Pinkhes Berniker immigrated to Cuba to join his older brother, Chaim, who had started Dos Fraye Vort, the first Yiddish newspaper in Cuba. In 1931 he moved to the United States, where he worked as director of a Hebrew school in Rochester, New York. In 1935, a collection of his stories, Shtilé Lebns (Quiet Lives), was published in Vilna. "Jesus" is a striking piece on Jewish-gentile relations.

He didn't take it seriously the first few times his roommates suggested that he start peddling images of Jesus, or Yoshke, as he preferred to call him. He thought they were kidding. How could they be serious? Were they fools? What could they mean? How could they possibly think that he should schlep the goyish icons through the streets of Havana? What was he, a boy, a young lad who knew nothing of the world? How could they imagine that he—a middle-aged Jew with a beard and side curls, who had been ordained as a rabbi, who had devoted all the days of his life to Torah and to divine service—could all of a sudden peddle icons and spread word of Jesus of Nazareth? No, even they couldn't be serious about that! So he thought, and he didn't even try to answer them. He just sighed quietly, wiped the sweat off his face, and sat without moving, sure that they wouldn't bring up such a notion again.

Later he realized he'd been mistaken. Those roommates of his had been very serious. Not daring to propose the idea outright, they had begun by alluding to it, joking about it. He had remained silent and, contrary to their expectations, hadn't jumped up from his seat as though he had been
scorched. So they had begun to broach the subject directly, insisting that he not even try another livelihood, even if one presented itself. He, of all people, was in just the right position to turn the greatest profit from peddling the “gods.” No one else could approach his success. “For every god you sell, you’ll clear a thousand percent profit.”

“And the Cubans love to buy gods.” “Especially from you, Rabbi Joseph, who looks so much like the bastard, pardon the comparison.” “You’ll see how eager they’ll be to buy from you.” “And they’ll pay whatever you ask.” “Listen to me, Rabbi Joseph, just try it! You’ll see! They’ll sacrifice everything they have for you! People who don’t even need a god will buy one from you!” Thus his roommates urged him to become a god peddler. They couldn’t stand to see him half-starved, in total distress, bereft of the slightest prospects. And they really did believe that selling the gods would solve his problems.

The more persistent they became, the more pensive he grew. He didn’t answer them, for what could he say? Could he cut out his heart and show them how it bled, how every word they uttered made a sharp incision in it, tearing at it painfully? How could they understand what he felt if they didn’t know how he’d been trained, what his position had been in the old country? He was consumed with self-pity. The world had stuck out its long, ugly tongue at him. Rabbi Joseph, so diligent a pupil that he’d been hailed as the prodigy from Eyshishok, was now supposed to spread tidings of Jesus of Nazareth throughout the world?!

He couldn’t resign himself to his lot. Every day, in the blue, tropical dawn, he dragged himself through the narrow streets of Old Havana, offering his labor to one Jewish-owned factory after another, promising to do whatever it would take to earn a pittance. He was rejected everywhere. How could they let a venerably bearded Jew work in a factory? Who would dare holler at him? How could they prod him, ordering him around as necessary? “How could someone like you work in a factory?” “In the Talmudic academy of Volozhin, did they teach shoe making?” “Rabbi, you’re too noble to work here.” They looked at him with pity, not knowing how to help.

“Why? Wasn’t the great Rabbi Yokhanan a shoemaker?” he asked, pleading for mercy. “That was then, this is now.”

“And what about now? Wouldn’t Rabbi Yokhanan still need to eat?” That was what he wanted to cry out, but he couldn’t. He was already too discouraged. The unanimous rejections tortured him more than the constant
hunger. And the charity, the sympathy, offered by all became harder to bear. It wouldn't have humiliated him had it not been for the presence, in a far-away Lithuanian town, of a wife and three small children who needed to eat. "Send some money, at least for bread." Thus his wife had written to him in a recent letter. And the word bread had swelled up and grown blurry from the teardrop that had fallen on it from the eye of a helpless mother.

Joseph recalled the words from The Ethics of the Fathers: "If I am not for me, who will be for me?"

"I must harden myself. I must find work!" He called out these words, forcing himself onto the street. Pale, thin, with a despairing mien, he posted himself at a factory door, glancing around helplessly, hoping to catch sight of the owner. From among the workers, a middle-aged Jew ran up to the door and pressed a few pennies into his palm. Joseph froze. His eyes popped out of his head; his mouth gaped open. The couple of cents fell from his hand. Like a madman, he ran from the factory. Late that night, when his roommates returned, he pulled himself off his cot, stared at them momentarily, and said, "Children, tomorrow you will help me sell the gods." They wanted to ask him what had happened, but, glimpsing the pain in his eyes, they could not move their tongues.

Binding both packages of gods together, he left between them a length of rope to place on his neck, thereby lightening the load. He had only to hold onto the packages with his hands, lest they bump into his sides and stomach.

The uppermost image on his right side portrayed Mother Mary cuddling the newborn child, and the one on his left showed Jesus already grown. Between the two images he himself looked like the Son of God. His eyes were larger than life, and his face was paler than ever. Deep, superhuman suffering shone forth from him, a reflection of the pain visited on Jesus of Nazareth as he was led to the cross.

The day was burning hot. Pearls of sweat shone on his mild, pale face, and his clothes stuck to his tortured body. He stopped for a while, disentangling his nightmarish thoughts, slowly removing the rope from his neck, straightening his back racked with pain, and scraping away the sweat that bit into his burning face. He wiped tears from the corner of one eye.
He saw, far off, the low wooden cabins in the next village. In the surrounding silence, from time to time, there came the cries of the village children. Feeling a bit more cheerful, he slowly loaded his body with the two packages of gods. Trembling, he strode onward, onward. He was noticed first by the lean, pale children playing in the street. They immediately stopped their games and stiffened in amazement. The tropical fire in their black eyes burst forth as they caught sight of him. Never had they seen such a man.

"¡Mamá, mamá, un Jesús viene!" "A Jesus is coming!" Each started running home. "¡Mira! ¡Mira!" The children's voices rang through the village.

From windows and doors along the road, women leaned their heads out, murmuring excitedly to one another; "¡Santa María!" "¡Qué milagro!" "¡Dios mío!" They all whispered in astonishment, unable to turn their straining eyes away from the extraordinary man.

Joseph approached one of the houses and pointed to the image of Jesus, mutely suggesting that they buy a god from him. But the hot-blooded tropical women thought he was indicating how closely the image resembled him. Filled with awe, they gestured that he should enter. "¡Entre, señor!" said each one separately, with rare submissiveness. He entered the house, took the burden off his neck, and seated himself on the rocking chair they offered him. Looking at no one, he began untying the gods. No one in the household dared to sit. Along with some neighbors who had sneaked in, they encircled him and devoured him with their wide-open eyes.

"¿Tienes hijo?" "Do you have a son?" a young shiksa asked, trembling.

"I have two," he answered.

"And are they as handsome as you?" asked another girl excitedly.

"I myself don't know."

"¡Mira, él mismo tampoco sabe!" "He himself doesn't know!" A strange shame overtook the girls. They looked at each other momentarily, then burst into embarrassed laughter: "Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!" Their hoarse guffaws echoed through the modest home.

"What's going on?" asked the mothers, glancing unkindly toward the man.

"Nothing!" said the girls, embracing each other, then repeating ecstatically, "¡El mismo tampoco sabe! ¡El mismo tampoco sabe! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!" Their suffocating laughter resonated as each tuckèd herself more closely into her girlfriend's body.
"And what's your name?" One of the girls tore herself from her friend's embrace.

"José . . ."

"What?" asked several of the women in unison.

"José . . ."

"José, Jesús!"

The village women began to murmur, winking more than speaking.

One of the shiksas was unable to restrain herself: "And what's your son's name?"

"Juan . . ."

"Juan, Juan," the shiksas began to repeat, drooling. Embarrassed, they pushed each other into the next room, wildly, bizarrely. There was a momentary silence. Those watching were still under the spell of what had taken place. Joseph, however, was out of patience.

"Nu, ¿compran? Are you going to buy or not?" he asked, raising his eyes, filled with the sorrow of the world. He could say no more in Spanish, but no more was necessary. Every woman purchased a god from him by paying an initial installment—from which he already cleared a handsome profit—and promising the rest later.

Home he went, with only the rope. All the gods had been sold. He had never felt so light, so unencumbered. He had no packages to carry, and a hope had arisen within him that he would be forever free from hunger and want.

Later he himself was astonished at how he had changed, at how indifferently he could contemplate Jesus's beard. He went to a Cuban barber and had his blond beard trimmed in the likeness of Jesus.

"Your mother must have been very pious!" said the barber to him, with great conviction.

"How can you tell?"

"When she conceived you, she couldn't have stepped away from the image of Jesus."

"Perhaps." Joseph was delighted.

How could he act this way? He didn't know. The Christian women, his
customers in the villages all around, waited for him as Jews await the Messiah. They worshiped him, and he earned from them more than he could ever have dreamed.

They had no idea who he was. He never told them he was a Jew, and he still wondered how he could deny his Jewish background. He learned a little Spanish, especially verses from the New Testament, and spoke with the peasant women like a true santo, a saint. Once, when a customer asked him, "¿Qué eres tú?" "What are you?" he rolled his eyes to the heavens and started to say, drawing out his words, "What difference does it make who I am? All are God’s children."

"And the judíos? The Jews?" asked the women, unable to restrain themselves.

"The judíos are also God’s children. They’re just the sinful ones. They crucified our Señor Jesús, but they are still God’s children. Jesús himself has forgiven them." He ended with a pious sigh.

"And do you yourself love the judíos?"

"Certainly."

"¿De veras?" "Really?"

"¿Y qué?" "What of it?" He put on a wounded expression and soon conceded, "My love for them isn’t as deep as for the Christians, but I do love them. A sinner can be brought back to the righteous path through love, as our Señor Jesús said."

"¡Tiene razón!" "He’s right!"

"¡Y bien que sí!" "And how!"

"¡Es un verdadero santo!" "He’s a true saint!" All the women drank in his words.

"Have you yourself seen a real Jew?" Their curiosity couldn’t be sated.

"Yes, I have."

"Where?"

"There, in Europe."

"What did he look like?"

"Just like me."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed."

"¡Si él lo dice, debe ser verdad!" "If he says it, it must be true." The peasant women winked at each other, and their faces grew intensely serious, as if in
a moment of great exaltation. Joseph fell silent, engrossed in his thoughts. He let the peasant women examine some sample gods. For now he simply took orders, which he filled by mail. In the meantime, he took stock of his situation, how much money he had in the bank, how much he was owed, and how many more thousands he would earn in the coming year if business improved by just 50 percent. "Who needs to worry?" A smile lit up his face as he felt these words in his heart: "I give thanks and praise to Thee, almighty God, who hast given Jesus unto the world."

A new god peddler showed up in the same area. Day in and day out, he dragged himself from one village to the next, stopping at every home. He scraped the scalding sweat off his face and neck as he knocked, trembling, on the hospitable Cuban doors.

"¿Compran algo?" "Will you buy something?" he asked, gesturing broadly. Solidly built mothers and passionate, well-formed daughters looked at him with pity, comforting him and caressing him with the softness of the Spanish tongue and the gentleness of their big, velvety eyes. They gladly offered him a handout but shook their heads at his gods. "I'm sorry." He got the same answer almost everywhere.

"Compra y no lamentos!" "Buy and don't be sorry!"

"You're right!" answered the women, with a slight smile. He stood with his distressed face and heavy heart, looking at the peasant women, unable to understand why they were so stubborn.

A few children gathered around him. They stared at his earnest face, carefully touched the frames of the unveiled images, and began playing with them. "Tell your mother to buy a santo," he said, caressing one of the children. The child stopped laughing. His glance passed from the god merchant to his mother. It was hard for him to grasp what was happening.

"How sweet you are," said the mother, affectionately embracing her now serious child.

"I have a child just like him in the old country," said the god merchant, about to burst into tears.

"¡Mira, parece una mujer!" "He's acting just like a woman!" The peasants were astonished to see the shiny tears forming in the corners of his eyes.
"Should a man cry?" "And he's supposed to be the breadwinner for a wife and children!" "How funny!" A few girls, unable to restrain themselves, laughed in his face. Ashamed, he glanced at their widely smiling eyes, felt his own helplessness, and went away. His feet had grown heavier and his grasp of events slighter. Nonetheless, arming himself with courage, he went from village to village. He knocked on every door and humbly showed his wares: "¡Compre!" "Buy something! If you help me, God will help you. And I sell very cheap!"

But he seldom came across a customer interested in his low prices. Almost everyone was waiting for the santo, the holy peddler, who bore a great likeness to God Himself. They dismissed the new god merchant out of hand: "I don't need any." "I'm very sorry." "We've already bought some from someone else." He already knew all their answers by heart.

"Are gods the only thing to peddle?" Such was the bitter question he asked his fellow immigrants every day.

"Do you know of something better? Food isn't about to fly into your mouth. And what are you going to do with the gods you've already bought?"

"¡Hay que trabajar!" "You've got to work!" exclaimed one of his countrymen, eager to show off his Spanish.

"But my work is in vain!"

"Right now your work is in vain, but it will pay off in time," said his friends, trying to console him.

"In time, in time!" he muttered nervously, not knowing at whom.

It had grown dark in the middle of the day. The clear, tropical sky had suddenly clouded over. Waves of heat rose from the ground, and the air became closer and denser. At any moment buckets of rain could fall. Campesinos, riding into town, became uneasy lest the storm catch up with them. So they pushed back their gritty straw hats, their tijanas; fastened the palm-leaf baskets full of fowl on one side of their saddles; secured the cans of milk on the other side; and urged the horses on with all their might. "¡Pronto!" "Faster!" "¡Pronto!" "Soon there'll be a deluge!" "You'll get soaked with all your gods in the middle of the field." The riders took pity on the poor foot traveler as they dug their spurs ever more deeply into the sides of their horses. But
scarcely moved his feet, hammering his steps out heavily. It was already past noon, and he hadn't sold a single god.

Arriving at the next village, soaked to the bone, he caught sight of an open door leading into a home full of people. Sneaking in, he put down his pack of gods in a corner behind the door. As he started removing his wet clothes from his even wetter body, he heard a woman speaking: "Here's five dollars; send me a San Antonio like that next week." "And send me a Jesús by the Well." "I'll take a San Pablo. Take three dollars in the meantime, and I'll pay the rest later." "Make sure you don't forget to send me a Santa Maria." "And I want a Mother with the Son." The women shouted over each other.

He could hardly believe his ears. He thought he was dreaming one of his sweet nightly dreams, in which he saw himself amid circles of peasant women ripping his godly wares out of his hands. He had believed that such good fortune was possible only in a dream, but here it was happening for real. "What can this be?" He wondered why he hadn't yet looked into the opposite corner of the room, and he took a few steps toward it.

He stopped in his tracks, stupefied. All his limbs began to shake.

He tried to hide his surprise, for never had he seen a man who looked so much like Jesus. "So that's it!" he murmured to himself as he watched Joseph rolling his eyes from time to time toward heaven, blessing the peasant women as a rebbe blesses his Hasidim. "Aha!" He was astonished at the reverence the village women bestowed on the stranger. "No, no, I could never become such a showman!" He stepped off to one side to keep Joseph from noticing him.

His last bit of hope had run out. "Y tú, ¿de dónde vienes?" "And where have you come from?" The peasant women were surprised to see the new god peddler after Joseph had left.

"From Santo Domingo."
"You've just gotten here?"
"No, I'm just about to leave."
"Did you see our Jesúsito?"
"You mean the vendedor, the seller of the gods?"
"Yes. Doesn't he look just like Jesús?" asked the peasant women, offended.
"Like Jesus? But he's a judío, a Jew!" These words came flying out of his mouth with unusual force.
"¡Mentira! ¡Mentira!" "That's a lie! A lie! You yourself are the judío, and a dirty one at that!" cried the peasant women in unison, pale with emotion.

"¡Palabra de honor!" "I give you my word of honor that he's a judío!"

The new god peddler couldn't restrain himself when he realized what a terrible impression the word judío made on them. But his claims were all in vain. The village women still didn't believe him. He couldn't make them understand. "¡No, no puede ser!" "No, it can't be!" "¡Vamos, vete de aquí!" "Come on! Get out of here!" They couldn't stand to hear his words any longer.

He fell silent and left the house but not the village. He sought out some young men and bought them a round of drinks. As he sipped black coffee by the white marble table, he told them that the god peddler with the face like Jesus's, who overcharged their mothers for the pictures they bought from him, was a Jew, a descendant of the ones who had crucified Jesus.

"¡No hable boberías!" "Don't talk nonsense!" "¿Cómo es posible?" "How can that be?" "¡No me lo diga!" "Don't tell me." The young men didn't want to believe him. As their stubbornness grew, so did his. Finally, he told them of the first Jewish commandment. He left twenty-five dollars with the owner of the café and swore that the money was theirs if he had been lying to them. The cash had the right effect. It was as though the young men had been touched by fire. The blood rushed to their faces, and they drank themselves into a stupor.

Joseph hadn't yet arrived at the first house in the village when a lad ran across his path. "¡Oiga!" "Listen, sir, my mother wants to buy something." The boy breathed with difficulty, hardly able to utter these words.

"¡Bendito eres, hijito!" "Blessed are thou, my son!" Such was Joseph's gentle answer.

"¡Por aquí es más cerca!" "This way is shorter!" said the little goy as he strode over the field, with Joseph trailing behind him.

Soon they were far, very far, from the village. The boy had already pointed out that "right over there" was their house. Although Joseph saw no house "over there," he still suspected nothing, assuming that his eyes were not as keen as the little goy's.

"Oiga, santo, ¿tú eres judío?" "Listen, Your Holiness, are you a Jew?"
The earth had suddenly brought forth, before Joseph's eyes, a robust young Cuban. Joseph gazed in surprise. For once his quick tongue failed him. When he finally could say something, it was too late. He was already splayed on the ground, with several goyim pinning down his legs; one held his head and two his arms. He screamed bloody murder, thrashed with his feet, pulled with all his might, but to no avail. They were stronger and did what they had to.

When they found out that he was indeed a Jew, they left him lying there, half-naked in the middle of the field. Every one of them spat in his face, hollered "Judio!" and ran to the village to tell of this wondrous thing.

The village women refused to believe even their own children. And for a long, long time they wouldn't patronize the new god merchant, for they hoped that Jesús would come back. But Joseph never returned.