

A Pestilence of Virgins

Jack Pulaski

“What do you know from cold?”

“It was forty below in Korea!”

“In 1933 the streets were ice and the pawn shops were closed.”

“Please don’t fight. Eat.”

Mother lays the plates out on the table. Father chews, his senses slip down deep and blind into his guts.

“Tender?” he asks through the meat ravished in his mouth.

“Good,” I answer.

“Good?” he says dreamily, “Good? It’s delicious!”

The food is in my mouth, no? He’s telling me the taste in my mouth!

“Stalin was a murderer,” I remind him.

“I’m a very emotional person,” he reminds me. “Please don’t make me excited. I don’t like to get physical.”

But he stands, legs wide apart, the table above his head. The feast is about to come down around my ears.

“Abe . . .” mother says softly, “Abe . . .”

And the table is lowered to the floor, not even the wine spills, but he is shivering.

Pity the centaur, pity Abe, a pestilence of virgins sepulchered both their days. My mother, like Minerva, who was wombed in the head of Zeus (a virginal goddess of reason), lifts the centaur’s head by his live recalcitrant hair, up, up, beyond his bestial lower parts, confounding his blood by the broader scope of his sight.

Father’s furtive eyes avoid looking at her.

“Mishugge, nut . . .”

“Esther . . .” he says plaintively.

“You can’t talk like a human being?”

I leave and he whines after me, “Six million of us they killed, and you’re going to marry one of them.”

“She’s not the gestapo. She’s Puerto Rican,” I answer, as my feet carry me down to the street.

As ingenuously hungry as Esau he once trod the streets of the new world. The tar stink of the asphalt sizzling under his feet, the earth under the summer sun.

Before Abe saw her, he heard coming from the sky an agonized male scream. He looked up and perched on a steel girder was a man with one hand on his crotch and the other hand raised. The sun, a blister which had burst in the sky, turned the man and the steel of the half-constructed building the color of flame. Abe saw the men behind the shimmering heat waves and could hear one screaming through the megaphone he had made of his hands.

"Lady, lady, lady . . . I would let you piss in my eye just to see what it looks like."

Abe's eye traveled down, where he saw, for the first time, Esther, barricaded and trapped by the tumult she had caused. Wheelbarrows, trowels dripping cement (the men not sufficiently blind with sweat—all labor had ceased). Men and tools fell from the sky, sprouted from the sidewalk, everything stood still but the howling men.

"Oh Esther . . ." the orator in the sky bellowed and the chorus on the sidewalk answered, "Oh Esther, oh Esther baby." And Esther, out to get a bottle of milk for mother, only wanted to get back to her house full of sisters, her mother's kitchen.

"I'll walk you home," Abe said. And to the largest chest, and next to the largest belly standing in their way, "I'll walk all over you wop bastards." For a moment they were frozen, Abe and the bulk of the two men. A somnambulist, moving with labored grace, as in a dream, he carried and dropped them in the gutter which came up to meet them with a terrible velocity, an explosion of teeth and blood.

On the girder in the sky the man stood cupping his testicles in one hand and bowing from the waist as he laughed. From the sidewalk, Abe threw his head back and closed his eyes to the blinding sun and shouted, "I don't back down from nuttin'!"

Flushed in the house of sisters, Esther radiant at its center, Abe the serious suitor sat dumb. In that giggling nunnery, the daft women trying to plot their lives beyond pain, Abe struggled towards the explicit bargain; he would stand between Esther and the world. An elevated train ran by the window rattling the immaculate kitchen and drowning the soft tick-tocking clock that measured their fugitive peace.

"I clear fifteen bucks a week," he shouted above the noise of the train, and wondered whether the trembling women had guessed that he had bullied the other suitors from the door, fat and hairy angels, tender eunuchs who were good providers and could after all make babies, but Abe courted without flowers, a carton of groceries on his back, and apologized to Sidneys and Irvings, and begged, "Please, please don't make me hurt nobody." He showed his mother-in-law-to-be the hands that would build an impregnable citadel for a mother; she stared at the midget ape with a hawk's head and eyes as ferocious as a hurricane, and confessed fear.

"I'm a widow," she said.

"Me and my brother Moish are half partners in the truck," he said.

"This winter we froze," she said, "The janitor, that drunk Kozyanowicz is saving the landlord's money, he won't send the heat up, and who can talk to such a maniac?"

"I know one thing," says Abe, "In America the only thing lower than a nigger is a polack. I'll take care of him now."

"It's summer, in winter we'll need."

"O.K. In winter."

"Ice is expensive," she screams, "and in the summer the milk spoils on the fire escape. I got hemorrhoids and in Russia they murdered my husband." The scream that said, "spoiled milk" splits the membrane in her nose and blood drops as she shrieks "murdered my husband." The daughters surround her and place a key behind her neck to stop the bleeding.

A glass of tea in his hand, a lump of sugar clamped between his teeth, he says, "I ain't a guy without a heart."

"I keep clean and still the rats chew on the Sabbath candles. Zelda's got T.B., the bathtub leaks. Russia was worse . . ."

"Yeah, yeah . . ." Abe nods his head, the willing party to an agreement, "the tub leaks, Heshey the plumber is a personal friend."

"My husband was a Talmudic scholar," she says. "He hung by his hands from the ceiling . . ." She points with a shaking finger stained with blood towards the ceiling.

Abe continues to nod his head, "Yeah, yeah . . ."

"Murdering Cossacks . . ." she whimpers, pointing to the ceiling. Two daughters, each supporting her by an arm, dab at the blood that drips from her nose with a handkerchief and turn their heads up towards the ceiling. Abe licks the sugar off the roof of his mouth and looks up. Tillie the youngest looks up from the dishes with the dreaming repose of a girl staring at the moon from her bedroom window. He is up there. From the ceiling the widow's husband hangs as he hung in Russia, a Talmudic bat emaciated and holy, staring down at the floor where the sabers come through the wide spaces between the boards like pursuing teeth. Neither his hands nor arms grew weary, but when he could no longer stand the screams of the disembowled women he clamped his hands over his ears and fell, as ripe to the knife as the women whose cleft wombs became receptacles for dead cats and the prayer shawls the Cossacks wiped their asses with.

"Those loose wires up there could cause a fire," Abe says. "Dershowitz the electrician owes me a favor."

"Fire!" the women shout, "Fire!", as if the apartment were already in flames, "God forbid a fire."

"First thing in the morning I'll have Dershowitz here."

The plumbing sings a dirge to the twilight, and Abe fills their laps with melons. "Eat." In the following days Abe's back is a cornucopia bearing candles and rat traps, an icebox and a bathtub.

The virgin groom is blinded by the relentless juggernaut of his sex. The dumb colossus hangs between his legs and innocence inhabits his longing as sure as the stink of herring on his breath.

His bride shrinks from the idolatry of her name tattooed on her husband's

chest. The neon calligraphy stares at her through his hair—ESTHER—and his mouth moans, Esther. She is saying that she has never traveled on the subway alone. He gnashes his teeth.

Abe, I would have said to him, consider the lilies of the field—but his bride wants a night's respite for her virginity and he feels damned.

The seventeen-year-old groom climbs naked to the window as rabid as King Saul. Half his body hangs over forever; Esther's eyes roll up in her head like a corpse; her father is falling from the ceiling; her husband is throwing himself out the window and she pees in the wedding sheets.

"Mishugge," she names him, calling him to her bed, and howls like a woman being had in an alley. He hears nothing but the pounding of his own blood and blunders through the remains of her feminine sanctities. Abe, consider the lilies of the field—but there are no lilies of the field, only pushcarts, and they pay protection. He awakes after love the sanest man in the city. It is morning and his peace in its second waking moment becomes ecstatic; he must make a banquet of it.

He puts "Alexander's Ragtime Band" on the phonograph, turns the volume high as it will go, and crouches naked, pressing his ear to the speaker. He plugs his other ear with a finger and can't hear his own jaws sucking the whitefish that hangs from his mouth. With his eyes closed he tastes the fish meat and the music shivers the hair on his neck erect. The trumpets blast Esther from sleep. Her eyes are open; domiciled in his appetite one night, she knows where she is. Her womb conjures my beginnings as if she did it herself. Motherhood, her newest and fiercest virginity, muscles the lip that trembled. "Lunatic," she screams, "you'll wake the dead." Neither she nor he hear the sound of her voice. Momentarily deaf and dumb, her eyes see out the window. Between factory buildings, beneath the elevated trains, in a lot, sunflowers grow like idiots through prostrate automobile tires.

Esther rose from the bed as if it were a city in ruins where she had grown wise and wrenched the phonograph's electric cord from the wall. "Alexander's Ragtime Band" whined down to incoherence and was still. In Abe's astonished face and the music's slow revolutions swooning to noise was the hint of that discipline which would render him tractable.

Embarrassed in the midst of his disrupted pleasure he stared, an adolescent onanist discovered in the toilet. Looking for the first time into his wife's contempt, he knows he is guilty of something.

"You wanna wake the whole building?"

"They know me."

But he had the feeling, like when he is part of a laughing group of people, suddenly he is the only one laughing and the others that were laughing are silent and staring at him in disbelief. Often his joy carries him naked into the street, where silence litters the cage of his pleasures.

His back will redeem his ungainly hungers—the Chrysler Building is a manageable load, being paid the lawful hourly wage he delivers it to New Jersey—it's not as heavy a load as uncles, tubercular sisters, mad aunts, leaking faucets,

and his stiff prick growing a conscience.

The centaur is ruptured. Two rents big enough for a pair of skinny feet flank his hairy navel. His right shoulder is an inch shorter than his left and a corset trusses his spavined back. His hand clutches the lamb chop like a baling hook.

Abey, Abey, considering that you could not consider the lilies of the field, you should have rocked and rolled with the great whore of Babylon. Instead you were cuckolded by me. Even if you were the wisest and sweetest, you were too far from the primal first birth—I am related to your wife by blood, you are not.

The groom is in the street with his bride. Dressed up in his George Raft suit, shoulder pads like the wings of a Mafia torpedo. There are gorillas in the street, hunger has walked across their faces, they have dirty hands and lumbago and are selling apples from pushcarts. August gentlemen are jumping out of windows, shrouds of ticker tape around their ears. Abe's truck is gone and for the rest of his life, between meals, he will predict the end of the world.