

## A DAY OF PLEASURE

By I.B.Singer

WHEN times were good, I would get a two-groschen piece, a kopeck, from Father or Mother every day, as every boy who went to cheder did. For me this coin represented all worldly pleasures. Across the street was Esther's candy store, where one could buy chocolates, jelly beans, ice cream, caramels, and all sorts of cookies. Since I had a weakness for drawing with colored pencils, which cost money, a kopeck proved not nearly so large a coin as Father and Mother made it out to be. There were times when I was forced to borrow money from a cheder classmate, a young usurer who demanded interest. For every four groschen, I paid a groschen a week.

Now imagine the indescribable joy I felt when I once earned a whole ruble—one hundred kopecks!

I no longer remember exactly how I came to earn that ruble, but I think it happened something like this : A man had ordered a pair of kidskin boots from a shoemaker, but upon delivery they proved to be either too tight or too loose. The man refused to accept them, and the shoemaker brought him to my father's rabbinical court. Father sent me to another shoemaker to ask him to appraise the value of the boots or perhaps even to buy them, since he also dealt in ready-made footwear. It so happened that the second shoemaker had a customer who wanted the boots and was prepared to pay a good price for them. I do not recall all the details, but I remember that I carried a pair of brand-new boots around, and that time of the litigants rewarded me with a ruble.

I knew that if I stayed home my parents would ruin that ruble. They would buy me something to wear, something I would have got anyway, or they would borrow the ruble from me and—though they'd never deny the debt—I would never see it again. I therefore took the ruble and decided to indulge myself for once in the pleasures of this world, to enjoy all those good things for which my heart yearned.

I quickly passed through Krochmalna Street. Here everyone knew me too well. Here I could not afford to act the profligate. But on Gnoyna Street I was unknown. I signaled to the driver of a droshky, and he stopped.

"What do you want?"

"To ride."

"Ride where?"

"To the other streets."

"What other streets?"

"To Nalewki Street."

"That costs forty groschen. Have you got the money to pay?"

I showed him the ruble.

"But you'll have to pay me in advance."

I gave the driver the ruble. He tried bending it to see if it was counterfeit. Then he gave me my change *pleasure*—four forty-groschen pieces. I got into the droshky. The driver cracked his whip and I almost fell off the bench. The seat under me bounced on its springs. Passers-by stared at the little boy riding alone in a droshky, without any bundles. The droshky made its way among trolley cars, other droshkies, wagons, delivery vans. I felt that I had suddenly assumed the importance of an adult. God in heaven, if I could only ride like this for a thousand years, by day and by night, without stop, to the ends of the earth . . .

But the driver turned out to be a dishonest man. When we had gone only halfway, he stopped and said, "Enough. Get down!"

"But this is not Nalewki Street!" I argued.

"Do you want a taste of my whip?" he answered.

Oh, if only I were Samson the Strong, I'd know how to take care of such a bandit, such a clod! I would pulverize him, chop him into little pieces! But I am only a small weak boy, and he is cracking his whip.

I got down, shamed and dejected. But how long can you mourn when you have four forty-groschen pieces in your pocket? I saw a candy store and went in to select my merchandise. I bought some of every kind. And as I bought, I tasted. The other customers looked at me with disdain 5 they probably suspected I had stolen the money. One girl exclaimed, "Just look at that little Hasid!"

"Hey, you ninny, may an evil spirit possess your father's son!" one boy called out to me.

I left, laden with candy. Then I reached Krasinski *Pleasure* Park. I was nearly run over while crossing the street. I entered the park and ate some of the delicacies. A boy passed by and I gave him a chocolate bar. Instead of saying thank you, he grabbed it and ran off. I walked over to the lake and fed the swans—with chocolate. Women pointed their fingers at me, laughed, made comments in Polish. Daintily dressed girls, with hoops and balls, came over to me and I chivalrously and prodigally distributed my candy among them. At that moment I felt like a rich nobleman distributing largess.

After a while I had no more candies, but I still had some money. I decided to take another droshky. When I sat in the second droshky and the driver asked where I wanted to go, I really wanted to say, "Krochmalna Street." But someone inside of me, an invisible glutton, answered instead, "To Marshalkov-sky Boulevard."

"What number?"

I invented a number.

This coachman was honest. He took me to the address and did not ask for the money in advance. On the way another droshky rode alongside ours 5 inside sat a lady with an enormous bosom and a big hat decorated with an ostrich feather. My driver chatted with the other driver. Both spoke Yiddish, which the lady did not like at all. Even less did she like the little passenger with the black velvet hat and the red ear-locks. She threw angry looks at me. From time to time 30 both droshkies stopped to let a trolley car or a heavily laden wagon pass by. A policeman standing near the trolley tracks stared at me, at the lady, seemed for a minute about to come over and arrest me—and then began to laugh. I was terribly afraid. I was afraid of God, of my mother and father, and I was also afraid a hole had suddenly appeared in my pocket and my money had fallen through. And what if the driver was a robber carrying me off to some dark cave? Perhaps he was a magician. And perhaps all this was only a dream. But no, the driver was not a robber, and he did not carry me off to the twelve thieves in the desert. He took me exactly to the address I had given him, a big house with a gateway, and I paid him the forty groschen.

"Who are you going to see?" he asked me.

"A doctor," I answered without hesitation.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I cough."

"You're an orphan, eh?"

"Yes, an orphan."

"From out of town?"

"Yes."

"From where?"

I gave him the name of some town.

"Do you wear the fringed garment?"

This last question I did not answer. What concern of his were my ritual fringes? I wanted him to drive off, but he remained there with his droshky, and I could delay no longer—I had to enter the gateway. But behind the gate there lurked a gigantic dog. He looked at me with a pair of knowing eyes that seemed to say: "You may fool the coachman, but not me. I know you have no business here." And he opened a mouth full of sharp, pointed teeth.

Suddenly the janitor appeared. "And what do you want?"

I tried to stammer something, but he shouted at me, "Get away from here!"

And he began to chase me with a broom. I started to run, and the dog let out a savage howl. The droshky driver was probably a witness to my shame—but against a broom, a janitor, and a dog, a small boy cannot be a hero.

Things were not going well for me, but I still had some money left. And with money one can find pleasures anywhere. I saw a fruit store and went in. I ordered the first fruit I saw, and when it came to paying, my money was just barely enough. I parted with my last groschen.

I no longer remember what kind of fruit it was. It must have been a pomegranate or something equally exotic. I could not peel it, and when I ate it, it had a poisonous taste. Nevertheless I devoured it all. But then I was overcome by a horrible thirst. My throat was parched and burning. I had only one desire—to drink. Oh, if only I had money now! I could have emptied a gallon of soda water! But I had nothing and, furthermore, I was far from home.

I started to walk home. I walked and suddenly I felt a nail in my boot. It pierced my flesh at every step. How did the nail happen to be there just then? I stepped into a gateway. Here there were no dogs and no janitors. I took off the boot. Inside, right through the inner sole, a pointy nail was sticking up. I stunted some paper into the boot and set out again. Oh, how bitter it is to walk when an iron nail pricks you at every step! And how bitter it must be to lie on a bed of nails in Gehenna! This day I had committed many sins. I had said no blessing before eating the candy. I had not given even one groschen of all my money to the poor. I had only gorged myself.

The walk home took about two hours. All manner of frightening thoughts beset me as I walked. Perhaps something terrible had happened at home. Perhaps I had not been lying when I told the coachman I was an orphan, but at the very moment when I said it I was in truth orphaned. Perhaps I had no father, no mother, no home. Perhaps my face had changed, like that of the man in the storybook, and when I got home Father and Mother would not recognize me. Anything was possible!

A boy saw me and stopped me. "Where are you coming from? Your mother has been looking for you everywhere!"

"I was in Praga—I rode on a trolley," I said, telling lies now just for the sake of lying. Because once you have eaten without a blessing and committed other sins, then you can do anything—it no longer matters.

"Who did you visit in Praga?"

"My aunt."

"Since when do you have an aunt in Praga?"

"She just came to Warsaw."

"Go on, you're fibbing. Your mother is looking for you. Swear you were in Praga."

I swore falsely too. Then I went home, tired, sweating—a lost soul. I pounced upon the water faucet and began to drink, to drink. Thus must Esau have devoured the mess of pottage for which he

sold his birthright.

Mother wrung her hands. "Just look at that child!"