

Yitskhok Bashchev's prize-winning story
(1925). 5b6d 5b2 4jk

Growing Old

[Poorly]

TRANSLATED BY GOLDA WERMAN

I

While his wife was alive Gimpel Bedner was still something of a "mensch." True, it was years since he had worked as a water carrier and they lived only on what Sheyndel was able to earn selling milk. But Sheyndel managed; she bought milk from the peasants and sold it from large earthen crocks that she kept in the storeroom of their house, she made her own butter, and from time to time she even carried home a sack of corn on her shoulders.

Gimpel always lay on the iron bed with his pants on and barefoot. He was half paralyzed and one arm was twisted, so he couldn't work anymore.

He hardly ever left the house except for the High Holidays, when he dragged himself to the synagogue on crutches. Meanwhile Gimpel's daughters, children of his old age, grew up and left for the big city, where they worked as servants. Every summer they came home for a week. They were tall, good-looking girls who wore low-cut dresses and flesh-colored stockings. Everyone in town talked about them but the ugly rumors never reached Gimpel.

When he saw them coming through the door his grimy, blackened face would light up and as he struggled to close his perpetually unbuttoned pants, he would draw a deep sigh and blurt out breathlessly: "Oy — ay — a good year to you!" Every year they brought new clothes and clean linens for their father. Then the windows that had been closed all year would be opened, and the sweet smell of perfume would fill the house, and the piles of rags that always lay in heaps on the floor would

disappear, and the ceiling would light up and make the little house bright and festive. Gimpel never stopped sighing with the pleasure of it all. Once, with fatherly pride, he said to his wife: "I can't understand where the girls got their good looks. I don't remember that you were so pretty — eh? Ooh, aah," he suddenly cried out as his leg began to throb with pain.

In those days he was still the head of the family. He had a little house, an inheritance from his grandfather, he had a wife, and he had children. When a housewife came to buy milk and butter and Sheyndel was not home, Gimpel would haggle with her:

"I can't reduce the price, believe me it costs me as much . . . I should live so long . . ."

The real problems began when Sheyndel fell in a peasant woman's house and died.

By the next day there wasn't even a piece of bread in the house, and no one to bring him any. Good friends forgot about him and the peasants didn't honor the deposits that Sheyndel had left with them for milk. Elke, the neighbor with the long, yellow teeth, came in for the first few days to cook some unpeeled potatoes for him. She always let out a series of loud, heartbreaking sighs, a signal that she was ready to deliver one of her firsthand reports about the latest tragic events in town. Moaning and rocking from side to side, she would wait until someone asked her why she was groaning — what happened?

This time she had bad news for Gimpel.

"They say that your daughters are doing shameful things in Lublin . . . yes, they know it for a fact . . . and they say that they are coming back . . ."

That's how Gimpel learned that he had lost not only his wife but his children, too. He kept his eyes fixed on the dark floor and his stiff hands shook so uncontrollably that he could hardly lift the potatoes that he had peeled with his long dirty nails to his mouth.

"Nu, if that's the way it is," he cried, scratching his tangled beard, "that's how it is."

♦ ♦ ♦

II

His daughters returned and rented a little house at the edge of town. They put flowerpots in the windows and wore silk scarves and smelled of perfume. And they paraded through the street wearing red dresses and green hats. Fat housewives pointed their fingers and cursed them. Shopkeepers who knew Gimpel looked them straight in the eyes and reproached them for their sins: "You should be ashamed of yourselves for bringing such disgrace on your father in his old age."

Gimpel began to spend his days in the synagogue. Day in and day out he sat near the stove, mumbling passages from the Book of Psalms and smoking cigarettes made of leaves taken from the bathhouse brooms. He always kept his stiff, twisted hand open at his side. His whole body had become stiffer after his daughters came home. But his appetite remained good, just like a peasant's. If they brought carrots to the house of study, he ate them; if they passed around handfuls of cooked beans, he ate them, too.

Since Gimpel's daughters came to town the young men in the house of study found it difficult to concentrate. They would take their large tomes to the window and smile — their heads were full of sinful thoughts as they stared out with glazed eyes, their books all but forgotten.

"Greetings from your daughters, Reb Gimpel," they taunted. "They want to catch a student from the house of study on their fishing pole. Would you know why? I mean, haven't they told you?" And choking with laughter, they would pinch each other.

Once, tired of reciting Psalms, Gimpel joined the young students in their vulgar patter.

"You're right, as I live. Quick, a radish, give me a radish. I need a radish for my dry throat."

The older members of the congregation were not around so the students indulged him with radishes that they peeled and cut into slices. Gimpel bit into them with his strong, bovine teeth and nodded his head, like an animal chewing its cud. Then he rewarded the group by talking about his own daughters. "Never mind, they earn their money honestly."

Suddenly, feeling his lips twist into a distorted smile, he realized that

he was losing control of his body. One of his eyes closed and he couldn't speak. He waited for the crooked smile to disappear, and it was clear from the expression on his face that he knew that he had made a public spectacle of himself. Finally he returned to his tobacco-stained book — he moistened his dry finger to turn the page and mumbled something from Psalms. The young students pinched each other until their arms were black and blue as they heard Gimpel mispronouncing the words and inverting the order of the verses.

"It's a pity that you didn't learn the bakery trade, Reb Gimpel," they said. "You already know how to knead and mix, just like a real baker."

III

In the winter the roof of Gimpel's little house collapsed and he began to spend his nights in the synagogue. At first no one said anything, but after a while the older congregants became annoyed. They held their noses up high and sniffed the air for bad odors, complaining bitterly to each other.

"What a disgusting stench," they whispered, pointing toward the stove. "It's suffocating."

They took out their snuffboxes and passed them around to see if the smell of the tobacco canceled out the bad odor. After long consideration they finally agreed that their initial estimate was correct.

"It's a profanation of God's name," they said. "One may not even pronounce a holy word under these conditions."

Chanina, a young porter with a full head of hair, a fleshy face, and a little blond beard, said that he had seen with his own eyes how the old man had dirtied the washbasin. What a commotion broke out in the house of study! They threw out the water and everyone removed his phylacteries. Mordecai Joseph, the crippled trustee of the ritual bath and a very influential person, stopped reading the sacred text on his book stand, pressed his deformed body forward on his heavy cane, and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Gimpel and his daughters have sullied the whole town," he screamed. "We've put up with enough from him, enough! Get a horse

and wagon and take him away! Take him there to the, you know, his whores — the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

His green watery eyes glared with anger under his thick eyebrows and his long nose turned red. He attacked the beadle for permitting the abomination to occur and accused the wardens of being ignoramuses — they are not fit to be officers in the synagogue, he charged. Then he sent the children to fetch him various books and pointed his long white finger at a passage in the Shulkhan Arukh. "Distance yourself the space of four arm-lengths from excrement and urine and if a night pot filled with feces and urine is left in the room, praying there is not permitted.

"Do you understand or not? It could not be more clearly stated, and it comes straight from the Talmud. Here, see for yourselves!"

Taking out one holy book after another and sneezing from the snuff, he ranted about the filth and the fact that today's prayers were an abomination. The synagogue wardens quaked in fear when they heard the rules he cited.

"That's it, take him away now," they ordered. "Tell Hirsh Malkha to bring his horse right away so that we can get this business over with!"

An hour later Gimpel was lying in a bed with a red quilt and a pillow under his head. All over the walls of the little room were pictures of naked women, and there was an odor of pork cooking in the kitchen. Gimpel's daughters, wearing nothing but their bodices and scandalously short red slips, were sullenly humming a tune as they ironed. They heaped abuse on Hirsh Malkha, the coachman, for bringing their father and they talked about sending him away to the hospital in Lublin that very night. And they argued about money. Gimpel lay with his eyes closed, half asleep, and heaved a deep and bitter sigh from time to time.

"Oy — ayyaiyai!"

The younger daughter, overcome with pity for her father, tried to comfort him. "You'll have everything you need in the hospital, Tatte. We'll work and pay, just like everyone else."

And while she was talking to him a tall, pockmarked soldier with a shining sword hanging at his side came to the door. For a few moments he stood motionless, staring at Gimpel with a stupid, drunken expression on his face. The older daughter shot an angry glance in her father's

direction. For a while she couldn't figure out what to do with him and she scratched her ear, trying to think of a solution. Then she quietly stepped over to his bed.

"Move a little closer to the wall, Tatte," she whispered in a firm and businesslike tone. "Do you hear me or not? There — lie just like that until I tell you to move. That's the way . . . that's it."