

The Cleaver's Daughter

by Avrom Sutzkever

TRANSLATED BY ZACKARY SHOLEM BERGER

1.

She was my first love, the pockmarked redhead with cute freckles on her pert nose, like a poppy seed topping. I even allowed myself to imagine that she had as many freckles as she was years old, a freckle every year for good luck.

When I made her acquaintance, I counted nine of those presents on her nose.

The street where we both grew up panted its way uphill, starting from the Green Bridge over the clay banks of the Vilia, ascending as far as the Sheskin Mountains, where the street became a trail going all the way to Vilkomir. Most kids from my street and even a number of adults called the girl the Cleaver's Daughter.

Why did she get that name? Why was an orphan labeled that way? Because her father, Reb Elye, was a shochet? If that's the reason, it would be fairer to call her the Butcher's Daughter. But why should you expect fairness, if no one's treated fairly?

Many years later I often wished to portray in words my first—or nearly first—love, but I was embarrassed by the nails of my writing hand, in which, like a cloud in water, a girl was reflected whose name (her true name) I didn't remember. For that reason, she would always slip off the page like off a sheet of ice.

Praised be my memory. Today he heard my prayer and blew her forgotten name into my ear:

“Glikele.”

My heart was relieved. Now I can tell about her, sketch her in words.

2.

From now on my memory isn't boss anymore. I remember what was just as well as he does.

It's neither winter nor spring. It's Purim season, the happy holiday coming along any time now, but it's not hurrying; it's trembling on the tip of spring's nose, though spring can't—for some reason—finally sneeze. The hamantaschen are not yet actual. As a matter of fact, Mother planted them in the garden next door, and they should sprout any time now.

Even before the hamantaschen grow, Mother sends me to Roize-Eidel to buy a herring. My good mother already had her eye out for one, and since Roize-Eidel the herring seller started wrapping up her schmaltz herring in newspaper, I loved carrying out this mission, attracted not so much by the silvery saltiness as by the dear words of love from the hero or heroine in the newspaper serials. But the storekeeper didn't always give me the pleasure—instead of a fragment of that serial, I often had to go home, disappointed, with no more than a herring.

Today I am fated to have an out-of-the-ordinary experience: I meet Glikele in Roize-Eidel's store. True, we've already known each other awhile. How would we not know each other, since we've spent our lives together on the same street, and from my courtyard—over the gray split fence—her house isn't at all far away. But because her father is Reb Elye, and Reb Elye is a shochet (I heard myself how the chickens curse him on the eve of Yom Kippur), another fence stands there, between me and his daughter.

But now, in Roize-Eidel's store, the barrier disappears. It's not Glikele's fault that the hens curse her father! Did she give birth to him? I was sure that the hens weren't cursing Glikele. It might even be possible that they blessed her. Last year her mother died from a bad whooping cough and, feeling sorry for Glikele, I accompanied the coffin to the high bridge. A miracle that this girl has a grandmother, Granny Tzviokle, who loves Glikele—and Glikele loves her Granny Tzviokle much more than her father.

Roize-Eidel crawls out from behind the counter, like out of a

herring barrel. She's wearing an apron the color of tin, and perhaps the apron is made of tin—no one dares touch it. On her mother-of-pearl hair, brushed over the ears, she wears a head scarf woven from silver flakes.

Roize-Eidel is famous in the entire region. On Friday market days, the store is surrounded by horses and carriages, like an inn. Peasants come from far off. There are those—they say—who come to Roize-Eidel's store from as far as Vilkomir, a city in Lithuania. They come over the border illegally, because a herring of Roize-Eidel's is famous for its taste and smell in both countries. The farmers believe that a herring of hers is so delicious because it's kosher.

When the storekeeper sees her two esteemed clients, she turns her salted head to me, because I'm older.

“What do you say, little boy?”

I want to lecture Roize-Eidel: that's not nice! First of all, she should have turned to Glikele first, because a girl is worthy of respect, and besides, how could she see me as a little boy? But I don't have enough chivalrous courage to lecture her, so I say in a grumpy voice, “Give me the same schmaltz herring you gave me the other day.”

Obviously Roize-Eidel got up on the wrong side of the bed today.

First she grunts and then her words start pouring out. “Little boy, you've already eaten up that herring. What are you thinking, that the sea is a machine? How can it keep feeding you with schmaltz herring? I'm hoarse from telling everyone that this year the rains were late and so the underground wells in the sea were clogged. Without rains, the roe doesn't hatch—and without roe, no schmaltz herring. Even a *holiak*, a simple herring, is worth its weight in gold!”

I probably turn all sorts of colors from her lecture, because Glikele interrupts all of a sudden, coming to my aid quite respectably.

“So tell us what kind of herring you do have, and we'll know what to choose from.”

The word “us” entrances me, attracting me to Glikele even more, the tips of my fingers touching her cold little hand.

Roize-Eidel sinks down underneath the counter and emerges from the other side from among the barrels covered with a thick coat of salt

like a mane of hair, rummaging in them, feeling around, sniffing, and finding something with the appearance of a rotten carrot.

“It’s what I got, and it’s what I’m selling—herring with a stink.”

“Eat it by yourself,” I cried cry out, doubly insulted that the herring seller allowed herself such a rude turn of phrase for an orphan’s innocent ears. I grab Glikele quickly under her arm as we run out of the store into the Purim Eve, accompanied in the rushing gutter by a sun shattered into fragments, like the young bones of a broken fiddle.

The story of the herring seller puts down roots all up and down the block. Glikele and I have absolutely no part in this. Roize-Eidel is the one who exaggeratedly blows up the incident. She even invents an entire story to insult me, that I grabbed the yellow herring and smeared her face with it.

But as soon as you start with a romance, insults and shame are worth it: Glikele is now my love. We walk together by the brick factory and along the river, when the moon slips into the pocket of a cloud.

3.

“Darling summer, oh my love, buzz-buzz-buzz...” Is a bee buzzing in my veins? In any case, from time to time we have to cool our blood in the Vilia, but not where everyone goes swimming, which is swarming with boys like an anthill with ants. I would much rather they not caress the half-naked body of my lover with their sly eyes. Especially since when she jumps out of the river and goes striding along by the shore, one could be forgiven for thinking that she is wearing not a shirt but a wave—and if she’s running, it’s because she wants to catch her breasts dashing off in front of her.

So we swim far from an evil eye. A couple of miles downstream, where no one is swimming, where the water turns left—and when you swim across the river, you’re in the Zakreter forest with the tall blue-black firs, where it’s cool and dark in midday, like in a well.

And though Glikele feels like we should swim across the river, I am scared, scared of the whirlpools in the river and the whirlpools in ourselves. We could be dragged into them and plummet to the depths.

We can't help it, though. We can't think about it. Both of us are dreaming of summer, and we let ourselves dream of it day and night.

I lie with Glikele, just after going swimming, on the warm sand, radiant with sun and summer. The waves' sweet tongues caress the soles of our feet. Glowing gossamer engraves itself into the echoing blue. Both of us in a delicious silence, I slowly cover Glikele with sand. Before you know it, her small body is completely covered. Just her head and the flowing sun-reddened hair are peeking out of the sand. Like a sunflower, torn apart by a storm, lying submissive among the grass in the garden. Above us a steel sunray breaks in two. The firs of the opposite bank do somersaults in the water. Glikele's eyes are now bigger than they've ever been, and their color is windy pink like bird's milk.

I bend down my head over hers, scared to cut open the silence.

"Since you can't move and your hands are all covered up, I can let my lips do whatever they want."

Instead of getting angry, the girl bursts out laughing, with a laughter that is too loud for an orphan. The laughter carries playfully over the water and bounces like a stone far, far away where the sunset starts.

"It's too bad that my arms are all covered up, I can't hold you."

I try to laugh along with her sassy answer, but my lips are taken captive. Not Glikele, but I am now the one covered up to my neck in sand, and she has to take pity on me to set me free.

4.

It's clear as day that a good angel has me in mind. He is fluttering over my attic, and when I have fun he does too. So, for example, he frustrates my enemies, convincing Reb Elye that he should become shochet in the town of Vornian, coming home only for the holidays. But for me it's always a holiday when Reb Elye is in Vornian. Then I don't need to creep around in other people's gardens with Glikele, hiding out from the busybodies in the stinging nettles next to the tall fence posts, or get stuck in the sandy shore next to the whirlpools; I can come to her house when I feel like it, even at night, and pour out my heart to Glikele till the rooster on the roof starts crowing—out of joy that Reb Elye has left.

As far as her grandmother, Granny Tzviokle, she's a granny without a mean bone in her body. Only a crook would have a problem with her. Full of stories like a poppy's full of seeds. The only trouble is that Granny Tzviokle is paralyzed, can't move. Poor thing, she's always lying there in a black silk dress hemmed with sequins, in a small wooden bed.

I like coming into that house, even when I know that Glikele won't be at home since she's gone off to the tailor or buying food. A father is a father; he doesn't forget to send home a couple of crowns from Vornian.

Granny Tzviokle can tell I've come from my opening the door. I open it both slowly and with boyish impatience. And the door creaks out my good morning, or good evening, like a saw sawing a saw.

Granny Tzviokle doesn't remember how old she is, because the year is faded on her birth certificate. But she recalls well that where the Vilia river is now there was once a birch forest whose trees grew higher than the castle mountain. She was a girl then, younger than Glikele, when she went with a friend of hers into the forest to pick wild strawberries. Each wild strawberry was as big as a fist—not like the ones now. Instead of a basket they carried them in bags on their backs.

"When did all that happen?" I ask Granny Tzviokle, astonished.

"In the first peacetime." She shakes her head, and I imagine a gray child lying in a crib. "Then there was a great famine; everyone ate everything up but one wild strawberry with its roots. Later Emperor Napoleon came and set the birch forest on fire, because he needed the birch trees to build himself a palace. Then came a rain, and it put out the blaze; and from that rain, the Vilia was born."

However many times I hear the story, it never bores me, just like eating bread doesn't get boring. And the fact that Granny Tzviokle remembers all the charming facts so well and tells them the same way today as yesterday and the day before—that's the best sign that it's all true, you know?

Another story I like to hear is about how she and her groom eloped from under the chuppah.

"What was his name, your fiancé?" I act like I don't remember, and

the tips of my ears tingle, just for the heck of it.

“When my fiancé was a boy he was called Kishke, when he was a man he was called Kishl, and when my fiancé became a grandfather he was called Kiss.”

“A beautiful name, very beautiful.”

“A name is nothing. A woman can be called Gute and be evil or be named Chaye and be an angel. But Kishke was an exception. These days you don’t see people like that.”

“It’s a pity I didn’t know him,” I say regretfully.

“Yes, it’s really too bad. Whoever spoke a word with him became wise that very minute.”

I swallow her criticism and continue the thread.

“If he was such a genius, why did you run away from him from under the chuppah?”

“Dummy, what are you talking about? We eloped together!”

“I guess you didn’t like the musicians.”

“Musicians? Ridiculous. Don’t make us out to be fools. We were too shy to get married, that’s all it was.”

“And where did you run away to?”

“Troker Street, to the cellar of Shapsal the Karaite. But we didn’t have any rest there either, because a lot of cats attacked us.”

“How many, Granny?”

“Round about a hundred.”

“How many? I can’t hear you.”

“Round about a hundred, though I didn’t count ‘em.”

5.

I make big plans, figuring that R’ Elye did me a huge favor by becoming the shochet in Varnian. I’ll be able to be the boss in his city house undeterred, enjoy Glikele’s presence as long as I want, and see what’s up in the black boxes where his old cleavers lay. Those cleavers, Glikele tells me, are hidden up high, over the top of the oven, between the oven and the ceiling beams, and I have a desire—an improper one— to open up those boxes.

But like Faiвке the dove keeper, the one in the chamois leather boots, and the biggest heretic boy on my street, says: I don't know if there's a God, but I'm sure there's *someone* who tries to screw things up. So, from the time Reb Elye left his household and went off to seek his fortune in Varnian, the One Who Tries to Screw with Things has certainly gotten on my case. As if with a cocked slingshot from a hiding place, he levels at me sharp gravel and always hits his target.

First, the One Who Tries to Screw with Things shoves the ladder while I am crawling up, like a spider on its web, to grab a cleaver from the top of the oven cover—and I fall, breaking my left hand. But that by itself isn't such a tragedy. One can make love even one-handed.

My broken arm has a cast, and I carry it around my neck on a sling that I keep close to my heart, like a widow carrying a baby. But what does the Screw-Upper want from Glikele? After all, she looks like nothing so much as a dove sprinkled with ash. Who robbed her smile? No longer the pink bird's milk in her flowing hair. Even the freckles on her nose are obscured by a black cloud. What happened? I can't find out from Granny Tzviokle, and she, Glikele, is full of silence.

A humid summer night sucks my blood like a leech. I want to go to sleep, no matter what it takes, and let it suck me to the last drop. That's what I want, but it doesn't matter what I want. Sleep went out on a walk in sleep land and can't find the path back. Under the cast on my broken arm there's an annoying itch. I feel like laughing and crying, crying and laughing. Through the grates to my attic room enticing odors seep through. There are flowers that no one sees, and just their spirits, like ghosts, reveal their blossoming, and their garden, where you can't stick your nose in.

Lightheaded from the entrancing scents I descend the wooden steps like a sleepwalker. Spilled mercury bounces over the rooftops. Over the street, bats swing on the black. The vault of night has the same color as my arm cast. Sleepwalking, I swim to Glikele—she needs my cure.

6.

The window of the little room where Granny Tzviokle is talking in

her sleep is dark like a chimney. But at the second window, behind which Glikele is breathing, a long flame flickers behind a curtain. How should I let my girlfriend know that I am on the other side of the windowpane without scaring her? Maybe knock and call out her name? I've never heard such a knocking from my heart. It must be a woodpecker knocking in me. The idiot pecker thinks I am pine. Such a brilliant thought. Woodpeckers don't peck at night. The idiot is me.

And now the curtain is drawn away and my lips are right on Glikele's lips. Just a thin pane of glass between us. In a moment, the pane melts away, my left arm forgets its fracture, and both it and Glikele help my right arm lift me over the sill.

Glikele's apron hangs on the chair across from the bed, blue with red dots like berries—you almost want to gobble it up. She is dressed in a glowing nightshirt, like the wave of diamonds in which she jumps out of a river. I sober up enough to grab her by the hand and ask something.

"How did you know that I was snooping around at your window?"

"I would have had to be deaf not to hear your heart pounding," she answers. At the same time I hear both our hearts pound like two clocks, one wall against the other, forged together in chains; when one strikes tick, the other answers, in agreement, tock. And look, one clock is stopping, it must be mine, and I only hear hers, not knocking but breaking out in silence just before tears.

I imagine something terrible must have happened to Granny Tzviokle. Even before my guess takes on words, the grandmother's voice floats to me from behind the wall. She is talking in her sleep, telling someone in her dream the story about the Vilia when it was still a forest and she went there as a girl to pick wild strawberries.

Glikele's cold hand is still in my right hand and is not getting any warmer. Now I see the floor is sprinkled with fresh sawdust. I was thinking that snow had fallen and that's why her hand was so cold, but what do I notice on the lit-up snow? Bills, torn-up paper zlotys. The snowy path is covered with ready money. Did a rich landowner lose it? A strange story—the money is torn up, ripped to shreds, you can't even make out on it the eagles and the likenesses of heroes.

She tears her hand out of mine and curls up in a corner of the bed.

“I don’t need his gift. Even if he sends me millions, it’s all the same. You think he went to Vornian to earn more money? Nonsense. He went to get married, obviously. I’ll go do wash or nurse kids to earn an honest living. Nothing is up in the air with me. You only have one mother, and if my father wants to drop in here with another one, I’ll take the green broom and chase them out of the house.”

The rest of her sentences are in fragments, held together only by her tears. In any case I can imagine what happened here: Glikele found under Granny Tzviokle’s pillow a letter from her father, saying that he had struck it rich. The woman whom he is fated to marry is the possessor of a distinguished pedigree, and a head taller than him. If God grants it, he—Reb Elye—will come home for Shevuos and bring his brand-new mate.

7.

At this point it is right before Legboymer¹. We still have enough time before Shevuos to prepare for the battle. Let my broken hand wither if I allow my Glikele to beat wash or nurse other people’s kids. It’s not the end of the world yet. She won’t go hungry with me. First of all, I’ll arrange to loan her my fortune: the five dollars that my rich uncle sent me from America. Afterward I’ll sell my bar mitzvah watch (I’ll tell my mother I lost it) and give the money to Glikele—the money will be enough for her to live on for six months; then I’ll go to work and hand over my earnings to the orphan. Of course, I was sick of my teachers in school. The Hebrew teacher, he should forgive me, is a dummy who can barely get the words out. The gap between one word and the other is wide enough for a hay wagon to truck through. The math teacher is an angry type and a wuss, plus he’s a midget and so the students call him Dwarf. The Galitzianer, the guy who teaches Polish, the kids call Giant, and no one knows that he has another name too. The only problem is the teacher with the glasses—him I actually like. The only one who is smarter than his student. I am especially excited that he knows the names of all the stars.

My standing in hesitation at Glikele’s side, my sympathy for her desperation, helps soothe her wounds. A wind issues from her eyes again

with pink bird's milk, and the freckles jump out on her nose—one more freckle than her age.

Yeah, the wheel of fortune turns to my luck and I win a treasure: Glikele is Glikele again, and she is happy with my offer to take a trip out of the city for all of Legboymer. A distant relative is visiting then from Haydutsishok, a pharmacist who carries into the house the odor of valerian, chamomile, and something that a dentist smells of. True, when she hears that Reb Elye was still slaughtering in Varnian, the pharmacist grimaces—nonetheless she will stay here till after Legboymer. She'll figure out what to do later. So we have someone to take good care of Granny Tzviokle, and we can be free as birds. And my left arm is speedily recovering, the cast has been carved off, the annoying itching is no more.

I say to Glikele, "Where do you want to spend Legboymer: in the Zakrete forest at the green pond, or in Verek?"

Glikele wrinkles up her face in a girlish wrinkle that I see for the first time—it snakes down the length of her face from the blonde-tinged fuzz on her high forehead to the freckles on her nose.

"There are too many black crows in the Zakrete forest. The green pond hasn't blossomed yet, so you can't swim there. Verek then. The forest there is young and dense, oozing with warm sap."

"Right, Glikele, we have the same ideas. We'll take along a cleaver of your father's, and there I'll carve two sticks with it, one for me and one for you."

Glikele is so happy with our hike the next day that she doesn't dare ask why I must cut two sticks not with a pocketknife, but with a cleaver especially.

8.

The kids from my street greet Legboymer with a campfire at the Vilia. The campfire is the kind that can't be extinguished by water. The kind of fire that creates golden fish in the river.

The campfire sprays Legboymer onto the frightened windowpanes.

Now is the time when Glikele fulfills my unclear will. She climbs the rungs of the ladder to take down from between the oven and the

ceiling beams a cleaver for our hike for tomorrow. I stay underneath, below where Glikele is, holding the sides of the ladder with both my hands so that the ladder won't slip and Glikele won't, God forbid, fall. The toes of one of her bare feet drift into my open mouth and my teeth don't want to release their honey. The longer I sate myself with their sweetness, the stronger my hunger is.

"Which cleaver should I bring down, for cows or chickens?" I hear overhead Glikele's little voice, a muffled whisper, so Granny Tzviokle and the pharmacist from Haydutsishok won't hear in the other room through the thin walls.

"The one for chickens is enough," I answer with feigned calm, and at the same time I feel a dancing needle down my spine. And I can barely wait for that second when Glikele comes down safely off the ladder.

9.

In the young dense fir forest, flooded by rills of sap, summer is also young and dense; light blonde, foamy, shy the curled-up moss. Sun and shade play hide-and-seek. The trees glow from inside. Their roots drink from an underground green fire and shine from inside.

Quietly Glikele sits down on the moss and unwraps black bread and cheese for us both from a bag. I like to see her cheeks filling up, moving with rhythmic enjoyment. I only envy the bread that the girl kisses and swallows with such appetite.

There among the grass, opposite us on a chalk-white rock, a lizard with a billows neck and a diamond head appears out of nowhere. But maybe I'm with Glikele in the Garden of Eden. Then it wouldn't be a lizard, but that mischievous snake, wouldn't it, urging us to eat that fruit that we shouldn't?

"Listen to my heartbeat." Glikele takes my left hand, recently freed from its cast, and brings it mercifully to a warm nest and a pecking bill.

Not only do I hear her innocent heart beat, but I even hear the echo afterwards. And the hot rills of sap from the young dense forest pour into my veins.

Everything's the lizard's fault. Stuck itself onto that white rock

casting dazzling frozen-spell glances our way. There's a twig on the ground, and I try to smack it away with the twig: Enough of your barefoot tricks. Get outta here! Whatever, it doesn't notice, plays dead. And then I have an idea: it's too bad that I don't have me a good little stick—even the devil is scared of a good thwop.

And that was lizard's clever scheme: as soon as I think of the stick, I immediately remember the cleaver in the black case, which Glikele extracted at my request from its hiding place under the top of the oven, between the oven and the ceiling beams, for me to whittle two sticks—for me and her.

I hadn't seen the cleaver till now. Glikele brought it to the forest exactly how she had taken it down from over the oven, in the longish black case.

When I open the case, something is torn apart among the trees, as if silence plummeted into a pit: a blue stream in violet banks sparkles on my palm. I hear an "oy" and I don't know if it's coming from me or Glikele.

I am a sinner, a sinner. In the birch forest, I discover a naked secret sealed in a case. As soon as a living eye glimpses it—you can try rolling a mountain on top of the secret and you'll never cover it up again.

Now I know that the lizard's followed us the whole way into the forest. The same one in the city convinced me to play with cleavers.

No, I won't give in. I am a grown man. I'd look pretty silly if a little lizard wastes my shining summer day and my fun with Glikele. I search about carefully and find a pine with a light green, moist bark and fresh buds. This is the kind it's good to whittle shapes out of.

"Glikele, first I'll carve one for you." She turns her face to me with a curiosity just this side of scared.

"Why do I need a stick? I'm not a boy!"

"If Faiвке the pigeon keeper hassles you, you should have something to break his bones with."

I've never heard such a salvo of laughter before. Not just the freckles on her nose laugh, but her bare feet, her breasts laugh, too; the

sun-reddened hair over the pinkish breeze of her eyes, the hummingbirds, the warblers laugh, though they should be singing, and the pine trees, overflowing with rills of sap, shake with laughter.

Glikele is laughing. The crowns and roots laugh, and louder than them all the lizard laughs. Let it laugh, let it die laughing. Meanwhile I take my cleaver and cut into the chosen tree.

Suddenly someone lets out a scream. Slaughtered laughter. Red bursts out of the cut branch like out of a throat. The cleaver is not blue anymore. The blue brook is overflowing with sunset, the same color as Glikele's flowing hair.

A storm in the forest. A swarm of burbling shouts. Roosters crowing, geese honking, a mooing and babbling of cows and calves disturbs the forest and breaks its branches.

In the grass, then, lies the cleaver, which is overcast with the same color as Glikele's flowing hair.

After the lizard's magic and the disturbance in the forest an invisible cleaver hung between me and Glikele. I kept loving her, but it was love at a distance. I was afraid to get close to her because of the color and the shine of her hair. How could I caress her? I'd cut my fingers open.

A little later I forgot her name. I called her the same name the kids on my street did: the cleaver's daughter.

Reb Elye came home for Shevuos, and he brought a brand-new spouse from Vornian. But the new householder no longer needed to drive out the cleaver's daughter with her green broom. That green broom had gone up in smoke the day before.

Here's what happened: the cleaver's daughter left to go swimming. The pharmacist from Haydutsishok left the house for a bit to bring sawdust to sprinkle the floor for yontev. As it would happen, right then from under the stool a burning piece of tinder fell onto the ground and the wooden shovel caught on fire.

No one heard anyone scream for the fire to be put out, because people were literally choking from smoke. When the people with hoses and brass hats came running, half the house, together with the fire, was already extinguished by itself.

The wooden bed where Granny Tzviokle had slept burned from the very bottom, from the four legs. Inside, she was as black as embers.

When the people in the brass helmets came running up, she turned her sooty face to them.

“I guess it’s still smoldering here.”

Those were her last words.

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¹ Shevuos (Shavuot): A Jewish holiday, usually in May or June in the non-Jewish calendar, celebrating the giving of the Torah. Traditionally it represents the beginning of the wedding season cut short by summer and its fast days commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Legboymer (Lag B’Omer): A Jewish minor holiday, occurring before Shevuos, in which children traditionally shoot bows-and-arrows and play other games outside, and on which weddings and other festive occasions can be celebrated as the summer mourning season comes to an end.