embodying some element of another cosmos, as his winnings stacked up around him: a tall glass of wine; a plate of brisket; an overcoat. His starting odds of 25-to-1 had been applied by his instruction to his winnings in all five courses, consolidated – a purse of 570,000 by itself. But he'd come to the Courses with winnings of 112,000 zloty already in hand, and he'd wagered 100 large on himself to win. That meant another 2.5 million zloty. Winnings of such magnitude were unprecedented in the storied annals of the Hippodrome. History had been forever changed.

Before him still lay the long cold road he'd traveled the previous morning, a road upon which the sun would soon again be rising to light his way back home. But this time he'd ride it on horseback. He was a champion, and champions ride.

David relaxes in his parlor, a heavily-furnished room made warm by the smiles of family, the play of children, the smell of latkes frying in the nearby kitchen, and the light of eight candles on the menorah. His eyes linger on the seventh night's display; he offers a mute toast to it as the kinderlach begin a shrei.

Ach, the dreydel song, he realizes – they're singing that silly song about ponies. I'll tell them all about it. Eventually. Not this year, he resolves. They're too young to appreciate it.

"...I made it out of clay..."

"No, no, no. Clay? Do they think you're stupid? Really, who makes a clay dreydel, anyway? It's meshugga. You know what a dreydel is really made out of?"

"Wood, grandpa." The boys' eyes are already glazing over in anticipation of the story they know they're about to hear again.

"Wood! That's right, wood, like oak, or pine! Or...Mahogany!" Dov's voice caresses the name of the exotic tree, one he's never seen in leaf but which has for years given him solace and respite. A flicker of brown flits through his pale blue eyes. His dreydel has been spinning now for sixty years already. In the fullness of the generations and the warmth of central heating, every year he keeps that dreydel spinning, the greater the miracle grows.