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DID GOD MAKE BEDBUGS—?

(From a Book of East Side Memoirs)

pp. 3-5

By MICHAEL GOLD

It rained, we squatted dull as frogs on the steps of the rear tenement. What boredom in the backyard, we didn't know what to do with ourselves. Life seemed to flicker out on a rainy day.

The rain was warm and sticky; it spattered on the tin roofs like a gangster's blood. It filled our backyard with a smell of decay, as if someone had just dumped a ton of rotten apples.

Rain, rain! The sky was a strip of gray tin above the terraced clotheslines, on which flowery shirts and underwear flapped like flags in the rain. I looked up at them.

I heard the hum of the sewing machines in my father's little shop, a dreary sound like surf on a lonely island. A feeble baby wept, and its mother answered hoarsely. The swollen upper half of a fat woman hung from a window, above two elbows like hams. She stared for hours with dull eyes at the rain.

A decaying wooden shack occupied a fair portion of the yard; it was the common toilet. A bearded man in suspenders went in there.

There was nothing to do. Masha sang from the next tenement yard, she was a blind young prostitute girl. The deep sad Russian songs helped her pain, she was homesick for Kiev. The other girls often sang with her, many nights I was soothed to sleep by that lullaby, but now she sang alone, drearily.

Because there was nothing to do. Rain, rain, we had tired of our marbles, our jacks and playing store games.

The backyard was a curious spot. It had once been a graveyard, and some of the old American headstones had been used to pave our Jewish yard. The inscriptions were dated a hundred years ago, but we knew them all, and were tired of weaving romances around the ruins of America.

Once we had torn up a white gravestone. What an adventure. We scratched like ghouls with our hands deep into the earth until we found mouldy dirty human bones. What a thrill that was. I owned chunks of knee bone, and yellow forearms, and parts of a worm-eaten skull. I had them cached in a secret corner of my father's dark shop, wrapped in burlap with other treasured playthings.

But it would be boring to dig for bones now. And we were sick of trying to sail paper boats in the standing pool above the drain pipe. It was choked with muck, too sluggish for real boat races.

Then a cat appeared in the rain and macabre gloom of the yard. We were suddenly alert as flies.

It was an East Side gutter cat, its head was gaunt, its bones jutted sharply like parts of a strange machine. It was sick. Its belly dragged on the ground, it was sick with a new litter. It paused before a garbage can, sniffing out food.

We yelled. In slow agony, its dim eyes cast about, as if searching for a friend. The sick, starved mother-cat suspected our sudden whoops of savage joy. It leaped on a garbage can and waited.

It did not hump its back, it was too weary to show anger or fear. It waited.

And then we pursued it like fiends, pelting it with offal. It scrambled hysterically up the fence, we heard it drop on heavy feet into the next yard—where other children sat in the rain.

2. TOO MANY CATS

There is nothing in this incident that ought to be recorded. There were thousands of cats on the East Side; one of the common-place joys of childhood was to torture cats, chase them, drop them from steep roofs to see whether cats really had nine lives.

It was a world of violence and stone, there were too many cats, there were too many children.

The stink of cats filled the tenement halls. Cats fought around each garbage can in the East Side struggle for life. These cats were not the smug purring pets of the rich, but outcasts, criminals and fiends. They were hideous with scars and wounds, their fur was torn, they were smeared with unimaginable sores and filth, their eyes glared dangerously. They were so desperate they would sometimes fight a man. At night they alarmed the tenement with their weird cries like a congress of crazy witches. The obscene heartbreak of their amours ruined our sleep, made us cry and toss in cat nightmares. We tortured them, they tortured us. It was poverty.

When you opened the door of your home there was always a crazy cat or two trying to claw its way inside. They would lie for days outside the door, brooding on the smell of cooking until they went insane.

Kittens died quietly in every corner, rheumy-eyed, feeble and old before they had even begun to learn to play.

Sometimes Mommer let you pity a kitten, give it a saucer of milk which it lapped madly with its tiny tongue.

But later you had to drive it out again into the cruel street. There were too many kittens. The sorrow of kittens was too gigantic for one child's pity.

I had chased and persecuted cats with the other children; I had never had much pity; but on this rainy afternoon I pitied the poor mother-cat.

I found myself thinking: Did God make cats?

3. THE RIOT IN A CHAIDER

I was oppressed with thoughts of God then because my parents had put me in a Chaider. I went to this Jewish religious school every afternoon when the American public school let out.

There is no hell fire in the orthodox Jewish religion. Children are not taught to harrow themselves searching for sin; nor to

fear the hereafter. But they must memorize a long rigmorale of Hebrew prayers.

Reb Moisha was my teacher. This man was a walking, belching symbol of the decay of orthodox Judaism, for what could such as he teach anyone? He was ignorant as a rat. He was a foul-smelling emaciated beggar who had never read anything, or seen anything, or felt anything, who knew absolutely nothing but this sterile memory course in dead Hebrew which he whipped into the heads and backsides of little boys.

He dressed always in the same long black alpaca coat, green and disgusting with its pattern of grease, snuff, old food stains and something worse; for this religious teacher had nothing but contempt for the modern device of the handkerchief. He blew his nose on the floor, then wiped it on his horrible sleeve. Pickled herring and onions were his standard food; the sirocco blast of a thousand onions poured from his beard when he bent over the Aleph-Beth with you, his face close and hot to yours.

He was cruel as a jailer. He had a sadist's delight in pinching the boys with his long pincer fingers; he was always whipping special offenders with his cat-o-nine-tails; yet he maintained no real discipline in his hellhole of Jewish piety.

I was appalled when my parents brought me there, and after paying Reb Moisha his first weekly fee of fifty cents, left me with him.

In the ratty old loft, lit by a gas jet that cast a charnelhouse flare on the strange scene, I beheld thirty boys leaping and rioting like so many tigers pent in the one cage.

Some were spinning tops; others played tag, or wrestled; a group kneeled in a corner, staring at the ground as though a corpse lay there, and screaming passionately. They were shooting craps.

One of these boys saw me. He came over, and without a word, tore the picture button of W. J. Bryan from my lapel. The boys gambled in buttons.

At a long table, hacked by many knives, Reb Moisha sat with ten surly boys, the beginner's class, and soon I was howling with them. Over and over again we howled the ancient Hebrew prayers for thunder and lightning and bread and death; meaningless sounds to us. And Reb Moisha would pinch a boy, and scream above the bedlam, "Louder, little thieves! Louder!" He forced us to howl.

There was a smell like dead dog from the broken toilet in the hall. A burlap curtain hung at one end of the hall to disguise the master's home, for he was the unlucky father of five children. His wife's harpy voice nagged them; we could smell onions frying; always onions for the master.

His face was pale, peaked, sinister, like a corpse's; it was framed in an inkblack beard; he wore a skullcap; his eyes glittered, and roved restlessly like an ogre's hungry for blood of little boys.

I did not like this place. Once he tried to whip me, and instead of the usual submission, I ran home. My mother was angry.

"You must go back," she said. "Do you want to grow up into an ignorant Goy, a Christian?"

"But why do I have to learn all those Hebrew words? They don't mean anything, Mommer!"

"They mean a lot," said my mother severely. "Those are God's words, the way He wants us to pray to Him, in Hebrew."

"Who is God?" I asked. "Why must we pray to Him?"

"He is the one who made the world," said my mother solemnly. "We must obey Him."

"Did He make *everything*?"

"Yes, everything. God made everything in this world."

This impressed me, I returned to the chaidar, and in the midst of the riot and screaming I would brood on my mother's God, on the strange man in the sky who must be addressed in Hebrew, that man who had created everything in the world.

4. GOD IS A JEW

My mother was very pious; her face grew solemn and mysterious when she talked about her God. Everyone argued about God. Mendel Bum, and Fyfa the Miser, and my Aunt Lena, and Jake Wolf, the saloonkeeper, and the fat janitor woman, and Mrs. Rifkin, of the umbrella store, my mother's best friend, and Mottke Blinder, and Harry the Pimp—all were interested in God. It was an important subject, and when I discovered this, it became important for me, too.

(This Jewish God! Chief of a tribe of desert fanatics, moody tyrant, dictator, sadistic king who loved the smoke of innocent blood, of burning cities!

(You were a mighty captain on the hills of Palestine, you told the Jews they were your chosen people, you promised them the earth, you led them to victory and injustice!

(You were their strong God, and then you failed them. They became the dregs of the nations. They lived in the cellars of the world.

(But they CLUNG TO YOU! They did not reproach their Judas. They built synagogues to their pale shrunken defeated ghetto God. They were martyrs for you, Viper!)

(But that was in Europe. This is America, end of the centuries, here you are fated to perish at last!)

Meyer Sheftel, was a pale lonely young immigrant, one of my father's three workers, with a dangly head and blue protruding nearsighted eyes. He was always in a daze. He shambled about, his clothes flapping on his scrawny skeleton. He was always reading, reading. A Russian book was propped against the head of his machine, and even while he worked, he was reading.

Once, from this abstraction, he leaped up with a scream of pain. He had run the needle through his finger. A doctor was called, it was a painful operation. But Meyer, his finger bandaged, went on reading hungrily that same afternoon. It was life to him.

My father and his friends respected Meyer because he read so much. They assured each other he was very wise. What he was reading, or what he thought, no one knew. He rarely spoke; and this silence made him the more impressive.

One day a funny thing happened in the shop. Mottke popped in the door, dragging Mendel Bum by the coat. They had been arguing about God in the saloon; cross-eyed Mottke was all asweat with emotion. His face of a gentle gargoyle was purple with excitement.

"Meyer," he said, puffing indignantly, "we want you to decide a bet. You have read books, you know things. This Mendel, this bum, he says that there is no God. And I say there is. So we have bet a quarter."

The student's pale face flushed faintly. He was embarrassed because we were looking at him.

"Well," he stammered.

Mendel, that rogue, grinned and winked at my father, as if he had already won the bet.

"Well," the young student began, "I think so, that is to say: I think there is a God."

Mottke laughed, he showed his yellow stumps, then he slapped Mendel on the shoulder.

"Nu, free thinker," he crowed, "hand me over the quarter!" But Mendel went on arguing, he shrugged his shoulders.

5. A HORSE NAMED GANUF

I couldn't get the thought out of my head; it was God who made everything. A child carries such thoughts about him unconsciously, the way he carries his body; they burrow and grow inside him. He sits quietly; no one knows why; he himself doesn't know; but he is thinking. Then one day he will speak.

In the livery stable on our street there was an old truck horse I loved. Every night he came home weary from work, but they would not unhitch him at once, he would be made to wait for hours in the street by Vashka.

He was hungry, and that's why he'd steal apples or bananas from the pushcarts if the peddler was napping. He was kicked and beaten for this, but it did not break him of his bad habit. They should have fed him after a day's work, but he was always neglected, and dirty, fly-bitten, gall-ridden. He was nicknamed the Ganuf—the old Thief on our street.

I stole sugar from my home and gave it to him. I stroked his damp nose, and gray flanks, or gray tangled mane, and he shook his head, and stared at me with his large gentle eyes. He never shook his head for the other boys, they marvelled at my power over Ganuf.

He was a kind, good horse, and wise in many ways. For instance: Jim Bush abused him. Jim Bush was a fiery little Irish cripple who lived by doing odd jobs for the prostitute girls. Jim Bush was a tough guy from the waist up. His blue fireman's shirt covered massive shoulders and arms; his face was red and leathery like a middle-aged cop's; but his legs were shrivelled like a baby's.

He cracked dirty jokes with the girls, he was genial when sober, but when he was drunk he wanted to fight everyone. He would leap from his crutches at a man's throat and hang there like a bulldog, squeezing for death with his powerful hands, until beaten into unconsciousness. He always began his pugnacious debauches by abusing Ganuf the Horse.

He seemed to hate Ganuf. Why, I don't know. Maybe to show his power. He was the height of a boy of seven. He stood there, eyes bloodshot with liquor, mouth foaming, and shouted curses at

the horse. Ganuf moved; Jim struck him over the nose with a crutch.

Jim grabbed the 'bridle; "back up!" he yelled, then he sawed the bit on poor Ganuf's tongue. Then he clutched the horse's nostrils and tried to tear them off.

The poor horse was patient. He looked down from his great height at the screaming little cripple, and seemed to understand. He would have kicked anyone else, but I think he knew Jim Bush was a cripple.

People always marvelled at this scene. I used to feel sorry for my poor horse, and imagine there were tears in his eyes.

This horse dropped at work one summer day. They loosened his harness, and slopped buckets of water over him. He managed to stand up, but was weak. He dragged the truck back to the stable. Waiting there for his supper, he fell gasping; he died on our street.

His body bloated like a balloon, and he was left there until the wagon could come to haul him to the boneyard.

When a horse lay dead in the street that way, he was seized upon to become another plaything in the queer and terrible treasury of East Side childhood.

Children gathered around Ganuf. They leaped on his swollen body, poked sticks in the vents. They pried open the eyelids, speculated on those sad, glazed big eyes. They plucked hair from the tail with which to weave good-luck rings.

The fat blue and golden flies swarmed, too, around the body of my kind old friend. They buzzed and sang with furious joy as they attacked this tremendous meal sent them by the God of Flies.

I stood there helplessly. I wanted to cry for my poor old Ganuf. Had God made Ganuf? Then why had He let Ganuf die? And had God made flies?

The millions of East Side flies, that drove us crazy in summer, and sucked at our eyelids while we slept, drowned in our glass of milk?

Why?

6. DID GOD MAKE BEDBUGS?

Did God make bedbugs? One steaming hot night, I couldn't sleep for the bedbugs. They have a peculiar nauseating smell of their own; it is the smell of poverty. They crawl slowly and pompously, bloated with blood, and the touch and smell of these parasites wakens every nerve to disgust.

(Bedbugs are what people mean when they say: Poverty. There are enough pleasant superficial liars writing in America. I will write a truthful book of Poverty; I will mention bedbugs.)

It wasn't a lack of cleanliness in our home. My mother was as clean as any German housewife; she slaved, she worked herself to the bone keeping us fresh and neat. The bedbugs were a torment to her. She doused the beds with kerosene, changed the sheets; sprayed the mattresses frantically. What was the use; nothing could help; it was Poverty; it was the Tenement.

The bedbugs lived and bred in the rotten walls of the tenement, with the rats, fleas, roaches; the whole rotten structure needed to be torn down; a kerosene bottle would not help.

It had been a frightful week of summer heat. I was sick and feverish with heat, and pitched and tossed, while the cats sobbed in the yard. The bugs finally woke me. They were everywhere. I cannot tell the despair, loathing and rage of the child in the dark tenement room, as they crawled on me, and stank.

I cried softly. My mother woke and lit the gas. She renewed her futile battle with the bedbugs. The kerosene smell choked me. My mother tried to soothe me back to sleep. But my brain raced like a sewing machine.

"Mommer," I asked, "why did God make the bedbugs?"

She laughed at her little boy's quaint idea. I was often jollied about it later, but who has yet answered this question? Was it the God of Love who put pain and poverty into the world? Why, a kind horse like my Ganuf would never have done such a thing.

COLOR TONES

Force is gray-black

Revolt is red

The city is gray-black

And the mass is gray-red

The machine is gray-black

And its wheels are red

Mass power is gray-black, gray-red, red

And that is the strength of revolt.

HELEN KOP JL.



Drawn by Saul Yalkert.

THE DISTURBER

The movie was about a poor slob chauffeur who loved his master's beautiful daughter. We gasped, bawled, at our breasts, and were surprised when we sensed one in our midst who didn't sympathize with the aspiring young hero. Following other annoyed glances my eyes fixed on a youngish chap slumped in his seat. I caught a glimpse of his face, expressionless, but queer clothes he wore intrigued us, and we were unable to pay unadulterated homage to the famous stars of the silver sheet. Yes; among us sat a person in gray blouse and pants. Unrelieved by color except for red ribbon across left cheek. Eyes sunken and thoughtful, lips enigmatic and tight. "George sweeper?" a buxom matron inquired. "Don't know," I mumbled. "He's just pulled a hanky cleaner than mine," protested a stenog at my right. I tried, and the good people around us tried, to follow the far-trumpeted movie. Alas! this motionless fellow in shapeless clothes had captured our attention. Somebody shied spitballs at him. No movement. Now, on the screen, the hero clasped his high-born dearly beloved. We yelled, cheered, all but one who slumped still farther down in his seat and yawned. I was enraged. I recalled hearing at our last Party meeting of disaffected persons who didn't like anything to do with American, taking a snobbish attitude toward native production, we growled as the lecturer proceeded, and it sounded ominous to me. The feature came to a beautiful end; chauffeur moved into a suite in the great house, and was to be given the master's daughter in honorable marriage. Our applause was a thing never to forget, except to one person; of course the chap in gray blouse wasn't impressed one bit. "Heehee!" he laughed, in a coarse undignified manner. Forgetting my training as an American gentleman I shouted: "Who the hell are you?" He half rose. On his lap I glimpsed a cap with a five-point star that seemed to be burning angrily. Instinctively a woman of delicate sensibilities fainted at sight of him. In staccato, foreign-accented tones, glittering with contempt for me, he said: "I am a Bolshevik soldier."

GEORGE JARRBOE,