THE FATALIST

Isaac Bashevis Singer, translated by Joseph Singer

"The Fatalist" is a lighthearted story, but it springs from a profound question that philosophers have been asking throughout time: Do we humans have a choice in determining our future, or are all our actions predetermined? See if you think Singer's story answers the question—or is that not his point at all? The story takes place in Poland some years ago.

Nicknames given in small towns are the homely, familiar ones: Haim Bellybutton, Yekel Cake, Sarah Gossip, Gittel Duck, and similar names. But in the Polish town where I came as a teacher in my young days, I heard of someone called Benjamin Fatalist. I promptly became curious. How did they come to the word fatalist in a small town? And what did that person do to earn it? The secretary of the Young Zion organization where I taught Hebrew told me about it.

The man in question wasn't a native here. He stemmed from somewhere in Courland. He had come to town in 1916 and posted notices that he was a teacher of German. It was during the Austrian occupation, and everyone wanted to learn German. German is spoken in Courland and he, Benjamin Schwartz—that was his real name—got many students of both sexes. Just as the secretary was talking, he pointed to the window and exclaimed: "There he goes now!"

I looked through the window and saw a short man, dark, in a derby and with a curled mustache that was already long out of style. He was carrying a briefcase. After the Austrians left, the secretary continued, no one wanted to study German any more and the Poles gave Benjamin Schwartz a job in the archives. If someone needed a birth certificate, they came to him. He had a fancy handwriting. He had learned Polish, and he also became a kind of hedge-lawyer.

The secretary said: "He came here as if dropping from heaven. At that time, he was a bachelor of some twenty-odd. The young people had a club, and when an educated person came to our town, this was cause for a regular celebration. He was invited to our club and a box evening was arranged in his honor. Questions were placed in a box, and he was supposed to draw them out and answer them. A girl asked whether he believed in Special Providence, and, instead of replying in a few words, he spoke for a whole hour. He said that . . . all things were determined, every trifle. If one ate an onion for supper, it was because one had to eat an onion. It had been so preordained a billion years ago. If you walked in the street and tripped over a pebble, it was fated that you should fall. He described himself as a fatalist. It had been destined that he come to our town, though it appeared accidental."

"He spoke too long; nevertheless, a discussion followed. 'Is there no such thing as chance?"' someone asked, and he replied: "No such thing as chance." 'If that is so,' another asked, 'what's the point of working, of studying? Why learn a trade or bring up children? Well, and why contribute to Zionism and agitate for a Jewish homeland?'"

"The way it is written in the books of fate, that's how it has to be," Benjamin Schwartz replied. "If it was destined that someone open a store and go bankrupt, he has to do this." All the efforts man made were fated, too, because free choice is nothing but an illusion. The debate lasted well into the night and from that time on, he was called the Fatalist. A new word was added to the town's vocabulary. Everyone here knows what a fatalist is, even the beadle of the synagogue and the poorhouse attendant.

"We assumed that after that evening the crowd would get tired of these discussions and turn back to the real problems of our time. Benjamin himself said that this wasn't a thing that could be decided by logic. Either one believed in it or not. But somehow, all our youth became preoccupied with the question. We would call a meeting about certificates to Palestine or about education, but instead of sticking to these subjects, they would discuss fatalism. At that time our library acquired a copy of Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time, translated into Yiddish, which describes a fatalist, Petchorin. Everyone read this novel, and there were those among us who wanted to test their luck. We already knew about Russian roulette and some of us might have tried it if a revolver were available. But none of us had one."

1. hedge-lawyer: an unofficial lawyer.

2. beadle: a minor official, a person who keeps order.

"Now listen to this. There was a girl among us, Heyele Minz, a pretty girl, smart, active in our movement, a daughter of a wealthy man. Her father had the biggest dry-goods store in town, and all the young fellows were crazy about her. But Heyele was choosy. She found something wrong in everybody. She had a sharp tongue, what the Germans call schlagferit. If you said something to her, she came right back at you with a sharp and cutting retort. When she wanted to, she could ridicule a person in a clever, half-joking way. The Fatalist fell in love with her soon after he arrived. He wasn't at all bashful. One evening he came up to her and said: 'Heyele, it's fated that you marry me, and since that is so, why delay the inevitable?'"

"He said this aloud so that everyone would hear, and it created an uproar. Heyele answered: 'It's fated that I should tell you that you're an idiot and that you've got lots of nerve besides, and therefore I'm saying it. You'll have to forgive
me; it was all preordained in the celestial books a billion years ago.'

'Not long afterward, Heyele became engaged to a young man from Hrubieszów, the chairman of the Paole Zion there. The wedding was postponed for a year because the fiancé had an older sister who was engaged and who had to be married first. The boys chided the Fatalist, and he said: 'If Heyele is to be mine, she will be mine,' and Heyele replied: 'I am to be Ozer Rubinstein's, not yours. That's what fate wanted.'

'One winter evening the discussion flared up again about fate, and Heyele spoke up: 'Mr. Schwartz, or Mr. Fatalist, if you really believe in what you say, and you are even ready to play Russian roulette if you had a revolver, I have a game for you that's even more dangerous.'

'I want to mention here that at that time, the railroad didn't reach to our town yet. It passed two miles away, and it never stopped there at all. It was the train from Warsaw to Lvov. Heyele proposed to the Fatalist that he lie down on the rails a few moments before the train passed over them. She argued: 'If it's fated that you live, you will live and have nothing to fear. However, if you don't believe in fatalism, then ...'

'We all burst out laughing. Everyone was sure that the Fatalist would come up with some pretext to get out of it. Lying down on the tracks meant certain death. But the Fatalist said: 'This, like Russian roulette, is a game, and a game requires another participant who must risk something, too.' He went on: 'I'll lie down on the tracks as you propose, but you must make a sacred vow that if I should live, you'll break your engagement with Ozer Rubinstein and marry me.'

'A deadly silence fell over the hall. Heyele grew pale, and she said: 'Good, I accept your conditions.' 'Give me your sacred vow on it,' the Fatalist said, and Heyele gave him her hand and said: 'I have no mother; she died of the cholera. But I swear on her soul that if you will keep your word, I will keep mine. If not, then let my honor be stained forever.' She turned to us and went on: 'You are all witnesses. If I should break my word, you can all spit in my face.'

'If I'll make it short. Everything was settled that evening. The train would pass our town around two in the afternoon. At one-thirty, our whole group would meet by the tracks, and the Fatalist would demonstrate whether he was a real fatalist or just a braggart. We all promised to keep the matter secret because if the older people had found out about it, there would have been a terrible fuss.

'I didn't sleep a wink that night, and, as far as I know, none of the others did either. Most of us were convinced that at the last minute, the Fatalist would have second thoughts and back out. Some also suggested that when the train came into sight or the rails started to hum, we should drag the Fatalist away by force. Well, but all this posed a gruesome danger. Even now as I speak of it a shudder runs through me.

'The next day we all got up early. I was so scared that I couldn't swallow any food at breakfast. The whole thing might not have happened if we hadn't read Lermontov's book. Not all of us went; there were only six boys and four girls, including Heyele Minz. It was freezing cold outside. The Fatalist, I remember, wore a light jacket and a cap. We met on the Zamosc Road, on the outskirts of town. I asked him: 'Schwartz, how did you sleep last night?' and he answered: 'Like any other night. You actually couldn't tell what he was feeling, but Heyele was as white as if she had just gotten over the typhoid. I went up to her and said: 'Heyele, do you know that you're sending a person to his death?' And she said: 'I'm not sending him. He has plenty of time to change his mind.'

'I'll never forget that day as long as I live. None of us will ever forget it. We walked along and the snow kept falling on us the whole time. We came to the tracks. I thought that on account of the snow the train might possibly not be running, but apparently someone had cleared the rails. We had arrived a good hour too early, and, believe me, this was the longest hour I ever spent. Around fifteen minutes before the train was due to come by, Heyele said: 'Schwartz, I've thought it all over and I don't want you to lose your life because of me. Do me a favor and let's forget the whole thing.' The Fatalist looked at her and asked: 'So you've changed your mind? You want that fellow from Hrubieszów at any price, huh?' She said: 'No, it's not the fellow from Hrubieszów; it's your life. I hear that you have a mother and I don't want her to lose a son on account of me.' Heyele could barely utter these words. She spoke and she trembled. The Fatalist said: 'If you will keep your promise, I'm ready to keep mine, but under one condition: stand a little farther away. If you try to force me back at the last minute, the game is over. Then he cried out: 'Let everyone move twenty paces back!' He seemed to hypnotize us with his words, and we began to back up. He cried again: 'If someone tries to pull me away, I'll grab him by his coat and he will share my fate.' We realized how dangerous this could be. It happens more than once that when you try to save someone from drowning, you both get pushed down and drown.

'As we moved back, the rails began to vibrate and hum and we heard the whistle of the locomotive. We began to yell as one: 'Schwartz, don't do it! Schwartz, have pity!' But even as we yelled he stretched out across the tracks. There was then just one line of track. One girl fainted. We were sure that in a second we would see a person cut in half. I can't tell you what I went through in those few seconds. My blood literally began to seethe from excitement. At that moment, a loud screech was heard and a thud and the train came to a halt no more than a yard away from the Fatalist. I saw in a mist how the engineer and fireman jumped down from the locomotive. They yelled at him and dragged him away. Many passengers disembarked. Some of us ran away out of fear of being arrested. It was a real commotion. I myself stayed where I was and watched everything. Heyele ran up to me, put her arms around me, and started to cry. It was more than a cry, it was like the howling of a beast—give me a cigarette. I can't talk about it. It chokes me. Excuse me...'

I gave the secretary a cigarette and watched how it shook between his fingers. He drew in the smoke and said: 'That is actually the whole story.'

'She married him?' I asked.

'They have four children.'

'I guess the engineer managed to halt the train in time,' I remarked.

'Yes, but the wheels were only yard away from him...'

'Did this convince you about fatalism?' I asked.

'No. I wouldn't make such a bet even if you offered me all the fortunes in the world.'

'Is he still a fatalist?'

'He still is.'

'Would he do it again?' I asked.

The secretary smiled. 'Not for Heyele.'