

Isaac Bashevis Singer

The Adventure

FOR YEARS I DID business with him and he never had a good word for me. A state of friendly hostility existed between us. Morris Shapiro was the owner of the well-known printing shop Kadimah, and I, David Greidinger, was the unknown editor of a budding magazine, *Sproutings*. Morris Shapiro disliked both our pretentious writings and the new Yiddish orthography. Besides, we always owed him money. Often the young writers revised their stories and essays when the typed pages were already going to press. Morris Shapiro used to tell them, "The stuff reads better with the errors than without them."

Before the war, Morris Shapiro's printing shop was one of the largest in Warsaw, with fifteen linotypes and two printing presses. After the war the competition became intense. The Printers' Union demanded higher wages. Morris Shapiro constantly threatened that he would sell out or give everything away to the scrap dealer. The modern Hebrew was as obnoxious to him as the new fangled Yiddish. He ridiculed the so-called futuristic poetry which had neither rhyme nor rhythm. He often spoke nostalgically of Peretz, Frishman, Spector and the other classics whose works he printed.

Although there were constant rumours about his being on the verge of bankruptcy, he still conducted himself as if he were a rich man. He never touched the typed pages and never came near the machines where he might soil his hands. He sat in his office behind a fancy mahogany desk and a manservant brought him tea, cookies, an orange. Morris Shapiro was short, broadly built, with a grey moustache and a shock of white hair that used to be pitch black, but never lost its youthful lustre. On the bridge of his wide nose he wore a gold-rimmed pince-nez which was attached to his lapel by a black ribbon. His

shirt was invariably spotless and there were golden cuff-links in his shirtsleeves. Even the abacus on which he made his calculations was an expensive one, with wires that shone like silver and with discs of ivory. His dark eyes behind the thick lenses expressed stern dignity. When the telephone rang, Morris Shapiro did not answer immediately. He finished reading the paragraph of his newspaper, or slowly chewed and swallowed the bite in his mouth. Only then would he lift up the receiver and say, "Nu". . . .

I had heard that Morris Shapiro had a wife and that some misfortune had befallen his son. I knew nothing else about his family nor did it concern me. All I wanted from him was the correction of typographical errors and the lines to be in proper order. Printers always considered young writers half-idiots, and writers never took printers seriously.

I DID NOT REALLY know how the change came about, but Morris Shapiro began to treat me more kindly. It seemed to me a sign that my literary stock had risen. Once in a while he threw in a word of praise for my writing. He offered me a glass of tea or a cookie. Formerly he never asked me to sit down when I entered his office. Now he would point to a chair. It pleased me but not excessively. I had no desire to engage in conversations with him and to listen to his opinions. Without his angry looks and his caustic comments Morris Shapiro appeared less interesting. He used to criticise severely all the allusions to sex in my stories; now he began to point out how true they were. It became clear that his whole attitude towards me had changed. But why? Had he read a laudatory review somewhere about me? Did one of the older writers praise me? It was not worth while pondering about. I had come to the conclusion long ago that it made no sense to look for consistency

in people. Things soon came to such a pass that Morris Shapiro wanted to converse with me for more time than I was inclined to offer him. Often I had to interrupt him and excuse myself. Then he would frown and ask, "What is your rush? Your little scribblers will wait for you."

One day Morris Shapiro invited me to his home for supper. I was amazed; I did not have the slightest desire to spend an evening with him. But I could not refuse. I was sure I would find a bunch of printers, paper dealers, bookbinders, and fat women in his house. I had to brace myself with patience. That evening I shaved carefully, put on my best suit and bought some flowers. Then I took a droshky to his house. It was an ordeal for me, but I hoped that the magazine might benefit from it, although I knew quite well that he would not print for us without charge. I walked up the marble steps, pressed the bell on the right hand side of the carved door, where the brass tab with the engraved name of the tenant sparkled. I soon heard steps. I expected to hear the noise of guests and to see many overcoats and hats on the clothes-rack in the foyer. But the apartment was quiet. The door was opened by a middle-aged woman, small, girlishly slender, her hair streaked grey and brown, combed in a bun, not cropped *à la garçon* as was then the fashion. Her dress, too, was longer than those worn by the fashionable women. A motherly kindness looked out from her dark eyes. She had a narrow nose, thin lips and a youthful chin. She smiled at me with knowing friendliness. "Pan Greidinger, please give me your coat. My husband is a little late. He asked me to excuse him. Something went wrong with a machine."

"It's all right."

"Please, come in."

She led me into a living-room furnished in the middle-class style: an ottoman, upholstered chairs with fringes, a piano, a threadbare oriental carpet, lithographs on the walls. The house smelled of naphthaline and bygone affluence. On a low table stood a bottle of cordial and a glass bowl filled with cookies. The woman poured a glass for me and one for herself and she said: "I want you to know that my husband is a great admirer of yours. He often talks about you and praises you highly. I rarely used to read Yiddish,

mostly Polish and Russian. But some time ago he began to bring your magazine to me and I am now an ardent reader of yours."

"This is a pleasant surprise to me," I said. "Mr Shapiro used to be highly critical of my work."

"True, he disliked your too daring descriptions of—how shall I call it?—private matters. Well, but times do change. In comparison with the modernists you are quite modest. Also, one cannot deny that these things are important. Besides, no one can dictate to a writer how to write. The main thing is that it is interesting and—"

THE WOMAN SPOKE slowly and thoughtfully. During the course of our conversation, I learned that her father was a rich man in Warsaw, one of the enlightened. She, Anna, had studied in a boarding school for *Panienkas*. She had had a son by Morris Shapiro but he had died during a flu epidemic some years ago. Mrs Shapiro pointed to a portrait of a boy in the uniform of a gymnasiast. Her eyes became moist and her chin trembled. She said: "Lost is lost," and she took a sip of the brandy.

It was quite difficult for me to imagine her as the wife of the severe Morris Shapiro, but on the other hand, he must have been a handsome young man. He knew Hebrew, Russian, once took part in a Zionistic Congress. I was glad that I did not find a house full of guests. The cordial was sweet and strong, the anise cookies melted in my mouth. The woman spoke quietly, gently, with the special confidence women show to their favourite writers. She said to me: "You are still quite young. How old are you? You are only beginning to develop. You have the courage to be yourself."

"How can one not be oneself?" I asked, just to make conversation.

"Most people try to imitate someone, or to satisfy others. Take me for example—"

And the woman tactfully hinted that she married upon the wish of her parents, not of her own choice. Her real desire was to go abroad to study at a university instead of becoming a housewife. But when Grisha was born she decided to devote herself entirely to his upbringing, both intellectually and physically. "Then came a microbe and

destroyed the work of a lifetime. What is there to be done? One has to suffer and go on living."

"Yes, true."

"Why do you let me talk only about myself? Why don't you tell me something about yourself? Actually, I know quite a lot about you from your stories."

THE LONGER THE WOMAN talked, the clearer it became to me that it was for a special purpose that they had invited me—a strange and sensational purpose. The woman confided in me, told me the most intimate facts of her marriage. They were in short as follows: since their son died, the relationship between her and her husband deteriorated. To begin with, she became frigid. She could not let Morris approach her. This went on for two years. Later when she learned that Morris engaged in a clandestine affair with the wife of a typesetter, her sexual desire rekindled, but Morris had become impotent towards her. They spent a lot of money for doctors, spas, hydrotherapy. Nothing helped. The situation was now so bad that if she would not have sexual relations, she would break down. The family doctor had advised her to find someone, but who could it be? She had no male friends whom she could proposition. Her husband's cronies were all solid citizens, married for many years, fathers of grown children, even grandfathers. Besides, she had to maintain her reputation. She still had an old mother, uncles, aunts, a whole clan of nephews and nieces. Anna emptied her glass of cordial and spoke to me clearly: if I agreed, she would be mine—not here in Warsaw, but on a trip somewhere in Zakopane or Zoppot. In what way was she worth less than the loose females with whom, according to my writings, I caroused? She would cover all the expenses. At least I would not contract a venereal disease from her.

I sat there shocked. I said in a choked voice: "Does your husband know about this?"

"It is his idea."

I drank a whole glass of the cordial. "Why did he choose me?"

"Oh, because of your writings. We would not choose a man off the street. There must be some feeling and all the rest of it. You are

so much younger than I, true. But you mentioned in one of your sketches that you liked older women."

"Yes, I do."

"We had to come to a decision."

I marvelled how this modest woman could speak of such matters so directly. But I had already convinced myself that the quiet and the introverted can be unbelievably daring. My knees shook.

"Your husband will undoubtedly change his mind."

"No, he understands and is tolerant. He is under the spell of the other woman, even though she is a vulgar creature. Grisha's death shattered both of us. How I remained alive after this blow is beyond me. But we changed thoroughly. Our life together does not depend on physical contact anymore. We are like brother and sister."

"Aha!"

"Whatever your answer will be, I hope you won't compromise us."

"God forbid! I swear by all that is sacred to me."

"Well, it is not necessary. Ten years ago, if someone would have told me that I was capable of such talk or even of such thoughts, I would have considered him a degenerate and crazy too. But it seems that this blow has numbed me. I feel as though I were in a trance. Just the same, instincts awoke in me of which I was never aware. Perhaps it is only an illusion, but I'm constantly tortured. Morris has suffered too much at my hands to be able to approach me. It may sound strange to you, but Grisha comes between us always to prevent any intimacy. He appears to me in his shroud and wails at me. Even though you are a writer, you won't understand this."

"I do understand."

"How? No. I intended to go about it gradually, but I have no more patience. I decided to speak to you openly."

"You did the right thing."

"What is your answer? You do not have to decide right now. If you don't like me and I am not—as they say—your type, please don't be embarrassed. You owe me nothing. I could almost be your mother."

"You are a beautiful and a noble woman."

"Neither beautiful nor noble. You speak to a person who is spiritually crushed. When

Grisha left, he took everything, even my sense of honour.”

We were silent for a while. Then I asked, “Isn’t Mr Shapiro going to come home now?”

“No, he went to the other one. Come, let’s have dinner.”

AT DINNER I promised my hostess an answer within three days. I thereby implied that I actually accepted her proposition. We would go to Zoppot or maybe to Danzig where we would have complete privacy. Mrs Shapiro had prepared a sumptuous meal but I had no appetite. I wanted to compliment her, embrace her, kiss her, but some inner force withheld me. I could not even look her straight in the face. My boyhood bashfulness had returned and paralysed me. Everything remained untouched: the soup, the meat, the dessert. I was even unable to drink my glass of tea. Mrs Shapiro too became silent. We faced one another across the table mute and tense. I had the uncanny feeling that an invisible being lurked between us, watching all our movements. Was this Grisha? My nerves, or whatever it was, began to play tricks on me. My intestines seemed to shrink and my stomach bulged. I needed to urinate but I dared not ask for the bathroom. After trying to taste the piece of honeycake which Mrs Shapiro pressed on me, I rose and said in a strangely official tone: “I will call you, I must leave.”

“You are running away already? Well. . . .”

The woman handed me my coat and hat. In the hallway she offered me her hand and both our palms felt wet. I hurried down the stairs. I belched and hiccupped. A sour fluid filled my mouth and I was about to throw up. I ran along the street and I imagined that the gutter rose in front of me and that any minute I would fall backwards.

That night I could not sleep. Each time I dozed off, my leg twitched and the mattress under me rang as if a bell were hidden among the springs. The next day I was supposed to go to the printing shop for what was called the last revision, but I lacked the courage to meet Mr Shapiro. I thought I would have to get in contact with another printer for the coming issues, but this would have been a cowardly step, to say the least, towards a

man who had placed such an extraordinary trust in me. There was only one way out; to dispense with the magazine. It didn’t turn out as I expected anyway. Writers of whom I had a low opinion had managed to worm their way in.

During the three days in which I was supposed to give my answer, my mood vacillated. For a while my nervousness abated and I was about to ring up Mrs Shapiro and make an appointment. Then again I was seized with terror and a desire to escape and hide. At night I dreamt that a young man, with a face as white as chalk, scolded me and tore at my hair. I took sleeping pills but continued to awake. Although there was no heating in my room, I perspired. My pyjamas became drenched and my pillow twisted as if it had gone through a wringer. My skin pricked and every few minutes I jumped up as if bitten by a bedbug. The third day I rose at dawn, took out the Bible from my bookcase, raised my hand and vowed that I would never take any part in this adulterous adventure.

Thank God, the apartment in which I roomed had no telephone. There was no danger that Mr Shapiro or his wife might call. I left everything at the printing shop—typed copy, manuscripts, proofs. The young writers who contributed to the magazine came to investigate why we stopped publishing. My co-editors wanted to give me extended authority. I had made believe that I was leaving because of a review which appeared against my wish and which raved about a mediocre book. A meeting of all the contributors and editors was called. I did not attend. The last issue, which contained a sketch of mine, appeared five weeks late. I did not read the proofs and it came out with many mistakes and garbled lines.

I don’t know until today whether Mr Shapiro got fully paid for that number. Not only did I avoid his printing shop, but even the street where it was located. I joined a new group of writers and we published a magazine which was printed out of town. For some years I never heard the name Morris Shapiro mentioned. The former group of writers fell apart. Some left for the U.S. or Argentina. Others got married and went into business. I myself got a job on a newspaper.

One day while working on my column, a

colleague of mine said: "Have you heard the latest? Mr Shapiro, the printer, died."

"When?"

"The city room just got the call."

Again some time passed. I had entered a trolley car that went to Danzig station. There was one vacant seat and I sat down near a woman. I looked up and I recognised Mrs Shapiro. She was still in mourning. Her hair had turned white. I wanted to rise and get off at the next station but she had already seen me. She said: "I don't know if you remember me, but I remember you quite well."

"Mrs Shapiro!"

"Yes, it's me."

For a long while we were both silent. Mrs Shapiro swallowed hard.

"Perhaps it is too late for it, but I want to thank you."

"What for?" I asked.

"Oh, I was insane at that time, simply out of my mind. It was a miracle that you were wiser and more responsible."

"I was simply shy."

"Nothing would have come of it anyhow. I loved my husband with all my heart. It was all a result of my agony. Until my last day I will thank God that He spared me this kind of downfall. I am grateful to you too. I guess you know, Morris is not alive any more."

"Yes, I am deeply sorry."

"I tortured him so that he too became deranged. We often spoke about you. He actually mentioned your name a few days before his death."

A controller came in and clipped off parts of our tickets. Mrs Shapiro looked at me sideways and nodded. I heard her murmur: "Grisha would never have allowed it."

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The Ruin

I see it still,
The gothic ruin crowning Welford Hill;
"At dawn", I said, "it seems to glow
With an unworldly light, as though
Not merely made of stone;
Surely a soul still claims that skeleton?"

You answered me:
"Look harder now; the structure that you see
Is only half-complete—our new
Cathedral: what looks to you
Like a great ruin is
The unfinished hulk of a great edifice."

But now—a shock:
Thirty years later, coming to take stock
Of the remembered "ruin", I see
This finished mediocrity—
For all its prosperous bulk
The ruin of a once unfinished hulk!

Edward Lowbury