

Isaac Bashevis Singer

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Translated from the Yiddish  
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## Author's Note

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I.B.S.



# One

## 1

That morning Yasha Mazur, or the Magician of Lublin as he was known everywhere but in his home town, awoke early. He always spent a day or two in bed after returning from a trip; his weariness required the indulgence of continual sleep. His wife, Esther, would bring him cookies, milk, a dish of groats. He would eat and doze off again. The parrot shrieked; Yoktan, the monkey, chattered; the canaries whistled and trilled, but Yasha, disregarding them, merely reminded Esther to water the horses. He needed not have bothered with such instructions; she always remembered to draw water from the well for Kara and Shiva, their brace of gray mares, or, as Yasha had nicknamed them, Dust and Ashes.

Yasha, although a magician, was considered rich; he owned a house and, with it, barns, silos, stables, a hay loft, a courtyard having two apple trees, even a garden where Esther grew her own vegetables. He lacked only children. Esther could not conceive. In every other way she was a good wife; she knew how to knit, sew a wedding gown, bake gingerbread and tarts, tear out the pip of a chicken, apply a cupping-glass or leeches, even bleed a patient. In her younger days she had tried all sorts of remedies for barrenness, but now it was too late — she was nearly forty.

Like every other magician, Yasha was held in small esteem by the community. He wore no beard and went to synagogue only on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur; that is, if he happened to be in Lublin at the time. Esther, on the other hand, wore the customary kerchief and kept a Kosher kitchen; she observed the Sabbath and all the laws. Yasha spent his Sabbath talking and smoking cigarets among musicians. To the earnest moralists who attempted to get him to mend his ways, he would



always answer: 'When were you in heaven, and what did God look like?'

It was risky to debate with him since he was no fool, knew how to read Russian and Polish, and was even well-informed on Jewish matters. A reckless man! To win a bet, he had once spent a whole night in the cemetery. He could walk a tightrope, skate on a wire, climb walls, open any lock. Abraham Leibush, the locksmith, had wagered five rubles he could make a lock that Yasha could not open. He had worked over it for months, and Yasha had picked it with a shoemaker's awl. In Lublin they said that if Yasha had chosen crime, no one's house would be safe.

His two days of lounging in bed were over, and that morning Yasha rose with the sun. He was a short man, broad-shouldered and lean-hipped; he had unruly flaxen hair and watery blue eyes, thin lips, a narrow chin and a short Slavic nose. His right eye was somewhat larger than his left, and because of this he always seemed to be blinking with insolent mockery. He was now forty but looked ten years younger. His toes were almost as long and tensile as his fingers, and with a pen in them he could sign his name with a flourish. He could also shell peas with them. He could flex his body in any direction - it was said that he had malleable bones and fluid joints. He rarely performed in Lublin but the few who had seen his act acclaimed his talents. He could walk on his hands, eat fire, swallow swords, turn somersaults like a monkey. No one could duplicate his skill. He would be imprisoned in a room at night with the lock clamped on the outside of the door, and the next morning he would be seen nonchalantly strolling through the market place, while on the outside of the door the lock remained unopened. He could manage this even with his hands and feet chained. Some maintained that he practiced black magic and owned a cap which made him invisible, capable of squeezing through cracks in the wall; others said that he was merely a master of illusion.

Now he got out of bed without pouring water over his hands as he should have done, nor did he say his morning prayers. He put on green trousers, red house slippers, and a black velvet vest

decorated with silver sequins. While dressing, he capered and clowned like a schoolboy, whistled at the canaries, addressed Yoktan, the monkey; spoke to Haman, the dog, and to Meztotze, the cat. This was only part of the menagerie he kept. In the courtyard were a peacock and peahen, a pair of turkeys, a flock of rabbits, even a snake which had to be fed a live mouse every other day.

It was a warm morning, just before Pentecost. Green shoots had already appeared in Esther's garden. Yasha opened the stable door and entered. He inhaled deeply the odor of horse-droppings and petted the mares. Then he curry-combed them and fed the other animals. Sometimes he returned from a trip to find one of his pets gone, but this time there had been no deaths.

He was in good spirits and he strolled about his property aimlessly. The grass in the courtyard was green, and a host of flowers grew there: yellow, white, speckled buds, and tufted blossoms that dispersed with every breeze. Brush and thistle reached almost to the roof of the outhouse. Butterflies fluttered this way and that, and bees buzzed from flower to flower. Every leaf and stalk had its inhabitant: a worm, a bug, a gnat, creatures barely discernible to the naked eye. As always, Yasha marveled at them. Where did they come from? How did they exist? What did they do in the night? They died in winter but, with summer, the swarms came again. How did that happen? When he was in the tavern, Yasha played the atheist but, actually, he believed in God. God's hand was evident everywhere. Each fruit blossom, pebble, and grain of sand proclaimed Him. The leaves of the apple trees were wet with dew and sparkled like little candles in the morning light. His house was near the edge of the city and he could see great fields of wheat which were green now but in six weeks would be golden-yellow, ready for the harvest. Who created all this? Yasha would ask himself. Was it the sun? If so, then perhaps the sun was God. Yasha had read in some holy book that Abraham had worshipped the sun before accepting the existence of Jehovah.

No, he was not illiterate. His father had been a learned man, and Yasha had even studied the Talmud as a boy. After his

father's death, he had been advised to continue his education, but instead had joined a traveling circus. He was half Jew, half Gentile – neither Jew nor Gentile. He had worked out his own religion. There was a Creator, but He revealed Himself to no one, gave no indications of what was permitted or forbidden. Those who spoke in His name were liars.

## 2

Yasha amused himself in the courtyard and Esther prepared his breakfast: a hard roll with butter and cottage cheese, scallions, radishes, a cucumber, and coffee which she had ground herself and which she brewed with milk. Esther was small and dark, had a youthful face, a straight nose, black eyes in which both joy and sorrow were reflected. There were even times when those eyes would sparkle mischievously. When she smiled her upper lip turned up playfully, revealing small teeth, and her cheeks dimpled. Since she was childless, she associated with the girls rather than with other married women. She employed two seamstresses with whom she was always joking, but it was said that when alone she wept. God had sealed her womb, as it is written in the Pentateuch, and it was rumored that she spent much of what she earned on quacks and miracle workers. Once she had cried out that she even envied those mothers whose children lay in the cemetery.

Now she served Yasha his breakfast. She sat opposite him on the bench and studied him – wryly, appraisingly, curiously. She never bothered him until he had had time to recover from his trip, but this morning she saw from his face that his period of recuperation was over. His being away so much had had its effect upon their relationship; they did not have the intimacy of long-married couples. Esther's small talk might have been exchanged with a casual acquaintance.

'Well, what's new out in the great big world?'

'It's the same old world.'

'And how about your magic?'

'It's the same old magic.'

'What about the girls? Have there been any changes there?'

'What girls? There aren't any.'

'No, no. Of course not. I just wish I had twenty silver pieces for every girl you've had.'

'What would you do with such a vast amount of money?' he asked, winking at her. Then he returned to his food, chewing as he stared off into the distance beyond her. Her suspicions never left her, but he admitted to nothing, reassuring her after each trip that he believed in only one God and one wife.

'Those who run around with women don't walk tightropes. They find it hard enough to creep around on the ground. You know that as well as I do,' he argued.

'Just how could I know it?' she asked. 'When you're on the road I don't stand at the foot of your bed.'

And the smile that she gave him was a mixture of affection and resentment. He could not be watched over like other husbands he spent more time on the road than at home, met all sorts of women, wandered further than a gypsy. Yes, he was as free as the wind, but, thank God, he always returned to her and always with some gift in his hand. The eagerness with which he kissed and embraced her suggested that he had been living the life of a saint during his absence, but what could a mere woman know of the male appetite? Often Esther regretted that she married a magician and not some tailor or cobbler who sat at home all day and was constantly in view. But her love for Yasha persisted. He was both son and husband to her. Every day that she spent with him was a holiday.

Esther continued to study him as he ate. Somehow he did things differently from the usual run of people. While he was eating, he would suddenly pause as if in deep thought, and then begin chewing again. Another of his odd habits was to dally with a piece of thread, idly tying knots in it, but so skillfully that an equal space would remain between each knot. Esther would gaze often into his eyes trying to penetrate their artifice, but his impassivity always defeated her. He concealed much, seldom spoke in earnest, always hid his vexations. Even if he were ill, he would walk around burning with fever, and Esther would be none the wiser. Frequently she questioned him about

the performances which had made him famous throughout Poland, but he either dismissed her questions with a curt reply or evaded them with a joke. One moment he would be on the most intimate terms with her, and the next he would be equally remote, and she never grew tired of wondering about each move he made, each word, each gesture. Even when he was in one of his exuberant moods and babbled like a schoolboy, everything he said had meaning. Occasionally, it was only after he had left and was once more on the road, that Esther would understand what he had said.

They had been married twenty years, but he was still as playful with her as he had been on the first days after their wedding. He would tug at her kerchief, tweak her nose, call her ridiculous nicknames such as Jerambola, Pussyball, Goose Gizzard – musician's jargon, she knew. Days, he was one thing, and nights another. One moment he crowed elatedly like a rooster, squealed like a pig, whinnied like a horse, and the next was inexplicably melancholy. At home he spent most of his time in his room, occupied with his equipment: locks, chains, ropes, files, tongs, all sorts of odds and ends. Those who had witnessed his stunts spoke of the ease with which they were performed, but Esther had witnessed the days and nights spent perfecting his paraphernalia. She had seen him train a crow to speak like a man; watched him teach Yoktan, the monkey, to smoke a pipe. She dreaded his overworking or being bitten by one of the animals, or falling from the tightrope. To Esther he was all sorcery. Even at night, in bed, she would hear him clicking his tongue or snapping his toes. His eyes were those of a cat; he could see in the dark; he knew how to locate missing articles; he was even able to read her thoughts. One she had had a quarrel with one of the seamstresses and Yasha, coming in late that night, had scarcely spoken to her before divining that she had had an argument that day. Another time she had lost her wedding ring and searched everywhere for it before she had told him of the loss. He had taken her by the hand and had led her to the water barrel where the ring lay at the bottom. She had long since come to the conclusion that she would never be able to understand all his complexities. He possessed hidden



powers, he had more secrets than the blessed Rosh Hashonah pomegranate has seeds.

### 3

It was midday and Bella's tavern was almost deserted. Bella was dozing in a back room and the bar was tended by her small assistant, Zipporah. Fresh sawdust had been sprinkled on the floor, and roast goose, jellied calf's foot, chopped herring, egg cookies, pretzels, had been laid out on the counter. Yasha sat at a table with Schmul the Musician. Schmul was a large man with bushy black hair, black eyes, sideburns, and a thin mustache. He was dressed in the Russian manner; a satin blouse, tasseled belt, and high boots. For several years Schmul had worked for a Zhitomir nobleman, but having become involved with the wife of his patron's steward, had had to flee. Considered Lublin's most accomplished violinist, he always performed at the more exclusive weddings. This, however, was the period between Passover and Pentecost, a time of no weddings. Schmul had a mug of beer before him; he leaned against the wall, one eye screwed up, the other contemplating the beverage, as if debating whether to drink or not. On the table was a roll and on the roll a large golden-green fly, which also seemed unable to come to a decision: Should it fly off or not?

Yasha had not yet tasted his beer. He seemed entranced by the foam. One by one the bubbles in the brimming glass disintegrated until it was only three-quarters full. Yasha murmured, 'Swindle, swindle, bubble, bubble.' Schmul had just been bragging about one of his amorous adventures, and now at the end of one story and before the beginning of another, the men sat silently thoughtful. Yasha enjoyed listening to Schmul's stories; he could have replied in kind had he wished, but with the pleasure evoked by Schmul's story, came an inner gnawing, an ominous feeling of doubt. Let's assume he's telling the truth, Yasha thought, then who is deceiving whom? Aloud he said, 'It doesn't sound like much of a triumph to me. You captured a soldier who wanted to surrender.'

'Well, you've got to catch them at the right moment. In Lublin it's not as easy as you think. You see some girl, She wants you, you want her – the problem is how can the cat climb the fence? Let's say you're at a wedding; when it's over she goes home with her husband and you don't even know where she lives. And even if you do know, what good is it? There's her mother, her mother-in-law, her sisters, and her sisters-in-law. You don't have such problems, Yasha. Once you're on the other side of the city gate, the world is yours.'

'All right, come along with me.'

'You'd take me?'

'I'll do more than that. I'll pay your expenses.'

'Yes, and what would Yentel say? When a man has children, he's not free any more. You won't believe me, but I'd miss the kids. I leave town for a few days and I'm half crazy. Can you understand that?'

'I? I understand everything.'

'Despite yourself, you get involved. It's as if you took a rope and tied yourself with it.'

'What would you do if your wife carried on like the one you were telling me about?'

Schmul's face suddenly became serious. 'Believe me, I'd strangle her,' and he lifted the mug to his lips and drained its contents.

Well, he's no different from anyone else, Yasha thought as he sipped his beer. It's what we're all after. But how do you manage it?

For quite some time now Yasha had been involved in this very dilemma. It disturbed him day and night. Of course he had always been a soul-searcher, prone to fantasy and strange conjecture, but since the advent of Emilia, his mind was never quiet. He had evolved into a regular philosopher. Now instead of swallowing his beer, he rolled the bitterness around on his tongue, gums, and palate. In the past he had sowed every variety of wild oats, had tangled and disentangled himself on numerous occasions, but in some final sense his marriage had remained sacred to him. He had never concealed that he had a wife and he had always made it clear that he would do nothing that

would jeopardize this relationship. But Emilia demanded that he sacrifice everything: his home, his religion – nor were these all that were required. Somehow or other he must raise a vast amount of money. But how could he accomplish that honestly?

No, I must end the thing, he told himself, and the sooner the better.

Schmul twirled his mustache and moistened it with saliva to get the ends nicely pointed. 'How's Magda?' he asked.

Yasha woke from his reverie. 'How should she be? She's just the same.'

'Her mother still living?'

'Yes.'

'Have you taught the girl anything?'

'Some things.'

'What, for instance?'

'She can spin a barrel with her feet and do somersaults.'

'Is that all?'

'That's it.'

'Someone showed me a newspaper from Warsaw and there was a great to-do about you in it. What a fuss! They say you're as good as Napoleon the Third's magician. What sleight of hand, eh Yasha? You really are a master of deception.'

Schmul's words jarred him; Yasha did not like to discuss his magic, and for a moment he disputed with himself, finally deciding: I won't answer at all. But aloud he said, 'I don't deceive anyone.'

'No, of course not. You really swallow the sword.'

'Of course I do.'

'Go tell that to your grandma.'

'You big simpleton, how can anyone deceive the eye? You happen to hear the word "deception" and you keep repeating it like a parrot. Do you have any idea what the word means? Look, the sword does go down the throat and not into the vest pocket.'

'The blade goes into your throat?'

'First the throat, and then the stomach.'

'And you stay alive?'

'I have so far.'



‘Oh Yasha, please don’t expect me to believe that!’

‘Who gives a damn what you believe?’ Yasha said, suddenly becoming weary. Schmul was nothing but a loud-mouthed fool who could not think for himself. They see with their own eyes but they don’t believe, Yasha thought. As for Schmul’s wife, Yentel, he knew something about her that would have driven that big blockhead insane. Well, everyone has something that he keeps to himself. Each person has his secrets. If the world had ever been informed of what went on inside of him, he, Yasha, would have long ago been committed to a madhouse.

#### 4

The dusk descended. Beyond the city there was still some light, but among the narrow streets and high buildings it was already dark. In the shops, oil lamps and candles were lit. Bearded Jews, dressed in long cloaks and wearing wide boots, moved through the streets on their way to evening prayers. A new moon arose, the moon of the month of Sivan. There were still puddles in the streets, vestiges of the spring rains, even though the sun had been blazing down on the city all day. Here and there, sewers had flooded over with rank water; the air smelled of horse and cow dung and milk fresh from the udder. Smoke came from the chimneys; housewives were busy preparing the evening meal: groats with soup, groats with stew, groats with mushrooms. Yasha said good-bye to Schmul and started for home. The world beyond Lublin was in turmoil. Every day the Polish newspapers screamed war, revolution, crisis. Jews everywhere were being driven from their villages. Many were emigrating to America. But here in Lublin one felt only the stability of a long-established community. Some of the town’s synagogues had been built as long ago as the time of Chmelnicki. Rabbis were buried in the cemetery, as well as authors of commentaries, legists, and saints, each under his tombstone or chapel. Old customs prevailed here: the women conducted business and the men studied the Torah.

Pentecost was still several days off, but the cheder boys had