

The Kiss by Lamed Shapiro

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Reb Shakhne's hands and feet were shaking and there was an unbearably bitter taste in his mouth. He was sitting on a chair, hearing the wild cries from the street, the whistling and cracking of breaking windows. It seemed to him that all the shattering, crying and ringing were inside his head.

The pogrom had started so suddenly that he hadn't even had the time to lock up his store. He had run home immediately. The house was empty. Sarah and the children had hidden somewhere, apparently, abandoning the house with its bit of silver and cash to God's mercy. He himself hadn't thought about hiding; he hadn't thought about anything at all. He had just listened to the shouts for help from the street and to the bitter taste in his mouth.

The noise of the pogrom would get nearer, then farther, like a fire in the neighborhood. Suddenly, it surrounded the house from all four sides. The windows began to crack, several stones flew into the dining room, and all at once, through the doors and windows, goyim began to crawl in, mostly young toughs, with sticks, knives and red drunken faces. Reb Shakhne felt he had to do something. He raised himself from his chair with great difficulty and right in front of the pogromists' eyes, began to crawl under the couch. The crowd began to laugh.

"*Vot durok!*" one of them said and grabbed him by a foot. "*Eh, ty, vstovoy!*"

He suddenly got his wits about him and burst out crying like a small child.

"Children," he begged, "I'll show you where the money is myself, the silver and everything. Just don't kill me. Why should you kill me? I have a wife and children . . ."

None of it helped. They took everything and they started beating him, hitting him in the mouth, the sides, and the stomach, with murderous violence. He cried and begged, and they beat him. He knew one of the toughs and he turned to him for mercy:

"Vasilenko, you know me. Your father worked in my house. Tell me: did I ever not pay him? He did good work for me. Vasilenko. Vasilenko . . . Help! Help! Sav—"

A blow to the solar plexus cut off his plea. Two toughs sat down on him and started pressing his belly with their knees. Vasilenko, a small, thin tough with a crooked face and little gray eyes, smiled arrogantly and said:

"*To shtsho?* You paid, what else? Father worked, you paid. I would've liked to see you *not* pay him."

Still, he had liked the way Reb Shakhne turned to him for help, and he said to the others:

"Well, *rebyata*, enough, let the corpse live. Just look—he's barely breathing . . ."

Little by little they tore themselves away from their victim and started to leave the house, breaking all the furniture that had managed to remain intact.

"Well, Shakhne, you can thank me for the fact you're still alive," Vasilenko said to Reb Shakhne, who was standing in front of him with a lowered head and bruised face, breathing heavily. The crowd would've taken care of you pretty quickly if I hadn't . . ."

He started to leave, but suddenly he had an idea.

"Here," he stretched his hand out to Reb Shakhne, "kiss it . . ."

Reb Shakhne raised his bloodshot eyes and gave him a confused look. He didn't understand.

Vasilenko's face clouded.

"You didn't hear, *shto ly?* Kiss, I'm telling you!"

Two of the toughs had remained standing in the doorway, interested in what was going on. Reb Shakhne looked at Vasilenko and remained quiet, and Vasilenko turned red.

"Ah, you and your damned kike face!" He gritted his teeth and gave Reb Shakhne a full-handed slap to the face. "You're still hesitating? . . . Eh, you guys, come here!"

The two toughs came nearer.

"Well, start working him over again. If he's such a big shot, then he's going to have to kiss my foot. If not . . ."

He sat down on a chair. The toughs grabbed Reb Shakhne and threw him down at Vasilenko's feet.

"Pull them off!" Vasilenko ordered, kicking his boots into Reb Shakhne's teeth.

Reb Shakhne slowly pulled the boot off the tough's foot.

"Kiss it!"

They faced each other: a red, filthy foot, reeking of sweat, and a bruised face with a long, distinguished dark beard. By remarkable chance, the crowd hadn't spent much time on the beard, and the hairs had been plucked out only in a few spots; the glory of a grown Jew and a respectable householder still lay on his face. Vasilenko's red, crooked face with the gray eyes looked down on him from above.

"Kiss it, I tell you!"

Another kick in the teeth accompanied the order.

For a moment everyone in the room was silent and motionless. Then Reb Shakhne bent his head, and Vasilenko let out a sharp, terrible shriek. All of his toes and a good part of his foot had disappeared in Reb Shakhne's mouth, and two rows of teeth had buried themselves deep in the filthy, sweaty flesh.

What happened after that was as savage and horrific as an oppressive and evil dream.

The toughs beat Reb Shakhne in the sides with their boots with such force that every blow rang loud and hollow, like hitting a barrel. They pulled his beard in clumps, stuck their fingers in his eyes and tore them out, looked for the most sensitive places on his body and ripped

chunks out of his flesh. The body trembled, shook feverishly, tossed and turned about, and the two rows of teeth pressed together even more convulsively and went even deeper. Something cracked inside the foot: the teeth, the bones, or both of them together. The whole time Vasilenko screamed, madly, nonsensically, like a stuck pig.

The two toughs didn't have any sense of how long it all lasted, and they only came to themselves when they noticed that Reb Shakhne's body wasn't twitching any more. Looking at his face, they both shuddered from head to toe.

The ripped out eyes dangled near the bloody sockets, large, round, and sticky. There was no face to see. The beard had been shoved together in wet bloody locks, and the dead teeth were fixed with the piece of foot between them, like a slain wolf. Vasilenko was still thrashing about—not on the chair any more, but on the ground. His body twisted around like a snake, and hoarse, drawn out cries tore from his throat. His little gray eyes grew large, dull, and glassy. He was, apparently, out of his mind.

With a terrified "*Haspodi pamiloy nas!*" the two toughs ran out of the house.

In the street the angry pogrom raged, and among the overlapping voices no one noticed the broken screams of the living man who was slowly expiring in the teeth of the dead man.

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