

Lublin



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SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK

First published in 2024 by And Other Stories
Sheffield – London – New York
www.andotherstories.org

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

ISBN: 9781913505943
eBook ISBN: 9781913505950

Editor: Tara Tobler; Copy-editor: Madeleine Rogers; Proofreader:
Sarah Terry; Typesetter: Tetragon, London; Typefaces: Albertan Pro
and Linotype Syntax (interior) and Stellage (cover); Series cover
design: Elisa von Randow, Alles Blau Studio, Brazil, after a concept by
And Other Stories; Author photo: Christopher James Owens.

And Other Stories books are printed and bound in the UK on FSC-
certified paper. The covers are of G . F Smith 270gsm Colorplan card,
which is sustainably manufactured at the James Cropper paper mill
in the Lake District, and are stamped with biodegradable foil.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

And Other Stories gratefully acknowledge that our work is
supported using public funding by Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by
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ENGLAND**



For my grandparents, Bertha and Isidore Greenblatt



The sky is as bright as a polished shoe. Elya has never known a sky like it. Over Mezritsh, the sky is often dark with fumes from the tanneries, smoke, ash, cinders, wood shavings, winged insects, small birds, flying cats, prayers, curses and avenging visions of Adoshem. Here on the open road a lad can breathe. Elya fills his lungs. Everything around him is alive and vibrant. With a joyous gasp, he tries to take it all in, pitying the poor unfortunates who have not been invited on this excellent trip, the twins Yossel and Yankel, Benyamin, Szymen, Benesh, Shloymele, Nahum, Moïshe Fishben, Moïshe Untermeyer, and all the others. How they must envy Elya, Kiva and his cousin Ziv, three trainee merchants headed for the great markets of Lublin to sell brushes. 'Lublin!' Elya cries, and they all cheer. They grab, push and shove each other playfully, Ziv snatching their shoulders, Kiva and Elya running away, Ziv catching and pummelling Kiva. 'Hit him in the *kishkas*,' Elya cries with delight.

The road, which is wide, flat and smooth, becomes even wider, flatter and smoother. Unclenching his fists and throwing back his shoulders, Ziv glides ahead of the others with his seldom-used long-legged stride. When he runs, it's impossible to catch him. Thin and hard, Ziv should have been fast like a tall, slender dog, but he's often droopy and slow, walking as if he's just staggered through a twelve-hour shift at one of the brush and bristle factories in town. But now he walks with a spring in his step.

'Adoshem makes beautiful roads,' observes Kiva. In his well-constructed shoes and superior socks, Kiva walks briskly too, for Kiva. At this rate, they'll reach Lublin in no time. And Elya, who is like an arrow pointed at a target, unexpectedly stops to laugh. I told you, he must be thinking. I promised. But have they got the stamina? This important question prompts him to propose the best way of walking, gently pointing out his friends' mistakes. Ziv, although gaining speed, does not lift his feet high enough and is liable to trip and fall. Kiva lifts his feet too high, coming down on his toes as if stepping over something unpleasant, and will soon tire.

'Watch me,' Elya says.

They watch him with growing irritation.

'We know how to walk, chicken-head.' Ziv reckons he's a better walker than Elya any day. Kiva would rather not walk at all and wishes for a troika with deep upholstered seats.

'Two troikas,' says Elya, 'are speeding down a highway going in opposite directions. One troika is driven by a man, the other by a woman. The woman leans out of her carriage and yells, "Chazzer!"

How dare she?

In response, the angry man leans out of his carriage and yells "Tsoyg!"

They continue on their way, but as the man rounds the next bend he crashes into a chazzer standing in the middle of the road, killing both himself and the pig.

If only men would listen.'

'Listen to what?' Ziv doesn't get it. 'Women don't drive troikas.'

Kiva doesn't like it either. *Tsoyg* is a rude word. He asks Adoshem who does miracles to help Elya tell more respectful jokes. Then Ziv needs to stop and pee. Prone to faintness of the kidneys from the beatings he gives and takes in the back alleys of Mezritsh, he pees against a hedge at the side of the road. Kiva, out of sympathy, pees too. Elya has a great joke about peeing, but he won't tell it. Not now. He wants to, but he won't because his

pisher friends, you should excuse the expression, have no sense of humour. Never mind, they're on their way. Kiva blesses the road and the emptiness of the road, both sides of the road, the middle of the road, the sky above the road, and the birds in the sky above the road, the hedge on which Ziv pees, and the leaves on the hedge on which Ziv pees.

Is he finished?

Not yet.

Kiva blesses their conversation, which immediately dries up. Then he calls down blessings on Elya's vision and Ziv's bladder. Let nothing obstruct either.

Kiva prays at every fork in the road, over every dead animal flattened under the wheels of a troika, before every sip of water, every meal, every snack. Upon seeing anything beautiful, smelling anything nice, wearing anything new, hearing good news, or bad. There's even a prayer in celebration of moving one's bowels after a period of constipation. Praising and offering, thanking and requesting, Kiva talks to Adoshem as if He were another trainee merchant walking alongside them. When Kiva pauses to pray, Elya and Ziv must stand with their hands clasped. When he's finished, they must say 'Amen', pronounced Aw-main, in unison. Later it will be different. Even now they show some impatience. Enough already! They're on the open road, not in a shul. They pass around the flask of water they carry, Kiva reciting a short blessing before they drink. 'That won't improve it,' says Ziv, who does not like the taste of flask water but drinks anyway.

Soon the road narrows to a carriage track meandering through a field and into a forest. Elya eyes the landscape greedily, turning his head this way and that. At the side of the road, in a copse of trees with smooth grey bark and hairy leaves, they forage for walking sticks. 'Over here,' Elya calls out. He cuts sticks for Kiva, Ziv and himself, trimming the leaves.

‘Don’t we need permission?’ Kiva asks, peering nervously through his tight iron spectacles. According to Ziv, wealthy Poles from Warsaw own these woods, or Russians living even further away. ‘Nothing to worry about,’ he smiles slyly. ‘Of course, if we happen to meet a land *Kapitan*, run!’ The local *Kapitans* protect the absent landlords’ estates, flogging peasants or poor travellers who dare to trespass. ‘The peasants should own this land,’ Ziv declares. Which is another one of his daft ideas. Peasants owning land? Then he smiles, dazzling them with his big, white teeth. Everyone else has small teeth, bad teeth, no teeth. Only Ziv’s teeth, which he won’t have for long, are perfect. ‘Aren’t you going to bless the peasants?’ he asks Kiva. ‘You blessed everything else.’ But Kiva decides to reserve his blessings.

United by tradition and strong faith, the noble peasants, Ziv explains, share tools, labour and the cigarettes they roll from home-cured tobacco. Having little care for privacy, peasants *essen* from a common pot, *shlofen* in a common bed, and *kakken* in the open air, all healthy, normal, and natural. Kiva listens with distaste. He wouldn’t like to share a bed or bowl with others, or do his business in the open air. But the forest, shimmering in the sun, is most attractive.

‘The Tsar comes here to shoot birds,’ Ziv reports.

‘Here?’

‘Hereabouts. He was shooting birds when *his* workers, as he calls them, aroused by foreigners and *Yiddisher menschen*, marched on the Winter Palace.’

Ziv prepares to talk at length about the revolutionary movement but neither Kiva nor Elya want to hear more. Beyond the forests, there are streams and lakes, grassland, hills and valleys. In every direction there are wonders: a row of bushes with waxy leaves; trees thick with branches; creeping plants and climbing plants; berries ripening in the sun; moss growing in the shady places;

and a deep, consoling silence unimaginable in Mezritsh, where *Yiddisher menschen* shout, cry, joke, argue, or loudly lament the price of eggs, nuts, pelts, and shoes.

Elya thinks back. The day has not started well. Kiva and Ziv were late to the marketplace where they'd arranged to meet Elya. At last they appear. Dressed as if for a Jewish holiday, Kiva Goldfarb is wearing a fine black coat, although it is too warm for such a garment, and walking shoes imported from Berlin. On his head, a new hat. Ziv Nagelbach, with his shabby coat and famished appearance, resembles one of the bristleworkers he admires. 'Hey ear-face!' he greets Elya.

Elya Grynberg turns red. Like *cheder yinglach*, they shove and elbow each other affectionately. Kiva alone has gone on to study Talmud Torah in yeshiva, ten hours a day, six days a week. Kiva has nice clothes, lovely light eyes and round cheeks. His sister Mindel and all the girls on the riverbank adore him. Before he marries, however, he must have nothing to do with women or girls. Nevertheless, he's in demand as a prospective bridegroom and his mother is already taking bids from interested parties. He also has a blue certificate, paid for by his Uncle Velvel, exempting him from military service. What more could a boy want?

Elya runs up to them, anxious for their journey to begin. Along with his personal belongings and a bedroll, Ziv is carrying their sack of provisions, bread, potatoes, and a bucket of soup. Kiva is carrying the brushes they will sell in a large holdall stamped with the company name, VELVEL GOLDFARB & NEPHEW LTD. in gold shadow lettering.

'Careful,' Elya tells him. 'All set?' he asks.

'We were just talking,' Kiva says. 'It's such a long way.'

His cousin Ziv hovers at his elbow.

'What do you mean? Of course it's a long way.' Elya's baffled but

there's a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Has Kiva changed his mind?

He has.

'Many apologies,' Kiva says, smiling and flinching.

Kiva's not a healthy boy. What if he has a fit on the road? His lungs are delicate. What if he coughs blood? He'll be far from the paper tubes he spits into every morning and the jars of creosote into which these tubes must be thrown.

'But . . . but . . .'

Tears gather in Elya's eyes and he blinks them away. He tells himself to calm down. Calm down and think. Then he remembers the library book on selling, arguing and persuasion he has read. 'I hear what you're saying, Kiva.' He shifts his pack higher. 'We'll start slow. Build up our pace. I've studied the route. We can't get lost.' He takes a deep breath. 'We'll rest. Or catch a troika, stay at an inn. Make it a holiday.'

'No crude carts,' Kiva insists. He will be sick from jostling in a no-frills cart or wagon.

'Of course not,' says Elya. 'But we all need jobs. We can go on the road in the fresh clean air selling brushes, setting our own pace, enjoying the freedom and each other's company, or we can toil in a noisy, dark factory.'

Elya waits, eyebrows up.

'It's good honest labour in those factories,' Ziv protests, though he's never had a job in his life. Roughly he snaps open the holdall and shows Elya one of the paintbrushes they'll be selling. 'Hog bristles,' he sneers.

What did Ziv expect? This is their first time. But even Elya's disappointed.

'My uncle's doing us a big favour,' Kiva reminds them.

'He's cheating us,' says his cousin Ziv, who's from the poor side of the family. 'These are *drek*.'

Ziv corners a man who's pushing a cart filled with onions across the marketplace, and offers him a brush. 'What do you think, eh? *Shlock*, eh? *Drek*? Here, take it.' He gives it to the man for free.

Elya looks on helplessly. 'OK. We won't go,' he says.

Kiva and Ziv nod, shoulder their packs and turn towards home. 'Do you really want to live off your mothers forever?' Elya calls after them. 'All right, I'll go on my own.' He grabs the brush case and the food and begins to stagger away. The brush case alone weighs 0.58 of a pood in the Russian Imperial measurement which is Elya's measurement. 'Why'd you even come this morning? You tricked me,' he snivels. 'I'll tell everyone. The whole town what you did.'

Kiva and Ziv ignore him.

'It isn't real life,' Elya tries again. 'It's on the road. We'll roast food on sticks, stay up all night, laugh when we feel like it, get into mischief and no one'll know.'

'Except the All-Seeing One,' says Kiva, turning around to face him. But from Ziv there's a glimmer of interest. He wants a few words with Kiva and the two confer.

Meanwhile the marketplace is getting busier. Soon Elya's mother will arrive with her eggs to sell. In desperation, Elya opens Kiva's oversized, overpacked backpack and starts throwing the contents on the ground. 'Look at this. Kiva's brought a pillow.' He buries his face in it, smells valerian drops. Ziv laughs. Kiva snatches it away. Underneath the pillow, books. Elya picks one up. It's bound in calfskin with a golden spine. He holds it inches above the cobbles.

'Don't,' Kiva begs. A holy book must never touch the ground. In response Elya lowers the book a bit more. Desecrating books is something Elya's brother Fishel might do. Or Ziv. But Elya's doing it.

'All right. I'll go!' Kiva gasps.

'Ziv?'

Ziv nods, thinking of all the forbidden things he might encounter.

After carefully repacking Kiva's bag, Elya agrees not to walk or carry on the Sabbath.

'Or tie a knot,' Kiva adds. 'No planting or ploughing, cooking or boiling, hunting or trapping, lighting or extinguishing fires, scraping or sanding.'

Elya promises. They divide the packs between them, vow never to argue again, and set off down the road, shoulder to shoulder.

Elya Grynberg, fourteen years old, has finally left home. In the large suitcase they will carry in turn, Kiva's uncle has packed twenty-four boxes of paintbrushes, twenty brushes to a box, 480 brushes in all, encased for protection in moss litter, also used for the lining of mittens and boots because it absorbs twenty times its weight in water. Unworldly Kiva, who loves Adoshem, soft benches, prune pastries and his father's gold watch, which will be stolen on the journey; who hates discomfort, dark forests, insects, Cossacks, swearing, sleeping outside and walking, is first to *shlep* the brush case. Ziv, who loves all workers but hates work, will take the brush case next although not for long because, *oy vey*, his arm hurts. Then it's Elya's turn. Elya, who loves jokes, maps, commerce, money; who hates his big ears, his father's shoemaking, his mother's chickens and admitting he's wrong, will hold the brush case tenderly, solemnly and without complaint.

'Three boys and their guide are journeying through Poland on their way to sell brushes in Lublin,' says Elya. *'They walk and walk, but never arrive. Are they walking in circles?'*

"We're lost," cries one of the boys. *"And I thought you were the best guide in Poland."*

"I am," says the guide. *"But we've wandered into Moldavia."*

Stony faces all around. Even Elya's not pleased. There's something wrong with the punchline.

'*We've wandered into Ruthenia,*' he tries again.
Still not right.
Hungary? Lithuania? Bohemia? Silesia? Galicia?
Never mind. They're on their way.

There's a mill in Mezritsh belonging to Kiva's father; a brickyard; a cigarette factory; a rope-twisting factory; an eau de cologne factory; a soap factory; shuls, naturally, where fathers pray for the success of their sons; a tannery; and many brush and bristle factories known far and wide. Mezritsh, as Elya would tell you, is the brush and bristle capital of the world. The very air, when the wind comes from the right direction, smells like hair. Not just any hair. Pig hair, constricting the lungs.

The surrounding land belongs to the Polish Count Potocki. The family coat of arms, a yellow cross with three branches, one broken, is rumoured to signify shameful apostasy. Years ago, a Potocki was cut off when he became, you should excuse the expression, a Jew, and took the name Abraham, which is hard to believe. A Russian church is the tallest building in town. But don't look up. The shadow of its spire and cross might fall on you. And then what? Dropsy, blindness, bad knees.

The road from Mezritsh to Lublin climbs along the crest of a hill, woodland on both sides. It's too narrow to walk three abreast and Ziv tries to take the lead, cutting ahead of Elya. Then Elya cuts ahead of Ziv.

But where's Kiva?

Bringing up the rear.

Kiva is cautious. Maybe too cautious. But you need a cautious friend on a trip like this. Kiva will never let them get into trouble,

or take unnecessary risks. He's always on the alert for Cossacks who may suddenly appear carrying sabres, long spears, horseman's picks, axes and pistols. Kiva's come on this trip to satisfy his mother, who desires him to enter his rich Uncle Velvel's business against her husband's wishes. Kiva's father, an ill-tempered miller by day and a passionate scholar by night, wants his son to study Torah around the clock. Kiva wants to please both his father and his mother. But how? Now his mother is pleased but his father isn't.

Swatting at small bushes, wildflowers and the trunks of young trees with his walking stick, Ziv would rather displease. But you need a naysayer on a trip like this to question the wisdom of the leader. And who's the leader?

Elya, naturally.

They gallop down the road to Lublin, imagining they're horses, passing no one except a long line of students, some no older than children. Where are they going? The yeshiva in Biale, a town famous for its piety. For the briefest moment, Kiva has the urge to join them. 'Come with us,' they call out to him. But Kiva's on a different path. All the students, even the youngest, have beards. Beards that are tufts, tassels, bookmarks, handkerchiefs; beards resembling shreds of tobacco, lady's slippers, and the crests of birds; flat-bottomed beards and pointy beards; tall and fragrant beards; beards with length and breadth but no thickness; beards like clouds, like hedges; beards like Adoshem's.

Even the girls?

No. Girls are not students.

To his shame, Ziv is still beardless. It's unmanly. He should be wearing Kiva's beard, which is fair in colour. Or Elya's, which is coming in short, black and bristly. 'Sorry,' Kiva says to Ziv. 'If I could, I'd share mine with you.' That's Kiva, generous to a fault. But Ziv sulks. 'I didn't like my beard at first, then it grew on me,'

says Elya. But Ziv's not amused. Another *pish*? Why not? Ziv asks his friends to stop while he pees into a ditch.

The trees along the roadside are taller and fuller now, some with barks of orange and red. Elya stares with delight at row upon row, so tall and straight. All Elya knows are *shtetl* trees: hard trees dropping edible nuts in prickly husks; trembling trees with leaves that flutter in the slightest breeze; trees with leaves resembling feathers that smell bad when touched, with sour berries which could be cooked and eaten and small white flowers which could be turned into syrup and drunk. As for bushes and grasses, Elya knows only common burdock bushes with prickly leaves; bird cherry bushes that line the roads around Mezritsh; and the tall stiff grasses, reeds and rushes that grow along the banks of the Kzrna River.

'What are these trees called?' Elya asks the others, but they don't know. All Kiva knows about trees is the Parable of the Trees, which he believes might have actually occurred.

'When?' Elya taunts, but kindly.

'On the day Abimelech was crowned King of Shechem.'

'Who?' Ziv and Elya nudge each other and laugh.

'Abimelech, the illegitimate son of King Gideon and his concubine.'

'Where's Shechem?' enquires Elya. He couldn't care less.

'In Palestine, between the mountains, Ebal and Gerizim.'

Kiva's knowledge of the Holy Land is prodigious. If only he'd known as much about Poland, things might have turned out differently. Ziv would rather hear about the concubine. According to Kiva, Gideon already has seventy legal wives. Why does he need a concubine? She must be something special.

Then Abimelech grabs the throne, killing all Gideon's other sons and rightful heirs except the youngest who escapes and curses the *narisher menschen* who have accepted a usurper as their king.

‘At the same time the trees also seek a king,’ Kiva tells them, which Elya rightly regards as ridiculous. He determines to listen no more.

‘The olive tree with its silvery leaves is asked if it wants to be King of the Trees.’

‘Who asked it? Another tree?’ Ziv scoffs.

Is this what Kiva studies all day in yeshiva?

‘But the olive tree declines,’ says Kiva. ‘Why give up its oil to be King of the Trees?’

A tree, Ziv reckons, would be a better ruler than the Tsar. He nudges Elya who nudges him back. Kiva ignores them both. They’re missing the point. ‘Then they ask the fig tree,’ Kiva says. ‘But the fig also declines. Why give up its fruits to be King of the Trees? So, they ask the vine, but the vine won’t give up its wine.’

As a last resort, they ask the thorn bush, the lowest grade of plant life, according to Kiva.

‘I don’t understand,’ Ziv complains.

‘There’s nothing to understand, it’s just a story,’ says Elya.

‘It’s more than a story. It’s a parable,’ says Kiva. ‘The parable of who should be king.’

According to Kiva, the story compares Abimelech, the usurper, to a thorn bush with its deep and twisting roots grabbing nourishment from the soil, harming other plants and causing headaches for those who cultivate the land. A thorn bush offers no protection to anyone except unclean insects hiding under its brambles. The olive, fig, and vine, however, all know their nature and their place. Unlike Abimelech, they do not covet a position that is not rightfully theirs. ‘The present Tsar might be unworthy,’ Kiva adds. ‘But he’s the rightful heir.’

‘Says who?’ Ziv sneers and wanders off to pee on a cluster of wildflowers.

‘Don’t you want to know how Abimelech died?’ Kiva calls after him. But Ziv doesn’t give a *drek*. ‘Struck on the head,’ says Kiva, ‘with a millstone thrown from a tower by a woman. Then, almost dead, he begs his armour-bearer to kill him so that it should not be said that the mighty Abimelech perished at the hand of a *balabusta*.’

Elya thinks immediately of Kiva’s mother, the miller’s wife. A seat-grabber on carriages and trains. With her big arms, she could lift a millstone.

The sun is now high in the sky and Kiva takes out his father’s watch. His mother begged him to leave such a valuable item at home, but where would they be without it? Only 12:05. Excellent time. But as the day advances, the road grows longer and Kiva wonders when they’ll be catching a carriage. He would like to stop and rest. But Elya urges him on. ‘Soon you’ll be resting on a feather-filled Lublin love seat,’ says Elya. ‘Or on any of the vast and comfortable armchairs in the town.’

Lublin is only 102 kilometres south of Mezritsh. At an average walking pace of six kilometres an hour, walking for eight hours every day, Elya determines that they will arrive in two, maybe three days. In Lublin there are great Jewish marketplaces, Jewish squares; fountains; theatres; stone-built synagogues; renowned yeshivas; statues of *Polisheh* heroes, who are admittedly not Jewish; and statues of frowning lions, who look Jewish with their expressions of finicky distaste as if offered a pork ball or a crustacean to eat. Gazing past distant fields of a lilac hue, Elya imagines Lublin, just there over the horizon waiting to be discovered. Lublin, where all the fortunate inhabitants carry full purses; where Ziv can buy a beard, and Kiva a prune pastry; where the salt is saltier, the water wetter, the streets more than six cobbles wide. It’s only a matter of time before Elya and his friends arrive.

Then Ziv needs to stop and *nemen* a piss again.

Late in the afternoon, they find a clearing a short distance from the road and make camp. There's a tranquil lake nearby, clear and deep. The surface, mirror-like, reflects the sky. Parting the reeds that surround the shore, Kiva peers over the still water. 'Maybe we'll find a baby in a basket,' he says. The others look at him like he's crazy. Do they not even know about Moses in the bulrushes? Kiva feels sorry for all those who have not tasted Jewish learning. Standing beside him, Elya admires the flowers with large, round leaves floating on the lake. Elya knows many words but he doesn't know the word for the water plants he sees or the glowing trees that line the opposite shore. All he can do is point and gaze with large foolish eyes.

'Very nice,' says Kiva.

'But do you know their names?'

'Adoshem knows.'

'So you don't know?'

'He named everything.'

'I'm asking you.'

'Ask Adoshem.'

Kiva only knows the names of those trees that appear in the Jewish Bible: olive trees, fig trees, palm trees, caper bush trees and sorb trees, which do not grow in Poland. Passing between two palm trees invites demons, according to Kiva.

But what use has Elya for this nonsense when before him are the real wonders of nature? Even the small insects dancing in the air delight him. 'We could live here,' he says out loud.

What's wrong with him? They can't live here. Here is nowhere. What if Kiva's Uncle Velvel, the Great Benefactor, saw them dawdling beside a common lake, not even a lake, a lakelet? The Uncle, an eagle of understanding, wouldn't understand. Besides which, Elya's not interested in nature. None of them are. They are town *menschen*, not peasants. Even so, Elya wants to stand

for a moment and appreciate the view. He wants to, but he won't. Instead, he and Kiva gather dead wood to build a fire. They carry a load between them in Elya's blanket which he loosens from his bedroll. Ziv could carry more wood single-handedly, without a blanket, but looking both tired and sly, he leans against a tree and watches them work.

Kiva cannot start an outdoor fire, although he's willing to learn. Elya claps him on the back and shows him how it's done. First Elya must search for the right spot, away from bushes and overhanging trees. In preparation for this very task, he has read a book on outdoor living and with confidence sends Kiva off to gather tinder.

'*Vas iz tinder?*'

It's the small stuff that ignites easily. Dry grass, of which there's plenty around the campsite; bark and mosses in the surrounding woods. Kiva, who's frightened of woods, hesitates. 'And we need kindling,' Elya calls after him. 'Bigger pieces, twigs, dry leaves.'

Elya, who's decided on a square construction for their first fire, places two large branches side by side, close but not touching, to form a base, then two branches on top. When they break up the larger branches with Elya's axe, Kiva manages only a few unhappy swipes. Never mind, Elya will teach him. What can Kiva teach Elya in return? How to admire Adoshem? Elya doesn't want to learn that. But Kiva, wiping his hands on his fine trousers, decides to teach him anyway. Then kneeling, Kiva starts to blow, while Elya lights the tinder with a match. Such a long time it takes, Kiva is soon dizzy and out of puff.

Meanwhile, somewhere in England, a man with the English name of Robert Baden-Powell is setting forth the principles of Boy Scouting. Gathering twenty-one lads from all backgrounds, *arumloifers* included, he sends them on a week-long outdoor camp in the English countryside to test his methods, encouraging the boys to organise themselves in packs and select a leader like Elya.

Once the fire is going, Elya spreads the tarpaulin he's brought. Then he and Kiva lay out soup, cheese, hard-boiled eggs, fresh bread. A feast!

'Isn't this great?'

From under his tree, Ziv nods lightly. He will allow it's been a good day and a good meal is coming.

Then Kiva lifts his head. 'Did you hear that?' he asks, his chubby cheeks turning pale.

'What?'

'I heard it,' says Ziv, getting to his feet.

Like a whistle in the air, the sound comes first from the left, then the right, from above, then below. 'We're surrounded!' Kiva cries, his cheeks now white as two boiled potatoes. 'Cossacks!' he screeches, as small whistling birds rise up out of the grass all around them and fly away.

When two Christian children are found dead in the town of Kishinev, an angry mob led by Cossacks start a pogrom, believing Jews used the children's blood to prepare the matzohs eaten on Passover. What, matzohs? That's ridiculous. Matzohs are made only from wheat which is never exposed to moisture or allowed to ferment in any way.

In Kishinev, the local police make no attempt to stop the mob. Nails are driven through Jewish heads, bellies split and filled with feathers. Many decide this is the last straw and make plans to leave for America where there are no angry mobs, no graveyard ghosts, starving birds with sooty wings, muddy puddles, damp walls, or bleak faces. Whole families depart. Even girls. Girls, it is said, who were ugly in Mezritsh become beautiful in America. Why stay?

What are they called, those little birds, Elya wonders, bending over the good fire he's built, while Ziv gets out his slingshot and takes aim.

'Put that away!' Elya cries.

A moment later he gets up and shakes himself, as if waking from a dream. Elya doesn't care about birds. All he cares about is commerce. Yet he finds himself trying, over and over again, to imitate their whistling song, giving Ziv a headache. Kiva only knows those birds unfit to eat: birds that inhabit the ruins of Babylon, and birds that dwell in the clefts of desert rocks.

The Audubon Society for the protection, preservation and appreciation of birds has recently been established beyond the borders of Poland. The Society's main purpose is to convince women like Elya's mother to cease buying, wearing or admiring feathered hats. No feathered hats? A bird in Poland only exists for its hat feathers.

Nursing a sore head, Ziv watches while his friends recommence unpacking. Using Elya's pocket knife, which he sharpens on his shoe, Ziv whittles the end of his walking stick to a point.

'Too bad about his head,' observes Elya.

'It's not his head,' Kiva whispers.

'His neck?'

'No, not his neck.'

'His arm?'

'No, not that either.'

'Then what?'

But Kiva won't say.

Elya has made a cooking crane with his shovel, leaning it at just the right angle against a heavy log placed on one side of the fire, then hanging their soup pot from the handle.

When the soup starts bubbling, Elya calls them to eat.

But where's Kiva?

Praying.

The setting sun grows enormous, then sinks below the horizon. Kiva makes two more blessings. One for the setting sun, another for the food they are about to share.

‘Like peasants,’ Ziv says.

Frowning, Kiva shakes out a linen napkin. Where did he get that? Ziv throws a hard-boiled egg at him. ‘Catch, chubby cheeks.’

The egg hits Kiva in the chest and falls to the ground.

‘Hey,’ Elya cries. ‘We might need that.’

‘Sorry,’ says Kiva. But it’s Ziv who should be sorry.

Kiva has a clever collapsing cup which he folds and unfolds like a magician, then allows Ziv to do it. ‘Thanks.’ Ziv catches him in a tender headlock, then lets him go.

An indoor boy who drinks raisin wine on the Sabbath, Kiva honours his father with a silver medal won for Torah study, and carries numerous pairs of shoes along with a supreme, stainless pillow in his oversized backpack. Waving his linen napkin, he blesses even the dirt already beginning to accumulate under his fingernails.

After eating and drinking, they dig a latrine near the edge of the woods. Elya digs then gives the shovel to Kiva. Kiva recites a blessing, loads the shovel with earth, but can’t lift it. ‘Sorry.’ He tries again, taking less this time. His father, the miller, can heft a five-pood sack of flour, sometimes two at once. ‘I’ll toughen you up,’ Elya promises. ‘Watch me.’ He feels great affection for Kiva, whose chubby cheeks are now red as plums.

Ziv can’t dig. The pain in his head has travelled to his shoulder. If Ziv could dig, he’d dig a better, deeper latrine than Elya or Kiva.

‘Too bad about his shoulder,’ observes Elya.

‘It’s not his shoulder,’ Kiva whispers.

‘His back?’

‘Not his back.’

‘His feet? Knees? Elbows? Legs?’

‘It’s his haemorrhoids.’

‘*Vas iz haemorrhoids?*’ Elya asks.

'*Tsores.*'

Something painful upon which Ziv is forced to perch, haemorrhoids are like a ball of mud stuck through with twigs, brambles and burrs clinging to the seat of his pants.

After dinner, they roast potatoes. 'Go on, Kiva.' Ziv hands him a potato on a stick. The skin is charred black and covered in ash. Kiva looks at it dubiously. 'That's the best part,' Ziv tells him.

It's still too hot, and Kiva burns his mouth eating it off the stick. '*Wasser!*' he cries, and Ziv splashes him with water from their flask. 'Sorry,' Kiva says once more, as if it were his fault. And perhaps it is. Before taking a bite he has forgotten the blessing. *Wasser* drips from his face to his chest, soaking his shirt. Then Ziv jumps on him and motions Elya to join in. They wrestle Kiva to the ground and give him dead limbs. Kiva tries to get up. He can't feel his arms or legs. Well that's the whole point. Now he's hopping on one leg, one arm dangling. They howl with laughter, Kiva howling loudest.