

A Wedding in Brownsville



Isaac Bashevis Singer
Born 1904

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born in Poland. His father and grandfather were rabbis and he was educated at the Warsaw Rabbinical Seminary. In 1935 he emigrated to the US and since then has worked as a regular journalist and columnist for the New York paper, The Jewish Daily Forward. Apart from some early work published in Warsaw, nearly all his fiction has been written in Yiddish for this journal. It is relatively recently that Singer's work has been translated on any scale and that his merit, and the endurance of his writing, have been recognised by a general audience. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1978. His publications include—A Friend of Kafka, The Seance and Other Stories.

The wedding had been a burden to Dr Solomon Margolin from the very beginning. True, it was to take place on a Sunday, but Gretl had been right when she said that was the only evening in the week they could spend together. It always turned out that way. His responsibilities to the community made him give away the evenings that belonged to her. The Zionists had appointed him to a committee; he was a board member of a Jewish scholastic society; he had become co-editor of an academic Jewish quarterly. And though he often referred to himself as an agnostic and even an atheist, nevertheless for years he had been dragging Gretl to Seders at Abraham Mekheles', a *Landsman* from Sencimin. Dr Margolin treated rabbis, refugees, and Jewish writers without charge, supplying them with medicines and, if necessary, a hospital bed. There had

been a time when he had gone regularly to the meetings of the Senciminer Society, had accepted positions in their ranks, and had attended all the parties. Now Abraham Melchior was marrying off his youngest daughter, Sylvia. The minute the invitation arrived, Gretl had announced her decision: she was not going to let herself be carted off to a wedding somewhere out in the wilds of Brownsville. If he, Solomon, wanted to go and gorge himself on all kinds of greasy food, coming home at three o'clock in the morning, that was his prerogative.

Dr Margolin admitted to himself that his wife was right. When would he get a chance to sleep? He had to be at the hospital early Monday morning. Moreover he was on a strict fat-free diet. A wedding like this one would be a feast of poisons. Everything about such celebrations irritated him now: the Anglicised Yiddish, the Yiddishised English, the ear-splitting music and unruly dances. Jewish laws and customs were completely distorted: men who had no regard for Jewishness wore skullcaps; and the reverend rabbis and cantors aped the Christian ministers. Whenever he took Gretl to a wedding or Bar Mitzvah, he was ashamed. Even she, born a Christian, could see that American Judaism was a mess. At least this time he would be spared the trouble of making apologies to her.

Usually after breakfast on Sunday, he and his wife took a walk in Central Park, or, when the weather was mild, went to the Palisades. But today Solomon Margolin lingered in bed. During the years, he had stopped attending functions of the Senciminer Society; meanwhile the town of Sencimin had been destroyed. His family there had been tortured, burned, gassed. Many Senciminers had survived, and, later, come to America from the camps, but most of them were younger people whom he, Solomon, had not known in the old country. Tonight everyone would be there: the Senciminers belonging to the bride's family and the Tereshpolers belonging to the groom's. He knew how they would pester him, reproach him for growing aloof, drop hints that he was a snob. They would address him familiarly, slap him on the back, drag him off to dance.

Well, even so, he had to go to Sylvia's wedding. He had already sent out the present.

The day had dawned grey and dreary as usual. Overnight, a heavy snow had fallen. Solomon Margolin had hoped to make up for the sleep he was going to lose, but unfortunately he had woken even earlier than usual. Finally he got up. He shaved himself meticulously at the bathroom mirror and also trimmed the grey hair at his temples. Today of all days he looked his age: there were bags under his eyes, and his face was lined. Exhaustion showed in his features. His nose appeared longer and sharper than usual; there were deep folds at the sides of his mouth. After breakfast he stretched out on the living-room sofa. From there he could see Gretl, who was standing in the kitchen, ironing—blonde, faded, middle-aged. She had on a skimpy petticoat, and her calves were as muscular as a dancer's. Gretl had been a nurse in the Berlin hospital where he had been a member of the staff. Of her family, one brother, a Nazi, had died of typhus in a Russian prison camp. A second, who was a Communist, had been shot by the Nazis. Her aged father vegetated at the home of his other daughter in Hamburg, and Gretl sent him money regularly. She herself had become almost Jewish in New York. She had made friends with Jewish women, joined Hadassah, learned to cook Jewish dishes. Even her sigh was Jewish. And she lamented continually over the Nazi catastrophe. She had her plot waiting for her beside his in that part of the cemetery that the Senciminers had reserved for themselves.

Dr Margolin yawned, reached for the cigarette that lay in an ashtray on the coffee table beside him, and began to think about himself. His career had gone well. Ostensibly he was a success. He had an office on West End Avenue and wealthy patients. His colleagues respected him, and he was an important figure in Jewish circles in New York. What more could a boy from Sencimin expect? A self-taught man, the son of a poor teacher of Talmud? In person he was tall and quite handsome, and he had always had a way with women. He still pursued them—more than was good for him at his age and with his high blood pressure.

playing an Israeli march that was a hodge-podge of American jazz with Oriental flourishes. Men were dancing with men, women with women, men with women. He saw black skullcaps, white skullcaps, bare heads. Guests kept arriving, pushing their way through the crowd, some still in their hats and coats, munching hors d'oeuvres, drinking schnapps. The hall resounded with stamping, screaming, laughing, clapping. Flash bulbs went off blindingly as the photographers made their rounds. Seemingly to come from nowhere, the bride appeared, briskly sweeping up her train, followed by a retinue of bridesmaids. Dr Margolin knew everybody, and yet knew nobody. People spoke to him, laughed, winked, and waved, and he answered each one with a smile, a nod, a bow. Gradually he threw off all his worries, all his depression. He became half-drunk on the amalgam of odours: flowers, sauerkraut, garlic, perfume, mustard, and that nameless odour that only Senciminers emit. 'Hello, Doctor!' Hello Schlome-David, you don't recognise me, eh? Look, he forgot! There were the encounters, the regrets, the reminiscences of long ago. But after all, weren't we neighbours? You used to come to our house to borrow the Yiddish newspaper! Someone had already kissed him: a badly shaven snout, a mouth reeking of whiskey and rotten teeth. One woman was so convulsed with laughter that she lost an earring. Margolin tried to pick it up, but it had already been trampled underfoot. You don't recognise me, eh? Take a good look! It's Zissel, the son of Chaye Beyle! Why don't you eat something? Why don't you have something to drink? Come over here. Take a glass. What do you want? Whiskey? Brandy? Cognac? Scotch? With soda? With Coca Cola? Take some, it's good. Don't let it stand. So long as you're here, you might as well enjoy yourself. 'My father? He was killed. They were all killed. I'm the only one left of the entire family.' 'Berish the son of Feivish? Starved to death in Russia—they sent him to Kazakhstan. His wife? In Israel. She married a Lithuanian.' 'Sorele? Shot. Together with her children.' 'Yentl? Here at the wedding. She was standing here just a moment ago. There she is, dancing with that tall fellow.' 'Abraham Zilberstein? They burned him in the

synagogue with twenty others. A mound of charcoal was all that was left, coal and ash. 'Thank Schlome! He passed away years ago. You must mean Yente Sholem. He has a delicatessen store right here in Brownsville—married widow whose husband made a fortune in real estate.' 'Lehoyim, Doctor! Lehoyim, Schlome-David! It doesn't offend you that I call you Schlome-David? To me you're still the same Schlome-David, the little boy with the blood side-curbs who recited a whole tractate of the Talmud by heart. You remember, don't you? It seems like only yesterday. Your father, may he rest in peace, was laughing with pride. 'Your brother Chayim? Your Uncle Oyster? They killed everyone, everyone. They took a whole people and wiped them out with German efficiency: *ghettopschutzen!*' 'Have you seen the bride yet? Pretty as a picture, but too much make-up. Imagine, a grandchild of Reb Tzadok of Radom! And her grandfather used to wear two skullcaps, one in front and one in back. Do you see that young woman dancing in the yellow dress? It's Hava's sister—their father was Moshe the candlemaker. Hava herself? Where all the others ended up: Auschwitz. How close we came ourselves! All of us are really dead, if you want to call it that. We were exterminated, wiped out. Even the survivors carry death in the hearts. But it's a wedding, we should be cheerful.' 'Lehoyim, Schlome-David! I would like to congratulate you. Have you a son or daughter to marry off? No? Well, it's better that way. What's the sense of having children if people are such murderers?'

Stop and Think

1. What is the Hippocratic oath?
2. What topic does the merry humor at the wedding inevitably lead to?

It was already time for the ceremony, but someone still had not come. Whether it was the rabbi, the cantor, or one of the in-laws who was missing, nobody seemed able to find out. Abraham Mekheles, the bride's father, rushed around, scowled, waved his hand, whispered in

"We'll get along without it."

"But how am I going to get home?"

"Why go home?" she said, countering with a question.

She smiled with that heavenly smile of hers that was so full of mystery. He took her by the wrist and gazed at her. Suddenly it occurred to him that this could not be his Hazel. She was too young. Probably it was her daughter who was playing along with him, mocking him. For God's sake, I'm completely confused! he thought. He stood bewildered, trying to untangle the years. He couldn't tell her age from her features. Her eyes were deep, dark, and melancholy. She also appeared confused, as if she, too, sensed some discrepancy. The whole thing is a mistake, Margolin told himself. But where exactly was the mistake? And what had happened to the wallet? Could he have left it in the taxi after paying the driver? He tried to remember how much cash he had had in it, but was unable to. I must have had too much to drink. These people have made me drunk—dead drunk! For a long time he stood silent, lost in some dreamless state, more profound than a narcotic trance. Suddenly he remembered the traffic collision he had witnessed on Eastern Parkway. An eerie suspicion came over him: perhaps he had been more than a witness? Perhaps he himself had been the victim of that accident! That man on the stretcher looked strangely familiar. Dr Margolin began to examine himself as though he were one of his own patients. He could find no trace of pulse or breathing. And he felt oddly deflated as if some physical dimension were missing. The sensation of weight, the muscular tension of his limbs, the hidden aches in his bones, all seemed to be gone. It can't be, it can't be, he murmured. Can one die without knowing it? And what will Gretl do?

Stop and Think

1. Who was the woman that Dr Margolin suddenly encountered at the wedding?
2. What were the events that led to his confused state of mind?

He blurted out:

"You're not the same Hazel!"

"No? Then who am I?"

"They shot Hazel!"

"Shot her? Who told you that?"

She seemed both frightened and perplexed. Silently she lowered her head like someone receiving the shock of bad news. Dr Margolin continued to ponder. Apparently Hazel didn't realize her own condition. He had heard of such a state—what was it called? Hovering in the World of Twilight. The Astral Body wandering in semi-consciousness, detached from the flesh, without being able to reach its destination, clinging to the illusions and vanities of the past. But could there be any truth to all this superstition? No, as far as he was concerned, it was nothing but wishful thinking. Besides, this kind of survival would be less than oblivion. I am most probably in a drunken stupor," Dr Margolin decided. All this may be one long hallucination, perhaps a result of food poisoning.

He looked up, and she was still there. He leaned over and whispered in her ear:

"What's the difference? As long as we're together."

"I've been waiting for that all these years."

"Where have you been?"

She didn't answer, and he didn't ask again. He looked around. The empty hall was full, all the seats taken. A ceremonious hush fell over the audience. The music played softly. The cantor intoned the benedictions. With measured steps, Abraham Mekheles led his daughter down the aisle.

(Translated by Chara Fierslein and Elizabeth Pollert)

Understanding the Text

1. What do you understand of Dr Margolin's past? How does it affect his present life?

A Wedding in Brownsville

"A Wedding in Brownsville" has been written by Isaac Bashevis, one of the writers who belongs to Poland. He has shown the impacts of world war on different families. In this short story the life of Dr. Solomon Margolin who is the main character has been shown. In fact he belongs to the "Jewish family" in Europe who were harassed by the Germans during the world war. Many of the families were attacked and tortured. After the life was normal, Dr. Solomon Margolin met with Raizel who belonged to the "Nazi family". He started liking her but everything went wrong when Raizel got married to another young man. The bad impact of war reached here as well because the entire family of Raizel was murdered.

The incident was shocking for Dr. Margolin but he couldn't help them. He moved ahead. The turning point ^{came} ~~came~~

in his life when he got an invitation of marriage from his friend Abraham about his daughter. He decided to go there. Dr. Margolin booked a taxi as there was heavy snowfall everywhere and it was risky to drive in the winter night. He somehow went to Brownsville, where the marriage party was hosted. On the way he saw an accident. He was thinking about the person in between he reached the venue.

Meanwhile, he saw Raizel his beloved at the dancing floor. At first he couldn't believe it. Later he went near to her and found that it was really Raizel. He took her to side and asked her for marriage. As per their custom, it was compulsory to have a coin to get marry. Margolin was searching for the coin in his wallet but he could not. Suddenly his hallucination was broken and he found Raizel nowhere. He wished he could have married her but lost her again.