Isaac Babel[1]

FIRST LOVE[2]
(1925)

When I was ten years old I fell in love with a woman by the name of Galina Apollonovna. Her surname was Rubtsov. Her husband, an officer in the army, had gone to the Japanese War and returned in October 1905. He brought many trunks back with him. These trunks were full of Chinese things: folding screens, precious weapons—all in all, thirty poods. Kuzma told us that Rubtsov had bought them with money he had made serving in the engineering corps of the Manchurian Army. Others said the same thing. People found it hard to gossip about the Rubtsovs, because the Rubtsovs were happy. Their house lay right next to our property. Their glass veranda cut into a piece of our land, but my father had not quarreled with them about it. Old Rubtsov, the tax inspector, was known in our town as a fair man, he counted Jews among his acquaintances. And when his son, the officer, returned from the Japanese War, we all saw how lovingly and happily he and his wife settled down together. For days on end Galina Apollonovna would hold her husband's hand. She didn't take her eyes off him, as she hadn't seen him for a year and a half. But I was horrified at her gaze, and looked away, shivering. In the two of them I was watching the strange and shameful life of all the people in the world, and I wanted to fall into a magic sleep to forget this life that surpassed all my dreams. Sometimes Galina Apollonovna would walk about her room in red shoes and a Chinese dressing gown, her braid hanging loose. Beneath the lace of her low-cut chemise I could see the deepening onset of her pressed-down breasts, white and swollen, and on her dressing gown dragons, birds, and hollow trees embroidered in silk.

All day she trailed about the house, a vague smile on her wet lips, bumping into the trunks that had not yet been unpacked and the exercise ladders that lay around on the floor. Whenever Galina bruised her leg, she would lift her dressing gown above her knees and croon to her husband, "Kiss my little booboo!"

And the officer, bending his long legs in dragoon's breeches, spurs, and tight kidskin boots, got down on the dirty floor, and, smiling, shuffled crawling on his knees to her and kissed the bruised spot, the spot where her garter had left a puffy crease. I saw those kisses from my window. They caused me great suffering, but it is not worth describing because the love and jealousy of a ten-year-old boy resembles in every way the love and jealousy of a grown man. For two weeks I did not go to my window and avoided Galina, until a coincidence threw us together. The coincidence was the pogrom that broke

[1] Isaac Babel (1894-1940), Russian Jewish writer, best known for his three, by now "archetypal," cycles of short stories, *Red Cavalry* (1926, an account of the Soviet-Polish War of 1920), *Odessa Stories* (1925-32, Rabelaisian tales about the Odessa gangsters), and "autobiographical fiction" *Story of My Dovecote* (1925-1937), named after the first story of the cycle. "First Love" is the second story, linked to the first in time, setting, and main characters. The time is a day or two after 17 October 1905, when Tsar Nicholas II promulgated his "October Manifesto," transforming the autocratic Russia into a quasi-constitutional monarchy. The event was marked by a series of spontaneous anti-Jewish pogroms throughout the Pale of Settlement, including Nikolayev, a grain port near Odessa, where Babel's family resided in 1895-1905.

[2] The Complete Works of Isaac Babel. Edited by Nathalie Babel. Translated with Notes by Peter Constantine. Introduction by Cynthia Ozick. W. W. Norton & Company: New York London, 2002.

out in 1905 in Nikolayev and other towns inside the Jewish Pale. A crowd of hired killers ransacked my father's store and killed my Grandpa Shoyl. All this happened without me. That morning I had been out buying doves from Ivan Nikodimich, the hunter. For five of my ten years I had dreamed with all the fervor of my soul about having doves, and then, when I finally managed to buy them, Makarenko the cripple smashed the doves against the side of my face. After that Kuzma had taken me to the Rubtsovs. A cross had been drawn in chalk on the Rubtsovs' gate, no one would harm them, and they had hidden my parents. Kuzma took me to their glass veranda. There, in the green rotunda, sat my mother and Galina.

"We're going to have to wash our face," Galina said to me. "We're going to have to wash it, my little rabbi. Our whole little face is covered in feathers, and the feathers are all bloody."

She hugged me and led me along the corridor with its sharp aroma. My head was leaning against Galina's hip, and her hip moved and breathed. We went into the kitchen, and she put my head under the tap. A goose was frying on the tiled oven, flickering kitchenware hung along the walls, and next to the kitchenware, in the cook's corner, hung Czar Nicholas I, decorated with paper flowers. Galina washed off the remains of the dove that were caking my cheeks.

"As handsome as a bridegroom, my pretty little boy," she said, then kissed me on the lips with her puffy mouth and turned away.

"Your Papa," she suddenly whispered, "your Papa is very troubled right now. All day long he has been wandering aimlessly through the streets. Go to the window and call him!"

Outside the window I saw the empty street with the enormous sky above it, and my red-haired father walking along. He wasn't wearing a hat, and his red hair was tousled and wispy. His paper shirtfront was twisted to the side and fastened haphazardly with a button, but not the right one. Vlasov, a haggard workman in patched-up soldier's rags, was doggedly following my father.

"No, we don't need it!" he was saying in a fervent, wheezing voice, patting my father tenderly with both hands. "We don't need freedom just so the Yids can trade freely! Just give a working man a life of bright . . . brightfulness . . . for all his big horrible toil! Give it to him, my friend! You hear me? Give it to him!"

The workman was patting my father, beseeching him. In his face, flashes of pure drunken inspiration alternated with drowsy despondence.

"Like wimps, that's what our lives should be like," he muttered, swaying on unsteady legs. "Our lives should be just like wimps, only without that God of the Old Betrievers*—it's from Him the Jews make a profit, no one else does!"

And Vlasov began shouting desperately about the God of the "Old Betrievers," who took pity on no one but the Jews. Vlasov howled, stumbled, and tried to catch up with his mysterious God, but at that moment a mounted Cossack patrol blocked his path. An officer in striped trousers, wearing a silver parade belt, was riding at the head of the detachment. A tall peaked cap was perched on his head. The officer rode slowly, without looking left or right. He rode as if he were riding through a ravine where one can only look forward.

"Captain," my father whispered, when the Cossack reached his side. "Captain," my father repeated, falling to his knees in the mud and clasping his head.

"What can I do for you?" the officer answered, still looking forward, lifting his hand in its lemon suede glove to his peaked cap.

Up ahead, at the corner of Rybnaya Street, thugs were smashing our store and throwing out

into the street boxes of nails, tools, and also the new portrait photograph of me in my lycée uniform.

"Over there," my father said, without getting up from his knees. "They're smashing everything I've worked for all my life, Captain! Why are they doing this?"

The officer muttered something, tapped his cap with his lemon suede glove, and tugged the reins, but his horse didn't move. My father had crawled on his knees in front of it, brushing against its kindly, short, slightly shaggy legs.

"I will see to it!" the captain said, tugged at the reins, and rode off. The Cossacks followed him.

They sat dispassionately on their high saddles, riding through their imaginary ravine, and disappeared around the corner of Sobornaya Street.

Galina again pushed me toward the window.

"Get your Papa to come home," she said. "He hasn't eaten anything since this morning."

And I leaned out the window.

My father turned around when he heard my voice.

"My darling son," he called out with indescribable tenderness.

He and I went up to the veranda of the Rubtsovs, where mother was lying in the green rotunda. Next to her bed lay dumbbells and an exercise machine.

"Those damn kopecks!" my mother said to us as we came in. "People's lives, and children, and our luckless luck. You gave them everything! Those damn kopecks!" she shouted in a hoarse voice unlike her own. She shuddered convulsively, and lay quiet on the bed.

Then, in the silence, I began to hiccup. I stood by the wall with my cap pulled down and couldn't stop hiccuping.

"Shame on you, my pretty little boy," Galina said, smiling her haughty smile at me, and tapping me with the stiff flap of her dressing gown. She went over to the window in her red shoes and began to hang Chinese curtains on the extraordinary rod. Her bare arms drowned in the silk, the live braid moved over her hip. I looked at her with delight.

Learned boy that I was, I looked at her as at a distant stage lit by many lights. And I imagined I was Miron, the son of the coal merchant who sold coal on our street corner. I imagined myself in the Jewish Self-defense Brigade. I could see myself walking around, just like Miron, in tattered shoes tied together with string. A dingy rifle hangs on a green strap from my shoulder, and I'm kneeling by the old wooden fence, firing shots at the murderers. Beyond the fence lies a vacant lot with heaps of dusty coal. My old rifle shoots badly, the murderers with their beards and white teeth are edging ever closer to me. I feel the proud sensation of impending death, and high, high up, high in the blue heavens, I see Galina. I see an opening cut into the wall of a gigantic fortress built with myriads of bricks. This crimson building looms over the side street with its badly tamped gray earth. On the parapet stands Galina. With her haughty smile she smiles from that inaccessible opening, her husband, the half-dressed officer, standing behind her back, kissing her neck.

In my attempt to stop hiccuping, I imagined all this in order to make my loving her more bitter, hot, and hopeless, and perhaps because so much grief is overwhelming for a ten-year-old boy. These foolish fantasies helped me forget the death of the doves and the death of Shoyl. I would have perhaps forgotten these deaths if Kuzma had not come onto the veranda with that terrible Jew, Aba.

It was twilight when they came. A weak little lamp, hiding in a corner, shone on the veranda—a twinkling lamp, a disciple of misfortune.

"I have prepared Grandfather," Kuzma said as he came in. "Now he's lying nice and pretty—I

brought the shamas too so he can say some words over the old man."

And Kuzma pointed to shamas Aba.

"Let him whine a little," Kuzma said amiably. "Stuff a shamas' guts, and the shamas will pester God all night."

Kuzma stood on the threshold, his good-natured, broken nose jutting in all directions, and warmly began telling us how he had bound the dead man's jaw. But my father interrupted him.

"I would be thankful, Reb Aba, if you would pray over the deceased, I will pay you," my father said.

"Pay me? But I'm worried you won't pay," Aba answered in a weary voice, laying his squeamish bearded face on the tablecloth. "I am worried that you will take my ruble and run off to Argentina, to Buenos Aires, and open a wholesale business there with that ruble of mine! A wholesale business!" Aba said. He chewed his disdainful lips and picked up the newspaper Son of the Fatherland, which was lying on the table. In this newspaper there was an article about the Czar's manifesto of October 17, and about freedom.

"Citizens of free Russia," Aba read haltingly, and chewed his beard, which he had stuffed into his mouth. "Citizens of free Russia, Happy Easter to you all, Christ has risen!" The old shamas held the shaking newspaper sideways in front of him. He read it drowsily, in a singsong voice, pronouncing the Russian words he did not know in the strangest way. Aba's pronunciation of these words resembled the muffled babble of a Negro who has just arrived at a Russian port from his native land. It even made my mother laugh.

"I am being sinful," she shouted, leaning out of the rotunda. "You are making me laugh, Aba! You should tell us how you and your family are doing?"

"Ask me about something else," Aba mumbled without releasing his beard from between his teeth, and continued reading the newspaper.

"Ask him something else," my father repeated, walking over to the middle of the room. His eyes, smiling at us through their tears, suddenly began rolling and fixed themselves on a spot invisible to all.

"Oy, Shoyl!" my father uttered in a flat, false, theatrical voice. "Oy, beloved Shoyl!"

We saw that he was getting ready to start hollering, and my mother forewarned us.

"Manus!" she shouted, tearing at my father's breast, her hair becoming instantly disheveled. "Look what a state our child is in, can't you hear him hiccuping? Can't you?"

Father fell silent.

"Rakhel," he said timorously, "I cannot tell you how unhappy I am about Shoyl."

Aba went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water.

"Drink, you little shlemazl," he said, coming over to me. "Drink this water, which will help you as much as incense helps a dead man!"

And sure enough, the water did not help me in the least. My hiccups became stronger and stronger. A growl tore out of my chest. A swelling, pleasant to the touch, expanded in my throat. The swelling breathed, widened, covered my gullet, and came bulging out over my collar. Within the swelling gurgled my torn breath. It gurgled like boiling water. By nightfall I was no longer the silly little boy I had been all my life, but had turned into a writhing heap. My mother, now taller and shapelier, wrapped herself in her shawl and went to Galina, who stood watching stiffly.

"My dear Galina," my mother said in a strong, melodious voice. "We are imposing on you and

dear Nadyezhda Ivanovna, and all your family so much. My dear Galina, I am so embarrassed!"

With fiery cheeks my mother jostled Galina toward the door, and then came hurrying over to me, stuffing her shawl into my mouth to smother my groans.

"Hold on, my little darling," mother whispered. "Hold on for Mama."

But even if I could have held on, I wouldn't have, because I no longer felt any shame at all.

That was how my illness began. I was ten years old at the time. The following morning I was taken to the doctor. The pogrom continued, but no one touched us. The doctor, a fat man, diagnosed an illness of the nerves.

He told us to go to Odessa as quickly as we could, to the specialists, and to wait there for the warm weather and bathing in the sea.

And that is what we did. A few days later I left for Odessa with my mother to stay with Grandfather Levy-Itskhok and Uncle Simon. We left in the morning on a ship, and by midday the churning waters of the Bug changed to the heavy green waves of the sea. This was the beginning of my life in the house of my crazed Grandfather Levy-Itskhok. And I bade farewell forever to Nikolayev, where I had lived the first ten years of my childhood.