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Lower East Side, New York City, between 1900 and 1915

ANZIA YEZIERSKA
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THE LOST
“BEAUTIFULNESS”
&
SOAP and WATER
in
HUNGRY HEARTS
[short story collection] 1920

The Lost “Beautifulness”

“OI WEH! How it shines the beautifulness!” exulted Hanneh Hayyeh over her newly painted kitchen. She cast a glance full of worship and adoration at the picture of her son in uniform; eyes like her own, shining with eagerness, with joy of life, looked back at her.

“Aby will not have to shame himself to come back to his old home,” she rejoiced, clapping her hands — hands blistered from the paintbrush and calloused from rough toil. “Now he’ll be able to invite all the grandest friends he made in the army.”

The smell of the paint was suffocating, but she inhaled in it huge draughts of hidden beauty. For weeks she had dreamed of it and felt in each tin of paint she was able to buy, in each stroke of the brush, the ecstasy of loving service for the son she idolized.

Ever since she first began to wash the fine silks and linens for Mrs. Preston, years ago, it had been Hanneh Hayyeh’s ambition to have a white-painted kitchen exactly like that in the old Stuyvesant Square mansion. Now her own kitchen was a dream come true.

Hanneh Hayyeh ran in to her husband, a stoop-shouldered, care-crushed man who was leaning against the bed, his swollen feet outstretched, counting the pennies that totaled his day’s earnings.

“Jake Safransky!” she cried excitedly, “you got to come in and give a look on my painting before you go to sleep.”

“Oi, let me alone. Give me only a rest.”

Too intoxicated with the joy of achievement to take no for an answer, she dragged him into the doorway. “Nu? How do you like it? Do I know what beautiful is?”

“But how much money did you spend out on that paint?”

“It was my own money,” she said, wiping the perspiration off her face with a corner of her apron. “Every penny I earned myself from the extra washing.”

“But you had ought save it up for the bad times. What’ll you do when the cold weather starts in and the pushcart will not wheel itself out?”

“I save and pinch enough for myself. This I done in honor for my son. I want my Aby to lift up his head in the world. I want him to be able to invite even the President from America to his home and shame himself.”

“You’d pull the bananas off a blind man’s pushcart to bring to your Aby. You know nothing from holding tight to a dollar and saving a penny to a penny like poor people should.”

“What do I got from living if I can’t have a little beautifulness in my life? I don’t allow for myself the ten cents to go to a moving picture that I’m crazy to see. I never yet treated myself to an ice-cream soda even for a holiday. Shining up the house for Aby is my only pleasure.”

“Yah, but it ain’t your house. It’s the landlord’s.”

“Don’t I live in it? I soak in pleasure from every inch of my kitchen. Why, I could kiss the grand white color on the walls. It lights up my eyes like sunshine in the room.”

Her glance traveled from the newly painted walls to the geranium on the window-sill, and back to her husband’s face.

“Jake!” she cried, shaking him, “ain’t you got eyes? How can you look on the way it dances the beautifulness from every corner and not jump in the air from happiness?”

“I’m only thinking on the money you spent out on the landlord’s house. Look only on me! I’m black from worry, but no care lays on your head. It only dreams itself in you how to make yourself for an American and lay in every penny you got on fixing out the house like the rich.”

“I’m sick of living like a pig with my nose to the earth, all the time only pinching and scraping for bread and rent. So long my Aby is with America, I want to make myself for an American. I could tear the stars out from heaven for my Aby’s wish.”

Her sunken cheeks were flushed and her eyes glowed with light as she gazed about her.

“When I see myself around the house how I fixed it up with my own hands, I forget I’m only a nobody. It makes me feel I’m also a person like Mrs. Preston. It lifts me with high thoughts.”

“Why didn’t you marry yourself to a millionaire? You always want to make yourself like Mrs. Preston who got millions laying in the bank.”

“But Mrs. Preston does make me feel that I’m alike with her,” returned Hanneh Hayyeh, proudly. “Don’t she talk herself out to me like I was her friend? Mrs. Preston says this war is to give everybody a chance to lift up his head like a person. It is to bring together the people on top who got everything and the people on the bottom who got nothing. She’s been telling me about a new word — democracy. It got me on fire. Democracy means that everybody in America is going to be with everybody alike.”

“Och! Stop your dreaming out of your head. Close up your mouth from your foolishness. Women got long hair and small brains,” he finished, muttering as he went to bed.

At the busy gossiping hour of the following morning when the butcher-shop was crowded with women in dressing-sacks and wrappers covered over with shawls, Hanneh Hayyeh elbowed her way into the clamorous babel of her neighbors.

“What are you so burning? What are you so flaming?”

“She’s always on fire with the wonders of her son.”

“The whole world must stop still to listen to what news her son writes to her.”

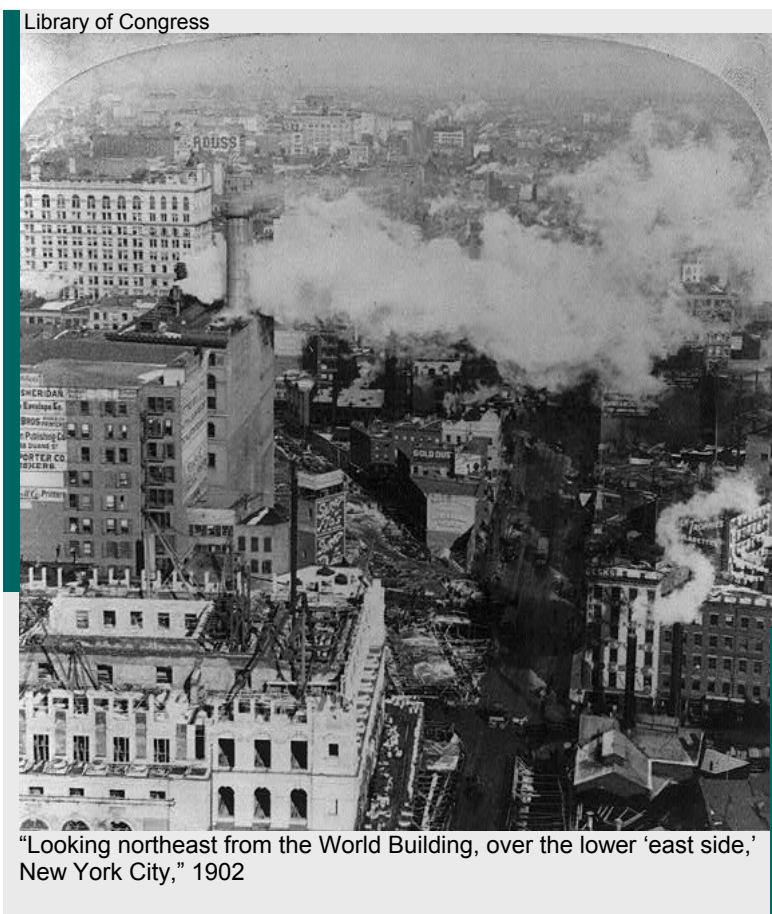
“She thinks her son is the only one soldier by the American army.”

“My Benny is also one great wonder from smartness, but I ain’t such a crazy mother like she.”

The voices of her neighbors rose from every corner, but Hanneh Hayyeh, deaf to all, projected herself forward.

“What are you pushing yourself so wild? You ain’t going to get your meat first. Ain’t it, Mr. Sopkin, all got to wait their turn?”

Mr. Sopkin glanced up in the midst of cutting apart a quarter of meat. He wiped his knife on his greasy apron and leaned across the counter.



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“Looking northeast from the World Building, over the lower ‘east side,’ New York City,” 1902

“Nu? Hanneh Hayyeh?” his ruddy face beamed. “Have you another letter from little Aby in France? What good news have you got to tell us?”

“No — it’s not a letter,” she retorted, with a gesture of impatience. “The good news is that I got done with the painting of my kitchen — and you all got to come and give a look how it shines in my house like in a palace.”

Mr. Sopkin resumed cutting the meat.

“Oi weh!” clamored Hanneh Hayyeh, with feverish breathlessness. “Stop with your meat already and quick come. The store ain’t going to run away from you! It will take only a minute. With one step you are upstairs in my house.” She flung out her hands. “And everybody got to come along.”

“Do you think I can make a living from looking on the wonders you turn over in your house?” remonstrated the butcher, with a twinkle in his eye.

“Making money ain’t everything in life. My new-painted kitchen will light up your heart with joy.”

Seeing that Mr. Sopkin still made no move, she began to coax and wheedle, woman-fashion. “Oi weh! Mr. Sopkin! Don’t be so mean. Come only. Your customers ain’t going to run away from you. If they do, they only got to come back, because you ain’t a skinner. You weigh the meat honest.”

How could Mr. Sopkin resist such seductive flattery?

“Hanneh Hayyeh!” he laughed. “You’re crazy up in the air, but nobody can say no to anything you take into your head.”

He tossed his knife down on the counter. “Everybody!” he called; “let us do her the pleasure and give a look on what she got to show us.”

“Oi weh! I ain’t got no time,” protested one. “I left my baby alone in the house locked in.”

“And I left a pot of eating on the stove boiling. It must be all burned away by this time.”

“But you all got time to stand around here and chatter like a box of monkeys, for hours,” admonished Mr. Sopkin. “This will only take a minute. You know Hanneh Hayyeh. We can’t tear ourselves away from her till we do what wills itself in her mind.”

Protesting and gesticulating, they all followed Mr. Sopkin as Hanneh Hayyeh led the way. Through the hallway of a dark, ill-smelling tenement, up two flights of crooked, rickety stairs, they filed. When Hanneh Hayyeh opened the door there were exclamations of wonder and joy: “Oi! Oi!” and “Ay! Ay! Takeh! Takeh!”

“Gold is shining from every corner!”

“Like for a holiday!”

“You don’t need to light up the gas, so it shines!”

“I wish I could only have it so grand!”

“You ain’t got worries on your head, so it lays in your mind to make it so fancy.”

Mr. Sopkin stood with mouth open, stunned with wonder at the transformation.

Hanneh Hayyeh shook him by the sleeve exultantly. “Nu? Why ain’t you saying something?”

“Grand ain’t the word for it! What a whiteness! And what a cleanliness! It tears out the eyes from the head! Such a tenant the landlord ought to give out a medal or let down the rent free. I saw the rooms before and I see them now. What a difference from one house to another.”

“Ain’t you coming in?” Hanneh Hayyeh besought her neighbors.

“God from the world! To step with our feet on this new painted floor?”

“Shah!” said the butcher, taking off his apron and spreading it on the floor. “You can all give a step on my apron. It’s dirty, anyhow.”

They crowded in on the outspread apron and vied with one another in their words of praise.

“May you live to see your son married from this kitchen, and may we all be invited to the wedding!”

“May you live to eat here cake and wine on the feasts of your grandchildren!”

“May you have the luck to get rich and move from here into your own bought house!”

“Amen!” breathed Hanneh Hayyeh. “May we all forget from our worries for rent!”

Mrs. Preston followed with keen delight Hanneh Hayyeh’s every movement as she lifted the wash from the basket and spread it on the bed. Hanneh Hayyeh’s rough, toil-worn hands lingered lovingly, caressingly over each garment. It was as though the fabrics held something subtly animate in their texture that penetrated to her very finger-tips.

“Hanneh Hayyeh! You’re an artist!” There was reverence in Mrs. Preston’s low voice that pierced the other woman’s inmost being. “You do my laces and batistes as no one else ever has. It’s as if you breathed part of your soul into it.”

The hungry-eyed, ghetto woman drank in thirstily the beauty and goodness that radiated from Mrs. Preston’s person. None of the cultured elegance of her adored friend escaped Hanneh

Hayyeh. Her glance traveled from the exquisite shoes to the flawless hair of the well-poised head.

“Your things got so much fineness. I’m crazy for the feel from them. I do them up so light in my hands like it was thin air I was handling.”

Hanneh Hayyeh pantomimed as she spoke and Mrs. Preston, roused from her habitual reserve, put her fine, white hand affectionately over Hanneh Hayyeh’s gnarled, roughened ones.

“Oi-i-i-i! Mrs. Preston! You always make me feel so grand!” said Hanneh Hayyeh, a mist of tears in her wistful eyes. “When I go away from you I could just sit down and cry. I can’t give it out in words what it is. It chokes me so — how good you are to me — You ain’t at all like a rich lady. You’re so plain from the heart. You make the lowest nobody feel he’s somebody.”

“You are not a ‘nobody,’ Hanneh Hayyeh. You are an artist — an artist laundress.”

“What mean you an artist?”

“An artist is so filled with love for the beautiful that he has to express it in some way. You express it in your washing just as a painter paints it in a picture.”

“Paint?” exclaimed Hanneh Hayyeh. “If you could only give a look how I painted up my kitchen! It lights up the whole tenement house for

her own son, the youngest captain in his regiment whose home-coming had been delayed from week to week.

“Everything I do is done for my Aby,” breathed Hanneh Hayyeh, her hands clasping her bosom as if feeling again the throb of his babyhood at her heart. “But this painting was already dreaming itself in my head for years. You remember the time the hot iron fell on my foot and you came to see me and brought me a red flower-pot wrapped around with green crêpe paper? That flower-pot opened up the sky in my kitchen.” The words surged from the seething soul of her. “Right away I saw before my eyes how I could shine up my kitchen like a parlor by painting the walls and sewing up new curtains for the window. It was like seeing before me your face every time I looked on your flowers. I used to talk to it like it could hear and feel and see. And I said to it: ‘I’ll show you what’s in me. I’ll show you that I know what beautiful is.’”

Her face was aglow with an enthusiasm that made it seem young, like a young girl’s face.

“I begged myself by the landlord to paint up my kitchen, but he wouldn’t listen to me. So I seen that if I ever hoped to fix up my house, I’d have to spend out my own money. And I began to save a penny to a penny to have for the paint. And when I seen the painters, I always stopped them to ask where and how to buy it so that it should come out the cheapest. By day and by night it burned in me the picture — my kitchen shining all white like yours, till I couldn’t rest till I done it.”

With all her breeding, with all the restraint of her Anglo-Saxon forbears, Mrs. Preston was strangely shaken by Hanneh Hayyeh’s consuming passion for beauty. She looked deep into the eyes of the Russian Jewess as if drinking in the secret of their hidden glow.

“I am eager to see that wonderful kitchen of yours,” she said, as Hanneh Hayyeh bade her good-bye.

Hanneh Hayyeh walked home, her thoughts in a whirl with the glad anticipation of Mrs. Preston’s promised visit. She wondered how she might share the joy of Mrs. Preston’s presence with the butcher and all the neighbors. “I’ll bake up a shtrudel cake,” she thought to herself. “They will

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Lewis W. Hine, “Jewish family working on garters in kitchen for tenement home,” New York City, February 1912

blocks around. The grocer and the butcher and all the neighbors were jumping in the air from wonder and joy when they seen how I shined up my house.”

“And all in honor of Aby’s home-coming?” Mrs. Preston smiled, her thoughts for a moment on

all want to come to get a taste of the cake and then they'll give a look on Mrs. Preston."

Thus smiling and talking to herself she went about her work. As she bent over the wash-tub rubbing the clothes, she visualized the hot, steaming shtrudel just out of the oven and the exclamations of pleasure as Mrs. Preston and the neighbors tasted it. All at once there was a knock at the door. Wiping her soapy hands on the corner of her apron, she hastened to open it.

"Oi! Mr. Landlord! Come only inside," she urged. "I got the rent for you, but I want you to give a look around how I shined up my flat."

The Prince Albert that bound the protruding stomach of Mr. Benjamin Rosenblatt was no tighter than the skin that encased the smooth-shaven face. His mouth was tight. Even the small, popping eyes held a tight gleam.

"I got no time. The minutes is money," he said, extending a claw-like hand for the rent.

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Lewis W. Hine, tenement hall, New York City, Feb. 1912

"But I only want you for a half a minute." And Hanneh Hayyeh dragged the owner of her palace across the threshold. "Nu? Ain't I a good painter? And all this I done while other people were sleeping

themselves, after I'd come home from my day's work."

"Very nice," condescended Mr. Benjamin Rosenblatt, with a hasty glance around the room. "You certainly done a good job. But I got to go. Here's your receipt." And the fingers that seized Hanneh Hayyeh's rent-money seemed like pincers for grasping molars.

Two weeks later Jake Safransky and his wife Hanneh Hayyeh sat eating their dinner, when the janitor came in with a note.

"From the landlord," he said, handing it to Hanneh Hayyeh, and walked out.

"The landlord?" she cried, excitedly. "What for can it be?" With trembling fingers she tore open the note. The slip dropped from her hand. Her face grew livid, her eyes bulged with terror. "Oi weh!" she exclaimed, as she fell back against the wall.

"Gewalt!" cried her husband, seizing her limp hand, "you look like struck dead."

"Oi-i-i! The murderer! He raised me the rent five dollars a month."

"Good for you! I told you to listen to me. Maybe he thinks we got money laying in the bank when you got so many dollars to give out on paint."

She turned savagely on her husband. "What are you tearing yet my flesh? Such a money-grabber! How could I imagine for myself that so he would thank me for laying in my money to painting up his house?"

She seized her shawl, threw it over her head, and rushed to the landlord's office.

"Oi weh! Mr. Landlord! Where is your heart? How could you raise me my rent when you know my son is yet in France? And even with the extra washing I take in I don't get enough when the eating is so dear?"

"The flat is worth five dollars more," answered Mr. Rosenblatt, impatiently. "I can get another tenant any minute."

"Have pity on me! I beg you! From where I can squeeze out the five dollars more for you?"

"That don't concern me. If you can't pay, somebody else will. I got to look out for myself. In America everybody looks out for himself."

"Is it nothing by you how I painted up your house with my own blood-money?"

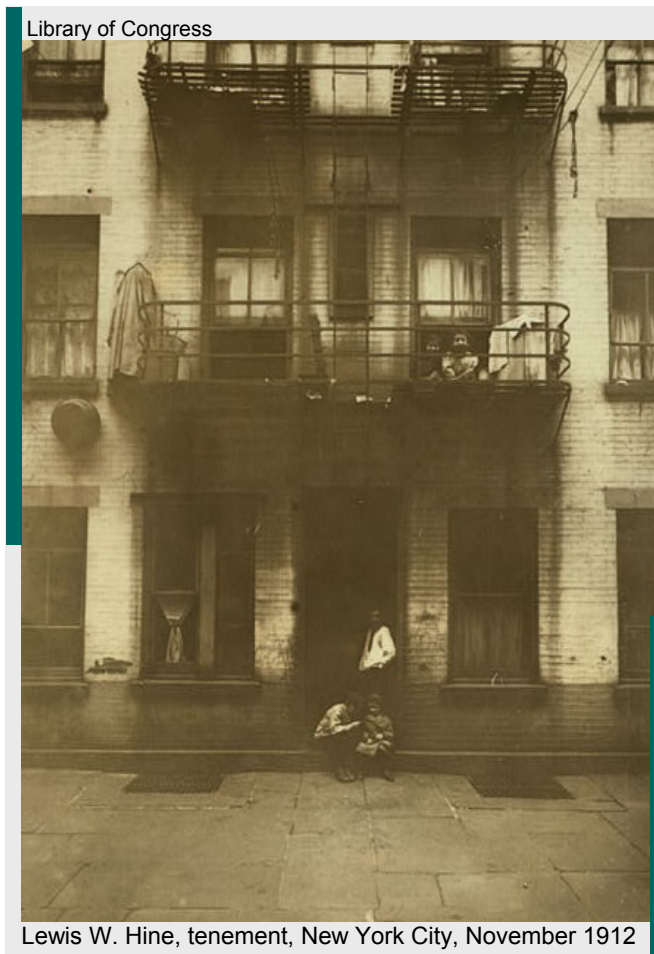
"You didn't do it for me. You done it for yourself," he sneered. "It's nothing to me how the house looks, so long as I get my rent in time. You wanted to have a swell house, so you painted it. That's all."

With a wave of his hand he dismissed her.

“I beg by your conscience! Think on God!”
Hanneh Hayyeh wrung her hands. “Ain’t your house worth more to you to have a tenant clean it out and paint it out so beautiful like I done?”

“Certainly,” snarled the landlord. “Because the flat is painted new, I can get more money for it. I got no more time for you.”

He turned to his stenographer and resumed the dictation of his letters.



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Lewis W. Hine, tenement, New York City, November 1912

Dazedly Hanneh Hayyeh left the office. A choking dryness contracted her throat as she staggered blindly, gesticulating and talking to herself.

“Oi weh! The sweat, the money I laid into my flat and it should all go to the devil. And I should be turned out and leave all my beautifulness. And from where will I get the money for moving? When I begin to break myself up to move, I got to pay out money for the moving man, money for putting up new lines, money for new shelves and new hooks besides money for the rent. I got to remain where I am. But from where can I get together the five dollars for the robber? Should I go to Moisheh

Itzek, the pawn-broker, or should I maybe ask Mrs. Preston? No — She shouldn’t think I got her for a friend only to help me. Oi weh! Where should I turn with my bitter heart?”

Mechanically she halted at the butcher-shop. Throwing herself on the vacant bench, she buried her face in her shawl and burst out in a loud, heart-piercing wail: “Woe is me! Bitter is me!”

“Hanneh Hayyeh! What to you happened?” cried Mr. Sopkin in alarm.

His sympathy unlocked the bottom depths of her misery.

“Oi-i-i! Black is my luck! Dark is for my eyes!”

The butcher and the neighbors pressed close in upon her.

“Gewalt! What is it? Bad news from Aby in France?”

“Oi-i-i! The murderer! The thief! His gall should burst as mine is bursting! His heart should break as mine is breaking! It remains for me nothing but to be thrown out in the gutter. The landlord raised me five dollars a month rent. And he ripped yet my wounds by telling me he raised me the rent because my painted-up flat is so much more worth.”

“The dogs! The blood-sucking landlords! They are the new czars from America!”

“What are you going to do?”

“What should I do? Aby is coming from France any day, and he’s got to have a home to come to. I will have to take out from my eating the meat and the milk to save together the extra five dollars. People! Give me an advice! What else can I do? If a wild wolf falls on you in the black night, will crying help you?”

With a gesture of abject despair, she fell prone upon the bench. “Gottuniu! If there is any justice and mercy on this earth, then may the landlord be tortured like he is torturing me! May the fires burn him and the waters drown him! May his flesh be torn from him in pieces and his bones be ground in the teeth of wild dogs!”

Two months later, a wasted, haggard Hanneh Hayyeh stood in the kitchen, folding Mrs. Preston’s wash in her basket, when the janitor — the servant of her oppressor — handed her another note.

“From the landlord,” he said in his toneless voice.

Hanneh Hayyeh paled. She could tell from his smirking sneer that it was a second notice of increased rental.

It grew black before her eyes. She was too stunned to think. Her first instinct was to run to her husband; but she needed sympathy — not nagging. And then in her darkness she saw a light — the face of her friend, Mrs. Preston. She hurried to her.

“Oi — friend! The landlord raised me my rent again,” she gasped, dashing into the room like a thing hounded by wild beasts.

Mrs. Preston was shocked by Hanneh Hayyeh’s distraught appearance. For the first time she noticed the ravages of worry and hunger.

“Hanneh Hayyeh! Try to calm yourself. It is really quite inexcusable the way the landlords are taking advantage of the situation. There must be a way out. We’ll fix it up somehow.”

“How fix it up?” Hanneh Hayyeh flared.

“We’ll see that you get the rent you need.” There was reassurance and confidence in Mrs. Preston’s tone.

Hanneh Hayyeh’s eyes flamed. Too choked for utterance, her breath ceased for a moment.

“I want no charity! You think maybe I came to beg? No — I want justice!”

She shrank in upon herself, as though to ward off the raised whip of her persecutor. “You know how I feel?” Her voice came from the terrified depths of her. “It’s as if the landlord pushed me in a corner and said to me: ‘I want money, or I’ll squeeze from you your life!’ I have no money, so he takes my life.”

“Last time, when he raised me my rent, I done without meat and without milk. What more can I do without?”

The piercing cry stirred Mrs. Preston as no mere words had done.

“Sometimes I get so weak for a piece of meat, I could tear the world to pieces. Hunger and bitterness are making a wild animal out of me. I ain’t no more the same Hanneh Hayyeh I used to be.”

The shudder that shook Hanneh Hayyeh communicated itself to Mrs. Preston. “I know the prices are hard to bear,” she stammered, appalled.

“There used to be a time when poor people could eat cheap things,” the toneless voice went on. “But now there ain’t no more cheap things. Potatoes — rice — fish — even dry bread is dear. Look on my shoes! And I who used to be so neat with myself. I can’t no more have my torn shoes fixed up. A pair of shoes or a little patch is only for millionaires.”

“Something must be done,” broke in Mrs. Preston, distraught for the first time in her life. “But in the meantime, Hanneh Hayyeh, you must accept this to tide you over.” She spoke with finality as she handed her a bill.

Hanneh Hayyeh thrust back the money. “Ain’t I hurt enough without you having to hurt me yet with charity? You want to give me hush money to swallow down an unrightness that burns my flesh? I want justice.”

The woman’s words were like bullets that shot through the static security of Mrs. Preston’s life. She realized with a guilty pang that while strawberries and cream were being served at her table in January, Hanneh Hayyeh had doubtless gone without a square meal in months.

“We can’t change the order of things overnight,” faltered Mrs. Preston, baffled and bewildered by Hanneh Hayyeh’s defiance of her proffered aid.

“Change things? There’s got to be a change!” cried Hanneh Hayyeh with renewed intensity. “The world as it is is not to live in any longer. If only my Aby would get back quick. But until he comes, I’ll fight till all America will have to stop and listen to me. You was always telling me that the lowest nobody got something to give to America. And that’s what I got to give to America — the last breath in my body for justice. I’ll wake up America from its sleep. I’ll go myself to the President with my Aby’s soldier picture and ask him was all this war to let loose a bunch of blood-suckers to suck the marrow out from the people?”

“Hanneh Hayyeh,” said Mrs. Preston, with feeling, “these laws are far from just, but they are all we have so far. Give us time. We are young. We are still learning. We’re doing our best.”

Numb with suffering the woman of the ghetto looked straight into the eyes of Mrs. Preston. “And you too — you too hold by the landlord’s side? — Oi — I see! Perhaps you too got property out by agents.”

A sigh that had in it the resignation of utter hopelessness escaped from her. “Nothing can hurt me no more — And you always stood out to me in my dreams as the angel from love and beautifulness. You always made-believe to me that you’re only for democracy.”

Tears came to Mrs. Preston’s eyes. But she made no move to defend herself or reply and Hanneh Hayyeh walked out in silence.

A few days later the whole block was astir with the news that Hanneh Hayyeh had gone to court to answer her dispossession summons.

From the windows, the stoop, from the hallway, and the doorway of the butcher-shop the neighbors were talking and gesticulating while waiting for Hanneh Hayyeh's return.

Hopeless and dead, Hanneh Hayyeh dragged herself to the butcher-shop. All made way for her to sit on the bench. She collapsed in a heap, not uttering a single sound, nor making a single move.

The butcher produced a bottle of brandy and, hastily filling a small glass, brought it to Hanneh Hayyeh.

"Quick, take it to your lips," he commanded. Weak from lack of food and exhausted by the ordeal of the court-room, Hanneh Hayyeh obeyed like a child.

Soon one neighbor came in with a cup of hot coffee; another brought bread and herring with onion over it.

Tense, breathless, with suppressed curiosity quivering on their lips, they waited till Hanneh Hayyeh swallowed the coffee and ate enough to regain a little strength.

"Nu? What became in the court?"

"What said the judge?"

"Did they let you talk yourself out like you said you would?"

"Was the murderer there to say something?"

Hanneh Hayyeh wagged her head and began talking to herself in a low, toneless voice as if continuing her inward thought. "The judge said the same as Mrs. Preston said: the landlord has the right to raise our rent or put us out."

"Oi weh! If Hanneh Hayyeh with her fire in her mouth couldn't get her rights, then where are we?"

"To whom should we go? Who more will talk for us now?"

"Our life lays in their hands."

"They can choke us so much as they like!"

"Nobody cares. Nobody hears our cry!"

Out of this babel of voices there flashed across Hanneh Hayyeh's deadened senses the chimera that to her was the one reality of her aspiring soul — "Oi-i-i-i! My beautiful kitchen!" she sighed as in a dream.

The butcher's face grew red with wrath. His eyes gleamed like sharp, darting steel. "I wouldn't give that robber the satisfaction to leave your grand painted house," he said, turning to Hanneh Hayyeh.

"I'd smash down everything for spite. You got nothing to lose. Such a murderer! I would learn him a lesson! 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"

Hanneh Hayyeh, hair disheveled, clothes awry, the nails of her fingers dug in her scalp, stared with the glazed, impotent stare of a madwoman. With unseeing eyes she rose and blindly made her way to her house.

As she entered her kitchen she encountered her husband hurrying in.

"Oi weh! Oi weh!" he whined. "I was always telling you your bad end. Everybody is already pointing their fingers on me! and all because you, a meshugeneh yideneh, a starved beggerin, talked it into your head that you got to have for yourself a white-painted kitchen alike to Mrs. Preston. Now you'll remember to listen to your husband. Now, when you'll be laying in the street to shame and to laughter for the whole world."

"Out! Out from my sight! Out from my house!" shrieked Hanneh Hayyeh. In her rage she seized a flat-iron and Jake heard her hurl it at the slammed door as he fled downstairs.

It was the last night before the eviction. Hanneh Hayyeh gazed about her kitchen with tear-glazed eyes. "Some one who got nothing but only money will come in here and get the pleasure from all this beautifulness that cost me the blood from my heart. Is this already America? What for was my Aby fighting? Was it then only a dream — all these millions people from all lands and from all times, wishing and hoping and praying that America is? Did I wake myself from my dreaming to see myself back in the black times of Russia under the czar?"

Her eager, beauty-loving face became distorted with hate. "No — the landlord ain't going to get the best from me! I'll learn him a lesson. 'An eye for an eye'—"

With savage fury, she seized the chopping-axe and began to scratch down the paint, breaking the plaster on the walls. She tore up the floorboards. She unscrewed the gas-jets, turned on the gas full force so as to blacken the white-painted ceiling. The night through she raged with the frenzy of destruction.

Utterly spent she flung herself on the lounge, but she could not close her eyes. Her nerves quivered. Her body ached, and she felt her soul ache there — inside her — like a thing killed that could not die.

The first grayness of dawn filtered through the air-shaft window of the kitchen. The room was faintly lighted, and as the rays of dawn got stronger and reached farther, one by one the things she had mutilated in the night started, as it were, into consciousness. She looked at her dish-closet, once precious, that she had scratched and defaced; the uprooted geranium-box on the window-sill; the marred walls. It was unbearable all this waste and desolation that stared at her. "Can it be I who done all this?" she asked herself. "What devil got boiling in me?"

What had she gained by her rage for vengeance? She had thought to spite the landlord, but it was her own soul she had killed. These walls that stared at her in their ruin were not just walls. They were animate — they throbbed with the pulse of her own flesh. For every inch of the broken plaster there was a scar on her heart. She had destroyed that which had taken her so many years of prayer and longing to build up. But this demolished beauty like her own soul, though killed, still quivered and ached with the unstilled pain of life. "Oi weh!" she moaned, swaying to and fro. "So much lost beautifulness —"

Private Abraham Safransky, with the look in his eyes and the swing of his shoulders of all the boys who come back from overseas, edged his way through the wet Delancey Street crowds with the skill of one born to these streets and the assurance of the United States Army. Fresh from the ship, with a twenty-four-hour leave stowed safely in his pocket, he hastened to see his people after nearly two years' separation.

On Private Safransky's left shoulder was the insignia of the Statue of Liberty. The three gold service stripes on his left arm and the two wound stripes of his right were supplemented by the Distinguished Service Metal on his left breast bestowed by the United States Government.

As he pictured his mother's joy when he would surprise her in her spotless kitchen, the soldier broke into the double-quick.

All at once he stopped; on the sidewalk before their house was a heap of household things that seemed familiar and there on the curbstone a woman huddled, cowering, broken. — Good God — his mother! His own mother — and all their worldly belongings dumped there in the rain.



Lower East Side, New York City, between 1900 and 1915

ANZIA YEZIERSKA
 ❖
THE LOST
“BEAUTIFULNESS”
 &
SOAP and WATER
 in
HUNGRY HEARTS
 [short story collection] 1920

Soap and Water

WHAT I so greatly feared, happened! Miss Whiteside, the dean of our college, withheld my diploma. When I came to her office, and asked her why she did not pass me, she said that she could not recommend me as a teacher because of my personal appearance.

She told me that my skin looked oily, my hair unkempt, and my finger-nails sadly neglected. She told me that I was utterly unmindful of the little niceties of the well-groomed lady. She pointed out that my collar did not set evenly; my belt was awry, and there was a lack of freshness in my dress. And she ended with: “Soap and water are cheap. Any one can be clean.”

In those four years while I was under her supervision, I was always timid and diffident. I shrank and trembled when I had to come near her. When I had to say something to her, I mumbled and stuttered, and grew red and white in the face with fear.

Every time I had to come to the dean’s office for a private conference, I prepared for the ordeal of her cold scrutiny, as a patient prepares for a surgical operation. I watched her gimlet eyes searching for a stray pin, for a spot on my dress, for my unpolished shoes, for my uncared-for finger-nails, as one strapped on the operating table watches the surgeon approaching with his tray of sterilized knives.

She never looked into my eyes. She never perceived that I had a soul. She did not see how I

longed for beauty and cleanliness. How I strained and struggled to lift myself from the dead toil and exhaustion that weighed me down. She could see nothing in people like me, except the dirt and the stains on the outside.

But this last time when she threatened to withhold my diploma, because of my appearance, this last time when she reminded me that “Soap and water are cheap. Any one can be clean,” this last time, something burst within me.

I felt the suppressed wrath of all the unwashed of the earth break loose within me. My eyes blazed fire. I didn’t care for myself, nor the dean, nor the whole laundered world. I had suffered the cruelty of their cleanliness and the tyranny of their culture to the breaking point. I was too frenzied to know what I said or did. But I saw clean, immaculate, spotless Miss Whiteside shrivel and tremble and cower before me, as I had shriveled and trembled and cowered before her for so many years.

Why did she give me my diploma? Was it pity? Or can it be that in my outburst of fury, at the climax of indignities that I had suffered, the barriers broke, and she saw into the world below from where I came?

Miss Whiteside had no particular reason for hounding and persecuting me. Personally, she didn’t give a hang if I was clean or dirty. She was merely one of the agents of clean society, delegated to judge who is fit and who is unfit to teach.

While they condemned me as unfit to be a teacher, because of my appearance, I was slaving to keep them clean. I was slaving in a laundry from five to eight in the morning, before going to college, and from six to eleven at night, after coming from

college. Eight hours of work a day, outside my studies. Where was the time and the strength for the “little niceties of the well-groomed lady”?

At the time when they rose and took their morning bath, and put on their fresh-laundered linen that somebody had made ready for them, when they were being served with their breakfast, I had already toiled for three hours in a laundry.

When college hours were over, they went for a walk in the fresh air. They had time to rest, and bathe again, and put on fresh clothes for dinner. But I, after college hours, had only time to bolt a soggy meal, and rush back to the grind of the laundry till eleven at night.

At the hour when they came from the theater or musicale, I came from the laundry. But I was so bathed in the sweat of exhaustion that I could not think of a bath of soap and water. I had only strength to drag myself home, and fall down on the bed and sleep. Even if I had had the desire and the energy to take a bath, there were no such things as bathtubs in the house where I lived.

Often as I stood at my board at the laundry, I thought of Miss Whiteside, and her clean world, clothed in the snowy shirt-waists I had ironed. I was thinking — I, soaking in the foul vapors of the steaming laundry, I, with my dirty, tired hands, I am ironing the clean, immaculate shirt-waists of clean, immaculate society. I, the unclean one, am actually

I look back at my sweatshop childhood. One day, when I was about sixteen, some one gave me Rosenfeld’s poem, “The Machine,” to read. Like a spark thrown among oily rags, it set my whole being aflame with longing for self-expression. But I was dumb. I had nothing but blind, aching feeling. For days I went about with agonies of feeling, yet utterly at sea how to fathom and voice those feelings — birth-throes of infinite worlds, and yet dumb.

Suddenly, there came upon me this inspiration. I can go to college! There I shall learn to express myself, to voice my thoughts. But I was not prepared to go to college. The girl in the cigar factory, in the next block, had gone first to a preparatory school. Why shouldn’t I find a way, too?

Going to college seemed as impossible for me, at that time, as for an ignorant Russian shop-girl to attempt to write poetry in English. But I was sixteen then, and the impossible was a magnet to draw the dreams that had no outlet. Besides, the actual was so barren, so narrow, so strangling, that the dream of the unattainable was the only air in which the soul could survive.

The ideal of going to college was like the birth of a new religion in my soul. It put new fire in my eyes, and new strength in my tired arms and fingers.

For six years I worked daytimes and went at night to a preparatory school. For six years I went about nursing the illusion that college was a place where I should find self-expression, and vague, pent-up feelings could live as thoughts and grow as ideas.

At last I came to college. I rushed for it with the outstretched arms of youth’s aching hunger to give and take of life’s deepest and highest, and I came against the solid wall of the well-fed, well-dressed world — the frigid whitewashed wall of cleanliness.

Until I came to college I had been unconscious of my clothes. Suddenly I felt people looking at me at arm’s length, as if I were crooked or crippled, as if I had come to a place where I didn’t belong, and would never be taken in.

How I pinched, and scraped, and starved myself, to save enough to come to college! Every cent of the tuition fee I paid was drops of sweat and blood from underpaid laundry work. And what did I get for it? A crushed

Library of Congress



Lewis W. Hine, “9:00 P.M., Feb. 27/12. Making garters (armlets). A Jewish family and neighbors working until late at night,” New York, 1912

fashioning the pedestal of their cleanliness, from which they reach down, hoping to lift me to the height that I have created for them.

spirit, a broken heart, a stinging sense of poverty that I never felt before.

The courses of study I had to swallow to get my diploma were utterly barren of interest to me. I didn't come to college to get dull learning from dead books. I didn't come for that dry, inanimate stuff that can be hammered out in lectures. I came because I longed for the larger life, for the stimulus of intellectual associations. I came because my whole being clamored for more vision, more light. But everywhere I went I saw big fences put up against me, with the brutal signs: "No trespassing. Get off the grass."



I experienced at college the same feeling of years ago when I came to this country, when after months of shut-in-ness, in dark tenements and stifling sweatshops, I had come to Central Park for the first time. Like a bird just out from a cage, I stretched out my arms, and then flung myself in ecstatic abandon on the grass. Just as I began to breathe in the fresh-smelling earth, and lift up my eyes to the sky, a big, fat policeman with a club in his hand, seized me, with: "Can't you read the sign? Get off the grass!" Miss Whiteside, the dean of the college, the representative of the clean, the educated world, for all her external refinement, was to me like that big, brutal policeman, with the club in his hand, that drove me off the grass.

The death-blows to all aspiration began when I graduated from college and tried to get a start at the work for which I had struggled so hard to fit myself. I soon found other agents of clean society, who had the power of giving or withholding the positions I sought, judging me as Miss Whiteside judged me.

One glance at my shabby clothes, the desperate anguish that glazed and dulled my eyes and I felt myself condemned by them before I opened my lips to speak.

Starvation forced me to accept the lowest-paid substitute position. And because my wages were so low and so unsteady, I could never get the money for the clothes to make an appearance to secure a position with better pay. I was tricked and foiled. I was considered unfit to get decent pay for my work because of my appearance, and it was to the advantage of those who used me that my appearance should damn me, so as to get me to work for the low wages I was forced to accept. It seemed to me the whole vicious circle of society's injustices was thrust like a noose around my neck to strangle me.

The insults and injuries I had suffered at college had so eaten into my flesh that I could not bear to get near it. I shuddered with horror whenever I had to pass the place blocks away. The hate which I felt for Miss Whiteside spread like poison inside my soul, into hate for all clean society. The whole clean world was massed against me. Whenever I met a well-dressed person, I felt the secret stab of a hidden enemy.

I was so obsessed and consumed with my grievances that I could not get away from myself and think things out in the light. I was in the grip of that blinding, destructive, terrible thing — righteous

indignation. I could not rest. I wanted the whole world to know that the college was against democracy in education, that clothes form the basis of class distinctions, that after graduation the opportunities for the best positions are passed out to those who are best-dressed, and the students too poor to put up a front are pigeon-holed and marked unfit and abandoned to the mercy of the wind.

A wild desire raged in the corner of my brain. I knew that the dean gave dinners to the faculty at regular intervals. I longed to burst in at one of those feasts, in the midst of their grand speech-making, and tear down the fine clothes from these well-groomed ladies and gentlemen, and trample them under my feet, and scream like a lunatic. "Soap and water are cheap! Soap and water are cheap! Look at me! See how cheap it is!"

There seemed but three avenues of escape to the torments of my wasted life, madness, suicide, or a heart-to-heart confession to some one who understood. I had not energy enough for suicide.

Besides, in my darkest moments of despair, hope clamored loudest. Oh, I longed so to live, to dream my way up on the heights, above the unreal realities that ground me and dragged me down to earth.

Inside the ruin of my thwarted life, the *unlived* visionary immigrant hungered and thirsted for America. I had come a refugee from the Russian pogroms, aflame with dreams of America. I did not find America in the sweatshops, much less in the schools and colleges. But for hundreds of years the persecuted races all over the world were nurtured on hopes of America. When a little baby in my mother's arms, before I was old enough to speak, I saw all around me weary faces light up with thrilling tales of the far-off "golden country." And so, though my faith in this so-called America was shattered, yet underneath, in the sap and roots of my soul, burned the deathless faith that America is, must be, somehow, somewhere. In the midst of my bitterest hates and rebellions, visions of America rose over me, like songs of freedom of an oppressed people.

My body was worn to the bone from overwork, my footsteps dragged with exhaustion, but my eyes still sought the sky, praying, ceaselessly praying, the dumb, inarticulate prayer of the lost immigrant: "America! Ach, America! Where is America?"

It seemed to me if I could only find some human being to whom I could unburden my heart, I would have new strength to begin again my insatiable search for America.

But to whom could I speak? The people in the laundry? They never understood me. They had a grudge against me because I left them when I tried to work myself up. Could I speak to the college people? What did these icebergs of convention know about the vital things of the heart?

And yet, I remembered, in the freshman year, in one of the courses in chemistry, there was an instructor, a woman, who drew me strangely. I felt she was the only real teacher among all the teachers and professors I met. I didn't care for the chemistry, but I liked to look at her. She gave me life, air, the unconscious emanation of her beautiful spirit. I had not spoken a word to her, outside the experiments in chemistry, but I knew her more than the people around her who were of her own class. I felt in the throb of her voice, in the subtle shading around the

corner of her eyes, the color and texture of her dreams.

Often in the midst of our work in chemistry I felt like crying out to her: "Oh, please be my friend. I'm so lonely." But something choked me. I couldn't speak. The very intensity of my longing for her friendship made me run away from her in confusion the minute she approached me. I was so conscious of my shabbiness that I was afraid maybe she was only trying to be kind. I couldn't bear kindness. I wanted from her love, understanding, or nothing.

About ten years after I left college, as I walked the streets bowed and beaten with the shame of having to go around begging for work, I met Miss Van Ness. She not only recognized me, but stopped to ask how I was, and what I was doing.

I had begun to think that my only comrades in this world were the homeless and abandoned cats and dogs of the street, whom everybody gives another kick, as they slam the door on them. And here was one from the clean world human enough to be friendly. Here was one of the well-dressed, with a look in her eyes and a sound in her voice that was like healing oil over the bruises of my soul. The mere touch of that woman's hand in mine so overwhelmed me, that I burst out crying in the street.

The next morning I came to Miss Van Ness at her office. In those ten years she had risen to a professor-ship. But I was not in the least intimidated by her high office. I felt as natural in her presence as if she were my own sister. I heard myself telling her the whole story of my life, but I felt that even if I had not said a word she would have understood all I had to say as if I had spoken. It was all so unutterable, to find one from the other side of the world who was so simply and naturally that miraculous thing — a friend. Just as contact with Miss Whiteside had tied and bound all my thinking processes, so Miss Van Ness unbound and freed me and suffused me with light.

I felt the joy of one breathing on the mountain-tops for the first time. I looked down at the world below. I was changed and the world was changed. My past was the forgotten night. Sunrise was all around me.

I went out from Miss Van Ness's office, singing a song of new life: "America! I found America."