

# *The Girl of My Dreams*

Bernard Malamud

AFTER MITKA burned the manuscript of his heartbroken novel at the blackened bottom of Mrs. Lutz's rusty trash can in her backyard, although the jolly landlady tried all sorts of bait and schemes to lure him forth, and he could tell as he lay abed, from the new sounds on the floor and the penetrating stench of her cologne that there was an unattached female loose on the premises (wondrous possibility of yore), he resisted all and with a twist of the key locked himself a prisoner in his room, only venturing out, unshaven, after midnight for crackers and tea and an occasional can of fruit, and this went on for too many weeks to count.

The novel had returned to stay in the late fall, after a long year and a half of voyaging among more than two dozen publishers, and he had

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hurled it into a barrel burning autumn leaves, stirring the mess at intervals with a long length of iron pipe, to get the inner sheets afire. Overhead a few dead apples hung like Christmas ornaments upon the tree stripped of leaves. The sparks, as he stirred, flew to the apples, to him representing not only creation gone for nothing (three long years), but all the dead hopes, ultimately even the proud ideas he had given the book; and Mitka, who was not a sentimentalist, felt as if he had burned (it took a thick two hours) an everlasting hollow in himself.

Into the fire also went a sheaf of odd-sized documents (why he had saved them he would never know): copies of letters to literary agents and their replies; mostly, however, printed rejection forms, with perhaps a half dozen typed notes from lady editors, saying they were returning the MS of his novel because — among other reasons, but this prevailed: because of the symbolism,

and the fact that it was obscure. Only one of the ladies had written let us hear from you again. Though he cursed them all to damnation, it did not cause the acceptance of his book. Yet for a year Mitka labored over a new one, up to the time of the return of the old manuscript, when, upon rereading the new work, he discovered that the same symbolism was there and more obscure than ever, so he shoved the second book aside. True, at odd moments he sneaked out of bed to give a new thought a try with his pen, but the words refused to budge; besides he had lost belief that anything he said could make meaning, and if it perhaps did, that it could possibly be conveyed in all its drama to some publisher's reader, uninvolved with creation, in his aseptic office high above the Manhattan streets; so he wrote nothing for months — although Mrs. Lutz actively mourned — and vowed never to write again though he knew the vow was worthless, because he couldn't write anyway, whether he had vowed or no.

SO MITKA sat alone and still in his faded yellow-papered room, with the badly colored Orozco reproduction he had picked up, showing Mexicans bent and suffering, thumb-tacked above the peeling mantle-piece, and stared through sore eyes at the antics of pigeons on the roof of the house across the street; or aimlessly followed traffic — never

people — in the streets; he slept for good or ill a great deal, had dry dreams, some horrific, and awakening, looked long at the ceiling, which never represented the sky unless he imagined it snowing; listened to music if it came from the distance, and occasionally attempted to read some historical or philosophical work, but cast it aside if it lit the imagination and set him to thinking of writing. Several times he cautioned himself, Mitka, this will have to end or you will, but the warning did little to change his ways. He grew wan and thin, and once when he beheld his meager thighs as he dressed, if he were a weeper, he would have wept.

Now Mrs. Lutz, herself a writer — a bad one but always interested in writers and had them in her house whenever she could land one (her introductory inquisition into a prospective roomer's life masterfully sniffed this fact first) even when she could ill afford it — Mrs. Lutz knew all this about Mitka and she daily attempted some unsuccessful ministrations. She tried tempting him down to her kitchen with spry descriptions of lunch: steaming soup, Mitka, with soft white rolls, calf's foot jelly, rice with tomato sauce, celery hearts, delicious breast of chicken — beef if he preferred — and his choice of satisfying goodies; also with fat notes slipped under his door in sealed envelopes marked personal, describing when she was a

little girl, and the intimate details of her sad life since with Mr. Lutz, imploring a better fate on *him*; or she left at the door all sorts of books fished from her ancient library that he never once looked at, magazines with stories marked, "You can do much better than this," and when it arrived, her own copy, for him to read first, of the *Writer's Journal*. All these attempts having this day failed — his door shut (Mitka voiceless) though she had hid in the hall an hour to await its opening — Mrs. Lutz dropped to one horsy knee and with her keyhole eye peeked in: he lay outstretched in bed.

"Mitka," she wailed, "how thin you have grown — a skeleton — it frightens me. Come downstairs and eat."

He remained motionless so she enticed him otherwise: "Here are clean sheets on my arm, let me refresh your bed and air the room."

He groaned for her to go away.

Mrs. Lutz groped a minute. "We have with us a new guest on your floor, girl by the name of Beatrice — a real beauty, Mitka, and a writer too."

He was silent but she knew listening.

"I'd say a tender twenty-one or two, pinched waist, firm breasts, pretty face, and you should see her little panties hanging on the line — like flowers all."

"What does she write?" he solemnly inquired.

Mrs. Lutz found herself in a fit of coughing.

"Advertising copy, as I understand, but she would like to write verse, she says."

He turned away, wordless.

She left a tray in the hall — a bowl of hot soup whose odor nearly drove him mad, two folded sheets, pillow case, fresh towels, and a copy of that morning's *Morning Globe*.

AFTER he had ravished the soup and all but chewed the linen, he tore open the *Globe* to confirm that he was missing nothing. The headlines told him: correct. He was about to crumple the paper and pitch it out the window when he recalled "The Open Globe" on the editorial page, a column he had not for years seen. In the past he had reached for the paper with three cents and trembling fingers for "The Open Globe," come one-come all to the public, to every writer under a rock, inviting their contributions in the form of stories, at five bucks the thousand-word throw. Though he now hated the thought of it, it was his repeated acceptance here — fifteen stories in less than half a year (he had bought a blue suit and a two-pound jar of strawberry jam) — that had started him writing the novel (requiescat); from that to the second abortion, to the impotence and murderous self-hatred that had descended on him now. Open Globe, indeed. He gnashed his teeth but the

holes in them hurt. Yet the not unsweet remembrance of past triumphs — the quarter of a million potential readers every time he appeared in print, all within a single city so that *everybody* knew when he was in (people reading him in buses, at cafeteria tables and park benches, as Mitka, the Young Magician lurking by, watched smiles appear on their faces or searched for tears in their eyes); also flattering letters from publishers, fan letters too, from the most unlikely people — fame is the purr, the yip, the yay. In remembrance he cast a momentary dewy eye upon the column, and having done so, devoured the print.

The story socked in the belly. This girl, Madeleine Thorn, who wrote the piece as “I” — though she only traced herself here and there, she came at once alive to him — he pictured her as maybe twenty-three, slim yet soft-bodied, the face bright with the whiplash of understanding — that Thorn was not for nothing; anyway, there she was that day, running up and down the stairs in joy and terror. She too lived in a rooming house, at work on her novel, bit by bit, nights, after a depleting secretarial grind each day; page by page, each neatly typed and slipped into the carton under her bed. At the very end of the book, a last chapter of the first draft to go, she had one night got out the carton and lay on the bed, rereading, to see if the book had gone as it should have.

Page after page she dropped to the floor and at last fell asleep, worried that she hadn't got it right, wearied at how much rewriting (this sank in by degrees) she would have to do, when the light of the risen sun struck her eyes and she pounced up, realizing she had forgotten to set the alarm. With a sweep of the hand she shot the typewritten sheets under the bed, washed, ran a comb through her hair, and slipped on a fresh dress. Down the stairs she ran and out the house.

At work, strangely a good day: the novel again came together in her mind and she memo'd what she'd have to do — not very much, really, to make it the decent book she had hoped to write. Home, happy, holding flowers, to be met on the first floor by the landlady, flouncing and all smiles: guess what I've gone and done for you today: describing new curtains, matching bedspread, a rug no less, to keep your tootsies warm in the morning, and surprise! the room spring-cleaned from top to bottom. Oh my God. The girl tore up the stairs. Falling on her hands and knees in her room she searched under the bed: an empty carton. Downstairs like dark light. Where, landlady, are the typewritten papers that were under my bed? She spoke with her hand to her throat. “Oh, those that I found on the floor, honey? I thought you meant for me to sweep them out and so I did.” Madeleine: “Are they in the garbage, perhaps?”

—I— don't believe they collect it till Thursday." "No, love, I burned them in the barrel this morning. You should have seen the smoke they made, my eyes watered for an hour." Curtain. With a groan Mitka collapsed on the bed.

HE WAS CONVINCED it was every bit of it true. He saw the crazy dame dumping the manuscript into the barrel and stirring it until every blessed page was aflame. He groaned at the burning — years of precious work. The tale haunted him. He wanted to escape it — leave the room and abandon the dismal memory of misery, but where could he go and what do without a penny in his pocket? So he lay on the bed and whether awake or asleep dreamed the recurrent dream of the burning barrel (in it their books commingled), suffering her suffering as well as his own. The barrel, a symbol he had never conceived before, belched word-flame, shot sparks, poured smoke as thick as oil. It turned red hot, a sickly yellow, black — loaded high with the ashes of human bones — guess whose. When his imagination finally calmed, a sorrow for her afflicted him. The last chapter — irony of it. He yearned all day to assuage her grief, express sympathy in some loving word or gesture, and assure her she would write it again, only better. Around midnight he could bear his thoughts no longer. He thrust a sheet of paper into the

portable, twirled the roller and in the strange stillness of the house clacked out to her a note c/o the *Morning Globe*, expressing how sorry he was — a writer himself — but don't give up, write it again. Sincerely, Mitka. He found an envelope and sticky stamp in his desk drawer. Against his better judgment, he sneaked out and mailed it.

Immediately he regretted it. Was he in his right mind? *All right*, so he had written to her, but what if she wrote back? Who wanted, who needed a correspondence? He simply hadn't the strength for it. Therefore he was glad there continued to be no mail — not since he had burned his book last November, and this was February. Yet on the way out to forage for some food at night, ridiculing himself, holding a lit match he peered into the mailbox. The next night he felt inside the slot with his fingers: empty: served him right. Silly business. He had all but forgotten her story; that is, he thought of it less each day. Yet if the girl by some mischance should write, Mrs. Lutz usually opened the box and brought up whatever mail herself — any excuse to waste his time. The next morning he heard the courier carrying her bulk lightly up the stairs and knew the girl had answered. Steady, Mitka. Despite a warning to himself of the dream world he was in, his heart pounded as the old tease coyly knocked. He did not answer. Gurgling, "For you,

Mitka darling," she at last slipped it under the door — her favorite pastime (he tried to make a symbol of it and failed). Waiting till she had moved on so as not to give her the satisfaction of hearing him go for it, he sprang from the bed and tore the envelope open. "Dear Mr. Mitka (a most feminine handwriting): Thank you for the expression of your kind sympathy, sincerely, M.T." That was all, no return address, no nothing. Giving himself a horse bray he dropped the business into the basket. He brayed louder the next day: there was another epistle: the story was not true — she had invented every single word of it; but the truth was she was lonely, and would he care to write again?

**N**OTHING COMES easy to Mitka but he eventually wrote to her. He had plenty of time and nothing else to do. He told himself he had answered her letter because she was lonely — all right because they both were. Ultimately he admitted that he wrote because he couldn't do the other kind of writing and this, though he was no escapist, solaced him a little. Mitka sensed that although he had vowed never to go back to it, he hoped the correspondence would return him to the book he had abandoned. (Sterile writer seeks end of sterility through satisfying epistolary intercourse with lady writer.) Clearly then, he was trying with these letters to put an

end to his impotence, the hatred of self for not working, for having no ideas, for cutting himself off from them. Ah, Mitka. He sighed at the revelation of this weakness: to depend on others. Yet though his letters were often harsh, bitter, provocative, even unkind, they drew from her warm responses, receptive, soft, willing; and so it was not long (who can resist it? he bitterly assailed himself) before he had brought up the subject of their meeting. He broached it first and she (with reluctance) gave in, for wasn't it better, she had asked, not to intrude the person?

The meeting was arranged for a Monday evening at the branch public library near where she worked — her own bookish preference; himself, he would have chosen the freedom of a street corner. She would, she said, be wearing a sort of reddish babushka. Now Mitka found himself actively wondering what she looked like. Her letters showed her as sensible, modest, honest but what of the body? Though he liked his women to be lookers, he guessed she was not. Partly from hints dropped by her and partly his intuition. He pictured her as comely yet hefty. What of it so long as she was womanly, intelligent, brave? A man like him had need of something special.

The March evening was zippy outside but cupped in it the breath of spring. Mitka opened both windows and allowed the free air to blow on him. About to go — there

came a quick knock on the door. He hesitated, suspicious — Mrs. Lutz knew everybody's business — seemed to sniff it out of the mail. "Telephone," a girl's voice sang out. Probably the advertising Beatrice. He waited till he was sure she was gone then unlocked the door and cautiously stepped into the hall for his first phone call of the year. As he picked up the receiver a crack of light showed in the corner. He stared and the door shut tight. The landlady's fault: she built him up among the roomers as a sort of freak: "my writer upstairs."

"Mitka?" It was Madeleine.

"Speaking."

"Mitka, do you know why I'm calling?"

"How should I know?"

"I'm half drunk on wine."

"Save it till later."

"Because I am afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I do so love your letters and would hate to lose them. Do we have to meet?"

"Yes," he hissed.

"Suppose I am not what you expect?"

"Leave that to me."

She sighed. "All right then —"

"You'll be there?"

No sound from her.

"Don't frustrate me now."

"No, Mitka." She hung up.

**S**ENSITIVE KID. He plucked his very last buck out of the drawer and

quickly left the room to hurry there before she could change her mind and leave. But Mrs. Lutz, in a flannel bathrobe, caught him at the bottom of the stairs. Her gray hair wild, her voice broken. "Mitka, why have you shunned me so long? I have waited months for a single word. How can you be so cruel to me?"

"Please." He shoved her aside and ran out of the house. Nutty dame. The balmy current in the air swept away the unpleasantness, carried a sob to his throat. He walked briskly, more alive than for many a season.

The library was an ancient stone structure. He searched in circulation amid rows of books on sagging floors but found only the yawning librarian. The children's room was dark. In reference, a lone, middle-aged female sat at a long table, reading; on the table stood her bulky market bag. Mitka surveyed the room and was turning to seek elsewhere when a monstrous insight tore at his scalp: *this was she!* He stared unbelievably; his heart sank, then he was filled with violent rage. Hefty she was but yes, eyeglassed, and marvellously plain; Christ, didn't know color even — the babushka a sickly running orange. Ah, colossal trickery — was ever man so cruelly defrauded? His impulse was to flee, escape into the breathable air but she held him there by serenely reading the printed page — (sly one, she knew a tiger was loose in the room.) Had she for a split second gazed up with waver-

ing lids he'd have bolted sure; instead she buttoned her eyes to the book and let him duck if he so willed. This infuriated him further. Who wanted charity from the old lady? Mitka strode (with much misery) toward her table.

"Madeleine?" He mocked the name.

She looked up with a shy and stricken smile. "Mitka?"

"The same —" He bowed low.

"Madeleine is my daughter's name, which I borrowed for my story. Mine is Olga really."

A pox on her lies — yet he hopefully asked, "Did she send you?"

She smiled sadly. "No, I am the one. Sit, Mitka."

He sat sullenly, harboring murderous thoughts: to hack her to pieces and incinerate the remains in Mrs. Lutz's rubbish can.

"They'll be closing soon," she said. "Where shall we go?"

He was motionless, still stunned.

"I know a beer place around the corner where we can refresh ourselves," Olga suggested.

She buttoned a drab coat over a gray sweater. At length he rose. She got up too and followed him, hauling the market bag, down the stone steps.

In the street he took the bag — it felt full of rocks — and trailed her hopelessly around the corner into the beer joint.

Along the wall opposite the beer bar ran a grim row of dark booths.

Olga sought one in the rear.

"For peace and privacy."

He laid the bag on the table. "The place smells."

They sat facing each other. He grew increasingly depressed at the thought of spending the evening with her. The irony of it — immured for months in a rat hole, to come forth for this. He'd go back now and entomb himself forever.

SHE removed her coat. "You'd have liked me when I was young, Mitka. I had a sylphlike figure and glorious hair. I was much sought after by men. I was not what you would call sexy but they knew I had it."

Mitka looked away.

"I had verve and a quality of wholeness. I loved life. In many ways I was too rich for my husband. He couldn't understand my nature and this caused him to leave me — mind you, with two small children."

She saw he was not listening. Olga sighed and burst into tears.

The waiter came.

"One beer. Bring the lady wine."

She used two handkerchiefs. One to blow her nose in and the other to dry her eyes.

"You see, Mitka, I told you so."

Her humility touched him. "Yes," he said. Why had he, the fool, not listened?

She gazed at him with smiling eyes. Without glasses she looked better.

"You're exactly the way I pictured you except for your thinness, which surprises me."

Olga reached into her market bag and brought out several packages. She unwrapped bread, sausages, herring, cheese, soft salami, pickles and a large turkey drumstick.

"Sometimes I favor myself with these little treats. Eat, Mitka."

Another landlady. But he ate, grateful she had provided an occupation.

The waiter brought the drinks. "What's this, a picnic?"

"We are writers," Olga said.

"The boss will be pleased."

"Never mind him, eat, Mitka."

He ate listlessly. A man had to live. Or did he. He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure when he had felt this low. Probably never.

Olga sipped her wine. "Eat, it's self-expression."

He expressed himself by managing to finish what was left of the salami, also half the loaf of bread, some cheese and herring. Despite himself his appetite grew. Searching within her bag Olga brought out a package of sliced corned beef and a pear. He made a sandwich of the meat. On top of that the beer was tasty.

"How is the writing going now, Mitka?"

Mitka stopped drinking. He lowered the glass but changed his mind and gulped the rest.

"Don't speak of it."

"Do you try every day?"

"No."

"Believe me, Mitka, things will change. Be patient."

"Yeah."

"Be upbeat, not down. Work every day."

He gnawed the turkey drumstick.

"That's what I do. I've been writing for almost twenty-one years and sometimes it gets so bad — for one reason or another — that I can't get started again for weeks. But what I do then is to relax for a short while and then change to another story. After the second one is moving along and my juices are flowing again, I go back to the first and usually that starts off once more. Or sometimes I discover that it isn't worth bothering with. After you've been writing as long as I have, you'll learn a system to keep yourself working. It depends on a view of life. If you're a mature person you'll get there, Mitka, believe me."

"My writing is all screwed up."

"You'll invent your way out."

THEY SAT a while longer. Olga told him of her childhood. She would have talked more but Mitka was restless. He was wondering what to do with himself. Where would he drag that dead cat, his soul?

Olga put what was left of the food into the market bag.

In the street he asked where to.

"The bus, I guess. I live on the other side of the river with my son, his vinegary wife and their little

daughter."

He took her bag — a lighter load — and walked with it in one hand, a cigarette in the other, toward the bus terminal.

"I wish you'd known my daughter, Mitka."

"So why not?" he said hopefully. He was surprised that he had not taken up the subject of the daughter, because she had all the time been in the back of his mind.

"She had flowing hair and a sweet hourglass figure. You'd have loved her."

He was suspicious of the past tense. "What's the matter, is she married?"

"She died at twenty — at the fount of life. All my stories are actually about her. Someday I'll collect twenty of the best and take them around to see if I can get them published. I'll call the book *Madeleine*."

He all but crumpled, then walked unsteadily. For Madeleine he had this night come out of his burrow to hold her against his lonely heart, but she had burst into fragments, a meteor in reverse, scattered against the far-flung sky, while he walked below, a man mourning.

They came at last to the terminal and Mitka put Olga on the bus.

"Will we meet again, Mitka?"

"Better no," he said.

"But why not?"

"It makes me sad."

"Won't you write either? You'll

never know what your letters meant to me. I was like a young girl waiting for the mailman in the morning."

"Who knows?" He got off the bus.

She called him to the window. "Don't worry about your work, and get more fresh air."

His face showed nothing.

"Character is what counts in the pinches, of course properly mixed with talent. When you saw me in the library and stayed there I thought, there is a man of character."

Mitka said, "Good night."

"Good night, my dear. Write soon."

She sat back in her seat and the bus roared out of the depot. As it turned the corner she waved from the window.

Mitka went the other way. He was momentarily uneasy, until he realized there were no pangs of hunger. On what he had eaten tonight he could live for a week. Mitka, the camel.

**S**PRING. It suddenly gripped and held him. Though he fought the intimacy he was the night's prisoner as he moved toward Mrs. Lutz's.

He thought of the old girl. He thought he'd go home now and drape her from head to foot in white. They would jounce together up the stairs and he would swing her (strictly a one-marriage man) over the threshold, holding her where the fat overflowed her corset as they waltzed around in his writing chamber.

Ben B. Seligman

# The Satellite Squeeze

*Soviet Exploitation in Eastern Europe*

FOR CENTURIES the Danube basin has been one of the most important agricultural areas of Europe. Together with Poland, lying immediately northeast of this region, the countries of the Danube basin — Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia — produced wheat, corn, oilseeds, fruits, tobacco, wines, eggs, and meat in quantities that were more than enough to feed their own populations. In spite of relatively low yields and primitive techniques, these countries had left, at the end of their harvest season, a fairly substantial export surplus whose sale gave them money with which to buy industrial goods.

After Yalta, with all of Eastern Europe either already a part of the Soviet empire or about to become so, it was widely expected that the Danube basin would serve as the

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main source of food and raw materials for a gigantic Soviet Russian industrial complex.

Yet the reports seeping out from behind the Iron Curtain belie this expectation of an Eastern European agricultural colony feeding the Russian imperial center. Dispatches from Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest tell the same story of a catastrophically deteriorating food situation, caused by a frantic Soviet drive to industrialize the Danube basin. For the simple fact of the matter is that Moscow isn't making a breadbasket of Eastern Europe; on the contrary, it is doggedly insisting on setting up factories throughout this region in order to build the kind of economic strength it believes it must have.

Such statistics as we have on the subject testify to the fact that Soviet Russia and her satellites are on the whole industrially poor. The Soviets simply do not make enough capital goods to take care of their own needs, let alone those of the