

DISGUISED

WHEN Temerl stood under the wedding canopy she surely did not know that in less than half a year she would be an abandoned wife. Temerl was the daughter of a rich man. Pinchos—or Pinchosl, as her husband was called, because he was small and slight—was a poor yeshiva student. He received a large dowry from his in-laws and was promised ten years' board. Temerl was good-looking. Why would anybody want to run away from her? But a few months after the wedding Pinchosl was gone. He stealthily packed a few garments in a bundle, took his prayer shawl and phylacteries, and left the town on foot. Even though he could have taken the entire dowry, he took only three silver guldens.

No, Pinchosl was not a thief, and neither did he chase women. He barely looked at Temerl when he lifted the veil from her face on the wedding night. Why, then, did he run off? Some people thought he was homesick for Komarov, where he had been brought up, and yearning for his mother and father. But even his parents heard nothing from him after he left his wife. Someone had seen him in Zamosc, someone else in Lublin. After that, there was no trace of him. Pinchosl had vanished.

People expressed all kinds of opin-

ions. Maybe he had quarrelled with his wife? Maybe he disliked the town where his in-laws lived? Perhaps he wanted to make an end to the Jewish Exile and return to the Land of Israel? Even so, he didn't need to run away. He could have divorced Temerl, or at least sent divorce papers with a messenger. To walk out on a Jewish daughter is a grave sin, because unless she is divorced according to the laws of Moses and Israel she can never remarry.

Temerl sulked and wept. It would have been much less of a misfortune had he left her with a child. But he left her with nothing but an ache in her heart. The women questioned Temerl: "Did he come to your bed on your pure nights?" "Did he speak gently to you?" "Did you ever resist him?" From Temerl's answers it was clear that they had behaved more or less like man and wife.

As far as the family knew, the night before Pinchosl left he read a Talmudic book in the study house until late. There was no sign on his face that he was preparing to do anything unusual. But in the middle of the night, as Temerl slept, he packed up and slipped away. Why? And where to? His parents and father-in-law sent messengers to look for him in the neighboring towns. The family wrote to rabbis and

to community leaders across Poland. But Pinchosl had apparently managed to elude everybody.

There was only one explanation: the demons had captured him. But if the demons capture a man, he is not spotted in Zamosc and in Lublin. They drag him behind the black mountains where no people walk, no cattle tread. Some women murmured that perhaps Pinchosl harbored hatred toward Temerl. But how could anyone hate Temerl? She was a mere seventeen years old, with a silky-smooth face, dark eyes, and slender limbs, and she seemed to be utterly devoted to her husband. She had sewn an ornate prayer-shawl case for him and sent to him as a wedding gift a velvet matzo cover embroidered with golden threads and with his name in little gems. If he dallied too long in the study house, she sent her maid to call him home to lunch.

Rumors spread that a young man who looked Jewish had been seen in a procession of priests and monks at a cloister. But this certainly could not have been the learned and law-abiding Pinchosl. People often say that one cannot understand the ways of the Almighty. Yet the ways of human beings can be just as perplexing.

TWO years passed. Pinchosl's parents and in-laws had searched far and wide. They inquired in every city or village where a Jew might settle. One day, Temerl surprised her parents by telling them that she had decided to go and comb the earth herself in search of her husband. Her mother, Baila, cried bitterly. How could she allow her nineteen-year-old daughter to wander over the world? Where would she go? Where would she stay? Baila was terrified that the same fate would befall Temerl as had befallen Pinchosl. But her father, Reb Shlomo Meltzer, had another viewpoint. It was not unheard of for an abandoned wife to set out in search of her husband. It had happened more than once that the wife finally found the man and got a divorce from him or else located witnesses to his death. What did Temerl have to lose? Her



life was ruined either way. Reb Shlomo gave his daughter money and sent along a maid to help her in all her endeavors. The maid, a widow, was a distant relative of his.

A long journey began for Temerl. She did not travel with any specific plan. She followed all possible leads. If she was given the name of some town that the messengers might have omitted, she found a vehicle and travelled there. Wherever she went, she sought out the rabbi and the community leaders, and she visited the synagogue and the study house. She searched in the marketplaces, along the side streets, in the poorhouse. She asked if anyone had seen or heard about a certain Pinchosl. People shrugged their shoulders, shook their heads. Pinchosl had no outstanding traits. He looked like an average young Chassid. When he forsook her, he had

not yet begun to sprout whiskers, but by now he probably had grown a little beard. Wherever Temerl and her maid went, they heard the same refrain: "Go look for a needle in a haystack."

Months passed, and Temerl pursued her search. Travelling all over the Lublin region and farther, into the so-called Great Poland, matured her before her time. She gained the kind of knowledge that comes from staying at inns and listening to all sorts of talk. She met with other abandoned wives. Men did disappear. Once in a while, a woman, too, disappeared, but those were rare cases. Temerl learned how vast the world was and how odd people could be. Each human being had his own desires, his own calculations, and sometimes his or her own madness. In the city of Chelm, she heard, the daughter of a rich Jew had fallen in love with a pork butcher and converted to Catholicism. In Jaroslaw, a wealthy businessman divorced his wife and married a prostitute. In Lemberg, they imprisoned a charlatan who had twenty-four families in twenty-four

towns and villages. Temerl also heard many tales of people who had been carried away by hobgoblins, of children captured and enslaved by Gypsies, and of men who escaped to America, where, she was told, it was nighttime when it was daytime in Poland, and where people walked upside down. There was also talk about a monster who was born with a gray beard and the teeth of a wolf. But Temerl somehow felt that Pinchosl had not been seized by demons, and that neither was he lost in faraway America, across the ocean.

Temerl journeyed through all the Jewish towns. The money that her father had given her ran out, but she had her jewelry with her and was able to sell some of that. She had written to her parents, but they could not answer her, since she never stayed long enough in one place. In time, the maid became weary of roaming and she returned home. For Temerl, wandering had become a habit. In one town, she met someone who resembled Pinchosl. She alerted the community leaders, and he was taken to the rabbi and later

to the ritual bath, but certain marks on his body did not coincide with Temerl's description. He did not have a black nail on the big toe of his left foot, and he did not have a wart on his neck. He denied having been born in Komarov, and swore that his name was not Pinchosl but Moshe Shmerl. He admitted that he was married and the father of children but said he had not run away from his wife. The opposite was true. His wife refused to live with him, because he could not provide for the family, and he had gone out to look for a teaching job. The rabbi and the elders believed him, and Temerl was sentenced to pay a fine of eighteen groschen for suspecting the innocent and giving a stranger a bad name.

TEMERL travelled as far as the city of Kalisz, and there she was passing through a marketplace when her eyes caught sight of a woman who seemed strangely familiar. Where have I seen that face before, Temerl wondered. The woman was buying eggs from a merchant and holding a



"Hello. I'm director Bob ('Blue Fires') Munsey, and this is screenwriter Doris ('Highway to Nowhere') Winslow."

HISTORY

Only I never came back

the gates stand open
where I left the barnyard in the evening
as the owl was bringing the mouse home
in the gold sky
at the milking hour
and I turned to the amber hill and followed
along the gray fallen wall
by the small mossed oaks and the bushes of rusting
arches bearing the ripe
blackberries into the long shadow
and climbed the ancient road
through the last songs of the blackbirds

passing the last live farms
their stones running with dark liquid
and the ruined farms their windows without frames
facing away
looking out across the pastures of dead shepherds
whom nobody ever knew
grown high with the dry flowers of late summer
their empty doorways gazing
toward the arms of the last oaks
and at night their broken chimneys watching
the cold of the meteors

the beams had fallen together
to rest in brown herds around the fireplaces
and in the shade of black trees the houses were full
of their own fragrance at last
mushrooms and owls
and the song of the cicadas

there was a note on a page
made at the time
and the book was closed
and taken on a journey
into a country where no one
knew the language
no one could read
even the address
inside the cover
and there the book was
of course lost

it was a book full of words to remember
this is how we manage without them
this is how they manage
without us

I was not going to be long

—W. S. MERWIN

basket, into which she put the merchandise. There was nothing unusual about all this, but Temerl stood there gaping and could not move from the spot. Suddenly she realized whom the woman resembled: no one else but Pinchos! "Am I losing my mind?" Temerl asked herself in bewilderment. She remembered being fined the eighth groschen for false accusations.

At that instant, the woman glanced at Temerl and seemed to be so shaken that she dropped her basket, breaking many of the eggs. She attempted to run, but the merchant ran after her, calling that he hadn't been paid for the eggs. The woman stopped and began to look for money, but her hand was trembling and the coins fell from her purse. Temerl herself was about to faint, yet she noticed that the woman's cheeks were not smooth but fuzzy, as if she were sprouting a beard. Also, her hands were too large for those of a female. A wild thought ran through Temerl's mind: Perhaps this is Pinchos! dressed up like a woman. But why would a man want to parade around like a woman? It is forbidden by the Mosaic Law for a man to wear the garments of a woman, and vice versa.

The woman picked up the fallen coins and paid the merchant. She then began to walk away quickly. She was almost running, and Temerl ran after

her, screaming and calling her back. The woman stopped short. "Why are you chasing me? What do you want?" she asked, in Pinchos's voice.

"You are Pinchos!" Temerl cried out.

Instead of denying it, the strange woman stood there, pale and speechless. Finally, she managed to ask—again in Pinchos's voice—"What are you doing in Kalisz?"

"I'm looking for my husband. It is you!" Temerl exclaimed. "You left me an abandoned wife." In her dismay, Temerl began to choke and cry spasmodically.

The woman looked at her and said, "Come with me," and she pointed to a muddy alley strewn with garbage and pools of slop. There, after attempting to quiet Temerl, the strange woman admitted, "Yes, I am Pinchos!"

"Why did you run away? Why did you dress in a woman's clothes?" Temerl howled. "Are you mad, pos-

sessed by a dybbuk? What are you doing here in Kalisz and for whom were you buying eggs? Are you someone's servant or slave? Are my eyes deceiving me? Am I dreaming? Or am I bewitched? God in Heaven, the terrible misfortunes that have befallen me!" Temerl began to sway and was about to collapse into a swoon. She clutched at Pinchos's shoulder, and a horrifying shriek came out of her throat.

In fear of attracting attention and having a mob of people witness his disgrace, Pinchos blurted out, "I know that this will shock you terribly, but I live here in Kalisz with a man."

"With a man?" Temerl gasped. "Are you fooling me? Are you joking? What do you mean with a man?"

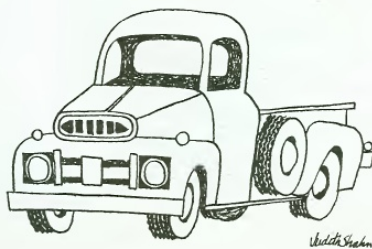
"Yes, with a man. His name is Elkonah. We met in a yeshiva years ago. Here we bake pretzels for yeshiva boys. This is how we earn our living, and for this I went to buy eggs. Forgive me, Temerl, but I never wanted to marry you. I was forced by my parents. That is the real truth."

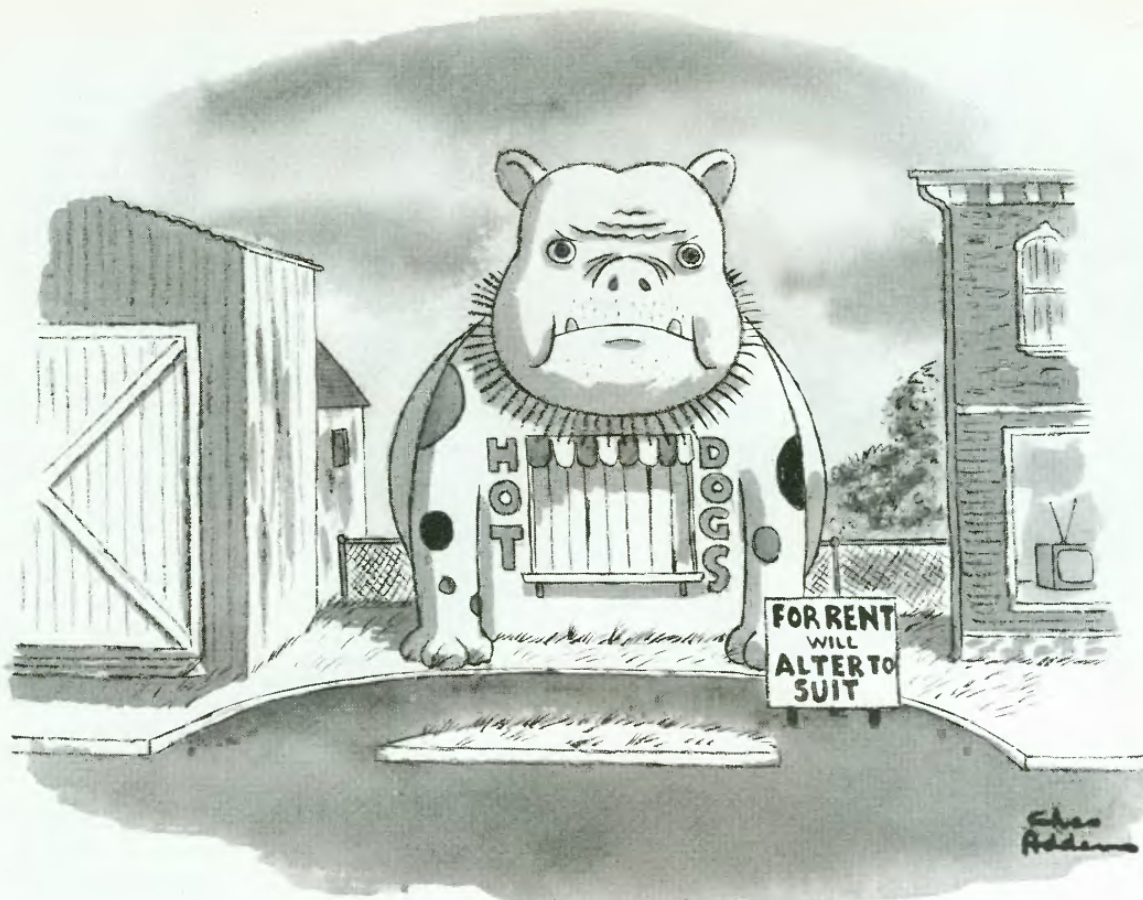
"Whom did you want to marry?" Temerl asked.

"Him."

They stood motionless for a while; then Pinchos managed to say, "I can't help it, I must confess the whole truth."

"What truth?" Temerl exclaimed.





"What did you do? Have you, God forbid, forsaken your faith?"

"No, Temerl. I am still a Jew, but . . ." Pinchosl stammered and shook. He again dropped the basket, but he did not bother to pick it up. He stood before her ashamed, frightened, pale, moving his lips but unable to utter a word. Then Temerl heard him say, "I'm not a man anymore—not really, not for you. . . ."

"What are you saying?" Temerl asked. "Were you sick? Did some vicious people do something to maim you? No matter what you tell me, I am still your wife and I must know!"

"No, Temerl, not this but . . ."

"Speak clearly!" Temerl, too, was trembling, and her teeth chattered.

"Temerl, come with me!" Pinchosl both ordered and pleaded.

"Where to?"

"To my house—I mean home, where we live."

"Where is your home? Who is the 'we'? Did you find another woman?"

"No, Temerl, but . . ."

"Don't lie to me! I beseech you! In the name of God. Oh, I'm afraid!"

Pinchosl started to walk ahead, and he motioned to Temerl to follow him. As they walked, Pinchosl was saying, "According to the Talmud, when a man is overcome by the evil spirit and knows of no way out he should wrap himself in black garments and go to a place where he is not known and do what his heart desires. This is what we did, Elkonah and I."

They came to another alley and to a shabby-looking house. Pinchosl urged Temerl to come inside, but she refused. He pulled her by the arm, but she stood firm. After much hesitation, she gave in. Luckily, Elkonah was not home. There was a clay oven in the house and a kneading board. The place smelled of yeast and firewood. Temerl imagined that she recognized some of Pinchosl's books in the bookcase. A ladder led up to a loft bed. Pinchosl invited her to sit down. This was no longer the modest, bashful Pinchosl she remembered but a

worldly man who reminded her of the adventurers described in the storybooks she used to read before she married. Pinchosl offered her some of the pretzels he had baked and a glass of soda water. He repeatedly apologized for his sins and the suffering he had caused her and her parents. He even joked and smiled—something he never did in former times. Temerl heard herself saying, "Since you seem to regret your sins, perhaps you could repent and return to God and even to me."

"It's too late for that," Pinchosl answered. "I can regret but not repent. Those who are trapped in our net can never escape." And he quoted the Book of Proverbs: "None who come to her return, nor do they reach the paths of life."

Shocked as Temerl was, she heard him out. She told Pinchosl that there was only one redeeming act for him, and that was to divorce her and free her as quickly as possible. Pinchosl agreed immediately but said that the divorce could not take place in Kalisz,



"Mr. and Mrs. Dunlap, you are accused of filling your son Randolph's head with romantic claptrap and liberal flapdoodle, thus preventing him from becoming a productive member of society. How do you plead?"

where he was known as Elkonah's wife. "You could have done this from the very beginning," Temerl reproached him. "And spared me all the misery I went through."

"We know that we will be punished, and we are ready for the fires of Gehenna," Pinchosl said. "Passions, too, are fires. They are Gehenna on earth, perhaps the Gate to Hell. Meanwhile, come let us have a glass of tea together."

Temerl could not believe her own eyes. Pinchosl served tea with jam for her. They were sitting and drinking like two sisters. He was saying, "My parents had hoped to have grandchildren from us, but certainly not through an outcast like me, who would be excommunicated by the Jews and hanged on the gallows by the Gentiles. But you, Temerl, will soon remarry and bring your parents all the joy they expected. I wish you good luck in advance."

"You are utterly mad, but thank you just the same," Temerl said.

That evening, when Elkonah came home—a tall, handsome man in a

short coat and a silk vest, his black sidelocks curled in ringlets—he was told the whole story. While Pinchosl still spoke with the humility of a Jew, Elkonah proved to be like one of those who are referred to in the Talmud as profligates for the sake of spite. He denied the existence of God, of Providence, and the holiness of the Torah. He went so far as to suggest that Temerl should get the divorce papers from him, Elkonah, in order to save Pinchosl a costly trip.

Temerl asked Elkonah, "Have you no fear of God at all?"

He answered, "All I ask of Pinchosl is for him to come back soon and continue to bake pretzels for the yeshiva boys—some of whom I have managed to seduce." And he winked and laughed.

SOME weeks later, when Baila was sitting in the kitchen with her maid, plucking goose down for a feather bed, the door opened and Temerl entered. It was snowing outside. An icy wind rattled the shutters. Baila let out a wild cry of joy and

jumped up from her stool, and all the down on her apron fell off. The maid lost her tongue altogether. Even before Baila could greet and kiss her daughter, Temerl announced, "Mazel tov! Here are my divorce papers, written by a master scribe, signed by two kosher witnesses."

That was almost all she could tell that day and for many days, weeks, months, and even years after. The real story, with all its peculiarities, Temerl could not tell, because Pinchosl had made her swear by God, by the Pentateuch, by the lives of her father and mother, and by everything holy to her never to mention any details as long as she lived. All she could say was that she had found her husband somewhere and had got her divorce. The entire story was told

to a rabbi and to the elders of the burial society many years later when Temerl lay on her deathbed and was reciting her confession, surrounded by her sons, daughters, and grandchildren, as well as friends and admirers from the region, where she lived to a ripe old age.

"There were many demands and temptations for me to break my oath of silence," Temerl was saying, "but, thank God, I kept my lips sealed until today. Now, after all these years, I am free and ready to tell the whole story, since the place where I am going is called the World of Truth."

Temerl closed her eyes. The women of the burial society had already prepared the feather to hold under the dying woman's nostrils to see if she was still breathing. Suddenly, Temerl opened her eyes and smiled, as the moribund sometimes do, and she said, "Who knows? Perhaps I will meet this madman once again in Gehenna."

—ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

(Translated, from the Yiddish, by Deborah Menashe.)