

# **Golem**

**By Todd Maternowski**

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"So will you help me steal the Golem of Prague or not?"

"Steal *what*?"

"Good luck getting that through customs."

"Dude, Zev, just drop it."

I had no intention of dropping it. This was Prague—a magical, mysterious city. Rick had been here several times before but it was my first time in the city. And the Golem, just sitting up there in the attic of the Old New Synagogue in the tiny Jewish quarter, was simply too tempting.

"But it's a piece of real, magical history!"

"It's a myth, man, don't be stupid."

"Rick's right. Never happened."

"Why are we wasting our time with this guy? Let's go."

I was fighting a losing battle. None of my comrades had shown any interest whatsoever in the legend of the Golem of Prague that afternoon—other than Quan, who bought one of those little statues they sell in the gift shop—and they were ready to get out and hit the clubs we'd seen earlier in the day.

I can't blame them. From what we saw earlier that day, we guessed that up to one half of the women in the Czech Republic would be considered supermodels back in Madison. Even Rick said so, and he went to Northwestern.

"Fine, you guys suck. I'll just go myself."

Rick got up off the hotel bed, took two long strides to my chair and grabbed me by my shoulders.

"Zev. Zev, zevzevzevzev. We're not here to explore grand mysteries of the ancient whatever. We already went sightseeing. It was great, I personally could have used the extra sleep but it's ok, whatever. But tonight, we *party*. All of us. I'm getting married in a week and you'd goddamn better come with us tonight and try and score some of these amazingly beautiful European girls."

"I know, bu—"

"No. No choice. We're going to hit that club on the other side of the bridge and we're going to find the four hottest pieces in the place and we're going to pretend we're cowboys from Texas—except you, Quan, you can say you're Fu Manchu or something—and we're going to have the best night of our lives. And you're not coming with us dressed like that."

I couldn't argue with the man. That was the reason we were here. All the guidebooks I'd read on the flight here—being careful to select only the hip and cool ones like *Timeout* and *Lonely Planet*—all that urban exploration would have to be on my own time.

"Fine, fine. Just pick a shirt out and I'll go put some deodorant on."

"THAT'S the Zev I wanted to party in Prague with! Someone tell Roger to get the hell out of the bathroom. I'm getting tired of waiting on his ass. It shouldn't take a grown man that long to puke and shave."

We left the hotel, a dirt-cheap little two-room place in the Mala Strana district, crossed the Charles Bridge and hit the Karlovy Lazne, which advertised itself as the biggest dance club in all of Middle Europe. Rick disappeared into the sweaty, pulsating mass of barely-clothed young flesh almost instantly. Roger left to go to the restroom and didn't come back, while Quan and I hit one of the bars inside and ordered a pair of Czech Budweisers—not to be confused with the thin, tasteless, beer-flavored water that goes by the same name back home.

Despite the many, many opportunities to join in with the dancing throng, Quan—always the shy one in the group—silently stood by my side at the bar as we watched the proceedings with detached amusement. Whatever he was thinking, he didn't tell me. I probably wouldn't have heard him over the bland house music anyways, and even if I had, my mind was a world away, scrambling down the side of the Old New Synagogue with the clear, definitive proof of the Golem that would make this trip one of the most unforgettably coolest bachelor parties in human history.

The others didn't realize it, but by skipping out on the party at the first opportunity, I was doing them a tremendous favor. Taking one for the team, so to speak.

After a half hour and two more beers for courage I shouted in Quan's ear that I was heading to the restroom and would be right back. He nodded, staring at the glistening back of a ridiculously healthy blonde in front of us that was a foot taller than he was and completely out of his league. I started toward the restrooms, cut my way through a dense patch of youth and doubled around toward the exit, checking back to make sure Quan didn't see me leave.

The cool night air blowing off the Vltava River hit me with a shock more pleasurable than anything I could've managed in the dance club or the hotel room afterward. I started up the picturesque street alongside the river—I had a small flashlight on my keychain and had slipped my lockpicks into my wallet before we left the hotel, so I wouldn't waste any time crossing back and forth across the bridge—and practiced blending into the rare shadows in my dark pants, dark red silk shirt and army-navy surplus boots.

If I had read those guidebooks before I packed for my flight, I might've been better equipped, but there's also a certain elegance to travelling light. Dressed the way I was, with three strong beers sloshing around in my veins, I had the "drunk American tourist on a dare" alibi that should keep me out of any serious trouble. I didn't know squat about the Czech justice system and hadn't seen any cops outside of the really touristy areas, but I felt a little invincible that night, an ugly American explorer in the pith helmet of my generation getting ready to open the forbidden tombs of the Pharaohs, mummy's curses be damned.

As I put my hand in my pocket to double-check on the picks, a hand grabbed my elbow. I turned. It was Quan.

"Don't do this, Zev."

"Don't do what?"

"Don't go there. You don't know what you're messing with."

"I'm not. I just needed some fresh air. That whole place smelled like armpits and feet and bodyspray."

"Don't play around with me, Zev. I mean it."

I had never seen Quan's face look so.. *alarmed*. He was genuinely worried. Not just drunk, although he was easily the biggest lightweight in the group.

"Hey, man, don't worry. Fine, I won't go, fine."

"I'm going to slap you if you keep lying to my face."

I was shocked. For a single moment, I really, truly had meant to go back to the club. But just for a moment. Was I really that easy to read? It would explain my terrible luck with females.

"Ok, ok. I'll go back."

"We don't have to go back. Just not there. We can get some beers in one of those underground dungeons."

"Why do you even care?"

Quan looked at the river for a long moment, breathing heavily. I thought I detected a slight sway in his posture, but it was hard to tell since I was a little buzzed too.

"Listen, Zev. Listen. What I'm about to tell you, hell, I can't tell you. You can't—but you've got to hear it."

"Spit it out, bro."

"You can't go up into that attic."

"Why the hell not?"

"Listen. I know a thing or two about those things. Golems. Let's—Let's sit down over there. I've got something to tell you."

We found a little bench nearby, one with interesting gargoyle-like carvings holding up the wooden slats instead of the usual posts, and sat down. He stared off at the motion of the dark river in front of us.

My eyes naturally settled on the gorgeous fairy-tale castle on the hill across the river.

"Where I come from, when I grew up, things were difficult for us. For my community."

"Chinese?"

"Not exactly. I mean, yes, we're all technically Chinese, but we, my family and a few other families, we were part of something different. Something most of the people in our village didn't understand. Even in that part of the country, just two decades ago. You simply just can't understand how it was."

I was wondering if he would ever get to the point. "How what was?"

"Our community was persecuted by the others in the village. The kids would throw rocks through our windows. Our dogs would wander off and disappear. People would avoid us in the street, or pass us and hurl insults at us. We never did anything to provoke them, but it didn't matter."

"What did you guys do? You family, I mean?"

"Nothing. Then one day someone stole one of our cows. It may sound funny to you, Mr. Wisconsin, but it was a big deal to us. An invasion. My grandfather decided things, if left to themselves, would only go from bad to worse."

"Hey, a cow is a big deal in Wisconsin too."

"It wasn't just about the cow. The villagers would be coming for us next. We had to do something. We couldn't move away. We had to take a stand. We had to fight. But not with our fists, not with weapons. That would have been idiotic. Suicide. We had to make sure we did it the right way. Otherwise we would have been simply overrun."

"I'm.. I'm not sure I follow you. What does this have to do with me and my Golem?"

"Hold your thoughts and listen to me. My grandfather, he knew a lot about the world, about the universe and how things happened. How they moved. I was just a little kid at the time, seven, eight, something like that. My dad had been killed in the late seventies when they came through the village looking for him."

"The villagers?"

"No, the government. At any rate, my grandfather took me and my mother in, and tried to teach me stuff right from the beginning. The five elements. Stories on how to manipulate—"

"Don't you mean the four elements?"

"We've got five. You Westerners leave so much out in your haste. Anyways, he took me aside one night, took me down to the river. It was close to midnight, and at the time our village didn't have much in the way of electricity so it was very dark. When we got to the bank I saw that he had drawn, or dug, a somewhat human shape in the wet soil, and padded out a wide circle around it."

"The shape of a human?"

"Yes. He gave me a small pamphlet and told me to walk around the edge of the circle, naked, reading and re-reading lines in a language I had never heard before. He told me how to pronounce the words, then we started, him going ahead of me with a fire in a censer and me following, reciting these strange words over and over again."

"What language was it?"

"To this day I have no idea. Very guttural, possibly a Mongol dialect? At any rate, we went around and around the edge of the circle for what seemed forever. Although it was summer, I started to get very cold. My teeth were chattering, my limbs shaking. But my voice was strong, stronger and more powerful than it had ever been. It seemed to rise up from someplace within me I didn't even know I had. Like my mouth was the mouth of a deep cave that stretched for miles into the earth. It scared the hell out of me, but I kept at it."

"So, then—"

"Please, let me finish." Quan stared up at the castle on the hill, which had just switched off most of its lights. "He finally stopped, showed me another passage to read and we started again. This time, within seconds almost, the shivers disappeared and I felt a raging inferno inside me. My skin turned red, like it was about to blister. Like I was in an oven. I became extremely weak, but trudged on, barely. It was

everything I could do to just look down at the path we were walking on the edge of the circle."

"Sounds awful."

"It was less than nothing compared to what happened next. From my peripheral vision I could see... *movement*... in the middle of the circle."

"Movement?"

"Where the shape was, the human shape. Like the mud was bubbling up. I was only a kid—I dared not look. Finally my grandfather stopped where we had begun, and started chanting something with a voice I had never before heard from him before. He held my shoulder tightly with one hand. In front of us, the glob of mud bubbled up. No, wait... it didn't."

"No?"

Quan paused, then looked down at the cobbled street below his feet. "No. It—it *stood* up. The drawing in the wet mud was standing there, looking back at us with empty brown orbs. Not moving toward us, but as frightening as death. I passed out. I don't know for how long, maybe only a few seconds, but I woke up underneath a small tree on the riverbank about ten feet away, while a strange, powerful wind swirled all about us like a herd of tornados. My grandfather was standing directly in front of the mud-human, shouting something at it and drawing something on its chest."

"That... that sounds just like—"

"It was. The windstorm passed in a breath, and the mud-thing stood there, looking at my grandfather in total silence. He was significantly taller than the tallest person I had ever seen in our small village, which wasn't much at the time. Back then he seemed ten or twelve feet tall, but I was just a kid, so who knows? But he towered over my grandfather. Thickly-built, with dark black skin, the color of the mud where he had been drawn from. He had grown eyelashes, fingernails, pupils and what not, but no hair anywhere. And two hieroglyphs on his chest."

"Were they Hebrew?"

"No, they were Chinese, but I didn't recognize them. Not back then at any rate. The thing stood there patiently while my grandfather came and got me. He told me not to tell anyone about what I had seen to-night, to pretend like this huge, scary black man was just a family friend in town visiting for awhile."

"In rural Manchuria?"

"Right. No one bought it. But they weren't supposed to. He stayed with us for four weeks. My mother and grandmother didn't ask any questions. He never ate anything, and never spoke, but he always seemed to understand whatever my grandfather said."

"Did anyone else talk to him? Did you?"

"Hell no, I was too scared. Everyone was. The villagers stopped threatening us. In fact, they never bothered us again. We moved a few years later to the city anyways, when the harvests started to go really poorly. We—"

"Waitaminute, what happened to our mud buddy?"

"After four weeks, my grandfather walked him down to the river one night and we never saw the thing again. I thought about going down to the spot where we had made him but never had the courage. Three years later both my grandparents passed away, and the crops failed, so we moved and never looked back."

"Are you sure you didn't just read this in the gift shop? You're pulling my leg, man."

"Listen Zev, I know what's driving you up there. You want proof of something fantastic. Something magical. Real, physical evidence. Like bagging Bigfoot on a hunting trip or the Loch Ness with a fishing reel. But this is different. Golems are not like those things."

"Well, Quan, I appreciate your concern, but I'm going to check it out anyways."

Quan looked a little paler than usual, even in the dim light of the streetlamps. "I figured you wouldn't listen. I can't believe I just told you that story. I promised I never would. And you still didn't listen."

"I listened alright, I'm just not going to be swayed by it one way or another."

"What a waste."

We parted ways, Quan hugging me like he would never see me again and me looking awkward in front of a svelte Czech couple strolling along the river. The story had sapped some of my bravado, and I started to make alternate plans for the evening in case I couldn't muster up the nerve to go through with it.

Then I walked past the unmistakable Jewish Cemetery, and my American pluck and courage was instantly renewed.

It had been a while since I had left the riverbank and plunged into the old section of town, although I was still on the same street for all I could tell. The Cemetery, with its scores of headstones jutting out from the sacred burial grounds in tight, chaotic clumps, reminded me of a sarlacc pit, where tens of thousands of jagged teeth fiercely ripped away at the poor souls being devoured alive over the centuries below the sand.

A short walk later, and I was standing in front of the Old New Synagogue.

The legend says that the Golem was hidden away in the attic to prevent it from doing significant damage to the gentiles surrounding the Jewish ghetto —currently, the only way into the attic was via a metal ladder bolted to the back of the building. As I rounded the Synagogue, two obvious problems reared their centuries-old heads: first, there was absolutely no place to hide on the wall. Once over the low outer wall, there was no cover other than a single bush all the way up to the attic door three stories above.

Secondly, the first ten to twelve feet of the ladder had been removed for the express, singular purpose of defeating overly zealous adventurers like myself.

I found a nearby bench across the street, got out my phone to pretend I was texting and started reconnoitering. With a ten-foot gap at the bottom and no cover, I didn't like my chances of not getting caught.

For two long, agonizing hours I sat there, trying to discern patterns in the foot traffic and staring blankly at the back of the Synagogue. The attic door was less than fifty yards away, the Golem itself less than sixty or sixty five. I would never again be this close to a piece of living, once-breathing magical history. Never.

I vowed to do whatever it took to get up there. Once up the ladder —which by no means looked safe, as it was merely about thirty or so U-shaped metal rods nailed into the side of the building over a hundred years ago— there was a small black door. I had no way of knowing whether it was locked, bolted, even trapped or alarmed.

Still, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to experience something no one else on earth could claim. I was going up that ladder.

As the night wore on the traffic slowed to nearly nothing. Around three-thirty in the morning there were the odd couples, probably lost, and at one point a thin man with a bushy mustache looked at me strangely as he passed. Possibly an undercover policeman. I nodded silently at him, then buried my face in my phone, hoping I would pass from his memory forever once he passed by.

At long last, it was time. I stood up, stretched out my aching legs and walked with authority toward the low outer wall. Then I heard voices behind me. A mob!

I hurried back to the bench and tried to look as nonchalant as possible. Within seconds, a huge mass of fifty to seventy drunken English thugs passed by, singing, cursing, spitting and yelling insults at each other. Many of them stared at me as they passed, and for the first time in my life I felt seriously threatened —deep in the old heart of his peaceful city of magic and wonder, here was a potentially dangerous group of English thugs that was eager to get into a fight. I pretended to look down as they passed, they who so easily could overpower me, me in my dark red silk shirt and boots, an easy target for the fists of an angry thug.

After thirty or so of the brutes stumbled by I thought I saw a man standing in the shadows of the bushes on the other side of the outer wall, either watching me or the mob of English drunks. The man

was dressed in all black with a wide-brimmed black hat shadowing his face, like the Hasidic Jews I'd seen in Skokie back when I would visit Rick in his dorm. I squinted for a better view, but a small breeze moved the bush and—it was difficult to see behind the mass of drunkards between me and the wall—the man in black disappeared. It seemed I had only seen the outline of a man. An optical illusion, my adrenaline and nervous imagination playing tricks on me. Thank god I didn't have to worry about someone else trying the same thing I was on the one night I could pull it off. The mob passed without incident, their shouts and soccer songs fading away to the south.

Ten minutes later I made my move. Beyond the pathetically useless outer wall was a small outcropping, possibly a chimney or other utility, with a gas meter snaking up to a tiny patch of steeply-sloped shingled roof that just happened to be roughly the same height as the bottom rungs of the metal ladder. I hopped over the wall and hid behind the thin bush. This was the last time I would have cover of any sort from the traffic on the street, so I took a minute to look both ways before I tested the strength of the meter to see if it could hold my weight.

It looked strong enough. Even if it wasn't, in the worst case scenario I would fall no more than six or seven feet, dust myself off and head for a pub. I grabbed onto the meter, wedged my right boot against a tiny ridge in a pipe and lifted myself up.

Solid. I scampered up the meter quickly and got to the shingled roof. It was far more concealed from the street than I had expected, but not quite at the same height as the bottom rungs of the metal ladder, and a solid eight-foot jump around a tricky corner to boot. A fall here would be ten or twelve feet, a sprained ankle and a long and agonizing walk on cobbled stone streets back to the hotel. Back to the hotel with a pathetic half-story to tell. Still, a better half-story than Roger, who's only contact with Prague was in the bathroom. After a quick glance both ways down the street, I braced myself for the jump.

With my left boot on a roofing shingle—praying it would hold—I swung my right leg around the corner of the outcropping, holding my back to the wall as tightly as I could. Then I pushed off on my right over ten feet of air, aiming for the third rung from the top, my hands open like I was catching a football.

My right hand bounced off the third rung with a loud clang, but my boot momentarily caught my momentum below the ladder. I slipped off the second to last rung but caught hold of the final rung with my left with a painful jerk. My heart was exploding out of my chest, pounding against the ribcage like a bloodied prisoner raging in his cell. I pulled myself up to the third rung, then scampered up the upper rungs like I was fleeing for my life.

When I reached the attic door I suddenly realized that in my panic I had made enough noise to wake the dead. I froze at the top rung and looked for a security guard running toward me.

Silence.

Down the street perhaps thirty yards away, a figure of a man—again, dressed in all black with a wide-brimmed Hasidic hat—was walking away in the direction of the cemetery. Did he not hear the noise my boots made against the metal rungs? He glided slowly away and turned the corner, seemingly oblivious to my intrusion. If he was going to get help, he was certainly taking his sweet time about it. I was lucky this time. I couldn't afford to be so careless again.

I turned back to the door. The Star of David was engraved on the center, a small handle the only other feature. Was it locked? I pulled the handle. Nothing, not a budge. I pushed. Slight movement. I pushed some more, and a breath later I stepped off the topmost rung and into another world.

The dust of centuries invaded my nostrils, throat and eyes as I fumbled for the small flashlight on my keyring. I closed the door behind me and was enveloped by pitch-black darkness.

I pressed the small button on my keychain flashlight, and was shocked. Whatever I had expected on all those hours crossing the Atlantic, or sitting up eating a hearty breakfast of ham, cheese and bread in the hotel room, or perusing little touristy books on the Golem in the Synagogue gift shop... nothing

prepared me for what I saw.

It was empty. Completely, uneventfully, empty. Nothing more than the inside of a barn.

The attic was devoid of anything even remotely interesting. I swept my light across nothing of interest. The floor was covered in dust and pigeon droppings, with five or six rises in the floor that I eventually figured to be where the naves in the Synagogue below were located. Above me were your standard wooden beams and columns, one of which had the year "1883" carved into it.

No treasure chests full of sacred Hebrew texts. No chandeliers of human bone. The thick chains that dropped from the beams to the floors below were not there to bound the man-made Frankenstein, but merely held up the light fixtures in the temple below. No secret tunnels with ancient Hebrew curses inscribed above their entryways. Nothing.

And no Golem of Prague.

I had pictured the Golem to look something like the metal monsters of those cheesy black-and-white serials of the 1930s; ugly, with a scary, unmoving face, powerful limbs, eight to ten feet tall, waiting patiently on some dusty slab for the next ambitious Rabbi to re-animate it in a time of great need once again. But there was nothing up here, not even an empty slab to designate the existence of a Golem that escaped its bonds and roams the attic freely.

Desperate for anything, I climbed up to see if the tops of the columns were hollow. They were! My sense of excitement, of danger, returned. I dug with my bare hands through layers of dust from the thirteenth century, along with the dried fecal matter of tens of thousands of pigeons.

After ten minutes or more of digging... nothing. I moved on to the next column. Again, nothing. And a third.

Finally in the fourth column I felt something different laying buried in the dust. I shined my flashlight on it, and nearly squealed in orgiastic delight at the off-white ivory color of the object in my hand.

Bone!

I quickly uncovered the rest of it—but my hopes were crushed by a heavy, hollow emptiness. It was a pigeon carcass, years old. No human finger, no single relic of the Golem for the next great Rabbi to re-animate. No souvenir to hide in my carry-on on my way back through customs.

My left shoulder went numb. I looked down and saw three spindly black fingers with no nails.

I don't remember how I found my way through the darkness, how I opened the attic door, how I got down the ladder, or where these odd markings on my body came from. I do remember this: laying on my back on the ground, my foot braced against the wall, looking up at the where the door should be, thirty feet above. A man in all black with a wide-brimmed Hasidic hat, his face shadowed, sticking his head out the door and staring down at me from above.

I bolted, slashing my expensive pants on the low outer wall, stumbling directly into an undercover Czech policeman. I screamed at him and pointed to the attic, but he just looked at me with a puzzled look and asked me questions I didn't know the answer to; my name, where I was born, which hotel I was staying at. I looked up at the attic—the door was closed. The man in black had disappeared.

The policeman saw me looking at the attic, stopped asking questions and escorted me back to my hotel, where Rick, Quan and two anonymous brunnettes were waiting, worried. They said I looked like a walking ghost. I waved them off and crawled into bed with my clothes on but couldn't sleep, so I spent the night in the restroom with the lights turned on.

I must have passed out at some point, because when I woke up I found that my wallet and keys were gone. No need to search the room—I knew where they were. They would be discovered in time, by some adventurous Brazilian or Cantonese or Australian youth with more brains than wisdom, a hundred years from last night.

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About the Author: Born in Madison, Wisconsin, Todd studied Ancient Near Eastern religion and early Judeo-Christianity at the University of Chicago before heading into the real world. He has since worked as a ballroom dance instructor, bass player, mediator, credit specialist, art preparator, janitor, journalist, copy editor, armored car money counter, mambo dancer and satirist. He lives in Dallas, Texas with his hyper-creative wife and baby girl.

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