

THE GOLEM OF PRAGUE

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JANUARY 21, 1892: NIGHTTIME IN PRAGUE

Prague is fast asleep. The blue sky has grown dark. Everyone has gone inside. The lights have dimmed. Time stands still as a deep silence overtakes the city.

The moon opens one eye and peers through the windows.

In Rooster Lane, the old houses with their colorless walls and locked gates hug one another tightly as if to keep from falling down.

On the second floor of the last house, an oil lamp burns. It shines on a man with a black skullcap perched on his white hair. Aaron Wassertrum, the old puppeteer, is bent over a wooden table. He is making dolls, designing sets, and inventing magical stories to bring them to life.

While sewing a tiny velvet ribbon around the neck of a princess with blond hair and a purple robe, he mutters, “Oh, my wooden creatures, how I love making you come alive!”

On the third floor, the moon with its pearly brush touches the face of Miriam, daughter of Anshel Ginzburg, the junk dealer. Her porcelain complexion and delicate skin seem to be the very source of the moon’s glow. She is fast asleep, breathing gently.



On the top floor, the silvery light lands on a small, empty room. The bed, which has not been slept in, belongs to Frantz Munka, son of the jeweler. Frantz said that tonight he would stay with his best friend, David Meshullan.

But where is Frantz really?



EARLIER THAT EVENING

Before night fell, Frantz crept out of Rooster Lane. But he did not go to David's house. Like a shadow gliding silently through Prague's laneways, he went in the opposite direction, toward Cervena Street and the Old New Synagogue.

A beggarwoman with a gray, wrinkled face cried out as he passed, "Where are you running like that, my boy? To an appointment with the devil?"

Frantz did not reply. He stopped only once along the way. He couldn't resist the sight of the old puppeteer standing in the square.

Whenever Aaron Wassertrum set up his puppet theater, children came running from every corner, their eyes gleaming with excitement.

A LOST HEART

On the stage draped in a red curtain and lit by flickering torches, the puppeteer was telling the story of two children who swore to love each other forever. A painted backdrop showed a beautiful garden with a large pool, an old stone staircase, and a moss-covered statue.

The children were exchanging their vows at the edge of the pool. The girl wanted to seal her pledge with the crimson heart strung around her neck on a black velvet ribbon. But as she handed it to the boy, the ribbon tore.

The heart rolled away and the boy was filled with despair. He searched for the heart while softly singing:

*Where did the red stone heart go
That fell from your neck white as snow?
Where did the blood-red stone fall
That sealed our love once and for all?*

Behind him, Punch, in his multicolored costume, was making faces. Everyone could hear his cruel laughter as he waved the ruby-red heart back and forth above his head. The children in the audience cried out, “It’s there! It’s there! Punch stole the heart.”

Among the children, Frantz recognized Miriam. They hardly ever spoke when they ran into each other on the stairs or in the courtyard, but when they did, their words left a deep impression. Miriam wasn’t shouting like the other children. She was staring wide-eyed at the scarlet heart dangling from Punch’s fingers. In the dim light, her pale, translucent face shone like a piece of the moon. Frantz thought of the precious moonstone on his father’s workbench, how it gave off a bluish-white light.

Suddenly, Miriam felt Frantz’s presence. She turned toward him and stared, as if she was still watching the puppet show.

In the dying light, Miriam seemed unreal, dreamlike. Like the boy in the puppet show, Frantz was determined to find the heart. He ran as fast as he could.







LAST SPRING: THE FORBIDDEN ATTIC

As he ran, he remembered that day in the spring when the caretaker at the Old New Synagogue told the story of the Golem. In a solemn voice, he had begun to speak: “Long ago, in the Middle Ages, the Jews of Prague were under constant fear of death or expulsion. Rabbi Yehuda Loew, also known as the Maharal of Prague, was famous for his knowledge, wisdom, and courage. He decided to create a Golem, a giant made of clay, to protect the Jews of Prague. Nothing could vanquish or destroy it. But later, the Maharal smashed it to pieces. Its dusty remains were put in the attic of the Old New Synagogue.”

He stopped talking and looked each boy in the eye before adding in a somber voice, “You must never try to go into the attic. Do not even open the trapdoor to look inside. One boy who tried went mad and another lost his life. Do you understand?”

A chorus of voices shouted Yes! so loudly the walls shook. Only Frantz Munka remained silent.



From then on, he never had a moment's peace. All he wanted was to enter the forbidden attic. He didn't dare mention it to anybody, not even his best friend, David. Frantz knew that David would refuse to take part in his insane plan and would tell on him for fear of seeing him die or go mad.

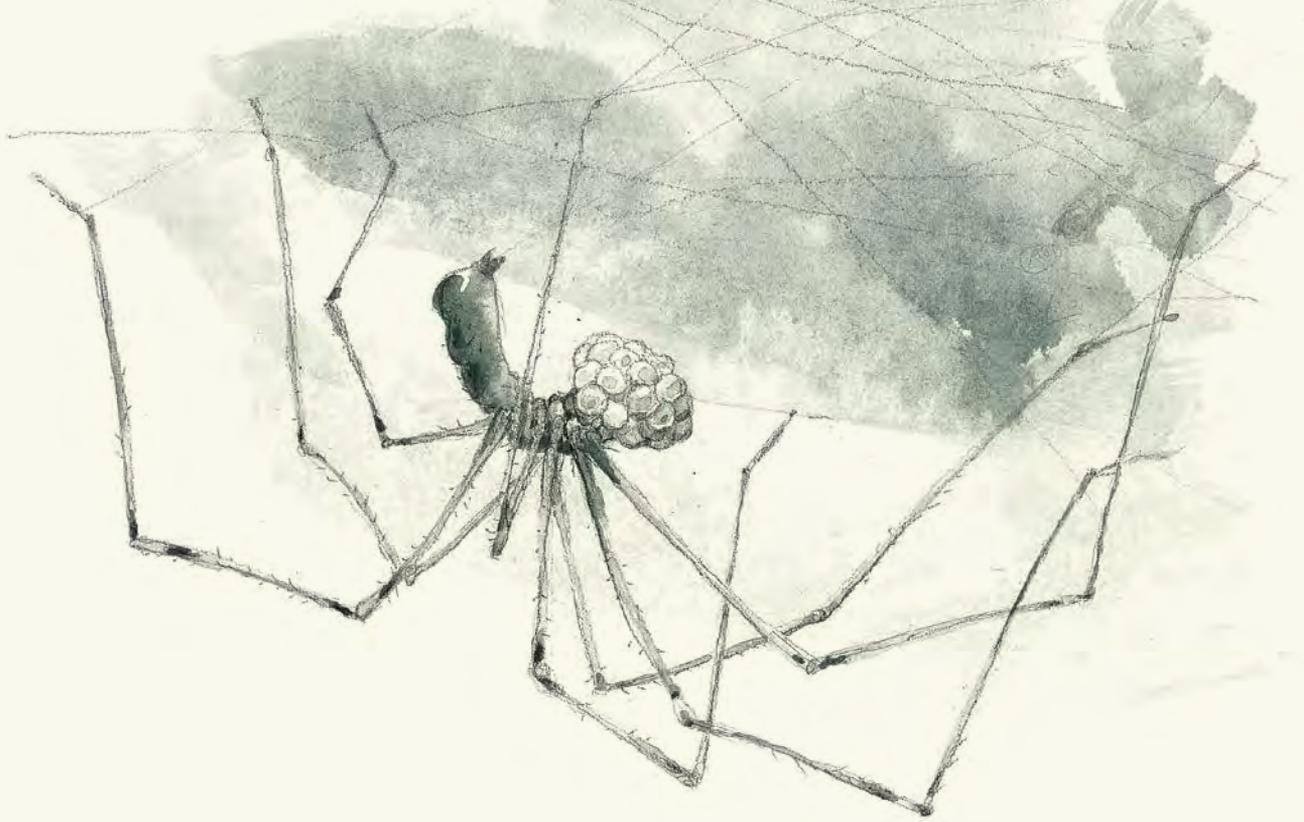
Torn between a gnawing curiosity and fear, he never let a day go by without passing by the Old New Synagogue or the ancient Jewish cemetery, close to the Vltava River.

On prayer days, he stood with his father under the vaulted stone ceiling of the synagogue, which now seemed alive and mysterious.

In the old cemetery, he contemplated the imposing tomb of the Maharal, which looked like a real building with its columns, carved garlands of fruit, and, on top, the symbol of the Maharal: a lion.

Today, January 21, 1892, Frantz decided to disobey the old caretaker. When he arrived at the corner of Maiselova Street, he looked up at the clock on the town hall. He loved this old clock with its two faces. They both said seven o'clock: the number seven on one and on the other, the letter zayin, the seventh letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

The little doorway on the north side of the synagogue was always open. Frantz looked around, then as quietly and as nimbly as a cat, he slipped through the half-open door. Whenever he had been in the synagogue before, it was like a beehive with the constant buzz of people praying, singing, and chattering. But now there was a deep silence that made him nervous.



People said that at night the dead met there to study and pray. But they also said that angels had built the synagogue with stones taken from the ruins of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. And when a terrible fire almost destroyed the Jewish Quarter, two mysterious doves landed on the facade of the synagogue and, by beating their wings, they prevented the fire from spreading. Were they not the angels who always kept watch over the synagogue? Frantz felt somewhat reassured.

But as he climbed the stairway leading to the trapdoor to the attic, all his courage abandoned him. He shook so hard that he could barely move one foot in front of the other.

But it was too late to turn back. Terrified, he pushed the trapdoor to the attic open and went in.