

LIT 5217 / SHOLEM-ALEICHEM

as, hungry as the ... : all the way home. We rolled with laughter in the streets. Only Reb Yozifel walked home alone, his head bowed, full of grief, unable to look anyone in the eyes, as though the bones had been shaken out of his own pockets."

The story was apparently over. Unconcerned, the man with the round eyes of an ox turned back to the window and resumed smoking.

"Well," we all asked in one voice, "and what about the money?"

"What money?" asked the man innocently, watching the smoke he had exhaled.

"What do you mean—what money? The eighteen hundred rubles!"

"Oh," he drawled. "The eighteen hundred. They were gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone forever."

Translated by Julius and Frances Butwin

Eternal Life

IF YOU LIKE, I'll tell you a story of how I once took a burden upon myself and came close, perilously close, to misfortune. And why, you may wonder, did it happen? Because I was very young, neither experienced nor shrewd. It's possible, of course, that I'm still far from wisdom, for if I were clever, wouldn't I be rich? If you have money you're clever and handsome, and you can sing, too.

In short, I was a young man, living, as the custom was, off my in-laws, sitting at my studies, dipping into forbidden books on the sly when my father-in-law and mother-in-law weren't looking. My father-in-law wasn't so bad. It was she, the mother-in-law, who made the trouble; she wore the pants; she was boss! All by herself she ran the business, made matches for her daughters—everything singlehanded. She picked me, too; it was she who examined me in the Law; it was she who brought me to Zwihiil from Radomishli. I'm from Radomishli myself—surely you've heard of Radomishli! It was written up in the papers not so long ago.

Well, so there I was in Zwihiil, living off my in-laws, sweating over Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, hardly stepping across the threshold of the house, you might say, until the time came to register for military service and I had to bestir myself, arrange my papers, figure out a way of getting an exemption, obtain a passport, and all the rest of it. This, you might say, was my first journey into the world. To show that I was now a man, I went to the market all by myself and hired a conveyance. God sent me a bargain, a lucky find—a peasant from Radomishli with a sleigh, a broad red sleigh with two wings on the sides, like an eagle. I never even noticed that he had a white horse, and a white

horse, said my mother-in-law, means bad luck. "May I be lying," she said, "but I'm afraid this journey will end in trouble." "Bite off your tongue," exclaimed my father-in-law and regretted it immediately, for he soon got what was coming to him. But to me he said on the sly, "Women's superstitions."

I began to prepare for the trip—prayer shawl and phylacteries, cakes made with butter, a few rubles in my pocket, and three pillows: one to sit on, one to lean on, and one for my feet. But when the time came to say good-bye, the words stuck in my throat. It's always like that with me: I lose my tongue. What does one say? I don't know! To me it's always seemed rather coarse to turn your back on people and leave them, just like that. I don't know how you feel about it, but farewells for me are, to this day, a torment. But I seem to be losing the thread of my story . . . I was on my way to Radomishli.

It was the beginning of winter; the snow was thick and made excellent going for the sleigh. White though it was, the horse ran like a song, and the peasant I had drawn was a silent one, the kind that answers "Eh-heh," meaning Yes, or "Ba-nee," meaning No. If you threatened him with the cholera you couldn't get another word out of him. Having eaten well, I departed happily, settled cozily in the sleigh, a pillow under me, a pillow at my shoulders, a pillow at my feet.

The nag leaps ahead; the peasant clucks; the sleigh glides; the wind blows. Snow whirls in the air and floats down upon the great wide highway. My heart is full of a strange, outlandish joy. For the first time I am going into God's little world, all by myself, my own master. And I lean back and stretch my legs in the sleigh, as proud and easy as a squire.

But in winter, no matter how warm your clothes may be, you want to stop, to catch your breath and warm your sides before you go on. I began to imagine a warm inn, a blazing samovar, a roast with hot gravy. These dreams pressed upon my heart—that is, they made me hungry. So I took up the matter of an inn with my peasant. "Ba-nee," he said, meaning No. "Is the inn far?" I asked. "Eh-heh," he drawled, meaning Yes. "How far?" But that I couldn't pry out of him. And then I began to think: imagine if the driver had been a Jew instead of a peasant! He'd have told me not only where the inn was, but who was the owner, what he was called, how many children he had, how much he had paid for the inn, how much he earned by it, how long he's been there, and whom he had bought it from—he'd have recited me an epic. A strange people. Our Jews. I mean. God bless them.

CODE OF THE FOREST

reticence here = cultural barrier
heightened self-awareness

So I dreamed on about my inn and the hot samovar and the little delicacies to eat. Until God took pity on me. The peasant clucked to his nag, turned the sleigh off to a side, and there stood a small gray hut covered with snow, a country tavern. Standing alone on the white snowy plain, it seemed strangely solitary, like a remote and forgotten gravestone. We drove up to it as grand as you please, and my peasant took the horse and sleigh to the stable while I went right into the tavern, opened the door, and remained standing on the threshold, perplexed. Why, you wonder? (It's a pretty story, and a short one) In the middle of the floor, on the ground, lay a corpse covered with black. At its head stood two brass candlesticks with tiny candles. Tattered children sat beside it, beating themselves on their heads with their tiny hands, weeping, yammering, crying, "Ma-ma! Mama!" And a tall, long-legged man in a torn, summer-thin, loose coat paced back and forth, wringing his hands and muttering to himself, "What's to be done? What can I do?"

Seeing this, my first thought was to escape. "Noah," I said to myself, "clear out!" I began to back away. But the door closed behind me and something soldered my feet to the threshold. I couldn't move from the spot. Catching sight of me, the long-legged man rushed over to me with arms outstretched, like someone begging to be rescued. "What do you say to this misfortune!" he cried, showing me the weeping children. "Their mother has left them. What shall I do? What's to be done?"

"Blessed be God's righteousness," I said to him and wanted to console him with kind words (as the custom is among us) But he interrupted me and said, "It's an old story, you understand. She's been all but dead this past year. It was the true blessing, consumption. Poor thing, how she begged and prayed for death! But what shall we do, here in the middle of this barren field? What's to be done? If I go to a farm and hire a wagon to take her to town, how can I leave the children? And night is coming on. What's to be done!"

With these words my long-legged Jew burst into a strange tearless weeping, almost like laughter, and sounds resembling coughs came from his throat. "Oohoo! Oohoo!" Many of extreme grief

I forgot my hunger, my cold, I forgot everything and said to him, "I'm traveling from Zvihil to Radomishli and have a fine sleigh. If the village you speak of is not far, I can lend you the sleigh and wait here. If it won't take too long."

He threw his arms around me and almost kissed me. "Oh, long life to

forbidding

empty world

The Best of Sholom Aleichem

Life! The village isn't far from here. Four or five miles, no more. It will hardly take an hour, and I'll send your sleigh right back. It'll bring you Eternal Life, I swear it, Eternal Life! Children, get up from the ground and give thanks. Kiss this young man's hands and feet. He's given us his sleigh, and I will take your mother to the consecrated ground. Eternal Life! As I am a Jew, Eternal Life!"

You could scarcely say there was rejoicing. The children, when they heard their mother was to be taken away, fell upon her with still more tears. All the same, these were good tidings. Someone—a man, myself—had turned up to do them a mercy; God alone had sent him there. They looked at me as though I were a redeemer, a sort of Elijah the Prophet, and to tell the honest truth I began to see myself as no ordinary person. Suddenly I grew in stature before my own eyes, becoming what some people call a hero. At that moment I was ready to lift mountains, to overwhelm worlds. Nothing seemed impossible. So I blurted out, "You know what? I'll take her myself, with the help of my peasant, so you won't have to leave the children alone at such a time."

The more I talked this way, the more they all wept. They wept and they looked at me as if they were seeing an angel that had come down from heaven. In my own eyes I kept getting bigger by the minute, unbelievably great, so much so that I forgot I had always lived in terror of corpses, being afraid even to touch them. With my own hands I helped carry out the body and put it in the sleigh. I promised my peasant an extra half-ruble and a shot of brandy. He scratched his head doubtfully and mumbled under his breath, but after his third drink he grew more reasonable, and the three of us—the peasant, the corpse, and I—were off. Her name was Chava Nechama, daughter of Raphael Michael. I remember this name as if I had heard it today, because I kept repeating it to myself, Chava Nechama, daughter of Raphael Michael. Her husband had taken great pains to make sure I got it correctly, since the burial service could not be performed properly unless her full name was invoked. So I kept repeating, "Chava Nechama, daughter of Raphael Michael."

As I was doing this I forgot her husband's name! If you threatened to cut my head off, I couldn't remember what he called himself. He had told me his name and assured me that as soon as I came to the village I had only to mention it and the body would be taken from me, so I could continue my journey. He was well known in the village, he went there on

= magical words

voice of the dead

gotten

2nd dialogue
invective

curse

Eternal Life

SNOW STORM

such good causes as the ritual bath; to hear him tell it, he was virtually a legendary benefactor. He stuffed my head with instructions and directions, where to go and what to say. But I forgot every word of it. Nothing remained with me. Nothing! All my thoughts were centered on one thing only: I had a corpse on my hands. And this caused me so much tumult and panic that I nearly forgot my name. From early childhood I have dreaded the sight of the dead. It seemed to me, as we drove along, that the half-closed frosty eyes were looking at me and that the locked dead lips might soon open and some strange subterranean voice issue from them. Just to imagine such a sound would be enough to make you lose your senses. Not for nothing are stories told among us of people swooning or even losing their minds from fear of the dead!

We drove on with the corpse. I gave the dead woman one of my pillows; she lay there at my feet. To avoid weird and oppressive thoughts I looked toward the heavens and began to repeat silently, "Chava Nechama, daughter of Raphael Michael, Chava Nechama, daughter of Raphael Michael," until the names grew confused in my mind and I found myself saying, "Chava Raphael, daughter of Nechama Michael" and "Raphael Michael, daughter of Chava Nechama." I failed to notice that it had been growing darker, the wind was blowing fiercely, and the snow fell and fell until it covered the road marks. The sleigh now seemed to be gliding forward at random into a white waste. The peasant grumbled more and more loudly; I could have sworn he was heaping threefold blessings upon me. "What's the matter?" I asked. He spat with rage—may God defend me! He opened his mouth and pelted me with words. I was leading him to ruin, he said, him and his horse, too. Because of the corpse in the sleigh the horse had lost its way, we had lost the road, night was coming on, and soon we would be utterly forsaken.

When I heard this I was ready to turn back with the corpse and undo my good deed. But the peasant said there was no going back; there were no longer any recognizable signs; we were circling about, lost in the fields. The road was snowed under, the sky was dark, it was night, the little nag was tired to death. "May a filthy end overtake the innkeeper and all the innkeepers of the world!" cursed the peasant. "If only he had broken his leg," he continued—and by "he" he meant himself—"before he decided to stop at that inn! If only the first drink had choked him before he let himself be talked into this folly of taking a calamity into his sled, for a few dirty coins, and being lost to the devils, nag and all, in these fields." About himself he said he didn't complain: maybe it was

fated so. But the little nag, this innocent creature that knew nothing, what had it done to deserve such a fate?

I could have sworn that there were tears in his voice. I promised him another half-ruble and two more glasses of brandy to make him feel better, but this only made him furious, and he said that if I didn't keep quiet he'd throw the corpse out of the sleigh altogether. And I thought to myself, what will I do if he does throw out the corpse, and me with it, leaving the two of us there together in the snow, the corpse and me? Can anyone tell what a peasant will do when he becomes angry?

I grew dumb. I huddled into the pillows and tried to stay awake. After all, how can you fall asleep with a corpse in front of you? And besides, I had often heard that one must not sleep in the winter frost; from such sleep one may never waken. But my eyes began to droop. At that moment I would have given anything to be able to drop off, but I fought against it and held my eyes open with my fingers. Nevertheless they kept closing, again and again, while the sleigh flew across the soft white deep drifts, and a curious sweetness poured through my limbs. I experienced a strange, close pleasure, and I wished this sweetness to last forever, but some power kept waking me, cruelly rousing me, poking me in the sides and saying, "No, Noah, don't sleep. Stay awake!" And I forced my eyes and found this imagined sweetness to be a terrible chill that crept through my bones, and I began to know a deep fear—terror! May God have mercy on me! I imagined that the corpse stirred, uncovered itself, and looked at me with those frosty half-open eyes as though to say, "What are you doing to me, young man? Destroying a daughter of Israel who has died, the mother of tiny children, not bringing her to rest in consecrated ground?" The wind howled in my ears as if it were a human voice, and hideous thoughts ran through my mind. I saw us all under the snow, buried there, the horse, the peasant, the dead woman, and myself, the living frozen to death and only the corpse, the innkeeper's wife, come to life.

Suddenly I heard the peasant urge his horse on more cheerfully, thank God. He crossed himself in the dark with a sigh. It was as if he planted a new soul in me. Far off a tiny fire could be seen; it appeared, disappeared, and then we saw it again. A settlement, I thought, and I gave thanks to God with a full heart. To my peasant I said, "Apparently we've found the way. That's a town we're approaching, isn't it?"

"Eh-heh," said the peasant, without anger and in his usual laconic style. Right then and there I wanted to embrace him, to kiss him on the

* back for his good tidings and for his laconic "Eh-heh," which was dearer to me than the cleverest sermon.

"What's your name?" I asked, wondering why I hadn't thought to ask before.

"Mikita."

"Mikita!" I repeated, and found a rare charm in the sound.

"Eh-heh!" he said, and I wanted him to say more, at least a few words, for Mikita had become so dear to me, and his horse too, lovely little nag. I spoke to Mikita about him. "That's a fine little horse," I said.

"Eh-heh," answered Mikita.

"Fine sled, too."

"Eh-heh."

And more than that, though you broke him into a dozen pieces, Mikita wouldn't say.

"Don't like to talk, do you, Mikita my heart?"

"Eh-heh."

I laughed. I felt gay, happy. If I had found a treasure or a juicy piece of news the world had never heard of I couldn't have been happier. In short, I felt lucky—oh, so lucky! Do you know what I wanted? I wanted to raise my voice in song. That's my nature, I sing when I'm happy. My wife, who knows me inside out, will ask, "Well, what's happened now, Noah? How much money have you made that you're singing so loud?" Women, with their women's brains, seem to think that a man is happy only when he's making money. I wonder why it is that our women are so much more concerned with money than we, the men. Who works for it? We or they? But there, I've fallen off the track again.

So, with God's help, we arrived in the village, and it was still quite early. The place was still deep in slumber, there were many hours before day would come, and nowhere was a fire to be seen. I caught sight of a wide-gated house with a little broom hung on it to signify a hotel. We stopped, crawled down, and began to beat our fists upon the gate. We knocked and we knocked, and finally we saw a little light in the window; then we heard someone scuffing his feet and a voice came from within: "Who is it?"

"Open up, uncle," I shouted, "and you'll win Eternal Life."

"Eternal Life?" came the voice from behind the gate. "Who are you?" The lock began to turn.

"Open up," I said. "I've brought a corpse."

"A corpse? What do you mean, a corpse?"

CODE OF
THE
CULTURE

2nd
voice of
the dead

"A corpse means someone who has died. The body of a Jewish woman from the country. From an inn."

Silence on the other side of the gate. I heard a lock turn and feet scuffle away into the distance. The light went out. What was I to do!

The whole thing angered me so that I called my peasant to help me, and we beat so hard that at last the lamp reappeared and we heard the voice again.

"What do you want from my life? What kind of plague are you?"

"In the name of God," I pleaded as with a bandit. "Take pity. I have a corpse here."

"What kind of a corpse?"

"The innkeeper's wife."

"What innkeeper?"

"I've forgotten how he calls himself, but her name is Chava Michael, daughter of Chana Raphael—Chana Raphael, daughter of Michael Chava—I mean, Chana Chava Chana—"

"Get away from here you *schlimazel*, or I'll pour a bucket of water over you."

That's what the innkeeper said. He clumped away from the window and put out the light. There was nothing we could do.

About an hour later, when the dawn began to show, the gate opened a bit. A black head streaked with pillow feathers looked out and said, "Was it you, pounding on the windows?"

"Of course. Who else?"

"What did you want?"

"I've brought a corpse."

"A corpse. Take it to the *shammes* of the Burial Society."

"Who is this sexton of yours? What's his name?"

"His name is Yechiel. You'll find him down the hill, not far from the bath."

"And where is your bath?"

"You mean to say you don't know where the bath is? I guess you don't live here. Where do you come from?"

"From Radomishli. I'm a Radomishler myself, but now I'm coming from Zwihi, and I've brought along the corpse from an inn not far from here. It's the innkeeper's wife—she died of consumption."

"A pity. But what's that to do with you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I was just passing through and he asked me—the innkeeper, that is. He's all alone out there in the fields, with

little children, and no one to leave them with. So he asked me. And since it was a chance to win Eternal Life, I thought, why not?"

"There's something fishy about your story," he said to me. "You'll have to see the Burial Society. I mean the officers."

"Who are these officers? Where can they be found?"

"You mean to say you don't know? Reb Shepsel, one of them, lives on this side of the marketplace, and Reb Eliezer Moishe, another one, lives right in the middle of the marketplace, while Reb Yosi is near the old synagogue. The most important one is Reb Shepsel. He's the boss. He's a hard man, I may as well warn you. He won't be easy to get around."

"Thanks," I said. "May you live to give better tidings. When can I meet them?"

"When? What sort of a question is that? Why, in the morning of course, after prayers."

"Great," I said. "And in the meantime, let me come in to warm myself. What kind of a town is this anyway, a Sodom?"

Hearing these words, my host quickly locked his gate again, and the silence of a cemetery descended on the street. What could we do now? We remained standing by the sleigh, in the middle of the road, as Mikita murmured angrily, scratching his head, spitting and cursing. "May this innkeeper and all the innkeepers of the world meet a foul end." For himself, he said, meaning himself, personally, he won't complain. But this little nag of his—what do they have against such a sweet little nag that they try to kill it with hunger and cold? An innocent creature, a beast of the field that has never sinned.

I felt ashamed. "What," I asked myself, "must he be thinking in the head of his about us Jews? How must we look—we the merciful and son of the merciful—to peasants like this, coarse and boorish, when one Jew shuts the door against another and won't even let him in to warm himself on a freezing night?" It seemed to me then that our fate, the fate of the Jews, made sense after all. I began to blame every one of us, as usually happens when one Jew is wronged by another. No outsider can find more withering things to say of us than we ourselves. You can hear bitter epithets among us a thousand times a day. "You want to change the character of a Jew?" "Only a Jew can play such a trick." "You can't triffl with a Jew." And other such expressions. I wonder how it is among the Gentiles. When they have a falling out, do they curse the whole tribe?

In any case, we sat in the sleigh in the middle of the marketplace and waited for daylight to bring a sign of life. By and by we heard door

creaking, the occasional groan of a windlass as a bucket was hauled from the well; smoke rose from chimneys, and the crowing of cocks grew stronger and livelier. Presently all doors opened and God's creatures appeared in a plenitude of forms: cows, calves, goats, and also Jews, women and girls wrapped in warm shawls and bundled up like dolls, bent triple and as frozen as winter apples in the cellar. In short, the town had revived from its cold sleep. The inhabitants awakened and poured the ritual water over their fingers before saying the prayers. The men were off to their labor of worship, prayers, study, and chanting of psalms; the women to their ovens, kneading troughs, and the tending of cows and goats.

I began to inquire after the officers of the Burial Society. "Where does one find Reb Shepsel? Where does Reb Eliezer Moishe live? Reb Yosi?" Those whom I asked, asked me in turn, "Which Reb Shepsel? Which Eliezer Moishe? What Yosi?" There were several Shepsels and several Eliezer Moishes and even several Yosis in the town, they told me. And when I said that I was looking for the officers of the Burial Society, they grew frightened and wanted to know, "Why does a young man like you need the Burial Society so early in the morning?"

Well, I didn't give them time to feel me out and come at the facts gradually. I told them my story at once, straight from the heart, and revealed what a burden I had taken upon myself. You should have seen what happened. Do you think they set about helping me in my misfortune? Nothing of the sort! They all ran to the sleigh to peer into it and see for themselves whether I really had a corpse. A crowd formed around us, a changing crowd; because of the cold some spectators left, others came over, looked into the sleigh, shook their heads, shrugged their shoulders, inquired of one another whose corpse that could be and from where it had come, and who I might be and how I happened to have brought it. But of help they gave me none whatever. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded someone to show me the house of Reb Shepsel.

I found him facing the wall, standing, wrapped in his prayer shawl and phylacteries, and praying so sweetly, so melodiously, so raptly, that the very room seemed to sing with him. He snapped his fingers, bumbled harmoniously, twisted his trunk back and forth, made many queer and pious gestures. I had the double satisfaction of watching this extraordinary prayer—I love to listen to spirited praying—and of warming my frozen bones at the same time. And when at last he twisted

his head around to me, his eyes were still full of tears and he had, for me, every appearance of a godly man, a man whose soul was as far from earth as his round fat body from heaven. And because he had not yet finished his prayers and didn't want to break off in the middle, he communicated with me in the holy tongue—that is, by means of winks and twirling of his fingers, shrugs, movements of the head, and twitching of the nose, with a few words of Hebrew thrown in for good measure. If you like, I can report our conversation word for word.

[23] "Sholem aleichem, Reb Shepsel."

"Aleichem sholem. Iyo, sit. Sit down."

"Thanks. I've had enough sitting."

"Nu? Ma? What, what?"

"I've come to you on a great errand, Reb Shepsel. You'll win Eternal Life."

"Eternal Life? Good! But what? What?"

"I've brought you a corpse."

"A corpse? What corpse?"

"Not far from here there's an inn, and there lives a poor man, pitifully poor, and this poor man has lost his wife—she died of consumption—and he is left with small children. A great pity. If I hadn't taken pity on them I don't know what he would have done, this poor man, out there in the fields with an unburied corpse."

"Blessed be God's righteousness! But nu? Money? The Burial Society?"

"What money? He's poor as a mouse. Down to nothing. Burdened with children. Rep Shepsel, you'll gain Eternal Life."

"Eternal Life? But what? What? Poor folk, poor Jews here, too. Iyo nu? Feh!"

And because I hadn't quite grasped his meaning he turned angrily to the wall once again and resumed his prayer, much less ardently this time, squeaking somewhat and rocking himself swiftly in a sort of galloping courier's tempo. He then threw off his prayer shawl and phylacteries and turned to me with great heat, as though I had spoiled a sale for him at the fair.

"Look here," he said to me, "this is a poor town and has enough of its own paupers who have no shrouds when they die. We have to hold collections for them. And still people come here from everywhere, from the very ends of the earth. Everyone has to die here!"

I defended myself as well as I could. I said I was innocent of any design

against his town, that I was merely performing a good deed. "As though," said I, "one had found a corpse in the street! It's entitled to decent burial and last rites. You're an honest Jew, and a pious one. You can win Eternal Life by this deed."

He became even more furious. You might almost say he nearly drove me out—that is, he didn't literally drive me, but pummeled me with words. "Is that so! You are a young man representing Eternal Life? Go and make a little inspection of our town. See to it that people are prevented from dying of hunger and cold and you will win Eternal Life. Eternal Life indeed! A young man who trades in Eternal Life! Go, take your goods to the shiftless and the unbelievers, and peddle your Eternal Life to them. We have our own charities, and if we develop a craving for Eternal Life we'll know where to find it. What do we need you for?"

So spoke Reb Shepsel and angrily escorted me to the door, which he loudly slammed after me.

I swear to you that from that morning I took a rooted dislike to those people who are always worshiping and conversing with God. You will tell me that modern unbelievers are even worse than the orthodox old-fashioned communers-with-God, but I disagree. Now at least the hypocrisy is less glaring.

Well, Rep Shepsel had shouted at me and shown me the door. What should I do now? I turned to the others, his colleagues. But at this point a miracle occurred, a miracle straight from heaven. There was no need for me to seek them; they had come looking for me. We met nose to nose, at Reb Shepsel's door.

"Do you happen to be the young man with the goat?" they asked.

"What goat?"

"The young man, that is, who brought the corpse to our town? Is it you?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm the one."

"Come in with us to Reb Shepsel's and we'll talk it over."

"What's there to talk about? Take the corpse off my hands and you'll gain Eternal Life."

"No one's keeping you here," they said to me. "You can go any time you wish. You can even drive your corpse to Radomishli and gain our thanks for it."

"Many thanks for the advice," I said to them.

"You're welcome," they said to me.

So we made our way into Reb Shepsel's house, the three of us, and

they began to dispute among themselves, quarreling, disagreeing, all but cursing one another. The two newcomers declared that Reb Shepsel had always been a hard man to deal with, a stickler for the letter of the law, a literalist. For his part, Reb Shepsel twisted to and fro, hitting back with quotations from Scripture. *The poor of your city have prior need*. But the others attacked him with strong arguments. "So? Does that mean that this young man should be turned away with his corpse?"

"God forbid!" said I. "Go off again with this dead woman? Why, I barely made it here alive. We were nearly lost in the storm. The blessed peasant wanted to throw me into the snow. I beg you, take pity. Free me from this burden. You will purchase Eternal Life."

"Eternal Life, that's quite a mouthful," answered one of the two, a tall, lean, long-fingered Jew, the one they called Eliezer Moishe. "We'll take the corpse from you and see that it's properly buried. But it'll cost you a little something."

"What do you mean?" I said. "Isn't it enough that I took this good deed upon myself, nearly perished in the field, was almost thrown from the sleigh by the peasant? And you still speak of money?"

"But you'll be winning Eternal Life, won't you?" said Reb Shepsel with such an ugly face that I loathed his soul. Only by a great effort did I hide my feelings—after all, I was at the mercy of these people.

"Listen to us," said the one called Reb Yosi, a little Jew with a meager beard, half plucked out. "You'd better realize young fellow, that there's another obstacle. You have no burial papers."

"What papers?"

"We don't know who this corpse is. She may not be the person you say she is," said the lean one with the long fingers, Eliezer Moishe.

I stared from one to the other, and the long-fingered Eliezer Moishe pointed at me and said, "Yes. Who knows? Maybe you killed a woman somewhere. Maybe she's your own wife, whom you brought here with a story about a poor innkeeper, the innkeeper's wife, little children, consumption, and Eternal Life."

Apparently I myself looked like a corpse when he said these things, for the little one they called Reb Yosi began to console me, explaining that they had nothing against me. Why should they have? They didn't suspect me of a crime. They knew I wasn't a murderer or a thief. Nevertheless, he said, I was a stranger, and a corpse is no mere sack of potatoes. A human being is involved, a corpse. They had a rabbi, they gave me to understand, and a police official. One had to think of protocol.

"Yes," said Eliezer Moishe, pointing to me and looking me up and down as if I had already been convicted of a crime, "there's protocol." I was struck dumb. Sweat started forth, my forehead grew cold, and I felt ill, as if I were going to faint. I understood my situation only too well. I saw how I had been snared. Shame, sorrow, and heartbreak overcame me. But I thought, why enter into long negotiations with these three? I took out my small purse and said to them, "Listen to me. This is how matters stand. I see that I have gotten myself badly tangled. It was just my luck to have gone to that inn to warm myself right after the death of this innkeeper's wife, and to have listened to the pleas of the poor widower with children who promised me Eternal Life if I would give him a helping hand—and the upshot is that it's going to cost a pretty penny. All right, here's my purse. I have some seventy rubles in it. Take what you want. Just leave me enough to get me to Radomishli. But relieve me of the corpse and let me go."

I must have spoken with great emotion, for the three of them exchanged looks, refused to touch my money, and said that after all this town was not Sodom. True, it was poor, with more paupers than rich men, but to fall upon a stranger like robbers, no, that wasn't their way. They had no intention of abusing me. They would take whatever I felt I could offer in a spirit of good will, but not a penny more. Still, I would have to contribute something, it was such a poor town. The beadles, the pallbearers, the shrouds, the plot, brandy for the services—all cost money. Naturally they didn't expect any extravagance. You start to spend carelessly on an occasion like this and there's no telling how much money may spill between your fingers.

Well, what else can I tell you? Even if the innkeeper had been a man of great wealth his wife's funeral couldn't have been more impressive. The townspeople came out in droves for a sight of the young man who had brought a corpse. The rumor spread, increasingly detailed and complicated, that I was a wealthy young man who had brought the body of his mother-in-law, a woman of vast fortune, to be interred—where did they get the idea she was my mother-in-law? Crowds came into the streets to welcome me, the wealthy mourner with the rich mother-in-law. I was said to be flinging money to the poor by the fistful. People pointed at me from all sides. And the poor—an endless multitude! Never, never have I seen such a quantity of paupers. Not even on the eve of Yom Kippur was there ever so great a throng before the doors of the synagogue. They snatched at my coat, they nearly tore me to pieces. After all, an

immensely rich young man pouring money! It was no ordinary thing. Luckily the officials of the Burial Society were there to protect me. They prevented me from giving away all of my money, especially the tall sexton who kept by my side all the while and kept admonishing me with his long finger. "Young man, don't throw your money away. There's no end to this." And the more he admonished, the more the beggars crowded me and tore at my flesh. "It's all right," they cried. "When you bury a rich mother-in-law you can afford to spend a few more pennies. She's left him plenty—plenty! Wishing him no bad luck, we should have as much as he's inherited."

"Young man," shrieked one of the beggars as he tugged at my coat, "give up half a ruble for two of us here! Or forty kopecks at least. We're two born cripples, one blind and the other lame. Give us fifteen kopecks at least for the two. Two cripples are always worth that much!"

"Cripples," shouted another beggar as he kicked the first one out of the way. "You call these cripples? My wife, there's a cripple for you! No hands, no feet, nearly lifeless, and with sick little ones. Give me five kopecks, will you, and I'll say *Kaddish* for your mother-in-law and brighten her Paradise."

Now it's easy to laugh, but it was no laughing matter at the time, for the poor multiplied all around me. They covered the marketplace within half an hour, like a plague of locusts. The pallbearers couldn't move forward. The officials had to beat the beggars off with sticks, and a free-for-all broke out. Peasants too began to collect around us, and at last the police took action. The inspector himself appeared, mounted and sporting a whip, and with a single glare and several lashes he scattered them all as if they were sparrows. Then he dismounted and approached the casket. He began to make inquiries. Who was it that had died? Of what illness? And why such disorder in the marketplace? It pleased him to begin with me. Who was I? What was my business here? Where was I bound to? I was terrified. I lost all power of speech. Why it is I don't know, but whenever I see a policeman I fall into a cold terror. I've never harmed a fly, and I know that a policeman is, after all, merely a mortal. I'm even acquainted with a man who is on friendly terms with a policeman; they visit each other; the policeman eats fish with him on High Holidays, and he is received as a guest in the policeman's house, where he feasts on eggs. This Jew is forever telling everyone what a gem his policeman is. But all the same, when I see a policeman my impulse is always to run. Perhaps it's hereditary, for I myself, you must remember,

CODE
OF THE
POWERLESS!

am a descendant of pogrom survivors from the days of Vailchikov. About those days I have heard stories and stories to tell you, but enough—I've fallen off the track again.

The inspector gave me a thorough grilling. I had to tell him who I was and what I was doing and where I was going, details about details. How could I explain that I lived with my in-laws at Zwiwil and had to journey to Radomishli to obtain some papers? I was deeply thankful to the officers of the Burial Society for disentangling me. One of them, the fellow with the half-plucked beard, called the inspector aside and the two of them conferred in whispers of secrecy, while the tall one with the thin fingers coached me meantime, half in Hebrew and half in Yiddish, telling me what explanations to make. "You will say you live a short way from town. And that is your mother-in-law who just died. And you've come here to bury her. And while you slip him a few rubles, invent a name straight from the *Haggadah*. Meanwhile we'll get your driver away and give him a glass of spirits and keep him out of sight. Everything will be fine."

The inspector took me into a house and began to examine me. I'll never be able to repeat what I told him. I don't remember what I said; whatever came to my head, that's what I babbled. He took everything down.

"Your name?"

"Moishe."

"Your father's name?"

"Itzko."

"Age?"

"Nineteen."

"Single."

"Married."

"Children?"

"Children."

"Occupation?"

"Merchant."

"Who is the corpse?"

"My mother-in-law."

"Her name?"

"Yente."

"Her father?" *

"Gershon."

[240]
low
cryptic

"Her age?"

"Forty."

"Cause of death?"

"Fright."

"A fright?"

"Yes, a fright."

"What sort of fright?" he said, putting down his pen, smoking his cigarette and glaring at me from head to foot.

My tongue seemed to stick to my palate. I decided that, since I had begun with lies, I might as well continue with lies, and I made up a long tale about my mother-in-law sitting alone, knitting a sock, forgetting that her son Ephraim was there, a boy of thirteen, overgrown and a complete fool. He was playing with his shadow. He stole up to her, waved his hands over her head, and uttered a goat cry, *Mehh!* He was making a shadow goat on the wall. And at this sound my mother-in-law fell from her stool and died.

As I wove this tale he kept looking at me, never once dropping his gaze. I mumbled, repeated myself, lost the sense of what I was saying. He heard me out, spat, wiped his red mustachios, accompanied me to the casket, raised the black lid, looked at the face of the dead woman, and shook his head with suspicion. He said to the three officials, "Well, you can bury the woman. But I'll have to detain this fellow while I investigate his story and find out whether she really is his mother-in-law and really died of fright."

You can imagine how I felt. I turned aside and burst into tears, the tears of a very small child.

"What are you crying for, young man?" said the one called Reb Yosi. He consoled me: I had nothing to fear. If I was I innocent.

"If you've eaten no garlic your breath will be clean." Reb Shepshel smiled with such a grin that I wanted to slap both his cheeks.

Why had I let myself be so misled as to tell such a tale and involve my mother-in-law? To make things worse, it would now reach her ears that I had killed her with fright and buried her alive.

"Don't be afraid. God is with you. The inspector isn't a bad sort. Just slip him something and tell him to drop the whole thing. He's a clever man. He knows you've told him a yarn." So spoke Eliezer Moise' pointed his long fingers at me. If I could, I would have to pieces, the way one tears a herring.

The rest of my money was taken away, I was put in prison, and there was a trial. But all this was nothing compared with what happened when my in-laws discovered that I was in prison because I had somehow acquired a corpse. They came at once and declared that they were my father-in-law and mother-in-law—and things really began to boil. On one side the police kept asking, "Now that we know your mother-in-law is alive, this one who says she is Yente, tell us who the dead woman was." And on the other side my mother-in-law kept demanding, "There's only one thing I want to know. What did you have against me that you wanted to bury me while I was still alive?"

At the trial I was, naturally, found to be innocent. But it cost a lot of money. Witnesses were brought. The innkeeper and his children appeared, and I was freed. But what I had to endure from my mother-in-law—I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

From then on, when anyone mentions Eternal Life, I run.

Translated by Saul Bellow

1902

Home for Passover

le's
slavic home  Balta

le's =

TWO TIMES A YEAR, as punctually as a clock, in April and again in September, Fishel the *melamed* goes home from Balta to Hashtchavata to his wife and children, for Passover and for the New Year. Almost all his life it has been his destiny to be a guest in his own home, a most welcome guest, it is true, but for a very short time, only over the holidays. And as soon as the holidays are over he packs his things and goes back to Balta, back to his teaching, back to the rod, to the *Gemara* that he studies with the unwilling small boys of Balta, back to his exile among strangers and to his secret yearning for home.

However, when Fishel does come home, he is a king! Bath-Sheba, his wife, comes out to meet him, adjusts her kerchief, becomes red as fire, asks him quickly without looking him in the eye, "How are you, Fishel?" And he answers, "How are *you*?" And Froike, his boy, now almost thirteen, holds out his hand, and the father asks him, "Where are you now, Ephraim, in your studies?" And Reizel, his daughter, a bright-faced little girl with her hair in braids, runs up and kisses him.

"Papa, what did you bring me for the holidays?"

"Material for a dress, and for your mother a silk shawl. Here, give Mother the shawl."

And Fishel takes a new silk (or maybe half-silk) shawl out of his *tallis*-sack, and Beth-Sheba becomes redder than ever, pulls her kerchief low over her eyes, pretends to get busy around the house, bustles here and there, and gets nothing done.

"Come, Ephraim, show me how far you've got in the *Gemara*. I want to see how you're getting along."

And Froike shows his father what a good boy he has been, how well he has applied himself, the understanding he has of his work, and how good his memory is. And Fishel listens to him, corrects him once or twice, and his soul expands with pride. He glows with happiness. What a fine boy Froike is! What a jewel!

"If you want to go to the baths, here is a shirt ready for you," says Bath-Sheba, without looking him in the eye, and Fishel feels strangely happy, like a man who has escaped from prison into the bright, free world among his own people, his loved and faithful ones. And he pictures himself in the room thick with steam, lying on the top ledge together with a few of his cronies, all of them sweating, rubbing each other and beating each other with birch rods and calling for more, more

... "Harder! Rub harder! Can't you make it harder!"

And coming home from the bath, refreshed, invigorated, almost a new man, he dresses for the holiday. He puts on his best gabardine with the new cord, steals a glance at Bath-Sheba in her new dress with the new silk shawl, and finds her still a presentable woman, a good, generous, pious woman ... And then with Froike he goes to the synagogue. There greetings fly at him from all sides. "Well, well! Reb Fishel! How are you? How's the *melamed*?" "The *melamed* is still teaching." "What's happening in the world?" "What should happen? It's still the same old world." "What's doing in Balta?" "Balta is still Balta." Always, every six months, the same formula, exactly the same, word for word. And Nissel the cantor steps up to the lectern to start the evening services. He lets go with his good, strong voice that grows louder and stronger as he goes along. Fishel is pleased with the performance. He is also pleased with Froike's. The lad stands near him and prays, prays with feeling, and Fishel's soul expands with pride. He glows with happiness. A fine boy, Froike! A good Jewish boy!

"Good yontif! Good yontif!"

"Good yontif to you!"

They are home already and the *seder* is waiting. The wine in the glasses, the horseradish, the eggs, the *haroses*, and all the other ritual foods. His "throne" is ready—two stools with a large pillow spread over them. Any minute now Fishel will become the king, any minute he will seat himself on his royal throne in a white robe, and Bath-Sheba, his queen with her new silk shawl, will sit at his side. Ephraim, the prince, in his new cap and Princess Reizel with her braids will sit facing them.

Make way, fellow Israelites! Show your respect! Fishel the *melamed* has mounted his throne! Long live Fishel!

325

The wits of Hashtchavata, who are always up to some prank and love to make fun of the whole world (and especially of a humble teacher) once made up a story about Fishel. They said that one year, just before Passover, Fishel sent a telegram to Bath-Sheba reading like this: *Rabiata sobrani. Dengi vezu. Prigotov puli. Yedutzarstvovat.* In ordinary language this is what it meant: "Classes dismissed. Purse full. Prepare *kneydlach*. I come to rule." This telegram, the story goes on, was immediately turned over to the authorities in Balta, Bath-Sheba was searched but nothing was found, and Fishel himself was brought home under police escort. But I can tell you on my word of honor that this is a falsehood and a lie. Fishel had never in his life sent a telegram to anyone. Bath-Sheba was never searched. And Fishel was never arrested. That is, he was arrested once, but not for sending a telegram. He was arrested because of a passport. And that not in Balta but in Yehupetz, and it was not before Passover but in the middle of summer. This is what happened.

Fishel had suddenly decided that he would like to teach in Yehupetz that year and had gone there without a passport to look for work. He thought it was the same as Balta where he needed no passport, but he was sadly mistaken. And before he was through with that experience he swore that not only he but even his children and grandchildren would never go to Yehupetz again to look for work ...

And ever since that time he goes directly to Balta every season and in the spring he ends his classes a week or two before Passover and dashes off for home. What do you mean—dashes off? He goes as fast as he can—that is, assuming that the roads are clear and he can find a wagon to take him and he can cross the Bug either over the ice or by ferry. But what happens if the snows have melted and the mud is deep, there is no wagon to be gotten, the Bug has just opened and the ferry hasn't started yet because of the ice, and if you try to cross by boat you risk your very life—and Passover is right in front of your nose? What can you do? Take it the way a man does if he's on his way from Machnivka to Berdichev for the Sabbath, or from Sohatchov to Warsaw—it's late Friday afternoon, the wagon is going up a hill, it's getting dark fast, suddenly they're caught in a cloudburst, he's dead hungry—and just then the axle snaps! It's a real problem, I can assure you ...

imaginary
tale

factual
tale

King for
the
day

Well, Fishel the *melamed* knows what that problem is. As long as he has been a teacher and has taken the trip from Hashtchavata to Balta and from Balta to Hashtchavata, he has experienced every inconvenience that a journey can offer. He has known what it is to go more than halfway on foot, and to help push the wagon, too. He has known what it is to lie together with a priest in a muddy ditch, with himself on bottom and the priest on top. He has known how it feels to run away from a pack of wolves that followed his wagon from Hashtchavata as far as Petschani—although later, it is true, he found out that it was not wolves but dogs.... But all these calamities were nothing compared with what he had to go through this year when he was on his way to spend the Passover with his family.

It was all the fault of the Bug. This one year it opened up a little later than usual, and became a torrent just at the time when Fishel was hurrying home—and he had reason to hurry! Because this year Passover started on Friday night—the beginning of Sabbath—and it was doubly important for him to be home on time.

doubly
sacred
time

Two

131

Fishel reached the Bug—traveling in a rickety wagon with a peasant—Thursday night. According to his reckoning he should have come there Tuesday morning, because he had left Balta Sunday noon. If he had only gone with Yankel-Sheigetz, the Balta coachman, on his regular weekly trip—even if he had to sit at the rear with his back to the other passengers and his feet dangling—he would have been home a long time ago and would have forgotten all about the whole journey. But the devil possessed him to go into the marketplace to see if he could find a cheaper conveyance; and it is an old story that the less you pay for something, the more it costs. Jonah the Drunkard had warned him, “Take my advice, Uncle, let it cost you two rubles but you’ll sit like a lord in Yankel’s coach—right in the very back row! Remember, you’re playing with fire. There is not much time to lose!” But it was just his luck that the devil had to drag an old peasant from Hashtchavata across his path.

“Hello, Rabbi! Going to Hashtchavata?” (Ukr)

1/2 - 1/2

“Good! Can you take me? How much will it cost?”
How much it would cost—that he found it necessary to ask; but whether or not he would get home in time for Passover—that didn’t even occur to Fishel. After all, even if he went on foot and took only tiny steps like a shackled person, he should have been able to reach Hashtchavata in less than a week...

But they had hardly started out before Fishel was sorry that he had hired this wagon, even though he had all the room in the world to stretch out in. It became apparent very soon that at the rate at which they were creeping they would never be able to get anywhere in time. All day long they rode and they rode, and at the end of the day they had barely got started. And no matter how much he kept bothering the old peasant, no matter how many times he asked how far they still had to go, the man did not answer. He only shrugged his shoulders and said, “Who can tell?”

Ukr

It was much later, toward evening, that Yankel-Sheigetz overtook them, with a shout and whistle and a crack of the whip—overtook them and passed them with his four prancing horses bedecked with tiny bells, and with his coach packed with passengers inside, on the driver’s seat, and some hanging onto the rear. Seeing the teacher sitting alone in the wagon with the peasant, Yankel-Sheigetz cracked his whip in the air again and cursed them both, the driver and the passenger, as only he could curse, laughed at them and at the horse, and after he had passed them he turned back and pointed at one of the wheels: “Hey, *schlimazel*! Look! One of your wheels is turning!”

Ukr

“Whoa!” the peasant yelled, and together the driver and passenger climbed down, looked at every wheel, at every spoke, crawled under the wagon, searched everywhere, and found nothing wrong.

Realizing that Yankel had played a trick on them, the peasant began to scratch the back of his neck, and at the same time he cursed Yankel and every other Jew on earth with fresh new curses that Fishel had never heard in all his life. He shouted louder and louder and with every word grew angrier and angrier.

Ukr

“Ah, *shob tubi dobra ne bulo!*” he cried. “Bad luck to you, Jew! I hope you die! I hope you never arrive! Every one of you die! You and your horse and your wife and your daughter and your aunts and your uncles and your cousins and your second-cousins and—and—and all the rest of your cursed Jews!”

It was a long time before the peasant climbed into his wagon again and was ready to start. But even then he was still angry; he couldn’t stop

12

yelling. He continued to heap curses at the head of Yankel-Sheigetz and all the Jews until, with God's help, they came to a village where they could spend the night.

The next morning Fishel got up very early, before dawn, said his morning prayers, read through the greater part of the *Book of Psalms*, had a bagel for breakfast, and was ready to go on. But Feodor was not ready. Feodor had found an old crony of his in the village and had spent the night with him, drinking and carousing. Then he slept the greater part of the day and was not ready to start till evening.

"Now, look here, Feodor," Fishel complained to him when they were in the wagon again, "the devil take you and your mother! After all, Feodor, I hired you to get me home for the holidays! I depended on you. I trusted you." And that wasn't all he said. He went on in the same vein, half pleading, half cursing, in a mixture of Russian and Hebrew, and when words failed him he used his hands. Feodor understood well enough what Fishel meant, but he did not answer a word, not a sound, as though he knew that Fishel was right. He was as quiet and coy as a little kitten until, on the fourth day, near Petschani, they met Yankel-Sheigetz on his way back from Hashtchavata with a shout and a crack of the whip and this good piece of news: "You might just as well turn back to Balta! The Bug has opened up!"

When Fishel heard this his heart sank, but Feodor thought that Yankel was making fun of him again and began to curse once more with even greater vigor and originality than before. He cursed Yankel from head to foot, he cursed every limb and every bone of his body. And his mouth did not shut until Thursday evening when they came to the Bug. They drove right up to Prokop Baraniuk, the ferryman, to find out when he would start running the ferry again.

And while Feodor and Prokop took a drink and talked things over, Fishel went off into a corner to say his evening prayers.

Three

140

Nature conspires against him

The sun was beginning to set. It cast its fiery rays over the steep hills on both sides of the river, in spots still covered with snow and in spots already green, cut through with rivulets and torrents that bounded downhill and poured into the river itself with a roar where they

Home for Passover

= Moses who cannot cross into Promised Land

met with the running waters from the melting ice. On the other side of the river, as if on a table, lay Hashtchavata, its church steeple gleaming in the sun like a lighted candle.

Standing there and saying his prayers with his face toward Hashtchavata, Fishel covered his eyes with his hand and tried to drive from his mind the tempting thoughts that tormented him: Bath-Sheba with her new silk shawl, Froike with his *Gemara*, Reizel with her braids, and the steaming bath. And fresh matzo with strongly seasoned fish and fresh horseradish that tore your nostrils apart, and Passover borscht that tasted like something in Paradise, and other good things that man's evil spirit can summon . . . And no matter how much Fishel drove these thoughts from his mind, they kept coming back like summer flies, like mosquitoes, and they did not let him pray as a man should.

And when he had finished his prayers Fishel went back to Prokop and got into a discussion with him about the ferry and the approaching holiday, explaining to him half in Russian, half in Hebrew, and the rest with his hands, how important a holiday Passover was to the Jews, and what it meant when Passover started on Friday evening! And he made it clear to him that if he did not cross the Bug by that time tomorrow—all was lost: in addition to the fact that at home everybody was waiting for him—his wife and children (and here Fishel gave a heartrending sigh) if he did not cross the river before sunset, then for eight whole days he would not be able to eat or drink a thing. He might as well throw himself into the river right now! (At this point Fishel turned his face aside so that no one could see that there were tears in his eyes.)

Prokop Baraniuk understood the plight that poor Fishel was in, and he answered that he knew that the next day was a holiday; he even knew what the holiday was called, and he knew that it was a holiday when people drank wine and brandy. He knew of another Jewish holiday when people drank brandy too, and there was a third when they drank still more—in fact they were supposed to become drunk, but what they called that day he had forgotten . . .

"Good, that's very good!" Fishel interrupted with tears in his voice. "But what are we going to do now? What if tomorrow—God spare the thought . . ." Beyond that, poor Fishel could not say another word.

For this Prokop had no answer. All he did was to point to the river with his hand, as though to say, "Well—see for yourself . . ."

And Fishel lifted his eyes and beheld what his eyes had never before seen in all his life, and he heard what his ears had never heard. For it can

truthfully be said that never before had Fishel actually seen what the out-of-doors was like. Whatever he had seen before had been seen at a glance while he was on his way somewhere, a glimpse snatched while hurrying from *cheder* to the synagogue or from synagogue to *cheder*. And now the sight of the majestic blue Bug between its two steep banks, the rush of the spring freshets tumbling down the hills, the roar of the river itself, the dazzling splendor of the setting sun, the flaming church steeple, the fresh, exhilarating odor of the spring earth and the air, and above all the simple fact of being so close to home and not being able to get there—all these things together worked on Fishel strangely. They picked him up and lifted him as though on wings and carried him off into a new world, a world of fantasy, and he imagined that to cross the Bug was the simplest thing in the world—like taking a pinch of snuff—if only the Eternal One cared to perform a tiny miracle and rescue him from his plight.

These thoughts and others like them sped through Fishel's head and carried him aloft and bore him so far from the riverbank that before he was aware of it, night had fallen, the stars were out, a cool wind had sprung up and had stolen in under his gabardine and ruffled his undershirt. And Fishel went on thinking of things he had never thought of before—of time and eternity, of the unlimited expanse of space, of the vastness of the universe, of the creation of heaven and earth itself . . .

Four

JSL

It was a troubled night that Fishel the *melamed* spent in the hut of Prokop the ferryman. But even that night finally came to an end and the new day dawned with a smile of warmth and friendliness. It was a rare and balmy morning. The last patches of snow became soft, like *kasha*, and the *kasha* turned to water, and the water poured into the Bug from all directions . . . Only here and there could be seen huge blocks of ice that looked like strange animals, like polar bears that hurried and chased each other, as if they were afraid that they would be too late in arriving where they were going . . .

And once again Fishel the *melamed* finished his prayers, ate the last crust of bread that was left in his sack, and went out to look at the river

Natural
setting for
the
super-
natural

and to see what could be done about getting across it. But when he heard from Prokop that they would be lucky if the ferry could start Sunday afternoon, he became terrified. He clutched his head with both hands and shook all over. He fumed at Prokop, and scolded him in his own mixture of Russian and Hebrew. Why had Prokop given him hope the night before; why had he said that they might be able to get across today? To this Prokop answered coldly that he had not said a word about crossing by ferry, he had only said that they might be able to get across, and this they could still do. He could take him over any way he wanted to—in a rowboat or on a raft, and it would cost him another half ruble—not a kopek more.

"Have it your own way!" sobbed Fishel. "Let it be a rowboat. Let it be a raft. Only don't make me spend the holiday here on the bank!"

That was Fishel's answer. And at the moment he would have been willing to pay two rubles, or even dive in and swim across—if he could only swim. He was willing to risk his life for the holy Passover. And he went after Prokop heatedly, urged him to get out the boat at once and take him across the Bug to Hashtchavata, where Bath-Sheba, Froike, and Reizel were waiting for him. They might even be standing on the other side now, there on the hilltop, calling to him, beckoning, waving to him . . . But he could not see them or hear their voices, for the river was wide, so fearfully wide, wider than it had ever been before.

The sun was more than halfway across the clear, deep-blue sky before Prokop called Fishel and told him to jump into the boat. And when Fishel heard these words his arms and legs went limp. He did not know what to do. In all his life he had never been in a boat like that. Since he was born he had never been in a boat of any kind. And looking at the boat he thought that any minute it would tip to one side—and Fishel would be a martyr!

"Jump in and let's go!" Prokop called to him again, and reaching up he snatched the pack from Fishel's hand.

Fishel the *melamed* carefully pulled the skirt of his gabardine high up around him and began to turn this way and that. Should he jump—or shouldn't he? On the one hand—Sabbath and Passover in one, Bath-Sheba, Froike, Reizel, the scalding bath, the *seder* and all its ceremonial, the royal throne. On the other hand—the terrible risk, almost certain death. You might call it suicide. Because after all, if the boat tipped only once, Fishel was no more. His children were orphans. And he stood with his coat pulled up so long that Prokop lost his patience and began to

shout at him. He warned him that if Fishel did not jump in at once he would spit at him and go across by himself to Hashtchavata. Hearing the beloved word Hash-tcha-va-ta, Fishel remembered his dear and true ones again, summoned up all his courage—and fell into the boat. I say “fell into” because with his first step the boat tipped ever so slightly, and Fishel, thinking he would fall, drew suddenly back, and this time he really did fall, right on his face . . . Several minutes passed before he came to. His face felt clammy, his arms and legs trembled, and his heart pounded like an alarm clock: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock! J6L

As though he were sitting on a stool in his own home, Prokop sat perched in the prow of the boat and coolly pulled at his oars. The boat slid through the sparkling waters, and Fishel's head whirled. He could barely sit upright. No, he didn't even try to sit. He was hanging on, clutching the boat with both hands. Any second, he felt, he would make the wrong move, any second now he would lose his grip, fall back or tumble forward into the deep—and that would be the end of Fishel! And at this thought the words of Moses' song in *Exodus* came back to him: “They sank as lead in the mighty waters.” His hair stood straight up. He would not even be buried in consecrated ground! And he made a vow . . .

But what could Fishel promise? Charity? He had nothing to give. He was such a poor, poor man. So he vowed that if the Lord brought him back home in safety he would spend the rest of his nights studying the Holy Writ. By the end of the year he would go, page by page, through the entire Six Orders of the *Talmud*. If only he came through alive . . . text

Fishel would have liked to know if it was still far to the other shore, but it was just his luck to have sat down with his face to Prokop and his back to Hashtchavata. And to ask Prokop he was afraid. He was afraid even to open his mouth. He was so sure that if he so much as moved his jaws the boat would tip again, and if it did, where would Fishel be then? And to make it worse, Prokop became suddenly talkative. He said that the worst time to cross the river was during the spring floods. You couldn't even go in a straight direction. You had to use your head, turn this way and that. Sometimes you even had to go back a little and then go forward again.

“There goes one as big as an iceberg!” Prokop warned. “It's coming straight at us!” And he swung the boat back just in time to let a huge mass of ice go past with a strange roar. And then Fishel began to understand what kind of trip this was going to be!

“Ho! Look at that!” Prokop shouted again, and pointed upstream.

Fishel lifted his eyes slowly, afraid to move too fast, and looked—looked and saw nothing. All he could see anywhere was water—water and more water.

“There comes another! We'll have to get past—it's too late to back up!”

And this time Prokop worked like mad. He hurled the boat forward through the foaming waves, and Fishel became cold with fear. He wanted to say something but was afraid. And once more Prokop spoke up: “If we don't make it in time, it's just too bad.”

“What do you mean—too bad?”

“What do you think it means? We're lost—that's what.”

“Lost?”

“Sure! Lost.”

“What do you mean—lost?”

“You know what I mean. Rubbed out.”

“Rubbed out?”

“Rubbed out.”

Fishel did not understand exactly what these words meant. He did not even like the sound—lost—rubbed out. He had a feeling that it had to do with eternity, with that endless existence on a distant shore. And a cold sweat broke out all over his body, and once again the verse came to him, “They sank as lead in the mighty waters.” PT

To calm him down Prokop started to tell a story that had happened a year before at this same time. The ice of the Bug had torn loose and the ferry could not be used. And just his luck one day an important-looking man drove up and wanted to go across. He turned out to be a tax officer from Ouman, and he was ready to pay no less than a ruble for the trip. Halfway across, two huge chunks of ice bore down upon them. There was only one thing for Prokop to do and he did it: he slid in between the two chunks, cut right through between them. Only in the excitement he must have rocked the boat a trifle too much, because they both went overboard into the icy water. It was lucky that he could swim. The tax collector apparently couldn't, and they never found him again. Too bad . . . A ruble lost like that . . . he should have collected in advance. . .

Prokop finished the story and sighed deeply, and Fishel felt an icy chill go through him and his mouth went dry. He could not say a word. He could not make a sound, not even a squeak.

Five

37C

When they were halfway over, right in the middle of the current, Prokop paused and looked upstream. Satisfied with what he saw, he put the oars down, dug a hand deep into his pocket and pulled out a bottle from which he proceeded to take a long, long pull. Then he took out a few black cloves and while he was chewing them he apologized to Fishel for his drinking. He did not care for the whiskey itself, he said, but he had to take it, at least a few drops, or he got sick every time he tried to cross the river. He wiped his mouth, picked up his oars, glanced upstream, and exclaimed; "Now we're in for it!"

In for what? Where? Fishel did not know and he was afraid to ask, but instinctively he felt that if Prokop had been more specific he would have added something about death or drowning. That it was serious was apparent from the way Prokop was acting. He was bent double and was thrashing like mad. Without even looking at Fishel he ordered, "Quick, uncle! Lie down!"

Fishel did not have to be told twice. He saw close by a towering block of ice bearing down upon them. Shutting his eyes, he threw himself face down on the bottom of the boat, and trembling all over began, in a hoarse whisper, to recite *Shma Yisroel*. He saw himself already sinking through the waters. He saw the wide-open mouth of a gigantic fish; he pictured himself being swallowed like the prophet Jonah when he was escaping to Tarshish. And he remembered Jonah's prayer, and quietly, in tears, he repeated the words: "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the deep was round about me. The weeds were wrapped about my head."

Thus sang Fishel the *melamed* and he wept, wept bitterly, at the thought of Bath-Sheba, who was as good as a widow already, and the children, who were as good as orphans. And all this time Prokop was working with all his might, and as he worked he sang this song:

Oh, you waterfowl!
You black-winged waterfowl—
You black-winged bird!

And Prokop was as cool and cheerful as if he were on dry land, sitting in his own cottage. And Fishel's "encompassed me about" and Prokop's

ecumenical

"waterfowl," and Fishel's "the weeds were wrapped" and Prokop's "black-winged bird" merged into one, and on the surface of the Bug was heard a strange singing, a duet such as had never been heard on its broad surface before, not ever since the river had been known as the Bug...

"Why is he so afraid of death, that little man?" Prokop Baraniuk sat wondering, after he had got away from the ice floe and pulled his bottle out of his pocket again for another drink. "Look at him, a little fellow like that—poor, in tatters... I wouldn't trade this old boat for him. And he's afraid to die!"

And Prokop dug his boot into Fishel's side, and Fishel trembled. Prokop began to laugh, but Fishel did not hear. He was still praying, he was saying *Kaddish* for his own soul, as if he were dead...

But if he were dead would he be hearing what Prokop was saying now?

"Get up, Uncle. We're there already. In Hashtchavata."

Fishel lifted his head up slowly, cautiously, looked around on all sides with his red, swollen eyes.

"Hash-tcha-va-ta?"

"Hashtchavata! And now you can give me that half-ruble!"

And Fishel crawled out of the boat and saw that he was really home at last. He didn't know what to do first. Run home to his wife and children? Dance and sing on the bank? Or should he praise and thank the Lord who had preserved him from such a tragic end? He paid the boatman his half-ruble, picked up his pack, and started to run as fast as he could. But after a few steps he stopped, turned back to the ferryman: "Listen, Prokop, my good friend! Come over tomorrow for a glass of Passover brandy and some holiday fish. Remember the name—Fishel the *melamed*! You hear? Don't forget now!"

"Why should I forget? Do you think I'm a fool?"

And he licked his lips at the thought of the Passover brandy and the strongly seasoned Jewish fish.

"That's wonderful, Uncle! That's wonderful!"

Six

When Fishel the *melamed* came into the house, Bath-Sheba, red as fire, with her kerchief low over her eyes, asked shyly,

Gentle
has more
faith

resurrected

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"How are you?" And he answered, "How are *you*?" And she asked, "Why are you so late?" And he answered, "We can thank God. It was a miracle." And not another word, because it was so late.

He did not even have time to ask Froike how he was getting along in the *Talmud*, or give Reizel the gift he had brought her, or Bath-Sheba the new silk shawl. Those things would have to wait. All he could think of now was the bath. And he just barely made it.

And when he came home from the bath he did not say anything either. Again he put it off till later. All he said was, "A miracle from heaven. We can thank the Lord. He takes care of us . . ."

And taking Froike by the hand, he hurried off to the synagogue.

Translated by Julius and Frances Butwin

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