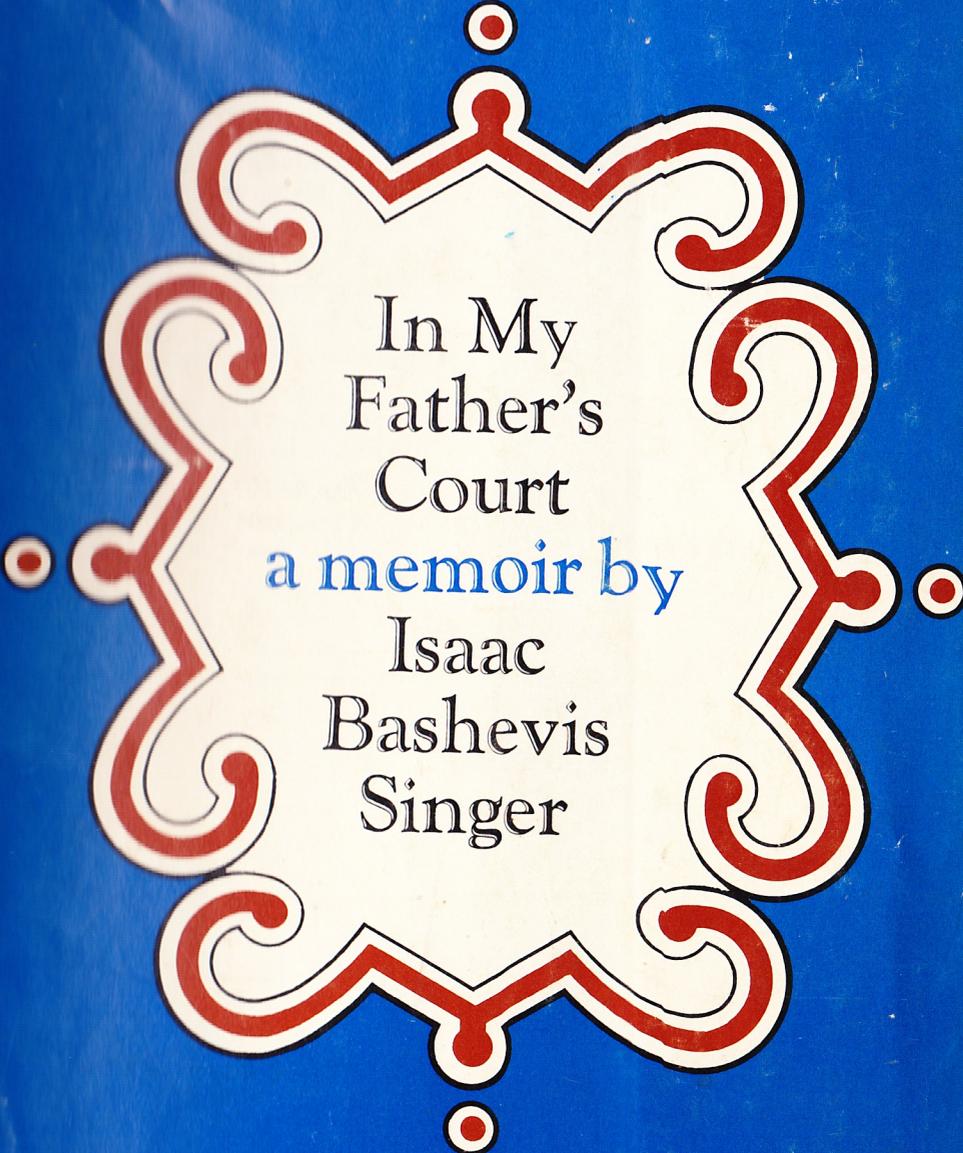


In My Father's Court • Singer • F.S.G.



In My
Father's
Court
a memoir by
Isaac
Bashevis
Singer

THE
SACRIFICE

THERE ARE in this world some very strange individuals whose thoughts are even stranger than they are.

In our house in Warsaw—No. 10 Krochmalna Street—and sharing our hallway, there lived an elderly couple. They were simple people. He was an artisan, or perhaps a peddler, and their children were all married. Yet the neighbors said that, despite their advanced years, these two were still in love. Every Sabbath afternoon, after the *cholent*, they would go for a walk arm in arm. In the grocery, at the butcher's—wherever she shopped—she spoke only of *him*: “*He* likes beans . . . *he* likes a good piece of beef . . . *he* likes veal . . .” There are women like that who never stop talking about their husbands. He, in turn, also would say at every opportunity, “My wife.”

My mother, daughter of generations of Rabbis, frowned upon the couple. To her such behavior was a sign of commonness.

But, after all, love—especially between an elderly couple—cannot be dismissed so easily.

Suddenly there was a rumor that shocked everyone: the old people were going to be divorced!

Krochmalna Street was in an uproar. What did this mean? How could it be? Young women wrung their hands: "Mamma, I'm going to be ill! I feel faint!" Older women proclaimed: "It is the end of the world." The angry ones cursed all men: "Well now, aren't men worse than beasts?" Soon the street was aroused by an even more outrageous report: they were getting the divorce so that the old sinner could marry a young girl. You may well imagine the curses that were heaped upon the old man—a burning in his belly, a pain in his black heart, a fire in his bowels, a broken arm and leg, a plague, the judgment of heaven upon him! The womenfolk spared no curse and prophesied that he would not live to see his wedding day, the old billy goat—instead of a wedding canopy he would find a black coffin.

In our home, in the meantime, the truth, the real truth, came to light.

The old woman herself came to my mother and spoke to her in such a manner that my mother's pale face flushed with embarrassment. Although she tried to chase me away so that I would not be able to hear, I did listen, for I was afire with curiosity. The woman swore to my mother that she loved her husband more than anything in the world.

"Dear lady," she argued, "I would gladly give my life to save a fingernail of his. I am, woe is me, an old woman—a broken shard—but he, he is still a man. He needs a wife. Why should he be burdened with me? As long as the children were still at home, one had to be careful. People would gossip. But now what they say matters no more to me than the cat's meow. I no longer need a husband, but he—may he be well—is like a young man. He can still have children. And now he has found a girl who wants him. She is past thirty; the time has come for her, too, to hear the wedding music play. Besides, she is an orphan

and works for others as a maid; she will be good to him. With her he will enjoy life. As for me, I am provided for. He will give me enough to live on, and I do a little peddling on the side. What do I need at my age? I only want to see *him* happy. And he promised me that—after a hundred and twenty years, when the time comes—I will lie next to him in the cemetery. In the other world I will again be his wife. I will be his footstool in Paradise. It has all been settled."

The woman had come, quite simply, to ask my father to arrange the divorce and then perform the wedding.

My mother tried to dissuade her. Like the other women, my mother saw in this affair an affront to all womankind. If all old men were to start divorcing their wives and marrying young girls, the world would be in a fine state. Mother said that the whole idea was clearly the work of the Evil One, and that such love is an impure thing. She even quoted one of the books on ethics. But this simple woman, too, could cite Scripture. She reminded my mother of how Rachel and Leah had given their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, to Jacob as concubines.

Though I was a mere boy, I was not at all indifferent to this affair. I wanted it to come off. First of all, I loved to be present at a divorce. Second, at weddings I always got a piece of sponge cake and a sip of brandy or wine. And third, when Father earned some money, I would be given a few groschen to buy sweets. And then, after all, I was a *man*. . . .

When my mother saw that she could do nothing with the woman, she sent her in to my father, who immediately began to discuss the law. He warned her that after the divorce her former husband would be as a total stranger to her. She would not be allowed to remain under the same roof with him. She would not be permitted to speak with him. Was she aware of this, or had she imagined that she could continue to be with him? The woman replied that she knew the laws, but that she was thinking of *him*, not of herself. For him she was ready to

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make any sacrifice, even give her life. Father said he would give her an answer. Let her come back the next day.

After the woman left, Mother went into the study and began to argue with my father that she did not want him to earn money by such means. The old man, she said, was a woman-chaser, a goat, a vulgar person, a lecher. She said that if he were to grant this divorce and perform the marriage, the entire community would be aroused against him. Father left to go to his Hasidic study house, to talk the matter over with sensible men. There, too, a heated argument took place, but the final conclusion was that since both parties were in agreement, no one had the right to interfere. One scholar even quoted the verse: "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand. . . ." According to the Gemara, this means that even an elderly man is still obligated to "be fruitful and multiply."

The next morning, when the old woman returned, this time with her husband, my father began to cross-examine her. I was sent out of the study. Father spoke gruffly, sometimes slowly and sometimes faster, sometimes gently and sometimes in anger. I stood behind the door, but could hear little. I was afraid that any minute now Father would burst out with: "Scoundrels, remember that He has not yet abandoned His world to the rule of chaos!" and chase them out, as was his custom with those who defied the law. But an hour passed and the two were still inside. The old man spoke slowly, in a broken voice. The woman pleaded. Her voice became softer and ever softer. I sensed that she was convincing my father. She whispered intimate secrets to him, such as a man seldom hears from the lips of a woman, such as are only rarely discussed in the heavy tomes of the Responsa. When husband and wife left the study, they looked happy. The old man wiped the sweat off his face with his kerchief. The woman's eyes glowed as on the night after

Yom Kippur, when one feels assured that the prayers for a happy year have been answered. . . .

During the weeks that passed between that day and the wedding, Krochmalna Street gaped and wondered. The community was divided into two parties. The affair was discussed everywhere: in the grocery and at the butcher's, at the fish tubs in Yanash's bazaar and in the fruit shops behind the markets; in the synagogues of the unlearned and in the Hasidic study houses where disciples gathered to tell of the miracles wrought by *their* Wonder Rabbi and to disparage the claims of all rivals.

Most excited, however, were the women. The old wife herself seemed to have lost all shame. She went around praising her husband's bride to the skies, brought presents for the "couple," busied herself with the wedding preparations as though she were the girl's mother. The other women scorned or pitied her. "Heaven help us—it just goes to show how an old woman can lose her mind!" All clung to the same idea: the old woman was crazy, and the husband, the old sinner, wanted to get rid of her. All mocked her, all were outraged, all were puzzled. All asked the same question: "How can such things be?" And the only answer was: "Well, you see . . ."

Had there been any young hooligans in the neighborhood, they might have molested the old couple or the bride, but our neighbors were quiet people. The husband himself was a good-natured man with a white beard and the mild eyes of the very old. He continued to come to the synagogue regularly. He wound the leather straps of his phylacteries around his arm with a trembling hand. The youngsters made fun of him, but he never showed anger. He touched the ritual fringes of his prayer shawl to his eyes. He kissed the phylactery that is worn on the forehead, and then that which is placed on the arm. A Jew remains a Jew, even when extraordinary events befall him. The truth was that it was not he who had talked his wife into this. On the contrary, it had all been her idea, he confided to my father. She had simply overwhelmed him. The girl was a poor

orphan. The old woman herself went about happy, hopeful, smiling. Her eyes shone with a weird joy.

At the same time that husband and wife were preparing for the divorce and the subsequent wedding, they also purchased a cemetery plot. They invited friends there, to the place of eternal rest, and served cake and brandy. All was mixed up together: life, death, lust, boundless loyalty, and love. The old woman announced that when *his* wife would give birth she, the ex-wife, would care for the child because the young woman would have to help earn a living. Women who heard such talk spat out: "God help us! Heaven preserve us! May all evil dreams come upon them!" Others openly declared that these were the doings of the devil, of Satan himself. And yet there was something else. Although all were wholeheartedly against the marriage, they were eager for it to take place as quickly as possible. The entire street had been infected by a fever. Here life was presenting a drama more exciting than those one read about in the papers or saw in a theater.

The divorce took place in our home. Two old people who had loved each other with a great love were now divorced. The scribe wrote out the document with his goose quill and wiped the ink on his skullcap. Every once in a while he would mumble something. His green eyes threw out sparks. Who knows? Perhaps he was thinking of his own "better half"? . . . The witnesses signed. The old man sat there, bewildered, his eyes veiled by his brushlike white brows. His beard lay flat against his chest. It was clear that he, the chief protagonist, was as perplexed as everyone else. This idea had not been born in *his* head. From time to time he took a snuff of tobacco to relieve his dejection. Occasionally he would glance at his wife, who sat on the bench. Usually the participants in a divorce wear modest, even shabby, clothes, but the old woman had adorned herself with her holiday bonnet and a Turkish shawl. She replied to his

gaze with a radiant look. Her eyes were simply sparkling with fire. "*Mazel tov!* See, I do everything for you, for you! I sacrifice myself for you, I sacrifice myself. Accept this offering graciously, my lord and master. . . . If only I could, I would bare my throat to the Reaper's scythe for you. . . ."

My mother paced impatiently up and down the kitchen. Her matron's wig was awry. An angry flame burned in her eyes. I entered the kitchen and asked for something to eat, but she exclaimed in vexation: "Get out! Get out! Don't grab things from the pot!"

Even though I was only a small boy and her own son, I was at that moment for her a member of the despicable male sex.

I stood by while the old woman held out her wrinkled hands and the old man placed the writ of divorcement in them. My father then gave the customary instructions: that the woman may not remarry immediately but must wait for three months.

The old one with her toothless gums began to laugh. What an idea! She, thinking of remarrying?

I do not remember how much later it was, but I know that eventually the wedding also took place in my father's study. Under the canopy stood an old man and a stout young woman. Four men held the rods of the canopy. Father gave the groom and bride a sip of wine. Everyone said, "*Mazel tov!*" and drank brandy with sponge cake. Then, in another room, a meal was served. The cooking and all the preparations had been done by the first wife. People said that the old woman had had underclothes, slips, and skirts sewn for the bride, for the girl had no proper clothes to wear. So many guests came for the meal that all our rooms were filled and people were standing out in the hallway.

For some time longer Krochmalna Street continued to bubble and boil. People would run after the old man and his new wife and stare at them as though they were performing magicians or

Chinese with pigtails, such as occasionally came to our street to sell paper flowers. But after a while they found other things to talk about. After all, what is so unusual about an old woman losing her senses? Or an old man marrying a cook? People began to say that the first wife already regretted what she had done. The new wife did not give birth. The old man fell ill.

I regret, dear reader, that I cannot report a dramatic climax. Like everyone else, I too eventually lost interest. I only remember that the old man died not long after the wedding, and both women cried at the funeral. Then the old wife also breathed her last in some garret room. Even the fire of the Evil Inclination does not burn forever.

Whether husband and wife finally were reunited in Eden, and whether she became his footstool there, I cannot say. When you yourself arrive there—after a hundred and twenty years—ask for the mansion wherein dwell the former inhabitants of Krochmalna Street.

WHY THE GEESE SHRIEKED

IN OUR HOME there was always talk about spirits of the dead that possess the bodies of the living, souls reincarnated as animals, houses inhabited by hobgoblins, cellars haunted by demons. My father spoke of these things, first of all because he was interested in them, and second because in a big city children so easily go astray. They go everywhere, see everything, read profane books. It is necessary to remind them from time to time that there are still mysterious forces at work in the world.

One day he told us a story that is found in one of the holy books. If I am not mistaken, the author of that book is Rabbi Eliyahu Graidiker, or one of the other Graidiker sages. The story was about a girl possessed by four demons. It was said that they could actually be seen crawling around in her intestines,