Yiddish

When it was first organized, the Sunset Village Yiddish Club met once a week. Members talked in Yiddish, read passages from the Yiddish papers to each other, and discussed, in Yiddish, the works of Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer that they had read during the week—in the original Yiddish, of course. The members enjoyed it so much that they would sometimes stay in the all-purpose room in the Sunset Village Clubhouse, where the meetings were held, for hours after they were over, talking in Yiddish as if that language were the only logical form of communication. Finally they had to increase the meetings of the Yiddish Club to three times a week, although most of the members would have preferred to attend every day.

There were a great many reasons for the phenomena, their club president would tell them. His name was Melvin Meyer, but in the tradition of the club, he was called Menasha, his name in Yiddish. He had a masterly command of the Yiddish language. Both his parents had been actors in the heyday of the Yiddish stage, when there were more than twenty Yiddish theaters on the Lower East Side of New York alone and they were showing at least three hundred productions a year.

"There is, of course, the element of nostalgia," Menasha would explain to the group pedantically, his rimless glasses imposing in their severity. "It is the language of our childhood, of our parents and grandparents. To most of us it was our original language, the language in which we first expressed our fears, our anxieties, our loves, and the language in which our parents forged our childhood. The link with the past is compelling. And, naturally, there is the beauty of the language itself—its rare expressiveness, its untranslatable

qualities, its subtlety and suppleness — which makes it something special simply in expressing it and keeping it alive."

To both Bill (Velvil) Finkelstein and Jennie (Genendel) Goldfarb, Menasha's words were thrilling, but merely suggestive of the depths of their true feelings. They had joined the club on the same day and, they discovered later, for the same reasons, some of which Menasha had expressed. Their respective spouses had lost the language of their forebears and showed absolutely no interest in the activity as a joint marital venture. Besides, they were much more disposed to playing cards and sitting around the pool yenting with their friends.

Because they had joined on the same day, they had, out of the kinship of newness, sat next to each other and were able to start up a conversation on the subject of their first day at the club.

"It's amazing," Genendel had said when the meeting had adjourned, "I haven't spoken it since my mother died twenty years ago; yet I caught every word. God, I feel good speaking that language. It brings back the memories of my childhood, my mother, those delicious Friday nights."

"Oh those wonderful Friday nights," Velvil had responded, his mind jogged by the dormant images now sprung to life, the candles, the rich rhythm of Yiddish speech, the smells of fricassee and honey cake. He looked at Genendel as someone familiar, someone perhaps that he had known in his youth or at least someone recognizable to his spirit. She was smallish, thinner than his wife Mimi, who had allowed herself to run to fat. Lines were embedded in Genendel's tanned face, but when the light hit her at a special angle, the wrinkles disappeared and with them the years. She looked then like a young girl. When he told her this after they had become intimate in their conversation, she pursed her lips in mock disbelief and punched him lightly on the arm. But he could see she was pleased.

"Thank God you're telling me that in Yiddish," she said. "If my David would hear it, he'd think you're flirting."

"I am."

She put a hand over her mouth and giggled like a girl. It had not seemed possible to her that anything could occur beyond their lighthearted banter, their kibitzing in Yiddish. She dismissed such thoughts as idle and forbidden speculation. And yet they would sit for a long time after the meetings were over, discussing their lives, their children, their fortunes. At first their exchanges had been purely factual, filled with the details of their biographies.

"I worked for the Veterans Administration as a lawyer, and hated every minute of it," Velvil had said, "but I was frightened to death." He was surprised to have told her that. He had never referred to being frightened except to himself, characterizing his long term as a civil servant merely as "an easy buck with no hassle." What he really meant, he knew, was that he had been too scared to leave the government. "But I had two kids and it was safe. So we lived in Flatbush and the kids grew up and we waited out my pension. Not very exciting. My parents had greater dreams for me, but they had scrambled so hard for money that they made me paranoid about it."

"Are you sorry you stayed with the government so long?"

Why is she probing my regrets, he wondered, yet understanding the special poignancy that Yiddish could inject into such inquiries.

"Of course I regret it. But I went through the motions for my family."

She, too, could understand that kind of sacrifice. She had also longed for other things.

"I wanted to travel," she said, lifting her eyes to his. He had all his hair, she noted, and a part of it was still black. It was his most striking feature. A handsome man, she concluded to herself, feeling a faint stirring, a mysterious memory of yearning.

"Once we did go on a packaged B'nai B'rith tour of Israel. I loved it, not necessarily because of my Jewishness but because it was exotic. It all looked like a movie set. David, after the first day, didn't tour. He hates touring. And I love it. That's why we never went anywhere else."

"I love to travel," Velvil said suddenly, knowing it was true, although he, too, had never traveled.

"Where have you been?"

"Not very many places," he said. But it was important for him to be scrupulously truthful with her, like strangers meeting on a train who say things to each other that they wouldn't dare say to anyone they really knew. "In fact, no place. My wife would never leave the children."

Sitting in the back corner of the room after the meetings adjourned, losing all sense of time, they picked through their lives with care and detail as if embroidering a tapestry.

"I have a son and a daughter," Genendel told him. By then their Yiddish had returned to them in full force, their vocabulary amplified, dredged up from some secret place in their subconscious. They could be both fluent and subtle, the little nuances delicate but sure. "They were good kids. All that's left now is merely the loving of them."

"Yes," he responded, his heart leaping because she had struck just the right chord. "I must remember that way of putting it. Mimi thinks there should be more, extracting the last bit of tribute, making them always feel that they haven't done enough somehow, keeping that tug of guilt in force, always taut. She whines to them constantly on the phone. I tell her she's wrong, but she insists that daughters must care more. We have two daughters. I keep telling myself I love them, but I sometimes have doubts. They are not really very nice people."

"What a terrible thing to say!"

"It's the truth." He blushed, wondering if she sensed the special joy of telling it. He had vowed to himself that he would never express anything but the truth in Yiddish, in this special language between them.

"Where is it written that parents should love their children and vice versa?" he had pressed, the Yiddish rolling easily off his tongue.

"It is a forbidden thought," she responded, but the idea of it intrigued her. David, her husband, had always been the sentimentalist, the worrier. It was he who fidgeted when the children didn't call at their accustomed intervals.

"The Ten Commandments talk of 'honor,' not love."

"So you've become a Talmudic scholar in your old age," she bantered, a sure sign that they were growing closer, he thought.

Finally, after it had become apparent that it was getting on past the time of propriety, they said good-by. He was conscious of his hand lingering for an extra moment in hers, followed by a light squeezing response. He walked her to the driveway and watched her as she moved into the car. Then he stood for a long time observing the red tail lights until they disappeared into the darkness.

His condominium was close enough to walk to and, after she left, he could feel the exhilaration in his step, a springiness in the legs that seemed uncommon in a man nearing his sixty-ninth birthday. He thought of her now with great intensity. He had willed himself to think of her only in Yiddish, as if she were his special possession and he had to guard her reality in the privacy of his own thoughts. He was certain that there was something stirring in him, a dormant plant, struggling for germination beneath the soil of time.

"You come home so late from those meetings, Bill," his wife would mumble as he slipped in beside her. He never succeeded in not waking her.

"We're working on a special project," he said.

"So late?" Then she would hover off, snoring lightly.

When it became apparent that three days a week was not enough time for them, Velvil suggested that the four of them socialize.

"Have you told her about me?" Genendel said, looking at him curiously. She wondered why she had said it in quite that manner, as if they were engaging in a conspiracy.

"No," he had answered. "And you?"

"I tell David about the club and its activities," she answered. She

knew she was growing wise about her feelings concerning Velvil, but she could not stop them, nor did she care to.

The couples met at Primero's for dinner, as they had taken two cars. It was a Sunday so they had to wait on line for nearly an hour before they could be seated. Perhaps it was the wait that had soured the meeting.

"We were ahead of them," Mimi told the headwaiter, her lips tight with anger. She could not abide being bested.

"They were a fiver," the headwaiter said. His arrogance had deserved a challenge.

As always when she did this, Velvil was embarrassed. He poked her in the small of the back.

"Don't poke me. He could seat four very easily at a table for five. God forbid you should lose one lousy meal," she said loudly, knowing that the headwaiter would hear.

"Mimi, please."

"You should be telling him," she snapped. "Why should I have to fight with him?"

"It's all right really," David Goldfarb had said. He was a smallish man, bald with a fringe of white hair around his pate and a benign, kindly look on his face.

"It's not all right," Mimi said, huffing and continuing to direct a withering gaze at the headwaiter. "You don't squeak, you don't get the oil."

Velvil looked hopelessly at Genendel.

"I'm sorry," he said in Yiddish.

"It's all right," she responded in Yiddish.

By the time they were finally seated, the wait and the altercation with the headwaiter had put them all in a gloomy mood, particuarly Mimi, who could not let it go.

"They take advantage," she said, tapping the table with her forefinger. "You let them get away with it once, they take more advantage."

"Why don't we forget about it and enjoy the meal?" Velvil said. It was simply her way, he tried to tell Genendel with his eyes; she is not a bad woman really. But he wondered if that was true.

"You like it here in Sunset Village?" Velvil asked David, who was either not very talkative or had simply been cowed by Mimi's performance.

"Actually it's not bad," he answered. "Not bad at all."

"He has his regular gin game. He likes the sun and the pool." Genendel patted her husband's hand in a gesture of reassurance. A flash of anger stabbed through Velvil. She must have seen his frown and quickly withdrew her hand.

"So you really like the Yiddish Club?" David asked after a long stretch of embarrassed silence.

"It's really quite wonderful," Velvil said, smiling at Genendel.

"It could be Greek to me," Mimi said. "It seems like an odd waste of time, keeping a dead language alive."

"It's not dead at all," Velvil said, annoyed at her obtuseness. He suddenly realized that he was no longer rationalizing her actions, her words. Watching her, he felt her bitterness. Did she know? he wondered. Could she feel it?

"Yiddish is quite beautiful, really," Velvil said, watching Genendel. "She's not always this bad," he said suddenly in Yiddish. "I'm sorry it's not working out. It wasn't a very good idea."

"All right," Genendel responded in Yiddish. "At least we gave it an honest try."

"What are you two jabbering about?" Mimi said with a mouth full of salad.

"We're illustrating the possibilities of the language," Velvil said.

"It's still Greek," Mimi said, spearing some lettuce leaves.

"Actually, I like the sound of it," David said. He was a pleasant man, very bland and eager to please. He looked frequently at his wristwatch as if he were anxious to depart.

When the steaks came, the conversation turned to the couples' chil-

dren, the common denominator when all else failed. Velvil winced, knowing what was coming.

"My girls married well," Mimi said, directing her gaze at Velvil as if in rebuke. "But then they set their hearts on it. Bill always worried too much about security. They're always fighting among themselves, all the time, but underneath it all they love each other. I'm sure about that. They both live in Scarsdale. Huge houses. They each have three kids, all doing well."

Not the pictures, Velvil thought in Yiddish. Please not that. He saw her pocketbook on the floor beside her, a vile time bomb.

"She's going to show you pictures in a second," he whispered to Genendel in Yiddish.

"That's not polite, Bill," Mimi said, glancing at him briefly but continuing her story without missing a beat. "Everything they touch turns to gold. One thing the girls knew was how to choose well. I taught them that." She reached for her pocketbook, took out her half glasses, perched them on her nose, and reached into the crowded interior of her bag.

"Must you start with the pictures?" Velvil said, feeling the steak congeal into a lump in his stomach.

"He hates when I start with the pictures," Mimi said, taking out a sheaf of pictures and handing them over to the Goldfarbs, who took them politely and seemingly with great interest.

"I think it's disgusting," Velvil said in Yiddish.

Genendel ignored his comment. He discovered why after they had viewed Mimi's pictures. David Goldfarb reached for his wallet and drew out a few faded colored Polaroid prints.

"That's my son Marvin, the orthodontist. And there's Greta, who runs a boutique on Madison Avenue."

"She's divorced," Genendel said.

"Every time I think about it I get sick to my stomach," David Goldfarb said suddenly. One felt his anger and frustration.

"It's her life," Genendel said gently.

"One of my daughters was on the verge once," Mimi said. "But I told her: 'Dotty, if you divorce Larry I'll never speak to you again. You have the children to consider, my grandchildren.' That was ten years ago. Today they're still together, happy as two peas in a pod."

"What she doesn't know doesn't hurt her," Velvil said in Yiddish.

"Will you stop that jabbering, Bill? Can't you see it's impolite?"

"I'll speak as I damn-well please," he said in Yiddish, watching her irritation increase.

"See? He does it just to make me angry," Mimi said while cutting into her steak.

Genendel watched, signaling with her eyes. You had better stop, he imagined she was saying.

Perhaps it was the stark comparison between the two women that in the end triggered the intensity of his emotion. By the time they had finished dinner and parted with politeness and empty promises of "getting together" again, he was certain that he had spent his entire adult life in a bargain with the devil. Turning it over in his mind, in Yiddish of course, his wife of forty-five years seemed a gross, unfeeling monster. Perhaps I am imagining this, exaggerating her weak points, ignoring her essential goodness, he thought. After all, he told himself, he was no bargain and she had put up with him all those years. The idea filled him with such guilt that he abandoned even his most secret Yiddish thoughts, reverting to English, trying to remember with difficulty all the good things that she had brought him over the years. He even forced himself to be affectionate when they finally went to bed after the eleven-o'clock news. He reached out for her and cupped a hand over a breast, feeling the hardness begin. Mimi seemed so startled by the act and the obvious reaction of his body that she did not shrug him away as swiftly as usual.

"Not now, Bill," she said after a while. He wondered what "now" really meant, thinking this thought in Yiddish.

But what the socializing had done was to trigger an awareness in Velvil and Genendel that both of them finally admitted to themselves.

"Seeing you two together only emphasized her grossness," Velvil said after the Yiddish Club had adjourned one evening. They had decided to take a walk in the hushed stillness of the tranquil night. The air seemed light with a touch of tropical scent. The path brought them to one of Sunset Village's manmade ponds which reflected a half-moon in the clear sky.

"I think you're exaggerating," Genendel responded after a long pause. She dared not comment what she truly felt, the sense of his entrapment, the frustration of his wife's overbearing inanity.

"Actually . . ." He sighed. "Your husband seems like a sweet guy."

That he was, she thought, sweet, with a disposition that never registered below sunny. She had long ceased to wonder where the fire had gone, knowing in her heart that it was never there. They had simply lived together, occasionally copulated, passing the time. She shivered in the warm night, aware of Velvil's closeness and the sound of his breathing.

"You are the person . . ." Velvil began, stumbling, feeling the power of the compulsion to say it.

"Me?" she questioned, knowing what was coming next, yearning for it, conscious that her shivering was not from the cold.

"I feel closer to you than to anyone I have ever known in my life," he said swiftly, the Yiddish floating in the air like a musical phrase. He looked at her but did not touch her. She seemed to move away from him as they walked.

"I know," she said, feeling her knees weaken.

"And you?" he asked after they had not talked for a while.

"I confess it," she said. It was such an appropriately Yiddish remark, as if a sense of guilt were necessary to embellish the mystery.

His heart pounded, the revelation of the shared feeling a caress in itself. He wondered if he should stop and reach out for her, but he held off, as if the spiritual kinship might be lost in the physical

touching. Or perhaps he was simply shy, like an adolescent. He suddenly remembered the discomfort and frustration of his first stirrings in the presence of a female.

I am a grown man, he thought, wanting to express it some way, boiling down the essence into Yiddish elixir. "You are a flower to my soul," he said, the Yiddish translatable only in the heart.

"You are embarrassing me, Velvil," Genendel said. A sliver of cloud passed over the moon, emphasizing the darkness. "We have no right," she protested, but he had caught the collective pronoun. It assured him, affirming that, whatever it was, they were in it together.

When he said good-by at her car, he felt the courage to touch her, squeezed her hand briefly but she quickly withdrew it.

I love her, he decided as he walked home, feeling a new sense of strength, the infusion of youth. He was surprised there was no guilt in the declaration and when he slipped in between the sheets, next to his wife, he reveled in his private thoughts, wondering who the stranger was who snored beside him.

She stirred briefly. "I won twenty dollars in canasta tonight," she croaked hoarsely.

He hummed a response without interest, thinking of Genendel. That night he hardly slept, knowing it was impossible to wade through another two days without seeing her.

In the morning he feigned sleep while Mimi rattled in the kitchen.

"If you didn't come in so late, you wouldn't be so tired," she cried when he did not respond to the breakfast call.

"Make your own breakfast," she said finally as she finished dressing and slammed the door behind her.

Jumping out of bed he reached for the telephone book, found Genendel's number, and called her.

"I must see you," he said.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"So am I."

"We could have breakfast."

He mentioned a fast-food place on Lake View Drive to which he could walk. He knew she had the car since her husband rarely used it.

They met an hour later, feeling awkward, hardly speaking until the coffee was served. He watched her as she peered into her cup. What was she looking at? he wondered.

"I want to see you every day," he said, feeling the power of his newly found courage. He had never thought himself capable of exercising it. People at the next booth looked his way. He noted their reddish goyishe faces and knew that their curiosity was aroused by the strange language.

"I want to see you every day," he said again proudly.

"People would talk, Velvil. They would notice."

Suddenly a crowd of people came into the restaurant, Sunset Village types in well-filled Bermuda shorts. Outside he could see the parked tricycles of the Sunset Village Cycling Club, the high pennants limp on their antennae.

"We could join the Cycling Club," he decided, watching the group come in. "They meet every day. Besides, it will be healthy. Plenty of fresh air and exercise."

"They look so foolish," Genendel said, smiling.

"Who cares?"

She knew that he was responding to another question. She wondered about her own caring, thinking only of her husband, of the hurt, the wound that knowledge of them would inflict on him.

"All right," she said, lowering her eyes. She knew she had taken another step in the journey and felt the mystery of it, the joy.

In the Cycling Club they practiced discretion, talking to the others as they pedaled en masse through the crowded roads, making a mess out of the traffic, prompting occasional catcalls and anti-Semitic epithets, which they ignored, laughed about. They did not have much time to themselves, but it seemed enough that they were together. Even in the silence their intimacy grew. When they exchanged information, it was always in Yiddish.

"Don't you people speak English?" one of the club members asked as he pedaled close by.

"Not very well," Velvil said slyly, hearing Genendel's giggle begin beside him.

The idea had been growing within each of them for some time, but it wasn't until they had been in the Cycling Club for several months that it became clear, hitting them both with the force of a hurricane.

They were having breakfast, the entire cycling group, chattering like children, making the waitresses in the restaurant move more swiftly than they were accustomed to. Another couple sat down beside them, a large freckle-faced woman with wispy gray hair curling from under her blue baseball cap. Her husband was tanned almost black by the sun, his bald head shining like some African wood sculpture.

"We're the Berlins," the woman said.

They knew instantly that she would dominate the conversation with her rapid-fire questions, a dyed-in-the-wool yenta.

"I've been watching you," the woman said. "I even remarked to Harry. Didn't I, Harry?"

Harry nodded, his dark face breaking, the neat line of false teeth flashing in the brightness.

"I have a sixth sense about devoted couples. Tell me, how long have you been married?"

Velvil had wanted to respond immediately, but shrugged instead, watching Genendel's discomfort.

"Forty-five years at least, right?"

Genendel lowered her eyes, which the woman must have taken for affirmation.

"See, I was right," she said, turning to Harry. "They are a truly devoted couple. How many children have you got?"

Velvil looked at Genendel, wondering if she could see beyond her anxiety the humor of the situation. He decided to be playful and held up four fingers.

"Canahurra," the woman said.

"She wanted to have more," Velvil said, "but she got a special dispensation from the Pope."

"You had a hysterectomy?" the woman pursued. "I had one ten years ago."

"They took the baby carriage out and left the playpen in," Harry said suddenly.

"It's not often that you meet such a devoted couple. I can tell. I've got a sixth sense about it, haven't I, Harry?"

Velvil felt the idea explode in his head, but dared not entertain it and worried that once broached it would affect his relationship with Genendel.

After the Yiddish Club meeting that night, they sat on chairs near the pool.

"Is it possible that we look like a married couple?" Velvil said, noting his own caution as he watched her face in the glow of the clubhouse lights.

"I'm afraid so," she said. "You can't fool an old yenta."

"I hadn't realized."

"I have."

"You?"

"How long do you think we can get away with it?" She sighed.

"What have we done? Have I once? . . ."

She put a finger over his lips, a gesture to induce silence. Instead he kissed her finger, their first kiss. He grasped her wrist and showered kisses on the back of her hand. She let her hand linger, closing her eyes, tilting her head. He could see a tear slip out of the corner of her eye and roll down her cheek, catching the brief glow of the lights.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Genendel," he said, a lump growing in his throat, his heart pounding. "I want to marry you."

"This is madness. This is crazy," she cried. "I don't want to hear it ever again, not ever." He had never seen her so upset. "Not ever

again." But she did not take her hand out of his. "If you dare mention such a thing again, I promise you I will never see you again. You must promise me, Velvil."

He clutched her hand, feeling the full impact of the emptiness of his future without her, not daring to precipitate her anger further. But he did not promise.

"You must promise," she persisted.

"I cannot promise," he said, after a long silence, still holding her hand. He lifted it again to his lips. "I love you," he said. "And that is the only thing I can promise."

She withdrew her hand, stood up, cleared her throat, and wiped her tears.

"I think we better not see each other any more." What angered her particularly was that she was actually thinking the unthinkable. How would David react? Her children? The cruelty of it. She had no right. She strode forward and he rose to follow her.

"Leave me alone," she said. "I am going home now."

"Will I see you again?" he cried after her, afraid to follow, knowing his voice was carrying too far in the quiet night. He stood rooted to the spot, watching her depart.

The next morning Genendel did not join the morning activities of the Cycling Club. Instead of going with the group, he rode to her condominium and watched it for a long time without gathering the courage to press the buzzer and confront her. The blinds were drawn. Later he stopped at a pay phone and dialed her number. There was no answer.

A heavy depression washed over him as he moped around his condominium thinking that he had lost her, letting self-pity clutch at him. Mimi made his lunch, not noticing his strange behavior. He did not listen as she chirped away about her friends, her card games. The incessant patter of her voice with its empty gossip increased the blackness of his mood. Feeling his hatred, he hacked away at the sandwich with his teeth.

"Stop eating so fast," Mimi said.

He chewed the food, aware of its tastelessness and heaviness as it moved down his gullet. Without Genendel, he told himself, life would be empty—the future just a long wait for them to carry him out and put him in the box.

After Mimi had gone to her afternoon game, he made an effort to calm himself, to rationalize his position, to go over his options. He was, after all, a lawyer. But contemplation of what a divorce might entail boggled his mind, made him tired. His wife's harangues would be hysterical. The children would think he was a monster. Would he hate himself later?

He did consider having a clandestine affair, but it was so foreign to his nature and his morality that he could not bring himself to accept such a possibility. What he concluded was that he could accept any pain—from Mimi, from his children, from anyone, pay any price—for the privilege of spending the rest of his life with Genendel. Anything was worth that.

He was again tempted to call her on the telephone, but lost his courage, deciding instead to suffer through the long night and day until the meeting of the Yiddish Club. It was not an easy assignment.

Feigning a slight cold, he was able to escape from Mimi's patter by squirreling himself in bed for most of the next day.

"You're going to the Yiddish Club?" Mimi asked as he dressed.

"I feel better."

"You're acting strangely, Bill."

"I know," he mumbled, wanting to shout out at her, to tell her what was happening inside of him. Instead he walked out into the warm night, hoping that in a few minutes he would be once again in the presence of the woman he loved. But the slight optimism that he felt as he walked quickly dissipated when he arrived and it became apparent that she was not coming. He listened listlessly to the speakers, walked out early, and roamed through the clubhouse.

In the long cardroom, he saw David playing gin. He moved toward the table and watched the game for a while, waiting for the moment to ask him news of his wife.

"Where's Jennie?" he asked casually. "Missed her at the meeting."

"Said she missed the kids. Went up north to visit for a few weeks." He poked Velvil in the stomach. "Look at this," he said, holding up the score. "I got him on a triple schneid."

Her absence made his longing more intense and he spent his time in long solitary walks around Sunset Village. You must come back to me, he begged her in his mind.

"What's wrong with you, Bill?" his wife asked with casual but persistent interest.

"I am sad and lonely," he said in Yiddish.

"That again."

"You give me no pleasure," he said, again in Yiddish.

"This is ridiculous."

"You are ridiculous," he said in Yiddish.

"The hell with you," Mimi responded with anger, slamming the door behind her as she rushed off to the clubhouse. He savored his cruelty, yet knew that it was wrong.

After the first shock of Genendel's departure wore off, leaving him only with a gnawing emptiness, he still participated in the morning cycling and the Yiddish Club. He went through the mechanical process of the activities in the hope that when she returned, she too would fall into the same old patterns. What was her life with David like? he wondered. Was she prepared to compromise her remaining years? For that?

When she finally returned to the Yiddish Club two weeks later he felt that the curtain had been raised on his life again, and he could barely sit through the meeting waiting for a few private words with her. By then he had convinced himself that he would take half a loaf, to leave it as it had been. Even a few moments of her time were better than to endure the suffering of her absence.

When the meeting was over, he dashed over to her, stumbling over a chair. "Did you enjoy your trip?" he asked, stammering, unable to control the frantic beat of his heart.

"It was all right," she responded.

He imagined that he could detect sadness in her eyes. "Would you like to take a walk?"

She nodded. He had gone over and over this request in his mind and could hardly believe that he had made it.

They walked along the familiar path in silence.

"I promise," he finally said.

"Promise?" She paused and turned to look at him.

"I promise I won't bring up that subject again." He wondered if she understood.

"You think it's that simple?" she said, looking at him.

She had touched his arm and he felt his flesh respond with goose pimples. He was confused.

"How many more years do you think we have, Velvil?"

Her question left him speechless as his mind groped for some kind of logic.

"I try not to think about it," he said at last.

"I have been thinking about it for the last two weeks."

"You have?"

"I spent the time with my daughter. I felt like a picture on the wall."

He knew instantly what she meant and she sensed his understanding. She, too, had dreamed and longed for this moment, when she would reveal to him that she was, indeed, willing to pay the price.

"We are in the elephant burial ground, Velvil," she said. "We know the end is coming fast. We have to seize the present."

In Yiddish, the words came to him as poetry and he felt the power of himself. His energy surged as he gripped her shoulders and gathered her in his arms.

"It will not be easy," she said firmly, relieved at last, unburdened. "And, frankly, I don't know if I'll be able to go through with it."

"We'll give each other courage," he said.

They resumed their walk, arms locked around each other like young lovers.

"They'll think we're crazy," Genendel said suddenly. "And they might be right."

"Between us, Genendel," Velvil said, "we've been married nearly a century."

"Eighty-nine years," she said. "See? I've been thinking about it. I even thought of ways that I might get David interested in your wife. It would make matters so much simpler."

"I wouldn't wish it on him," Velvil said.

On the way back to her car, he pondered the legal problems. Although he was a lawyer, he had never paid much attention to divorce laws. He was annoyed with himself for allowing practicalities to intrude. What did that matter? Somehow they would survive it.

But it was not that easy to break the news to Mimi and he agonized over it, sleepless, tossing and turning, unable to shut off his mind. In the darkness he felt the terror of guilt, knowing what Genendel must be going through. He felt his courage ebb and only when the light filtered through the drawn blinds did his resolve return.

Following Mimi into the kitchen, he sat down at the little table and watched her as he gathered his thoughts. It was not that he despised her. Hardly that, although he knew he had lost all feeling for her except compassion. He did feel compassion, he told himself. Only because he knew that she would never understand.

"I want a divorce," he said, flat, straight-out.

She turned and looked at him quizzically, coffeepot poised in mid-air, hair still disheveled from sleep. The odor of her floated across the room.

"What?" She squinted, as if seeking comprehension with her eyes.

"I want a divorce," he repeated.

"You want a what?"

"A divorce."

She started to smile, alert to his words, but not yet understanding.

"I'm serious," he said, wanting her to be sure of his meaning, urging himself to be precise. "I want a divorce. I am in love with another woman."

"Another what?"

He surveyed her coolly, knowing she was aghast, her lips trembling. The coffeepot slipped with a clang into the sink.

"Another woman. Genendel Goldfarb."

"Genendel?"

"Jennie."

"Her?"

He imagined he felt the eruption begin with vibrations in his toes, like the beginning of an earthquake. He had seen her like this before—once when he threatened to leave the government, and again when he had at first refused to move to Florida. But this time he was girded with the image of Genendel. Watching her now did not diminish his courage as it had done in the past.

"Are you crazy?" she began. "An alte cocker like you. And that dried-up prune. She hypnotized you. You should both be put away in an institution." She paused, sneering. "You had relations? That's it. Right, Bill? I got it. Right, Bill? She put her hands on my husband's fly, right? So what did she get? Such a big deal. And she made you all hot and crazy, right?"

She rushed into the living room and grabbed the telephone, her hysteria mounting. "A psychiatrist is what you need. And quick. Forty-five years of marriage and he wants a divorce. I got a senile old man for a husband."

He shrugged and walked back into the bedroom, hearing her voice rise behind him.

"You want me to call your children?" she cried. "I'll call them. Are you ready for me to tell them about your shame?" She yelled at him. "I'm calling them."

"There's the phone." He pointed, surprised at his calm.

He went into the bathroom and watched his face in the mirror as she banged on the locked door.

"You want a divorce, you bastard?" she screamed. "I'll show you divorce. I'll get a knife and stick it through my heart first. You hear me, bastard? I'll put a knife in my heart first."

How absurd, he thought, feeling pity begin. Listening, he heard her walk heavily into the kitchen, opening doors, making a racket with the pots and pans. Then he heard her coming back.

"I have a knife," she said. "I have it in my hands pointing into my heart."

He remained silent, listening. Her breathing was heavy, gasping. Tempted by the movement at the other side of the door, he put his hand on the knob, then withdrew it as if it were hot.

"Do you hear me, you bastard?" she hissed.

"I hear you," he said, turning on the tap.

"Your children will curse you forever," she screamed.

He could tell by the pitch of her voice that she had reached the outer edge of hysteria.

"And you'll rot in hell."

He knew she was dissolving into self-pity when her deep sobbing began. She is thinking only of herself, he thought, of her own humiliation, of the effect on her card-playing friends. Who cares, he thought, surprised at his own callousness, yet exhilarated by his sense of freedom. I am no longer frightened, he told himself. I am free. He opened the bathroom door and saw her face-down on their bed, her shoulders shaking. He kicked the knife away with his foot.

"I am going out," he said loud enough for her to hear and embellished his words with a slam of the door.

Genendel met him where the cyclists gathered. Her eyes were puffy, evidence of her own pain of disclosure. He reached out and held her hand.

"Done?" he asked.

"Done." Her eyes filled with tears. "It was like feeding him poison."

"Now what?"

"I had no illusions," she said, the Yiddish between them a soothing tonic. "It is part of the price. And you?"

"I got a genuine suicide attempt," he said. "But don't worry. She's done it before."

"Have we done the right thing?" she asked, brushing aside the tears that had rolled down her cheeks.

"My conscience is clear," he responded. "For once in my life, I have done an honest thing. Genendel, my darling Genendel. It was the only way."

"I hope so," she said, squeezing his hand.

"They'll hate us," Velvil said, "but that is to be expected."

They wheeled away from the main body of the cyclists and found a bench.

"Now what? Genendel said.

"You mean practical considerations?"

"Yes."

He patted her arm. For the first time in his life he had not pondered the consequences, had acted not out of fear, but out of love and honesty.

"We'll rent a place and if necessary move in together now," he said, contemplating financial matters at last. "It will be no bed of roses," he said, "but we'll have each other."

"You mean live together before we're married?"

"We'd share an apartment."

"I hadn't—" She paused. "It would be difficult for me." It was against her grain, she admitted to herself.

"Well then," he said gently, "perhaps David will move out and I'll rent a place alone." He silently calculated the burden of supporting two households on his pension. If necessary the children would have to kick in for Mimi. He knew they did but hid the knowledge from him. He had been offended by the thought of taking money from his

children as if it diminished him in some way. But that did not prevent his acquiescence, another act of hypocrisy that was part of his old life.

"I'm sure David has called the children by now," Genendel said suddenly. David always called the children in major crises. That was another hurdle that she dreaded. Was it all worth it? she wondered, watching Velvil. Her life with David had after all been tranquil. Hardly anything had happened, except that they had produced children, fussed over them for a few years, and had grown old. The children were the only thing they had in common. They cohabited peacefully. Was this what one must accept of life? David would survive, she concluded. He had his friends, his gin rummy, his television set, and he would simply have to find himself another companion to cook and clean for him. In Sunset Village, this nest of widows, it should be easy enough. She reached out and took Velvil's hand, feeling the bond between them, the friendship and communication.

"It's no sin to want more," she said suddenly in Yiddish, the inflection of the language reassuring.

"We are in for some tough times in the near future," Velvil said. He was thinking how the telephone lines must be burning between his wife and their daughters.

"I am prepared," she said calmly, her faltering resolve shored up as she watched his face. "We will help each other."

By the end of the day he had sublet a condominium and moved some of his clothes out of the place he shared with his wife. She had sobbed bitterly as he packed a small valise, wailing like a mourner at a graveside. I am not dead yet, he thought to give himself courage, but he could not fully control his pity. In ten, maybe fifteen years it will hardly matter to anyone, he assured himself. Such a thought bolstered his courage.

They had agreed to meet at the poolside that evening. Genendel was late. When she finally came, he noted again the puffiness of her

eyes and a deepening in the lines of her face, which even in the dim light seemed to have assumed a gray cast. They began to walk along the path that led around the pool.

"Your wife called me," Genendel said, her voice breaking.

"The bitch—"

"Please, Velvil. I understand."

"Was she hysterical?"

"Worse. She accused me of being a whore, of stealing her husband."

"The bitch. I hope you hung up on her."

"No. I listened. I listened to every word."

"It wasn't necessary."

"It was to me."

He was agitated. He balled his hands and hit them against his thighs in frustration. They walked for a while in silence.

"Your children will be here tomorrow," she announced.

"My children?"

"Both daughters and their husbands."

"She told you this?"

"And mine are coming too."

"How awful." He was feeling his indignation now, searching her face in the darkness for a hint of her reaction.

"I agreed."

"Agreed?"

"When she calmed down, David got on the phone and they decided that perhaps we should all meet."

"Together?" It would be, he told himself calmly, a new experience. Perhaps this was what was required. One big final meeting. He shook his head. "It is sheer madness," he said. "They'll overwhelm us. We wouldn't have a chance against them."

"What could I say?"

"You could have said no." He willed his anger under control. "They have no right. We are entitled to our own life, to our own decision."

"I said that, but then your son-in-law called."

"Larry?"

"The lawyer."

"That one. You should have hung up the phone. He's the worst of the lot. He has ten women on the string, a miserable character." He felt fear at this effort to pry them apart. "We must resist them."

"We are going to meet tomorrow morning." Genendel's voice broke as she said it. "How could I refuse? They're our children. Our families."

"I have finished my duty toward them," he said, sensing the frustration of the impending confrontation. "I have made enough sacrifices."

"I felt we owed it to them," she said, holding back her tears. "I knew it wouldn't be all wine and roses, but I hadn't expected this."

"Are you sorry?"

"Not sorry," she said, the tears coming now, "confused."

"Unsure?"

"Please, Velvil," she said, and then sniffled. "I've been a quiet peaceful married lady for forty-four years."

"A vegetable."

"Yes, a vegetable. But this kind of aggravation is more than I think I can take."

"When is the meeting?" he asked stiffly.

"Tomorrow morning. In a room in the clubhouse."

"My God, it is like an innocent family affair, a family circle." He bit his lips. "I'm not coming," he said weakly, knowing his protest was in vain.

"I promised for you."

His anger would not dissipate, and walking her back to her car in the dark parking lot, he wondered if he had lost her. She should be coming home with me, he told himself, gathering her in his arms, kissing her cheeks, feeling the saltiness of her tears.

"Are you slipping away from me?" he whispered. But she did not answer. She got into the car and drove off, leaving him lonely and despairing in the darkness, feeling the weight of his years.

During the night he tossed in the strange bed, going over imaginary conversations with his children and their husbands, with David, with Genendel's children. In all of these fantasies his words sounded hollow, unpersuasive. How can an old man talk of love? Even in his mind he sounded like an adolescent. It was only toward morning that he discovered that the conversations in his imagination were not conversations at all. Information was transmitted to him, but not from him as he had been talking Yiddish. The idea of that restored his courage and calmed him enough for him to fall into semi-slumber.

He had timed himself to be the last to arrive. They all looked toward him, tight anxious faces masked with bitterness rising like steam. They had set the room up like a business conference, twelve seats around a long table. Thankfully, they had left one seat empty at the far end of the table. Larry, his son-in-law, sat at the other end, looking very much like a board chairman. Genendel was sitting between what must have been her son and daughter. They resembled her. Dutifully, he kissed the proffered cheek of his daughter Dotty, who mumbled something politely. Mimi turned her eyes away.

The scene was ludicrous, he told himself in Yiddish, a strange assemblage. He knew that the two families had briefed themselves in advance, had hit upon a strategy and, as he had suspected, had appointed Larry as their spokesman. Looking at the group, he was surprised at his own calm. His eyes sought Genendel's, who lifted hers. She had been crying again, he saw, hoping that he could will her to take heart. She looked defeated and he sensed her indecisiveness. I am free of them all, he told himself with elation as he took his seat.

"We felt this was the only way, Pop," Larry began.

What a pompous ass, Velvil thought, observing him with his coat opened and the Phi Beta Kappa key dangling from his vest. He wondered why they hadn't brought the grandchildren. It was, after all, everybody's business.

"I don't want you both," Larry began unctuously, "to think of this as any kind of special pressure. We are simply all in some way involved in these decisions. What we are discussing here are two families, children, grandchildren, and, essentially, peace of mind. We all have a genuine interest in your mutual welfare." He paused, as if he were in court, feeling the strength of his own authority.

Mimi sat stiffly, indignant and sour-faced, but assured and under control. Velvil watched as David nodded.

"We all honestly feel that if we appealed to your reason and intelligence, to your practicality and good sense, that you would conclude that this idea is detrimental to yourselves and all of us," Larry said.

"As far as I'm concerned they could both rot in hell," Mimi suddenly blurted.

Larry turned to her in disgust. "You promised, Ma. You promised." He banged the table. "We will have none of this, do you hear?"

"They can still rot in hell." Mimi huffed and folded her arms over her fat breasts.

"If we allow ourselves to get emotional," Larry said, glaring at Mimi, "then we might as well adjourn this meeting. We are here as mature adults discussing what could become a complicated problem, one that will give us all, everyone in this room, the kind of grief that none of us have a stomach for. We've all taken time out of our lives to see if we can solve this problem." He looked at Velvil. "Now, Pop, my understanding is that you wish to divorce Mom and marry this woman."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't refer to my mother in those terms," Genendel's son said.

"I hadn't intended anything disparaging," Larry said quickly.

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt," Genendel's daughter said to her brother.

"You realize, of course, Mrs. Goldfarb," Larry said, looking at Genendel, "that you are encouraging an action that will result not

only in humiliation for your husband and my mother-in-law but ostracism for yourself and my father-in-law."

"Now you're trying to fix blame," Genendel's son said. He was thin like his mother, with his mother's gentle face. Velvil wondered if he was sympathetic, a thought quickly dispelled. "I don't agree with what they're doing, but I don't think you can fix blame."

"She's a woman," one of Velvil's daughters interjected. "She knows that it's the woman who controls the situation. She encouraged him."

"I resent that," Genendel's son said. "Your father is not exactly innocent in this matter."

"They should both rot in hell," Mimi said, her voice booming in the room. "I still say he needs a psychiatrist."

"That's for sure," one of Velvil's daughters said huffily.

"It's that Yiddish Club," Mimi shouted. "They should close that Yiddish Club."

"This is getting out of hand," Larry shouted and banged on the table. He waited until they settled down again.

"You're all acting like a bunch of children."

"I think Mother's right," Larry's wife said. "Dad needs some help."

But Velvil listened calmly, surveying, in turn, each of the people around the table allegedly debating their fate. He looked at Genendel again, observing her calm, which gave him courage. David Goldfarb wore a long face, the embodiment of gloom.

"You must realize, Pop," Larry said, "that you're being cruel to all of us. You're breaking up two families. Both of you are. Really—" His arguments seemed to have disintegrated, his appeals repetitive.

"Are you all right?" Velvil said suddenly to Genendel in Yiddish.

"I'm not exactly comfortable, but I think I can bear it."

"You see," Mimi cried, "they're talking gibberish again."

"Please speak English, Pop," Larry said in exasperation.

"They are all idiots, Genendel," Velvil said, sure that his courage had returned. "Nothing they say will matter to me."

"I feel better now too, Velvil," she said.

He imagined he could see the gray cast to her skin lift and a new color begin.

"They're sick. It's obvious," one of Velvil's daughters said. She looked at him, glaring. "Will you please speak English?"

"I'll speak whatever I feel like," he said in Yiddish.

"See! Was I right?" Mimi asked, posing it as a general question to the group.

"In order to solve this," Larry said, "you've got to communicate in a language we can all understand."

"I didn't call this meeting," Velvil said in Yiddish. He could see Genendel smiling. "I don't think it's any of your business. Who are you to preside in judgment over my life? What do you know of my life?"

"Of course," Genendel said in Yiddish. "They have no right." She looked around the room. "None of you have any right."

"What are they saying?" Larry said and stood up. "Is there anyone here who knows what they're saying?"

"I know what we're saying," Velvil said, feeling the joy in his strength, in his freedom.

"And I know what we're saying," Genendel said.

"This is impossible," Genendel's daughter shouted, turning to her mother.

"I didn't ask you to come," Genendel said, continuing in Yiddish.

"I can't stand this," Mimi shouted, standing up. She put a hand over her throat as if she were in agony.

"See what you're doing to her," one of his daughters said, holding her mother's free hand.

"She's only acting," Velvil said. "Can't they see that?"

"They know it," Genendel said. She stood up.

"Where are you going, Mother?" Genendel's daughter shouted.

"That bitch. That whore," Mimi shouted.

"Who are you calling a whore, you fat pig?" Genendel's daughter said.

"They're mockies," one of Velvil's daughters shouted.

"A whore . . ." Mimi cried, forgetting about her assumed frailty, pointing her finger at Genendel, then at her husband. "Rot in hell. Both of you."

"My conscience is clear," Genendel said quietly.

"We can still make the Cycling Club, Genendel," Velvil said quietly.

"A wonderful idea," Genendel responded. She moved toward him, reaching for his arm. They stood now together at the end of the table, looking at the faces of their families.

"Please," Larry persisted. "If you will all sit down . . ." But neither of them was listening.

"Who are these people?" Velvil asked, as they turned and proceeded toward the door, arm-in-arm.

"Nobody I ever knew," Genendel said as they walked out of the room.

Continue reading...

Amazon: https://amzn.to/2LWji9G

iBooks: https://apple.co/2O1SSAH

Kobo: https://bit.ly/2uGOPRG

Audible: https://adbl.co/2M2Io6y