

God's Wrath by Bernard Malamud

GLASSER, a retired sexton, a man with a short beard and rheumy eyes, lived with his daughter on the top floor of a narrow brick building on Second Avenue and Sixth Street. He stayed in most of the day, hated going up and hated going out. He felt old, tired, and irritable. He felt he had done something wrong with his life and didn't know what. The oak doors of the old synagogue in the neighborhood had been nailed shut, its windows boarded, and the white-bearded rabbi, whom the sexton disliked, had gone off to live with his son in Detroit.

The sexton retired on social security and continued to live with his youngest daughter, the only child of his recently deceased second wife. She was a heavy-breasted, restless girl of twenty-six who called herself Luci on the phone and worked as an assistant bookkeeper in a linoleum factory during the day. She was by nature a plain and lonely girl with thoughts that bothered her; as a child she had often been depressed. The telephone in the house rarely rang.

After his shul had closed its doors, the sexton rode on the subway twice a day to a synagogue on Canal Street. On the anniversary of his first wife's death, he said kaddish for both wives and barely resisted saying it for his youngest daughter. He was at times irritated by her fate. Why is my luck with my daughters so bad?

Still in all, though twice a widower, Glasser got along, thanks to God. He asked for little and was the kind of man who functioned well alone. Nor did he see much of his daughters from his first marriage, Helen, forty, and Fay, thirty-seven. Helen's husband, a drinker, a bum, supported her badly and Glasser handed her a few dollars now and then; Fay had a goiter and five children. He visited each of them every six weeks or so. His daughters served him a glass of tea.

Lucille he had more affection for, and sometimes she seemed to have affection for him. More often not; this was his second wife's doing. She had been a dissatisfied woman, complained, bewailed her fate. Anyway, the girl did little for herself, had few friends—once in a while a salesman where she worked asked her out—and it was possible, more and more likely, that she would in the end be left unmarried. No young man with or without long hair had asked her to live with him. The sexton would have disliked such an arrangement, but he resolved, if ever the time came, not to oppose it. If God in His mercy winks an eye, He doesn't care who sees with two. What God in His mystery won't allow in the present, He may permit in the future, possibly even marriage for Lucille. Glasser remembered friends from the old country, some were Orthodox Jews, who had lived for years with their wives before marrying them. It was, after all, a way of life. Sometimes this thought worried him. If you opened the door a crack too much the wind would invade the bedroom. The devil, they said, hid in a cold wind. The sexton was uneasy. Who could tell where an evil began? Still, better a cold bedroom than one without a double bed. Better a daughter ultimately married than an empty vessel all her life. Glasser had seen some people, not many, come to better fates than had been expected for them.

At night after Lucille returned from work, she prepared supper, and then her father cleaned up the kitchen so she could study or go to her classes. He also thoroughly cleaned the house on Fridays; he washed the windows and mopped the floors. Being twice a widower, used to looking out for himself, he was not bothered by having to do domestic tasks. What most disappointed the retired sexton in his youngest daughter was her lack of ambition. She had wanted to be a secretary after finishing high school and was now, five years later, an assistant bookkeeper. A year ago he had said to her, "You won't get better wages if you don't have a college diploma." "None of my friends go to college anymore," she said. "So how many friends have you got?" "I'm talking about the friends I know who started and stopped," Lucille said; but Glasser finally persuaded her to register at Hunter College at night, where she took two courses a term. Although she had done that reluctantly, now once in a while she talked of becoming a teacher.

"Someday I will be dead," the sexton remarked, "and you'll be better off with a profession."

Both of them knew he was reminding her she might be an old maid. She seemed not to worry, but later he heard her, through the door, crying in her room.

Once on a hot summer's day they went together on the subway to Manhattan Beach for a dip in the ocean. Glasser, perspiring, wore his summer caftan and a black felt hat of twenty years. He had on white cotton socks, worn bulbous black shoes, and a white shirt open at the collar. Part of his beard was faintly brown and his complexion was flushed. On the train Lucille wore tight bell-bottom ducks and a lacy blue blouse whose long sleeves could be seen through up to her armpits; she wore clogs and had braided her dark hair to about six inches of ponytail, which she tied off with a green ribbon. Her father was uncomfortable at an inch of bare midriff, her heavy breasts, and the tightness of her pants, but said nothing. One of her troubles was that, however she dressed, she had little to say, and he hoped the college courses would help her. Lucille had gold-flecked grayish eyes, and in a bathing suit showed a plumpish but not bad figure. A Yeshiva bocher, dressed much like her father, stared at her from across the aisle of the train, and though Glasser sensed she was interested, her face self-consciously stiffened. He felt for her an affectionate contempt.

In September Lucille delayed, then would not go to reregister for night college. She had spent the summer mostly alone. The sexton argued kindly and furiously but she could not be moved. After he had shouted for an hour, she locked herself in the bathroom and would not come out though he swore he had to urinate. The next day she returned very late from work, and he had to boil an egg for supper. It ended the argument; she did not return to her night classes. As though to balance that, the telephone in her room began to ring more often, and she called herself Luci when she picked up the receiver. Luci bought herself new clothes—dresses, miniskirts, leotards, new sandals and shoes, and wore them in combinations and bright colors he had never seen on her before. So let her go, Glasser thought. He watched television and was usually asleep when she got home late from a date.

“So how was your evening?” he asked in the morning.

“That’s my own business,” Luci said.

When he dreamed of her, as he often did, he was upbraiding her for her short dresses; when she bent over he could see her behind. And for the disgusting costume she called hot pants. And the eyeliner and violet eye shadow she now used regularly. And for the way she looked at him when he complained about her.

One day when the sexton was praying in the shul on Canal Street Luci moved out of the house on Second Avenue. She had left a greenink note on lined paper on the kitchen table, saying she wanted to live her own life but would phone him once in a while. He telephoned the linoleum office the next day and a man there said she had quit her job. Though shaken that she had left the house in this fashion, the sexton felt it might come to some good. If she was living with someone, all he asked was that it be an honest Jew.

Awful dreams invaded his sleep. He woke enraged at her. Sometimes he woke in fright. The old rabbi, the one who had gone to live with his son in Detroit, in one dream shook his fist at him.

On Fourteenth Street, one night on his way home from Helen’s house, he passed a prostitute standing in the street. She was a heavily made-up woman of thirty or so, and at the sight of her he became, without cause, nauseated. The sexton felt a weight of sickness on his heart and was moved to cry out to God but could not. For five minutes, resting his swaying weight on his cane, he was unable to walk. The prostitute had taken a quick look at his face and had run off. If not for a stranger who had held him against a telephone pole until he had flagged down a police car that drove the sexton home, he would have collapsed in the street.

In the house he pounded clasped hands against the wall of Lucille’s room, bare except for her bed and a chair. He wept, wailing. Glasser telephoned his eldest daughter and cried out his terrible fear.

“How can you be so positive about that?”

“I know in my heart. I wish I didn’t know but I know it.”

“So in that case she’s true to her nature,” Helen said. “She can’t be otherwise than she is, I never trusted her.”

He hung up on her and called Fay. “All I can say,” said Fay, “is I saw it coming, but what can you do about such things? Who could I tell it to?”

“What should I do?” “Ask for God’s help, what else can you do?”

The sexton hurried to the synagogue and prayed for God's intervention. When he returned to his flat, he felt unrelieved, outraged, miserable. He beat his chest with his fists, blamed himself for not having been stricter with her. He was angered with her for being the kind she was and sought ways to punish her. Really, he wanted to beg her to return home, to be a good daughter, to ease the pain in his heart.

The next morning he woke in the dark and determined to find her. But where do you look for a daughter who has become a whore? He waited a few days for her to call, and when she didn't, on Helen's advice he dialed information and asked if there was a new telephone number in the name of Luci Glasser.

"Not for Luci Glasser but for Luci Glass," said the operator.

"Give me this number."

The operator, at his impassioned insistence, gave him an address as well, a place on midtown Ninth Avenue. Though it was still September and not cold, the sexton put on his winter coat and took his rubbertipped heavy cane. He rode, whispering to himself, on the subway to West Fiftieth Street, and walked to Ninth, to a large new orange-brick apartment house.

All day, though it rained intermittently, he waited across the street from the apartment house until his daughter appeared late at night; then he followed her. She walked quickly, lightly, as though without a worry, down the avenue. As he hurried after her she hailed a cab. Glasser shouted at it but no one looked back.

In the morning he telephoned her and she did not answer, as though she knew her father was calling. That evening Glasser went once more to the apartment house and waited across the street. He had considered going in and asking the doorman for her apartment number but was ashamed to.

"Please, give me the number of my daughter, Luci Glasser, the prostitute."

At eleven that night Luci came out. From the way she was dressed and made up he was positive he had not been mistaken.

She turned on Forty-eighth Street and walked to Eighth Avenue. Luci sauntered calmly along the avenue. The sidewalks were crowded with silent men and showily dressed young women. Traffic was heavy and there were strong lights everywhere, yet the long street looked dark and evil. Some of the stores, in their spotlight windows, showed pictures of men and women in sexual embrace. The sexton groaned. Luci wore a purple silk sweater with red sequins, almost no skirt, and long black net stockings. She paused for a while on a street corner, apart from a group of girls farther up the block. She would speak to the men passing by, and one or two would stop to speak to her, then she waited again. One man spoke quietly for a while as she listened intently.

Then Luci went into a drugstore to make a telephone call, and when she came out, her father, half dead, was waiting for her at the door. She walked past him.

Incensed, he called her name and she turned in frightened surprise. Under the makeup, false eyelashes, gaudy mouth, her face had turned ashen, eyes anguished.

“Papa, go home,” she cried in fright.

“What did I do to you that you do this to me?”

“It’s not as bad as people think,” Luci said.

“It’s worse, it’s filthy.”

“Not if you don’t think so. I meet lots of people—some are Jewish.”

“A black year on their heads.”

“You live your life, let me live mine.”

“God will curse you, He will rot your flesh.”

“You’re not God,” Luci cried in sudden rage.

“Cocksucker,” the sexton shouted, waving his cane. A policeman approached. Luci ran off. The sexton, to the man’s questions, was inarticulate.

When he sought her again Luci had disappeared. He went to the orange apartment house and the doorman said Miss Glass had moved out; he could not say where. Though Glasser returned several times the doorman always said the same thing. When he telephoned her number he got a tape recording of the operator saying the number had been disconnected.

The sexton walked the streets looking for her, though Fay and Helen begged him not to. He said he must. They asked him why. He wept aloud. He sought her among the streetwalkers on Eighth and Ninth Avenues and on Broadway. Sometimes he went into a small cockroachy hotel and uttered her name, but nobody knew her.

Late one October night he saw her on Third Avenue near Twenty-third Street. Luci was standing in mid-block near the curb, and though it was a cold night she was not wearing a coat. She had on a heavy white sweater and a mirrored leather miniskirt. A round two-inch mirror in a metal holder was sewn onto the back of the skirt, above her plump thighs, and it bounced on her buttocks as she walked.

Glasser crossed the street and waited in silence through her alarm of recognition.

“Lucille,” he begged her, “come home with your father. We won’t tell anybody. Your room is waiting.”

She laughed angrily. She had gained weight. When he attempted to follow her she called him dirty names. He hobbled across the street and waited in an unlit doorway.

Luci walked along the block and when a man approached, she spoke to him. Sometimes the man stopped to speak to her. Then they would go together to a run-down, dark, squat hotel on a side street nearby, and a half hour later she returned to Third Avenue, standing between Twenty-third and -second, or higher up the avenue, near Twenty-sixth.

The sexton follows her and waits on the other side of the street by a bare-branched tree. She knows he is there. He He waits. He counts the number of her performances. He punishes by his presence. He calls down God’s wrath on the prostitute and her blind father.