
THE FIRST SEVEN YEARS

Bernard Malamud

This story is set in New York City. Feld, a shoemaker, is a poor Jewish immigrant who has come to America from Poland. But Feld has a daughter, born in America, whose ideas about education—and love—are different from her father's. After you read the first paragraph of this story, stop

and ask yourself this question: What do you expect is going to happen to the four main characters—Feld, the shoemaker; Sobel, his assistant; Miriam, the independent daughter; and Max, the admirable college boy whom Feld believes could make a better life for his daughter?

Feld, the shoemaker, was annoyed that his helper, Sobel, was so insensitive to his reverie that he wouldn't for a minute cease his fanatic pounding at the other bench. He gave him a look, but Sobel's bald head was bent over the last¹ as he worked and he didn't notice. The shoemaker shrugged and continued to peer through the partly frosted window at the nearsighted haze of falling February snow. Neither the shifting white blur outside nor the sudden deep remembrance of the snowy Polish village where he had wasted his youth could turn his thoughts from Max the college boy (a constant visitor in the mind since early that morning when Feld saw him trudging through the snowdrifts on his way to school), whom he so much respected because of the sacrifices he had made throughout the years—in winter or direct heat—to further his education. An old wish returned to haunt the shoemaker: that he had had a son instead of a daughter, but this blew away in the snow, for Feld, if anything, was a practical man. Yet he could not help but contrast the diligence of the boy, who was a peddler's son, with Miriam's unconcern for an education. True, she was always with a book in her hand, yet when the opportunity arose for a college education, she had

said no she would rather find a job. He had begged her to go, pointing out how many fathers could not afford to send their children to college, but she said she wanted to be independent. As for education, what was it, she asked, but books, which Sobel, who diligently read the classics, would as usual advise her on. Her answer greatly grieved her father.

A figure emerged from the snow and the door opened. At the counter the man withdrew from a wet paper bag a pair of battered shoes for repair. Who he was the shoemaker for a moment had no idea; then his heart trembled as he realized, before he had thoroughly discerned the face, that Max himself was standing there, embarrassedly explaining what he wanted done to his old shoes. Though Feld listened eagerly, he couldn't hear a word, for the opportunity that had burst upon him was deafening.

He couldn't exactly recall when the thought had occurred to him, because it was clear he had more than once considered suggesting to the boy that he go out with Miriam. But he had not dared speak, for if Max said no, how would he face him again? Or suppose Miriam, who harped so often on independence, blew up in anger and shouted at him for his meddling? Still, the chance was too good to let by: all it meant was an introduction. They might long ago have become friends had they

1. **last**: a wooden or metal model of a foot that the shoemaker uses to make or repair a shoe.

happened to meet somewhere; therefore was it not his duty—an obligation—to bring them together, nothing more, a harmless connivance to replace an accidental encounter in the subway, let's say, or a mutual friend's introduction in the street? Just let him once see and talk to her, and he would for sure be interested. As for Miriam, what possible harm for a working girl in an office, who met only loudmouthed salesmen and illiterate shipping clerks, to make the acquaintance of a fine scholarly boy? Maybe he would awaken in her a desire to go to college; if not—the shoemaker's mind at last came to grips with the truth—let her marry an educated man and live a better life.

When Max finished describing what he wanted done to his shoes, Feld marked them, both with enormous holes in the soles which he pretended not to notice, with large white-chalk x's, and the rubber heels, thinned to the nails, he marked with o's, though it troubled him he might have mixed up the letters. Max inquired the price, and the shoemaker cleared his throat and asked the boy, above Sobel's insistent hammering, would he please step through the side door there into the hall. Though surprised, Max did as the shoemaker requested, and Feld went in after him. For a minute they were both silent, because Sobel had stopped banging, and it seemed they understood neither was to say anything until the noise began again. When it did, loudly, the shoemaker quickly told Max why he had asked to talk to him.

"Ever since you went to high school," he said, in the dimly lit hallway, "I watched you in the morning go to the subway to school, and I said always to myself, this is a fine boy that he wants so much an education."

"Thanks," Max said, nervously alert. He was tall and grotesquely thin, with sharply cut features, particularly a beaklike nose. He was wearing a loose, long slushy overcoat that hung down to his ankles, looking like a rug draped over his bony shoulders, and a soggy, old brown hat, as battered as the shoes he had brought in.

"I am a business man," the shoemaker abruptly said to conceal his embarrassment, "so I will explain you right away why I talk to you. I have a girl, my daughter Miriam—she is nineteen—a very nice girl and also so pretty that everybody looks

on her when she passes by in the street. She is smart, always with a book, and I thought to myself that a boy like you, an educated boy—I thought maybe you will be interested sometime to meet a girl like this." He laughed a bit when he had finished and was tempted to say more, but had the good sense not to.

Max stared down like a hawk. For an uncomfortable second he was silent, then he asked, "Did you say nineteen?"

"Yes."

"Would it be all right to inquire if you have a picture of her?"

"Just a minute." The shoemaker went into the store and hastily returned with a snapshot that Max held up to the light.

"She's all right," he said.

Feld waited.

"And is she sensible—not the flighty kind?"

"She is very sensible."

After another short pause, Max said it was okay with him if he met her.

"Here is my telephone," said the shoemaker, hurriedly handing him a slip of paper. "Call her up. She comes home from work six o'clock."

Max folded the paper and tucked it away into his worn leather wallet.

"About the shoes," he said. "How much did you say they will cost me?"

"Don't worry about the price."

"I just like to have an idea."

"A dollar—dollar fifty. A dollar fifty," the shoemaker said.

At once he felt bad, for he usually charged two twenty-five for this kind of job. Either he should have asked the regular price or done the work for nothing.

Later, as he entered the store, he was startled by a violent clanging and looked up to see Sobel pounding with all his might upon the naked last. It broke, the iron striking the floor and jumping with a thump against the wall, but before the enraged shoemaker could cry out, the assistant had torn his hat and coat from the hook and rushed out into the snow.

So Feld, who had looked forward to anticipating how it would go with his daughter and Max, in-

stead had a great worry on his mind. Without his temperamental helper he was a lost man, especially since it was years now that he had carried the store alone. The shoemaker had for an age suffered from a heart condition that threatened collapse if he dared exert himself. Five years ago, after an attack, it had appeared as though he would have either to sacrifice his business upon the auction block and live on a pittance thereafter, or put himself at the mercy of some unscrupulous employee who would in the end probably ruin him. But just at the moment of his darkest despair, this Polish refugee, Sobel, appeared one night from the street and begged for work. He was a stocky man, poorly dressed, with a bald head that had once been blond, a severely plain face, and soft blue eyes prone to tears over the sad books he read, a young man but old—no one would have guessed thirty. Though he confessed he knew nothing of shoemaking, he said he was apt and would work for a very little if Feld taught him the trade. Thinking that with, after all, a landsman,² he would have less to fear than from a complete stranger, Feld took him on, and within six weeks the refugee rebuilt as good a shoe as he, and not long thereafter expertly ran the business for the thoroughly relieved shoemaker.

Feld could trust him with anything and did, frequently going home after an hour or two at the store, leaving all the money in the till, knowing Sobel would guard every cent of it. The amazing thing was that he demanded so little. His wants were few; in money he wasn't interested—in nothing but books, it seemed—which he one by one lent to Miriam, together with his profuse, queer written comments, manufactured during his lonely rooming-house evenings, thick pads of commentary which the shoemaker peered at and twitched his shoulders over as his daughter, from her fourteenth year, read page by sanctified page, as if the word of God were inscribed on them. To protect Sobel, Feld himself had to see that he received more than he asked for. Yet his conscience bothered him for not insisting that the assistant accept a better wage than he was getting, though Feld

2. **landsman**: a fellow countryman; someone from the same town or section of eastern Europe.

had honestly told him he could earn a handsome salary if he worked elsewhere, or maybe opened a place of his own. But the assistant answered, somewhat ungraciously, that he was not interested in going elsewhere, and though Feld frequently asked himself what keeps him here? why does he stay? he finally answered it that the man, no doubt because of his terrible experiences as a refugee, was afraid of the world.

After the incident with the broken last, angered by Sobel's behavior, the shoemaker decided to let him stew for a week in the rooming house, although his own strength was taxed dangerously and the business suffered. However, after several sharp nagging warnings from both his wife and daughter, he went finally in search of Sobel, as he had once before, quite recently, when over some fancied slight—Feld had merely asked him not to give Miriam so many books to read because her eyes were strained and red—the assistant had left the place in a huff, an incident which, as usual, came to nothing for he had returned after the shoemaker had talked to him, and taken his seat at the bench. But this time, after Feld had plodded through the snow to Sobel's house—he had thought of sending Miriam, but the idea became repugnant to him—the burly landlady at the door informed him in a nasal voice that Sobel was not at home, and though Feld knew this was a nasty lie, for where had the refugee to go? still for some reason he was not completely sure of—it may have been the cold and his fatigue—he decided not to insist on seeing him. Instead he went home and hired a new helper.

Having settled the matter, though not entirely to his satisfaction, for he had much more to do than before and so, for example, could no longer lie late in bed mornings because he had to get up to open the store for the new assistant, a speechless, dark man with an irritating rasp as he worked, whom he would not trust with the key as he had Sobel. Furthermore, this one, though able to do a fair repair job, knew nothing of grades of leather or prices, so Feld had to make his own purchases; and every night at closing time it was necessary to count the money in the till and lock up. However, he was not dissatisfied, for he lived much in his thoughts of Max and Miriam. The

college boy had called her, and they had arranged a meeting for this coming Friday night. The shoemaker would personally have preferred Saturday, which he felt would make it a date of the first magnitude, but he learned Friday was Miriam's choice, so he said nothing. The day of the week did not matter. What mattered was the aftermath. Would they like each other and want to be friends? He sighed at all the time that would have to go by before he knew for sure. Often he was tempted to talk to Miriam about the boy, to ask whether she thought she would like his type—he had told her only that he considered Max a nice boy and had suggested he call her—but the one time he tried, she snapped at him—justly—how should she know?

At last Friday came. Feld was not feeling particularly well so he stayed in bed, and Mrs. Feld thought it better to remain in the bedroom with him when Max called. Miriam received the boy, and her parents could hear their voices, his throaty one, as they talked. Just before leaving, Miriam brought Max to the bedroom door and he stood there a minute, a tall, slightly hunched figure wearing a thick, droopy suit, and apparently at ease as he greeted the shoemaker and his wife, which was surely a good sign. And Miriam, although she had worked all day, looked fresh and pretty. She was a large-framed girl with a well-shaped body, and she had a fine open face and soft hair. They made, Feld thought, a first-class couple.

Miriam returned after 11:30. Her mother was already asleep, but the shoemaker got out of bed and after locating his bathrobe went into the kitchen, where Miriam, to his surprise, sat at the table, reading.

"So where did you go?" Feld asked pleasantly.

"For a walk," she said, not looking up.

"I advised him," Feld said, clearing his throat, "he shouldn't spend so much money."

"I didn't care."

The shoemaker boiled up some water for tea and sat down at the table with a cupful and a thick slice of lemon.

"So how," he sighed after a sip, "did you enjoy?"

"It was all right."

He was silent. She must have sensed his disappointment, for she added, "You can't really tell much the first time."

"You will see him again?"

Turning a page, she said that Max had asked for another date.

"For when?"

"Saturday."

"So what did you say?"

"What did I say?" she asked, delaying for a moment—"I said yes."

Afterwards she inquired about Sobel, and Feld, without exactly knowing why, said the assistant had got another job. Miriam said nothing more and began to read. The shoemaker's conscience did not trouble him; he was satisfied with the Saturday date.

During the week, by placing here and there a deft question, he managed to get from Miriam some information about Max. It surprised him to learn that the boy was not studying to be either a doctor or lawyer but was taking a business course leading to a degree in accountancy. Feld was a little disappointed because he thought of accountants as bookkeepers and would have preferred "a higher profession." However, it was not long before he had investigated the subject and discovered that Certified Public Accountants were highly respected people, so he was thoroughly content as Saturday approached. But because Saturday was a busy day, he was much in the store and therefore did not see Max when he came to call for Miriam. From his wife he learned there had been nothing especially revealing about their meeting. Max had rung the bell and Miriam had got her coat and left with him—nothing more. Feld did not probe, for his wife was not particularly observant. Instead, he waited up for Miriam with a newspaper on his lap, which he scarcely looked at, so lost was he in thinking of the future. He awoke to find her in the room with him, tiredly removing her hat. Greeting her, he was suddenly inexplicably afraid to ask anything about the evening. But since she volunteered nothing he was at last forced to inquire how she had enjoyed herself. Miriam began something noncommittal but apparently changed her mind, for she said after a minute, "I was bored."

When Feld had sufficiently recovered from his anguished disappointment to ask why, she answered without hesitation, "Because he's nothing more than a materialist."

"What means this word?"

"He has no soul. He's only interested in things."

He considered her statement for a long time but then asked, "Will you see him again?"

"He didn't ask."

"Suppose he will ask you?"

"I won't see him."

He did not argue; however, as the days went by he hoped increasingly she would change her mind. He wished the boy would telephone, because he was sure there was more to him than Miriam, with her inexperienced eye, could discern. But Max didn't call. As a matter of fact, he took a different route to school, no longer passing the shoemaker's store, and Feld was deeply hurt.

Then one afternoon Max came in and asked for his shoes. The shoemaker took them down from the shelf where he had placed them, apart from the other pairs. He had done the work himself and the soles and heels were well built and firm. The shoes had been highly polished and somehow looked better than new. Max's Adam's apple went up once when he saw them, and his eyes had little lights in them.

"How much?" he asked, without directly looking at the shoemaker.

"Like I told you before," Feld answered sadly. "One dollar fifty cents."

Max handed him two crumpled bills and received in return a newly minted silver half dollar.

He left. Miriam had not been mentioned. That night the shoemaker discovered that his new assistant had been all the while stealing from him, and he suffered a heart attack.

Though the attack was very mild, he lay in bed for three weeks. Miriam spoke of going for Sobel, but sick as he was, Feld rose in wrath against the idea. Yet in his heart he knew there was no other way, and the first weary day back in the shop thoroughly convinced him, so that night after supper he dragged himself to Sobel's rooming house.

He toiled up the stairs, though he knew it was

bad for him, and at the top knocked at the door. Sobel opened it and the shoemaker entered. The room was a small, poor one, with a single window facing the street. It contained a narrow cot, a low table, and several stacks of books piled haphazardly around on the floor along the wall, which made him think how queer Sobel was, to be uneducated and read so much. He had once asked him, Sobel, why you read so much? and the assistant could not answer him. Did you ever study in a college someplace? he had asked, but Sobel shook his head. He read, he said, to know. But to know what, the shoemaker demanded, and to know, why? Sobel never explained, which proved he read so much because he was queer.

Feld sat down to recover his breath. The assistant was resting on his bed with his heavy back to the wall. His shirt and trousers were clean, and his stubby fingers, away from the shoemaker's bench, were strangely pallid. His face was thin and pale, as if he had been shut in this room since the day he had bolted from the store.

"So when you will come back to work?" Feld asked him.

To his surprise, Sobel burst out, "Never."

Jumping up, he strode over to the window that looked out upon the miserable street. "Why should I come back?" he cried.

"I will raise your wages."

"Who cares for your wages!"

The shoemaker, knowing he didn't care, was at a loss what else to say.

"What do you want for me, Sobel?"

"Nothing."

"I always treated you like you was my son."

Sobel vehemently denied it. "So why you look for strange boys in the street they should go out with Miriam? Why you don't think of me?"

The shoemaker's hands and feet turned freezing cold. His voice became so hoarse he couldn't speak. At last he cleared his throat and croaked, "So what has my daughter got to do with a shoemaker thirty-five years old who works for me?"

"Why do you think I worked so long for you?" Sobel cried out. "For the stingy wages I sacrificed five years of my life so you could have to eat and drink and where to sleep?"

"Then for what?" shouted the shoemaker.

“For Miriam,” he blurted—“for her.”

The shoemaker, after a time, managed to say, “I pay wages in cash, Sobel,” and lapsed into silence. Though he was seething with excitement, his mind was coldly clear, and he had to admit to himself he had sensed all along that Sobel felt this way. He had never so much as thought it consciously, but he had felt it and was afraid.

“Miriam knows?” he muttered hoarsely.

“She knows.”

“You told her?”

“No.”

“Then how does she know?”

“How does she know?” Sobel said. “Because she knows. She knows who I am and what is in my heart.”

Feld had a sudden insight. In some devious way, with his books and commentary, Sobel had given Miriam to understand that he loved her. The shoemaker felt a terrible anger at him for his deceit.

“Sobel, you are crazy,” he said bitterly. “She will never marry a man so old and ugly like you.”

Sobel turned black with rage. He cursed the shoemaker, but then, though he trembled to hold it in, his eyes filled with tears and he broke into deep sobs. With his back to Feld, he stood at the window, fists clenched, and his shoulders shook with his choked sobbing.

Watching him, the shoemaker’s anger diminished. His teeth were on edge with pity for the man, and his eyes grew moist. How strange and sad that a refugee, a grown man, bald and old with his miseries, who had by the skin of his teeth

escaped Hitler’s incinerators, should fall in love, when he had got to America, with a girl less than half his age. Day after day, for five years he had sat at his bench, cutting and hammering away, waiting for the girl to become a woman, unable to ease his heart with speech, knowing no protest but desperation.

“Ugly I didn’t mean,” he said half aloud.

Then he realized that what he had called ugly was not Sobel but Miriam’s life if she married him. He felt for his daughter a strange and gripping sorrow, as if she were already Sobel’s bride, the wife, after all, of a shoemaker, and had in her life no more than her mother had had. And all his dreams for her—why he had slaved and destroyed his heart with anxiety and labor—all these dreams of a better life were dead.

The room was quiet. Sobel was standing by the window reading, and it was curious that when he read he looked young.

“She is only nineteen,” Feld said brokenly. “This is too young yet to get married. Don’t ask her for two years more, till she is twenty-one; then you can talk to her.”

Sobel didn’t answer. Feld rose and left. He went slowly down the stairs, but once outside, though it was an icy night and the crisp falling snow whitened the street, he walked with a stronger stride.

But the next morning, when the shoemaker arrived, heavy-hearted, to open the store, he saw he needn’t have come, for his assistant was already seated at the last, pounding leather for his love.

Responding to the Story

Analyzing the Story

Identifying Facts

1. Which character in “The First Seven Years” is the **protagonist**? (If you think there is more than one possibility, consider which character sets the action of the plot in motion.)
2. Explain what the protagonist wants—that is, what is his or her **conflict**? Is it **internal** or **external** or both?
3. List the steps the protagonist takes to get what he or she wants. What block gets in the way of this goal?
4. Explain how the conflict is finally **resolved**.

Interpreting Meanings

5. What is Miriam's opinion of Max after she has gone out with him twice? Find evidence in the story that seems to support her assessment of his **character**.
6. How would you describe Miriam's **character**? Find passages in which the writer establishes her character **indirectly** (by her appearance, by her behavior, by other people's response to her, and by what she says). Do you think Miriam is in love with Sobel? Why or why not?
7. Sobel is certainly not the typical romantic hero. What do we learn about his background, appearance, work habits, living habits, and values? Do you agree with Feld that Miriam's life with Sobel would be "ugly"? Why or why not?
8. When did it first occur to you that Sobel was in love with Miriam? Find the **foreshadowing**—the clues that hint at Sobel's secret long before it is fully revealed.
9. How did you feel about Feld at the end of the story? Did you sympathize with him, or did you feel that he was insulting the nature of Sobel's love for Miriam by saying, "I pay wages in cash, Sobel" (page 65)? Explain your response.
10. The title of this story is an **allusion** to the Biblical account of Jacob and Rachel. (See "Focusing on Background," page 67.) What exactly are the first seven years in the Biblical account? What extra level of meaning does this allusion add to Malamud's story?
11. The conflict in this story pivots on two very different views of the purpose of education. (Some people might define this clash as the difference between education and knowledge.) What is Feld's view of education, and how is it different from Miriam's? Which view do you agree with—or do you have a completely different idea about education? Explain.

Writing About the Story

A Creative Response

1. **Writing a Resolution for the Story.** What do you think will happen to Sobel and Miriam after two years? Will Feld really let Sobel marry Miriam? Will Miriam say yes? Or might she have met somebody else in the meantime? In a paragraph or two, write a resolution for the story. Before you begin writing, you might want to read the Biblical story alluded to in Malamud's title.

A Critical Response

2. **Evaluating a Character.** Sobel's love for Miriam is strong, but he keeps it secret for five years and then agrees to endure *another* two years of waiting for her. Do you think any man could really behave this way? In a paragraph, tell whether or not you think Sobel is a believable character.

Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

Dialects

If you have ever traveled to another part of the country, you may have been surprised to discover that, like most people, you have an "accent." That is, you speak a **dialect**—a form of English that is peculiar to the region where you live or grew up. In some cases, your "accent" even might make it easy for people to place you geographically. For instance, they might guess that you are from Chicago if you flatten your *a*'s so that you pronounce *marry*, *merry*, and *Mary* exactly the same way. Or they might guess that you are from Boston if you broaden your *a*'s so that *park* sounds almost like *pack*. And they'll certainly spot you as a native of Brooklyn, New York, if you pronounce the section called *Greenpoint* as *Greenpernt* and *Bensonhurst* as *Bensonhoist*.

Pronunciation differences are one characteristic of a dialect. Dialects are also distinguished by differences in syntax and vocabulary. It is important to realize that everyone speaks in dialect and that no one dialect is right or wrong.

The dialect spoken by a particular ethnic group often reflects the syntax of that group's native language. For instance, a Russian person speaking English will frequently omit the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a* because in Russian these forms are not always necessary. ("He has big house in country.")

On the other hand, a French person speaking English will often add unnecessary articles because in French articles are used more often than they are in English. A French speaker might also invert the standard English word order to reflect a direct translation of the correct French word order. ("Do you know where is the Fifth Avenue?")

Another common feature of ethnic dialects is the literal, or word-for-word, translation of their own foreign idioms into English. (An **idiom** is an expression peculiar to a certain language, which cannot be translated word for word.) For example, a Spanish speaker might say "I have twenty years" (in-

stead of "I am twenty years old") or "I have to make my grocery shopping" (rather than "I have to do my grocery shopping").

In "The First Seven Years," Feld and Sobel speak the dialect of their ethnic group—Polish-Jews whose native language is Yiddish. Malamud captures the sound of this dialect perfectly. Look back through the story, and find at least ten passages in which a Yiddish-speaking character inverts normal word order, misuses prepositions, omits words, or mixes up tenses. Then rewrite the sentences in **standard English**, the formal way of speaking and writing taught in schools.

Reading About the Writer

Bernard Malamud (1914–1986), the son of Russian immigrants, grew up in Brooklyn and was well acquainted with poverty. His mother died when he was fourteen, and his father kept a neighborhood grocery store, working at the counter from dawn until late at night. Malamud recalls that there were

no books in his family's apartment, no pictures, and no music beyond that of a neighbor's piano heard occasionally through the living-room window.

Malamud drew on the immigrant experience of his parents for his first stories, and in fact, the grocer in one of his earliest novels, *The Assistant*, is modeled after his father.

Malamud's characters live precarious lives in an alien world, and they are invariably steeped in sadness. They are lovelorn, yet often redeemed by love. The author once described the essential Malamud character as "someone who fears his fate, is caught up in it, yet manages to outrun it; he's the subject and object of laughter and pity."

Malamud's most celebrated novel, *The Fixer*, won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1966. His other novels include *The Natural* (which was made into a movie starring Robert Redford), *Dubin's Lives*, and *God's Grace*. "The First Seven Years" is from Malamud's first collection of stories, *The Magic Barrel*, which also won the National Book Award.

Focusing on Background

A Biblical Allusion

The title of this story is an **allusion**, or reference, to the Biblical account of Jacob, who worked twice seven years for Laban, Rachel's father, in order to win Rachel as his wife. Here is the Biblical account:

"Laban said to Jacob, 'Why should you work for me for nothing simply because you are my kinsman? Tell me what your wages ought to be.' Now Laban had two daughters: The elder was called Leah, and the younger Rachel. Leah was dull-eyed, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel and he said, 'I will work seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' Laban replied, 'It is better that I should give her to you than to anyone else; stay with me.'

"So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed like a few days because he loved her. Then Jacob said to Laban, 'I have served my time. Give me my wife. . . .'

"So Laban gathered all the men of the place

together and gave a feast. In the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob. . . . But when morning came, Jacob saw that it was Leah¹ and said to Laban, 'What have you done to me? Did I not work for Rachel? Why have you deceived me?' Laban answered, 'In our country it is not right to give the younger sister in marriage before the elder. Go through with the seven days' feast for the elder, and the younger shall be given you in return for a further seven years' work.' Jacob agreed, and completed the seven days for Leah.

"Then Laban gave Jacob his daughter Rachel as wife; and . . . Jacob . . . loved her rather than Leah, and he worked for Laban for a further seven years."

—Genesis 29:15–30,
New English Bible

1. Probably, the deception was possible because Leah wore a veil.