

Into the Starry Night

By Cathy Gohlke

Nine-year-old Celia Percy declared that her prayers were answered that rainy day in November 1939 when Abram Vishnevsky walked into the post office and general store in No Creek, North Carolina. She told Reverend Willard that all her life, at least since the previous week when she'd given up becoming a prima ballerina, she'd dreamed of becoming a US government spy.

Not only was Abram Vishnevsky an immigrant Jew, according to Ida Mae, postmistress and proprietress of the general store, but he'd come most recently from New York City and that pretty much made him a confounded Yankee to boot. Ida Mae didn't know which was worse. "Those Jews in Germany, according to Mr. Hitler—who I'm not sayin' is right about everything—are the cause of the world's troubles, and every Southerner worth his salt knows about Yankees. Why, that Jew man even orders *The New York Times* delivered to his mailbox each and every day, as if the *Journal-Patriot* isn't good enough!" Ida Mae fumed. "Time and again I've warned the good citizens of No Creek they'd do well to keep their eye on that man."

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For the first week, every afternoon after school, Celia and her little brother, Chester, dutifully watched every move Mr. Vishnevsky made from the hedgerow outside his house. By Monday of the second week they'd taken up their vigil near his back door. On Tuesday they mustered the gumption to climb the porch and peer in his front window, keeping a low profile beneath the sill. But by Wednesday, seven-year-old Chester was ready to give up the game.

"This makes the third day he's been hidin' behind that board! What can he be doin' back there?"

"How should I know?" Celia complained.

"Go see," begged Chester, "then let's go home. I'm tired and I want a bologna sandwich. Mama promised she'd leave a slab in the icebox we can share."

"Go see? Are you crazy? Ida Mae says he probably mixes the blood of slaughtered Christian babies in his bread—that's why it don't rise. She said she's sure she read that someplace."

"Where'd he get slaughtered Christian babies?"

"I don't know. That's what Ida Mae says Jews do to make their Passover bread. Maybe she just said that to scare us off from followin' him. Still, I have half a mind to walk right in there and arrest him on suspicion."

"Suspicion of what?" asked Chester.

"Just suspicion, that's all. Like when those revenueurs came and slapped handcuffs on

Daddy and hauled him off to jail. Mama said they didn't have nothin' on him—just suspicion.”

“Suspicion and a trunk full of moonshine,” Chester countered, little as he was.

“Well, there was that,” Celia conceded. “Never mind him. Anyway, I want to know what he's doin' back of that board.”

“Is that it? Is that why we're still settin' here? Well, okay then.” Chester picked himself up and walked through the unlatched front door.

“Wait! Chester! I didn't mean go in!” But it was too late. By the time Celia got to her feet and made it to the door, Chester was standing inside staring up at an open-mouthed Abram Vishnevsky.

“You—you are the faces in my window.” Mr. Vishnevsky's gray eyebrows arched above his spectacles. He set something down behind the white board and stepped forward, wiping red from his hands.

Celia gasped. *Blood? Could it be blood?*

But Chester grinned, tentatively at first, then wider. Celia stood close behind her brother and smiled a little, too, hoping she could inch him toward the door. She figured they'd best both show manners, and that they weren't afraid of being slaughtered or eaten. But she surely wished she'd brought her Dick Tracy decoder ring, in case she needed to leave their mother a secret dying message.

Mr. Vishnevsky frowned. “What are you two doing in my house? Is it not enough that you follow me each day from the store, that you peer into my windows? Have you no manners that you barge into a man's house?”

Chester's forehead wrinkled a full five seconds before his chin began to quiver. Celia knew the cry was coming from the shudder in her little brother's shoulders. “We didn't mean nothin', mister. He—we—just wanted to see.”

“To see?” Mr. Vishnevsky demanded. “And who are you that wants to see?”

“Celia. I'm Celia Percy. This here's my brother, Chester. We just want to see what you do behind that big board all day.” Celia, red faced, bravely pointed to the white structure set up on three wooden legs. “And—say—that red on your hands . . . Is it . . . blood?”

“Board? Blood?” Abram Vishnevsky's eyebrows arched higher yet. He peered over his spectacles at the two frightened children, then glanced back at the “board” behind him and at the red on his hands. He grunted, then chuckled, then laughed a full range of summer rain.

Chester stopped whimpering. Now Celia balled her fists, digging them into her hips. “I wasn't meanin' to be funny.”

Mr. Vishnevsky pulled a rumpled handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the tears from his eyes. “You are right, little one. I should not be so rude as to laugh. Don't you know what is an easel?”

Celia and Chester shook their heads in unison and Celia pulled Chester closer. If it

was something to slaughter little babies on, she wanted to make sure she could get Chester out the door with her.

He tugged his beard, as if considering. "Come. I will show you. It is not a board and this is not blood. It is paint." He stepped aside, allowing Celia and Chester behind the easel.

"It's a picture!" Chester vowed in awe.

"You mean to tell me you just stand here and paint pictures all day?" Celia couldn't believe it and Ida Mae surely would not.

"Portraits," Mr. Vishnevsky corrected.

"Who is it?"

"This portrait . . . is my son."

"You got a son?" Celia squinted. She hadn't seen one.

"A good son. A wonderful son. The best son." Mr. Vishnevsky hesitated. "But he is dead now."

Celia felt the earth move beneath her feet, and her heart fell down to meet it. "I'm sorry, mister. That's terrible."

Mr. Vishnevsky stared at the portrait. "Yes, it is terrible, and I, too, am sorry."

Chester tucked his small hand into Mr. Vishnevsky's large one, and the older man, clearly surprised by the sudden and unfamiliar warmth, pulled back and straightened, but he didn't drop Chester's hand.

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Abram cleared his throat. He'd not planned to share his gallery or his life with the people of No Creek. He'd moved far from New York and settled in this small and remote town wanting only to be left alone, left in peace. Once Germany's Kristallnacht had splashed across American headlines, he knew he dared not stay in a big city. It had taken him nearly a year to find this small hamlet. No, he needed no one, wanted no one.

But he could not remember such comfort as he found in Chester Percy's small hand.

"Did you paint all these pictures, Mr. Vish . . . Mr. Vishy? Every one?"

Abram realized the girl, Celia, had wandered through the kitchen and into the back room. He and Chester followed her voice.

"Yes." He cleared his throat again. "They are my family, as they were before—before the Great War, before the first pogroms came to our town." Why he'd shared that much, he couldn't say. He hadn't meant to.

"What's a pogrom? Is that like a program?" Celia sounded inspired.

"A pogrom? No. It is massacre. Extermination. It is slaughter." It was all he could do to keep his voice even. *How is it that anyone does not know about pogroms? Not know what ripped life from my dear ones?*

Celia's eyes widened. "You mean they're all dead? Every one?"

Abram didn't answer for a long minute. He dropped Chester's hand and reached for

the first canvas, the center portrait, with his finger. "They live in my memory."

"Who'd do such a thing?"

"Those who hate. Those who fear what they don't know and covet what they don't have. Those who demand someone else take the blame for what they cannot explain."

Celia frowned. "That could be half the people in No Creek, but I don't reckon they'd kill anybody."

Abram would not challenge the child's innocence. He traced the cheek of the beautiful woman in the center portrait. "My wife, Miriam." Her name, said out loud, sounded good in his ears. He swallowed the lump in his throat. Though he'd planned not to share his life with another soul, it was good to speak their names. He moved to the next portrait. "My daughter, Rachel." Then the next: "My parents, Jacob and Sarah. As soon as the oils are dry, my Daniel, my youngest, will join them."

"Then who will you paint?" Celia asked.

Abram did not answer for he did not know.

"You want to paint my picture?" Chester offered.

Celia's mouth dropped open.

Abram turned, not offended but astonished by the little boy's boldness. It was, he realized, an offer of the gift of friendship. "Perhaps." He looked into Chester's smiling brown eyes. "Yes, perhaps I want to paint your picture, Chester Percy . . . and yours, Celia Percy." He smiled, and the movement felt strange but good on his face.

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Three weeks later Chester pressed his nose against the candy case at the general store, trying to decide between a penny's worth of licorice and a penny's worth of peppermints.

"Best take peppermints, Chester. Maybe they'll make your belly feel better. Mr. Vishy says red and white is beautiful—the color of holly berries against snow."

"Say what?" Ida Mae demanded from behind the counter. "You children aren't still pesterin' around that Jew man, are you? Your mama's got enough to worry her these days without the two of you jumpin' on the bandwagon."

"We're not pesterin'," Chester assured her.

Celia swallowed and thumped Chester on the back till he glanced her way, then jerked her eyes toward the door.

Chester brushed her hand away, puffed out his small chest, and declared, "Mr. Vishy's paintin' my picture! Celia's, too!"

Celia's eyes shot to the ceiling. Ida Mae's mouth fell open and she dropped the candy into the bag, forgetting to weigh it. "For the love of—did you hear that, Reverend Willard? He's takin' up with children now!"

"Painting pictures doesn't sound like anything criminal."

"I told you what I read in that news article. I told you what my brother's wife said about . . . about Jews and babies."

“That’s a myth, Ida Mae. Not a word of truth,” Reverend Willard all but scolded.

Celia tugged the bib of Chester’s overalls. “Come on, we got to go!”

“It’s your duty to watch over these children, Reverend Willard! Their mother needs all the help she can get now that their daddy’s off to prison.”

Reverend Willard sighed but knelt in front of Chester, blocking his path to the door.

“Just what does happen when you go to Mr. Vishnevsky’s house, Chester?”

“He feeds us potato pancakes and lets us play with his wooden top he carved from hickory wood and paints our picture. We laugh our heads off!”

“I told you no good could come from him movin’ here, Reverend! I told Hyacinth Belvidere she ought not sell that cabin to him, either. She doesn’t need the money. Why, he’s no Baptist. He’s not even Christian!” Ida Mae leaned over the counter and whispered loudly, “Probably some no-good hiding out from the law! Now he’s luring innocent children up there behind closed doors—taking their likeness down on paper. What’s next? Kidnap them or bring on—”

“Ida Mae! You go too far. You’ll scare the children.”

“They ought to be scared! They’re taking up with a Christ killer. You know they don’t even allow Jews down at the Abington Bed and Breakfast—and you know why.”

Chester, still on eye level with Reverend Willard, spoke softly. “You mean they’d turn Jesus out?”

“What?” Reverend Willard blinked, looking as if his head might spin.

“Down at the Abington Bed and Breakfast. Because He’s a Jew.”

Celia stepped in. “You said it last Sunday, Reverend Willard. You said they hated Jesus not because He was a Jew but because they didn’t want Him to be their King and Saver. They wanted to be the high-and-mighties.”

“Savior,” Reverend Willard corrected. “Our Savior.”

“Savior,” Chester repeated. “Ain’t He Mr. Vishy’s Savior, too?”

Reverend Willard sighed and looked up at Ida Mae. “Out of the mouths of babes.”

Ida Mae pursed her lips.

* * *

Although Celia insisted that Chester, with her help, eat all the peppermints that very afternoon, it didn’t help the ache in his belly. Their mother, Gladys Percy, declared that a full bag of peppermints was likely to make anybody sick and sent both children to bed early.

Chester was no better the next morning.

“I hate to leave you two like this, but I’m sure your bellyache will wear off, Chester, honey. You must have eaten something real bad. I’ve got to take Miz Hyacinth on the train to the eye doctor in Winston-Salem this morning. She can’t see her hand in front of her face now. We should be back before dark. If you need anything, Celia, you fetch Ida Mae. Maybe she’ll know something can help.”

“What about Granny Chree?” Celia believed wholeheartedly in the herbs and barks and roots old Granny Chree brewed up in her log cabin on the mountain, and she wore a far better bedside manner than Ida Mae.

“Too far. I don’t want you leavin’ Chester alone that long, and he’s not fit to walk that far.” Their mama wrung her hands. “Oh, I don’t know what to do. Miz Hyacinth has waited near a month for this appointment, but I hate to go.”

“Go on, Mama,” Celia assured, though she felt anything but assured. “I’ll look after Chester and he’ll probably perk up in an hour or two. You know how we are.”

Their mama smiled, worry in her eyes. “I do know.” She frowned. “All right, then. You be sure to get Ida Mae if he’s not better by noon or if he gets any worse.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll read Chester the funnies again.”

And Celia did. She read every yellowed newspaper funny pasted across their bedroom’s unpainted walls, and then she read every ad for Flexible Flyer red wagons—the one thing Chester longed for with his whole heart. But it didn’t help, and Chester’s moans and groans grew. His color deepened from a pink flush to a sweating red heat that cooling rags didn’t help.

By three o’clock, Celia, frantic, ran the mile to the general store and post office and burst in, the bell over the door nearly jingling off its hook. “Ida Mae,” she panted, “Chester’s real sick and Mama’s not home from takin’ Miz Hyacinth up to the eye doctor yet. She told me to come fetch you if he got worse. It’s still his belly and it’s near awful. I don’t know what to do. Can you come quick?”

“Too many potato pancakes, no doubt,” said Ida Mae, glaring at Abram Vishnevsky, who stood, waiting for his mail.

“I can’t tell. But he’s feverish and moanin’ to beat the band.”

Mr. Vishnevsky stepped forward, looking concerned. “He should have a doctor.”

“I’m all the doctor there is this side of Abington,” quipped Ida Mae as she filled a brown cloth bag with tins of powders and roots stored behind the counter. “I’m sure I can handle whatever comes up. That is, unless some fool cast a curse on the child.” She glared again.

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Abram didn’t know if the woman spoke in jest or from spite. It didn’t matter. For years he had endured greater and lesser versions of Ida Mae. He rounded the counter until he stood nose to nose with the woman. The vein in his neck throbbed as he fired a steady stream in Yiddish. He did not know, nor had he cared to learn, those words in English.

“Chester Percy is like a grandbaby to me!” Ida Mae shouted back. “So help me—if that boy’s sick, it’s your fault!”

It was not Ida Mae’s fear or bitterness that tore at Abram’s heart. It was the doubt in Celia’s eyes as Ida Mae shoved him from the post office, locked the door, and hurried up the street with Celia in tow.

Abram made his way home and pulled in the latch. He sat long in his chair before the fire that night, watching his life march through the flames.

He remembered the second pogrom. He saw again the emptiness in his mother's eyes as she rocked the dead body of his father, the flames of the village behind their faces. He heard the screams of his wife and daughter as they were torn from his side. In the morning, when only he and Daniel remained, they pulled his young son from his arms to work with the older boys on the railroad—backbreaking work to move stones and rubble from the explosions, before repairs could begin. Work that the boy could not possibly do, small as he was.

“You are spared from such labor because of your skill, Jew,” the soldier had laughed, shoving Abram toward the enemy's infirmary. But Abram had not wanted to be spared, had hated being separated from his son. *Because of my skill. Because of my skill I lived. Because of my skill I saved our persecutors, our murderers; my own family, I could not save.*

It was nearly ten o'clock when the pounding came at the door. Abram did not answer.

“Mr. Vishy! Mr. Vishy! It's me, Celia. Please! Please open up!”

Abram sat still, willing the time to pass, willing her to leave him alone. But when he heard Celia begin to cry, he could not stop himself. He lifted the latch and stood before her. The dying firelight caught the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Mr. Vishy—Chester's real bad. Ida Mae can't do nothing for him and Mama's beside herself. He's burnin' up, Mr. Vishy!” She crumpled in his arms.

“Celia—”

“Ida Mae swears you put a curse on him, or put somethin' bad in the potato pancakes. She says Chester's like to die before mornin'. I heard her tell Mama. Mama says there's no such thing as a curse . . . but I don't know. I got to ask you. If there is, please take it off. Please, Mr. Vishy! Chester never done nothin' bad to anybody!”

Abram knelt before her, holding her by the shoulders to look into her eyes. “Celia, Celia. I put no curse on Chester. The potato pancakes you ate, too, and you are not sick. I would not hurt Chester for anything in this world. Ida Mae has not told you the truth.”

“Then you really can't do nothin'? Nothin' at all?”

He sighed, but there was a shudder in his sigh. “No, Celia. I can do nothing.”

She leaned against him, crying into the softness of his beard. He held her close and stroked her hair, doing his best to comfort her in words he thought he'd forgotten.

Celia sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “I got to go. I got to get back home for Chester. I can't let him go without me.” She turned away, hesitating. “Mr. Vishy? I might not be by for a while.”

He nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat, glad she had turned away, glad for the dark. “I understand, Celia.” Abram closed the door, letting the latch fall into place, and leaned his head against the door.

At length he lit a lamp and stepped into the back room, surrounding himself with the

faces of those he had loved. He tried to remember the lullaby Miriam had sung to their children.

He heard only the ring of Chester Percy's laughter. He swallowed, tasting the salt in Celia's tears. Abram spread his arms, palms upward, to the portraits of his family, replaying the vow he'd made when he could not save them, and asked what he should do now. When they did not answer, did not comfort, did not guide, he fell to his knees and raised his hands higher still to Adonai, to the God he'd all but turned his back on.

Twenty minutes later, Abram rose from the hard floor and dug out something he'd hidden, stuffed beneath the eaves. He'd resupplied before moving from New York—not much, but enough to help himself if needed. Now, perhaps he could help another. He grabbed his jacket and, clutching the small leather bag, crossed the field, cutting through woods to the Percy cabin. He rapped softly on the door, praying he was not too late. No one answered. Panic filled his heart and he knocked louder.

Reverend Willard opened the door. "Mr. Vishnevsky?"

"Reverend Willard. I did not expect to see you here. Is—am I too late?"

"The boy's bad. Ida Mae's nursing him all she can. This is not a good time to—"

"It is the only time."

Celia came from their bedroom. "Mr. Vishy!"

Abram set his lantern by the door and took Celia's hands in his own. "I did not speak the truth to you, Celia. There is, perhaps, something I can do for Chester."

"You're gonna lift the curse?"

"There is no curse, little one. That is the truth. But I am—I was once—a doctor. It has been a long time, many years, since I practiced. Not since the Great War. But if you and your mama are willing, I will examine Chester and do all in my power to help him."

Gladys Percy stood, pale and anxious, in the bedroom doorway. "Whatever you can do, I'd appreciate. We're thinking there's not much time."

"Gladys Percy, you're not going to let that man touch your son!" Ida Mae hissed.

"Hush, Ida Mae. He says he's a doctor," Gladys all but whispered.

"I don't believe it!"

Abram nodded twice and, ignoring Ida Mae, stepped through the bedroom door. He set his bag on the floor and laid his hand on Chester's burning forehead. He pulled out his stethoscope and listened to Chester's chest, his belly, then gently pressed up and down his belly. Chester moaned, gasping when Abram reached a most tender spot. Abram bowed his head, eyes closed, then straightened. "I need boiling water, sheets, fresh towels—anything clean—and all the light you can make. Candles, lanterns, whatever you have."

"Gladys, you must not allow—"

"I believe it is the appendix," Abram interrupted. "If I do not operate now, it will rupture."

Gladys gasped, her hand to her throat.

Abram waited. The mantel clock ticked.

“We’ll do as you say, Mr. Vish—Doctor.” Gladys nodded, doing her best to keep back tears.

“Boiling water, clean sheets, clean towels, and light,” Abram repeated. “And I will need someone to assist me with his pain control. Mrs. Percy?”

The last trace of color drained from Gladys Percy’s face.

Ida Mae stepped forward. “I will assist you.”

“I do not think, Mrs. Mae—”

“I love that boy. His mother’s been through enough. And I can stand the blood.”

Abram stared over the rim of his spectacles into the level gaze of Ida Mae. He nodded. “Clear the room, Mrs. Mae.”

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In the front room, Celia clung to her mama. Reverend Willard rocked softly, his head in his hands, deep in prayer.

Two hours passed before Ida Mae opened the door to find Celia still clinging to her mama and Rev. Willard still rocking. She nodded to Gladys. “Just in time. That appendix was on fire and ready to burst.”

Gladys, with Celia fast on her heels, was through the door before Ida Mae finished speaking.

“Thanks be to God!” Reverend Willard breathed.

“I expect you’d best be giving Dr. Vishnevsky some of that credit, Reverend,” Ida Mae said, rolling down her sleeves. “I’ve delivered my share of babies, but I never saw anything like that.”

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Abram appeared a moment later in the doorway, polishing his spectacles. “You no longer believe I cursed the child, Mrs. Mae?”

Ida Mae bristled. “Don’t hold that against me. You were a stranger, and we didn’t know you were a doctor. You never said. Besides, I’d say you hold a spark of temper yourself.”

Abram smiled, a little.

“We could certainly have been more neighborly,” Reverend Willard said quietly. He extended his hand to Abram. “For that, I’m truly sorry. I hope you’ll forgive us. We’d all benefit from a doctor here in No Creek. We need you, Dr. Vishnevsky.”

Abram looked into the reverend’s eyes but did not answer. He packed his bag, buttoned his jacket, and half turned before he was nearly bowled over by Celia’s rush from the bedroom and her fierce hug around his waist. “Thank you! Thank you, Mr. Vishy!”

He swallowed yet again, almost annoyed by the lumps that kept coming to his throat. He swept the hair from her red-rimmed eyes. "You're welcome, little one."

She was off, back to the bedroom and her brother in a moment.

Abram opened the front door. He straightened, breathed deeply of the frigid air, glad for the bite in his lungs and surprised by the change in his own bearing. As if in afterthought he turned and said, "Tell Mrs. Percy to send for me if there is any change. In any case, the doctor will call again before noon," and stepped into the starry night.

The End