The Bar Mitzvah Speech

SALOMON ZYTNER (1904–1986)
Translated from the Yiddish by Debbie Nathan

Born into a Hasidic family in Bialystok, Salomon (Shloyme) Zytner arrived in Uruguay in 1925. He participated in Labor Zionist organizations and wrote for Folksblat *and* Haynt *in Montevideo,* Di Prese *in Buenos Aires, and* Naye Tsaytung *in Israel, where he moved later in life. He is the author of three collections of stories,* Der gerangl *(The Struggle),* Di mishpokhe *(The Family), and* "Tsvishn vent" und andere dertseylungen *("Within Four Walls" and Other Stories), all published between 1955 and 1974. "The Bar Mitzvah Speech" is a study of social mores.*

IN BERNARDO TZALKIN'S impressive glassware shop, one can purchase as well all manner of religious images, plaster figures of various dimensions, each of which shows the mission and rank assigned to the particular guardian of humankind on this sinful earth. One can also acquire the finest gold and silver picture frames, variously decorated. The shop is as silent and tranquil as a church. The holy statues are placed on shelves at the very front, in diverse poses. Some stretch their arms out in prayer. Others have worried countenances, full of pain, which remind those who enter that earthly existence is meaningless and that true rewards and punishments will be dealt out only in the world to come.

The decorative frames, sparkling in gold and silver on the walls, can hardly bear to see the sorrowful faces and stooped, bowed, shrunken bodies of the saintly figures, who attract the glances of the passersby. When a customer shows up, a silent, bitter struggle breaks out among them. Each icon wants all the newcomer's attention and spreads about a godlike serenity, meant to

calm the soul in travail. Simultaneously, the brilliant picture frames use their ornaments—flowers of the most diverse shapes, etched in relief—to charm the new arrival. When the shop is empty, the frames look shimmeringly at the oil paintings and reproductions displayed in the great show window and await impatiently the acquirer who will deliver them from the suffocating atmosphere.

The oil paintings do not perceive the tumult of the street, the deafening shrieks and roars of motors. They yearn to be covered with glass, surrounded with decorative frames, and hung in dark, commodious rooms with draped windows, around which hovers an air of hospitable tranquility.

Bernardo Tzalkin's shop, his present social position, is the product of a dream come true. Years before, he had gone around with a crate of glass. From door to door he went, asking with a timid voice, blushing all the while, "Maybe you need a windowpane?" He trod the streets entire days, hardly managing to cover his expenses, mechanically repeating those few words at every home, every doorway. His thin, drawn-out cheeks, his subdued gaze, his entire demeanor clearly belonged to a man beaten down, who labored hard for each bit of bread, and who lived from one day to the next.

After several years of peddling in the streets, he saw his efforts were fruitless. He sought out a location in a downtown street and set up a glass shop. In addition to glass, he brought in some religious pictures, plaster figures, and frames of various sizes. At first, he himself was shocked by his dealing in icons; as a child, he would carefully avert his glance whenever he saw one. As time wore on, he became accustomed to them. They seemed to him even quite ordinary.

The business grew day by day. The religious items were the quickest-moving of all, especially before the holidays. He soon amassed a small fortune and had an appearance to go along with it. His thin, drawn cheeks filled out, his cautious gaze became audacious and even arrogant. Standing long days behind the counter, he acquired a round, well-fed belly, proudly projected outward, as if exclaiming impudently: "Show respect to Bernardo Tzalkin, the big glass dealer! He's no longer the poor glazier who would pace the length and breadth of the city, begging with a meek voice for a little livelihood. Nowadays, people come to him. In the business world his name is uttered with honor and dignity!"

Bernardo Tzalkin was consumed by his shop. Nothing existed for him

except glass, frames, and holy images bought by Christian neighbors in honor of their *shmolidays* . . . He wanted people to know just how comfortable he was, how lavish he could afford to be. He had been too involved in business to notice, slowly creeping up, special birthdays of his two children, born before his good fortune. His son was about to turn thirteen, and his daughter fifteen. The time was right to display his largess.

Bernardo Tzalkin had originally wanted to throw two parties: a bar mitzvah for his son, and a *quinceañera* for his daughter. But his wife so upbraided him that he saw stars. She warned him against letting so much money slip through his fingers and accused him of not knowing the value of a peso. After several evenings of strife and recriminations, they came to an agreement. They would celebrate their son's bar mitzvah and their daughter's quinceañera simultaneously, thereby guarding against useless expenses while attracting twice as many gifts.

Preparing their daughter would not require great effort. They would simply have a white silk gown custom sewn for her, her hair done up in nice curls, and deck her out for the party. With their son it was a different matter. They would have to drum a bar mitzvah speech into his head, which was not about to enter easily. And as though that were not enough, Bernardo Tzalkin demanded that his only son go up to the Torah, pronounce the blessings, and chant the haftorah portion taught to him by a teacher.

Bernardo Tzalkin also wanted a picture of his only son, in his little prayer shawl and skullcap, to appear in the newspaper for one and all to see. That seemed to him a compensation for all the years he had dealt in holy images.

His only son—a hefty boy, with full, round cheeks—was completely taken with soccer. He would come home ruddy and perspiring after playing outside with his friends and would burn with anger at his parents and teacher who demanded he learn the bar mitzvah speech. Most of all, he was annoyed by the haftorah, of which he understood nothing. The strange words frightened him. He would mechanically repeat them after his teacher, all the while thinking that he could be outside having fun, playing ball with his friends. He would break into a cold sweat as he recited word after word. His teacher gazed at him sympathetically, blaming him less than his father. Upon leaving the house, he would remind the boy to practice his speech on his own, lest he shame himself in front of everyone. The boy would breathe

more easily when the teacher was gone, as though he had been freed from a heavy burden, and would escape quickly to his friends outdoors.

Bernardo Tzalkin now kept close watch on his only son. Whenever the boy disappeared from the house, he would go find him in the street, pulling him away from the soccer match just as he was about to score a goal. The boy was angry at having to stop playing and with bowed head would listen morosely to his father's scolding remarks, the eternal litany: "Did you forget that you have to rehearse your bar mitzvah speech and the haftorah? There isn't much time left."

The big day was drawing near, and Bernardo Tzalkin had gone all out. He rented the fanciest, most luxurious hall. He arranged with the caterer for a lavish banquet, lest the guests feel cheated. It was, as he whispered to the caterer, a double party, for both his children, and each and every guest should feel satisfied with what was being offered.

He hired a band to entertain the guests, to warm their hearts with the melodies they knew from home. He had invitations engraved in golden letters, which clearly announced that Mr. and Mrs. Bernardo Tzalkin had the honor to invite their friends to a double celebration: the bar mitzvah of their son and the quinceaiiera of their daughter. On each side of the invitation stood a picture of one of the honorees. The boy, with the prayer shawl on his shoulders and a holy tome in his hand, stared dull and discontented; the girl, in her white silk gown, had a smile that suggested that her childhood had come to an end and a new period of life was about to begin.

A day before the celebration, with all the invitations out and everything in the offing, the boy fell ill. Bernardo Tzalkin paced desperately, anxiously, not knowing what to do. He glanced at his son, who lay in bed with a high fever, shivering. His sunken red cheeks, his glassy eyes, his dry lips made it clear that he had a bad cold and would have to stay in bed. Bernardo Tzalkin walked to and fro, wringing his hands in irritation and chagrin, stiffening them as he went over to his son, who lay breathing heavily, almost choking. He threw terrible glances at the boy and hissed into his face, "It's all because of that accursed ball-playing of yours!" Then he added, beside himself, "What are we supposed to do now? What will become of your speech? The guests we've invited? The food that's been prepared?"

His wife sat on the edge of the bed. She glanced anxiously at her son, from whose side she did not stir, as she placed cold compresses on his forehead.

She hazarded an idea: "Perhaps we could put off the party until a later date? You see how bad off the boy is. He's burning like fire."

"What do you mean, put it off?" exclaimed Bernardo Tzalkin. "What do you think this is—a game? How can you stay calm when so many guests are coming! We won't be able to show our faces in public." His voice cracked into a sob.

She made another attempt: "Maybe we could just celebrate the girl's occasion? And put off the bar mitzvah until the boy is better . . ." He dismissed her suggestion with a wave of the hand, as though no response were necessary. He ran over to the telephone and spoke into the receiver with a broken, nervous voice. Have the doctor come immediately! One of his children has a high fever, and he is very worried! Having gotten a reassuring answer, he hung up the phone and began pacing the room again, looking at the door repeatedly, starting at the slightest noise, anxiously awaiting the doctor's arrival.

At the first ring of the bell, Bernardo Tzalkin ran into the entryway, opened wide the door, and welcomed the doctor in. The doctor sat down calmly by the bed and began a lengthy examination of the patient, checking his throat, feeling his pulse, tapping the boy's back with his fingers, listening to his lungs. The parents stood near the bed, following nervously with their eyes the doctor's movements, waiting impatiently for him to utter some word, offer a diagnosis. The doctor shrugged his shoulders, as though to allay their unfounded fears, and said in sparse terms, "There's no danger. The boy has a bad cold and will have to stay in bed a few days to sweat it out."

Bernardo Tzalkin stood there as though he had just been drenched with a bucket of cold water. Perplexed, at a loss for words, he tried to ask the doctor whether the boy could possibly get out of bed the next day for just an hour. It was his thirteenth birthday . . . He attempted to explain that there was to be a big party. All the guests had been invited. Everything was ready. The boy would have to make a speech or otherwise the whole celebration would be ruined.

The doctor refused, shaking his head. He could not understand how it could matter so that the boy give a speech and thereby risk his health. Bernardo Tzalkin interrupted the doctor with a small voice, begging his authorization, trying to make him understand: "For us Jews, it's a big occasion. He's been practicing the speech for a long time." Maybe the doctor could

prescribe some penicillin shots, for example, a high dose, so that the next day the boy would feel well enough to be taken to the hall, just to recite the speech before the guests. Then they would bring him back home to bed.

The doctor, a good-hearted man of Spanish ancestry, smiled and patted Bernardo Tzalkin on the back, showing he now understood. He uttered a quick "Está bien" and left the room.

The next day Bernardo Tzalkin stood outside his house, waiting nervously as his wife helped their daughter arrange her hair and gown before a mirror. The white silk drew tightly at the waist, before falling into slight pleats. With each movement the gown rustled, as though expressing the dreams and longings of the girl, about to take leave of her fifteen childhood years.

Bernardo Tzalkin kept looking at his watch, fearful it was getting late. He saw all the guests sitting at their tables and straining their eyes in anticipation of the hosts' arrival. And here they were still lingering. The injections prescribed by the doctor the day before had wrought the desired effect. The boy felt better, thereby vindicating Bernardo Tzalkin. After all, what would the entire party have been like without the bar mitzvah speech?

All of a sudden he noticed the door opening. Out stepped his daughter, bedecked, shining brilliantly. His wife followed, leading by the hand their son, swaddled in warm clothing. He opened up the car door quickly and took his son by the other arm. Together, they helped the boy into the car.

Bernardo Tzalkin was overtaken by cheer. Here he was, taking his son to recite the long-awaited bar mitzvah speech. The celebration was to go forward exactly as planned.

Upon entering the catering hall, he remarked how his son began hesitating, tottering, and seemed about to fall over. The boy's usually ruddy face went pale and gaunt. His eyes were sunken in and surrounded by bluish spots. Bernardo Tzalkin gave a shiver, taking fright lest his son's health worsen and keep him from delivering the bar mitzvah speech.

The band intoned a joyous melody. Merriment and laughter poured over the hall. The honorees were welcomed with great festivity; applause broke out on all sides. Hands stretched out to wish the family happiness. Bernardo Tzalkin was entranced by the music, the jolly faces that shone at him from all directions. The ceremonious music swept over him like a warm wave, embracing and caressing him, making him forget all his cares. The fears

regarding his son dissolved. He remembered only that today was a celebration in honor of both his children, a double celebration he had made as sumptuous as possible, renting out the most luxurious hall, arranging for the finest foods—an occasion people were not likely to forget. They would all comment on his unrestrained generosity, his brilliant social standing. And soon his son would recite the bar mitzvah speech.

Papa's Friends

ELISA LERNER (b. 1932)
Translated from the Spanish by Amy Prince

Evoking the world of Russian Jewish immigrants in Caracas, this story takes place during the late 1930s and 1940, when Leon Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico City. Told from the viewpoint of a teenage girl confronting the underside of bourgeois family life, it first appeared—ironically enough—in the slick Venezuelan magazine Exceso *in 1991.*

IN APRIL OF 1953, Lydia was locked up in the remote land of a psychiatric clinic, and the gentle white dawns of her uniform were never seen again in Samuel's grocery store. Berta found prosperity after years of cheerful hard work managing the restaurant she had with her husband, Bernardo. Like a versatile sofa bed that never declines to show its hospitality, the restaurant also functioned as an inn. Freed from work, Berta began moving from one dismal house to another: you can all imagine her last home. She entertained herself buying ostentatious display cabinets for the different houses, in which she would place small, well-polished silver spoons. Now that she had money she could offer better service. But the spoons went unused, like cloistered nuns.

Señora Olinda, almost seventy years old, was obliged to close Odessa, the shoe store she had presided over for close to half a century. There were no longer customers looking for shoes with toes like pointed noses, or thin rose-stem heels. Left without the shoe store, she discovered in herself a belated religious vocation and found herself more and more at ease in the synagogue and at the jumble sales they held. Her lips (as in the younger days

at the Odessa) were, as always, covered with a throbbing scrap of a vibrant velvet red that at times obscured her smile.

As for Amelia, I heard she was stricken by an incurable disease that drove through her body like a sword watching its knight die on the battlefield. Susana got fat, as big as an ever-growing metropolis. She now lives with only her fatness for company in an apartment building in Miami, where most of the tenants are rich sentimental old women—widows exiled from New York or from some town in Central or South America.

In Miami she has become addicted to vitamins. Yet she often still finds herself returning from Florida on the occasion of the weddings and bar mitzvahs of her numerous relatives. These efforts, at times tiresome, to arrive on time for the family festivities have made her whine in the pharmacy for a renewed supply of her much-appreciated vitamins. "I am always on an airplane. The day before yesterday it was Raquel's wedding in New York. In June, it's on to Caracas for Leah and Isaac's golden anniversary. Next fall I'm invited to Tel Aviv to spend the New Year with Ana Landau. She's a widow now. What a production! I don't know anyone who functions more like a well-organized minister of foreign affairs than a member of a Jewish family. I'm about ready to ask for the ambassadorship. I'm just waiting for the Kafka twins' bar mitzvah in Rio de Janeiro."

Lydia, Amelia, Berta, Olinda, and Susana were my papa's friends. It wasn't a conscious flirtation on their part, nor on Papa's. There never was a more tender, loving, and conciliatory husband than he. Mama was a small anxious despot, a protector. Thanks to her methodical, stubborn, and proud nostalgia—above all, to the crazy collection of things she took with her on the boat—we lived in a far-off town of fiction, one that moved erratically in dark seas, ships of gigantic dimensions like massive caskets transporting entire populations.

The city that my mother founded with such care inside our house never had a real and established spot on the map. This was such an injustice when there was so much beautiful real geography that I began to suspect she was a capricious woman, of a spirit subject to sudden change. The passing of time assured me of my conviction that she is a silly woman, a scatterbrain who changes borders as if they were one-night stands.

Papa, possessor of an educated cynicism, faced reality with distracted compassion. That was why he could not remain forever inside the rigorous

region invented by Mama's mournful longings. Some Saturday mornings (if the teacher gave me good marks on the report I brought home from high school), he took me with him on the short but unconventional walks down the narrow streets in the center of town. I suspect Papa's own walk began much earlier. More than one Friday at 7:00 p.m., after greeting God and drinking a small glass of muscatel (his body wore the striped suit like a tablecloth ready to receive its wine glasses), nimble and content (with the jug of his heart half-full of wine), he would run to see his lovely Lydia and his needy Amelia before eight o'clock (the most melancholy time in the universe) when the stores closed.

Mama planned things like an actress in a repertory company of three-act comedies. The celebration of Hanukkah represented the first act. On the pretext of collaborating with the Israel Club, she would make a cake of honey, nuts, and raisins. The club now and then served as a house of charity, a somewhat bohemian, cordial hospice.

On Fridays, protected by the merciful music of prayer, men who looked as though they didn't even have a place of their own to die would appear at the door.

In order to do the honors to the second act, Mama put on her skirt and jacket of silk *imprime* (that's what the pretentious employees of El Gallo de Oro called the printed material) with the firm determination of appearing, hanging on Papa's arm, at the Israel Club, to drop off the delicious cake, decorated with the skill of an English assassin. She also used the argument of wanting to stretch her housewife legs (those crippled spousal extremities, sacrificed like mermaids' limbs in an ocean that prohibits voyages to worldly lands of enjoyment and pleasure) in order to arrive with dignity at the pretenses of the third act. Accompanying Papa on the short trip to his friends' shops (while he made some insignificant purchase), Mama perhaps wanted to assure herself that the visits were not just a useful excuse for a gaze or a verbal caress, performed with the enigmatic touch of love that has no homeland in bed, toward Lydia or Amelia, who, behind their safe sales counters, in the sweetness of dusk, were remote women hidden in the towers of their chaste castles.

Mama admired and at the same time despised Lydia. The variations of her indifference came in all sizes, big and small. Mama, the small domestic despot, envied Lydia her disquieting ability to sell black olives, nuts,

almonds, and Maracay cheese, as she did her white uniform, which, free of marital stains, emancipated her, gave her independence.

Lydia was of short stature, a bit heavy. Her ass was the least animated part of her body, but she seemed to keep singing birds in her somewhat meddlesome belly. The hapless uniform nevertheless tried to silence the indiscreet sparrows of a troublesome digestion. Her face, the green eyes, were those of an artist of the time. A shorter and plumper Kay Francis (the bargains she found in expensive department stores gave authority to her warm greetings), she was happy to be able to seize to her waist the liberating banner of stable and certain work.

A Kay, happy to watch life through lenses spread with foggy yellow Kupperschmidt butter. But Papa would have had to make the sacrifice of buying the necessary (as well as the unnecessary) theater seats in order for Lydia to have really been the haughty Kay Francis, to whom silver-screen husbands presented divine jewels, hidden in the lustrous silver domes of breakfast platters, in humble homage to the night before, when at the elegant party, fox skins drifted from one shoulder to the other like snowflakes swirled by the wind around the gargoyles of a palace roof.

Impassioned stars winked in Papa's eyes when he saw this domestic version of Kay Francis. Lydia, like the other Saturday morning women, didn't pay much attention to me, a pale skinny girl with braids tightly knotted like the shoelaces of shabby winter shoes, a red dress of Scotch plaid wool, and frail bones like toothpaste that called for immense bottles of calcium brimming over like a full water tank. Life was passing by. To find love, one had to rush around like the race walkers in the stadium. Papa and the women counted on those few hours a week to ignite the fires of opportunity, to try to light the logs of burning tenderness from fragile, fast-burning twigs.

I felt sorry for Lydia, something of a respectful pity. Mama cautiously mentioned (with tremendous scorn) that she was "separated." What the hell did that mean? I saw chubby Lydia flapping around in her uniform amid the comings and goings to Samuel's store, like an ocean teeming with life and topped with the whitest waves. Could it be that separation was an adult disease, different from my discouraging lack of calcium? Or is that the way she labeled it because in her house she had a Chinese folding screen that she hid behind to leisurely put in place some linen contraption supposed to reduce the vast habitation of her stomach?

This desolate operation, to tighten or to meticulously loosen the waists of a weary corset, was like that of a ship captain at the moment in which he hoists or lowers the sails that have been entrusted to him.

Papa, loaded down by his Mediterranean riches, black olives glittering like the buttons on a widow's bodice, grapes like fairies' teeth, and the skinny girl at his side like some unattractive trophy of his matrimony, twenty or twenty-five minutes later would enter Amelia's store for gentlemen.

She received him with little claps of happiness and with the melodramatic gymnastics of open arms. Papa's smile was a cordial cliff of luminous teeth. I don't remember if Amelia was married then or if she did it later. It doesn't matter. In any case, her heart sheltered an extraordinary comprehension of and access to the masculine world. The sale of men's shirts and ties gave her these powers.

Sometimes it surprised me that the anxiousness of the greetings, the intimate hubbub of the encounters between Amelia and Papa, depended on a commonplace casual Saturday visit to the haberdashery. It seemed unfair that the affectionate saleswoman wasn't included at our family dinners and that the evident happiness that Papa's arrival brought her had such a limited time frame. My girl's eyes perceived that their mutual delight was reduced to a cautious passion that could have been set in the cold snow of far-off mountains.

Amelia eagerly dressed herself up for the hours she spent in the shop. But the pale mauve or blue blouses, the gray wool skirts, seemed to age rapidly on her body. She looked lovely, however, when she wore her Romanian white silk camisole, covered with pleats and done up in a profusion of multicolored sashes. How beautiful it would have been, her entrance into the house for an innocent domestic meal, dressed in the Romanian camisole and with the fire of her eyes burning in golden affection. Then perhaps Amelia's love wouldn't have been limited to the embrace that stung by its similarity to farewells from a train en route to distant lands. In the ecstasy of being in such close proximity to Papa (different from the stolen and wounding hour that, on his quick visits to the store, he offered her every Saturday), perhaps Amelia would have let him pull up the multicolored sashes of her adornment, as if they were the backdrop or house curtain of a small and illicit theater.

Berta had set up her restaurant in a long thin building a block up from Amelia's store. The tables were at the back, in a raised area that meant

climbing three or four bare steps, unprotected by the decorations of the rest of the scene. But for me, to arrive at this upper section of the house was like being installed on the gently sloping hill of a theater house.

There was always something frustrating about these visits to Berta. Papa and I would arrive just as the preparations for the noonday meal were taking place. At the table they would have already placed large platters overflowing with salads of potato, beet, onion, and tomato. The chunks of lettuce were veritable gardens.

When Papa said good-bye to Berta, I knew we were going to miss the show, the real entertainment: the predictable actions of the actors, the customers' unexpected moments. "It's time to go." Papa watched life through the jealous mirrors of haste. Mama's tyranny awaited us in the dining room at 12:30 precisely, with the venetian blind up, the sun shining on a fountain of chopped egg, potato, and onion salad. That's why I was never able to see any of Berta's customers. Not once did I eat at her place of business. A restaurant was a prohibited adventure, a swelling of high waves. In order to get near such proud waters, it was necessary to make a crossing that would take an entire childhood.

The lower part of the house held the bedrooms where taciturn guests took their lodging. Berta had a slender, good-natured husband with the body of a dancer, who used it only to call the actors to their places: light taps on the doors to offer aspirins, front-door keys, correspondence from remote areas, vague messages. He spent the rest of the time in a corner, the chair balanced awkwardly against the wall behind the stairs that led to the tables, watchfully idle (carrying on the shoulders of his thin body the insomnia that flourishes in boardinghouses and also in theaters).

Sometimes he would let the newspaper drop from his hands onto the stairs as he murmured in a faltering voice: "Ay, Leybele! Leybele! Good God, the only one of us who got this far, and they wouldn't rest until they tracked him down in the last corner of the world to kill him."

Papa would hold me tight, tenderly taking my hand, trying to soothe with his smile the misfortune of the world. But a sad haze clouded the proud granite of his teeth.

I remember that Bernardo, Berta's husband, would take a napkin from one of the tables, and it wasn't sweat he wiped off his face. They were small and fragile tears. His Adam's apple would swell up disjointedly, as if he had already served himself salad without waiting for the customers. As if the spine of an evil accursed fish had lodged itself in his throat.

In this restaurant, suspended as in a dream of some high tower, the tables were covered by a type of cheap oilcloth generally reserved for the kitchen. I was enchanted by the innocent little animals and the rough-drawn dahlias printed on the cloth.

The petty maternal despot had never seen such crude material on a table. Now I understand: for her, to omit the white starched tablecloths would have been like renouncing the snow of her native city.

On the occasions that they laid out white tablecloths in Berta's restaurant, criminal fingerprints and blood (Del Monte ketchup spilled by negligent diners) ended up staining them. Anyway, the owner of the establishment would never have had the patience to thumb through fashion magazines for ideas about interior decorating.

And it was Berta who triumphed. She jumped over the tables like a thoroughbred horse going over a fence. She didn't bother herself with haughty refinement. A malady such as that would have shrouded Mama early in her pure white tablecloths of nostalgia.

Berta tended toward stockiness, and the gestures of a sharp and fierce worldliness peeked out from her face. Her eyes were spirited and vivacious. It was impossible for those pupils to fall victim to myopia or any other visual ailment. The abundance in her ebony gaze would have smashed to smithereens the glass of any lens. Those imperial violets! Her hair was all boisterous curls, like that of "Imperio Argentina" or some other torch singer, a joyful celebration of black ringlets.

A peaceful garbanzo bean of a mole, cooked over a slow fire on her skin and placed between the nose and the upper lip, gave belligerent notice of a large and brutal mouth, one that let loose virile laughs and cheerful curses in the way of greetings.

Sometimes the musical laughs, the insolent sarcasm, seemed to abandon her body, which was so occupied with changes in the menu and conversations with unattractive guests whose smiles revealed teeth like rusted grilles. And, indeed, the fighting and the celebrating in her grandiloquent voice migrated to a freer part of the body: straight to her arms. Berta's mischievousness traversed her upper arms until it arrived at her hands, folded in a gesture of prayer (of embrace) toward Papa. But on a moment's notice she

would have to go back to the kitchen for more platters of food, for soon the diners would arrive and the oil and vinegar would be scattered around the tables like incense at a church. And Papa had the officious tyranny of home waiting for him.

Perhaps because I was visiting a restaurant without being interested in any of the men who came for the platters of food, I began to dream about a customer who, in the middle of noon's torrential heat, would make his majestic entrance, suited in a black tuxedo and wearing soft patent leather shoes. A man with massive shoulders and gallant manners, with a mustache and graying temples like the actor Arturo de Cordoba.

He would snap his fingers in command and say to Berta and her husband, "Do you see my beautiful suit? Take my order. What dish do you recommend today? I want wine for everyone. But, for the love of God, no more potato salad with beets. I have triumphed. From sunrise on it's a constant party. For Leybele, our unfortunate brother, as well. In his memory. After all, Berta, what are we, anyway? Commerce and memory. One last favor: bring me some shoeshine boys from the corner to shine my shoes. That way they'll realize I don't crawl in the gutters and the streets anymore. I would like everyone to notice that my shoes are made of patent leather, fit for a ballroom."

Berta and Bernardo would appear, surrounded by waiters in starched uniforms like members of an army. In homage to the courteous diner, my fantasy transplanted itself to the great hall of the Paris restaurant, with its vast cemetery of a dining room. The elegant diner chose a filet mignon.

Olinda, in the shoe store Odessa, was always on her feet, a party hostess with no parties, attending to the door and maneuvering the cash register. Her hair was a fuzzy, fat gold cloud. She reigned over the store with a petulant and virtuous grace, dressed in a silk blouse adorned with exquisite designs of delicate lace and pleated Scotch plaid skirts. But in her white complexion, in her mouth painted a surprisingly shameless red, she was a woman of daring. Capable of taking on the whole night as if it were a big house, something unknown, with thick curtains of velvet surrounded by gilded railings. A mansion where it was necessary to break down all resistance, something that had to be possessed in full youth and vigor, when strength for the attack and the decision still remained.

The rotund housebound despot would snivel with spite when she saw her little one arrive with a bag containing shoes bought at Odessa. She also sobbed bitterly on seeing Papa enter with packages of olives and mortadella, purchased in the shop where Lydia worked, or with socks bought in haste at Amelia's bazaar. But for Mama the visits to Odessa were the most mortifying.

Olinda, the manager of the store, was a woman sufficiently audacious to have embarked alone for America. Customers at the store (especially on the days when prices were raised) would whisper: in Havana she stood up her boyfriend, who, it was said, had purchased the ticket for her long voyage. While she was there she had spent all her time dancing the rumba, and between dances she had met the Russian shoemaker who now crafted his wares at Odessa.

But to go to Olinda's shop was like becoming attached to an expensive lover. That was why some Saturdays Papa took me to Susana's shoe store, a less pretentious one next to the market.

Susana was voluminous and large. But the emphasis of her nose offered certain inroads into her character. She herself, without calling for one of the employees (all of melancholy faces and dressed in dark clothes, as if celebrating a burial), sat on a small stool to try the shoes on me. She was generous, complacent, and clever. Her knees, like juicy oranges recently brought in from the field, brushed up innocently against Papa's legs while concealing the arduous struggle with my shoe.

But I think he preferred Olinda, high-priced Olinda, along with the doves who found treasures beneath the bow of a silk blouse. Those doves that the Havana night sent off to hover over the body of the Russian artisan.

Over the years, it seems I have become Lydia, Berta, Olinda, and Susana.

In moments of vain coquetry, I am Amelia. The fugitive illusions of the Saturdays of their youth are my longings today.

An affable and timid man runs in brief and affectionate spells from his frigid marriage to my house; he pops up by chance, like the playing card that a blind man chooses. And then from my comfortable home back to the cold and imposing marble of his conjugal domicile, where, at the cocktail hour, they feed on shriveled peanuts.

The comings and goings of my lover are so rapid and so forced, so that he can return exactly on time to the gloomy castle of his marriage, that last spring he tripped and for months wore his right arm in a sling. Another

time, in the winter, he tore his Achilles tendon. The plaster cast, enemy of action and adventure (mountains of snow in the garden, the neighboring park, illicit paths), has him waylaid in the failed throne of a wheelchair.

I adore in my lover the exquisiteness of his manners, the sublime freshness of his body sprinkled with Loewe cologne. As for the rest of it, these fractures have become part of the custom of our passionate love.

He will return next spring on crutches (his suitcases of disability), ready to lose one leg or another as if in some ancient war. Because he will never stop running between his matrimony of solitary eiderdown and the love that we—Lydia, Amelia, Berta, Olinda, Susana, and I—offer him.

Cláper (excerpt)

ALICIA FREILICH (b. 1939)
Translated from the Spanish by Joan E. Friedman

Alicia Freilich's novel Cláper *(1987), from which the following segment is taken, deals with the entrepreneurial spirit of Jewish immigrants to Venezuela. A prominent journalist, she moved to the United States during the Hugo Chávez regime, which targeted the Jewish community. She is also the author of* Colombina Descubierta *(1991) and* Viaje Verde *(2000).*

I'M HAPPY. THROUGH the clean mirror, as through pure crystal, I see that at last, yes, at last the sun is setting and the first evening star has come out. Shabbat ends but my night begins. All I want to do is walk and walk . . .

I'm leaving you, my dear village, and you're seeing me off without knowing it. There is such excitement in your shabby narrow streets. This time Isaac and Pesha are the ones being led to the house of prayers. She will have to dance around him seven times before they shatter the glass in remembrance of the destruction of the temple in the Holy Land by the evilness of Titus the Roman. Cursed be his name! After hearing the noise and seeing the shards of glass, then and only then will they be man and wife according to the laws of our Arbiter, Creator of the Universe.

You know something? It's unusual for a month to go by without a wedding in my village. *Nu?* I guess even in paradise it's not good to be alone. Why did I decide to leave at the end of this Shabbat and not another? I've waited long enough, and the moment of destiny we forge for ourselves has arrived for me . . .

But I have to pretend and hurry without rushing. Thank God nobody

notices as long as my mouth laughs and my legs dance by themselves, which is of course what happens to everyone in my village when there is a wedding. If I let myself be dragged into the merriment and forget my trip, I'll have to wait until next fall, and that's too far away; after all I'm no longer a boy.

Is it true what they say, that a person's nature changes every seven years? If it is, then I've already shed my skin three times and I have reached the perfect age to break out of the shell forever. Forever? Do any of us ever really abandon forever the place where we're born and play as children?

A little while ago, on Yom Kippur, as I circled my head three times with the sacrificial rooster—and yelled out the exorcism louder than a crazy man would—I offered God this animal as a substitute for my sins. The bird will go to its death, that's what *kapparot* is, after all, while I shall live a long and peaceful life in America. Amen!

Oy yoy yoy! Here comes Meilaj the mute. Whew! He just passed. Thank you, my sweet little God, for your help. That good simpleton has very sharp eyes and with this full moon . . . Luckily he didn't see me. He was so absorbed with his whistling, announcing the wedding and inviting all Christians to come and see the beautiful bride. Have you ever seen an ugly bride? Everyone praises such beautiful happiness! So, while performing his assignment with virtuosity, the whistler didn't notice me, leaving with a knapsack over my shoulders.

As I pass the temple, I've got to walk more slowly. Awaiting the predestined couple, the wide open main door allows me to see the Ark, which holds its treasure, the Holy Scrolls, on the very same dais where—oy yoy yoy!—so often I've accompanied my Pappinyu at sunrise and sunset prayers.

God sits above and arranges it so that here, below, male and female may be joined at a chosen time. I know that all weddings are parties, but today the room looks more glittering than ever before. A couple of weeks ago, from nobody knew where, came a strange painter who decorated these blessed walls. And he never even charged us a cent! And, what's even more unbelievable, the drawings are intact!

I would look at him in silence because he was a man of few words. But one afternoon I took him some cider and sweet dough with raisins, and he spoke! He was fleeing France. He just wanted to breathe once again the air of Liozno, in Russia, where his family lives. But when he realized how far away it was, he chose to remain in Lendov with us—"almost the same," he said, smiling, never once taking his eyes off the enormous rooster he was coloring blue.

Magical! That's what it was. Magical! Without any books, he knew exactly how to draw the feathers of all kinds of different creatures! From his brushes emanated a violin with wings, and green priests suspended in midair above roofs, and a seven-branched candelabra flying like a burning bramble, and a yellow lion and red cows, and gigantic moons, without a single word. Colored shapes with soul!

The entire town was shaken. So? Nu? Who was this stranger? Marcus Chagalovich or Sagalij he called himself; I no longer remember. Of course, the village divided into two irreconcilable camps. One accused him of being a profligate and a sinner because of the irreverence with which he depicted the sacred commentaries. "Downright pagan!" The other said he had given a false name. They pointed him out as one of the anonymous Just Men, who in every era come to redeem the world. Of course, that would explain why he knew more about the laws than our own venerable teacher, Aaron.

Anyway, the artist was scared off by the whispers and all the gossip. After three days, probably to avoid being cursed by them—God forbid!—without even saying good-bye, or even leaving a single footprint, he disappeared into the night, just as I am doing now, along the very same long road . . .

Luminous was the morning of her inauguration into the world! Without crossing checkpoints or oceans, and while living under the same familial roof, she took the road that divided neighborhood from Milky Way.

She was not moved by her parent's objections; nor, for that matter, did she share their mourning over the distant yet to them ever-present news about the Suez Canal situation. Goodness, the way they moaned and carried on! You'd think these were their very own personal problems or something . . .

The tree-lined path that leads to the main building, with its high oval clock, is both border and path to her liberation. There is a lot to see and many to be seen by. In order to accomplish this, she'll have to sway her hips and get rid of that skinny slouching profile, that "good girl walk," Mom would say. A brave heroine, she had dared to break out of the family padlock, the collegiate gates, and the community fences in order to go beyond this door and enter the foremost university. God, does that sounds great! Now she must walk proudly and provocatively in keeping with the mood of her deed.

At last! Left behind are those gaudy reproductions of Marc Chagall that

hang all over the living and dining room walls. Where does Father get this obsession for buying any trinket that imitates the painter? Must be his small-town taste; like all hicks, he mistakes junk for real art. Real art is these stained-glass windows, which, on this particular morning, shed a special light, bringing them into harmony with the modern architecture all around it. What beauty! A splendid open gallery offers her famous muralists, painters, and sculptors in quantities that go far beyond her artistic appreciation, yet it is a most fitting place in which to experience this radical moment dividing her existence.

And the school building? Is it really this two-storied gray box? It looks more like a convent. What cold and penumbral classrooms! Ah, but behind the building, what a glorious field of furry green grass! Why are the walls so bare? No color, not even a line. In fact, nothing hints at the presence of young bright students everywhere.

"They put us up here in this dorm run by nuns, but it's only temporary," explains Cristina Doglio.

The animated voices of the freshmen break the still silence:

"Hey, what's up?"

"Schedule's out . . ."

"Who's teaching philosophy?"

"We get to choose from English, Italian, French, and German!"

"Wow! Look at the syllabus for Intro to Literature. That's a lot of work."

Yes, it's a new and exciting pleasure. Left behind is the daily, cloistered existence of her home in San Leopoldina. Here is an open universe without walls, so varied, it offers itself unconditionally to her every wish. No wonder the school motto is "This lighthouse is here to conquer darkness."

✸

Oy gottenyu! When will I finally be able to leave Lendov? From afar I see Pinchas Gros, the only one of us who lives among the gentiles and in the very center of town. He's a common man, who doesn't even know how to write his name and celebrates the Sabbath alone. I must admit he sure has a great talent for fixing watches and glasses. So why does he live alone? And with a big goat in his backyard? They even use him to threaten children and sinners; after all, who could bear being locked up with that enormous beast and all the noise he makes?

I still have to cross the worn-out wooden bridge, where young lovers walk arm in arm, until around midnight, when Don Josú lets loose his dogs and the lovers rush back to the drugstore. From the street, the lovers look through the open window and enjoy the concert. Oh, I forgot to tell you, the drugstore houses the only piano in town, a treasure that none of us ever really saw but guessed was there. We all managed, at some point, to hear its notes. Standing in front of the colored containers of the drugstore, each heard a different melody. Know what I mean? Only the town priest could enter that house of enchantment. Dressed in priestly garb, he used to go very often to the house with the piano. What did the priest do there? Was he by any chance a privileged cherub? Tell you the truth, I always thought that what interested him was the pharmacist's wife . . . And now where do I hide? Out of Guitzer Street comes Batcha and her crude husband, that chicken guzzler. *Oy vey iz mir!* That's all I need! Bitter as bile that woman is. Why, she'd cut off my hand with her kitchen knife if she so much as suspected that I had said they're not among the best of families. Save me, sweet God! And please don't let the lovers of the mill see me either . . . Ay, ay! One night, I too, dreamed of love while caressing Janala's blond braid, inhaling her clean dress, her knotted kerchief, and her bare lips! From that intimacy at the mill, thank God, not one was ever left pregnant, God forgive! . . .

Farewell, Pappinyu and Mommala! May no evil ever befall you. Without saying good-bye, without hugs or kisses, your son goes away but does not leave you . . .

She got rid of them. She never felt they were real men anyway. Little Jacobs, Moisheles, young Reubens. Always together since primary school. No comparison to these university hunks! Those others were sexless siblings. Angels and seraphs. Soul mates. Was any of them ever like these guys here? Machos with their meaningful glances and provocative gestures? That one over there, for instance, he could be in a Hollywood movie. He's got a Gregory Peck air about him! Ah! And the one next to him! Wow! He's the spitting image of Victor Mature! And what about that hunk of a professor? Exactly like Jorge Negrete! Slim, dark, elegant mustache, reminds me of my Charro singing:

Allá en el Rancho Grande
allá donde vi-vií-a.

Había una ranch-er-iita
que alegre me decí-aa,
que alegre me decí-aaaaaaa

Back there in the big raa-anch,
back there where I once liiii-i-ved.
There was a rancherita
who joyfully would saaaaaa-ay,
who joyfully would saaaaa-ay . . .

All this guy needs is a pistol and a big sombrero! My Mexican charm's got nothing on him . . .

Ahhh, those matinee movies at the Rex and the afternoon ones at the Anuaco! Great, but lasted barely ninety minutes, whereas university life will be four years of handsome men parading deliciously before her. Farewell, my old-fashioned parents! At last I'm a free little bird!

✸

Some hours earlier, during the pause between afternoon and evening prayers, as I counted the minutes, anguished by my upcoming departure, our humble house of god was a boiling caldron. The faithful were gathering in small circles, as if they were still at their market stalls. They were busy arguing: How many had actually died in the Great War? How many had we lost when General Pilsudski repelled the Russian army at the battle of Vistula?

"We should not have participated. That was a big imperialist war, and some of our people sympathized with the Bolsheviks."

"That's nonsense! Didn't we give the Polish legions a Henry Barwinski?"

"Yes, we did, so what? They paid us well for that one, didn't they, idiot?"

"Did you already forget that we were accused shortly after, and still to this very day, of spying for the Russians? Have they quit calling us rightists and anti-Polish?"

"You're the one who's an idiot. You don't even know that the Polish parliament protested that falsehood."

"Nu, so it protested, so? Did anything change? Why? Why do we have to serve in an army where we are always watched and never trusted?"

"Friends, friends. Don't insult each other, please, it's Shabbos!"

"I believe that nothing about this country should be far from our concerns."

"C'mon, we've been here for centuries and we're now citizens of the Polish Republic."

"Any alternatives, stupid? There is maybe somewhere else for us to go to?"

"Maybe."

"Yeah, sure."

"Nu, you stay here then. You'd rather put up with the slaughter of your brothers, the burning of your miserable little houses, and the fact that your sons will never be able to study in a Polish school than suffer a little hunger in the Holy Land or even over there in America. Yes, gentlemen, and in exchange for all the advantages you enjoy here, you have to give your blood to their wars! We're citizens, right? That's what you're saying, right? Sure . . . You poor misguided souls."

"Can you suggest a better place? Can you? Then let's leave right away!"

"There must be someplace on the face of this earth where there are no swords or Cossacks or savage thieves . . ."

Their yarmulkes seem about to explode with all the shouting and shoving and even hitting at times, believe me! But the cantor's deep and tender voice calls them back to prayer, marking the end of the Sabbath, and once again they turn meek before the splendor of the supplication. I, on the other hand, without arguing, am leaving: Momma, Poppa, I really don't want to be either hero or martyr on the Polish battlefield, or anybody else's for that matter. I want to live and die my life for me . . .

One afternoon, two months later, the students crowded together in the corridors to surround a bald young man with deep green eyes. At the same time, another one, thin, but with a noble expression on his face, is taken upstairs.

The group drowns them in hugs and tears. Even Professor Miguel Rosbaum, always isolated in his cubicle and covered in book dust, runs to embrace them. And Father Hernando, one of the most reserved students, talks on and on as never before.

"Who are they, Father Cornejo?"

"Famous people."

"From TV? Movies?"

"The resistance. They're survivors . . ."

"And what are they doing here?"

"Jesus, girl, are you Venezuelan?"

"Yes, by birth, and you?"

"Well, I was born in Spain, but I, for one, know that the UN protested the exile of these young people. Also that General Tarugo—what am I saying?—Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the president himself, was forced to grant them visas, even though one is an active member of the Communist Party and the other of the Democratic Action Party. But I've already said too much, my child. Around here, by God, even the walls have ears."

For seventeen years, she had been insulated from her surroundings. Who among her people took part in those passionate struggles for freedom, liberty, the sorrow of exile and jail, the excitement of a hastily called meeting against the dictator? Being a real citizen meant finding refuge for the democratic activists: distributing food and books to the opposition, whatever sublime task she might be entrusted with. Such a noble cause justified the total giving of oneself, and she would eagerly sacrifice herself for this Venezuela of hers.

Dad and Mom didn't have to find out. Why should they? What good would it do? Voluntarily isolated, they would die of worry if they knew. It was too late for them to accept the demands of a new life. How could these ignorant Polish peasants ever understand, these peasants whose workweek is a universe limited to a taxi route—from Plaza La Rueda to the corner of Carmelitas—from shop to home and vice versa? How could they possibly understand?

Dear Poppa and Momma,

I ask you: If the Polish gentiles win all the wars they start and will start, what do I ever gain? Quite the opposite. I'm neither Catholic, Ukrainian, communist, or even Lithuanian. I'll always be the loser because I am who I am. That's why I'm saying good-bye. So long, really. I'm leaving but am not abandoning you. And, anyway, I remain a fervent Pole in one thing: I worry a lot about the Germans . . .

Only yesterday Pappinyu brought home from shul a guest. This one was even poorer than we are! But to share Shabbat even with only a piece of onion and herring, water instead of wine, bringing a beggar to the table, is

the opportunity God grants us to praise him. No one should go hungry on his day of rest.

The paternal words proclaim the arrival of my very last Shabbat at home.

"My friend, have you ever studied?"

"Mr. David, he whose name I'm not worthy of mentioning, gave me life to go to school when I was very little, even though my clothes were patched and torn."

"How lucky, my friend! Everyone: Wash your hands and let's begin the blessings!"

I envy Poppa's voice, which becomes even more beautiful during the prayer:

And there was afternoon and there was morning. Sixth day. And heaven and earth were created and all that they contain. And having concluded His creation on the seventh, He rested and sanctified it because on that day He concluded his work. Blessed art thou, oh Eternal God, King of the Universe, who doth create the fruit of the vine. Blessed art thou, Our Lord God, King of the world, who sanctified us and graced us with Your precepts and granted us the Sabbath to sanctify the memory of Your labor of creation . . .

As the prayer concludes we raise our glasses: "Let us drink to life and for peace! L'chaim! Dear guest, make yourself at home. Tell me, if you know how to study, you're already rich, don't you agree?"

"Thank you. Yes, but dear family, you also should know that poverty sticks to your skin and is hard to get rid of. It clouds wisdom . . . I did study some, but one has to live . . ."

"Excuse me, but poverty is no dishonor . . ."

"Maybe not, Rebbe David, but it can make you do bad things . . ."

"Yes, but I believe those bad deeds can be erased with the mortar of good deeds."

"You really think so? I think that wherever you go, wherever you stop, poverty is always in the middle of everything. That's what I think."

"Will you do me the honor of eating this gefilte fish? And tell me, my friend, did you ever try to overcome it by working with a paintbrush or with a needle and thread?"

"One has to learn many things, sir, and no cloak is big enough to hide poverty."

"Nu, so how do you manage?"

"I manage . . ."

A candelabra with two candles barely sheds enough light upon us, but the vast darkness is illuminated by Poppa's every sentence and the amusing answers of Haim Lisrak, our guest, who is poorer than we are. Meanwhile, Momma and my siblings doze off, exhausted. Since sunrise they've been throwing sawdust on the floor, trying to get it to shine, rubbing out ashes, fetching water at the well, grinding and seasoning fish, getting dressed, blessing the candles . . . Yes, Shabbos relaxes the spirit but sure tires the body!

"Have another drink, dear guest. It's cherry brandy. A little wine lightens the heart. May you never be poor of soul. May your children grow to study Torah, to marry, and to do good deeds! L'chaim! As long as there is health . . ."

"You know, Rebbe David, poverty is worse than fifty plagues combined."

"But God hates only the ignorant . . ."

"That may be so, but there is no crueler joke of divine affection that an empty pocket!"

"Listen, Haim, even the poorest beggar with pants full of holes, with seven different coats and seven masks to go begging alms from the same rich man, can enjoy the honor of Shabbat."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk! I certainly won't argue with that, Rebbe. That's why I keep praying: Help me, God, send me the cure. I already have the ailment!"

Outside, my whole village is a single chant to God. Aromas of hot cabbage soup seeping into every corner. I don't remember when I decide to put an end to the dialogue. Anyway, if people who have read Scripture and have eaten at the same table don't exchange words on holy laws, they might as well kneel before an idol. Besides, these two have already argued enough. Before the prayer of thanksgiving for the food we had just received, I interrupt with a not very sacred matter: I ask Poppa to use his formidable influence to have the district bureaucrats fix the public baths. "Oy yoy yoy, my poor nose, Pappinyu! Phew! I've got to cover it tightly before I can even go in to empty out the waste containers. And you know what all the gossips say? That right next to the women's ritual baths, young ladies become pregnant! Seems that the very learned, who sing sublime harmonies and sway as they extol the glories of our Lord, every night of the week are actually reading passionate

love letters that *pretty* young girls hand them, while emptying the leftovers into that smelly hovel . . . deep below this mystical village . . . Poppa . . ."

✡

Was there ever a Sunday without guests at home? First in the house in San José and then the one in San Leopoldina. Any writer, speaker, delegate, or visitor who passed through Caracas was compelled to be a dinner guest in the small and modest apartment in the Edificio de Nuestra Señora del Carmen. A pretty incongruous name for a building that housed people with unusual traditions like ours, which many a guest had ironically pointed out to their hosts. We lived there since the time Father almost went bankrupt. It was a place full of books, magazines, and phony Chagalls. Its only luxury was an Erard piano reflected in the glass cabinet full of crystal objects. These had been gifts from the Landaus, the Sponkas, the Erders, and others, when they moved into the lovely house on the same street eight years later, the house that had to be sold in a hurry to avoid foreclosure.

Today's luncheon is one of many. This one is given for the writer Isaiah Rainfeld. As usual, Don Máximo had already taken and brought him back from the business area of town: "Because one must try to distribute the books of this known intellectual however one can. Whether those buyers read the hardbound volumes or just use them to decorate their libraries is irrelevant. It's a fundamental act of charity to help a wise man. Besides, we'll need real dollars to pay for the American edition of poems of resistance in the ghettoes."

During the week, the business on Pasaje Benzo between Madrices and Marron Streets was in the capable hands of the missus. After all, isn't she the expert in buying and selling bras, half slips, and panties? Her husband? Oh he's something else! Culture on agile legs and convincing lips. Yeah, a regular walking encyclopedia. No denying that.

"We sold thirty-six books, Mr. Rainfeld."

"That's great, my friend."

"In three more days, we'll sell all seventy. We'll go to the big tycoons, secluded in their enormous mansions."

"It seems to be easier to write books than to sell them, don't you think?"

"Nonsense. Relax. Nobody ever turns me down. No matter where

I knock, you saw that yourself. They know that I have never traded with someone else's gold. I am not a smuggler. I don't charge a cent of commission for the sacred labor of helping the learned. Just as I learned from my father, David, may he have found peace . . ."

The exquisite banquet the lady of the house prepared, almost at daybreak, overflows on platters. Gefilte fish, chicken soup and matzo balls, nuts, cakes, grapes. The best of the best. "One must always honor the intellect!"

And now, the moment of truth has arrived. Could there be a better setting to bring up the issue of her great leap?

"Father, tomorrow I'm beginning my studies at the university . . ."

"This isn't the moment to discuss . . ."

"I'm not discussing, I'm notifying."

"Tonight when there are no guests, we'll talk . . ."

"Why wait? I already registered, and in fact I'm also going to be teaching at the Colegio Canada."

"I'm embarrassed in front of Mr. Rainfeld. He understands Spanish . . . you're so obstinate . . ."

"That's a fact."

"A daughter of mine? Practically engaged? Should get involved in that dangerous place where Reds hide and the National Security guards go looking for them with guns? That's sacrilege! Please, Mr. Rainfeld, honored guest, excuse us and help yourself to more fish."

Nothing better to dissolve her anger at Father than the Louis Armstrong open-air concert at the Concha Acustica de Bello Monte, brought from heaven itself just for her! Instead of screams, the sensual poetry of Gershwin's "Summerti-i-me and the living is e-ea-sy . . ."

✸

Over there in Lendov, how many strangers had Friday and Saturday meals at my parents' humble table? Impossible to count. Occasionally, the guest might even be a modern freethinker from the city.

"But, Mr. David, Charles Darwin already proved that man is just another animal . . ."

"What are you saying, young man? If that's so, then how come not a single animal ever produced a Darwinich, or whatever his name is?"

"Rebbe, he's an English naturalist, who, after observing the animal species, determined their degree of evolution . . . No, sorry, nothing to do with our God."

"If a horse had something to say he would speak . . ."

"That's not what we're discussing, Mr. David. Beasts have their own way of expressing themselves."

"Yes, yes, they have tongues, that's true, but they cannot say a single blessing!"

"They express themselves in sounds and gestures."

"Young man, the ignorant is not the one who does not know but the one who scorns divine knowledge. And don't you forget that! A goat has a beard, but that doesn't make it a priest. Does it?"

"Ah! Finally we agree on something. Sir, you do admit then that we are the higher ranked in the animal kingdom?"

"You said that, I didn't. Anyway, before you become too big for your own breeches, young man, remember that butterflies precede *you* in the kingdom of divine creation!"

And so they might continue until the moon descended and the sun dazzled us . . .

✸

Ahhhh! Her intoxication continues with the music of Jelly Roll Morton . . . The mixture of sweet wine and wrathful words at the end of Mr. Isaiah Rainfeld's reception fueled her tenacious will to face her opponent and pursue the confrontation: "Father, I beg you! Please try to understand my wish to have a career."

"I understand and cannot tie you to the house or prohibit you from having an honorable profession. Quite the opposite, I want you to amount to something, not be like me, who never got a diploma, who could not study and so had to earn a living knocking on doors, peddling, selling *schmates*. What do you want from me, *kindele*? I'm afraid for you! In that political environment of atheists!"

"But, Dad, you're not even religious!"

"Yes, I most certainly am, in my own way. It's true I no longer pray every day and I don't do a full fast on Yom Kippur, and no doubt because of that

my poppa is turning in his grave. But I practice my tradition every moment of my life. And, as you well know, I've made a sacred cult of my mother tongue, Yiddish. Have you ever known me to sleep away from home, even one night? Do I have children on the streets? Do I get drunk? Gamble? Other women? That's what you're going to be exposed to out there. I'm afraid for you and for your sisters . . ."

"Please, please, try to understand. We can't stay locked up forever. Each of us has to forge her own life! You did it, or have you already forgotten? You broke with your family and crossed oceans!"

"That was very different, young lady! Don't confuse the issues! I stayed back in Lendov; just my feet left! Can you understand that?"

"No, not at all. Anyway, why not just pretend that I'm not leaving San Leopoldina either; just my beautiful legs are running in search of other roads?"

A seemingly never-ending dialogue was being repeated, but she decided that as of this night it was ending. Max's moist eyes and Rifka's long sad face, marked with silent resentment her leave-taking at breakfast.

Would it have been wiser to go to another country? With what money? Maybe she just lacked the courage to cut, really cut that heavy cord . . .

✸

As I was telling you, at the end of Shabbat, I'm leaving, without a word. I have a foreboding that I'm saying good-bye forever to Nune the carpenter, Toiba the cripple, and Leib the hunchback. Oy gottenyu, how deeply my heart aches for Momma, the blanket that covers all my weaknesses.

And when at last, Lendov is behind me, I jump, practically fly to Magelnitze, without spending even a minute in that ugly little town where I used to come so often to buy yarmulkes. Its very smell upsets me. You see, when someone from my village closes his eyes forever, he is wrapped in his tallis, covered in straw, and then sent in a carriage to this overcrowded cemetery. Its stench freezes my bones!

"Magelnitze is sacred because it's where the eternal house is," my father used to say. "It's the good place," my mother usually added. You know what I think? I think it's the only place in the entire world where someone from our village has a right to his own little piece of land! That's what I think. And

anyway, this business of putting the dead in facedown, boy, that really buries a person! Even if they swear to me that it's the real Garden of Eden and it's where all the dead will be resurrected, I still prefer gardens that are above and not below ground. Above, always above. You know what I mean? Even with all the hunger, plagues, pogroms. Nu, what can I tell you?

I don't stop at Vialorovsker either, because I know for sure that one-eyed Zina lurks right behind that window. Poor girl, she's been waiting for me to become engaged to her for four or five years now . . . I point my face to heaven and cross the main road like a thunderbolt. I couldn't bear to feel her rancorous gaze.

"Get married? But Poppa, I'm just fifteen years old!"

"So what? I got married at the same age, and I'm just fine, no?"

"But that's not good enough for me. From a cat a scratch; from a child bride nothing but damnation."

"What are you saying, my boychick? To get up early and marry early never hurt anyone. You'll have a good dowry and time to study Scripture."

"Pappinyu, you know why the bear dances? Because he has no wife. Give him one and he'll stop dancing. They sing that one at the market, Poppa."

"But it's a lie, because a husband is like a king and all couples are fine after a year or so."

"No, no, and no. It's never too late to marry or to die, Pappinyu."

"Oy vey iz mir! May the one whose name is blessed forgive your affront, my son! You're very stubborn, and I worry night and day about how you'll end up."

And while he wails, pulling hairs out of his long black beard, I run away to help Momma with the town fair, where she buys us used clothes . . .

✸

That whole week was full of tension and whispers. Finally, on Friday night, when the rest of the family sleeps, he speaks. He looks worried.

"Where does one begin such unpleasant business? My dear sweet daughter, I want to consult you on a very delicate matter." In a low voice: "Please don't get upset. But ah . . . Manuel Rabinovich, the engineer, destined to be your husband, and from such a good family too, grandson of wise people! Well, anyway, he asked for a dowry, a house, car, office, and if possible, some cash . . ."

The father, knowing full well his daughter's wickedly complicated personality, has to tell her the whole truth . . . Should he get a bank loan? What does she think?

"Well, I'm not surprised. It is customary, after all. The problem is I still like him even after six months. Elegant, handsome, first kiss and out together, in a group, of course, to places like that fabulous Montmartre in Baruta with its European music and the naughty Pasapoga with its mambos and *guarachas*."

"Thanks for the warning, Dad. If I were you, I wouldn't do anything." Of course, in historical terms, a dowry was after all a justifiable institution even under a Marxist focus . . . but it had nothing to do with love. "Tell me, Dad, how much did you make when you married?"

"Your mother with three cotton dresses. . . ."

"Well, that's just about what I think you should fork over . . ." At times, Max could seem primitive and abrupt in his reactions, but he had never been a good peddler. He was unable to sell his daughter. His smile, overflowing with impishness, signed a pact of complicity. On that point at least, there was never any argument.

✸

It was a long way to Warsaw. And to be honest, it was none too sweet. But then again, I guess it could have been worse. On the way to Prztyk and Gora Kalwaria, I befriended a couple of coachmen. I've heard it said that God should protect us from forced exile and from coachmen, but even though these were pretty rough guys, I could tell they weren't totally stupid. Look, these unfortunate men travel for so long facing their horses that after a while they themselves become like animals.

Anyway, I really liked Nisale, the frisky one. After listening to all my *Oy yoy yoy*-ings over my calf pains, one afternoon he asked me: "Tell me, young sir, you seem quite learned. What do we really need our legs for? After all, to Hebrew school we are taken, to our wedding we are driven, to our grave we are carried, to the temple we never go, and in front of all pretty gentile girls we prostrate ourselves . . . So, what do you think, do we need them for anything?"

"Yes, Nisale. We need them to take us to America the Golden!"

He remained pensive. Probably not half as old as he looked with those smooth toothless gums. I took great care to keep to myself my ideas about the feet being the very center of a penitent's soul. Like Joel, the bearded one dressed in rags, who showed up one day at my village. "May his body be feverish for nine years!" "A pox on him!" "He should only grow like an onion, with his head buried in the ground!" they all cursed him. Only a few of the women gave him some stale bread and water, moved by his misfortune.

To make a long story short, Momma, teary eyed, tells me about the great Joel, born in the big city of Vilna, whose voice, at thirteen, was already legendary throughout the country. He sang the prayers with the virtuosity of the chosen. One day a famous gentile composer hears him at an event and, overwhelmed, begs the parents to allow him to be the child's teacher. Years later, while in the capital singing profane tunes, Joel meets Katiuska, a Polish princess. They fall madly in love. So at the age of twenty-two, Joel abandons his singing career, and rejected by his people, he who had been so pious and devout decides to atone for his sins. He goes from village to village, dragging himself to each and every little broken-down house until he gets to ours. What grief his broken-down body bears! And even you two, my very own parents, watch him suspiciously between the slits of the window shutters.

Dear parents, in this letter I can finally tell you that as I felt his childlike face and white hair wandering feverishly around the alleys of my childhood, I was more frightened than I had ever been in my life. A leper without sores.

I was reminded of the story of the king and the two men who guarded his orchard: one blind and one cripple:

"I see some delicious ripe fruit, but I can't reach it with only one leg," says the cripple.

"So what do you need two legs for? If you stand on my shoulders, we'll both eat juicy apples. I don't need eyes to taste them. Why should you need two legs?" And that's exactly what they did. When the king found out, he questioned his guards.

"Your Highness, how could it have been me? I can't climb or walk."

"Do you believe, your Worship, that I could have picked them without seeing?"

The king ordered the cripple to get on the shoulders of the blind man and then sentenced both to die.

Body and soul must always go together, Poppa. I have finally realized that

if succumbing to pleasure sickens one's head, then one ends up with pain like Joel's and in an asylum in Warsaw. I will never be a cantor like my brother, nor a mohel like you, Pappinyu, much less one of those chosen to study God's words fifteen hours a day. Now and with this letter, I can finally tell you one of the reasons I left home without kissing you good-bye. Please try to understand. Just like you can't dance at two weddings at the same time, I don't want to separate my heart from my head. Poppa, Momma, dear little brothers and sisters, please don't cry when you think of me . . .

"That's what we need our feet for, Nisale, to save ourselves in America . . ."

CUBA

Kindergarten

VICTOR PERERA (1934–2003)

When Rites: A Guatemalan Boyhood *first appeared in 1986, critics immediately celebrated its engaging lyricism and touching honesty. This story from that collection, originally written in English, is reminiscent of Isaac Babel's "The Story of My Dovecot." The autobiographical narrator describes in an openly unsentimental fashion a child's first encounter with anti-Semitism. The plot involves two apparently unconnected murders: that of Jesus Christ and another of the narrator's favorite maid. Perera died in Santa Cruz, California. He was also the author of* The Cross and the Pear Tree *(1995), among other works.*

MY EARLIEST IMAGES are geometrical: the narrow bars of the bedstead that I amazed everyone by squeezing through one windy night when I was frightened by a sheet flapping on a clothesline and wanted my mother; the perfect rectangle of Parque Central, with its octagonal tiled benches, encircled fountains, checkered flagstones. And across the way the twin towers of the cathedral, housing a dark mystery of candles and painted idols that would forever be barred to me.

In my pedal car, I explored the limits of my universe, always certain that beyond our doorstep and the park's four borders lay unnamed terrors. I was especially fond of a wooded labyrinth in the park's northern end, a dark, sinuous place where I could act out my heroic reveries unseen by Chata, the Indian girl with long braids and sweet-smelling skirts who looked after me. To my five-year-old's eyes, Chata seemed a rare beauty; she dressed in the vivid, handwoven huipil blouse and skirt of her region and had unusually fine olive skin. Chata was a spirited and mischievous young woman who let

me eat forbidden sweets from street vendors and who would gently tease me into fondling her firm round breasts under the thin blouse.

I made friends in Parque Central, the year before my second branding. The first I can recall was Jorge, an idiot boy with gray drooping eyes that did not disguise his sunny nature. I liked Jorge because he was affectionate—indeed, he was little else—and disarmed my budding defenses by hugging me uninhibitedly and stroking my face. Jorge taught me to touch another without shame or ulterior motive, and for this I am forever indebted to him. I grew to love Jorge and had begun to interpret his grunts and noises into a modest vocabulary when he stopped coming to the park. Chata found out from his *china* that Jorge had been placed in a home.

That year I acquired my first heroes, the platoon of uniformed guards who marched past every afternoon on their way to the *palacio*. I would follow them the length of the park, beating my hands to the beat of the drum, pumping my legs as high as I could to their stride. At the curb I would stop and mark time until they turned the corner and disappeared.

Chata had an admirer, a tall Indian laborer named Ramiro, who courted her in the afternoons and on weekends, when Chata would take me to the park. Ramiro wore a straw hat and leather shoes and used to flash a gold tooth when he smiled or smirked. Chata kept Ramiro on tenterhooks, encouraging his advances and then rebuffing him with a toss of her head, or mocking his confusion with a whinnying giggle that appeared to goad and arouse him. He looked at her at times with a cold, hungering menace that I recognized even then as lust. I disliked and feared Ramiro, but I never dared to intrude on their lovers' play or their frequent spats in the park. Instead, I would retaliate by making Chata admit, when she tucked me into bed at night, that I was her favorite.

I was some weeks short of five, and small for my age, the first time Chata took me to school and abandoned me in the hands of a tall, gaunt woman with hard eyes and a pursed mouth. Her name was Miss Hale, and I detected from her accent that she was foreign.

"Aren't we a little small to be starting school?" she said, in slow, badly slurred Spanish. I understood this to be a taunt, which, on top of my desertion by Chata, brought tears to my eyes. I feared and distrusted Miss Hale all the more when I realized that this was the exact reaction she wanted and that my tears had placated her.

The room she led me into was musty and dim. I was presented to my classmates, most of whom seemed strange to me, and very large. Even their names, Octavio, Gunter, Michel, Loretta, had a foreign ring. From my earliest consciousness I had known I was a foreigner in this strange place, Guatemala.

Now, in the kindergarten room of the English-American School, I felt an alien among aliens.

"My mother says you are a Jew." It was Arturo, a dark, thickset boy with hooded eyes and hairy legs below his short trousers. Within a week, he and Gunter, a tall blond boy with smudged knees who made in his pants, established themselves as the class bullies. We were at recess, which meant I could play with my new friends, plump-cheeked Grace Samayoa and Michel Montcrassi, who was French and wore sandals on his stockinged feet and a round blue cap. There was a fountain in the patio with goldfish in it and a rising nymph with mossy green feet who poured water from her pitcher. In each corner of the patio (Mother said the school had once been a convent) was a large red flowerpot, with pink and white geraniums. I sensed the question was critical and I must reply with care.

"Yes," I said.

"My mother says the Jews killed Christ."

Now this was a trickier question. Who was Christ? "They did not," I said, but all I could be certain of was that I, at least, had not killed Christ—whoever he was—because I had never killed anyone, at least not knowingly.

Then I remembered stepping on a cockroach once and stomping on ants in the kitchen. Maybe I had killed Christ by accident.

"Prove it," Octavio said.

I told him I would ask Father about it and give him a reply the next day.

That night I asked Father why I was a Jew. He hoisted me up by the armpits, sat me on his knee, and told me a long and complicated story about God, the Bible, and a Jew named Moses. When I asked if it was true that the Jews had killed Christ, he frowned and said the Romans had done it. He said I should pay no attention to Arturo.

When Arturo approached me next day, Father's story had gone clear out of my head. All I remembered was that the Romans had done it.

"The Romans killed Christ," I said.

"Who are the Romans?" Arturo asked.

I said I wasn't sure but would ask Father and let him know.

When I asked Father in the evening, he was reading a newspaper. He said the Romans did it and that was that, and I was to pay no heed to Arturo. Father was not in a talkative mood, and I did not press the matter. But I was confused, and I feared my next encounter with Arturo.

Several days passed, and Arturo did not mention the Jews and Christ. I dared hope the whole subject had been forgotten. In the meantime, my friendship with Michel grew. He let me call him Coco, which was his nickname, because his head was round and hard like a coconut; even his curly blond hair resembled a coconut husk. Coco was as much a foreigner in the school as I was. He was Protestant, and the bigger boys mocked his French accent and played catch with his cap.

Grace Samayoa was a little shy of me, although she liked me to tell her stories I'd made up in the labyrinth. Now and again she gave me an approving smile when I answered Miss Hale's questions correctly—and once she let me stroke her hair. Grace Samayoa was the most attractive female I knew next to Chata and my mother. But Grace was also my own size, which made her a challenge. I longed to hug her.

One afternoon Chata failed to pick me up at school. That morning Ramiro had followed us to school, as usual, although they had quarreled in the park the day before, when he had caught her flirting with a young chauffeur.

"He's following us. Don't turn around," I recall Chata saying, glancing behind her without turning her head. They were the last words of Chata's I would ever hear.

It had grown dark outside and my knees were cold when Father finally came for me, after closing the store.

"Chata has gone away," was all he would say. "We will get you another china."

After dinner I went into the kitchen and I wormed the truth out of Clara, the cook. She said that Chata and I had been followed by Ramiro. After she deposited me at the school, he waylaid Chata a block away and gave her "siete puiialadas en el mero corazón" ("seven knife stabs in the very heart"). I accepted Clara's story on faith, not at all concerned that her description matched word for word the title of a popular song. I stamped about the house, pumping my legs high like the palace guards and chanting the song

title aloud: "Sie-te Puiia-ladas en El Mero Corazón. Sie-te Puiia-ladas en El Mero Corazón." The resonance of the phrase, its hard metric beat, gave Chata's disappearance a finality I could comprehend.

The fuller import of Chata's death did not dawn on me until the following day, when I was taken to school by her older sister, Elvira, whose braids were neither as long nor as glossy as Chata's and whose skirts did not smell half as good.

In the days that followed, Chata's violent death and Arturo's hard questions got mixed together in my dreams, and my apprehension grew that Chata had been murdered because of me, and because I was a Jew.

Unlike her younger sister, Elvira was a practicing Catholic, and one Sunday afternoon she sneaked me into the cathedral across from the park.

"You must pray to Our Lord," she whispered, pointing to the pale naked statue, with bloodied ribs and thorns on his head, that hung with arms outstretched from the front wall, in the same place where the Ark would stand in our synagogue; only this place was a lot bigger and scarier.

When I balked at reciting the paternoster she had taught me, Elvira rebuked me, "You must pray to Our Lord to be forgiven for your ancestors' sins against him. That way you can go to heaven, even if you're not Catholic."

Choking back tears, I mumbled the paternoster, not for myself so much but for Chata, who Elvira said had been punished for her sins.

During recess one noon, Arturo again brought up the Jews and Christ. This time Gunter was with him, and there was something in his face I had not seen here before. Gunter's blue eyes never looked right at yours.

"My mother says all Jews have tails and horns," Arturo said, with an accusing look. Now this I knew was absurd, because I had seen myself in the mirror.

"They do not," I said.

"Jews have bald-headed pigeons," Gunter said, with a smirk.

I flushed because this was true—at least I did, Father did and Uncle Mair, and Mr. Halevi at the Turkish baths, but not Señor Gonzales and the others there that day—their pigeons weren't bald . . . But then, what business was it of Gunter's anyway?

"It's none of your business," I said. My face was hot.

"My mother says Jews are the devil," Arturo said, and he gave me a shove.

Gunter called the other boys over and said, "Look at the Jew who killed Christ." Then they all gathered behind him and Arturo and stared at me.

"Leave him alone," called a thin, furry voice from the back. "He's not the devil." It was Coco.

"You keep still, dirty Frenchy," Gunter said.

"Dirty Frenchy, dirty Frenchy," chorused the other boys. Someone snatched the beret from Coco's head, and they all stomped on it, one by one.

"Let's look at his bald-headed pigeon," Gunter said, turning toward me, without looking in my eyes.

I was growing frightened now, but not of Gunter, whom I suspected to be the instigator of all this. I feared the mob.

"He killed Christ," Gunter said in a rising voice, and the group behind him grew tighter. Arturo shoved me again, harder. Torn between fear and anger, I wanted to punch Gunter in the face. But Gunter was a head taller than I, and out of reach.

I stretched to my full height. "At least I don't make in my pants," I said, and I looked Gunter straight in the eye.

He made a grab for my suspenders, and I swung at his face. But Arturo held me fast, and then all the other boys fell on top of me. I kicked and scratched and defended myself, but they were too many. When they had stripped off all my clothes—except my shoes and socks—they stepped back to look at me.

"He lost his tail," Arturo said, almost in relief.

"But he has a bald-headed pigeon," Gunter said. A giggle that was unlike any sound I had ever heard from a boy, or anyone else, came out of his face.

I turned toward the wall. My chest ached from the effort to hold back tears. Several of the boys had drifted away, as if they wished to distance themselves from the two leaders.

Silence, except for the trickle of the fountain and the heaving of my chest. Coco came forward and offered me his crushed beret so I could cover myself.

More boys moved away, and I saw that the girls had all gathered at the far end of the patio, behind the fountain—all except Grace Samayoa. She sat on the rim of the fountain and stared at me.

"Don't look," I said to Grace Samayoa, and I turned to one side. But she kept on looking.

Then Grace Samayoa said, "I hate you," and she walked toward the girls at the far end of the patio.

I covered myself with Coco's cap, and I cried. I cried at the top of my lungs until Miss Hale came. She cleared everyone from the patio and told me to get dressed.

The following year I was left back in kindergarten. Miss Hale and my parents agreed I was underage for the first grade.