Hersh Dovid Nomberg

By a Lonely Grave

Translated from Yiddish by Daniel Kennedy

I met him in the mountains, on my way to an alpine village that lies buried in a narrow pass on the edge of a fast stream. I wanted to spend the night there and then move on higher the next morning. He, on the other hand, had no intention of going any further.

I soon realized that he was not your typical tourist. He knew the village well, telling me that it was home to both Catholics and Protestants, that there were two churches and two graveyards, and that he knew some people there.

He came from the far north, from Norway, and was not overly fond of Switzerland.

"You should really see Norway some day," he told me. "The fjords, the bright nights, the cliffs! You must promise to visit me there next summer, to see for yourself."

I couldn't figure out what kind of a man he was, what he was doing there, or why, catching up with me on his long legs, he dove so eagerly into conversation that he was already inviting me to visit him in Norway. What was in it for him?

"You're a Russian, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly, a Jew from Russia," I said

"Of course that's what I meant. Exactly! Exactly!"

He'd had an acquaintance once; she too had been a Jew from Russia…. And I started to understand the intimacy that had developed so quickly between us. Incidentally, the man made quite a strong, unsettling impression; he was tall and blond, built like a giant, but had soft, strangely childlike blue eyes. He spoke naively, but his movements were energetic. He was one of those people whose simple words contain the echo of long and deep torment and yearning, which undermines even their best attempts at smiling, and lingers on in our memories of them.

We arrived just as darkness was falling; the surrounding snowy peaks still shimmered faintly in a pinkish glow. I was tired, and prepared myself for a sleepless, nerve-ridden night.

Ah, I know those moonlit nights in the mountains! As the air cools at night, the sky wraps itself up in a grey fog and it seems as if a storm is coming. But then, the slightest wind is enough to drive the fog away and the moon breaks through, pouring out an intoxicating brightness. If you look out the window, you'll see the snow gleaming in the moonlight. From far and near you

can hear the music of the Alps ringing out: the bells of livestock grazing in the white night on the pastures, wandering around, far from human eyes, with their shadows—uphill, downhill, ringing, ringing. The stream and waterfalls murmur ceaselessly. Nature lives its life and sings its abundant song. Such nights are not made for sleeping. On nights like those, if you happen to carry some vague hope in your heart or if you have perhaps someone close to you, a dear friend, a lover, then you'll end up thinking about them into the wee small hours, until the first rays of sunlight appear. Only corpses, or withered young souls, should rest there and sleep. I know those moonlit nights in the mountains.

I lay there like a prisoner, in my room filled with moonlight, for a long time, my eyes open, breathing in the sharp, cool mountain air, which intoxicates just like the brightness, just like the far-off bells which ring from the valley below. I got out of bed. It was already well past midnight. I went over to the window and saw the long shadow of a man. I looked carefully and recognized the outline of my new acquaintance, the Norwegian, striding off into the white night, apparently without aim, lost in his own thoughts, distracted.

"If I'm not disturbing you," I called out to him, "I'll get dressed and come down. Who can sleep during a night like this?"

"Good," he answered curtly, a moment later shouting back to me, "but I'd advise you to bring your cape and a scarf, there's a cold wind blowing from the mountains."

I did as he advised and was soon standing next to him. He was silent now; his demeanor had grown less childish and more serious. I thought to myself that this man was not out of place on a night like this; he had some sort of connection to it. You could almost hear something buzzing in his heart without let-up; like a mountain stream, there was something alive within him, singing in him, and he couldn't control it, couldn't get over it. It wouldn't let him free.

He'd been in love with a Jewish girl, a dead girl, who lay buried here in this village, in her own separate corner of the Protestant graveyard. He confided his sad story to me, telling it with all the naivety and trust of a child. He was sure that the tragic destiny of that girl would be a subject as close to my heart as it was to his. Like all Gentiles, he had a strong belief in the solidarity and brotherhood of all Jews. His lover, in a way, was connected to me, like family, like a sister.

It had happened about six years before; he'd been studying in Zurich and fell in love with the Jewish girl. What sort of a woman was she that she could capture and dominate a stranger from the distant north? He described her: pale, with brown hair and big, black eyes; she was quiet and attentive, with an unusual, melodic voice.

She was exactly—so he told me—like a locked harp: taut, shivering strings which hummed silently to themselves. She wasn't everyone's type—she was no great beauty—she was only for him that had the key, who could touch the strings. But what a temperament, what inner life revealed itself then! She was normally silent, contemplative, prone to melancholy—but how lively she could be when it was just you and her; how she could talk and talk without end, chirping like a little bird. There are types of people which nature only creates once, just one single copy, and she was one of those.

And she loved him and gave herself over to him with all the energy of her hidden temperament. They decided to get married, but for that she needed to convert.

"It's remarkable," he told me, "how attached you people are to that religion of yours. She wasn't in the least observant, but even I know what torment it was for her until she finally decided. Long, long nights without sleep, long days going around like mad, until love, her first love, finally overcame her and convinced her to take that step."

The only obstacle was her parents. They were well-off, cultivated people. She hoped to get their blessing, travelling all the way home with that express purpose, but once she got there, she found herself unable to say a single word to them about it. The anti-Jewish pogroms were in full swing in Russia at that time, and her parents had suffered because of them. She returned, tired and broken, not knowing what to do. In the end she confided her secret to her brother who was studying in Bern. He telegraphed their parents and her father came out immediately. She had to give him her word that she wouldn't convert. Once her father left, mollified, I came to her room and barely recognized her; she was terribly distraught, pale and sad.

"What is it, my love?"

She didn't tell me the whole story but I could tell that something was amiss.

"You don't love me anymore?"

"Oh, don't talk! Don't talk! Please…."

"But her voice, her kisses, and her eyes told me more about her love than could ever be expressed in words, and we set off together into the mountains, here to this very village. In this very hotel she poisoned herself after one long, hot night of love.

She wrote me a letter telling the story of what happened with her brother and father. In a separate letter to her parents, whom she loved deep down, she said her goodbyes and asked that her body should not be disturbed. She wanted to be buried here."

And so went the sad tale of a Jewish girl who lies buried in an Alpine village, in her own private corner of the Protestant graveyard.

We continued walking in the moonlit night until we came to the little graveyard that surrounded the church. Low gravestones and crosses twinkled in the light. On the gravestones, you could read short inscriptions from the living to the dead, in the modest style of country folk. We continued until we reached a certain corner with a small iron fence surrounding a flat stone. The Norwegian, unselfconscious despite my presence, knelt down in his childlike naivety. Leaning against the fence, he knelt in silence. Mute.

And all the while, the far-off bells continued to ring and the waterfalls murmured without cease.

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Hersh Dovid Nomberg (1876–1927) was a writer, essayist and political activist, born in Mszczonów near Warsaw. A protégé of I. L. Peretz, he began publishing poems and short stories in around 1900 in both Yiddish and Hebrew. Alongside Sholem Asch and Avrom Reyzen, he was one of the most influential Yiddish writers of his generation. Having penned dozens of successful short stories, he shifted his focus towards journalism and politics following the First World War. He was one of the founders of the *Folkspartey*, a party dedicated to safeguarding secular Jewish cultural autonomy within the Polish Republic, for whom he served as a delegate to the Sejm in 1919–1920.

The bulk of his stories deal with themes of alienation and isolation, with characters who are torn between their traditional upbringing and the intellectual freedoms of the modern world.

"Bay an aynzamer matseyve" (lit: "By a lonely gravestone") was first published in 1911 in the *Haynt*, a popular daily newspaper

printed in Warsaw between 1908 and 1939, and later republished in volume 7 of Nomberg's collected works in 1930. It is one of several stories that Nomberg set in Switzerland, a country he visited on his travels, where he indulges in romanticized depictions of a picturesque landscape, so alien and exotic for his readership.

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