

Of The Better Kind
by J. Elan Cohen

Act I. Scene 1.

Present day, America. From the center of the empty, dark stage, a vertical 4-foot x 4-foot square of light begins to glow, and the brightness illuminates the darkened theater. Gentle Eastern European mandolin strumming begins. We see silhouettes of people looking into the square of light, and first we hear their wordless exclamations as trepidation turns into exaltation and relief. After a moment, there is spontaneous applause and laughter. Then we hear their voices:

MOLLY (solemn, relieved): The paint's still intact.

DAVID: Some of it.

ARI: I can barely make out the ark wall.

RACHEL: I think I see... a lion?

DAVID (incredulous): The sun's shining in there. It's... glowing.

MOLLY: One of his optical illusions.

ARI: Is that a guitar?...no, a mandolin? Weren't they orthodox?

DAVID: What a shame, the plaster's all crumbling.

MOLLY: What a blessing, it's still here.

DAVID: I just meant--

RACHEL (reading slowly): Ma tovu ohalekha Ya'akov, mishk'notekha,...

ARI: Uh, translation?

MOLLY: "How goodly are thy tents O Jacob, your dwelling places,..."

RACHEL: From Numbers.

ARI: Numb3rs? That series with Judd Hirsch? I loved that show--

RACHEL: The Book of Numbers. From Torah. What Balaam said.

MOLLY: Another poet.

The square of light goes black.

Act I. Scene 2.

1905, Kovno, Lithuania. In the darkness, we hear a young man with a Yiddish accent reciting a poem – poetry slam style.

BEN: Ikh bin a Troymer, khoylem klayber,
Un pas zikh nit arayn in Rahm...

Lights up on BEN ZION BLOCH as he stands stage left, performing his spoken words. He holds a mandolin. His dress and demeanor could be those of a modern-day hipster. His girlfriend, RACHEL, sits at his feet, listening intently.

BEN:
Ikh bin fun yene iber-blayber,
Vus leben nokh mit alten Shtam.

I'm a Dreamer, collecting dreams
And don't exactly fit the frame
I'm one of those stubborn buds it seems
That still cling to the dry old stem

I'm a singer of the ages,
That are soon to turn to night
I know I'm the last line of the pages
And feel the pain of the dying light

Late nights I write and recollect
That which was and is no more
And every old dream that I collect
I seek to make new as before

I know that I will be forgot
With my words and poems, too
Oblivion will be my lot--
Who'll hear the songs of a Dream Jew!

He ends with a flourish on his mandolin. Rachel applauds with enthusiasm. She also has a Lithuanian Yiddish accent.

RACHEL: It's beautiful, Ben. So good.

BEN: Does it work?

Ben jots ideas in his notebook, erasing, scribbling - the manic creative process at work.

RACHEL: Everything you do works.

BEN: I'm not sure if I want to set it to music, or leave it as a poem. Maybe--

RACHEL: I'm not going to tell the artiste what to do!

BEN (very serious, chanting in deep bass): Why should this night be different than any other--

RACHEL (laughing): Ben!

They flirt and kiss.

BEN: I'll open with that. Then your turn. Enter stage right and move across and downstage as you sing. Like we rehearsed.

He strums on his mandolin and motions for her to begin. Rachel walks with exaggerated hand motions while singing "Oyfn Pripetchik" in an overly-dramatic way.

RACHEL:
Oyfn pripetchik brent a fayerl,
Un in shtub iz heys,
Un der rebe lernt...

She stops.

BEN: What're you doing?

RACHEL: It's no good.

BEN: Yes, it is. Try it again.

Rachel walks back to stage right. Ben strums and motions for her to begin. She performs as before.

RACHEL:
Oyfn pripetchik brent a fayerl,
Un in shtub iz heys,
Un der rebe lernt...

She stops.

BEN: Rachel, what is the problem?

RACHEL: It's not right.

BEN (stifling impatience): Could you please just try it once more?

Again Rachel walks back to stage right. Again Ben strums and motions for her to begin. This time, she marches directly towards him, more shouting than singing.

RACHEL

Oyfn pripetchik brent a fayerl,
Un in shtub iz heys,
Un der rebe lernt...

Ben stops strumming and stares at her.

RACHEL (deliberate): Not. Like. That.

He defers. She moves to the middle of the stage. She nods at Ben to begin playing. MR. SAIGER, Rachel's father, walks in and watches silently in the darkness. Ben strums and Rachel stands still and sings. It is an understated, powerful performance.

RACHEL:

Oyfn pripetchik brent a fayerl,
Un in shtub iz heys,
Un der rebe lernt kleyne kinderlekh,
Dem alef-beys.

Refrain:

Zet zhe kinderlekh, gedenkt zhe, tayere,
Vos ir lernt do;
Zogt zhe nokh a mol un take nokh a mol:
Komets-alef: o!
Lernt, kinder, mit groys kheyshek,
Azoy zog ikh aykh on;
Ver s'vet gikher fun aykh kenen ivre -
Der bakumt a fon.
Lernt, kinder, hot nit moyre,
Yeder onheyb iz shver;
Gliklekh der vos hot gelernt toyre,
Tsi darf der mentsh nokh mer?
Ir vet, kinder, elter vern,
Vet ir aleyn farshteyn,
Vifl in di osyses lign trem,
Un vi fil geveyn.
Az ir vet, kinder, dem goles shlep,
Oysgemutshet zayn,

Zolt ir fun di oysyes koyekh shepn,
Kukt in zey arayn!

Silence. Ben applauds and walks over to lift Rachel, spinning her around. They kiss.

BEN: “How many tears lie in these letters, ...how much lament.” My love, you owned that song. I’ll never doubt you again.

RACHEL: From your lips...

They continue to flirt.

MR. SAIGER (somber, yet firm): Rachel, we’re going.

RACHEL: Tatte?

MR. SAIGER: Now.

Rachel looks to Ben, desperate. He motions that she should go.

RACHEL: No, no. I’m not leaving you.

BEN: It’s okay, mine shenah Rachel. Any day you’re in my life is a beautiful day. In my arms, or across the sea.

RACHEL (to her father): Why can’t you--

BEN: He’s doing what he feels is best--

MR. SAIGER: I do not need you to defend my decision. Say your good-byes and come right home.

He exits. Rachel shouts at him as he leaves.

RACHEL: You don’t own me! I hate you.

Ben holds her.

RACHEL: I’m not going without you.

BEN: I haven’t earned his respect yet. But I will.

RACHEL: Let’s just leave. Run away.

BEN: Then he certainly won't respect me. I’ll join you as soon as I’m able.

RACHEL: Ben! It'll be too long.

BEN: Time is just perception.

RACHEL: All the way to America...

BEN: Our love is greater than time or distance.

RACHEL: How will you find me?

BEN (singing the tune of Ofyn Pripetchik, in English): "...don't be afraid,
Every beginning is hard"

RACHEL: Ben!

BEN: Our love is the map.

RACHEL: Stop. This is our life, not a script, not a performance. I'm leaving. Don't you have feelings?

He nods and draws her close.

BEN: And I have patience, and faith. We'll be together in our dreams, and I will hold you soon.

The light from the square is illuminated intensely until it flashes and the stage goes to dark. Mandolin music plays.

Act I. Scene 3.

It is present day, America. We see the back of three huge mural panels – half of a hexagonal turret - suspended from the ceiling with the bottom of the boards eight feet from the floor. MOLLY is standing on a scaffold facing the boards. We see only her legs. There are tables at the base of the mural covered with art conservator supplies and materials, scientific and artistic. Molly climbs down the scaffold and picks up an artist rendering. She backs up and compares it to the mural above her.

Ben Zion Bloch stands on the opposite side of the stage, holding a similar rendering, also looking up at the mural.

MOLLY: What were you thinking? What's so interesting is that this is so *un*interesting. Birds in the clouds? That curtain? This looks like a backdrop for a grammar school play. You were either careless, or a rebel. What were you thinking with that brushstroke? That color choice? Was this intentional?
(beat)

Were you trying to tell me something?

Ben turns his head to look at Molly. After a moment, she looks at him. ARI storms into the room, a flurry of words and motion. Ben exits. Ari carries a few bags of groceries, and one bag begins to rip as he tries to reach the table in time. He does not make it. He rants as he picks up the scattered items.

ARI: Damn it. They always put all of the like items together. How does it make sense to put all of the heavy cans in one bag, and all of the cotton balls in the other? Just because they look alike doesn't mean they have to be bagged next to each other. Such a lack of imagination.

Molly is looking down at pages in a binder.

MOLLY: Maybe ten years ago, we were hired to clean Atlas. THE Atlas. I got to drive the articulating boom lift - through all those people. In midtown. Crazy. Greatest day of my life.

ARI: That was the greatest day of your life? Thanks.

MOLLY (ignoring him): Incredible how the pigeon guano affected the bronze patina. (to Ari) Why don't you do your own bagging?

ARI: I try, but the baggers always look so disappointed. I don't want to make them feel like they aren't fit to do their own job.

MOLLY: All you have to do is--

ARI: How 'bout Prometheus?

MOLLY: How 'bout him?

ARI: Did you work on him, too?

MOLLY: A ravenous vulture plucked him clean.
(beat)
No, didn't get that gig.

Finally, Molly actually looks at Ari. His face and hands are yellow.

MOLLY: What's wrong with you?

ARI: Turmeric.

MOLLY: Turmeric?

ARI: I've been eating it and washing in it.

MOLLY: You're yellow.

ARI: For an art conservator, I'd expect something a bit more imaginative, and specific, say... golden ochre.

MOLLY: Hydrated iron oxide. Also known as limonite, I believe that's from the Greek - for meadow.

ARI: Nice. Don't worry, after it works its medicinal anti-inflammatory powers on my excessive flatulence—

MOLLY: Finally.

ARI: I didn't ask for these genes.

Molly helps unpack the groceries.

MOLLY: Cookies and milk weren't on the list.

ARI: Refreshments. Slam tonight.

MOLLY: What kind of poets are you? Where's the whiskey and peanut butter sandwiches?

ARI: You coming?

She nods "no."

ARI (hiding his disappointment): That's cool.

MOLLY: Can I hear it?

ARI: Now?

MOLLY: Let's get this last section prepped.

She pulls apart layers of sheer silky crepe fabric and applies it to a board with brushes dipped in a solution. Ari looks at other boards covered with sketches.

ARI: It's like his psyche fragmented.

MOLLY: That's what I thought when I first saw it. Kind of a Jungian totem.

ARI: Did he have any emotional problems?

MOLLY: Doesn't seem so. Nothing in the interviews or records. His poems are—

ARI: Poems? He wrote poems?

MOLLY: I thought *that* was why you agreed to assist me.

ARI: No. I knew about his Yiddish plays and the newspaper column, and his paintings. And signs, but not poems. And I only agreed to take this job because there didn't seem to be a choice.

MOLLY: There's always a choice.

ARI: Not according to Dad.

DAVID enters.

MOLLY: Speaking of the dybbuk...

DAVID: How's it going?

ARI: Well, instead of making my own art, I'm stuck in here with my mommy cleaning layers of coal dust and grease off some old pedestrian painting. So just grea--

DAVID: This is far from a mediocre painting. Do you have any idea how significant--

MOLLY: I was just telling Ari that Bloch was also a prolific poet.

DAVID: Another dreamer.

Molly rummages through a pile of papers and finds a file. She hands it to Ari.

MOLLY (to David, annoyed): What do you want?

Ari opens the file.

ARI (lets out a huge laugh): I thought this said Yiddish *porn*, not poems. Ha!

They ignore him.

DAVID: With the results of the relative humidity and electrical conductivity monitoring, it's strengthened our presumption that the damage on the upper area is due to the hygroscopicity of the salts. The good news is that the rate of loss of cohesion slowed and stabilized with the installation of the dehumidification equipment. A direct correlation.

MOLLY: Why are you here?

Ari is still looking through the file. He's muttering to himself and scribbling notes as he reads the poems.

DAVID: I don't need to give *you* a reason.

MOLLY: *I* was hired on this project, not you. So yes, like everyone else, you do need a reason – and permission - to be here.

DAVID: I raised the funds that pay you!

MOLLY: *You* raised the funds? You? All by yourself. As usual, your hubris grows as your "humility" shrinks. An indirect correlation.

DAVID: I should have never agreed to hire y--

MOLLY: *They* hired me because I am the best—

DAVID: Not sure I'd go that far.

ARI: This poem's title is translated to Dream Jew. It seems like it should be Dreamer Jew. How it's translated adds a really interesting layer of complexity, given that he not only dreams, which looks like in Yiddish that's "a Troymer" but he is also a part of that dream, kind of a transitive/intransitive dream state. Whoa. Whoa is me.

DAVID (to Ari): Aren't you supposed to be applying the synthetic resins?

MOLLY: I will tell him what he's supposed to be doing—

ARI: Stop! Fuck. It's like being six all over again. Your perfect marriage of overinflated egos and low self-esteem.

DAVID: Glad that psychology course paid off. Before you dropped out.

Ari looks at his parents with disdain and walks out. Molly says nothing, and gets back to work at the tables. There is a long, uncomfortable silence. David sighs, and feigns resignation.

DAVID: Well then. Carry on.

Molly salutes him and heads up the scaffold. David starts to walk out and notices a backpack hanging by the door. A publication is sticking out. He picks it up. As he turns the pages, he fumes.

DAVID: What the hell is this?

Molly peeks down from the scaffold.

MOLLY: No idea.

DAVID: Goddamn it. Your son—

MOLLY: My son?

DAVID: *Our* moronic son published his poem and included a scene from one of Bloch's plays - along with photos – *photos* - of the mural. It's the cover shot, for g-d's sake.

MOLLY: Ari got published? Why didn't he say anything?

DAVID: How do you not get this? We do not have the rights to this mural, to Bloch's body of work. Ari did not have the rights to publish this.

MOLLY: Rights?

DAVID: Intellectual property.

MOLLY: This mural doesn't belong to anybody.

DAVID: Really? The Board is going to... Shit, they're going to sue him, which means they're going to sue me.

(beat)

You both signed a confidentiality agreement.

MOLLY: So?

DAVID: So? So. So you cannot publish photos of the mural. You cannot publish his writing. You cannot--

MOLLY: He painted this in 1910. His writing's from '21. They're in the public domain.

DAVID: We are all so screwed. I am screwed.

He leaves. She looks closely at the journal cover and interior pages, as she backs up. She then looks up at the mural, and smiles.

Act I. Scene 4.

1910, America. The back of the mural panels are suspended from the ceiling with the bottom of the boards eight feet from the floor. There are no conservator tables. Rachel walks in and looks up at the mural, studying it.

RACHEL: Ben!

Ben walks in, head down, busily scribbling as he walks.

RACHEL: Ben. An angel?... Are you sure you should—

BEN: Just a second.

He writes and crosses something out.

RACHEL: But Ben...

BEN: What do you think of this?

And now, when a new generation
Seeks to break those bonds and fly
To a land of flowers and temples,
My old roots I cannot deny!

And so I stand, and wonder--
Twixt my source and these foreign desires
I've lived in a world torn asunder
And so is a lifetime gone by.

RACHEL: It's a recurring theme, you being a "between" person, neither completely of this world nor that.

BEN: I am. We all are...transplants.

RACHEL: I'm sorry. How do you even talk to my father?

BEN: I'm grateful for your father.

RACHEL: Grateful?!

BEN: I was able to hone my painting skills.

RACHEL: Three long years. All we - you - went through...

BEN: And now I'm here, and *he* convinced them to pay me to paint this. It all worked out.

RACHEL (worried): Wait til they see this.

BEN: What're they going to do, ship me back?

End of Act 1. Scene 4.