

## The Boy Who Could See Witches

**T**HE DAY SACHA found out he could see witches was the worst day of his life.

It started out as a perfectly ordinary Friday afternoon—if you could ever call Friday afternoons on Hester Street ordinary.

People said there were more human beings per square mile on New York's Lower East Side than in the Black Hole of Calcutta, and Sacha thought it must be true. The roar of all those people was like the surf of a mighty ocean. You could hear them working and eating, talking and praying, running the sewing machines that clattered away from dawn to dusk in the windows of every tenement building. You could feel their dreams crackling along the cobblestones like the electricity in the big transformers down at Thomas Edison's Pearl Street power station. And you could feel the shivery static charge of their magic—both the legal and the illegal kind.

Not that anyone was worried about illegal magic at half

past four on a Friday afternoon. Fridays on Hester Street were only about one thing: shopping.

Pushcarts packed every inch of pavement from the East River Docks to the Bowery. Mobs of housewives jostled and hollered, desperate to get their *Shabbes* shopping done before sunset. Salesmen cut through the crowd like sharks, hunting for customers to cajole, bully, or physically drag into their basement storefronts. Pack peddlers and day-old-bread sellers battled for space in the gutter, each one bellowing at the top of his lungs that his wares were cheaper, better tasting, and better for you than anyone else's.

Every piece of food had to be sold now, before the whole Lower East Side shut down for *Shabbes*. After that the city closed all the stores on Sunday to make sure the *goyim* stayed sober for church. And after that . . . well, if you had anything left to sell on Monday, you might as well just throw it out. Because no Jewish housewife was ever in a million years going to feed *her* family three-day-old anything.

Most Fridays, Sacha's mother got off work at the Pentacle Shirtwaist Factory just in time to race home, grab the week's savings out of the pickle jar behind the stove, and dash back outside half an hour before sunset.

That was when the real craziness began.

You'd think a woman with only half an hour to do three days' worth of grocery shopping wouldn't have time to haggle. But if you thought that, you didn't know Ruthie Kessler. Sacha's mother went shopping like a general goes to war. Her weapons were a battered shopping basket, a blistering tongue,

and a fistful of pennies. And her children were her foot soldiers.

Sacha and his older sister, Bekah, would sprint up and down Hester Street, ducking around knees and elbows and dodging within a hair's breadth of oncoming traffic. They'd visit every shop, every pushcart, every pack peddler. They'd race back to their mother to report on the state of the enemy's battle lines. And then Mrs. Kessler would issue her orders and dole out her pennies:

"Three cents for an onion? That's *meshuga*! Tell Mr. Kaufmann no one else is charging more than two!"

"What do you mean you're not sure how fresh Mrs. Lieberman's tomatoes are? Are you my son, or aren't you? Go back and *squeeze* them!"

"All right, all right! Tell Mr. Rabinowitz you'll take the herring. But if he chops the head off like he did last week, I'm sending it back. I never buy a fish until I see the whites of its eyes!"

This Friday the shopping seemed like it would never end. But at last the sun sank toward the Bowery. The shouting faded, and the crowds began to break up and drift away. Mrs. Kessler looked upon her purchases and found them good—or at least as good as a hardworking Jewish mother was willing to admit that anything in this wicked world could be.

"We've got a few minutes," she told her children as they hefted their overflowing baskets and began to stagger home. "Let's stop off at Mrs. Lassky's bakery for some *rugelach*."

"No thanks," Bekah said. "I'm not hungry. And anyway I have homework."

Mrs. Kessler watched her daughter go with narrowed eyes, fingering the little silver locket she always wore around her neck. "So secretive," she murmured. "You'd almost think . . . well, never mind. It's a mystery what girls want these days."

It might be a mystery what Bekah wanted, but there was no mistaking what the girls lining up outside Mrs. Lassky's bakery were after. The big English sign over the door said . . . But that sign was only there to fool the cops. And since there was no such thing as a Jewish Inquisitor in the New York City Police Department, the handwritten Yiddish signs taped to the shop window made no bones about what was really for sale inside:

NOSH ON THIS!  
OUR  
DELICIOUSLY EFFICACIOUS  
KNISHES  
ARE GUARANTEED TO  
GET ANY GIRL MARRIED WITHIN THE YEAR  
(MULTIPLE DOSES MAY BE REQUIRED  
IN SPECIAL CASES)

STOP SAYING "OY VEY!"  
START SAYING "OYTZER!"  
ONE BITE OF OUR  
MYSTERIOUSLY MONOGAMOUS  
MARZIPAN  
WILL MAKE HIM YOURS FOREVER!

TIRED OF WAITING FOR HER  
TO MAKE UP HER MIND?  
HAVE A MOTHER-IN-LATKE  
YOU PICK THE PERFECT SON-IN-LAW,  
WE DO THE REST!

Sacha had never quite understood *why* magic was illegal in America. He just knew that it was. And that his mother and practically every other housewife on Hester Street cheerfully ignored the law whenever disapproving husbands and fathers—not to mention the NYPD Inquisitors—were safely elsewhere.

Luckily, though, Sacha didn't have to worry about that. He'd made it all the way through his *bar mitzvah* without showing an ounce of magical talent—and he couldn't have been happier about it.

Inside Mrs. Lassky's tiny shop, the air was thick with magic. Customers packed every nook and cranny like pickled herring. Half of them were shouting out orders, the other half were trying to pay, and they were all yammering away at each other like gossip was about to be outlawed tomorrow. Behind the counter, the Lassky twins scurried back and forth under drifting clouds of pastry flour. Mrs. Lassky sat at the ornate cash register accepting cash, compliments—and, yes, even the occasional complaint.

“Do you see anything on that sign about a perfect *hus-*

*band?*” she was saying as Sacha and his mother finally reached the front of the line. “A perfect son-in-law I can deliver. But a perfect husband? There is no such thing!”

The other women waiting in line at the counter began chiming in one after another.

“She’s right, *bubeleh!* Show me a woman with a perfect husband, and I’ll show you a widow!”

“Perfect, shmerfect! Take it from me, sweetie. If it’s after ten in the morning and he’s not drunk, he’s perfect!”

When Mrs. Lassky caught sight of Sacha, she leaned over the counter and pinched him on both cheeks. “So handsome you’re getting, just like your Uncle Mordechai! But skinny! We need to fatten you up a little. How about a nice hot Make-Her-Challah-for-You? Not that you need any luck with the ladies.” She pinched his cheeks again for good measure. “Sooo adorable!”

“No thanks,” Sacha said, blushing furiously and wiping flour off his face. “Just a *rugelach*. And plain’s fine.”

“Well, if you change your mind, remember I’ve got two lovely daughters.”

“Speaking of daughters,” Sacha’s mother said ominously, “I’ll have a Mother-in-Latke.”

“Oh, Ruthie, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Your Bekah’s the prettiest girl on Hester Street.”

“*Kayn aynhoreh!*” Mrs. Kessler muttered, making the sign to ward off the evil eye. “And anyway she’s as stubborn as a mule. You should hear the wild ideas she’s picking up at night school.” Mrs. Kessler made it sound as if you could

catch ideas like you caught head lice. “Do you know what she told me the other day? That marriage is just a bourgeois convention. I could’ve *schreied!*”

“Well,” Mrs. Lassky said, “I don’t know anything about bourgeois convection. But I *do* know about son-in-laws. Come here, girls! And bring the latkes so I can make one up special for Mrs. Kessler!”

Sacha’s mother squinted at the tray of steaming hot latkes. “Hmm. I could do with a little less handsome. Handsome is as handsome does—and it doesn’t do much after the wedding night. And while you’re at it, why don’t you add a dash of frugality and another shake or two of work ethic?”

“Your mother,” Mrs. Lassky told Sacha, “is a wise woman.”

And then she did it.

Whatever *it* was.

Something flimmered over her head, like the hazy halo that blossomed around street lamps on foggy nights. Sacha guessed it must be what people called an aura. Except that the word *aura* sounded all mysterious and scientific. And the flimmery light around Mrs. Lassky and her latkes just looked grandmotherly and frazzled, and a little silly and, well . . . a lot like Mrs. Lassky herself.

“What did you just do?” he asked her.

“Nothing, sweetie. Don’t worry your curly head about it.”

“But you *did* something. Something magi—*ow!*”

Sacha’s mother had just kicked him hard in the shin.

“Why’d you kick me?” he yelped, hopping up and down on one foot.

“Don’t fib,” his mother snapped. “Nobody likes a liar!”

Later Sacha would wonder how he could have been so stupid. But at the time, he was too outraged to hear the bell tinkling over the bakery’s front door. Or to see Mrs. Lassky’s mouth falling open in horror. Or to notice the crowd behind him parting like the Red Sea for Moses.

“I am not a liar!” he insisted. “I *saw* it!”

But just as he was about to say what he’d seen, a heavy hand clapped him on the shoulder and spun him around—and he was face-to-face with a New York City Police Department Inquisitor in full uniform.

Sacha’s head was about level with the man’s belt buckle, so it took what seemed like an eternity for his eyes to travel up the vast expanse of navy blue uniform to the silver badge with the dread word stamped boldly across it. Above the badge the man’s eyes were the crisp blue of a cloudless sky.

“Well now, boyo,” the Inquisitor said, taking out his black leather ticket book and checking off the box for . “Why don’t you tell me just exactly what you saw. And make sure you get it right, ’cause you’re going to have to repeat it all to the judge come Monday morning.”