Papa's House

He added up the years on his fingers. He had been three years old when Papa had left Lachavitz for America; Uncle Yosel had told him the year had been 1912, before the war. Now he was thirteen. Ten years. He tried to remember what Papa looked like. Nothing. Sometimes the smell of saddle leather would stir a vague memory. Oh, he had built his own image of him from Uncle's descriptions and stories. Tall, strong, a thick black mustache. Of his mother he also remembered nothing since she had died at the time of his birth. Now he would be seeing his Papa here in America.

As he watched through the window of the automobile the buildings seem to fly by so quickly he was certain he would become dizzy. What grand and amazing things had happened to him in such a short time. Steamships, trains, and now an automobile. Soon they would be at Papa's house. A chill of excitement coursed through him just as it had when the ship had steamed into the great harbor and he had seen the giant statue which seemed to be welcoming him personally. What was it they had called him after he and Uncle Yosel and the rest of the family had left Ellis Island? Green Horn. Mendle Katzen, Green Horn! He smiled at the odd sounding name. Whatever it meant, he, Mendle Katzen, would soon be an American like his father.

The automobile, which also contained his uncle, aunt, two cousins and the driver, an American cousin of Uncle Yosel, slowed and pulled into a space at the curb. Unlike the streets they had driven along earlier near the train station--narrow, filled with people, carts, horses, children, with buildings crowding in on one another-- this was a quiet street. The houses were smaller, mostly two stories tall, with stone steps leading up to handsome doorways. Uncle Yosel laboriously climbed out of the car. " Cousin Itzy says that this street is Clara Avenue, and this is your father's house, Mendle. Say goodbye to Aunt Rivka and the girls. I will take you up there."

At the front door, Uncle Yosel dropped the carpet bag which contained Mendle's things, and rapped on the etched glass pane. The door opened. A stout woman stood there, an inquiring expression on her round face as she looked first at Uncle Yosel and then at Mendle. She must be my father's housekeeper, thought Mendle. Did they not say that Americans were wealthy? He listened as Uncle Yosel explained in Yiddish that he had come to drop off his nephew who was the son of the man who owned the house.

"I own this house," the woman said in four, tight, brittle words then turned a baleful eye on Mendle who cringed without knowing exactly why. "And my husband has no son that I know of."

"Does not Moshe Katzen live here?" Uncle Yosel asked. At the name, the woman blanched. Suddenly she grabbed Uncle Yosel by the arm and yanked him across the

threshold into the house. The door slammed shut. Mendle could hear muffled voices, first hers then his uncle's, steadily rising in volume.

The door opened, and Uncle Yosel stepped out. Mendle could see that his uncle's face was red and wore the same angry look he remembered when Uncle had caught him smoking his favorite briar pipe. Uncle Yosel stooped down, kissed Mendle on both cheeks. "Goodbye, Mendle. You will stay here with your father--and the woman he neglected to inform me he had married. Six years ago." He put his hand on Mendle's shoulder, "I would wait here with you until he comes home from work, but, as you know, we must get back to the train station. I will write you from Chicago where we will be staying with Aunt Rivka's sister. Be a good boy. Now go in the house. The woman is waiting for you."

Mendle watched his uncle hurry down the steps and climb back into the big, black automobile. He waved as the vehicle pulled away from the curb and disappeared around the corner. He would miss his family, the only family he could remember. A tear welled up in his eye. Hastily he wiped it away with his sleeve. Was he not thirteen? A man? A man does not cry. Now he would go in and talk with the woman, his . . . his father's wife. Another tear trickled down his cheek.

"Well, come in, boy. Don't stand out there like a lummox."

Mendle jumped at the sound of her voice, turned and stepped past her into the house. When she shut the front door, he offered his hand. "I am Mendle Katzen and I am pleased to meet you."

She brushed past him ignoring his outstretched hand. "In my house we do not speak Yiddish. We speak only English."

"But I do not know English," Mendle said following her broad back into the warm kitchen which smelled wonderfully of baked bread.

"You will have to learn. Now you will go into the parlor and wait for your father to return."

"The bread. It smells so good."

"We eat at six. No more Yiddish. English only. Go."

Mendle turned and followed in the general direction of her pudgy, pointing finger. I will starve to death if I do not learn English quickly, he thought, as he slumped down in an overstuffed mohair chair next to the window. He glanced back down the hall and saw his father's wife cutting off a thick slice of bread from a freshly baked loaf. Aha, he thought, she is not as mean as she acts. Soon I will taste that delicious bread. But she never came back to the parlor.

"Mendle? Mendlele? Wake up it's me, your father."

Mendle opened his eyes. His neck was stiff and ached. "Papa?" Bending over him was a stranger who looked nothing like the image he had carried so long. No black mustache. Not so tall. A thin face with watery, red-rimmed eyes.

"My God, how you have grown. Come, give your Papa a kiss."

As his father pulled him close, Mendle could smell a sweet aroma like lilacs. Saddle leather smells better, he thought. He felt the bristles on his father's cheek rub against his face, and mingled with the lilac there was the sharp smell of schnapps.

"My son," Papa said, putting his arm around Mendle's thin shoulders, "We have a lot of catching up to do, like how you got that scar over your eye."

"And how come no one, not even Uncle Yosel, knew you had a new wife," Mendle added.

"In due time, due time. Now let's go in and sample your stepmother's cooking which, between you and me, is the best thing she does."

"Papa, what is English word for bread?" Mendle asked as they walked in for the first of many meals to come.

Mendle thought about that first day in America often in the months that followed. He had expected so much and found so little. Papa never explained why he had not told anyone back in the Old Country that he had remarried. Mendle figured that he did not expect to see them again. He certainly had not sent money to bring them over. He had not even asked again about Mendle's scar, received during the war when one side had shelled the other. Mendle couldn't remember which side had done the shelling.

The first big surprise was to discover that he had a stepsister, a big lump of a girl, a head taller than him and two years older. Her name was Sylvia. She had been a small child when his father had married her mother, Anya. Recently widowed and needing a man in the house and in the family business, Anya had sought out a likely prospect. She found him in Papa who was a frequent customer in the tavern which her late husband had owned. Papa, during his earlier years in America, had squeezed out a precarious living as a rag picker in a junk yard and was only too glad to trade his rat-infested, hole-in-the-wall quarters for the fine home of his former tavern keeper.

All this Papa had once told Mendle in maudlin confidence after imbibing more than usual of the tavern's stock, which he did frequently, adding-- more to himself than to his thirteen-year-old son-- that Anya's ample charms on a few cold winter nights had been enough to clinch the proposition. Soon after the wedding, Papa then complained, the widow began to mete out in diminishing portions the passion with which she had secured her former husband's successor. But Papa was satisfied with the bargain. He had a solid roof over his head, occasional bedroom privileges, a job in his favorite environment, food that would delight even a gourmet's palate, and no rats. The rest he could put up with.

Mendle, however, had no such compensating factors. His stepmother, from that very first day, had let him know that he was an unwanted visitor. She ignored his Yiddish questions. Even when he laboriously learned to make elementary conversation in English after going to a special immigrant's school, she often refused to speak to him. The few times she did was to scold him for something he did or did not do, or to badger him to quit school and get a job so he could pay for his keep. With her, Mendle decided, it was best to stay out of the way altogether.

With Sylvia, however, it was another story. Sylvia made it her life's work to torment him. If he tried to avoid her (which he attempted constantly) she cornered him, using her overpowering bulk to force him to her will. Once when Anya had gone to the market, she had pounced on him, pinned him down on his bed and pulled his pants down. Then, she had laughed at his embarrassment, telling him with a sneer that he had a lot of growing to do. Afterwards she leeringly called him names like "skinny pickle," and "puny little thing."

He comforted himself by taunting her inYiddish which infuriated her because she did not understand. "What does that mean, you stupid greenhorn?" she would scream. When he remembered a particularly foul Yiddish curse, he would smile as he heaped it upon her with relish. She would then make up a complaint to Anya who would demand that he be punished without bothering to find out if it were true. (The time Sylvia had spied upon his private parts, she had scuttled up to Anya and told her that he had made a lewd comment.) These contrived complaints by Sylvia in her mother's willing ear cost him many scoldings and not a few hidings. Papa, fearful that his wife might decide to force him from that nice warm house if he did not do her bidding, (this much Mendle had surmised for himself) always sided with her and dealt the punishment vigorously.

"Mendele," Papa would say, "this will hurt me as much as it hurts you." Then he would remove his leather belt and and bring it down forcefully on Mendle's backside. Try as he may, Mendle could not see how the red welts on his rump could bring as much pain to Papa as they did to him. As painful as it was, however, Mendle never cried during his punishments because he knew his stepmother was listening on the other side of the door. Sometimes, after he was in bed the tears would flow, not tears of pain, but tears of sorrow as he thought about his father, his father's wife, his bully of a stepsister, and the unfairness of it all.

One day, Mendle observed Sylvia run screaming from her room. A tiny bug, it seems, had caused this outburst. Sylvia was afraid of bugs, even little ones. With this bit of knowledge, a plan began to percolate in his mind, a way to keep Sylvia at bay. He prowled the alleys behind the houses, over-turning rocks and debris. Whenever he came upon a sizable specimen he carefully placed it in the cardboard match box he carried for the purpose and added it to his growing collection. The big roaches were his favorites, and he would smile as he contemplated the confrontation between Sylvia and his new allies.

Sylvia, blissfully unaware of his plans, continued to harass him at every opportunity. When he protested, she taunted him. "So what are you going to do about it, tell my mother? She won't help you. Tell your father? He does what my mother tells him to do."

"I am warning you," he said summoning up all the menace he could muster. "If you don't leave me alone, you will be very sorry. Very, very sorry."

"Ha! What could a little twerp like you do?" Sylvia said and lumbered off to her room."

The next day when Sylvia opened her dresser to take out a clean blouse, a large roach scurried across the drawer. Sylvia screamed and screamed. Mendle smiled. The next day, when she bent to put on her shoe, another roach dropped out and disappeared under her bed. In hysterics she ran to her mother who immediately sent Mendle to the store for some roach poison. Mendle went willingly. With the roach powder sprinkled liberally throughout the house but especially in her room, Sylvia once more felt secure.

The next morning after her mother went to market Sylvia resumed her harassment of Mendle. This time, however, Mendle slowly opened his hand and smiled. A large roach stood there in his palm, feelers testing the air. Sylvia's eyes turned up into her head. She wobbled as if she were about to faint. Then, collecting herself, she screamed mightily and rushed from Mendle's room. Mendle laughed aloud. His days of torment were over. Maybe, soon, he would be treated as an equal member of the household.

On a gray, blustery November day, eight months after his momentous arrival in America, Mendle came home from work. Anya had been right in one thing. By working he could earn money. He earned almost as much as Anya allowed Papa. She had tried to talk him into working at the tavern, but he insisted on getting his own job which he had found in a shoe factory on Easton Avenue. As he walked up the steps to the landing, he noticed a bundle beside the door with a note attached. Curious, he bent and picked up the bundle. The note was addressed to him in Anya's spidery handwriting: "Mendle Katzen, you are no longer welcome in my home. Do not come back." It was written in Yiddish so that he would have no trouble understanding the message.

Mendle knew why. It was because he had refused to turn over his entire pay to his stepmother for room and board as she had insisted. Of the little money he earned, he gave half to the household, the rest he saved in a wooden cigar box under his bed. The cigar box! He ripped open the bundle and rummaged among his meager possessions. Not there. He began to bang on the door. He shouted for his stepmother. He banged and shouted until the chintz curtains over the window in the door lifted, and his stepmother's round, angry face peered out.

"Go away, you bad boy," she yelled through the closed door.

"My money in the box. Where is it?" he cried.

"It went to pay for all the time you lived here before you went to work."

"My father . . . he won't let you do this."

"He knows. He don't want you neither," she said with finality letting the curtain drop.

Mendle sat on the step shaking with anger. His first thought was to run to the tavern and confront Papa. No. Anya was right in one thing. Even if he were not a willing partner in this act, his father would do nothing. That much was clear. Tears streaked down his cheeks. Hastily, he wiped them away. He was a man, after all, was he not? A working man! He gathered up his clothes, tied them once again into a bundle, and stood up.

First, he would go back to the factory. Someone there would help him find a place to sleep. He would work and save his pay. All of it. Then he would buy a train ticket to Chicago where Uncle Yosel and the family lived.

Wait, he thought, could someone who was only thirteen years old travel alone to Chicago, wherever that was? Sure, he decided. It would be a snap. *A snap!* He smiled broadly. He had been thinking in English, not Yiddish. He really was an American now, wasn't he? And Americans can do anything. Mendle wiped the last wet streak of tears from his cheeks, picked up the little bundle of belongings and hopped down the steps. He looked back one last time at Papa's house--no, Papa's *wife's* house--then turned and walked away.