

The Boarder
by Isaac Bashevis Singer

Outside, there was the rumbling of a truck that wouldn't start. It rattled and gasped as if its metal soul were about to expire. Children were playing baseball and screaming wildly. The air coming through the open window smelled of gasoline, scallions, and the beginning of summer. Around the ceiling light, a swarm of flies eddied, droning monotonously. Through the window, hung with Dutch curtains, a butterfly flew in and landed on the table. It stood motionless, its wings together, waiting with the fatalistic calm of a creature that lives for only a short time. Reb Berish Zhichliner, in prayer shawl and phylacteries, had already finished his proper prayers, but he kept on reciting additional supplications, which are repeated only by the very pious and by those who have a lot of time.

Reb Berish's beard was white, and his face was red. He had bushy brows, and double bags hanging under his eyes. It had been only two years since he retired from his business in fabric remnants. For forty years, he'd had a pushcart on the Lower East Side, and also here in Williamsburg. His wife, his son, and a daughter had died during this time. Another daughter was living with a Gentile husband somewhere in California. Nothing was left to Reb Berish except his pension, a grave site in the cemetery that belonged to the Sochaczew Society, and an apartment on Clymer Street. In order not to live alone, he'd taken in a refugee as a boarder, a man who'd come back from the camps, spent time in Soviet Russia, and then wandered through half the world. His name was Morris Melnik. He contributed fifteen dollars a month toward the rent. At the moment, he was still sleeping in his room, which had a window that gave onto a fire escape.

Reb Berish had taken him in more out of pity than for the fifteen dollars. Morris Melnik had lost everything: his parents, his sisters and brothers,

his wife, and his child. Still, Reb Berish regretted ever having opened his home. Melnik was a mocker and an unbeliever, a lecher, a contrary creature. He tried monkey business with the neighborhood women. He mixed meat and milk dishes. He came home at two o'clock in the morning and slept until a little before noon. He didn't pray, didn't observe the Sabbath. Just as Reb Berish began to recite the Thirteen Principles of Faith, Melnik entered the room: a little man whose face was yellowed as if by jaundice and whose head bore only a few stray strands of black and gray hair. He wore red pajamas and shabby slippers. He hadn't yet shaved, and there were black shadows on his sunken cheeks. He had a pointed chin, a thin bony nose. His small eyes were hidden behind long, needle-like eyebrows. He reminded Reb Berish of a hedgehog. When he opened his mouth, he revealed a line of teeth studded with gold fillings. He said, "Are you still praying, Reb Berish?"

"Well . . ."

"To whom are you praying? To the God who made Hitler and gave him the strength to kill six million Jews? Or perhaps to the God who created Stalin and let him liquidate another ten million victims? Really, Reb Berish, you're not going to bribe the Lord of the Universe with a pair of phylacteries. He's a first-class son of a bitch and a terrible anti-Semite."

"*Pfui.*" Reb Berish grimaced. "Go away."

"How long will we keep cringing before Him and singing Psalms?" Melnik continued. "I've seen with my very own eyes how they threw a Jew with a prayer shawl and phylacteries into a ditch full of shit. Literally."

Reb Berish's red face turned even redder. He was in a hurry to finish the Articles of the Creed so that he could answer his lodger. He murmured, "I believe in perfect faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at a time when it shall please the Creator. Blessed be His name, and exalted be the remembrance of Him forever and ever." He closed the prayer book but left his index finger inside, so that he could open it again at the

same spot after he'd given Melnik a proper answer. He sighed and grumbled.

“Will you stop blaspheming? I don't tell you how to behave, and don't you try to teach me. No matter what you've seen, the Almighty is still a merciful God. We don't know His ways. If we knew Him, we'd be like Him. Free choice was granted to us, and that's that. Those who threw that Jew into the filth will never leave Gehenna, and his blessed soul will rest at the Throne of Glory.”

“Nonsense. Empty words. Where is the soul? There is no soul, Reb Berish. It was invented by idlers in the study house. In Russia, there was a Professor Pavlov, and he was the greatest of them all. A real big shot, as they say in America. He cut out the brains of a dog and he found no soul there. A brain is a machine, just like in an automat. You throw in three nickels and out comes a sandwich. The machine doesn't need your nickels. You can put in wooden slugs. It was just made that way, and nothing else.”

“You compare a saintly man to a dog or an automat. You should be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Melnik. A machine is a machine, and man is created in the image of God.”

“The image of God! I sat in the Moscow prison in a cell with the Rabbi of Bludnov. For seven weeks, we sat together, and in all that time he did one thing: studied the Torah. He suffered from hemorrhoids, and when he sat on the chamber pot he bled like an animal. In the middle of the night, they'd wake him up and take him for an interrogation. I could hear him screaming, and when he returned he couldn't walk anymore. They pushed him into the cell, and he fell down on the floor. We revived him as best we could. After seven weeks of torture, they took him out one night to be shot.”

“Well, so did he protest about God's injustice?”

“No, he remained a believer until his last breath.”

Reb Berish winced and rubbed his forehead. “When free choice is given, free choice is given. It means that the wicked have the power to do wickedness as they please. Does the government here on earth not give free choice? Every gangster can kill, steal, rob until he’s caught. But when he’s caught he gets his due.”

“The Nazis didn’t get their due, Reb Berish. I was in Munich after the war. They were all sitting in a huge beer hall, red and fat like pigs, swilling beer and singing Nazi songs with wild voices. They boasted openly about how many Jews they’d burned, gassed, buried alive, and about how many Jewish girls they’d raped. You should have heard their laughter. America was sending them billions of dollars, and they poured the Bayerisches down their gullets and gobbled their *Weisswurst*. Their paunches almost burst with pleasure. When I entered, and they recognized that I was a Jew, they became like beasts. They wanted to finish me off right on the spot.”

“Why did you go into such a place?”

“I had a German girlfriend there. I smuggled gold and she hid it. We worked, as they say, fifty-fifty. And we had another business besides.”

“*Pfui*, you’re no better than they are.”

“What could I do? The Jewish girls were all sick and bitter. When you lay down with them, they did nothing but complain until your ears popped. All they wanted was to get married and settle down. But not me. With a German girl, you got what you wanted, without any fuss. For a pack of American cigarettes, you could have had Himmler’s widow.”

“Do me a favor and keep quiet. If you’re not going to let me pray in peace, be so good as to move out of the house. We’re not a good match.”

“Don’t scold me, Reb Berish. As far as I’m concerned, you can pray from morning until evening. Keep on flattering God, tell Him how great

He is, how good, how merciful, and He'll prepare a second Hitler for you. They're already preparing. America's sending them airplanes. One day they'll give them the atomic bomb, too. On your taxes, Reb Berish, Germany is being rearmed. This is the truth."

Reb Berish clutched his beard. "This is not the whole truth yet. Please, go back to your room, and let me continue with my prayers."

"Continue, continue. The one who begrudges you should grow a horn on his belly."

After prayers, Reb Berish began to rummage around the kitchen and prepare breakfast. Actually, it was a combination of breakfast and lunch, because Reb Berish ate only two meals a day. He rummaged and sighed. The doctor had forbidden everything he liked: salt, pepper, sauerkraut, radishes, mustard, herring, pickles, even butter and sour cream. What was left? Toast with farmer's cheese and a cup of weak tea. He could have eaten spinach or cauliflower, but he would never get used to that kind of food. Even the fruit in America didn't have the old home taste. The truth was that since his wife, Feige Malke, died, everything had lost its taste and its sense: going to bed, getting up in the morning, receiving a check from Uncle Sam, even the Sabbaths and holy days. Reb Berish had many times made up his mind not to have any more conversations with his boarder, the charlatan who had gone through hell and remained no good. But sitting alone at the table was also hard. Somehow this grumbling boarder's harsh words took the place of onion, horseradish, garlic, or a glass of vodka. They made his heart beat faster, heated the blood in his veins. Reb Berish called out, "Hey, Mr. Melnik, come and have a cup of tea."

Melnik immediately appeared at the door. He'd combed the hair over his bald spot and smeared it with pomade. He wore a pink shirt, a yellow tie with black dots, a pair of khaki Army pants, and Army shoes that one could buy cheaply. On the ring finger of his left hand, he wore a signet ring with a ruby, and around his wrist a watch with a gold band. In his

shirt pocket, he had three fountain pens and two pencils with silver tops. After shaving and taking a bath, he seemed somehow younger. The bags under his eyes had flattened out. His eyes had become clearer. Reb Berish looked at him in amazement.

“Well, have something.”

“What shall I have? If you had prepared such a table in the camps, it would have been something. I was there when they killed a Jew because he stole a potato. He was a relative of mine. There was a fellow in our camp who had a store. You can imagine what a store this was. He kept his merchandise in the bunk where he slept. If he had been caught, he would have been shot immediately. He would have been lucky if they shot him. They probably would have tortured him. But business is business. I’ve seen Jews martyred for business. So it was in the ghettos, and so it was in Russia. Because of a few spools of thread and a dozen needles, people were condemned to death. In the camps, such a merchant kept a few leaves of cabbage, some potato peels, and some wilted radishes: that was his trade. But hunger is a bitter thing. In the Russian camps, people got sick with scurvy, from a lack of vitamins. One dies from these sicknesses quite suddenly. I saw it happen once.”

“Wait a moment, Mr. Melnik. Better take a slice of bread with cheese. Have some cherries.”

“Thank you. I was lying on my bunk one winter night, somewhere in a camp in Kazakhstan, talking with my neighbor on the bunk across from me. It was so cold the water in the pail froze. We covered ourselves with all our rags. Outside, the frost was terrible. We were hungry, too, but we talked. What did we talk about? About wives and children who stayed with the Germans, and about the good old times, and what we would do when peace came again. We were going to do only one thing—eat. We pictured all the roasts and cakes we’d put away, the chicken soup with noodles, the stuffed derma, the onions in chicken fat, the schnitzels and cutlets. For a while, it was quiet. Then I asked my neighbor something, but he didn’t answer. Did he fall asleep? I asked myself. And I listened.

Usually, he snored, because he had polyps in his nose, but now he was strangely quiet. I slid down the bunk to take a look. The man was dead. One second he was talking, the next he was dead.”

“Terrible, terrible.”

“What are you crying for? This is humanity, the crown of creation. My theory is that all men are Nazis. What right do we have to slaughter a calf and eat it? The one with the knife slaughters. It’s just as Hitler believed: might is right. As for God, He’s a Nazi to end all Nazis. The arch-Hitlerite. He has more power than anybody else, so He tortures everybody. You see, I’m not an unbeliever. There is a Gehenna, there is. Why should people suffer only on earth? They’re tortured in the hereafter, too. God has His own Treblinka, with devils, hobgoblins, demons, angels of death. They burn the poor sinners or hang them by their tongues or by their breasts. All the details are there in ‘The Rod of Punishment.’ But there’s no paradise. When it comes to death, I become a real heretic.”

Reb Berish stopped chewing. “Why would the Creator of the world be so cruel?”

“Why wouldn’t He be? He’s got the big stick, so He uses it. He’s given us a Torah, which nobody can keep. Each little rabbi adds new laws, and if you break one of these laws you’re reincarnated as a snake. The Christians maintain that God could not redeem mankind until He let His only son die on the Cross. One way or another, all He demands is blood.”

“Well, better eat something. Too much talk only leads to iniquity.”

“I’m eating. What else am I doing? The only thing that’s left for me is eating. The women here in America are no good. The truth is that there are no more good women anywhere. In my time, there were still some faithful wives. Nowadays, that species has disappeared altogether. If you had seen what I saw, your white beard would have turned black again.”

“I don’t want to hear about it.”

“I’m not talking about the camps. There a woman couldn’t help herself. When one is afraid for one’s life, one will do anything. I once heard a mother persuading her daughter to give herself to a scabby Ukrainian man because he could put more groats in her bowl of soup. She actually did it, and, when the Nazis learned about it, all three of them were murdered. Such events did not leave much of an impression—we became accustomed to them. But I witnessed even worse things. After we were freed, nobody was forced anymore, but they still wallowed in filth. We slept three families to a room. In one corner, a woman fornicated with a peasant, and in the other corner her sister did the same. They lost all sense of shame. They deloused themselves together and they fornicated together. One liked to do it by candlelight.”

“Will you keep quiet or not? I’m warning you for the last time.”

“Are you afraid of the truth?”

“This is not the truth. Sin is like froth. When you pour beer into a glass, you imagine that it’s full, but two-thirds of it is froth. When the froth dissolves, only a third of the glass is left. The same thing is true of transgressions. They burst like bubbles.”

“Well said. Is this your own thought?”

“I heard it from our rabbi.”

A nice saying, but I say that everything is filth. Nothing is real but filth. Your rabbi is also filth. Behind his beard and his sidelocks and the fringed garment is a man who loves females, and if he weren’t married to a good-looking woman he would run to whores.”

“Rascal! Betrayer of Israel!”

“Rascal, shmascal. I don’t say that I’m a saint. I do anything I can. So what do you want from me? By the way, why don’t you remarry?”

You're still healthy. I wouldn't leave you alone with a Gentile woman for a minute."

Reb Berish groaned. He set a fist on the table. With his other hand, he picked the crumbs from his beard. "Nonsense! You say the meanest things about women, but my Feige Malke, peace be with her, was a pious woman. She wouldn't even look at another man. She was just like my mother and my grandmother. What do you know, young man, about the modesty of women in the old times? In Warsaw, the murderers hanged an important woman, the wife of an elder, a saintly person. While they were dragging her to the gallows, she was afraid that her dress might rise above her knees and expose her to shame. So she put a pin into her dress, through her leg, and this was the way they hanged her."

"Were you there?"

"Others were there. My own aunt Deborah was a widow at twenty-three, and she never married again. They proposed her to a very wealthy man, but she said, 'I want to come pure to my Zorach in paradise.' "

"And you believe that she's there with him?"

"Yes, I do."

"Zorach isn't there, and she isn't there, either. Nothing remains of them but a heap of dust. She suffered in vain—this is what Morris Melnik says. In our town, there was a rich man, Reb Zadok, a scholar. He died and left his widow a great fortune. Exactly half a year later, she married an ignorant butcher named Chazkele Scab. She'd fallen in love with him at the butcher's block."

"Well, everything's possible."

"Everything's rotten."

Morris Melnik fell silent. He lifted a teaspoon and tried to balance it on the rim of a plate. The spoon shook, tipping toward the handle end, and Morris Melnik quickly poured a little salt into the bowl of the spoon to give it equilibrium. He bit his lower lip and one of his eyes opened wide. The other he shut, as if in a wink. He seemed to have taken it as an omen that the way the spoon fell would indicate how things really stood in the world.

Reb Berish shook his head, as if in agreement with an old truth, which, although one may doubt it, still makes one despair. He lifted a tuft of his beard and studied it, as though to convince himself that it was already white. Then he said, “When a worm is buried in garbage, how can it know that there are mansions, palaces, gardens? There’s a proverb: A bedbug in the wall doesn’t go to a ball. You keep on babbling about the earth, but there’s a heaven with stars, constellations, emanations. There are angels, seraphim, cherubim, holy chariots. In comparison with them, our little world is a piece of dust, or even less. There are some sacred sparks, but they’re hidden. Even in the mud you sometimes find a diamond. Amid all this filth, there is a Baal Shem, a Rabbi Elimelech, a Berditchever, a Kotzker. Where did they come from? My own grandfather Reb Chaim was a saint. For fifty years, he fasted each Monday and Thursday. He got up every midnight to lament the destruction of the temple, in summer as well as in winter. He gave away his last penny for charity. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Reb Berish began to pound his chest, which was covered with a fringed garment. His face became redder, his beard trembled. Then he said, “You are misled, Mr. Melnik. However, a man cannot be judged in his moments of suffering. I’m going to say grace.”

He took a glass, poured some water on his hands, and wiped them on the tablecloth. He began to recite aloud.

“Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who feedest the whole world with Thy Goodness, with Grace, with Loving Kindness . . .”

In that moment, the little spoon tipped into the plate. Morris Melnik's yellow eyes filled with laughter. He rose and went to the door. He said to himself, "Well, I guess I'll go see what the women are doing." ♦

(Translated, from the Yiddish, by the author.)