



---

FICTION

---

# Shtetl World

---

By **DARA HORN**

---

I look inside. Humans swim around like fish.... Those I saw throughout my life, death has crowned them with a green existence; all swimming about in the green aquarium, in a silky, airy music. Here, the dead live!... Found, found! Here's the

dream of my dream—"It's me, my dear, me, me. The creases are just nests of longing." My lips inundated with blood are drawn to hers. Alas, they remain on the pane of the aquarium.

—*Avrom Sutzkever, "Green Aquarium"*

**I**T WAS JUST a summer job, Leah kept reminding herself during that summer of 2009. Just a summer job to earn some money because she hadn't gotten the grant she needed to spend the summer doing her graduate research on Yiddish periodicals, and because the job was at least ostensibly related to her research, and because her boyfriend had dumped her and now their gorgeous shared apartment was no longer hers, and because her parents had decided to

---

DARA HORN is the author of three novels, the most recent of which, *All Other Nights*, is now available in paperback. This story will appear, in slightly different form, in *Promised Lands*, an anthology of new American Jewish fiction, to be published by Brandeis University Press in November.

rent out their house and spend the year in Madagascar, and because her life as a scholar and even as a person needed a summer break, and because it was better than working at Starbucks. It was only a summer job.

Her job was to run the dry-goods store. It was pretty easy. Much easier than being the milkman, who actually had to learn how to milk a cow, or the melamed, who had to pretend to smack kids' hands with a ruler in his little shack of a school, or the badkhen, who had to make up corny rhymes about every visitor who passed him by, or the rebbe, who had to recite the same sermon three times every day, or the Shabbes-goy, who had to lug buckets of water all over town (but at least only worked weekends), or the crippled beggar, who had to sit by the front gate of the complex all day long even in 90-degree heat begging for alms while winding and unwinding the bandages around his legs and occasionally, very subtly, letting on to a visitor that he was the Messiah. She might have preferred to be the bride, whose wedding they celebrated in the town square every afternoon at two o'clock, if she had been pretty enough.

But Leah's job wasn't bad. All she had to do was sit behind the counter of her store and wait for someone to come in and buy a tallis. Or, theoretically, a bag of flour, though that had never happened. Her store was even air-conditioned, through a small unit hidden under a pile of chuppah poles, which made her costume's woolen ankle-length skirt, long sleeves, and enormous plastic-pearl-brocaded headscarf a little more bearable. No, the job didn't bother her much at all. What bothered her was that along with the tallises in her shop, there were also T-shirts for sale emblazoned with the words FARSHTOONKINEH ZAIDEH—a phrase intended to mean “Rotten Grandfather,” which, in addition to being written in English characters that didn't conform to standardized transliteration, wasn't even grammatically correct. What bothered her was that the musical overture to *Fiddler on the Roof* was piped through her shop on a repeating loop. What bothered her was that there was an actual fiddler sitting on the roof of the house across from her shop. What bothered her was that there were rides.

Something else that bothered her was that

every day at exactly 4:30 p.m., right before closing, there was a pogrom. Most of the staff loved the pogrom—particularly Mendele the book peddler, in reality a sixth-year senior at U-Mass Amherst named Benjamin Ziskind who at 4:20 each day would abandon his cart full of books, slip off to the backstage area behind the World of Our Fathers ride, change out of his black hat and knickers and into an embroidered Cossack blouse, and come charging out from behind the ride to smash the windows of her shop with an ax, to the shock and delight of visitors in their Farshtoonkineh Zaidah T-shirts. After a while it began to get old.

But the main thing that bothered her about the job was Mendele himself. Lately he had started waiting for her behind her shop during her afternoon break. Except for the daily wedding—which was at least a good way to stretch her legs with a few rounds of horas after sitting behind the counter all day long—her break was her only time out of the shop during working hours.

For lunch, one of her six daughters (she tried to get their names right, not that any of the visitors noticed) would come by with a bialy or two or, on a particularly bad day, a bowl of kasha. The portions were small, cheap. It was an attempt at authenticity; either that or the bequest for the complex didn't cover food. Usually the herring at the wedding made up for it, though, so she didn't need anything to eat during her break, just a chance to get outside and look at the woods behind the building (western Massachusetts, she noted, was almost as wooded as Poland) and daydream about being somewhere else. It was a moment to herself during the day that she had begun to treasure, so she was genuinely irritated when Mendele began showing up behind her shop with his cart full of books, pretending that he just happened to be there, always finishing a cell phone call just as she stepped outside, muttering a pro forma “Love you” into the mouthpiece. And then he would flick the phone closed, slip it back into his tallis bag, and pull out a cigarette.

“I never see you making any calls out here,” he said to her one day, pushing one of his sidelocks behind his ear. “I never even see you smoke. What's the point of a break if you don't use it?”

“Phones aren’t allowed,” she said. She was embarrassed by how smarmy she sounded. He was attractive, she had to admit, under his beard. He was developing a beard tan, his nose and cheekbones rudely from the distinctly un-Polish summer sun.

“You forget that I’m the book peddler,” he said. “I’m the vanguard of the enlightenment.” He blew smoke at the wall. “Leah, right?”

“Yes, Mendele,” she said, and noticed he was hiding a smile. Had he been on the phone with a girlfriend, or his mother? “How’s business?”

He let out a groan. “They never buy the books,” he whined. “It’s a problem for my commission. You’re so damn lucky to be selling T-shirts. In air-conditioning.”

“You can stop by for some buckwheat whenever you’d like,” she said. The truth was that she’d have loved to be the book peddler, even if it meant being outside all day, just to have something to read, even if all there was to read were the book cart’s remaindered copies of Mark Zborowski’s *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* and Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, which was actually about the Lower East Side. But it wasn’t a job for a girl.

“I’m getting better at the pogrom,” Mendele said eagerly. “The other day I figured out how to throw the ax so that it just misses the tourists. I’ve been practicing. Check it out when I come to the store today.”

She snorted. “You’re a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

He pulled one of his tefillin out of his pocket and unfurled a strand of it, letting it tumble out of its coil until he snapped it back into his hand like a yo-yo, just clearing the ground. “Me and the rebbetsin are going out for a beer after the pogrom,” he said, winding the leather strap. The rebbetsin was beautiful, Leah remembered, a bombshell from Hampshire who even managed to look hot in a headscarf. “They’ve got a happy hour at the place down the road. Super-cheap. Wanna come?”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude on your date,” she said. “It’s not a date,” he said. “We’re just blowing off some steam.”

“I’m working evenings on my research,” she heard herself say. “There’s a pile of photocopies at

my place, and it’s going to take me all summer just to read through them.”

He flipped the tefillin by its strap toward the wall, then snapped it back. “What kind of research?” he asked.

He actually seemed interested, but Leah hated talking about her work to people outside her field. “Yiddish magazines,” she conceded.

He opened his eyes wide. “Oh, so you’re *living* it! Day and night!” He laughed out loud, then burst into one of the songs from her shop’s soundtrack. “Who, day and night, must scramble for a living . . .” He squatted down, doing the kazatsky dance that he would perform an hour later at the wedding. It made Leah nervous to watch it; at one point, she had seen a tourist actually break his leg trying. Finally he stood up. “You’re really living it!” he announced, out of breath.

She tried to decide how to respond—indignant and enraged? Or indifferent and bored? It was like dealing with a child, though Mendele couldn’t have been younger than 22. A century ago, he would have already been a father of four. Leah was 25, and she felt like his mother.

She was about to answer when the beadle came by, rapping on the window at the front of her shop to summon people to afternoon prayers. Mendele dropped his cigarette and started wrapping the tefillin strap around his arm, dusting ashes off his beard. “I gotta go to minyan. Catch ya later,” he called, and wheeled his cart around the corner.

Leah’s break wasn’t over yet, but the woods suddenly felt hot to her, oppressive. She went back into the air-conditioned shop, where someone was already waiting at the door, wanting to know the price of a T-shirt.

**L**IFE is with people, Leah discovered: Mendele wouldn’t leave her alone. She had tried to time her break to avoid him when she saw his book peddler’s cart pass by her window, but he seemed to be waiting for her. She would check outside to see whether he was there and venture out when the woods seemed empty, only to see him pop out from behind a tree, clapping his cell phone shut. He was one of those par-

asitic types who need to be with others in order to believe in their own existence. People avoided him, Leah had noticed, particularly the women; Leah had overheard the matchmaker complaining about him at the wedding, and the rebbetsin had blown him off. But Leah couldn't think of a way to get rid of him. He was her special curse, it seemed. Her bashert.

"So why are you studying this stuff?" he asked one day after hanging up his phone. "I mean, this is just a summer job. You really do this all year long?"

"I don't do 'this' all year long," Leah said. "I don't sell tallises. I don't eat bialys. I wear jeans. I have hair."

"But your name really is Leah," he said.

"That's not my fault."

Mendele didn't care. "You're an all-year-round-er. A shtetl townie." He grinned and lit a cigarette. "Seriously, why?"

Leah looked at his squinting eyes, wondering if telling him anything was a waste of breath. "I needed a foreign language in college," she said. "Yiddish fit my schedule, and it was only three times a week instead of five. Stupid, right? But when I started learning it, I just felt like I discovered an entire world that no one knows about at all." Mendele looked intrigued. She was surprised by how pleased she was to see that he cared. "It's nothing like this," she said, waving a hand at the buildings behind them. "It kind of makes me sick, being here."

Mendele nodded. "Me, too," he said, and for a moment she revised her opinion of him. Then he took off his hat and wiped his dripping forehead. "It's so damn hot all the time. Pay's good, though. Better than Starbucks."

She sighed. His tallis bag shuddered, and he fumbled to open it, grabbing his vibrating cell phone. He flipped it open and said, "Not now, I'm at work." He listened for a moment, then shouted, "Mom! Later!" and hung up. Leah tried not to laugh. He dropped the phone back in the bag, then continued smoking. "What did you say you're researching again?" he asked, looking back at her with a surprising lack of embarrassment. "Yiddish what?"

"Yiddish magazines," she said. He was cute, she thought. Did it matter that he was a moron? It was just a summer job.

Mendele laughed. "Like Yiddish *Seventeen?* 'What to Wear to Your Yeshiva Prom!' Or Yiddish *Cosmo?* 'Give the Shabbes-Goy an Orgasm He'll Never Forget!'"

"You're an ass," Leah told him.

Mendele smirked at his cigarette. "There can't seriously be such a thing as a Yiddish magazine."

"Of course there is," Leah said. "There were hundreds. Some still exist. There are even new ones, mostly for Hasidim."

But the book peddler had lost interest. "I bet you're one of those Super-Jews," he said. "Like you've spent your whole life at Jewish summer camps, and your parents work for the Elders of Zion or something, and they just want you to find some nice Jewish boy." He smiled.

Leah felt her face turning red. Why was she embarrassed in front of this idiot? "I never went to a Jewish camp," she said. "And my parents are in Madagascar."

Mendele stopped smoking. "What's that?"

"It's an island off the coast of Africa." Truly, she thought, I am working in Chelm.

But now Mendele was actually interested. "What the hell are they doing there?"

The phrase "midlife crisis" sounded as spoiled and clichéd as the concept actually was, so Leah had started making things up that were even more ridiculous. "They're animal-rights activists," she lied. "They're taking animals from American zoos back home to their former environments and helping them adjust."

Mendele didn't get the joke. "Wow, cool," he said, awed. "I bet that's really tough for the animals. I mean, they're not used to having predators and stuff. You can't really go back after that kind of change."

"That's why they're actually building the animals a little artificial habitat, to acclimate them to their former world," Leah said. "It's become a tourist attraction."

"That's awesome," Mendele gaped. Just then the beadle came by and shouted the time for prayers. Grumbling, Mendele started pushing his cart back around the corner. "I wish I was in Madagascar," he muttered.

Leah laughed. "I wish I was at Starbucks."

**T**HE WEEKEND before the Fourth of July was busy at the dry-goods store, and unbearably hot, which gave Leah a chance to avoid Mendele. She barely had time to take a break at all, which was a relief, since it meant she didn't leave the air-conditioning except at the wedding—and it also meant that she didn't have to talk to Mendele, though she could hear him lurking behind her shop with his book peddler's cart, whining on his cell phone to his mother. Other than that, she had barely seen him, except during the pogrom. Lately his pogrom antics had evolved. The previous afternoon, he had attempted a "rape" while attacking her shop, which consisted of his jumping on her behind the counter. She had screamed, following protocol. But he had really touched her breast. She should have reported him, but to her astonishment she hadn't minded. In fact, she had begun to look forward to the next pogrom.

But the next time Mendele approached her was at the wedding. She was standing off to the side, escaping with a piece of herring to the ambiguous area beyond the makeshift fence dividing men and women, where no one would pull her into a hora. The bride was flying high in a chair, throwing cloth napkins at the man who was being lifted up on the chair on the opposite side of the fence. In real life, Leah had heard, the bride was a radical feminist at Smith, majoring in performance art.

Mendele had beat his way through the dancing yeshiva students to track Leah down. He waved to her so insistently that she couldn't pretend she hadn't seen him, and eventually he edged toward her and lured her farther to the side with more insistent hand-waving, since they weren't allowed to touch each other in public—except when he transformed into a Cossack, of course. Now they were standing just in front of the study-house, right above the grave of the bride and groom, who, according to the gravestone's English inscription, had been murdered under their own wedding canopy during the 1648 Chmelnitsky massacre—an event that used to be reenacted during the daily wedding until a tourist was accidentally hit by an airborne chair.

"So how are the magazines coming?" Mendele asked. "Did you do a translation yet of the Yiddish *Maxim*? 'Good Times at the Mikvah'? 'Wigged Girls Gone Wild'?"

"Shut up," Leah muttered. But there was something amusing about him, something innocent in his lack of self-awareness. She smiled.

They watched from a distance as the rebbe and the melamed performed a carefully choreographed dance with wine bottles balanced on their yarmulkes. It was considerably less impressive when you knew about the Velcro. Mendele tilted his head toward Leah. "Me and the rebbe," he said, speaking under his breath and stroking his beard, "we're thinking about starting a pogrom."

"You're already in the pogrom," Leah said.

"No, I mean a real pogrom," Mendele replied. "Like burning down The World of Our Fathers."

Leah sucked in her breath. The World of Our Fathers was the most popular attraction in the entire complex—partly, she liked to think, because it didn't involve any actual people, just audio-animatrons of people acting out various moments in Eastern European Jewish history, on a loop, while the visitors sat in little book-peddler carts on a slow-moving track. It also had the benefit of being a place to sit, in air-conditioning. People would wait on line for it. Mendele couldn't possibly be serious, Leah thought. She stared at the dancing rebbe and pretended she hadn't heard him.

But Mendele wasn't someone you could easily ignore. He glanced around, then furtively tugged at her sleeve. "Are you in?"

A joke, she was sure now. She forced a laugh. He looked at her and smiled. "If you're interested, let me know tomorrow during your break," he said, as the drunken fiddler threw his violin at the bride. "I'll be by the yeshiva, corrupting the youth."

The next day, she glanced across the square and saw Mendele idling at the door of the yeshiva, waiting for her. But she didn't go. No one came out of the yeshiva either; even the tourists were ignoring him. Apparently the youth had already been corrupted enough.

**L**EAH felt they should have been given the day off on the Fourth of July, but unfortunately it was one of the busiest days of the year, with record numbers of visitors. She had people coming in and out of her store all day long—delighted old people, amused middle-aged people, and children who were so angry to be there that some were already throwing bagels before noon. The day lingered on like the final prayers on Yom Kippur, long and exhausting. Fifteen minutes before the pogrom, the dry-goods store was finally empty for a moment. Leah was leaning back against the wall of T-shirts, anticipating her own collapse beneath Mendele's ax-wielding form, when a tiny elderly woman with dyed black hair walked into her shop.

"Where are the magazines?" the woman asked. Her accent was heavy. Most of the old people who came here were American-born, the *farshtoonkineh* *zaidehs*. Occasionally there would be an old survivor, but usually they were brought there by their 60-year-old children or their 30-year-old grandchildren, and usually they were already lost to Alzheimer's. Leah listened, trying to determine whether the woman was demented.

"What magazines?" Leah asked. It was hot outside, short-sleeve weather. She glanced at the numbers on the woman's bare forearm.

"Magazines," the woman repeated, with deliberate slowness, as if Leah were a child, or an idiot. "Don't you have magazines to sell?"

Demented, Leah decided. Or very sane and severely bored. "You'll have to go and see Mendele the book peddler," she told her, using her most courteous voice. "He's around the corner, next to the mikvah."

"All he has are stupid English books," the woman huffed.

Leah looked up, startled.

"When I was a girl in Krakow we used to go to a country resort like this in Kazimierz, a little phony village for tourists, in the summer," she continued. "Nobody ever lived in a place like this for a hundred years, you know—it was just a movie set. But even there, at the fake one, they had the magazines. Don't you think these people knew how to read a magazine?"

Leah felt the chill of the air-conditioning on the

back of her neck and held her breath. Finally she decided on what to say. "Which magazines would you read?" she asked. In Yiddish.

She expected the woman to be surprised to hear her speaking Yiddish, but the woman simply answered, in Yiddish. "I would look for *In Zikh*," she said.

"*In Zikh*! You mean Yankev Glatshiteyn's magazine?" Leah asked. She felt, for the first time in months, genuine joy.

"Not just Glatshiteyn," the woman said. "Sutzkever wrote for it also. And Leyeles, but I never liked him."

"Avrom Sutzkever!" Leah sang. She was astonished by her own happiness.

The woman grinned, elated. "You like Sutzkever?"

"I love him," Leah murmured, swooning. "The 'Siberia' poem is the most wonderful thing I've ever read. In any language. And his 'Green Aquarium'..."

The woman grabbed Leah's hand, clutching it. "We moved to Vilna, and then in the Vilna ghetto, Sutzkever was living there," she said. Her speech was level, her pronunciation careful; an educated person's voice. "His wife worked in the ghetto library. I was only 14 maybe, but my mother had me read everything, even then. He won the Ghetto Prize for 'The Grave Child.' It's an exceptional poem. Exceptional. I haven't been able to find a copy of it since then." Leah's hand turned white under the pressure of the woman's fingers.

"I've seen it on microfilm," Leah mumbled, saying the word *microfilm* in English. But it didn't matter. She was gripping, and gripped.

"He's still alive, you know," the woman said. "He lives in Tel Aviv. Unfortunately he's very ill. He doesn't take visitors anymore."

Leah felt the store revolving around her, sliding out of her vision. If only Sutzkever took visitors, she thought. If only all the visitors who came to her shop, every last *farshtoonkineh* *zaideh* who came here in the hope of finding something, if only they could go to visit Sutzkever instead—if only the whole place could be dismantled and the bequest given to the visitors themselves in the form of plane tickets to Tel Aviv so all of them could line up like they did for

the rides and visit Sutzkever at his bedside, to gather at his feet, to drink in his words.

“But all you have here are stupid T-shirts and no magazines,” the woman said loudly, in English. She pulled her hand away, leaving the white imprint of her fingers on Leah’s skin. The woman looked at the T-shirts, and then at Leah, with utter contempt. “*Dos iz, takeh, a farshunktene shtetl,*” she said. “*Un ir—ir zayt, take, a farshunktene shtetl-folk.*”

Leah gaped, breathless, thoughtless, heartless. For an instant the world stopped. And then she heard the explosion. She looked out the shop window, not yet broken, and saw The World of Our Fathers burning to the ground.

**T**HE FIRE ENGINES arrived minutes later, but not before Mendele the book peddler burst into Leah’s shop in his Cossack costume, his baggy sleeves charred. “What the hell did you do?” Leah screamed at him. The door was open now, revealing the brilliant conflagration as the giant map of the Pale of Settlement was consumed by a wave of flames. The blaze was growing quickly. The ride had closed at four as usual, Leah remembered with relief; still, through the windows of her shop across the town square, she could see the smoke billowing up and out until it completely obscured the mikvah. Next door, the yeshiva had already been evacuated. A group of Cossacks on horseback were driving a pack of screaming tourists into the woods. “What the hell did you do?” Leah shouted again, grabbing Mendele by the shoulders.

“It wasn’t me!” Mendele wailed. “I swear to God it wasn’t me! I was just changing my clothes! I swear!” The sirens began wailing, amplifying Mendele’s whines. “I was just changing my clothes! I was taking off my tefillin, and I threw them down so I could change my shirt, and I had the new shirt over my head, and then the whole thing just—”

The old woman who had come for the magazines was still standing at the counter, the expression of disdain frozen on her face. She had turned now and was staring at the fire through the open door. Then she turned back to see Mendele in his burned Cossack blouse and shared with him her look of contempt.

“Anti-Semites,” the woman muttered. And before Leah could come out from behind the counter, she walked out the door.

**A** MECHANICAL failure, it turned out. The ride was actually very old, a refurbished remnant of a carnival ride from 80 years earlier, but no one had realized what a poor idea it was to rely on the old equipment. The wiring had short-circuited, and, the fire department deduced, someone had been smoking a cigarette at just the wrong moment. The rebbe claimed that Mendele had been planning it all along. Mendele blamed the rebbe, but no one believed the book peddler. Later, Leah heard that Mendele was being sued.

Meanwhile, other rumors abounded. The melamed was convinced it was actually an elaborate plot by the administrators of the site, who had failed to turn a profit and were planning to collect the insurance by “lighting shabbes candles in the middle of the week.” The mikvah lady said that the gas pipe used to turn on the fake wooden fires for heating the mikvah had been routed under the ride, and she was convinced there was a leak from the shoddy construction job. The badkhen blamed a 10-year-old tourist he had seen dressed in red, white, and blue, claiming that he knew for a fact that the kid had a fistful of roman candles in his pocket. The rebbetzin said that a goat from the tailor’s backyard had gotten loose and was wreaking all kinds of havoc and must have chewed at the wires before the ride blew up. And the Messiah swore that he had seen a young man walking into the complex wearing a puffy winter coat on a hot summer day while he sat at the gate with his wounded feet, and he was sure that microscopic pieces of the suicide bomber’s corpse were scattered across the ruins of the electronic map of the Pale of Settlement inside. But no one believed the Messiah.

In the very apologetic letter Leah received in the mail three weeks later, she was offered a job for the following year, when the complex was scheduled to reopen. But in January of 2010, after the death of the poet Sutzkever, Leah turned it down. She had decided to spend next year in Jerusalem. Or, failing that, Starbucks. 📖➡️