

The Son From America (by Isaac Bashevis Singer)

The village of Lentshin was tiny. It was surrounded by little huts with thatched roofs. Between the huts there were fields, where the owners planted vegetables or pastured their goats.

In the smallest of these huts lived old Berl, a man in his eighties, and his wife Berlcha. Old Berl was one of the Jews driven from Russia who had settled in Poland. He was short, broad-shouldered, and had a small white beard, and in summer and winter he wore a sheepskin hat, a padded cotton jacket, and stout boots. He had a half acre of field, a cow, a goat, and chickens.

The couple had a son, Samuel, who had gone to America forty years ago. It was said in Lentshin that he became a millionaire there. Every month, the Lentshin letter carrier brought old Berl a money order and a letter that no one could read because many of the words were English. How much money Samuel sent his parents remained a secret. They never seemed to use the money. What for? The garden, the cow, and the goat provided most of their needs.

No one cared to know where Berl kept the money that his son sent him. The hut consisted of one room, which contained all their belongings: the table, the shelf for meat, the shelf for milk foods, the two beds, and the clay oven. Sometimes the chickens roosted in the woodshed and sometimes, when it was cold, in a coop near the oven. The goat, too, found shelter inside when the weather was bad. The more prosperous villagers had kerosene lamps, but Berl and his wife did not believe in new gadgets. Only for the Sabbath would Berlcha buy candles at the store. In summer, the couple got up at sunrise and retired with the chickens. In the long winter evenings, Berlcha spun flax and Berl sat beside her in the silence of those who enjoy their rest.

Once in a while when Berl came home from the synagogue, he brought news to his wife. In Warsaw there were strikers who demanded that the czar abdicate. Somebody by the name of Dr. Herzl* had come up with the idea that Jews should settle again in Palestine. Berlcha listened and shook her head. Her face was yellowish and wrinkled like a cabbage leaf. She was half deaf. Berl had to repeat each word he said to her.

Here in Lentshin nothing happened except usual events: a cow gave birth to a calf, a young couple got married. Actually, Lentshin had become a village with few young people. The young men left for Zakroczyń, for Warsaw, and sometimes for the United States. Like Samuel, they sent letters and photographs in which the men wore top hats and the women fancy dresses.

Berl and Berlcha also received such photographs. But their eyes were failing and neither he nor she had glasses. They could barely make out the pictures. Samuel had sons and daughters—and grandchildren. Their names were so strange that Berl and Berlcha could never remember them. But what difference do names make? America was on the other side of the ocean, at the edge of the world. A talmud* teacher who came to Lentshin had said that Americans walked with their heads down and their feet up. Berl and Berlcha could not grasp this. How was it possible? But since the teacher said so it must be true.

One Friday morning, when Berlcha was kneading the dough for the Sabbath loaves, the door opened and a nobleman entered. He was so tall that he had to bend down to get through the door. He was followed by the coachman who carried two leather suitcases. In astonishment Berlcha raised her eyes.

The nobleman looked around and said to the coachman in Yiddish, "Here it is." He took out a silver ruble and paid him. Then he said, "You can go now."

When the coachman closed the door, the nobleman said, "Mother, it's me, your son Samuel-Sam."

Berlcha heard the words and her legs grew numb. The nobleman hugged her, kissed her forehead, both her cheeks, and Berlcha began to cackle like a hen, "My son!" At that moment Berl came in from the woodshed, his arms piled with logs. The goat followed him. When he saw a nobleman kissing his wife, Berl dropped the wood and exclaimed, "What is this?"

The nobleman let go of Berlcha and embraced Berl. "Father! "

For a long time Berl was unable to utter a sound. Then he asked, "Are you Samuel?"

"Yes, Father, I am Samuel. "

"Well, peace be with you. " Berl grasped his son's hand. He was still not sure that he was not being fooled. Samuel wasn't as tall and heavy as this man, but then Berl reminded himself that Samuel was only fifteen years old when he had left home. Berl asked, "Why didn't you let us know that you were coming?"

"Didn't you receive my cable?" Samuel asked.

Berl did not know what a cable was.

Berlcha had scraped the dough from her hands and enfolded her son.

"I never thought I could live to see this. Now, I am happy to die," Berlcha said. Berl was amazed. These were just the words he could have said earlier. After a while Berl came to himself and said, "Pescha, you will have to make a double Sabbath pudding in addition to the stew."

It was years since Berl had called Berlcha by her given name. Only now did Berlcha begin to cry. Yellow tears ran from her eyes, and everything became dim. Then she called out, "It's Friday—I have to prepare for the Sabbath." Yes, she had to knead the dough for the loaves. With such a guest, she had to make a larger Sabbath stew. The winter day is short and she must hurry.

Her son understood what was worrying her, because he said, "Mother, I will help you."

The nobleman took off his jacket and remained in his vest, on which hung a solidgold-watch chain. H rolled up his sleeves. "Mother, I was a baker for many years in New York," he said, and he began to knead the dough.

Berlcha wept for joy. Her strength left her, and she slumped onto the bed.

Berl said, "Women will always be women." And he went to the shed to get more wood. The goat sat down near the oven; she gazed with surprise at this strange man.

The neighbors had heard the good news that Berl's son had arrived from America and they came to greet him. The women began to help Berlcha prepare for the Sabbath. Some laughed, some cried. The room was full of people, as at a wedding. After Berlcha lit the candles, father and son went to the little synagogue across the street. A new snow had fallen. The son took large steps, but Berl warned him, "Slow down."

In the synagogue the Jews sang their prayers. All the time, the snow outside kept falling. When Berl and Samuel left the Holy Place, the village was unrecognizable. Everything was covered in snow. One could see only the contours of the roofs and the candles in the windows. Samuel said, "Nothing has changed here."

Berlcha had prepared fish, chicken soup with rice, meat, carrot stew. The family ate and drank, and when it grew quiet for a while one could hear the chirping of the house cricket.

After the final prayer Samuel asked, "Father, what did you do with all the money I sent you?"

Berl raised his white brows. "It's here."

"Didn't you put it in a bank?"

"There is no bank in Lentshin."

"Where do you keep it?"

Berl hesitated. "One is not allowed to touch money on the Sabbath, but I will show you." He crouched beside the bed and began to shove something heavy. A boot appeared. Its top was stuffed with straw. Berl removed the straw and the son saw that the boot was full of gold coins. He lifted it.

"Father, this is a treasure!" he called out.

"Well."

"Why didn't you spend it?"

"On what? Thank God, we have everything."

"Why didn't you travel somewhere?"

"Where to? This is our home."

The son asked one question after the other, but Berl's answer was always the same: They had everything. The garden, the cow, the goat, the chickens provided them with all they needed. The son said, "If thieves knew about this, your lives wouldn't be safe."

"There are no thieves here."

"What will happen to the money?"

"You take it."

Slowly, Berl and Berlcha grew accustomed to their son and his American Yiddish. Berlcha could hear him better now. She even recognized his voice. He was saying, "Perhaps we should build a larger synagogue."

"The synagogue is big enough," Berl replied.

"Perhaps a home for old people."

"No one sleeps in the street."

The next day after the Sabbath meal was eaten, Berl and Berlcha lay down for a nap. They soon began to snore. The goat, too, dozed off. The son put on his cloak and his hat and went for a walk. He strode with his long legs across the marketplace. He stretched out a hand and touched a roof. He had a desire to talk to someone, but it seemed that the whole of Lentshin was asleep.

Samuel returned home. Dusk had fallen. Berl went to the synagogue for the evening prayers and the son remained with his mother.

In the twilight Samuel put his hand into his jacket pocket and touched his checkbook, his letters of credit. He had come here with big plans. He had a suitcase filled with presents for his parents. He wanted to help the village. He brought not only his own money but funds from the Lentshin Society in New York. But this village needed nothing. From the synagogue one could hear people chanting. The cricket, silent all day, started again its chirping. Berlcha began to sway and utter holy rhymes inherited from mothers and grandmothers.