

Mac and the doctor carry Deborah to the bed.

The doctor sits on the edge of the bed and says: “She is dead.”

Menuchim too is dead, alone, among strangers, thinks Mendel Singer.

XIII

Seven round days Mendel Singer sat on a stool next to the wardrobe and looked at the windowpane, on which a white scrap of canvas hung as a sign of mourning and in which day and night one of the two blue lamps burned. Seven round days rolled away in succession like large, black, slow wheels, without beginning and without end, round like grief. One after another came the neighbors: Menkes, Skovronnek, Rottenberg and Groschel, brought hard-boiled eggs and bagels for Mendel Singer, round foods, without beginning and without end, round like the seven days of mourning. Mendel spoke little with his visitors. He scarcely noticed that they came and went. Day and night his door stood open with the unlocked, pointless bolt. Whoever wanted to come came, whoever wanted to leave left. This visitor and that tried to begin a conversation. But Mendel Singer avoided it. He talked, while the others spoke of living things, with his dead wife. “You have it good, Deborah!” he said to her. “It’s only a shame that you left behind no son, I myself have to say the prayer for the dead,

but I will soon die, and no one will weep for us. Like two little specks of dust we were blown away. Like two little sparks we are extinguished. I've begotten children, your womb has borne them, death has taken them. Full of need and without meaning was your life. In young years I enjoyed your flesh, in later years I spurned it. Perhaps that was our sin. Because the warmth of love was not in us, but between us the frost of habit, everything around us died, everything wasted away and was ruined. You have it good, Deborah. The Lord has taken pity on you. You're dead and buried. For me He has no pity. For I'm a dead man and live. He is the Lord, He knows what He is doing. If you can, pray for me, that I am effaced from the book of the living.

See, Deborah, the neighbors come to me, to console me. But though they are many and they all strain their heads, they nonetheless find no consolation for my situation. Still my heart beats, still my eyes see, still my limbs move, still my feet walk. I eat and drink, pray and breathe. But my blood freezes, my hands are limp, my heart is empty. I am no longer Mendel Singer, I am the remains of Mendel Singer. America has killed us. America is a fatherland, but a deadly fatherland. What was day at home is here night. What was life at home is here death. The son who at home was named Shemariah was here named Sam. In America you are buried, Deborah, I too, Mendel Singer, will be buried in America.”

On the morning of the eighth day, when Mendel stood up from his grieving, his daughter-in-law Vega came, accompanied by Mr. Glück. “Mr. Singer,” said Mr. Glück, “the car is waiting below.

You must come with us immediately, something has happened to Miriam.”

“All right,” replied Mendel indifferently, as if someone had informed him that his room had to be wallpapered. “All right, give me my coat.”

Mendel crept into the coat with weak arms and went down the stairs. Mr. Glück rushed him into the car. They drove and didn’t speak a word. Mendel didn’t ask what had happened to Miriam. Probably she is dead too, he thought calmly. Mac has killed her out of jealousy.

For the first time he entered the apartment of his dead son. He was pushed into a room. There lay Miriam, in a broad white bed. Her hair flowed loosely, in a sparkling blue-black, over the white pillows. Her face glowed red, and her black eyes had wide round red outlines; circled by rings of fire were Miriam’s eyes. A nurse sat next to her, Mac stood in a corner, large and motionless, like a piece of furniture.

“There is Mendel Singer,” cried Miriam. She stretched out a hand toward her father and began to laugh. Her laughter lasted a few minutes. It sounded like the ringing of the high-pitched incessant signals at train stations and as if someone was striking with a thousand brass mallets against a thousand thin crystal glasses. Suddenly the laughter broke off. For a second it was silent. Then Miriam began to sob. She threw off the blanket, her naked legs writhed, her feet kicked with a swift steady rhythm on the white bed, ever swifter and steadier, while her balled fists swung in the

same rhythm through the air. The nurse held Miriam down with force. She grew calmer.

“Good day, Mendel Singer!” said Miriam. “You are my father, I can tell you. I love Mac, who is standing over there, but I’ve deceived him. I’ve slept with Mr. Glück, yes, with Mr. Glück! Glück is my Glück, Mac is my Mac. I like Mendel Singer too, and if you want –” Here the nurse held her hand over Miriam’s mouth, and Miriam fell silent. Mendel Singer was still standing at the door, Mac was still standing in the corner. Both men stared intently at each other. Because they couldn’t communicate with words, they spoke with their eyes. “She is mad,” said Mendel Singer’s eyes to those of Mac. “She couldn’t live without men, she is mad.”

Vega entered and said: “We’ve called the doctor. Any moment now he should be here. Since yesterday Miriam’s been speaking incoherently. She went for a walk with Mac, and when they returned she began to behave in this incomprehensible way. Any moment now the doctor should be here.”

The doctor arrived. He was a German, he could communicate with Mendel. “We will bring her to the asylum,” said the doctor. “Your daughter, I’m afraid, has to go to an asylum. Wait a moment, I will anesthetize her.”

Mac was still standing in the room. “Will you hold her down?” asked the doctor. Mac held Miriam down with his large hands. The doctor pushed a syringe into her thigh. “Soon she will be calm!” he said.

The ambulance came, two carriers entered the room with a

stretcher. Miriam was asleep. They bound her to the stretcher. Mendel, Mac and Vega drove behind the ambulance.

“You didn’t live to see this,” Mendel spoke to his wife Deborah as they drove. “I’m still living through it, but I’ve known it all along. Ever since that evening when I saw Miriam with the Cossack in the field, I’ve known it. The devil has entered her. Pray for us, Deborah, that he leaves her again.”

Now Mendel sat in the waiting room of the asylum, surrounded by others waiting in front of small tables, on which vases full of yellow summer flowers stood, and thin racks laden with illustrated magazines. But none of the people waiting smelled the flowers, none of them leafed through the magazines. At first Mendel believed that all the people sitting here with him were mad and he himself a lunatic like the rest. Then he saw through the broad door of shining glass, which separated the waiting room from the whitewashed corridor, people in blue-striped gowns being led past in pairs. First women, then men, and occasionally one of the patients cast his wild, pinched, deranged, evil face through the pane of the door into the waiting room. All the people waiting shivered, only Mendel remained calm. Yes, it seemed strange to him that the people waiting weren’t wearing blue-striped gowns too and that he himself wasn’t. He sat in a broad leather armchair, the cap of black silk rep he had put over his knee, his umbrella leaned, a faithful companion, next to the chair. Mendel glanced alternately at the people, the glass door, the magazines, the lunatics, who were still passing by outside – they were being led to the

bath – and the golden flowers in the vases. They were yellow primroses, Mendel remembered that he had often seen them at home on the green meadows. The flowers came from his homeland. He recalled them happily. Those meadows had been there, and those flowers! Peace had been at home there, youth had been at home there, and familiar poverty. In summer the sky had been very blue, the sun very hot, the grain very yellow, the flies had glistened green and hummed warm little songs, and high below the blue sky the larks had trilled, without cease. Mendel Singer forgot, as he looked at the primroses, that Deborah was dead, Sam fallen, Miriam mad and Jonas missing. It was as if he had only just now lost his homeland and in it Menuchim, the most faithful of all the dead, the farthest away of all the dead, the closest of all the dead. If we had stayed there – thought Mendel – nothing at all would have happened! Jonas was right, Jonas, the dumbest of my children! He loved horses, he loved schnapps, he loved girls, now he is missing! Jonas, I will never see you again, I won't be able to tell you that you were right to become a Cossack. "Why do you people always roam around in the world?" Sameshkin had said. "The devil sends you!" He was a peasant, Sameshkin, a shrewd peasant. Mendel hadn't wanted to go. Deborah, Miriam, Shemariah – they had wanted to go, to wander around in the world. They should have stayed, loved horses, drunk schnapps, slept in the meadows, let Miriam run around with Cossacks and loved Menuchim.

Have I gone mad, Mendel thought, that I'm thinking this way? Does an old Jew think such things? God has confused my

thoughts, the devil is thinking in me, as he is speaking from my daughter Miriam.

The doctor came, drew Mendel into a corner and said softly: “Brace yourself, your daughter is very ill. There are many such cases these days, the war, you understand, and the misfortune in the world, it’s a bad time. The medical field doesn’t yet know how to cure this illness. One of your sons is an epileptic, I hear, I’m sorry to say that something like that runs in the family. We doctors call it degenerative psychosis. It can pass. But it can also turn out to be an illness that we doctors call dementia, dementia praecox, but even the names are uncertain. It is one of the rare cases that we can’t cure. But you are a pious man, Mr. Singer? God can help. Just pray diligently to the good Lord. By the way, do you want to see your daughter once more? Come with me!”

A bunch of keys rattled, a door slammed loudly, and Mendel walked through a long corridor past white doors with black numbers, like upright coffins. Again the attendant’s keys rattled, and one of the coffins was opened, inside lay Miriam, asleep, Mac and Vega stood beside her.

“Now we have to go,” said the doctor.

“Take me directly home, to my street,” commanded Mendel.

His voice sounded so hard that all were startled. They looked at him. His appearance didn’t seem to have changed. And yet it was another Mendel. He was dressed exactly as he had been in Zuchnow and the whole time in America. In high boots, in a half-long caftan, with the cap of black silk rep. What had changed him so?

Why did he appear taller and statelier to them all? Why did such a white and terrible glow emanate from his face? He almost seemed to tower above the tall Mac. His Majesty, pain, thought the doctor, has entered the old Jew.

“Once,” began Mendel in the car, “Sam said to me that American medicine is the best in the world. Now it can’t help. God can help! says the doctor. Tell me, Vega, have you ever seen God help a Mendel Singer? God can help!”

“You will live with us,” said Vega with a sob. “I will not live with you, my child,” answered Mendel, “you will take a husband, you shouldn’t be without a husband, your child shouldn’t be without a father. I’m an old Jew, Vega, soon I will die. Listen, Vega! Mac was Shemariah’s friend, he loved Miriam, I know, he is not a Jew, but you should marry him, not Mr. Glück! Do you hear, Vega? Does it surprise you that I’m talking like this, Vega? Don’t be surprised, I’m not mad. I’ve gotten old, I’ve seen a few worlds perish, finally I’ve grown wise. All those years I was a foolish teacher. Now I know what I’m saying.”

They arrived, they unloaded Mendel, led him into his room, Mac and Vega stood for a while and didn’t know what to do.

Mendel sat down on the stool next to the wardrobe and said to Vega, “Don’t forget what I told you. Now go, my children.” They left him. Mendel went to the window and watched them climb into the car. It seemed to him that he should bless them, as one blesses children who are starting on a very hard or a very happy path. I will never see them again, he thought, and I won’t bless

them. My blessing would only become a curse for them, their encounter with me a detriment. He felt light, yes, lighter than ever in all his years. He had severed all relationships. It occurred to him that he had already been alone for years. He had been alone since the moment desire had ceased between his wife and him. Alone, he was alone. Wife and children had surrounded him and had prevented him from bearing his pain. Like useless bandages that don't help one heal, they had lain on his wounds and had only covered them. Now, finally, he savored his woe with triumph. There was only one relationship left to break. He set to work.

He went into the kitchen, gathered up newspaper and pine chips and made a fire in the open stove. When the fire reached a considerable height and width, Mendel walked with strong strides to the wardrobe and took from it the little red velvet sack that contained his phylacteries, his prayer shawl and his prayer books. He imagined how these objects would burn. The flames will seize the yellow-toned shawl of pure sheep's wool and destroy it with pointed, bluish, greedy tongues. The glittering edge of silver threads will slowly become charred, in small red-hot spirals. The fire will gently curl up the pages of the books, turn them into silver-gray ashes, and for a few moments dye the black letters bloody. The leather corners of the bindings unfurl, stand up like strange ears with which the books listen to what Mendel calls after them into the hot death. He calls a terrible song after them. "It's over, over, over for Mendel Singer," he cries, and with his boots he stamps in time to it, so that the floorboards boom and the pots

on the wall begin to rattle. “He has no son, he has no daughter, he has no wife, he has no homeland, he has no money. God says: I have punished Mendel Singer; why does he punish, God? Why not Lemmel, the butcher? Why doesn’t he punish Skovronnek? Why doesn’t he punish Menkes? Only Mendel he punishes! Mendel has death, Mendel has madness, Mendel has hunger, all the gifts of God Mendel has. It’s over, over, over for Mendel Singer.”

Thus Mendel stood before the open fire and shouted and stamped with his feet. He held the little red velvet sack, but he did not throw it in. A few times he lifted it up in the air, but his arms lowered it again. His heart was angry with God, but in his muscles the fear of God still dwelled. Fifty years, day after day, these hands had spread the prayer shawl and folded it again, unrolled the phylacteries and wrapped them around the head and around the left arm, opened this prayer book, turned the pages over and over and closed it again. Now Mendel’s hands refused to obey his rage. Only his mouth, which had so often prayed, did not refuse. Only his feet, which had often jumped with a hallelujah to the glory of God, stamped in time to Mendel’s song of rage.

Because Mendel’s neighbors heard screaming and banging, and because they saw the gray-blue smoke penetrating through the cracks and gaps of his door into the stairwell, they knocked on Singer’s door and shouted to him to open for them. But he didn’t hear them. His eyes were filled with the haze of the fire, and in his ears roared his great painful jubilation. The neighbors were already prepared to fetch the police when one of them said: “Let’s

call his friends! They're sitting at Skovronnek's. Maybe they can bring the poor man back to his senses."

When his friends arrived, Mendel actually did calm down. He unbolted the door and let them in, one after another, as they had always been accustomed to enter Mendel's room, Menkes, Skovronnek, Rottenberg and Groschel. They compelled Mendel to sit down on the bed, themselves sat down next to him and in front of him, and Menkes said: "What's the matter, Mendel? Why are you making a fire, why do you want to set the house on fire?"

"I want to burn more than just a house and more than a person. You will be astonished when I tell you what I really intended to burn. You will be astonished and say: Mendel is mad too, like his daughter. But I assure you: I am not mad. I was mad. For more than sixty years I was mad, today I am not."

"So tell us what you want to burn!"

"I want to burn God."

A cry escaped from all four listeners at the same time. They weren't all pious and God-fearing, as Mendel had always been. All four had lived long enough in America, they worked on the Sabbath, their interest was in money, and the dust of the world already lay thick, high and gray on their ancient faith. Many customs they had forgotten, numerous laws they had violated, with their heads and limbs they had sinned. But God still dwelled in their hearts. And when Mendel blasphemed God, they felt as if he had grasped their naked hearts with sharp fingers.

"Do not blaspheme, Mendel," Skovronnek said after a long

silence. “You know better than I, because you have studied much more, that God’s blows have a hidden meaning. We don’t know why we are punished.”

“But I know, Skovronnek,” replied Mendel. “God is cruel, and the more one obeys him, the more harshly he deals with us. He is mightier than the mighty, with the nail of his little finger he can wipe them out, but he doesn’t do it. Only the weak he gladly destroys. The weakness of a man provokes his strength, and obedience arouses his wrath. He is a great cruel *ispravnik*. If you follow the laws, he says you have followed them only for your own advantage. And if you violate just one commandment, he persecutes you with a hundred punishments. If you try to bribe him, he puts you on trial. And if you deal honestly with him, he lies in wait for the bribe. In all of Russia there is no worse *ispravnik*!”

“Remember, Mendel,” began Rottenberg, “remember Job. The same sort of things happened to him as to you. He sat on the naked earth, ashes on his head, and his wounds hurt him so much that he writhed on the ground like an animal. He too blasphemed God. And yet it had only been a test. What do we know, Mendel, of what is going on up above? Maybe the evil one came before God and said as he did then: We must tempt a righteous one. And the Lord said: Just try it with Mendel, my servant.”

“And there you also see,” Groschel chimed in, “that your reproach is unjust. For Job wasn’t weak when God began to test him, but powerful. And you weren’t weak either, Mendel! Your son had a store, a department store, he got richer from year to

year. Your son Menuchim almost recovered, and he almost came to America too. You were healthy, your wife was healthy, your daughter was beautiful, and soon you would have found a husband for her!”

“Why do you break my heart, Groschel?” replied Mendel. “Why do you enumerate for me all that was, now that nothing remains? My wounds aren’t yet healed, and already you tear them open.”

“He is right,” said the other three, as if with one mouth.

And Rottenberg began: “Your heart is broken, Mendel, I know that. But because we can talk about anything with you and because you know that we bear your pains as if we were your brothers, will you be angry with us if I ask you to think of Menuchim? Maybe, dear Mendel, you tried to disturb God’s plans, because you left Menuchim behind? A sick son was granted to you, and you acted as if he were an evil son.” It was silent. For a long time Mendel answered nothing at all. When he began to talk again, it was as if he hadn’t heard Rottenberg’s words; for he turned to Groschel and said:

“And what do you want with the example of Job? Have you ever seen real miracles, with your eyes? Miracles as they are reported at the end of Job? Shall my son Shemariah be resurrected from the mass grave in France? Shall my son Jonas come to life from his disappearance? Shall my daughter Miriam suddenly return home healthy from the insane asylum? And if she returns home, will she still find a husband there and be able to live on peacefully like someone who has never been mad? Shall my wife Deborah

rise from the grave while it's still damp? Shall my son Menuchim, in the middle of the war, come here from Russia, supposing that he's still alive? For it is not correct," and here Mendel turned back to Rottenberg, "that I left Menuchim behind maliciously and so as to punish him. For other reasons, because of my daughter, who had begun to run around with Cossacks – with Cossacks! – we had to leave. And why was Menuchim sick? His illness was already a sign that God is angry with me – and the first of the blows that I did not deserve."

"Even though God can do anything," began the most thoughtful of them all, Menkes, "it is nonetheless probable that he no longer performs the truly great miracles, because the world is no longer worthy of them. And even if God wanted to make an exception for you, the sins of the others would still stand in his way. For the others aren't worthy of seeing a miracle befall a righteous man, and that is why Lot had to emigrate and Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed and did not see the miracle bestowed on Lot. But today the world is inhabited everywhere – and even if you emigrate, the newspapers will report what happened to you. So these days God must only perform moderate miracles. But they are big enough, praised be his name! Your wife Deborah cannot come to life, your son Shemariah cannot come to life. But Menuchim is probably alive, and after the war you can see him. Your son Jonas might be in war captivity, and after the war you can see him. Your daughter can recover, the confusion will be taken from her, she

can be more beautiful than ever, and she will get a husband, and she will bear grandchildren for you. And you have a grandson, Shemariah's son. Gather together your love, which you had until now for all your children, for this one grandson! And you will be consoled."

"Between me and my grandson," replied Mendel, "the bond has been broken, because Shemariah is dead, my son and the father of my grandson. My daughter-in-law Vega will marry another man, my grandson will have a new father, whose father I am not. The house of my son is not my house. I have no place there. My presence brings misfortune, and my love draws down the curse as a lone tree in a flat field the lightning. But as for Miriam, the doctor himself told me that medicine could not cure her illness. Jonas is probably dead, and Menuchim was sick, even if he was doing better. In the middle of Russia, in such a dangerous war, he will certainly have perished. No, my friends! I am alone and I want to be alone. All these years I have loved God, and he has hated me. All these years I have feared him, now he can do nothing more to me. All the arrows from his quiver have already struck me. All he can do now is kill me. But for that he is too cruel. I will live, live, live."

"But his power," Groschel objected, "is in this world and in the next. Woe to you, Mendel, when you are dead!"

Then Mendel laughed heartily and said: "I am not afraid of hell, my skin is already burned, my limbs are already lamed,

and the evil spirits are my friends. All the torments of hell I have already suffered. The devil is kinder than God. Because he is not as powerful, he cannot be as cruel. I am not afraid, my friends!”

At that his friends fell silent. But they didn’t want to leave Mendel alone, and so they remained sitting silently. Groschel, the youngest, went down to inform the others’ wives and his own that the men would not come home that evening. He brought another five Jews to Mendel Singer’s apartment so that they would be ten and could say the evening prayer. They began to pray. But Mendel Singer did not participate in the prayer. He sat on the bed and didn’t move. Even the prayer for the dead he did not say – and Menkes said it for him. The five strangers left the house. But the four friends stayed all night. One of the two blue lamps was still burning with the last remains of the wick and the last drop of oil on the flat bottom. It was silent. This man and that fell asleep in his seat, snored and awoke, disturbed by his own noises, and nodded off again.

Only Mendel didn’t sleep. His eyes wide open, he looked at the window, behind which the dense blackness of the night finally began to thin out, then turned gray, then whitish. Six strokes sounded from inside the clock. Then his friends awoke, one after another. And without their having arranged it, they grasped Mendel by the arms and led him downstairs. They brought him into the Skovronnek’s back room and laid him on a sofa.

Here he fell asleep.