Granny Rumple

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SHE WAS KNOWN AS GRANNY RUMPLE BECAUSE HER dress and face were masses of wrinkles, or at least that's what my father's father's mother used to say. Of course, the Yolens being notorious liars, it might not have been so. It might simply have been a bad translation from the Yiddish. Or jealousy, Granny Rumple having been a great beauty in her day.

Like my great-grandmother, Granny Rumple was a moneylender, one of the few jobs a Jew could have in the Ukraine that brought them into daily contact with the *goyim*. She could have had one of the many traditional women's roles—a matchmaker, perhaps, or an *opshprekherin* giving advice and remedies, or an herb vendor. But she was a moneylender because her husband had been one, and they had no children to take over his business. My great-grandmother, on the other hand, had learned her trade from her father and when he died and she was a widow with a single son to raise, she followed in her father's footsteps. *A sakh melokhes un veynik brokhes*: Many trades and little profit. It was a good choice for both of them.

If Granny Rumple's story sounds a bit like another you have heard, I am not surprised. My father's father used to entertain customers at his wife's inn with a rendition of Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish, passing it off as a story of his own invention. And what is folklore, after all, but the recounting of old tales? We Yolens have always borrowed from the best.

Great-grandmother's story of Granny Rumple was always told in an odd mixture of English and Yiddish, but I am of the generation of Jew who never learned the old tongue. Our parents were ashamed of it, the language of the ghetto. They used it sparingly, for punchlines of off-color jokes or to commiserate with one another at funerals. So my telling of Granny Rumple's odd history is necessarily my own. If I have left anything out, it is due neither to the censorship of commerce nor art, but the inability to get the whole thing straight from my aging relatives. As a Yolen ages, he or she remembers less and invents more. It is lucky none of us is an historian.

As a girl, Granny Rumple's name was Shana and she had been pursued by all the local boys. Even a Cossack or two had knocked loudly at her door of an evening. Such was her beauty, she managed to turn even them away with a smile. When she was finally led under the wedding canopy, the entire village was surprised, for she married neither the chief rabbi's son, a dark-eyed scholar named Lev, nor the local butcher, who was a fat, ribald widower, nor the half dozen others who had asked her. Instead she chose Shmuel Zvi Bar Michael, the moneychanger. No one was more surprised than he, for he was small, skinny, and extremely ugly, with his father's large nose spread liberally across his face. Like many ugly people, though, he was also gentle, kind, and intensely interested in the happiness of others.

"Why did you marry him?" my great-grandmother had wondered.

"Because he proposed to me without stuttering," Shana had replied, stuttering being the one common thread in the other suits. It was all the answer she was ever to give.

By all accounts, it was a love match and the expected children would have followed apace—with Shana's looks, her mother had prayed—but Shmuel was murdered within a year of the wedding.

It is the telling of that murder, ornamented by time, that my great-grandmother liked to tell. Distance lends a fascination to blood tales. It runs in our family. I read murder mysteries; my daughter is a detective.

There was, you see, a walled Jewish ghetto in the town of Ykaterinislav and beyond it, past the trenches where the soldiers practiced every spring, the larger Christian settlement. The separate Jewish quarters are no longer there, of course. It is a family joke: What the Cossacks and Hitler only began, Chernobyl finished.

Every day Shmuel Zvi Bar Michael would say his prayers in his little stone house, donning *tefillin* and giving thanks he was not a woman—but secretly giving thanks as well that he had a woman like Shana in his bed each night. He was not a man unmindful of his blessings and he only stuttered when addressing the Lord G-d.

Then he would make his way past the gates of the ghetto, past the trenches, and onto the twisting cobbled streets of Ykaterinislav proper. He secreted gold in various pockets of his black coat, and sewed extra coins and jewels into the linings of his vest. But of course everyone knew he had such monies on him. He was a changer, after all.

Now one Friday he was going along the High Street where the shops of the merchants leaned despondently on one another. Even in Christian Ykaterinislav recessions could not be ignored and the czar's coinage did not flow as freely there as it did in the great cities. As he turned one particular corner, he heard rather loud weeping coming from beside the mill house. When he stopped in—his profession and his extreme ugliness allowing him entree other Jews did not have—he saw the miller's daughter sobbing messily into her apron. It was a white apron embroidered with gillyflowers on the hem; of such details legends are made real. Shmuel knew the girl, having met her once or twice when doing business with her father, for the miller was always buying on margin and needing extra gold. As a miller's wares are always in demand, Shmuel had no fear that he would not be repaid. *Gelt halt zikh nor in a grobn zak*: Money stays only in a thick sack. The miller's sack, Shmuel knew, was the thickest.

The girl's name was Tasha—Tana to her family— and as pretty as her blond head was, it was empty. If she thought something, she said it, true or not. And she agreed with her father in everything. She would have been beaten otherwise. She was not smart—but she was not *that* stupid.

"Na—na, Tana," Shmuel said, using her familiar name to comfort her. "What goes?"

In between the loud snuffles and rather muffled sobs, she offered up the explanation. Her father had boasted to the mayor of Ykaterinislav that Tana could spin miracles of flax and weave cloth as beautiful as the gold coats of the Burgundian seamstresses.

"And where is Burgundian anyway?" Tana asked, sniffling.

"A long way from here," replied Shmuel. It was little comfort.

"I am a poor spinner at best," Tana confessed. She whispered it for it was nothing to boast of. "And I cannot weave at all. But I *can* cook."

"Na—na, Tana," Shmuel said, "but what is the *real* problem?"

"The real problem?"

"Why are you *really* crying?"

"Oh!" She took a deep breath. "Unless I can spin and sew such a cloth, my father's boast will lose us both our heads."

"This sounds like a fairy tale to me," said Shmuel, though of course he did not use the word *fairy*, that being a French invention. He said "It sounds like a story of the *leshy*." But if I had said that, you would not have understood. And indeed, I did not either, until it was explained to me by an aunt.

"But it is *true*!" she wailed and would be neither comforted nor moved from her version of the facts.

"Then I shall lend you the money—and at no interest—to buy such a cloth and you can give that to your father, who can offer it to the mayor in place of your own poor work."

"*At no interest*!" Tana exclaimed, that in itself such a miraculous event as to seem a fairy story.

"In honor of a woman as dark as you are fair, but equally beautiful," Shmuel said.

"Who is that?" asked Tana, immediately suspecting sorcery.

"My new bride," Shmuel reported proudly.

At which point she knew it to be devil's work indeed, for where would such an ugly little man get a beautiful bride except through sorcery. But so great was her own perceived need, she crossed herself surreptitiously and accepted his loan.

Shmuel found her a gold coin in the right pocket of his coat and made a great show of its presentation. Then he had her sign her X on a paper, and left certain he had done the right thing.

Tana went right out to the market of a neighboring town, where she bought a piece of gold-embroidered cloth from a tinker. It was more intricate than anything either she or her father could have imagined, with the initials T and L cunningly intertwined beneath the body of a dancing bear.

The mayor of Ykaterinislav was suitably impressed, and he immediately introduced his son Leon to Tana. The twined initials were not lost upon them. The

son, while not as smart as his father, was handsome, and he was heir to his father's fortune as well. Dreaming of another fortune to add to the family's wealth he proposed.

Good husband that he was, Shmuel reported all his dealings to Shana. He was extremely uxorious; nothing pleased him more than to relate the day's business to her.

"They would not have killed her for a story," she said. "Probably her father had wagered on it."

"Who knows what the *goyim* will do," he replied. "Trust me, Shana, I deal with them every day. They do not know story from history. It is all the same to them."

Shana shrugged and went back to her own work; but as she said the prayers over the Sabbath candles that evening, she added an extra prayer to keep her beloved husband safe.

Who says the Lord G-d has no sense of humor? Just a week went by and Shmuel once again passed along the High Street and heard the miller's daughter sobbing.

"Na—na, Tana," he said. "What goes this time?"

"I am to be married," she said.

"That is not an institution to be despised. I myself have a beautiful bride. Happiness is in the marriage bed."

This time she did not bother to hide her genuflection, but Shmuel was used to the ways of the *goy*.

"My father-in-law-to-be, the mayor, insists that I produce the wedding costume, and the costumes of my attending maidens besides."

"But of course," Shmuel agreed. "Even beyond the gates…"—and he gestured toward the ghetto walls—"even there the bride's family supplies…"

"Myself!" she cried. "I am to make each myself. And embroider them with my own hands. *And I cannot sew*!" She proceeded to weep again into her apron, this time so prodigiously, the gillyflowers would surely have grown from the watering had the Lord G-d been paying attention as in the days of old.

"A-ha!" Shmuel said, reaching into his pockets and jangling several coins together. "I understand. But my dear, I have the means to help you, only…"

"Only?" She looked up from the soggy apron.

"Only this time, as you have prospects of a rich marriage… "—for gossip travels through stone walls where people themselves cannot pass. It is one of the nine metaphysical wonders of the world— number three actually.

"Only?" To say the girl was two platters and a bottle short of a banquet is to do her honor.

"Only this time you must pay interest on the loan," Shmuel said. He was a businessman after all, not just a Samaritan. And Samaria—like Burgundy, was a long way from there.

Tana agreed at once and put her X to a paper she could not read, then gratefully pocketed three gold pieces. It would buy the services of many fine seamstresses with—she reckoned quickly—enough left over for a chain for her neck and a net for her hair. She could not read but, like most of the girls of Ykaterinislav, she *could* count.

"I do not like such dealings," Shana remarked that evening. "The men at least are honorable in their own way. But the women of the *goyim*…"

"I am a respected moneylender," Shmuel said, his voice sharp. Then afraid he might have been *too* sharp, he added, "Their women are nothing like ours; and *you* are a queen of the ghetto."

If she was appeased, she did not show it, but that night her prayers were even longer over the candles, as if she were having a stern talking to with the Lord G-d.

Ah—you think you know the tale now. And perhaps you are right. But, as Shmuel noted, some do not know story from history. Perhaps you are one of those. Story tells us that the little devil, the child stealer, the black imp was thwarted. Of such blood libels good rousing pogroms are made.

Still, history has two sides, not one. Here is the other.

Tana and her Leon were married, of course. Even without the cloth it was a good match. The milker's business was a thriving one; the mayor was rich on graft. It was a merger as well as a marriage. Properties were exchanged along with the wedding pledges. Within the first month Tana was with child. So she was cloistered there, in the lord mayor's fine house, while her own new house was being built, so she did not see Shmuel again.

And then the interest on the loan came due.

A week after Tana's child was delivered, she had a visitor.

It was not Shmuel, of course. He would never have been allowed into the woman's section of a Christian house, never allowed near the new infant.

It was Shana.

"Who are you?" asked Tana, afraid that in her long and difficult pregnancy her husband had taken a Jewish concubine, for such was not unheard of. The woman before her was extraordinarily beautiful.

"I am the wife of Shmuel Zvi Bar Michael."

"Who is that?" asked Tana. For her, one Jewish name was as unpronounceable as another.

"Shmuel Zvi Bar Michael," Shana explained, patiently, as to a child. "The moneylender. Who lent you money for your wedding."

"My father paid for my wedding," Tana said, making the sign of the cross as protection for herself and the child in her arms.

Shana did not even flinch. This puzzled Tana a great deal and frightened her as well. "What do you want?"

"Repayment of the loan," Shana said, adding under her breath in Yiddish: "*Vi men brokt zikh ayn di farfl, azoy est men zey oyf,"* which means "The way your farfl is cut, that's how you'll eat it." In other words, You *made your bed, now you'll lie in it*. You don't want to ask about *farfl*.

"I borrowed nothing from you," Tana said.

Talking as if to an idiot or to one who does not understand the language, Shana said, "You borrowed it from my husband." She took a paper from her bosom and shoved it under Tana's nose.

Tana shrank from the paper and covered the child's face with a cloth as if the paper would contaminate it, poor thing. Then she began to scream: "Demon! Witch! Child stealer!" Her screams would have brought in the household if they had not all been about the business of the day.

But a Jew—any Jew—knows better than to stay where the charge of blood libel has been laid. Shana left at once, the paper still fluttering in her hand.

She went home but said nothing to her husband. When necessary, Shana could keep her own counsel.

Still, the damage had been done. Terrified she would have to admit her failures, Tana told her husband a fairy tale indeed, complete with a little, ugly black imp with an unpronounceable name who had sworn to take her child for unspeakable rites. And as it was springtime, and behind the ghetto walls the Jewish community of Ykaterinislav was preparing for Passover, Tana's accusations of blood libel were believed, though it took her a full night of complaining to convince Leon.

Who but a Jew, after all, was little and dark— never mind that half of the population both in front of and behind the walls were tall and blonde thanks to the Vikings who had settled their trade center in Kiev generations before. Who but a Jew had an unpronounceable name—never mind that the local goyish names did not have a sufficiency of vowels. Who but a Jew would steal a Christian child, slitting its throat and using the innocent blood in the making of matzoh—never mind that it was the Jews, not the gentiles, who had been on the blade end of the killing knife all along.

Besides, it had been years since the last pogrom. Blood calls for blood, even if it is just a story. Leon went to his friends, elaborating on Tana's tale.

What happened next was simple. Just as the *shammes* was going around the

ghetto, rapping with his special hammer on the shutters of the houses and calling out "Arise, Jews, and serve the Lord! Arise and recite the psalms!" the local bullyboys were massing outside the ghetto walls.

In house after house, Jewish men rose and donned their *tefillin* and began their prayers; the women lit the fires in the stoves.

Then the wife of Gdalye the butcher—his new wife—went out to pull water from the well and saw the angry men outside the gate. She raised the alarm, but by then it was too late. As they hammered down the gate, the cries went from the streets to Heaven, but if the Lord G-d was home and listening, there was no sign of it.

The rabble broke through the gates and roamed freely along the streets. They pulled Jews out of their houses and measured them against a piece of lumber with a blood red line drawn halfway up. Any man found below the line was beaten, no matter his age. And all the while the rabble chanted "Little black imp!" and "Stealer of children!"

By morning's end the count was this: two concussions, three broken arms, many bruises and blackened eyes, a dislocated jaw, the butcher's and baker's shops set afire, and one woman raped. She was an old woman. The only one they could find. By pogrom standards it was minor stuff and the Jews of Ykaterinislav were relieved. They knew, even if the *goyim* did not, that this sort of thing is easier done in the disguise of night.

One man only was missing—Shmuel Zvi Bar Michael, the moneylender. He was the shortest and the ugliest and the blackest little man the crowd of sinners could find.

Of course the rest of the Jews were too busy to look for him. The men were trying to save what they could of Gdalye the butcher's shop and Avreml the baker's house. The women were too busy binding up the heads of Reb Jakob and his son Lev, and the arms of the three men, one a ten-year-old boy, and the jaw of Moyshe the cobbler, and tending to the old woman. Besides Shana had been too guilt-ridden to press them into the search.

It was not until the next day that she found his body—or the half of it that remained—in the soldiers' trenches.

At the funeral she tore her face with her fingernails and wept until her eyes were permanently reddened. Her hair turned white during the week she sat *shiva*. And it was thus that Granny Rumple was born of sorrow, shame, and guilt. At least that was my great-grandmother's story. And while details in the middle of the tale had a tendency to change with each telling, the ending was always tragic.

But the story, you say, is too familiar for belief? *Belief*! Is it less difficult to believe that a man distributed food to thousands using only a few loaves and fishes? Is it less difficult to believe the Red Sea opened in the middle to let a tribe of wandering desert dwellers through? Is it less difficult to believe that Elvis is alive and well and shopping at Safeway?

Look at the story you know. Who is the moral center of it? Is it the miller who lies and his daughter who is complicitous in the lie? Is it the king who wants her for commercial purposes only? Or is it the dark, ugly little man with the unpronounceable name who promises to change flax into gold—and does exactly what he promises?

Stories are told one way, history another. But for the Jews—despite their long association with the Lord G-d—the endings have always been the same.