

VERSION ANGLAISE ET COURT THÈME

VERSION

Despite all she had to do upstairs, and her recent good impression of him, Ida haunted the store, watching his every move. She was worried because, now, not Morris but she was responsible for the man's presence in the store. If something happened, it would be her fault. Therefore, though she climbed the stairs often to tend to her husband's needs, she hurried back down, arriving pale and breathless to see what Frank was up to. But anything he happened to be doing was helpful. Her suspicions died slowly, though they never wholly died.

She tried not to be too friendly to him, to make him feel that a distant relationship meant a short one. When they were in the back or for a few minutes together behind the counter she discouraged conversation, took up something to do, or clean, or her paper to read. And in the matter of teaching him the business there was also little to say. Morris had price tags displayed under all items on the shelves, and Ida supplied Frank with a list of prices for meats and salads and for the miscellaneous unmarked things like loose coffee, rice or beans. She taught him how to wrap neatly and efficiently, as Morris had long ago taught her, how to read the scale and to set and handle the electric meat slicer. He caught on quickly; she suspected he knew more than he said he did. He added rapidly, and accurately, did not overcut meats or overload the scale on bulk items, as she had urged him not to do, and judged well the length of paper needed to wrap with, and what number bag to pack goods into, conserving the larger bags which cost more money. Since he learned so fast, and since she had seen in him not the least evidence of dishonesty (a hungry man who took milk and rolls, though not above suspicion, was not the same as a thief), Ida forced herself to remain upstairs with more calm, in order to give Morris his medicine, bathe her aching feet and keep up the house, which was always dusty from the coal yard. Yet she felt, whenever she thought of it, always a little troubled at the thought of a stranger's presence below, a goy¹ at that, and she looked forward to the time when he was gone.

Although his hours were long – six to six, at which time she served him his supper – Frank was content. In the store he was quits with the outside world, safe from cold, hunger and a damp bed. He had cigarettes when he wanted them and was comfortable in clean clothes Morris had sent down, even a pair of pants that fitted him after Ida lengthened and pressed the cuffs. The store was fixed, a cave, motionless. He had all his life been on the move, no matter where he was; here he somehow couldn't be. Here he could stand at the window and watch the world go by, content to be here.

Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*, 1957.

THÈME

Du jour où ses affaires disparurent, me dit la femme de ménage, la ruine fit son entrée dans la maison. Elles ne disparurent pas d'un coup, mais assez vite tout de même, et selon un ordre, comme le repli concerté d'une armée. Un jour, il n'y eut plus de vêtements accrochés aux étagères ou posés sur les tables, plus de jeans et de vestes noirs, de tee-shirts blancs, de tennis

¹ « Goy » : Yiddish for « a non-Jewish person ».

sous la bibliothèque. Pendant un mois peut-être il y eut encore, sur la tablette de la salle de bains, une trousse noire contenant des produits de beauté. Puis, un autre jour, on ne la vit plus, ni presque aussitôt après les quelques très rares objets personnels qu'elle gardait là, un éventail en plumes de paon, quelques boîtes en nacre ou en écaille, un bracelet en ébène serti d'argent, une petite valise en osier : et qui devaient d'ailleurs être, selon la femme de ménage, des cadeaux ramenés par A. de ses voyages plutôt que des souvenirs auxquels elle fût attachée par une histoire antérieure à leur rencontre. Un jour, il n'y eut plus rien. Le camp avait été levé.

Olivier Rolin, *Port-Soudan*, 1994.

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