

Isaac Babel

My First Fee

TO LIVE in Tiflis in the springtime, to be twenty years old and not to be loved is a terrible thing. It happened to me. I had a job as a proof-reader in the printing works of the Caucasian Military District. The river Kura seethed under the windows of my garret. As it rose behind the mountains, the sun lit up its dark eddies in the mornings. I rented the garret from a Georgian couple who had just got married. The man had a butcher's shop in the Eastern Market. On the other side of the wall he and his wife, crazed with love, turned and twisted like two large fish in a small tank. The tails of these two frantic fish thrashed against the wall. They rocked the whole attic, burnt black by the sun, wrenched it from its timbers and bore it off into infinity. Their teeth were clenched tight in the relentless fury of their passion. In the mornings the wife, Miliet, went downstairs for bread. She was so weak she had to hold on to the banister in order not to fall. Groping for the steps with her small feet, she had the faint, vacant smile of someone recovering from an illness. With her hand on her small breasts, she bowed to everybody she met on the way—to the old Assyrian, who was green with age; to the man who came round selling paraffin, and to the old hags, deeply seared with wrinkles, who sold skeins of wool. At night-time the heaving and moaning of my neighbours was followed by a silence as piercing as the whine of a cannon ball.

To live in Tiflis, to be twenty years old, and to listen at night to the storms of other people's silence is a terrible thing. To get

away from it, I raced out of the house down to the Kura, where I was overwhelmed by the steam-bath heat of the Tiflis spring. It hit you for all it was worth and knocked you out. I wandered along the hump-backed streets with a parched throat. The haze of spring heat drove me back to my attic, to that forest of blackened stumps lit by the moon. There was nothing for it but to look for love. Of course, I found it. For better or for worse, the woman I chose was a prostitute. Her name was Vera. I prowled after her every night along the Golovin Avenue, not daring to speak to her. I had neither the money for her nor the words—those tireless, trite, nagging words of love. From childhood all the strength of my being had been devoted to the making up of tales, plays, and stories—thousands of them. They lay on my heart like toads on a stone. I was possessed by devilish pride and did not want to write them down prematurely. I thought it was a waste of time not to write as well as Leo Tolstoy. I was determined my stories should live for ever. Daring thoughts and consuming passions are worth the effort spent on them only when they are dressed in noble garb. How can you make it for them, this noble garb?

IT IS DIFFICULT for a man who is in tow to his thoughts, under the spell of their serpentine gaze, to expend himself in the froth of meaningless and nagging words of love. A man like that is too proud to cry from sorrow and he doesn't know how to laugh

from joy. Being a dreamer, I hadn't mastered the absurd art of happiness. I would be forced, therefore, to give Vera ten roubles out of my meagre earnings. When I had made up my mind, I started to wait one evening outside the "Sympathy" Restaurant. Tartars in blue Circassian tunics and soft leather boots sauntered past me. Picking their teeth with silver toothpicks, they eyed the crimson-painted women—Georgians with large feet and slender thighs. There was a touch of turquoise in the fading light. The flowering acacias along the streets began to sigh in low, faltering tones. A crowd of officials in white coats surged along the boulevard, and wafts of balmy air from Mount Kazbek came down towards them.

Vera came later, when it was dark. Tall and white-faced, she sailed ahead of the ape-like throng as the Virgin Mary rides the prow of a fishing boat. She drew level with the door of the "Sympathy" Restaurant. I lurched after her:

"Going somewhere?"

Her broad, pink back moved in front of me. She turned round:

"What's that you say?" She frowned, but her eyes were laughing.

"Where are you going?"

The words cracked in my mouth like dried sticks. Vera changed her step and walked side by side with me.

"Ten roubles, is that all right?"

I agreed so quickly she got suspicious.

"But do you have ten roubles?"

We went into a doorway and I handed her my purse. She counted the twenty-one roubles in it; her grey eyes were screwed up and her lips moved. She sorted out the gold coins from the silver.

"Give me ten," she said, handing back the purse, "we'll spend another five and you keep the rest to live on. When do you get your next pay?"

I said: in four days' time. We came out of the doorway. Vera took me by the hand and pressed her shoulder against me. We went up the street, which was growing cooler. The pavement was littered with withered vegetables.

"It'd be nice to go to Borzhom and get away from this heat..." she said.

Vera's hair was held by a ribbon which caught and reflected bent flashes of light from the street-lamps.

"Well, clear off to Borzhom..."

That's what I said: clear off. That's the word I used, for some reason.

"I haven't got the dough," Vera said with a yawn and forgot all about me. She forgot all about me because her day was made and because I was easy money. She knew I wouldn't turn her in to the police, or rob her of her money and her ear-rings during the night.

WE REACHED the foot of St. David's Mount. There, in a café, I ordered *kebab* for us. Without waiting for it to come, Vera went over and sat with some old Persians who were discussing business. Leaning on their polished sticks and nodding their olive-coloured skulls, they were telling the owner it was time he expanded his trade. Vera butted into their conversation. She took the side of the old men. She was for transferring the business to Mikhailovsky Boulevard. The owner, too flabby and cautious to see the point, just wheezed. I ate my *kebab* alone. Vera's bare arms flowed from the silk of their sleeves; she banged her fist on the table, her ear-rings flitted to and fro among the long, faded backs, yellow beards, and painted finger-nails. The *kebab* was cold by the time she came back to the table. She had got so worked up that her face was flushed.

"You can't shift him, the mule... You can really do business, you know, on Mikhailovsky with Eastern cooking..."

One after another, acquaintances of Vera came past the table—Tartars in Circassian tunics, middle-aged officers, shopkeepers in alpaca jackets, and pot-bellied old men with tanned faces and greenish blackheads on their cheeks. It was midnight by the time we got to the hotel, but Vera had a hundred and one things to do here as well. There was an old woman who was getting ready to go and see her son in Armavir. Vera left me

and went to help her pack—knelt on her suitcase, strapped pillows together, and wrapped pies in grease-proof paper. The broad-shouldered old woman in a gauze hat and with a handbag at her side went round all the rooms saying good-bye. She shuffled along the corridors in her elastic shoes, sobbing and smiling with all her wrinkles. It took a whole hour to see her off. I waited for Vera in a musty room with three-legged chairs, an earthen-ware stove, and patches of damp in the corners.

I had been tormented and dragged round the town for so long that this love I wanted now seemed like an enemy, an inescapable enemy. . . .

OUTSIDE IN THE corridor there was another, alien life shuffling or suddenly bursting into laughter. Flies were dying in a bowl filled with a milky liquid. Each died in its own way. The death throes of some were violent and lasted a long time. Others died quietly, with a slight quiver. Next to the bowl, on the worn table-cloth, was a book: a novel by Golovin about the life of the Boyars. I opened it at random. The letters lined up in a single row and then got all jumbled together. In front of me, in the square frame of the window was a steep, stony hill-side with a winding Turkish street going up it. Vera came into the room.

"We've just said good-bye to Feodosya Mavrikeyevna," she said. "She was just like a mother to us, you know. She's travelling all alone, the old woman, she's got nobody to go with her. . . ."

Vera sat down on the bed with her knees apart. Her eyes were far away, roaming in the pure realms of her care and friendship for the old woman. Then she saw me in my double-breasted jacket. She clasped her hands and stretched herself.

"You're tired of waiting, I bet. . . . Never mind, we'll get down to it in a moment. . . ."

But I just couldn't make out what Vera was going to do. Her preparations were like those of a surgeon getting ready for an operation. She lit a primus stove and put a saucepan with water on it. She threw a clean

towel over the head-board of the bed, and above it she hung an enema with a douche—the white tube dangled down from the wall. When the water got hot, she poured it into the douche, threw a red crystal into it, and started taking off her dress, pulling it over her head. A large woman with drooping shoulders and a crumpled stomach stood before me. Her flabby nipples pointed blindly sideways.

"Come over here, duckie," my loved one said, "while the water's getting ready."

I didn't move. I was numb with despair. Why had I exchanged my loneliness for the misery of this sordid den, for these dying flies and three-legged chairs? . . .

O Gods of my youth! How different it was, this dreary business, from the love of my neighbours on the other side of the wall, their long, drawn-out squeals. . . .

Vera put her hands under her breasts and wobbled them.

"What are you so miserable about? Come here. . . ." She pulled her petticoat up to her belly and sat down on the bed again.

"Are you sorry about your money?"

"I don't worry about my money," I said in a cracked voice.

"How come: you don't worry about your money? Are you a thief or something? . . ."

"I'm not a thief."

"Do you work for thieves?"

"I'm a boy."

"I can see you're not a cow," Vera muttered. She could hardly keep her eyes open. She lay down, pulled me towards her, and started running her hands over me.

"I'm a boy," I shouted, "a boy with the Armenians, don't you understand?"

O GODS of my youth! . . . Five of my twenty years had been spent in the making up of stories, thousands of stories which battened on my brain. They lay on my mind like toads on a stone. Dislodged by the force of loneliness, one of them had fallen to the ground. It was evidently a matter of fate that a Tiflis prostitute was to be my first "reader." I went cold all over at the

suddenness of my invention and I told her my story as a "boy with the Armenians." If I had given less time and thought to my craft, I should have made up a hackneyed tale about being the son of a rich official who had driven me from home, a tale about a domineering father and a down-trodden mother. But I didn't make this mistake. A well-devised story needn't try to be like real life. Real life is only too eager to resemble a well-devised story. For this reason—and because this was how my listener liked it—I was born in the small town of Alyoshki in the Kherson province. My father worked as a draftsman with a steam-boat company. He sweated over his drawing-board day and night to give us, his children, a good education, but we all took after our mother, a silly woman who was interested only in having a good time. At the age of ten I started stealing from my father. When I was grown up I ran away to Baku, to some relatives of my mother's. They introduced me to an Armenian called Stepan Ivanovich. I moved in with him and we lived together for four years. . . .

"But how old were you then? . . ."

"Fifteen."

Vera was expecting me to tell her about the wickedness of the Armenian who had corrupted me, but I went on:

"We lived together for four years. Stepan Ivanovich was the most decent and trusting person I've ever met. He believed every word his friends said to him. . . . I ought to have learned a trade during those four years, but I didn't do a thing. . . . All I cared about was playing billiards. . . . Stepan Ivanovich's friends ruined him. He gave them bills of change without any cover, and his friends presented them for payment. . . ."

"Bills of change without cover"—I don't know how they came into my mind, but I did right to bring them in. Vera believed everything after that. She wrapped herself in her shawl which quivered on her shoulders.

"Stepan Ivanovich was ruined. He was thrown out of his apartment and his furniture was sold by auction. He became a commercial traveller. I wasn't going to live with

him now he had no money, so I moved in with a rich old church warden. . . ."

The "church warden" was filched from some writer: he was the invention of a lazy mind which can't be bothered to produce a real live character.

I said "a church warden" and Vera's eyes flickered and went out of my control. Then, in order to restore the situation, I installed asthma in the old man's yellow chest. Attacks of asthma made him wheeze hoarsely. He jumped out of bed at nights and panted into the paraffin-laden air of Baku. He soon died. The asthma finished him off. My relatives wouldn't have anything to do with me. So here I was in Tiflis with twenty roubles in my pocket—the very same roubles which Vera had counted in the doorway on the Golovin Avenue. The waiter in the hotel where I was staying had promised to get me rich customers, but so far he had sent me only Armenian inn-keepers with great fat bellies. . . . These people liked their own country, their songs and their wine, but they trampled on other people, men or women, as a thief tramples on his neighbour's garden. . . .

And I started talking a lot of rubbish I had picked up about inn-keepers. . . . My heart was breaking from self-pity. It looked as though I was utterly doomed. I was trembling with sorrow and inspiration. Trickle of ice-cold sweat started down my face like snakes moving over grass warmed by the sun. I stopped talking, began to cry, and turned away. I had finished my tale. The primus stove had gone out a long time ago. The water had boiled and gone cold again. The rubber tube was hanging from the wall. Vera went silently up to the window. Her back, dazzling white and sad, heaved before me. In the window, it was getting light round the mountain tops.

"The things people do. . . ." Vera whispered, without turning round. "God, the things people do. . . ."

SHE STRETCHED OUT her bare arms and threw the shutters wide open. The paving stones on the street hissed slightly as they grew

cooler. There was a smell of dust and water. . . . Vera's head was shaking.

"So you're a whore . . . like us bitches. . . ."

I bowed my head.

"A whore like you. . . ."

Vera turned round to me. Her petticoat hung aslant on her body like a rag.

"The things people do," she said again, in a louder voice. "God, the things people do. . . . Have you ever been with a woman? . . ."

I pressed my cold lips to her hand.

"No, how could I? They wouldn't let me. . . ."

My head shook against her breasts which welled freely above me. The taut nipples thrust against my cheeks. They were moist like baby calves. Vera looked down at me from above.

"Sister. . . ." she whispered, and sat down on the floor at my side. "My little sister. . . ."

Now tell me, I should like to ask you: have you ever seen a village carpenter helping his mate to build a house? Have you seen how thick and fast and gaily the shavings fly as they plane a beam together? . . . That night this thirty-year-old woman taught me all the tricks of her trade. That night I learned secrets you will never learn, I experienced a love which you will never experience, I heard the words that one woman says to another. I have forgotten them: we are not supposed to remember them.

WE FELL asleep at dawn. We were woken by the heat of our bodies, a heat which lay in the bed like a deadweight. When we woke up, we laughed to each other. I didn't go to the printing works that day. We drank tea in the market-place of the

Old Town. A placid Turk poured us tea from a samovar wrapped in a towel. It was brick-red and steamed like newly-shed blood. The hazy fire of the sun blazed on the sides of our glasses. The long drawn-out braying of donkeys blended with the hammering of tinsmiths.

Copper urns were set up in rows on faded carpets under tents. Dogs nosed around in the entrails of oxen. A caravan of dust was flying towards Tiflis, the town of roses and mutton fat. The dust was blotting out the crimson fire of the sun. The Turk poured out more tea for us and kept count of the rolls we ate on an abacus. The world was beautiful just to be nice to us. When I was covered all over with fine beads of sweat, I turned my glass upside down. After I'd paid the Turk, I pushed two five-rouble pieces over to Vera. Her plump leg was lying across mine. She pushed the money away and removed her leg.

"Do you want us to quarrel, sister? . . ."

No, I didn't want to quarrel. We agreed to meet in the evening and I put the two gold pieces, my first literary earnings, back into my purse.

All this was a long time ago, and since then I have often received money from publishers, from learned men, and from Jews trading in books. For victories that were defeats, for defeats that turned into victories, for life and for death they paid me trifling sums—much smaller than the one I received in my youth from my first "reader." But I am not bitter because I know I shall not die until I have snatched one more gold piece—and this will be my last—from the hands of love.

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The Verdict on Smoking

Some Sceptical Remarks

TWO EXPERT JURIES have considered the case of the murderous cigarette, one in England and one in the United States. Both have examined the evidence in great detail and have found the accused guilty of murder in the first degree. This verdict, arrived at by medical experts of the highest authority, has been accepted by governmental agencies, newspaper editors, and even the man in the street. The evidence of an association between smoking and a variety of diseases from lung cancer to heart disease seems so striking that doubt about the causal influence of cigarette smoking seems almost indecent. Nevertheless, there are other experts who have seriously criticised the two reports, and it has been suggested not only that the logic on which the argument is based may be faulty, but that an alternative explanation is not only possible but plausible. I shall first consider the alleged faults in logic and procedure underlying the classical investigations; I shall then go on to discuss an alternative hypothesis.

In the investigation of the causes responsible for a given disease it is customary to distinguish three steps.

1. The first of these usually consists of so-called epidemiological investigations, *i.e.* studies associating a variety of external factors with the disease in question, on the basis of large-scale statistical enquiries. (The observation, for instance, that pellagra occurred almost en-

tirely among people suffering from a restricted diet suggested to Goldberger that this was a deficiency disease.) It is this type of epidemiological investigation which has implicated cigarette smoking in various disorders; the evidence in the two reports consists in the main of showing that the probability of dying of lung cancer, coronary artery disease, etc., is in direct proportion to the number of cigarettes smoked.

2. However, this type of investigation is only the beginning. As a second stage we are required to find by experimental means or laboratory evidence the precise way in which the alleged cause produces the effect in question. (Thus, in the case of pellagra, it was possible to experiment with the diets of patients in hospitals and convicts in prison, showing conclusively the truth of the dietary hypothesis.) No such demonstration has been made in the case of tobacco smoking. It is sometimes suggested that the fact that giving up smoking lowers the probability of contracting lung cancer may be considered as proof in this connection, but (as we shall see later) this is not necessarily so.

3. Even this, however, is not sufficient. As a third and last step we are required to identify the specific agent which causes the disease. This third step may not be necessary for the introduction of prophylactic measures, or even for the devising of cures for the disease, but it is essential for a complete understanding of the particular disorder in question. Usually this third step comes many years after the first and second. (Thus, a long time elapsed before nicotinic acid was identified as the specific agent concerned with the aetiology of pellagra.)

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