

**Excerpts from: Bella Chagall: Burning Lights: A Unique Double  
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For me the Sabbath begins as early as Thursday toward sunset. In the late evening, mother runs quickly out of the shop as though trying to wrest herself by force from the weekday bustle. While she is still in the shop, I hear her calling out: „Bashke, where are you? We're going to the bathhouse. Sasha, is the linen ready? Hurry, hurry, I have no time!“

The maid quickly wraps up the bundle of linen and ties it with a cord so heavy that the paper bursts. She helps me to put on my coat and galoshes and tightens my hood. I cannot breathe.

„You silly little girl, don't cry,“ she says, wiping off the tears that well up in my eyes. „It's freezing out and all I need is that you should catch a cold, God forbid!“ Almost furtively mother and I slip out through the front door of our apartment, as though it were already Saturday and the shop were closed. For mother would be ashamed to go through the shop with the bundle of linen under her arm, although it is wrapped in yellow paper. But the shop is full of men, and besides, who knows but that she might be detained there again. We are in a hurry, chiefly because it is late. Indeed, mother has waited until the last moment to go. The sleigh that is to take us to the bathhouse must be waiting for us at the door. The driver, who is always the same one (he is in fact stationed across from our house) knows that every Thursday evening, almost at the same hour, mother drives to the bath house.

The cold, snowy evening at once envelops us in a sheet of frost. In the sleigh, covered with the worn-out fur blanket, I feel through mother's hand as she holds me lest, God forbid, I should slide down that she has already forgotten the shop and the bustle that she has just left. She is carried away in the sleigh somewhere

into a pure air, as though she were already beginning to tremble in awe of all the holy texts that, God willing, she must recite before the Sabbath comes.

We travel for not so long a time. The driver takes us by a short cut, along the bank of a little river, the Vitbe, near which stands the Jewish bathhouse. Our sleigh tears silently through the shimmering air. From the high bank of the river trembling little lights are beckoning. This is the glow from Padlo, the little market place that lies up there on the heights.

I know the market very well; I know its shopkeepers and its little shops, sunk in the earth, and especially the dairy shops. Before going down the stone stairs to the dairy stalls, one had to call on the Lord's help, so wet and slippery were they. And it was cold there as in a grave. The gray walls dripped water. One single little lamp with a smoked-up glass served to light the whole cellar. Its tiny beam barely reached the mounds of yellow butter, the broad basin that held cream, and even less did it reach the corners where they kept hard, pointed Gomel cheeses, which stuck out like little children's heads. Only the high scales could be seen clearly. There they were in the middle of the cellar like a throne. Their iron chains swung in the air like two long black braids of hair, and their two brass trays proudly held a tiny bit of merchandise much as if they were supporting Justice herself. The shopkeepers, in thick, greasy clothes, bustled about in the cellar. With their fingertips sticking out from their mitts they seized pieces of butter, poured pitchers of milk, and tossed curds just as they would snowballs. And while doing all this they yelled as though someone were beating them from behind. They were probably keeping warm in this way. From time to time a coarse word shot through the stuffy cellar. Curses flew out like little tongues of flame, setting ablaze one little stall after another. „May the cholera take her, for the poisoned food she sells!“

„A curse on my years, if I am lying!“ The stall keepers would begin to squeal like black mice in their holes. The curses glowed hotter along with the pots of hot coals outside, on which squatted stocky Jewish women peddlers holding bags of roasted beans under their shawls. The shopkeepers reviled one another so warmly and lustily that their dark cellars would grow almost cheerful. All these cries now accompany us from afar as mother and I drive to the bathhouse. The wind blows a curse at us, tosses it about in the air. The falling snow carries the curse down to the ground. And so we arrive.

„Come back for us, God willing, in a couple of hours,“ mother says to the driver, although he has been doing this for years.

In the frame vestibule we bump into the ticket seller, wrapped up like a bale of goods. At first she does not stir from her place. One sees only the end of her nose and the tips of her fingers. Next to the tickets there is a glazed apple and a pear. A bit of blue kvass blue probably from the frost bubbles in a bottle.

The cashier, as though absorbing our warm breath, slowly undoes her half-frozen mouth and gives us a cold smile.

„It is cold to sit here the whole day,“ she says, beginning to revive. „The wind is blowing from all sides. A little more of this and one would freeze to death before at last a living being came.“

Mother encourages her with a smile and takes from her an apple or a pear for me. We push at the little door leading to the bath itself. The noise of the latch being raised arouses a couple of naked women resting under their shawls. Like startled flies they jump up from their benches and hum around us.

„Good evening to you, good evening, Alta, my dear! So late! How are you, Alta? Are all the children well? How are you, Bashinke?“ The women touch me from all sides. „Ah, you're growing up as on yeast may the evil eye spare you!“

They are warmed up, they have not waited in vain. The shawls like black wings fall from their backs. Before me there flashes the whiteness of their bodies. Everything becomes purer, brighter, all about.

The heat of the anteroom leading to the bath mingles with the cold outside air that has blown in. I can hardly recognize the bath attendants, although they are always the same. I used to think that every Thursday they had grown older, uglier. The younger one, who still smells of her moldy shawl, seizes me at once with her bony hands. „It's cold, isn't it?“ she says. „Well, have you unpinned your dress? Have you got another one with you? Well, we'll put it in the box. Now, hold out your leg come on!“ She urges me as if I were a colt. And before I have time to look around me, all the buttons of my shoes are unbuttoned, and the shoes with my twisted stockings fly into the black box on which I sit. My buttocks rise and fall with the lid of the box. I have not even had a chance to see what goes on inside the box, into which my belongings are tossed as into a dark pit. From the frosted window panes, coated over with snow like a pair of blind eyes, a wind blows. I shake from cold. The bath attendant snatches up my sheet and wraps me in it. „Well, wait awhile!“ she says. „In a minute you'll be warm! See, we are going to the bath at once.“ I feel giddy. She drags me like a bewildered captive straight over to the little door. „Do not fall, Bashinke, God forbid,“ she says, pulling me with her teely hands. „Walk slowly, it's slippery.“ In the doorway to the bath my breath is cut off and I allow myself to be dragged along, half in a faint. A dense cloud veils my eyes. A little tin lamp hangs from its bent hook high above the door. Its chimney, tiny as it is, is still too large for it, and it wobbles in all directions as soon as one touches the door. I remain glued to the spot. I am afraid to move. The floor is slippery, full of water. Water drips on my feet, drips from the ceiling, from the walls; the whole of the little house is sweating from the heat. The attendant rushes to the buckets and rinses the slippery bench on which I am supposed to sit. She has no time to say a word to me. Her glistening,

scrawny rump twists like the tail of a cat. Boiling water is poured out, seething. The buckets near me immediately breathe their heat into my face. The warmth of the bench soothes me and I allow the attendant to put my legs into a bucket of luke warm water. The woman comes closer to me. Her breasts hang before my eyes like deflated windbags, and her belly, with its skin taut like a drum, comes just under my nose. I am penned up between the buckets and the attendant's belly. I cannot turn, I cannot even think of turning. Her scratchy fingers gather up my long hair. With one motion she heaps it on my head and begins to rub it with a big cake of Zhukov soap. She pushes the soap back and forth as though she were ironing clothes with it on my head. Buried under hair, my head whirling, I have no time to think of crying. Smothering my tears, I pull out the bits of acrid soap that cut and bite my eyes. Soap gets into my ears, my mouth. Blindly I dip my fingers into a bucket of cold water beside me. I get down from the bench only when my hair is rinsed. Long drops of water roll down into my eyes and heal them. I catch my breath, straighten my back; my eyes open. I hear a creak of the door and on the threshold I see my whitely nude mother. She is immediately enveloped in the cloud of hot steam. Two attendants hold her at either side. Little tears of sweat drip from their hanging breasts and bellies. A thin little rain of drops, condensed from the steam, suddenly trickles from their hair behind their ears.

Silent and embarrassed, mother stands at the door. Her attendants rush to the buckets, open wide all the taps. They pass steam over the bench for her. Mother calmly sits down and her body occupies the whole bench. Exhausted from being scrubbed, I hardly see her from where I am. She is ill at ease even before me and lowers her eyes as soon as my glance rests on her hair. Instead of her accustomed thickly curled wig, I see her own short, scraggly hair. Smothered for years without air under the heavy wig, it has thinned out. I become sad, suddenly losing my own strength, and allow myself to be washed without resisting.

My attendant seizes my body, she even lays hands upon my soul. She places me on the bench like a piece of dough and begins to rub and pinch me; she might be trying to knead a challa out of me. I turn over on my stomach, and she gives me such a whack on my bottom that I jump up. „Well, what do you say, Bashinke? It's good, isn't it?“ says the attendant, suddenly recovering her speech. „Look, how red you have become! It's a pleasure to pinch you!“

Exhausted, I wait till I am rid of her. Suddenly I am frightened by a flood of water poured on me from behind. For a moment I am engulfed in the stream, the water lifts me and carries me as though I were in a river. This is the attendant rinsing me. From delight and heat, I melt like white wax, „Oof!“ sighs the attendant, wiping her nose with her wet hands. „You're shining just like a little diamond, Bashinke! May this give you health, my child! „ She looks at me with her glassy eyes, faded by the water, and quickly wraps me in a warm sheet. Surely she will at last dry herself off a little. She slowly encircles me with her two arms as if I were her white Sabbath candles that she must bless. From a distance I watch what is being done to my mother. Surely she has been soaped and rubbed just as I have been, and surely she too has taken delight in the buckets of lukewarm water. But she is not through as quickly as I.

After the scrubbing the older attendant pushes a low stool up to my mother and sits at her feet. She puts a brass candlestick on a little box and lights the piece of candle that is stuck in it. She fans the little flame and begins to complain to mother about her hard life. Her back sinks heavily, as though all her troubles were heaped on it; her drooping head is at mother's feet. „May God have mercy upon us and deliver us from all pain,“ she says, lifting her eyes from the ground. „So be it, Lord of the Universe!“ She must be trying to forget her own thoughts as she picks at mother's toes. The little flame burns brightly with each blessing she murmurs before cutting the nail. And her heart becomes more serene, it seems, with each blessing. Mother, with lowered eyes, watches what the attendant does

to her feet, listens to her pattering. Behind the burning candle both are fenced off from the dark bath chamber as within a crown of light. Their heads are close together; their white faces shine in a sort of purification.

Having cleaned mother's toes, the old attendant raises her head and says in a low voice: „Now, let us go to the mikvah!“ Mother swallows her breath as though the attendant had told a secret. The two rise slowly, straighten their backs, sigh deeply, take a long breath as though preparing to cross the threshold of the holy of holies. Their white shadows vanish in the darkness. I am afraid to go too. One has to pass a hot chamber where writhing souls lie in torment on long benches. Steaming bosoms swing out of the air and lash them and spatter them with drops of hot water. Heavy breathing comes from the benches, as though all of them were being burned on hot coals. The heat presses into my mouth, seizes me by the heart. „This must be a hell for those who have committed many sins!“ I think to myself and run after my mother to the mikvah, I stumble into a black chamber like a prison. On a staircase stands the old attendant. In one hand she holds the burning candle; from her other arm dangles a large white sheet. Mother I have been so fearful about her quietly descends the four slippery steps and goes into the water up to her neck. When the old Jewess cries out a blessing, mother is frightened. Like one condemned, she holds her nose, closes her eyes, and plunges into the water as though forever- God forbid! „Ko-o-o-sheer!“ cries the attendant, with the voice of a prophet. I am startled as by a thunderclap. Trembling, I wait surely now lightning will strike from the black ceiling and slay us all on the spot. Or perhaps a deluge will pour from the stone wall and drown us in the dark mikvah. „Ko-o-o-sheer!“ the attendant cries out again. Where is mother? The water does not splash any more. But suddenly the pool splits open and mother's head emerges. She shakes off water as if she were coming up from the very bottom of the sea. Three times the attendant cries out, and three times mother sinks into the black water. I am desperately waiting for the moment

when the attendant will stop shouting, so that mother will no longer have to disappear in the water. After all, she is tired by now. Water streams down from her hair, from her ears. But she is smiling. Contentment spreads over her whole body. She walks from the water as from a fire, clean and purified. „May it do you good, may it give you health,“ the attendant says, smiling too. Her long, thin arms lift the sheet up high. Mother wraps herself in it as in a pair of huge white wings, and smiles on me like a white angel.

Dressed, all finished with my steaming, I chew my glazed apple, which has long since melted from the heat, and wait for mother. At once she begins to hurry, as though she recalls suddenly that it is a week day, that the shop is still open. The sanctity and the warmth of the bath slip from her. She is in a hurry to get dressed. The women tell her the last tales of trouble, while one hands her dress to her, the other a shoe. They are probably afraid to leave anything untold, lest they should have to wait until the following Thursday to unburden their hearts. With trembling hands they wrap up our bundle of linen, and they wrap me too like a bundle. Swollen with warmth, I can hardly move. Mother distributes her tips and listens to the long benedictions with which the women send us off. „May it give you health, dear Altai Till next Thursday, if God wills! Keep well, Bashinke! May it do you good!“ One woman shouts louder than another, and all of them quickly cover themselves with their shawls.

The door opens as of itself. For a moment we stop on the threshold. What cold! Snow is falling from the black sky. Stars glimmer, and snowflakes. Is it day or night? To my eyes all is white and cold. The driver and his horse have grown into a high white mountain. Are they frozen? „May you have health!“ the driver says with a smile. His wet mustache comes unglued from his mouth. Little lumps of snow fall from his thick eyebrows. The horse awakens to life and begins to neigh. „God speed you!“ Voices call to us from the door of the bathhouse. The sleigh starts. „Hup, hup!“ The driver lashes at his thin horse.



Even faster than when she left, mother runs in at the front door and leaves her bundle of linen there. The smell of our apartment and of the shop hits her in the face. „God alone knows what has gone on here in my absence!“ With a look of guilt, she hastens to wash her reddened face and then hurries to the shop. I am regretting that the warm bath has ended so soon.