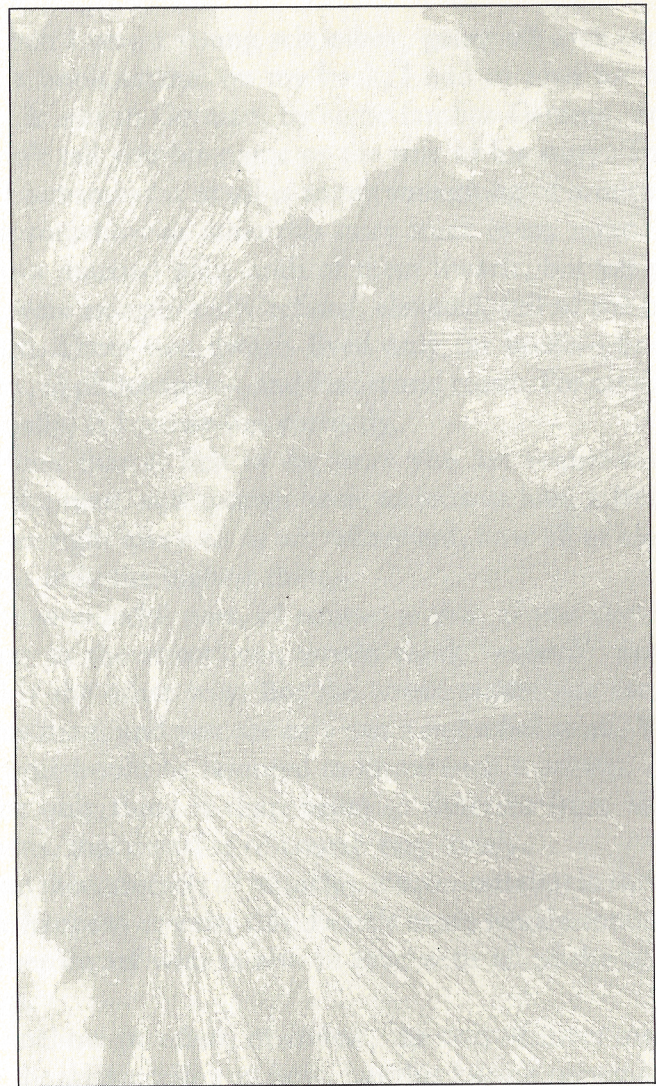


MINDEL GITTEL



When I was a young schoolboy, going off each morning with a book satchel on my back, I had to read for class a story, it was in German, by some famous German writer, I couldn't tell you his name or the title of his story. The fact that I remember it at all is to me something of a miracle.

But somehow or other this story stuck in my mind. It was about a married pair, both of them dwarfs, but yet people who were exceptionally refined, elevated, full of the highest culture. These two dwarfs lived only for books—books of poetry, of philosophy—and for art and music. For music most especially, if I remember correctly.

I think that at first in the story you are acquainted only with the man, and though he is, to look at him, a freak, yet you see right away all of his refinement, how all of his tastes are for only the highest things.

The wonderful part, of course, is that, if you saw such a person in the street, you would think "*nebech*" and look quickly the other way. But the writer makes you see inside of this man, and you see he's not a *nebechel* at all. You see that you would be honored to know such a person.

The only thing is that, being so different from all other humans, this dwarf is of course very lonely.

And then, miracle of miracles, it turns out that in this world there happens to exist this dwarf's exact female counterpart, another dwarf who is also in love with all of the beautiful things.

Somehow or other, of course, the two of them meet, I'm sure the writer tells you how, but this I don't remember. But

in any case it's as if each of these two lonely people has met that half of himself that was sliced away at birth—you know, there is such a theory about love—and now they are joined together again and they are as if whole. It is, as they say, a *shiddach* that was made in heaven.

I remember that the two play together duets on the violin, but they play it like a cello, sitting on a little chair with the instrument in between their knees, that's how tiny they are, and everything in the house is made small so as to fit them. Maybe this is the reason why the story stayed with me, because of the picture of these two people playing together the violin like a cello. It so happened that in those distant days I, too, took lessons on the violin.

So what happens? This woman gives birth to a child, a boy, and this boy is not a dwarf like his parents but completely normal. Even more than normal, he's a big, strong, strapping fellow, like a regular Esav, who likes only to play all sorts of wild games with the other ruffians in the neighborhood. For the beautiful things, for the poetry and music of his parents, this Esav, he has no interest at all, such things don't touch him.

And the parents, on their part, don't know what to make of this child with these unknowable ways, it's as if they're like to each other maybe Martians. And of course the house with the delicate little chairs and little ornaments is too small for the son. He can't move but it so happens he should break some priceless object—not out of malice, you understand, but only because for him nothing there fits. In this house of strangeness, he's the stranger.

So, somehow or other, it happens he breaks the mother's violin, which happens to be an especially fine instrument, a family heirloom—I don't know maybe *eppes* a Stradivarius, though of course the boy doesn't understand any of this. He mumbles that he's sorry and then dashes off to join his fellow

hooligans, just as on the other occasions, when he inadvertently smashed maybe a chair or a flowerpot.

So what happens? What do you think happens? In the end, the boy goes off into the normal world of regular-sized people, where he belongs, he doesn't give a glance back to the house of his parents, and the parents go back to their old life of poetry and philosophy and music as if the boy had never existed.

And I remember that, when I read this as a young school-boy, living as the only child in the house of my beloved parents, may they both rest in peace, I remember that I thought that here the writer had erred.

All along I followed with him, and I imagined to myself that what he said, it could really be so. But when this writer wrote that a child could leave behind parents and forget that they ever were, and that the parents, on their part, could again take up life as if they had no son, I thought: No. This is not true to human nature. No matter how different the generations may be, one to the other, yet they cannot be sliced away from each other and it happens nobody suffers. And because the writer had described a parting with no heartbreak, because the only heartbreak in the story is when the violin is shattered, this is why I felt that his ending was a false one.

So why, I'm sure by now you are already asking yourself, am I telling you this half-remembered story that was written by an author I cannot tell you who, and which even the little bit I do tell you I'm probably getting wrong? Here is my reason. It's because I want to tell to you yet another story entirely, about a family that I came to know back in America, by the name of Zweigel. This family lived in the same little town in Connecticut that I used to live in. I see already you're surprised that I come from Connecticut.

First I'll tell you how I came to know the Zweigels.

The man, may he rest in peace, his first name was Reuven, a refugee like myself. When I first met him it was already, I think, 1953, and somehow or other, with God's help, I had managed to start a new life in America. We had already, myself and my wife, Sara, may she rest in peace, a little store, in lady's ready-made clothing, and we had bought together even a small house, not far from the store.

In short, I felt that I was putting down a little bit roots, as it was in Connecticut, because for some reason or other that's where the Jewish Relief Agency had told me to go. Why, I don't know. I never met another soul who they sent to Connecticut.

But against Connecticut I never made not one complaint. It was a little town, it looked to me always, you can imagine, a little unreal—in every season pretty like a postcard, the houses all painted white with black shutters, every street lined with such beautiful, big old trees, they made in the summertime like a *chuppa* over the road. Such trees.

So how can such a place be real? I would stand sometimes on the main street, even after I had been there already for years, but suddenly there would come over me such a feeling of unreality, looking out onto what they call there the green, where in the days of the Pilgrims they would put down the cows they should graze, and I would think: Maybe I dream?

Never would I have thought to myself to end up in such a place, but it was very nice. Everybody knew each other, and the people, I wouldn't say they were exactly outgoing, but they were always very decent to my Surala and to me. Over the years we even made for ourselves some good friends, I mean among the Gentiles.

There also happened to live, scattered here and there in the little towns around us, a few more Jews, mostly lukewarm Jews, you know what I mean, but still they called themselves Jews, which is already something. It happened that when I came to Connecticut I made up the tenth Jewish man in this

area of Connecticut—I called myself in jest the tenth man of Connecticut—and I took this as a sign from the heavens that we ought to get together a little minyan, a prayer group, at least for the High Holidays.

Actually, to be honest, for myself I probably would have wanted to do this anyway. I only used this talk about the tenth man as an argument to try to nudge the others, most of whom had let such things go for so long that they just didn't want they should be bothered. But after everything that Surala and I had gone through over there, it was somehow important to us there should be a little bit a feeling of a community. We had somehow this hunger.

Of course I was only a newcomer, a refugee, I had always to be careful I shouldn't make myself a pest, it's easy that people can become annoyed. But there were a few, one or two maybe, who felt that they would like maybe also to celebrate a little bit the holidays, at least Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and they pulled along the rest, who said, finally, okay, so long as I took care of all the arrangements.

So what this meant was that I had to find someone he could lead us in the prayers, because for myself, I'm ashamed to say, the little bit I had managed to learn as a boy I had largely lost over there. And in any case a voice I never had.

So I put a little notice in the Yiddish paper—not the *Forward*, you understand, because that was for socialists and freethinkers, but in the other one, the *Morgen Journal*.

As for the fee that we were prepared to pay our visiting *chazzen*, in this matter, too, there was nothing but disagreement among us. We had all to contribute the same amount, and, as is normally the case, it was the wealthiest ones who couldn't be persuaded to add a penny more.

So the fee I didn't even mention in the advertisement in the *Morgen Journal*. Let's see first, I said to myself, if anyone responds. Then first I'll worry about the money.

As it was, I got only one letter, written in a fine Yiddish,

the return address a street I happened to know on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and this letter was from Reuven Zweigel.

And the truly amazing thing was that in his letter Mr. Zweigel didn't put to me any question about money. This already, voice unheard, made me very disposed in Mr. Zweigel's favor.

But the others, of course, they set up a clamor that the man would have to have a regular audition, how did we know he had even a voice, we couldn't just hire the first person who answered the advertisement.

And so with this demand I had, with much embarrassment, to write back to my respondent in New York City, only now I of course mentioned the *gevaltig* sum that we were prepared to offer, because otherwise I couldn't ask a man he should make the trek all the way out to Connecticut.

I expected after this not to hear from Mr. Zweigel. But lo and behold a letter quickly arrived, and this letter made me feel even worse than before.

Mr. Zweigel didn't want I should think he was trying to make difficulties, he understood perfectly the wishes of the community, but it happened, he wrote, that it would be very hard for him he should come to his audition. Mrs. Zweigel was expecting soon their first child and was anyway not so well, and he also intimated that the additional bus fare to our town—he had already found out the exact amount—would be for him a hardship. With many finely put apologies he asked me if it might be possible I should listen to him sing over the telephone. He gave me a telephone number, and this I immediately called.

A female voice, speaking in English, answered the phone. It was not what I would call a refined voice, it was to me an unpleasant voice, and my first thought was naturally that it was to Mrs. Zweigel that I was speaking, even though it sounded like the voice of a very healthy female. And I was

a little disappointed, because already I was drawing for myself a picture of the Zweigels.

This female voice answered in a very superior tone when I requested I should speak with Mr. Reuven Zweigel, and from this I immediately knew that I was not, thank God, speaking to Mrs. Zweigel, but to the landlady. After all, I myself had briefly lived, before I was instructed by the Jewish Relief Agency to go to Connecticut, in just such a rooming house, also on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, with also just such a landlady, she stands glaring it should happen that a tenant God forbid gets a telephone call.

I felt I knew already the owner of this bossy voice on the telephone. I began even to smell—I don't know, I have somehow this kind of a mind, my Surala used to tease me that if I made money like I imagined other people's lives I would be at least a Rothschild—but I smelled already the cooking odor of fried fish that used to stay always in the hallway of that rooming house I myself had lived in. To this day I don't eat fried fish.

It took some time for Mr. Zweigel to come to the phone, and from this I already guessed that his room, too, was on the very top floor, in what was really an attic. And, knowing what I knew from these attic rooms—it was, you understand, summer, the month of August, a heat was blowing like out of the furnace of Gehenna, and in such a room in the summer one only prays that the blood doesn't start already to bubble—knowing what I knew from such rooms, I worried all the more about this young couple. Such an attic room in August is no place for an expectant mother to be.

I was beginning to feel a little bit like a criminal for being the messenger of my high and mighty community that consisted of all of ten men, that was standing always so much on its dignity. Believe me, what we lacked in numbers, we made up for it in the sense of our own importance.

So, finally, Mr. Zweigel himself picked up the phone, a

little short of breath, which is not so good for a *chazzen*, and speaking in Yiddish, his voice coming in little pants.

A young man's voice it wasn't, so I had already to change the picture I had sketched of my young father-to-be. He sounded at least my age—I was then almost forty—if not older.

He spoke in such a quiet voice, even when he regained a little bit his breath, that it was necessary that I should strain my ears to hear, which is also not so good when you're considering a man for the position of *chazzen*.

So I had about what to worry. Because that I would not hire Mr. Zweigel was by this time already completely out of the question.

Meanwhile, as I'm worrying, Mr. Zweigel is stammering out his apologies that he should make these difficulties for the community, he should dare to ask for this special favor of not coming first to Connecticut for an "audition."

So I stopped him right there, because frankly I couldn't stand it anymore to hear a man that he should be so humble.

You know, there are some people you can interrupt them very easily, they immediately give way. I myself am not what you would call an interrupter, but there are some people they seem almost to be asking to be interrupted, as if they didn't want so much to be speaking in the first place, and this was true of Reuven Zweigel, who was never anyway a man to speak much, I think this telephone conversation was the most I ever heard him speak at any one time. And when he did speak it was always as if he was hoping any moment the listener maybe he'll interrupt.

So that was how it happened now that I interrupted him. Listen, my friend, I told him, as for a community, that is already too important a term for what we are, we are just a few scattered Jews, barely a minyan, and, if he still wishes it, it would be for us an honor to have him as our *chazzen* for the coming holidays. I also added that somehow, through

my own carelessness, I had neglected it should be clear that the community would cover his bus fare.

There was a long pause. And then Mr. Zweigel asked, "You don't want that now you should hear me sing?"

And in his voice I immediately heard that, in my haste and my embarrassment, I had made a very grave mistake, that I had insulted the professional integrity of Mr. Zweigel. I didn't want, God forbid, that he should think I was ready to hire him only because of the sick wife in the attic room and the smell of the fried fish in the hallway and all the rest of it.

But what could I say now, that it should erase my clumsy blunder? I was covered with confusion.

And as I stood, so dumb, Mr. Zweigel began quietly to sing for me the Kol Nidre prayer for Yom Kippur. And I thanked God, the man had a voice.

I was there to meet Mr. Zweigel at the bus stop when he came up the day before Rosh Hashana. He came by himself, leaving Mrs. Zweigel behind in the attic room in New York City. I only hoped the landlady had it in her more kindness than I had heard in her voice on the phone.

So, as soon as he stepped off of the bus, carrying an old-fashioned leather satchel bound around with a rope, I knew already it was him. Mr. Zweigel in Connecticut, you immediately knew it was Mr. Zweigel.

The very first thing that I noticed was that his skin had still the grayness of over there. It was, I think I already mentioned it, the year of 1953, and I had not seen that sort of a gray skin for six or seven years already.

I can't begin that I should put it into words, the feeling in me to see the *chazzen* step off of the bus on the main street of that postcard little town on a sunny day—it was just then autumn and there was in Connecticut such colors that you can't begin to describe it—and here he came off the bus, like an old man bent over, skinny and sick-looking, and the skin gray like ash.

That he was a man expecting his first child you wouldn't think it to look at him in a million years, though unlike me—I was already by that time completely bald—he had still a full head of thick black hair, which it so happened that he kept until the end of his days. His actual age at that time was, I believe, thirty-five.

So, meanwhile, I of course had gone up to him and introduced myself, shaking his hand, and asking about the trip from New York, and to this he responded with a little slight shrug of his shoulders. Or maybe that is just now how I imagine to myself that he answered me, because it was with him a fact that, if it was at all possible he should get away with it, that was how he answered any question. Never have I known such a person—and a *chazzen*, yet—so reluctant he should have to hear the sound of his own voice.

Of course, my having been designated the official *macher* of the community meant that it was for me and Sara to put up our visiting *chazzen*. And on the way over, I'll tell you the truth, I was very concerned for my Surala, because I knew how it would be by her to see Mr. Zweigel.

Sara was already by this time maybe nearly two hundred pounds, maybe, who knows, more. She carried always food with her in her purse so that she could prevent it should happen even the slightest pang of hunger. She was twelve years younger than me, she had been little more than a child over there, and so the hunger was by her a very vivid memory.

I walked in with our guest, and my Sara, when she came out to welcome him, I saw it immediately in her face how it was, and she couldn't for a few moments even trust her voice she should speak.

So for her and for me it was truly an amazing thing that, when we came the next day and brought Mr. Zweigel he should meet the others, to them the sight of the *chazzen* it meant nothing at all. To them he was just one more poor refugee from Europe.

So, anyway, Rosh Hashana came, and Mr. Zweigel led us in our prayers.

The rest of them couldn't even read Hebrew at all. So really what we had was that Mr. Zweigel he performed for us, while everybody sat back nice and comfortable—the synagogue was our living room, a Torah we didn't have, Mr. Zweigel had brought along his own prayer book—and everybody sat and evaluated for himself the *chazzen's* performance. You know how it is: to be a professional critic the whole world is fully qualified.

As I said before, he had, thank God, a voice: a good sound baritone, you wouldn't ever think it to look at him he could get such a nice round tone out of him. A great voice—I don't want, my friend, I should mislead you—a great voice it wasn't. And don't think that the others didn't give me plenty complaints about this, too.

Also, Mr. Zweigel performed in a very simple, very low-keyed style. A showoff he wasn't, not by any stretch of the imagination. He didn't add on all those fancy flourishes and the sobs and the *tzitters* that some of them remembered, those of them who knew enough to remember, and this, too, made them critical. You would think, to listen to them, that we should have coming to us, who were all of ten men and their wives in Connecticut, we should have at the very least a Richard Tucker.

I knew from listening to the others that Mr. Zweigel had no future as a *chazzen* in America. And Sara of course she knew this, too, and we both spoke about it, late into the night of that first Rosh Hashana that Mr. Zweigel was by us in Connecticut.

So, anyway, after Rosh Hashana, Mr. Zweigel took the bus back to Mrs. Zweigel in New York, he should travel back again to us for Yom Kippur.

As it happened, right after I saw him off at the bus stop, I went into a little corner luncheonette that I happened to

like, in order that I should have a cup of coffee before going to open the store. And as I was speaking to the owner, a very fine old gentleman by the name of Mr. Anderson, it so happened that Mr. Anderson told me that he was getting on in years, which was true, and that he was looking for someone he should purchase the business.

When he said this I knew immediately that somehow or other, with God's help and with mine, Mr. and Mrs. Zweigel were going to have this luncheonette.

So all those days, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I worked on this idea of the luncheonette with a Mr. White, who was a very fine gentleman at my bank, the People's Trust of Connecticut.

And so, to make a long story short, that is how it came to be that the Zweigels, Reuven and his wife, Miriam, came to be my neighbors in Connecticut.

Of course, between my discussions with Mr. White at People's Trust of Connecticut and the Zweigels' actually becoming Connecticut Yankees like me, I'm skipping a lot of detail. Sara and I, we had to work a little bit on Mr. Zweigel, he didn't want that he should have to accept our help.

In such a situation Sara was much better than I, who am at such times too embarrassed I should be of much good.

But my Surala, thank God, she could be, when the situation demanded it, very direct. And so she said to him: "Mr. Zweigel, I tell you now the truth: from *chazzenes* you will never be able to support your wife and the child she carries."

So again, to make a long story short, Mr. Zweigel went back on the bus to New York City the day after Yom Kippur, we three having decided between us that he would, if she was well enough, bring Mrs. Zweigel back to Connecticut. Because, I tell you frankly, I was very anxious he should get her away from that attic room in the boarding house of the harsh-voiced landlady.

He brought her back to Connecticut looking more dead than alive.

It isn't necessary that I should describe to you too much Mrs. Zweigel, because I have described for you already her husband, and she was his exact female counterpart.

He looked not like a man, but like a shadow of a man, and she looked like a shadow of a woman. She was like him just as gray, just as silent, breathing in and breathing out sorrow. The air around them, it smelled from sorrow. How people like that could have survived over there, this I'll never know.

To look at her, so thin and sickly-looking and also like an old person bent over, you wouldn't believe it in a million years she was carrying life within her.

"Like the matriarch Sura," my own Surala remarked, because you maybe know that the wife of the first Hebrew, the patriarch Avraham, she gave birth to her only son, Yitzchak, when she was already ninety years old.

Not that I am saying of course that Mrs. Zweigel was in actual years an old woman. She must have then been at that time, like her husband, maybe thirty-five.

When they first came to Connecticut they stayed by us, because it was not possible that Mrs. Zweigel she should keep house for herself and her husband. But actually there was, above the luncheonette, an apartment, it was for them.

The baby, a girl, was born on the first night of Chanukah. Such a time as the poor mother had of it I won't go into. But Mrs. Zweigel, who was already no stranger to the Angel of Death, that night she brushed against him once again.

And now I must tell you that, on this night of miracles, when a shadow of a woman managed to give birth to this child, on this night I learned something truly amazing about Mr. Zweigel.

We were together with him at the hospital, Surala and I,

through all of that endless night. Finally, they brought to us the news that the child was born and the mother's life saved. So then Reuven Zweigel began to cry, without making a noise.

And Sara and I, who needed always very little excuse we should shed tears, we always were ready to cry it should happen someone else cried, we of course cried, too.

And then Reuven he lifted up his head, he turned his head to me, and I saw for the first time in his eyes that they were the eyes of a living man. Only at this moment, all the years I knew him, did I see in his face such eyes.

And then he said to me something I will remember it till the hour of my death.

He said to me:

"It is written that a child who is born on the first night of Chanukah, such a child hastens, even in hidden ways, the final redemption."

So of course I asked him:

"Where is it so written?"

And he answered me:

"It is written so in the Zohar."

Now, when Reuven Zweigel said to me those words, then I felt within me a deep astonishment.

"You know," I asked him finally, "you know, my friend, to quote from the Zohar?"

"Yes, I know," he said quietly.

And now I knew for the first time that Reuven Zweigel was a learned man.

That he knew more than I, that he knew more than any of the other Jews in Connecticut, so this was already a given. So this was already nothing. But a person who can quote from the Zohar, a person who must have studied yet the Zohar as a boy, because, you know, for the Zohar even thirty-five, even forty is young, such a person is not only a scholar but truly something of a prodigy.

I looked into the eyes of Reuven Zweigel that first night of Chanukah when the baby daughter was born, and I saw in those eyes that were for the only time that I ever saw them the eyes of a living man, I saw that they were also the eyes of a learned man. I saw that they were the eyes of a prodigy he had vanished long ago.

After this I could never forget it that when I spoke to Reuven Zweigel I spoke to a scholar.

Once, some years later, I got up even somehow the nerve I should ask him if he were the son of a rabbi, because somehow or other I had such an idea, and he had answered me simply,

"Yes."

And then, after a few moments more, he added,

"And the grandson and the great-grandson of rabbis, too."

And this, too, my friend, made a deep impression on me.

It was my habit to go often to the luncheonette. More often than not, in fact, Surala and I, we ate there lunch, only separately, so that one or the other could remain at the store.

There was a counter in the back of the luncheonette, and there you stood and told, to either the one or the other of them, what it was you wanted they should give you. The menu, which was written in those white plastic letters you stick them onto the black plastic with the ridges, it was hanging on the wall behind, just exactly the same as when Mr. Anderson had the store, everything they kept exactly as it was by Mr. Anderson. There in the back was also the cash register, and then on either side of the room, along the walls, nearer toward the front of the store, there were the tables, covered with oilcloth, and the benches with olive-green vinyl against the wall, and there you carried your food.

So I would sit at such a table, sometimes with Sara but usually alone.

And sometimes there would be a customer who complained, *eppes* something wasn't right, something wasn't

fresh, who knows. And I would see the deep humility of Mr. Zweigel, how he felt bad inside, how he tried to make up for what the customer didn't like. And this was for me something terrible to watch. I would think: Here is the son and the grandson and the great-grandson of rabbis, and now he stands behind a counter in a white apron, and he spreads carefully mayonnaise on white bread, and answers with such humility to any rudeness. In this soft-spoken voice of a scholar he apologizes if a customer should complain maybe the lettuce is a little bit wilted.

Not that I ever once in my life regretted that I gave out a helping hand to the fate that had come looking for the Zweigels. Because, believe me, compared with the other fates that were also in the sampling, to be spreading mayonnaise on white bread in Connecticut is already something wonderful.

Other times, too, it happened over the years that a piece of Torah or Talmud would fall from Mr. Zweigel's tongue, or a rare midrash. And whenever it happened it caused me so that I should feel a very deep awe, though never so great as what I felt on that first occasion, when he quoted to me from the Zohar on the night that the daughter was born.

And the baby? Never in your life did you see such an ugly baby! It was actually comical, such a face, such an old-young face you had *taka* to laugh, although, God forbid, not in front of the parents.

Sara and I, we picked out right away the Zweigel baby, it wasn't necessary for us we should look at the name tag on the bassinet. She was there the only baby with a full head of black fuzzy hair, in the middle of all the pink-and-white little Connecticut *kinderlach*.

And she was there the only baby she was lying wide awake, already trying to screw her head in every direction, even the nurses said they had never seen over all the years such an alert newborn. Even the nurses they had to laugh when they

picked her up to show us through the window the Zweigel baby.

I have to say, next to that ugly little Zweigel baby, the rest of those babies they looked a little dull, they looked even maybe *taka* a little stupid, although already they all looked better fed than her, even though they were all just a few hours old.

But the Zweigel baby had a look on her, as if the angel Gavriel had forgotten to touch her under the nose, she should forget all the Torah she had learned before her birth.

The next day, when Mrs. Zweigel was already stronger, we discussed between the four of us the name. Why—you ask me, my friend—hadn't the name been discussed before? This was because of superstition, the mother's superstition.

So the Jewish name was Mindel Gittel, which was the name of Mr. Zweigel's mother. But Mrs. Zweigel she wanted also that her daughter should have an English name, she should sound like an American child. I don't know how he felt about this. He said nothing. Mostly at first the discussion was between my Surala and Mrs. Zweigel, there in the hospital room.

I'll tell you the truth, we were none of us such experts at American names. Sara and I, we thought maybe we should call in one or two of the nurses, they should be consulted in the decision, but the Zweigels were somehow embarrassed.

But, finally, Sara slipped out, and she had a discussion there with the nurses, they all got involved, they all trooped into the room, it was like a game by them, a word game, and we four listened to them as they, with such a good nature, they tried to figure out the solution to this problem for us, what to name our Mindel Gittel in English.

So they were coming up with all sorts of names, *eppes* "Melanie," "Millicent," "Melinda"; "Minda," with an "i"; "Mynda," with a "y." We were all four of us, especially the parents, getting already dizzy with the possibilities.

So, finally, one of these good-natured nurses said:

"How about 'Melody'? Can that be the English name for 'Mindel'?"

Melody. I ask you, my friend: could there be in the entire English language a more suitable name for a *chazzen's* daughter?

"It's *taka* a real name?" we asked the nurse.

"Sure," they all assured us. "It's not exactly common, but, then, you wouldn't want anything common for this little baby anyway, now would you?"

So we were all of us completely happy with this name: the father, the mother, and the nurses, too, especially when we explained to them what it was, a *chazzen*.

And the very same nurse, she had *eppes* some sort of a talent, she came up also with the name "Grace" for "Gittel." So now our little Mindel Gittel was Melody Grace.

The parents and the baby they came back to our house, we should help take care of them. But when Melody was two months old, the mother she finally got back a little bit some strength, and they all three moved into their own little apartment over the luncheonette.

For some time after this, our house was very quiet and empty. You know, for us children were not possible, and now that Melody was gone we heard more loudly than ever before the silence in the house. A faucet dripped, it was like the sound of thunder. Finally, I went out and bought Sara a television set.

But Sara was over there with Mrs. Zweigel all the time, and a day couldn't go by I wouldn't stop in to see little Melody Grace Zweigel, to stare into that comical little old face, into the eyes that spoke of all the ancient wisdom, and I would wonder at all that she must know. I would imagine to myself how it would be if she should suddenly start to speak, the wisdom dropping from her toothless mouth.

Meanwhile, when Melody was maybe three months old,

all the black fuzz on that little head fell out, and now the poor little thing was so bald as I sit before you now. Until she was maybe a year and a half, not a single hair did she have. But even so she got a little better-looking, she filled out, and she lost even that look of ancient wisdom that was at once so awe-inspiring and so comical.

And then it was truly something amazing. The hair began to grow back, and it was hair of pure gold. Not only this, but the child was becoming beautiful. As ugly as she had been as a baby, that's how beautiful she was becoming now.

By the time she was two and a half years old, you couldn't walk down the street with her, strangers would stop to exclaim. Her skin, against the golden hair, it was like peaches and cream, and her eyes were light gray, clear like the air in the mountains, and rimmed all around the outside with a deep blue. Such a coloring you never saw in your life. Even her teeth, her sharp little milk teeth, they were to me something of a miracle, so white.

Mrs. Zweigel, even though she worked all the day beside her husband in the luncheonette, she made at night all of Melody's clothes, beautiful little clothes, little blue velvet dresses with lace collars. There was not another child there in that town with more beautiful clothes. Or maybe it was that, no matter what you would have put on that child, it would have turned out it should look beautiful.

So Melody she would spend all the day with her parents in the luncheonette, sitting on the floor behind the counter, she shouldn't be in the way, chattering all the day long to her dolls, singing all sorts of funny little songs she would make up for them, laughing a laugh gold like the hair.

If a stranger came in they couldn't stop exclaiming over the child. That such a child could belong to those two gray people, they would take your order without looking at you, and then hand you your tuna sandwich or your salami on rye without a word or a glance, that this child was theirs,

you could see a person blinking as if maybe they're dreaming.

So what happened? What do you think happened? Before I knew it, Melody's days playing behind the counter in the luncheonette are over and she's starting already kindergarten. And then it seemed to me that her childhood started to speed up, it seemed to go past before me in a golden blur, that golden child always in the middle of a golden blur: of friends, of school-doings, of sports, of everything. What didn't that child do?

She did everything what the other children did. At first, I used to see that she asked her parents for permission, just like she saw her playmates that they should ask their parents. So what kind of an answer did they give her? They shrugged, either one or the other of them. And this shrug it meant: What do we know? Do what the others are doing. So after a while Melody already stopped asking them and she just did what the other parents gave permission their children should do.

She was always busy, it became already an occasion Sara and I we should get to see her. But always she was sweet. Always when she saw us she would throw her arms around us with a hug and a little kiss on the cheek. She had a disposition it was like pure sunshine.

I remember once she was complaining to Sara and myself, but comically, full of good humor, about the hardships of her life, all because her last name began with a "Z," because everything in that school it was by the alphabet.

Even to line up to go to the bathroom, they lined up by the alphabet!

"And not just 'Z'! No, that isn't bad enough. I have to be a 'Zw'! Look it up in the phone book, Uncle Sol. We're the very last ones!"

"So, Melody darling, you won't always be a 'Zw.' You'll get married, you'll change your name."

"Abbington," she smiled. "I looked it up. They're first in the book."

You've heard, my friend, maybe of the Brownies? It's like the Girl Scouts, only for younger children.

So, once, I remember, I'm sitting in the luncheonette and Melody comes in with two or three others, all of them in brown uniforms. They have on *eppes* a little brown funny hat, like yarmulkes, and across their chests there's some sort of a sash decorated with all sorts of insignia.

It was the first time I saw the child in this uniform, and to me it was a horrible sight. I felt my stomach turn. Never have I liked uniforms. To me a child in a uniform is a perversion.

So of course she comes right over to kiss me, and I ask her:

"What is this you are wearing, Melody darling?"

"Oh, Uncle Sol, it's my Brownie uniform. You see"—she indicated the other children, who were already trooping to the refrigerator at the back they should help themselves to milk—"we're all Brownies!"

"It's fun to be a Brownie?" I asked her.

"Sure. Tons!" And she slid off my lap she should go get herself some milk, too. They all grabbed some Danish from under the plastic case, and then dashed out the door, their thin little legs kicking out beneath the brown uniforms.

So then I got up from the table and went to the back I should have a word with Melody's parents.

"Miriam," I said. "You think this is right, Melody should go in such a uniform?"

She quickly glanced up from the celery she was dicing and then down again and shrugged.

"Reuven," I said. "It doesn't do something inside of you, you should see Melody in such a uniform?"

He looked up from the large jar of mayonnaise from which he was taking, and then put down the spoon, carefully wiped

his hands, took off his white apron, and disappeared through the door that went up to the apartment.

A few moments later, he came down with a little pamphlet, it was maybe twenty pages long, with a drawing on the cover of an orange-haired little girl with just such a Brownie beanie on her head. The pamphlet was called *On Our Way: Brownie Badge Program*.

He sat down next to me on the bench, watching me closely as I turned the pages, there on the oilcloth-covered table.

I have to say frankly I felt a little foolish as I read about Wise Owl, and Busy Bees, and Suzy Safety. The Brownies, I could see, were very fine people.

So maybe I smiled a little sheepish at Melody's father.

"Yes, my friend, you are right," I said to him. "There are uniforms and there are uniforms."

So Melody was for a short time a Brownie. They didn't stick with it long, they gave it up for other things: piano lessons, softball practice, this club, that club. Sara and I we had trouble keeping up with it all, and the parents I don't think they even tried.

I forgot to mention that, with all of Melody's other gifts, she had, too, a voice. In the school shows she had always a big part, usually a solo. People who knew—and if you didn't know you would never in a million years guess—that this pair from the luncheonette were Melody's parents they would come over to where we all sat in the back of the auditorium, on the brown wooden seats, and they would pour out their congratulations on the Zweigels.

"How proud you must be of her!"

And for an answer one or the other of them would shrug, so that Sara and I we were embarrassed, both for the parents and for the kind stranger whose smile would start to dissolve in the middle of the Zweigels' silence.

Now, when I think back, how quickly it all seems to have flown past, the golden blur. Only now, as she got older, of

course it was natural there should be also some boys in the blur that was always around her: nice boys, like the girls, from fine families. They would come, all together, to the luncheonette, it was filled with their happy noise. They would greet Mr. and Mrs. Zweigel with politeness, and then, when they would all leave together, they would all say to them goodbye, and Melody would also throw back a goodbye to us from the door.

Now, once, when Melody was already maybe thirteen, it happened that she came into the luncheonette all by herself, and she sat down beside me on the bench where I had been sipping my glass of tea.

"Uncle Sol!" she said, giving me a little kiss. "Long time no see. I see you haven't changed your hairstyle."

It was between us a little joke, she should tease me about my bald pate.

"But you've changed yours a little," I said. "Something somehow is different."

"Bangs," she pronounced, pointing to the fringe that decorated her forehead. "Do you like them? I wanted some sort of a change without doing anything really drastic, like actually cutting my hair."

She had very long hair at this age, all the way down her back, a river of gold.

"On you, Mindela Gittel, I like everything."

So why did it happen just then that I should call her Mindela Gittel? This, my friend, I can't tell you. I only know it came out. Maybe it could be that, because we were talking about a change in the hairstyle, so somewhere, in the back of my mind, I was remembering the black-fuzzed little baby she used to be.

"Mindela Gittel?" She smiled at me.

So I patted her hand.

"You know maybe who was Mindela Gittel, Melody darling?"

"Do you mean the grandmother I was named after?"

So she knew this much. One or the other of them had said this much to her, because with those two you could never assume it that anything had been said.

"That's right, Melody darling. Your grandmother. Maybe you know a little something about her?"

"No, Uncle Sol." She shook her head with the new fringe of bangs. "Really nothing at all. Only that she was Dad's mom. Do you know anything special about her?"

So what, my friend, could I say? The only thing special that I knew about Mindel Gittel was the same what I knew from all of our parents, what I knew from everybody over there.

So it was on the tip of my tongue to ask Melody if she knew maybe where it was that Mindel Gittel had died, if she knew how it was that Mindel Gittel had died, if she knew maybe why it was that her bubby, Mindel Gittel, had died.

But you could see it already the answers, or, rather, what you could see was there were no answers, the second that you looked into the child's face. You could hear it in the way she said those words, "Dad's mom," just exactly like any of her other friends, the other children of that town, they would have said those words.

So, although it was on the tip of my tongue to say something, I said nothing.

But to myself I said:

If a learned man like Mr. Zweigel, who quoted such words from the Zohar on the night that his only daughter was born, if such a man keeps his silence, then who am I, I should breathe the old stench of death on this child?

So that was how it was.

Meanwhile, Melody she started already high school, she was busy, busy, with all sorts of things busy, with drama club, with debating club, swimming, tennis, skiing. And al-

ways a student. A+. She brought home an A, Sara and I we would tease her she was getting lazy.

She looked like the young Grace Kelly. That's what everybody in town said. Just exactly like Grace Kelly, she could be her younger sister.

And then, in her senior year of high school, she was voted the president of the entire student body. That was how much they all loved our Melody.

And I will tell you this: all of that town they were all in love with our little girl. All of that town took pride in her. The only ones who never showed any pride, strange as it is to say, were the parents. I never saw they should even smile when people praised their Melody to them.

And when Melody graduated from that high school, she graduated with all sorts of honors. What kind of award didn't that school heap on her? She was the valedictorian, she was the student-council president. There were one hundred and two children graduating, but that night it seemed like it was Melody's night.

She stood toward the back, because they had had them march in by height, the shortest ones first, and our Melody she was a tall girl. And then how did they call them up for their diplomas but by the alphabet, this A-to-Z alphabet that had always made our Melody groan.

But I tell you—I did not imagine it—that the entire auditorium it exploded with applause for our Melody, that there was a roar in my ears from all the clapping as Melody Grace Zweigel stepped up to the front to get her handshake and the piece of paper.

The Zweigels didn't have to pay a cent their daughter should go to Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The town gave her a special scholarship, Radcliffe gave her a scholarship, the state of Connecticut they even gave her a scholarship. By the time everybody got through giving her,

believe me, there were plenty poorer students at Radcliffe College. She had money even for books. Only for clothes her parents and we gave her.

Now it was like, for Sara and myself, it was like when the Zweigels first moved out of our house, they should live in their own little apartment above the luncheonette, and our house it thundered with the silence. Now, for a while, the whole town seemed *eppes* quiet and emptied out.

In Radcliffe, Melody majored in international politics. And it was just the same as in high school. Straight A's. At Radcliffe they don't give any A+'s.

Sometimes she would come home for the vacations, the Christmas vacation, the summer vacation, sometimes she wouldn't, she would go to friends, she would go maybe to ski, once even to a Greek island in the summer, to a home one of her classmates' family owned. I think Melody told us they owned the entire island.

And for us, Surala and me in our dress shop, the Zweigels in the luncheonette, everything went on just the same.

So, in her senior year, Melody's roommate was a girl, also she was interested in international politics. And this girl, her name was Amanda Darnell, she came from a very prominent family in New Hampshire. It happened that her father was a United States congressman, her grandfather had been also I think *eppes* a congressman or a senator.

Melody went to the Darnells' home for the Christmas holidays, and there was there an older brother, of course he falls right away in love with Melody.

So in this there's nothing new. Everybody was in love with Melody. Only this time Melody loved the young man back.

He is already at Harvard Law School, so they see each other in Boston, and soon they're engaged to be married.

The Darnells, they're wonderful people, right away they adopt Melody as their own, just as people were always ready

they should adopt Melody as their own. Who doesn't dream they should be so lucky they should have such a child?

Mrs. Darnell she plans everything for the wedding together with Melody. She shops with her for the gown, they pick out together the china pattern, the silver, everything.

And about money, never a word. The Darnells were, I don't have to tell you, very well-to-do. It was old money, the kind that doesn't make a big tumult about itself, and they were never so crude they should breathe a word of money.

And so far as I know they never raised a single word either their son should be marrying a Jewish girl. They were, I don't know that this has anything to do with it, but they happened to be liberal Democrats.

So the wedding was on the grounds of their estate in New Hampshire. It was June, three weeks after Melody graduated from Radcliffe. The boy still had another year at Harvard Law School.

So we drive up there, the four of us, we leave early in the morning, it's still dark. It's an afternoon wedding. Surala and I we sit in the front, and the two Zweigels, silent like the grave, in the back.

And when it grows light, we see it's a very cloudy day, there's low down in the sky a thick heavy blanket of gray clouds, and even some drops fall, now and then, and Surala and I we worry, because it's supposed to be an outdoors wedding.

We drive up, we go through the gates of the Darnells' home, an iron gate with stone pillars, and the name of the home inscribed on the gate—a funny thing, the name suddenly escapes me.

We drive up a long, long drive, under trees like a canopy, on either side a forest, and then suddenly up ahead a beautiful home, stone, like a little castle. And the Zweigels they sit in the back and they say between them nothing.

We come, we're welcomed like royalty into the house, the vestibule is all with marble, it's a beautiful house but with a chill you feel it the moment you step in. Of course, it had been raining, and a stone house has always a chill.

But everybody is very nice, even more than nice. Mrs. Darnell is cooing like a happy dove. She is a tall and stately woman, everybody is tall and stately, like the trees along the drive. But Mrs. Darnell you can see she is a warm person, that underneath all the state she is a genuine person, and there is something even girlish about her, so that immediately I start to imagine what she must have been like on her own wedding day. Her I like.

They don't know yet whether the ceremony will be in the tent or not, because they had planned it for the rose garden, but the weather it's still uncertain.

Mrs. Darnell takes up the mother of the bride and my Surala to the room where Melody is already dressing, and Mr. Zweigel and myself are taken into a library, to speak for a little while with Mr. Darnell, a very distinguished-looking man, and also with very fine manners. So fine, you don't see the manners at all.

But even I am completely overwhelmed by all of this. I don't know how I should sit in such a room, how I should make conversation with such a man, so you can imagine how it is for Mr. Zweigel.

Although maybe, now I come actually to think about it, maybe it was, for him and for me, exactly the same. Because I tell you: in our little town in Connecticut, there was between us, Mr. Zweigel and myself, something of a difference. I was more the Connecticut Yankee. But, sitting here, and maybe even in the view of the Congressman Darnell, there is probably no difference at all. I'm not so sure he can even say at this point which of the two of us is the father and which the so-called uncle.

After about ten minutes, Mr. Darnell excuses himself, he has much to look after before the guests arrive.

And Melody, about a half an hour before the guests are scheduled to arrive, she comes floating into the library, where her father and I sit, and she is followed by Mrs. Darnell and Mrs. Zweigel and my Surala, and Mrs. Darnell her eyes are glowing with tears, and she stands right behind Melody with her hands they're in *eppes* a position like maybe she's praying.

I will tell you this: not on television, not in the movies, not on the stage, never did you see such a vision as Melody on her wedding day.

The wedding veil belonged to the mother, I mean of course to the boy's mother, to Mrs. Darnell. And the gown they had had it made up to go with the veil, at Rosett Pennington, in New York City. Because I was all those years in lady's ready-to-wear, so I can give you a description of this gown it will be professional.

It was very simple, elegant, not an ornament, not a single pearl there was embroidered on it. But the gown it was from silk baratheia, which you may or may not know is smooth-textured, not shiny, and it was in the princesse style, with only the long seams, no bodice, and a boat neck, which you may or may not know is across the shoulders cut wide. Melody wore with it only a single strand of pearls.

A train she didn't wear, but only the mother's veil, which was long, to the floor, made of silk tulle and with a wreath of silk flowers.

The names of the flowers she carried in her hands, that I couldn't tell you, because flowers they were never my business. Only women's ready-to-wear. I can only say that the flowers they were white.

But I can tell you that even the skies were charmed by the sight of Melody in her princesse gown of silk baratheia. Even the heavens were charmed into submission. The clouds had

parted, every bit of them had been swept away. The sun came out, strong like here it shines, and the lawns dried out enough so that Melody was married in the rose garden.

I have now in my mind a picture of this wedding, in the glowing afternoon, you could be the greatest artist you wouldn't be able to paint so much beauty. Only the Zweigels, and no doubt also Surala and myself, we are like maybe smudges on the edge of this picture.

The strange thing was that neither Sara nor I cried at that wedding. All around us were Episcopalians weeping. And Sara and I, with our never-emptied buckets of tears, who will the both of us cry at anything, at a Hallmark greeting card we'll sob, Sara and I we sit there dry-eyed. The Zweigels, too.

Because there is a language in tears, just as there is in laughter. Things you wouldn't know to say in words you say by when you cry and when you don't, when you laugh and when you don't.

Now, the Zweigels I had never seen either of them laugh, never once. I can't for the life of me even begin I should imagine what laughter from them would sound like. I would have thought the Messiah was surely on his way. A smile from them was already a historical occasion.

Him I had seen cry, but only that once, and without any noise.

When did I last see Melody? It was at her mother's funeral. He had died already, maybe two years before, from cancer, and she died of the same thing.

So Melody came with her husband, he was just elected to the State Assembly, he looked already something more like his father, *eppes* a little thicker, and with her also, her two little daughters, both of them beautiful children, they looked just like she had looked as a child. And she had them dressed in just such little velvet dresses with lace collars as her mother used to stay up nights sewing for her.

By this time my Surala she was long gone. It was the extra weight that killed her. She died young, fifty-one years old, from the extra weight she carried because of the hunger she couldn't forget.

So, after I lost my Surala, and then my two dear friends, I found that the roots I had put down in Connecticut they weren't *taka* so deep after all. The winters were cold, there was no luncheonette for me to sit in anymore.

I sold my store and thought about where to go. Miami? To sit and wait for what? Only one thing.

So if I want warm weather I should sit and wait, I thought, why not go to Israel? Let the Angel of Death he should have to travel a little bit he should find me. And so, to make a long story short, that is how you happen to find me sitting here.

And the strange thing is that, between that moment when I saw for the very last time my mother and my father and until this moment that I sit here in this café on Ben Yehuda Street, nothing at all seems real. Nothing except for my Surala and Mr. and Mrs. Zweigel.

I used to stand and stare onto the green and think: Do I dream? And now I look back and I say: Yes, I dreamt.

One thing that happened here I must tell you. I would never have thought it possible, but I found for myself here a relation, a distant cousin. Who would have thought such a thing?

You know that they have such a service at Yad Vashem, you register with them, and they try to see maybe you have still some family. So I thought: Well, I have nothing to lose.

And what do I discover but that right here in Jerusalem is a cousin, she lives with her husband, both of them such fine people I can't begin to tell you. I think maybe I even remember hearing my parents once or twice they should talk of her parents. And now, every Friday night, I'm eating dinner at my cousin's house. So life goes on.

My cousin has a son, he's *eppes* some kind of a mathematical genius, a one-of-a-kind wunderkind, Oren Glube, maybe you've even heard of him, my friend? According to my cousin he's been written about here, several times, in the papers. A beautiful name: Oren, light. He lives in France, at a special mathematical institute, all he has to do is think. They pay him just to sit and think. If my cousin is right—I don't know, because, you know, when it comes to a person's child, even the father Yitzchak thought his Esav a good boy—but if my cousin is to be believed, then her son Oren is at the very least another Albert Einstein. So I have even a little bit of *yiches*, several times removed, in my old age.

So, since I opened with a story—you maybe remember, with the dwarfs?—so maybe now I'll close with a story. Only this one is true, and it's even stranger than the other.

You know, here in Israel we have many zealots, many hotheads. We have unfortunately those who say that they are sick of words, that they must speak another language, with violence, with the spilling of human blood. Some of these people are Arabs and some of these people are Jews. And among these Jews, there are some, I am sorry to say, they call themselves even religious. In fact, some belong to the extreme Orthodoxy.

So, the other day, I'm reading in the *Jerusalem Post* about just such an incident, with two such Jewish extremists, they are arrested.

And there is a picture, they look like any two such very Orthodox young men, with full beards and black hats, but what do I read? One of these two young hotheads he is the grandson of Leon Trotsky!

Now, that Trotsky's grandson should be a hothead making trouble is *taka* not so amazing. But that he should be this kind of a hothead, making this kind of a trouble, this is a little bit of a miracle.

So, when I read this story in the *Jerusalem Post*, I think

immediately of my friends the Zweigels. And this is what I think:

If Leon Trotsky's grandson can wear a black hat and make himself a gangster in the name of the eternal right of the Jewish people to this land, then who knows? Who knows if it won't happen some day a little golden grandchild or great-grandchild or even great-great-grandchild of my friends the Zweigels should maybe know to quote a little something from the Zohar?