

The Ninth of Av

I CLIMB INTO RICHARD'S PHAETON, PULLING MY LAME LEG UP BEHIND me with some difficulty as my boot catches underneath the edge of the carriage. Richard has his watch out with the cover open. The horse stamps its foot, as impatient to be underway as its owner.

Each morning my brother stops for me on the way from his house to the German National Bank, where we are both employed. Here on Vance Avenue and nearby live many of the merchants and businessmen of the Israelite community. When we first came to Memphis, all the new immigrants lived in the central business district and walked to work each day and home for our noon dinner. Now we measure our prosperity by the distance between its source and our residences. Richard, of course, lives a few blocks farther up Vance Avenue from me.

“Good morning, Louis. You're late again.”

“Good morning, Richard. How are you on this fine August morning?” This first exchange of the day is always difficult, as it reminds me that walking out my door transforms me from the head of my household to my younger brother's underling.

“I despise August. It's so unbearably hot, and the mosquitoes are worse than ever this year.” Richard takes off his hat to scratch his head and then adjusts it so the band can soak up the sweat before it drips down his forehead. The day has barely begun and already his clothes are nearly soaked.

The wisteria that climbs the pillars of the front porch is wilted from the heat. In the spring the front entrance is hardly visible for the purple blossoms, but today the dark wood of the door stands out against the red brick that surrounds it. Last April when Minnie turned four, she said the house was in its best dress for her birthday. In August it hangs like a shroud.

As the carriage starts to move away, my wife, Rebecca, pulls the curtains apart and looks out from the upstairs window. She waits for Dr. Gibson.

AS WE GET NEARER TO DOWNTOWN, THE NUMBER OF CARRIAGES multiplies. One by one they enter onto the street until they are like the carriages of a train, all following the same track. We nod our heads to the other businessmen as they join us.

“Minnie had the chills last evening,” I say.

Richard looks at me in alarm. “In this heat?”

The conversation about town since July has been about nothing but the cases of Yellow Fever reported first in New Orleans and now Grenada, Mississippi. Half of Memphis is prepared to flee if the epidemic should take hold here. The memory of '73 is still with us when thousands died, including our brother-in-law. Thankfully the rest of our family survived.

“Dr. Gibson is on his way to see her. I'm sure it's nothing.” The image of Minnie enduring that kind of suffering enters my mind and I banish it quickly.

Drops of perspiration have escaped from under the band of Richard's hat and are traveling toward his nose. He looks as if he's about to say something, but doesn't.

WHEN WE ARRIVE AT THE BANK, THE BOOKKEEPER IS WAITING. THE three of us enter and Richard relocks the door behind us. It's darker and slightly cooler in here. I wait in the teller cage while Richard goes to the vault, opens the safe and brings the cash tray to install in the drawer in front of me. There are chits to sign, certifying that we both counted the cash. Record-keeping formalities completed, he unlocks the front door and nods his head in my direction as he goes back to his office and his mahogany desk.

Now there's nothing to do but wait for the door to open and admit a customer. I used to try to chat with Richard while I waited, but he made it plain that I was bothering him. My younger brother is the Vice President and I am merely the Cashier.

Perhaps, because we are sons of bankrupt immigrants, he feels honored to be entrusted with so important a responsibility. He takes care of this bank as if it belongs to him, when in fact he's just a hired hand. He will be a very old man by the time they elect him to the Board of Directors or allow him to purchase shares in the business.

Finally, Friedrich Borgert, the pharmacist, my friend from the German Cultural Club, approaches my teller cage. He relinquishes his bag of cash and bank drafts.

“Wasn't that a delightful picnic last Sunday?” I ask.

“Oh, yes. The cakes, the pies....”

“The beer....” Like many of the other Germans, Freddy is overly fond of his alcohol. “Is there anything else?” I ask when I’ve given him his receipt.

He waves a small piece of paper in the air. “I have a bank draft from New York. My father passed away nearly a year ago and it has taken this long to settle his estate and send me my share—nearly one thousand dollars. I’d like to have a word with your brother. He has a reputation for choosing sound investments.”

“I’ve done a bit of investing myself.” I say. “I could make some recommendations....”

“I’m sure you could, Louis. I’m sure you could.” He smiles and winks at me, but I don’t get his joke. “May I?” he asks, motioning toward the back office.

“Go ahead. I am sure he will be happy to help you.” Of course, everyone thinks that Richard is brilliant at investments—they think he is brilliant at everything.

By half past eleven I have seen only a few customers. This is turning out to be a terrible day. Minnie might be ill, the heat is stifling, business is slow, and now my favorite customer is coming in search of Richard.

I look at my watch for the hundredth time. A smile comes to my face when I think about how Minnie likes me to open it so she can point to the numbers and name them—such a smart little girl. May the sickness pass over her.

I’m glad it is nearly time for the noon meal, but I cannot imagine how I will pass the long afternoon without going mad. Just as Richard and I are leaving the bank for the restaurant around the corner, my stepson David arrives breathless at the door.

“Papa—you need to come home—quick!”

“What is it?” Richard asks before I can respond.

“It’s Minnie. Dr. Gibson thinks she might have Yellow Fever. He said I should fetch you.”

I look at Richard, and he nods his head. “You go. I’ll take care of the bank.” He motions me away with his hand. “Go.”

David has my carriage waiting in the street. He is now twenty-three, four years older than I was when I left my family in Philadelphia to come to Memphis, but he seems younger. By his age I was already the head of a family.

I have been David’s papa for fifteen years, but there are times when I don’t know how to speak to him. He has been silent since we started toward home.

“Have you sent word to Mr. Haas that you will be late to work today?”

“I think he knows that by now,” he replies.

“Nonetheless, you owe him the courtesy of an explanation.”

“Yes, sir, I will take care of it later.” He wipes the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. “We need to get home first.”

I don’t want to think about what awaits us at home. “How are you getting along in Mr. Haas’s business?”

“Honestly, I don’t enjoy being a bookkeeper, and I don’t enjoy working for Mr. Haas either.”

This is the first I have heard of any dissatisfaction on his part.

“Uncle Richard has said he would take you on as a junior bookkeeper at the bank...”

“Being a bookkeeper at a bank—how much different would that be from being a bookkeeper at a cotton factor’s?” He shakes his head. “Did you never want to be something other than a banker?”

“You forget I had my own grocery before I became a banker. If I could be anything, I would be a musician. But there’s no money in it. I have responsibilities. Soon you will too.”

He looks straight ahead as we approach the carriage house. Perhaps I’ve been too harsh. Have I forgotten how I felt when my parents sent me away from home to earn money for the family? Now I am a father, like them, thinking only of duty and responsibility.

MINNIE LIES IN BED WITH HER EYES CLOSED, COVERED BY WOOL BLANKETS. Dr. Gibson, Rebecca, and my stepdaughter Lilly are standing in the corner of the room speaking quietly.

“I have already administered castor oil, so she should purge her bowels soon,” says Dr. Gibson, nodding to acknowledge that David and I have arrived. “Put her feet in a hot mustard bath and moisten her skin with a cool cloth as you have been doing. If her fever gets higher or retreats completely, send for me at once. Keep her comfortable. She may have cold water, or warm orange-leaf tea, but no solid food. I’m leaving you these written instructions. Sometime between twenty-four and thirty-six hours her fever may break and she may seem to be getting better. That is the crucial day. Send for me immediately when that happens.” Rebecca reaches for the instructions. Dr. Gibson, after a moment’s hesitation, gives them to her. He takes his bag and turns to go.

“I need to speak to you,” he whispers as he passes me. I follow him into the hallway.

“Are you certain it’s Yellow Fever?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“Well, it’s the right time of year, and there have been cases downriver.”

“Is she...will she live?” I close my eyes and brace myself for his answer.

“Too soon to tell. If it is Yellow Fever, well, I’ve seen children recover, but not all of them do. It has to take its course—all we can do in the meantime is try to make her comfortable. Some doctors claim they have cures, but I don’t believe in any of it. God will decide.”

I nod, barely comprehending anything he has said.

“But there’s something else I want to talk to you about.” He strokes his beard, and then purses his lips. “I’m worried about Rebecca.”

“Is she ill too?” This cannot be.

“No, it’s not that. I know you weren’t here when Morris had his accident.”

“That was twenty years ago,” I say.

“Yes, well, after the accident....” He licks his lips and strokes his beard again. “Rebecca...she tried to take her own life.”

I grope for the hall chair and manage to ease myself into it before my bad leg gives out. “But she never said anything....”

“She was the one who found Morris on the ground after he fell off the roof. He was in bad condition. There was nothing I could do for him. He only lasted a few hours. She was young, with two small children, out of her mind with grief. I don’t know if she would react that way again, but should we take that chance? I’ve given her some laudanum—it should put her to sleep soon. I’ll leave more for you to give her when that wears off. Here are instructions for administering it.”

I put the vials and the instructions in my coat pocket. “For how long?”

“A few days at least. Until we see....”

Whether Minnie survives?

He starts down the stairs and then stops and turns back to me. “Don’t leave the vials where Rebecca can find them.”

WHEN I RETURN TO MINNIE’S ROOM, REBECCA’S EYES NARROW AS SHE demands, “What did that doctor say to you?”

“He is worried about your nerves. He wants you to rest. We don’t need two sick people in the family now, do we?”

“Mama, you do look tired,” says Lilly. “You were up all night with Minnie. Just come and take a little rest.” The laudanum must be working, as Rebecca’s resistance subsides and she allows Lilly to take her to bed.

Poor Minnie has awakened and her blue eyes are now red. The brown curls that frame her face are wet with perspiration. David dips a cloth in the washbasin and gently blots her face with it.

“David, Dr. Gibson has given Mama something to calm her and help her sleep. He says we should give her more medicine later. We’ll have to find someone to help us take care of Minnie.”

“No, I can take care of her.”

“But Dr. Gibson wants us to protect Mama from too much agitation—she’s not going to be able to help. You cannot possibly do this yourself.”

“I said I’ll do it!” His forehead is creased with anger. “Lilly will help me. I’m not going to leave Minnie’s side.”

I shake my head. He underestimates what this illness can do, but I haven’t the desire to argue. He will learn for himself soon enough.

I go into our bedroom, sit in the chair next to my wife’s side of the bed and hold her hand while she sleeps. How could she have done what Dr. Gibson says, nearly abandoning David and Lilly when they were so small? Even if she did it then, I cannot believe she would do it again.

Her breathing is deep and regular now. Her face is peaceful and breathes no worries. How I wish I could join her in sweet oblivion.

I have no idea what I should do. I go back to sit in Minnie’s room for a while with David and Lilly, but can’t seem to stay in one place. I look out the window for a while and then go back to the chair.

“Papa, doesn’t Uncle Richard need you at the bank?” Lilly asks. “You’ve been gone for over an hour now.” She and David exchange a glance.

“We’ll take good care of her,” says David.

“It might be better for you to have something to do, Papa. You’re so restless,” says Lilly.

I look at poor Minnie and listen to her labored breathing. I don’t know how to help here.

“We’ll be fine. Go ahead,” says David, ushering me out of the room.

RICHARD HAS TAKEN MY PLACE IN THE TELLER’S CAGE. “BUSINESS IS very slow this afternoon. You needn’t have come back.”

“There was nothing I could do at home.” I prop my walking stick against the edge of the counter and wait for Richard to relinquish my chair.

“What did Dr. Gibson say?” he asks, standing up.

“He can’t be sure yet. He left instructions for her care and David and Lilly are staying by her side.”

“What about Rebecca? Why isn’t she taking care of Minnie?”

“She’s suffering from nerves—Dr. Gibson said she should rest.”

Richard raises his eyebrows. “She’s not ill, too, is she?”

“No, he said she should not become too distressed.” I don’t think he believes me, but I cannot tell him the true story.

THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON PASSES SLOWLY. THERE ARE A FEW MORE customers, some of them talking about Yellow Fever, all of them complaining about the heat. Twice I make counting mistakes because I'm thinking about Rebecca and Minnie. Perhaps I should not have come back to work. Finally it's time to lock the door, count up everything, fill out the proper papers, and ride back home, alone this time.

When I arrive at home, Rebecca is awake, but still in her bed. The effects of the laudanum are evident. Her eyelids look heavy and her neck seems to barely support her head. "How are you feeling?" I sit down next to her and take her hand. I must ask her why she didn't tell me about what she did after Morris's death, but this is not the right time.

"Sleepy. Lilly won't let me get up and see Minnie. I'm worried—someone needs to take care of her. Why am I so sleepy?"

"It's just the medicine Dr. Gibson gave you. David and Lilly are taking care of Minnie. Everything is fine."

"But Dr. Gibson said she has Yellow Fever..."

"He said he can't be sure yet. He said you shouldn't get too excited—you need to rest."

"I need to see Minnie." She moves as if to get out of bed, but I hold her back.

"Let me go see her first and then I'll come and get you."

David is where I left him earlier in the afternoon, sponging Minnie's hot skin. He looks up.

"She's still feverish. She says her head hurts and she's thirsty." Her eyes are closed and she does not move as he brushes her wet hair away from her face and looks up at me. He should be tired from sitting there all day, but his voice is strong and his eyes are more intense than I've ever seen them.

I can barely breathe the heavy dank air. The windows are closed and the curtains drawn to keep out the sun. Minnie's perspiration has dyed her wool blankets dark. David's shirt clings to his body; his wet hair is plastered against his head. The smell of the mustard bath penetrates the thick air and stings my nostrils.

I go back into Rebecca's room. "You can see Minnie now—she's sleeping. David is taking good care of her." I help her get out of bed and walk to Minnie's room.

She can barely keep her head up, but when she nears Minnie she becomes alert for a moment. She strokes Minnie's arm and her cheek. "Poor little Minnie. You're going to feel better soon. You'll see."

"Mama, my legs hurt." This is the first I've heard her speak today. She is usually a boisterous child, talking and laughing and singing

until my ears ache. Now, though I can barely hear her, the sound of her voice is like the finest aria.

“Oh, my dear, I am sorry your legs hurt. They’ll feel better soon. Try to sleep now.” Rebecca’s voice is expressionless, her face so slackened that I hardly recognize her. I put my arm around her and take her back to bed.

She looks up at me with the face of a child. “I’ve had such pleasant dreams. Fields of flowers and cool breezes. . . .” She drifts off. Once again, she is peaceful. If only we could all be with her, wherever she is.

I AWAKEN AN HOUR EARLIER THAN USUAL FROM AN UNEASY NIGHT’S sleep and dress quietly so as not to disturb Rebecca. David’s in the hallway. I ask if he’s slept.

“A little. Lilly and I took turns last night. I’m going to eat something and then go back to Minnie so Lilly can sleep.”

Lilly is putting dry blankets over Minnie.

“How is she?”

“Still feverish, still has a headache and now aching in her legs and arms. She cried out for Mama a few times last night, but we were able to quiet her.”

“Shall I stay with her for a while?” I ask.

She nods. “I’ll take these blankets and hang them out to dry. David will be back up soon.”

Minnie’s sleep is fitful. She makes whimpering noises and tosses her head from side to side. I pick up the cloth and dip it in the basin, but the water is warm and I have no way to cool it. Her forehead feels like a stone baked in the sun. Her skin is hot and dry; she has no more water in her for perspiring.

Her eyes flutter open. “Papa, I’m hot.”

“I know you are, my darling. Let’s take these blankets off. Does that feel better?” A tiny smile barely appears on her lips as she nods and closes her eyes again. A smile comes to my lips as well for the first time since yesterday.

David’s voice rings out from the doorway. “Why are the blankets off her?” He rushes in and puts them back on.

“She needed some air. No wonder she’s hot, covered with blankets in August.”

“It’s fever! She needs to keep the blankets on! Dr. Gibson said to keep the blankets on!” He screams like a madman. I am speechless, frozen to the chair. An eternity passes while he stands over Minnie, protecting her, glaring down at me. I am no longer the father in this house, but a small child who has been naughty.

"I will be at the bank, then," I say as I leave the room, my voice quivering.

Richard is waiting in the carriage for me when I leave the house, putting his watch back in its pocket.

"How is Minnie this morning?"

I try to answer, but nothing comes out until I clear my throat. "About the same."

"And Rebecca?"

"Resting." I pat my jacket pocket to be sure the one remaining vial is still there.

"Louis, have you seen the newspaper?"

As the carriage starts to move forward, I can't take my eyes off my house. David is watching me from Minnie's room. The heavy curtains downstairs are pulled together to keep the sun out. I forgot to close the front door in my haste to leave.

"No. Why?" I continue watching my house until it is finally out of sight.

"Yellow Fever. A Negro man who arrived here on a boat a few days ago from New Orleans has come down with it."

"One case doesn't necessarily mean an epidemic. And we didn't get sick in '73."

"Except Simon."

I nod. "I wasn't forgetting Simon."

"In '73 I didn't have two small children to think about, and one more on the way. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to them, or Tillie." He wipes his brow with his handkerchief and I can see the fear in his eyes. "We're leaving."

"Where will you go?"

"Cincinnati. I'll cable today and arrange to rent a house. We can't wait too long or we may not be allowed in." He thinks for a moment. "What about the rest of your family? Has anyone else taken ill?"

"No. Everyone is fine."

"Then you must come with us."

Ever since he followed me to Memphis he has felt free to tell me what I must do.

"What about Minnie?"

"We can wait a day, maybe two. No longer."

I realize he's been planning this since the rumors of fever began.

"What about the bank?" I ask.

"I'll close the bank."

"You'll close it? But your position..."

He looks at me in disbelief. "This may be a matter of life and death and

you think I'd worry about the bank?" He shakes his head and slows the horses to allow another carriage to cross. "When we get downtown, I'll go to send the cables." He hands me his keys. "You open up."

"What about the signatures, checking the till..."

"Damn it, Louis—can't you see what we're up against? The paperwork can wait! Just open the bank. I'll take care of everything else."

I clench my teeth and look away. He'll take care of everything else.

THIS MORNING, MINNIE HAS THE "BLACK VOMIT," WHICH HAS THAT name because it resembles coffee grounds.

By last night Minnie's fever was calmed, so David went for Dr. Gibson, as instructed. Soon after his arrival, she began to have stomach pains. He attached a cup by suction to her abdomen by first lighting a candle to burn the air out of it and then placing it on her so that it stuck to her skin, but that did not still the pains. She became delirious and they gave her some brandy. Dr. Gibson stayed with her all through the night and David never left her side. I tried to stay up with them, but this morning I find myself waking up on the floor of her room.

I can't think of going to the bank today. I send Lilly to Richard's house to tell him.

In the middle of the afternoon, Dr. Gibson picks up his bag to leave and I follow him into the hall.

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, I've done all that I can. I have other patients to see now."

"Is she going to...?" My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. I can't say the word.

"She could still pull through, but I don't think it's very likely at this stage. I would pray if I were you. Maybe Hebrew prayers are stronger than English since it's the Lord's own tongue."

Poor Lilly is exhausted with preparing all the meals and helping David. After she brings supper upstairs for David and me, I send her to bed for fear she will be the next to succumb.

It is time to give Rebecca more laudanum. The vial is in the pocket of my jacket hanging on the coat tree. I look at the amber liquid inside and take the cork off. There is a strong smell of alcohol. I put the vial up to my lips and tilt it back the slightest amount, but stop before the liquid goes into my mouth. I shake my head and put the cork back in and take it upstairs to Rebecca.

David and I sit by Minnie's side eating our supper, not speaking to each other. She is so still that we check several times to see if she is breathing.

I want my prayer book. It isn't downstairs in the parlor bookcase where it belongs, nor in the secretary.

I limp back up the stairs. "David, do you know where my *siddur* is? I can't find it."

"What?" He looks at me blankly.

"Prayer book."

"Oh...yes. It's here. I went to get it last night," he says, handing it to me. "But it only had Hebrew and German and I hardly remember any prayers, so I just held it." He sniffs. "I tried to pray in English." His lip quivers. I put my arms around him—the first time I have done so since he was a small child.

"We'll find something you remember and we'll say it together."

He is sobbing now and I feel a tear rolling down my own cheek. I hold him in my arms until his body stops shaking and I hear his voice quietly saying the one Hebrew sentence that every small child learns—the *Shema*. "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One." He wipes his face and moves closer to Minnie.

Her pulse is very faint now. I don't know whether I should wake Rebecca so that she can see Minnie one last time. I look over at David but he does not look back at me. He is watching Minnie so intently, as if he can will her back to health just with his eyes.

I go and try to wake Rebecca, but she is still so drowsy she can barely stand.

"Rebecca, can you hear me?" She looks at me but I can't tell if she knows I'm there. "Rebecca, you need to wake up now."

"Louis?"

"Minnie is very weak and may not last the night. I'm taking you to see her."

She tilts her head and queries me with her eyes.

"I think Minnie may be dying."

"No! Not Minnie!" She buries her head in my shirt and begins sobbing. For several minutes we stand in our bedroom.

"Let's go see her. Let's say goodbye." My voice catches on the last word.

We help Rebecca into the chair nearest Minnie's bed. When the fever left, it took the color from her face. She is as white and delicate as the dogwood blossoms that were blooming the day she was born. Rebecca lifts Minnie's hand up to her own cheek and holds it there.

I open the *siddur* to a prayer for the sick—one last attempt to fight off the Angel of Death. I use a clean cloth to cover my head, motion to David to do the same, and begin to chant in Hebrew. "*Mi Sheberakh...*"

Just before midnight, Minnie stirs; her eyes fly open quickly and then close. She makes a choking noise, and then no more pulse. She is gone.

Rebecca lets out a scream and tears her nightgown over her heart. I rip my shirt in the same place. David sits staring blankly.

“Why? Why?” Rebecca keeps repeating the word between sobs. I hold her close, my tears washing her red hair.

The crying has exhausted her, so I take Rebecca back to bed. We have no more laudanum to give her, but she lies as still as Minnie.

MINNIE’S BURIAL WAS THIS MORNING, WITH JUST A FEW HASTY WORDS from the rabbi. We can’t stay at home to sit *shiva*—the seven days of mourning—Richard says we must run for our lives and we obey. I no longer have the will to argue.

Before we leave we must burn Minnie’s bedding and clothing—everything in the sickroom that might allow the disease to greet us when we return. I hesitate when I see the *siddur* on the table. It cannot be burned; it must be buried in sacred ground. Besides, Minnie did not touch it, so I replace it on the shelf in the parlor. The calendar on the secretary lies open to the month of Av. Today is the ninth—*Tisha B’Av*—a fast day, the day the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the Israelites went into exile. The world is destroyed once again.

“I’m not going,” David says as we’re leaving for the train station. He wipes his palms on his trousers and looks down at his shoes. “I’ve asked Dr. Gibson to accept me as an apprentice.”

How can we be asked to give up two children in one week? “You don’t know what you’re saying. Your mother needs you.”

“I’m needed here. There are going to be more Yellow Fever patients. I’ve joined the Howard Society and I’ll work with Dr. Gibson until I know enough to be on my own.”

Lilly and I hug him and cry as if to mourn him in advance. I don’t know if Rebecca even understood what David said. Her face is a blank, not from the laudanum, but from the absence of it. We will all live in pain from this day forward.

The train is so crowded that we have to force our way on, Richard leading the way.