

## *Bone Of My Bone, Flesh Of My Flesh*

The hem of his pyjama shirt drawn up under his chin, and the pants lowered to the crotch and supported by outspread knees, Simon Keppel, the pharmacist, stood once more before the mirror, probing where the day before Dr. Nagel had probed, feeling with his own finger-tips the object of the doctor's purse-lipped concern — the hard craggy cancerous rock to the right of his navel. In the bed behind him, his wife, Rebecca, for whom in her illness one day was a template for the next, was stirring. However in a limbo that was neither wholly sleep nor total wakefulness. She snorted as she drew breath and grunted as that breath escaped. Her eyelids, he saw, were flickering and her cheeks fluttered with the turbulent current of moving air. She smacked her lips more frequently now and the corners of her mouth were moister.

Keppel remembered Dr. Nagel's words.

"The trouble's not quite clear," the doctor had said, diverting his gaze to the pen he was rolling between his fingers, "and tests will be needed to clarify the matter."

His own tongue had carried the word "Baloney", but, not one to offend, his lips did not give it expression.

"Tests?" he asked instead.

"A blood test, bowel x-ray. To make sure you don't have. . ."

The doctor had paused under the patient's scrutiny.

". . . that you don't have . . . well, what is uppermost in your mind."

"I understand," Keppel had said, sparing the young doctor any further awkwardness.

He *had* understood, and knew as he descended the surgery steps that the final chapter of his life was being written. Looking about him not without regret at the trees, the tram wires, the shops and the handful of people entering and leaving the church next door, he prayed for the strength to hold the pen himself to write that chapter well.

Persuaded that the rock had not disappeared overnight, Keppel turned away from the mirror and gazed upon the sharpening colours of morning — the jade of the leaves, the merging blues of the sky, the motley lusciousness of the

flowers — calm at this hour of murmurs when resolutions were at their ripest and thoughts their freshest. The apple-tree forming fruit in the centre of the garden reinforced that sense of peace and the splintered sparkling dew stirred a kindred burgeoning of harmony. "Let the earth put forth grass, herb yielding seed, and fruit-tree bearing fruit after its own kind", he remembered having read some time before.

From the window, too, he now turned away, yielding to the demands of the moment. Routine would brook no departure. Manoeuvring his feet into old, tattered and familiar slippers, he went to the bathroom where he shaved off the overnight stubble and restored his dentures to the collapsed cavity of his mouth. His face at once expanded and his cheeks resumed their tighter livelier tones, belying, he thought flittingly, his seventy-two years. Back in the bedroom, he dressed, and then went downstairs to the kitchen behind the shop to prepare breakfast. Waiting for the eggs to boil, the bread to toast and the water in the kettle to whistle, he gave himself up to the sounds of morning — pigeons pattering in the spouting, the rumbling of trams, the hiss of tyres, the hum of wires — encroaching upon the early Saturday stillness. And he recited to himself, "Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light'. and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good."

Yet, instead of light, there had been only darkness and dinginess in that stifling dusty cheder where he had first learnt those words — darkness and dinginess, and the smell of onion and mothballs exuding from the massive kaftaned form of his vindictive rebbe.

"If the sun, moon and stars were created only on the fourth day, how could light have existed already on that fourth day of creation?"

The rebbe ground his browning teeth as one by one his pupils shrank from his glare and from the birch.

How many decades ago had that been?, he wondered.

The water in the pot boiled, Keppel resumed and completed the breakfast preparations, and, with tray in hand, returned to the bedroom.

Rebecca was fully awake now, and turned towards the door as he entered.

"A splendid morning," he said, placing the tray upon the trolley beside her. He walked towards the window where, raising the venetian blinds, he let the fullness of light tumble in. The light was too cruel. He saw Rebecca squint as the outside streamed in. But even so, not sight but hearing, he knew, formed her contact with outside reality, however tenuous the tether.

"You want the pan now?" he asked.

She made a truncated sound that he had long come to recognise as "Yes", a mangled hiss, the best she could form with her disease-shrivelled tongue lying within the hollow framed by flaccid cheeks. Directness the best tactic in a function unsavoury to both, Keppel drew back the covers and lifted her wasted legs towards the edge of the bed while supporting her hunched fragile trunk with his other arm. Then, with a foot, he pulled forward the commode chair, lifted off its cover, and, grunting mutedly under her weight, hoisted her upon the pan.

While she sat, he opened the windows a fraction and let in the morning's coolness and the imagined freshness of grass and geranium to dispel the rising odours of human waste.

At a long-familiar signal of sound and movement, he knew that she had finished and he set about cleaning, positioning, pulling, smoothing, with hands accustomed to the practice of duty. At the end of his labours, Rebecca sat propped upright against a mound of pillows, her white hair combed, the padded quilt drawn over her scaphoid belly, her arms flopped over the cover, her deformed, spindled hands turned helplessly inward. Keppel fed her. He broke the bread into chewable fragments, scooped quivering jellies of egg from a cup and, with a teaspoon, slipped those morsels into his wife's champing mouth which drooled with saliva and distaste. She struggled to swallow, coughing sometimes as egg or crumb tracked down the windpipe instead of gullet. He watched, and waited patiently, and wiped the corners of her mouth with the points of a serviette, until Rebecca's ordeal was over and he could return to the kitchen to eat in turn.

So passed that part of the morning that had, through eighteen months of his wife's deepening debility, become firmly honed into ritual.

Ordinarily, after eating, in the half-hour before Claire the housekeeper arrived and he opened the shop, he would sit at the table and read the morning paper. Now he leaned back

and shut his eyes for a moment, resisting the temptation to feel once more whether the rock in his belly was real. The resolution made during the sleep-lost night stayed his hand. Instead, impelled by a notion, he rose, walked to the living room where he kept his books and took down the Tenach which, in past months had provided sustenance, from its shelf. Secure in the knowledge that Rebecca was comfortable upstairs, he sat down in a chair and began to read, swaying as he had learnt long before, though this time with the buoyant rhythm of a quiet exaltation.

"And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. And God blessed them; and God said unto them: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth'.

"And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good."

Keppel read. His thoughts returned repeatedly to Dr. Nagel whose expression had shown the pain of an unpleasant duty.

"A blood test, bowel x-ray. To make sure . . . I can arrange it all for Monday morning. . . And then have you see a specialist . . . a surgeon. . ."

He forced himself back to the text.

"But there went up a mist from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

He drifted into oblivion to time and sound.

"And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the place with flesh instead thereof. And from the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man, made he a woman and brought her unto the man. And the man said: 'This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman for she was taken out of Man.' "

At nine o'clock, Claire arrived, bringing with her a small package wrapped in a paper-bag. She stood at the doorway, poised on her toes, hesitating to enter, fearing — irrationally, she knew — her employer within. In her three years of service, she could still not feel at ease in his presence. She was relieved then to see that in his absorption he might not even notice her. Keppel sat, no longer swaying, but simply

hunched over his book, his finger and thumb upon the inner corners of his eyes, breathing easily, rhythmically, as if asleep. Claire trod on eggs, strangely affected by the heavy bizarre-looking lettering in his book that barred her from knowledge and from mysteries of an occult sort. Just like the Yiddish newspapers he received each week. And the lettering on the skull-cap that, to her surprise, she saw for the first time on his head. She felt herself be in the presence of something alien, something mystical. Not at all like the certainties of her own precious personal Catholic faith.

"Ah, Claire. Good morning."

Keppel's seeming awakening startled her. Yet it was she who apologised.

"I didn't mean, Mr. Keppel . . . I didn't want . . .," then gaining poise, said, "I brung you this. A piece of sponge for the weekend. . . And fresh. . . Baked it meself. . ."

Coming out of Eden, Keppel looked at her fondly, taking in her imitation suede black coat with its crinkled collar and the spreading flabbiness of middle-age around her eyes, her cheeks, her chin and her neck around which she wore, as always, her gold-plated crucifix.

"Claire," Keppel said, faint mirth — she saw — playing on his lips, "Claire, tell me, do you know why God made Eve out of Adam's rib and not from dust?"

The housekeeper wilted under the impact of surprise.

"You is asking an old woman riddles," she said.

Though of a practical nature, her practicality did not extend to the interpretation of scripture.

"The woman," Keppel said, "is formed out of man's side, hence it is the wife's natural duty to be at hand ready at all times to be a help to her husband; as it is the husband's duty to cherish and defend his wife as part of his own self."

"Yeah," said Claire, translating his words to her own understanding; then spoiled it all by adding, "Me Herbie's all for the first part, but ain't none too keen on the second."

Suddenly she felt foolish and teetered before him. She fidgeted with the buttons of her coat, her hands seeking occupation, and would have been happy, delirious even, to be employed elsewhere with tray or mop or fly swat or duster. But deprived of these, her hands became utterly superfluous.

"I'll see if the missus is wanting something," she said, regaining a measure of poise, secure in the knowledge that,

following flight, she would not have to swim but could again tread firmer ground.

Turning to leave, she began to feel more at ease; but puzzled. The pharmacist had been her employer for all of three years, yet she would have gasped with amazement if he had known the name of even one of her five children, or where she lived, or what Herbie worked at. Yet, without preamble, he had drawn her into that private whirlpool of his concerns and placed her in his confidence; which, she felt — she knew — she had failed.

"Oh, Jesus," she said almost aloud as she left, stamping a foot on the carpeted floor and feeling better for that muffled tantrum as she went upstairs to Rebecca's bedroom where matters were, if less pleasant, then at least more predictable.

What to Claire had seemed foolishness, to Keppel was mere simpleness, which he preferred to smile at rather than mock or reprove. Life was too short, he had often said — his long-standing conviction now striking him with a more immediate force — to do otherwise.

"Smart, she isn't," he remembered having said once to his friend, customer, confident Emanuel Glantz. "But she *is* loyal."

And loyal indeed she was. It was Claire, Keppel knew, who kept Rebecca out of hospital or a nursing home. Few others would so dedicate themselves to an invalid's well-being as to deny what must have existed as exigencies of their own. She was paid well, to be sure. But her concern, her manner, had from the first transcended the value of services bought with mere money. She performed her duties efficiently and unquestioningly, the unpleasant and the necessary, undeterred by arduousness, smell or fatigue. And if it had ever occurred to her to look deeper into her situation, no-one else was aware. Or perhaps — it occurred to him — her devotion *had* been the result of looking deeper, and therefore to her greater credit.

So Keppel was ready to forgive, and to smile, when, unguarded, she had quipped back at a seriousness that reached beyond her.

Alone again and framed in silence, Keppel sat back and closed the Tenach. He reached inside the little parcel that Claire had brought and broke off a piece of sponge. It was indeed fresh, as the housekeeper had said, and deliciously sweet. Eating of it, he looked out through the window again.

The roses were in full flower, the chrysanthemums were open and a single violet-tinged magnolia swayed at the end of a supple branch as if lapped by a circuitous wind and glowed in the clarity of the morning light.

Just then, he heard the door-bell ring, once, twice, three times, long loud rings held by an impatient hand. It was already a quarter-past nine and he had it in mind not to answer the summons. But rising, he restored the Tenach to its shelf, removed his skull-cap and went into the shop. Through the glass door, he saw Freda Binstock frowning as she wiped her brow with a handkerchief. In her other hand, she carried a string-bag laden with groceries.

"Shimon! What's taking so long today?" she said when he had opened the door. "You're sick, God forbid, or something? You're late today. Here. Here's a prescription."

"Freda, Freda. What's the hurry? To the grave, there is no need to rush. And that's the only place we're going."

He did not laugh at his own humour which, with Freda Binstock, always tended towards the black. Nor was he in the habit of laughing at others' humour.

"Look," he had once said to her, "when a man's wife is dying, slowly and horribly, and his only son is already cold down there, he doesn't allow himself to laugh. But joke — Always."

"Have you ever seen *me* hurry?" Freda Binstock asked. She held a hand over her chest and heaved. Her puffy legs were more swollen than ever. Keppel saw her look around for a chair. Had there been one, she might have remained there for an hour.

"I've just been to the doctor," she said, and blew cool air over her face.

"Thank him for giving me business," he said, recalling his own consultation with Dr. Nagel. "What else is new?"

"The doctor is new."

"I know," he said as he counted out her pills, more with his finger-tips than with his eyes.

"Don't you want to know what he said?"

"You want to tell, so tell."

"He wants to put me in an old-age home. With . . . with *old* people."

Freda Binstock, he knew, was on the other side of seventy-five.

"So?"

**"So?!"**

**"He wants. You don't want. So let him want. And you stay home. Listen to the doctor less and you will live longer."**

**"You twist things around so much."**

**"Listen. A famous physician, attached to the royal court, came upon a Hasid and offered him a bargain. 'I shall heal your body if you will heal my soul'. 'Agreed,' said the Hasid, 'we will see which of us will succeed.' In the end, the physician became a Hasid while the Hasid remained incurably ill."**

**"You're become pious in your old age," Freda Binstock said.**

**The pharmacist, entering the prescription into his ledger, bowed, as though piety were a weakness, one that he possessed but which, after a lifetime of declared disbelief, he did not wish to make known. His son's death and his wife's illness had drawn him nearer to the mystical and mysterious. But his conversion remained incomplete. If he failed to trust whole-heartedly in the medical profession, faith in miracles found still less favour with him. A doctor's misdiagnosis had despatched his son, and, for that, the entire profession had to answer — though, to his continuing hurt, in an abstract and, therefore, ineffectual way. Necessity and the absence of other option had compelled him to submit his wife, too, to the science of healing which, he knew, possessed as many measures of ignorance as of knowledge, and as much of supposition as of fact. Under the circumstances, he had taken the only rational course open to him. He had submitted his wife to medical treatment — he could not in good conscience have done otherwise — but he had also undercut, as far as he was able, the caprices of chance. He had made elaborate enquiries, secured a physician of the highest repute, had insured his wife for the best hospital treatment available and, when she came home, prepared and administered her medicines himself, and had employed a housekeeper to care for her and tend the home while he occupied himself in the shop. And he had, through every phase of seeing her slip away from him, sustained himself with black humour and with prayer and with invocations threaded out from the old mothballed cases of his mind into which one-time repetitions and meaningless benedictions and supplications had been crammed by scowling, sallow rebbes and teachers.**



"Just cautious," he said, waving a hand. "Here, your tablets are ready."

Freda Binstock reached out for the medicines.

"So, Shimon, tell me, what should I do?"

"And if I give you advice, will you act on it?"

"Ask a Jew a question. . ."

Freda Binstock placed the bottles of pills in her bag of repositories and made for the door. There, she turned and asked again:

"Well, and what *should* I do?"

Keppel gazed at her, ran his eyes over her totally white hair, her sharpish nose, the concentric ripples about her eyes and shrugged his shoulders. He thought again of the rock inside him, that worm nibbling away at his future, remembered the resolve of the night, breathed deeply, and said, "Freda, every man must decide his own future. We say that every man is free, but in this world, Freda, that is the *only* freedom which any man can as much as pretend to have."

"Pious and a philosopher too," Freda Binstock said, and left.

Alone once more, with no-one else appearing, Keppel decided to close the shop.

He heard Claire rummaging about upstairs and recalled the question he had posed to her. The question had arisen from his immediate reading but had as well a deeper source, a primordial origin in the raw all-absorbing memory of childhood. The rebbe was asking for the twentieth time, his livid brow growing more livid, his birch swishing at the void: "Why did God make Eve out of Adam's rib and not from dust?" And the boy's stumbling reply, not word-perfect, had riled to fury the teacher to whom precision was as sacred as ritual. The boy knew the answer but hatred for his mentor held back his tongue and stifled his brain. Silence had become his act of rebellion, and rebellion had become indiscriminate, so that not even God, whose servants on earth were ugly and evil, was spared. Where the rebbe had tried to thrash belief into him, Simon Keppel, then Simchale Kepelowicz, still a boy, ceased to believe.

Nor had he cause, for many years, to return to the faith he had renounced. Not even in Palestine which the rebbe had called The Land, God's temple in Zion. For in that Land, the land alone had sufficed, sustaining the soul through the mere

practical worship of hands turning soil, from which worthier fruit than enforced sophistry would some day flower. He had blessed with sweat where words had lost their meaning — and come closer to fulfilment than he had ever come to God.

And if Palestine had absolved him of the need to ascend to God, Australia very early deprived him of such opportunity. He no longer renounced, but neither did he accept. God had merely become irrelevant. . .

At the foot of the stairs behind the step, he called out to Claire.

The housekeeper, with towels in her hands, came into view.

“Claire, I am closing the shop. I must go out.”

Evidently searching for the security of precedent and finding none, Claire opted for solicitude.

“Aren’t you well, sir . . . I mean . . . would you like a cup o’ tea . . . or . . . or. . . ?”

For the first time that morning, he felt the resurgence of a griping stomach cramp. It seized him about the navel, gripped him so that it stifled his breath for a second, and moved downwards toward the crotch. He then passed a silent draught of wind and felt relief. He hoped that Claire would not choose that moment to come downstairs.

It was impulse, he knew, quite out of keeping with his more customary deliberations that drove him into the familiar streets of Carlton where he had spent the last forty years. Arriving to Australia on the “Akademia” with his wife and infant son as a “greener” of thirty-two, he had settled there, seen the pressing of generations and the shifting of populations in the area — his fellow-Jews in particular having moved along the current of affluence to the south of the Yarra and to the east —, had in that district lived through the worst ordeals afflicting his wife and son, and knew now with the certainty of concrete beneath his feet — if ever a doubt had entered into his awareness - that there he would die.

The glancing thought of death evoked a swift thumping palpitation that passed as he crossed Richardson Street, heading south along Lygon. He had hoped that the initial pall that came upon him in the face of Dr. Nagel’s words had been dissipated through a night of wrestling with himself. But the reality remained, the truth that, while he could attempt to summon all his strength to resist fear, panic and questioning,

he remained inevitably human. And humans must palpitate and dread and perspire.

"Nice day," said Mrs. Cousins on the opposite corner.

"Not in the shop today, Mr. Simon?!", added Mrs. Benson, fretting close behind her sister's heels. She was skinny, wrinkled, sallow, some would have said runt-like. The sisters, widows, lived together, in tacit agreement to share miseries and hurts past and present for economy and comfort.

"Day off," Keppel said, elaborating no more than was required.

The sisters passed him, putting him out of mind, he was certain, their heels clattering and ringing on the pavement, as though everything were metal. A delivery boy on a bicycle rode past him, ringing his bell and whistling into his ear. A cat, sitting on a fence and licking a paw, looked up at him, arched its back as Keppel ran a hand through its fur, then settled back to its former activity when he was gone.

Keppel, removing his tie, which he folded and stuffed into a pocket and loosening his collar, turned into Lee Street towards Canning. He walked slowly, looking about him with a new eye, studying with an interest that was honed into a new acuteness the iron lace, the window frames, the flowering chrysanthemums and the neighbourhood locals whom he passed and greeted with a nod. The softness of the cat's fur had enhanced that sense of peace in which he walked. It was a kind of freedom he felt now, liberation from shop and invalidism even as he was aware of the new bondage in which he had been placed. But even from that bondage a renewed freedom emerged. Dr. Nagel, cagey and embarrassed, had insinuated nothing unexpected. Already with the first cramps, beginning four weeks before and mounting with severity, along with the constipation and the slow but unmistakable loss of weight, he had come to expect the worst. The decision to visit the doctor had been less to seek an immediate cure — he had seen too much to believe in immortality — than to gain confirmation or negation of his suspicions and to determine the course of action most pressing under the circumstances. He had, after all, to make provision for his wife, whatever the future held out for him. He had feared the verdict, to be sure, and confirmed in it, he had gritted his teeth in anger and forced a curse into the void. But might and the resolve it gave rise to left him with a

readiness to bless where the previous evening he had cursed. "No man can by any means redeem his brother," he had remembered, along with the words of Shimonovitz, "We are not like a tree but like the leaves, plucked by the wind and left to decay." By morning, he was ready to accept.

It was towards the past that Keppel now walked, towards Pitt Street, to the squat narrow cottage, still standing, to which Reuben Altman of the Welfare Society had driven the new arrivals in his Vanguard from Princes Pier through streets grey with rain and totally alien so many years before. A room has been prepared for them, a tiny room, colourless and spare, which oppressed Rebecca the moment she set foot in it. Standing on the threshold, he had felt the accusing bitterness of her silence and heard it in the heavy heaving of her breath. He had placed a hand on her shoulder and sought to placate. "We shall manage," he had said, but knew that no words could shake the impact of that room where a solitary unhooded bulb glowed dully over a bare table, three chairs and a bed and showed up the holes in the roller blind, half-drawn and askew across the grimy smeared windows. Could a man convince a mountain to bend!

The next morning, Altman returned and drove Keppel to the Linden Chemical Company in Brunswick where Bertram Linden himself, preoccupied with decanter and solutions, asked two questions of Altman and one of Keppel who had learned a few English phrases on board ship, and said, looking at neither, "All right, mate, start Monday."

When he returned, after exploring the streets and the shops, to the cottage that he had now to regard as home, Rebecca met him with a sullenness that annihilated with one glare his buoyant elation.

"To what, to what have you brought me?", she flung at him before his coat was yet on the nail. The combed-back hair, driven, riveted, almost tortured into a bun, framed her face in a rim of black severity that swelled with a flood too enormous to contain.

"What has happened?" he asked, reaching out with his hands but not truly reaching.

"What has happened?! This house, this street, the people! It's a wilderness, a desolation, a desert, a calamity! Everything is falling apart. Everything is so . . . so ugly, so cold. The washroom's outside, and the toilet, and laundry. There is no hot water and the basin leaks. Everything is rusted,

corroded, crooked. Go outside for a moment and see this paradise, this Australia, that you've chosen. There are cats everywhere. And rubbish. And a stench, a catastrophe, worse, far worse than the pig-market in Lodz. And if we are to have children, where should they play? Out there, in the frost, in the rain? Among the cats, in the filthy streets, in the streets infested with rats? There must be rats. Why else would there be so many cats here? . . . And the shkotzim. They'll kill your children one day. They are polaks. No better than at home. You wanted to escape. You haven't escaped at all. The murderers are waiting here too; they are waiting everywhere. . . And the women in this miserable house, the women won't leave me alone. They say they want to help; they say they know how I feel and the hardships here. They say they have gone through the same. But they interfere and ask so many questions, stupid questions, and want to know everything, as if everything is their affair. You can't cough or sneeze or cry without the walls hearing. This hell will drive me mad . . . mad . . . mad!"

Her own torrent swelled as a violent squall of wind brought rain crashing in opaque sheets against the window in a madness as chaotic as it was malignant. And it did not help her state of mind that the air became bitingly frigid and pinched even tighter her already bloodless livid cheeks. Or that a more menacing, deeper slate-like greyness engulfed a sky that earlier might have offered more hope.

Keppel knew the futility of placation; but tried nonetheless.

"It's only for the beginning," he said. "In six months — or less, even — we shall move. . ."

Standing now before the Pitt Street house, his palm pressed against his belly where a fresh cramp was abating, Keppel's memory took on a sharper edge. Through the heavy door, now painted a gaudy green and on which an anti-uranium poster had been pasted, and across the yawning gap of time, he could *hear*, hear again the voices of its one-time tenants — the incessant bickering of the Faymans, the political harangues of the hot-headed socialist Glantz, the shrill unstemmable outpourings of the carpenter Polanski as he gave expression to a succession of high-flown schemes, and the calmer pacifying tone of the gentle Rosen, all of them new arrivals, and all except for Glantz and the children of those arrivals now dead and buried at Carlton or in Spring-

vale. The cottage with its chipped brick facade, its flaking window-frames, its cracked iron lace and the overgrown unweeded garden between the verandah and the fence showed little of the pain and the hopes that had passed within its walls. Time was not so much cruel as indifferent.

As he stood before the gate, the door opened and a young woman, a girl of eighteen or nineteen, sporting a white T-shirt with the motif "Jesus is my brother" came out. She was tall, brunette, had an open lively full-cheeked face and hair held back by a broad crimson ribbon above her brow. She carried a shopping basket in one hand and rattled a set of keys with the other. Seeing Keppel studying the house, she smiled broadly. Deep dimples appeared at the corners of her mouth.

"May I help you?", she asked.

He shook his head, smiled in return.

"Chasing rainbows . . . and butterflies," he said and walked on. The girl passed him shortly after on a bicycle. "Catch at least a dozen of each," she said to him, turning her head back, and added "Have a nice day."

Keppel turned into Canning Street at the Chevra Kadisha before which he paused, pursed his lips, thought again of the rock inside him and then took a dozen brisk steps past the funeral parlour. A faint breeze lapped at his cheeks. On the centre plantation, a trio of dogs were romping about and smelling out each other and sparrows darted between the branches and pecked at seeds on the ground. The street was otherwise still, the cottages stood under the warming sun as if in some remote dream, their grey slate roofs glinted in the light.

"Time," he thought as the scene struck him with all its familiarity. "It heals all wounds only to deal out fresh ones. Time. Time."

He had improved upon that promise made in his stunted attempt to placate Rebecca. If, in Palestine, he had blessed with his sweat, this newer land, albeit greyer and manifestly unsanctified, offered the means to bless with the no-lessor virtue of diligence and application; and a vision besides, implanted and nurtured by the assurances and illustrations and examples of his landsman — of the Biletzkis, the Malkins, the Grossbergs — risen to security and status, not by brilliance, but by the more accessible ritual of steady, purposeful and productive work; so that ten hours a day in

Linden's firm and resumed study at nights and weekends towards Australian qualifications as a pharmacist, coupled, when he was able, with the paid distribution of leaflets into the neighbourhood letter boxes, enabled him within four months to take Rebecca out of Pitt Street and install her in a rented, though private, house in Canning Street a quarter-mile way.

That his promise had matured within a time much shorter than predicted became quite immaterial. For where deprivation of privacy had been the chiefest amongst Rebecca's grievances in Pitt Street, the dinginess and gloom and too-dreary quiet of her Canning Street home became her new source of complaint. The house was unheated, the walls damp, the linoleum lifting and frayed, the whole atmosphere choked with the smell of camphor and dust. And then the water-pressure was abysmal and the hallway a circuit for draughts while, in the wake of the winter rain, there sprouted leaks that inspection during summer days had not revealed. They shifted in August, at the height of a hailstorm which drenched their recently-bought second-hand furniture and linen and clothes, stacked hastily upon an open trailer *borrowed* for the four-hundred yards' journey. "Money is money," Keppel had said, intending to spare unnecessary cost, but he had not calculated the price in expended nerves. Rebecca had fretted, raged, berated, wept, in an entry into the house that was as inauspicious as it was ill-timed.

Keppel had accepted, acquiesced to the early meagre offerings of Australia, refusing to let his vision founder in the swamp of Rebecca's bitter tirades and finding consolation, when his deeper springs needed sustenance, in the company of the Bankiers and Grossbergs, and Rotbaums and Holzmans, neighbours, landsman, fellow-workers who, by sharing their successes and their disappointments, eased the turmoil of uprootedness and adjustment. And for himself, that had sufficed; though not for Rebecca who translated her misery into an aggregation of migraines, palpitations and dizzy spells, compelling him, for peace and health, to cast about again to seek out not that which would please her most — for, of that he was no longer sure — but that to which she might least object.

Crossing the road, he came upon the house where once they had lived. The house itself he could not see. Where, once, in his time, a row of pointed iron railings had separated

it from the street, a high dark-brown stone fence had been erected. On the narrow gate to its left was a gold-plated circular handle and at eye level an opening for letters above which a plate bearing the inscription "B. Jackson LL.B. Solicitor" had been nailed. From behind the fence, over which a poplar towered, came the squeal of a child's laughter and the squealing of tricycle wheels that begged for lubrication. From further back — the front door must have been open — he heard the crying of an infant and the soothing lilt of its mother's sing-song home-spun solicitude: "Benjy . . . Benjy . . . Hungry little Benjy. . . The milk is on the boil and baby will be fed. . . Mummy will feed Benjy and pat him on his head. . ."

The voice was pleasant, loveable, the mother undoubtedly contented and capable! — How unlike that earlier mother the walls of that Canning Street house had seen.

It was whilst they lived there that Rebecca had become pregnant. Keppel had hoped that pregnancy would subdue her dejection, or better, dispel her bitterness and foster in her a fresh sense of purpose, of belonging in the new land through the most tangible attachment possible to replace the separation from family and familiarity that migration had meant to her.

But his hopes, their wings frail from the very first, had foundered in their flight.

Born two weeks late, the infant David, to Rebecca — he suspected — might have been an unwanted child. Rebecca had never given utterance to the actual words and he had preferred not to probe, but that gestation had been attended by an onslaught of vomiting, headaches and dizzy spells that exceeded the normal. The baby, when born, had been an unattractive child, with bloated face and buttocks and legs, and with a squint and a broad flat nose that made him closer kin to animal than human. "Why am I being punished, Ribbono Shel Olam?!", Rebecca had cried out once and, for a time, all but neglected it, leaving the infant to the solicitude of a motherly neighbour, Hanna Nussbaum, who, accepting the bad with the good, nurtured it with a semblance of love and thanksgiving prayer that the newborn was at least not a cripple or epileptic or worse.

Though born with few traits that physically reflected his parentage, it did appear that David might have acquired the worst of his mother's neurotic temperament. He clung,



timorously, to the greater security of shadow, bit the nails raw on his stumpy finger-tips, and woke to terrors that left him sobbing and whimpering till the morning hours, even though he, Keppel, the father, had caressed and kissed and held tight the fearful child. There were signs of that neuroticism, too, in his later lachrymose recalcitrance to attend school or make friends, particularly in the stranger harsher environment where, without understanding their meaning, this fat ungainly child whose cheeks turned not red but violet from embarrassments was slapped repeatedly by rough-edged words, taunts and malignant laughter. Rebecca dragged him then from one specialist to another, to be told, for a guinea a visit, that the child suffered only from natural shyness which he would in time outgrow; or to have him receive injections of red or amber fluid which contributed nothing to the boy but appeased the brooding badgering conscience of his mother.

It was age, and the workings of a higher natural miracle which, by altering the growing adolescent's proportions and modifying his complexion, posture, gait and manner, cured David of his timidity and trepidations. He did not become particularly handsome, but rather more homely and more accepting of himself, more content and, on occasions, even able to shine if not to dazzle. No-one really noticed until the process was nearly over — concern for family left back home in Lodz and involvement with post-War relief work at that time dominated Keppel's thoughts and talk and energies — but at its end, the youth stood that bit sturdier, a jot prouder, and emerged from his shadowed cocoon to take his place in the current of daily fare. He finished high school, his results competent enough, and entered Myer's store as a salesman in the shoe department. He learnt to talk there, to converse, to sell, and, more, to relate to people; and accomplished all this with a vigour that made his past appear a hideous trance.

It had taken a long time, many years, but it was only now that Rebecca, nearly fifty, established a semblance of truce with country, home and self and ceased to make unhappiness her obsession. By then, she had already inhabited Australia for nearly twenty years and the country she had abandoned was a ruin and her family totally annihilated. Letters had ceased to arrive already years before, while subsequent enquiries failed to uncover survivors who might have drawn her back, either in actuality or in sentiment. Orphaned and

grieving, she managed to harness that grief and direct herself towards the only tangible thing remaining to her — the concrete reality of immediate surroundings. Keppel had seen the change and was thankful. Going up to their bedroom one Sunday afternoon, he found Rebecca storing memories into a cardboard box. Letters, photographs, a sewing box, a knitted shawl brought from home, even the matzoh cloth and the candlesticks she had brought with her were hidden away in the attempt to erase the past.

"Dead leaves," she had said, not without pain, but neither without relief.

She would one day retrieve those mementos, but only when they had already ceased to agonise, to punish, to hurt.

She no longer mentioned Lodz, he perceived. She began to tread Melbourne ground and to breathe Melbourne air, untrammelled by images, voices, smells of a remoter past. By then, too, Keppel had settled well into his own pharmacy in Lygon Street and the future had acquired some promise of security and calm, while out of the vast depression in the terrain of Rebecca's existence, there began to appear little elevations, mounds, peaks, of hope, optimism, even surprisingly, of enthusiasm.

Until. . .

That refrain he had heard outside his old Canning Street home lingered with him. He repeated it to himself, once, twice, then remembered: "Lo, children are the heritage of the Lord and happy the man that has his quiver of them."

Recall turned to pain, the event eighteen years past but bitter nonetheless, and Keppel was thankful for the distraction which Emanuel Glantz offered.

The old man was some twenty yards before him as Keppel turned from Canning into Pigdon Street. From the grocery store on the corner, there emerged the smell of raw coffee and the more acrid one of pickled herrings. Glantz wore his customary tattered grey jacket and battered hat. Apparently sensing someone close by, he turned, paused and waited for Keppel. He was carrying a rye bread and a carton of milk.

"So how is a Jew?", he asked in his usual way.

"A Jew lives," he answered, as always, reflecting briefly on the minor irony of his words.

"No shop today? Business so good you don't have to work?"

For all his eighty years, however wizened to angularity and bones he was, he missed, overlooked nothing.

"Even God rested," Keppel said, deliberately, awaiting the fruit of his provocation. Which Glantz offered, as predictably as ever.

"Phooia!" Glantz said as if he had swallowed pepper.

"Baloney! God indeed!"

"When your brother Marx is forgotten, the name of God will remain."

"Keppel! You ate raw apples or something? You sick? You, a one-time socialist, an idealist, a man of worth, now talking like some uneducated peasant about something you don't — you can't — know anything about."

" 'Man shall not see Me and live' ", Keppel quoted. Another bout of pain made him wince. Glantz did not notice.

"You know who God is? *Man* is god! You, me, that Lebanese dwarf who sold me this bread, that Robinson mongol who lives next door to me! Man is God and socialism his true goal."

" 'I have no father, I have no brother, I have no son. There is none else but Me' ."

"Twisted! A man would think you were dying, pardon the expression, that you were suddenly taking an interest in this God of yours."

Keppel bit a lip. "We are all dying," he said with a pretence at jest.

It was a game, an ineffectual game with neither solution nor end which Keppel and Glantz forever played as others might play cards or dominoes or chess, in the shop, on the pavement, over a cup of steaming tea drunk through sugar cubes. And the game would have continued had they not reached Rathdowne Street where Glantz lived; where, in defiance of the bourgeois values which had depleted Carlton of his ideological comrades, he had continued to live, a widower of twenty years, a loner, cocooning his existence in a spare dusty ill-kept house strewn about with his journals, his music, his books. As he turned left with the parting sally, "May your God help you across the street," indicating with his chin the stream of traffic that was heading city-ward, Keppel felt the impulse to shake his hand, to hold it for a moment, and to confide that their game was no more to be played. But Glantz, even as Keppel waited for the traffic lights to change, had already receded and was pushing open

his gate which squealed on its hinges. He watched until Glantz in his shabby jacket and hat, waving a last time, disappeared indoors.

For Keppel, forgetfulness proved too brief. Recalling that Glantz had a son with whom he rarely spoke, Keppel was brought harshly back to David.

Perhaps he had been too smug. His business, after much early sluggishness, prospered; Rebecca had learnt to accept the wilderness, as she called it, as her home; David had exceeded all expectations which, granted, had been modest indeed; and, in all, the current of his existence flowed between secure banks, undisturbed by crags, jutting trunks or unseen eddies. Looking back as he grew older with some satisfaction upon his life, he took credit upon himself, giving minimal, if any, thought to the actions of any superior being who might be watching, judging, weight or inscribing him in that book of life. If never quite as absolutely God-denying as Glantz, he had certainly not been God-avowing, and the seasons of the Jewish calendar had come and gone unheeded and unobserved, though not without that touch of — was it uneasy guilt? arising out of his departure from a way of breathing that been his father's in remote and distant Lodz.

How quickly the world of a man could keel from its axis!

Coming home from Myer's one afternoon, David had complained of stomach pains. The doctor called them cramps and prescribed a mixture. The next day, he diagnosed "a germ in the bowl" for which he advised a diet, and the day after, when the damage had passed beyond reprieve, a perforated appendix. By the time the surgeons operated, a fully-blown peritonitis had set in and after a week of lingering in a coma during which in too-rapid succession, his kidneys, his lungs and his heart failed, the youth, two months short of twenty, died.

It was then that Keppel, by cursing, had once more remembered God. Not the God of his father or the rebbe or of his pre-rebellious childhood. But a God who made a mockery of mercy and grace and loving-kindness and truth that men in their fear and superstition had fastened upon him for their own salvation. Wherever a man walked, there God stalked him — perhaps to test him, as some commentators were apt to assert — but always in a malevolent, even malignant way that made of man his sport.

He conducted disputes with Rabbi Kliger who had buried David, but the rabbi's hoary formula "God's ways are mysterious to man" and his admonition "Cleave to God as your companion" brought no solace. His friends — the Biletskis, the Malkins, the Holzmans — took upon themselves the burden of Job's comforters; but their words, too, the ceaseless torrent of their words, were ineffectual. Glantz, in pressing his point that God played no part in David's death at a time when Keppel needed a God to curse, cut himself off as a bringer of succour; and the only other person to whom in his grief Keppel could cling, Rebecca, so retreated into a state of profound depression that not long after the boy's death she required hospitalisation for shock treatment.

The present was the spinning wheel, the past the thread that was spun, the future the wool for man to weave the years. Through work, he wove the years that followed, opening the shop earlier, closing its doors later, and providing service on Saturdays and Sundays, not in quest of prosperity — as some malicious tongues wagged — but of forgetfulness and a measure of mental repose. Rebecca, too, now beginning to show her advancing middle age in the flabbiness of her cheeks and her pendulous double chin, recovered and, although constantly under medication, faced the sometimes glaring light of day and the quiet memory-haunted nights with a late-developed fortitude. Sharing their loss, Keppel and Rebecca drew closer together for mutual support though, as always, it was he who provided the greater share. Rebecca, in time, permitted herself to be humoured, to attend the picture theatre on a Saturday night, or visit the Biletskis or Rotbaums for an evening of cards, and often came down to the pharmacy, while Keppel filled the scripts, to chat at ease with Freda Binstock or Glantz or the fruiterer's wife.

It was outside the fruiterer's at the Lygon Street corner that Keppel now paused. In the window, there were apples on display, oranges, grapes, avocados and large rich-looking crimson strawberries. The very sight of them fed his taste-buds. He felt their succulence on his lips and entered. Braun, the fruiterer, who was bending over the morning's "The Age", looked up, clearly surprised.

"Keppel! Your shop closed on a Saturday morning," he said, eyeing him intently through his glasses, "You all right?"

"I am standing before you."

"Then. . . For the first time since Adam rose from the dust, your shop is closed. People come from the doctor's with their prescriptions. The doors are closed. 'It's not like Keppel', they say to me. 'Is he sick or, God forbid, has his wife. . .?' "

For the first time since the early hours of dawn, Keppel felt again the sense of being trapped beyond reprieve; and again, too, that intense and biting pity towards himself, Rebecca, his friends, the dead, the unborn; and the sense that his stroll around the long-familiar streets of Carlton had evoked the fondness, the comfort, the oneness with them, or whatever else, in his impulsive action, he had sought.

Keppel reached into the display window, withdrew two punnets of strawberries and handed them to Braun.

"Yes," he said, "People have to talk."

He paid for the strawberries, then, about to leave, he noticed several bunches of carnations in a bucket by the door. From them, too, he selected a bunch, waited wordlessly as Braun wrapped the flowers in tissue paper, paid for them, saying "For a special occasion", and left before the fruiterer could ask any questions.

He opened the pharmacy door just as Claire, adjusting her coat, was about to leave.

"Flowers! It ain't your anniversary or something, is it?" She was mortified at having forgotten an important occasion, she who knew the most significant dates of the Keppel household. "I wish I'd a-known. . . I'd a-brought you some of me special chocolate cakes instead of that crummy sponge. . ."

"You're a good woman, Claire," Keppel said, looking not directly at her but at the crucifix about her neck. "Come back inside for a minute."

Mystified, Clare complied. Keppel placed the strawberries and carnations upon the serving bench and took out his wallet.

"Take this, Claire," he said, handing her a crisp orange note. "Buy yourself something."

"Twenty dollars! I couldn't . . . I gets me wages . . . I don't ask. . ."

"Call it a bonus."

"Honest, I couldn't. . ."

"For your children, then."

Claire mellowed. Keppel had touched the softest part of her. She took the note flushing at what was unexpected kindness.

"May the good Lord be with you," she said, again awkward in his presence.

Whose Lord?, Keppel thought. Theirs, ours, the Lebanese grocer's Lord. . .?

"And Claire," he called after her as she looked back from the doorway, "take the day off on Monday. Do your shopping, give your children a treat, take them out, they deserve you too. . ."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Claire faltered, then went out, in her confusion not quite certain which way to turn, but, finding routine to be the most secure, crossed the road to wait at the tram-stop opposite. From behind the window, Keppel saw her gazing back, bewilderment still clinging to her flabby face.

"A virtuous woman who can find?" he thought. "Bless all God's creatures who wander dumbly through this world." And taking up the strawberries and carnations once more, he murmured, "On Tuesday, on Tuesday, you'll understand."

From the lounge-room, he fetched a long-necked vase into the kitchen, unwrapped the carnations and placed the stems into the vase one by one. He carried the flowers upstairs.

Rebecca lay in bed, supported on a triangular mound of pillows. Her head hung limply upon her chest, her mouth was open, her tongue protruding. She grunted with each breath. She was awake and, as Keppel entered, raised her eyelids in one of the few spontaneous movements left to her. Her eyes followed him as he walked to her side, held the carnations under her nose, then placed them on the night-table beside her.

"I couldn't resist," Keppel said. "Their colour, their smell. Perfume. And for after lunch, I've brought something special. Strawberries. Pure sugar. And I saw Freda this morning and Glantz and Braun. They are the same as always and all send you their good wishes. Glantz will try to come over, maybe tomorrow."

For well over twelve months, since his wife had totally lost her capacity for speech, Keppel had conducted a daily ritual patter, webbing into his monologues a mesh of observations, verbatim renderings of conversations, commentaries and a

plentitude of lies. Knowing beforehand his invariable reply — "She lives" —, acquaintances and customers had, in fact, long ceased to ask after Rebecca. But, aware of the strength of illusions, he had given her to know that people cared and had not discarded her among the forgotten. For his part, he blamed no-one, relieved indeed that people did not probe into matters upon which he was loathe to elaborate.

Where, before, upon David's death, he had rediscovered God through cursing, with the onset and relentless progression of Rebecca's crippling illness, Keppel had come to lean upon Him, in private to pray and petition him to spare the only being left to him. That he saw his entreaties unanswered, he punishingly blamed upon himself, bowing before the perverse and delayed justice visited upon him for his childhood rebellion that had persisted into maturity when, in the light of his success, he should have been more thankful, and for the blasphemies he had heaped upon Him in that period of trial following David's death. Yet, while denying the prospect of miracle, he had continued to hope for a reversal in Rebecca's condition and to express, in an intense primordial way that had long lain dormant, his faith in God's memory, justice and loving-kindness. He turned with renewed fervour to the Chumash and prayer-book, finding in their certainty a sense, however tenuous at first, of tranquility, direction and wholeness. Thus sustained, he learnt to impart whatever was strong in him to Rebecca in her moments, ever increasing, of embarrassment, frustration and despair. He prayed only for the preservation of his own health that he may survive to comfort her through her remaining days.

What he had dreaded most had come to bear. The rock in his belly was an hour-glass measuring out the remaining aliquots of his own days.

"A blood test, x-rays," Dr. Nagel had said. "To make sure that you don't have. . ."

He did not need blood tests nor x-rays to know the verdict. Nor to know that it meant surgery, the submission to a succession of doctors, the closure for an indefinite period of his pharmacy or its handing over to a locum tenens and abandonment of Rebecca to unfamiliar hands in a hospital or nursing home or, at best, to a live-in nurse. And for what all the upheaval? For another few months of breathing? To delay the day when there would be no more rising and the



heavens would be no more? To defer the decay into dust by another second against the vast canvas of time?

"Already half-past twelve," Keppel said, gazing at his watch and rising. "You must be hungry."

Rebecca's eyes were upon him. She groaned in what was muted assent.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, Claire, before leaving, had prepared the midday meal — vegetable soup, two plates of salmon and salad, and stewed fruit. Keppel lit the stove to warm the soup, then took out the punnets of strawberries from the paper-bag and set about plucking their green asters under running water, gazing distantly, no longer a part of it, upon the apple-tree, upon the chrysanthemums and upon the magnolias opening in their fullness.

"The man of wisdom rejoices at the prospect of death," he remembered. "What living man shall not see it?"

The meal portioned out on the tray, Keppel made his way to the shop. He had no need to seek through the bottles, the blue capsules standing in their familiar customary place upon the shelf.

"Death in the inmost chambers waits; of what avail if I bar the gates?"

Back in the kitchen, he set about the realisation of the night's resolve.

One by one, he broke open the capsules, sprinkled their contents into the soup, cast the spent gelatin shells into the repository kept for waste. Outside, the sky shimmered, luminous blue; in his square of window, there were no clouds. He thought of Claire, of Freda Binstock, Braun, Glantz, remembered the girl outside the Pitt Street house whose brother was Jesus, remembered too the squeaking of tricycle wheels and the mother placating her squealing child. How did the refrain go? "The milk is on the boil and baby will be fed . . . Mummy will feed Benjy and pat him on the head."

"Bless you, bless you, bless you," he thought.

His task completed, he looked about the kitchen, lingered over the stove, the table, the sink, and, through the window, upon the apple-tree in the centre of the garden.

"And fruit-bearing tree bearing fruit after its own kind."

Bearing the tray, he returned to the bedroom, listening to his own footfall upon the rising staircase, their solidity bringing consolation. In the room, he set the tray upon the

trolley beside Rebecca, passed a hand over her white hair, wiped the dribble from her mouth and placed a napkin under her chin.

"See the strawberries? I promised you they would melt in the mouth. God's own sweetness. But first the soup, the salmon — the best will wait till last. My meal's here too. We'll eat together for once."

Together, they ate, Keppel as always feeding Rebecca, emptying the spoon carefully into her moist drooling waiting mouth, between offerings himself swallowing a spoonful of the faintly bitter soup.

Rebecca ate mechanically, swallowing each mouthful with difficulty, sometimes coughing. Keppel watched her, touched her brow, her hair, her shoulders.

"Better an easy death, Rebecca," he wanted to say, "than a wretched life. Release now and peace, God with us, leading us, delivering us."

But he said nothing, aware as he was feeding Rebecca of increasing separation from her and his surroundings. The fork in his hand as he placed salmon into her mouth felt less hard; he felt the need to grasp it more tightly lest it slip.

Outside the bedroom window, he heard the fluttering of pigeons, saw two of them streak past in flight. A tram rumbled by and, in the early Saturday afternoon stillness, a solitary car murmured past. Several fragments of his sojourn returned to mind. Cottages, in the white sunlight, terraces, lampposts, traffic lights, tramlines, wires, shops, manholes, roundabouts, posters on fences, letter boxes. And two sisters sharing miseries for economy and company, a girl whose brother was Jesus and a precious mother who sang to her child. And Glantz out there wallowing in his journals and his disbelief, the widow Freda Binstock, the fruiterer Braun who sold strawberries and flowers and read "The Age". A moving chaotic turbulent world of the living, of the living, the breathing, the feeling, each to be gathered up in his own time, in his own way, the rose spared as little as the thistle and the minutest blade of grass not forgotten. And light all around, luminous light, because the Holy One, blessed be He, enwrapped Himself in light like a garment and the brilliance of His splendour shone forth from one end of the Universe to the other.

He smelt beside him the fresh carnations he had placed upon Rebecca's night-table and felt his breath slow and

deepen. His mouth was becoming tighter, his movements heavier. Rebecca, he saw, could scarcely close her lips. She barely swallowed the last mouthful of salmon when, he saw too, that she was asleep. He reached out for a strawberry and placed it to her lips, but her mouth did not respond. Rebecca was breathing deeply and grunting and even as he listened that grunting became more stridulous and laboured. Her head turned limply to one side and Keppel smelt, at first faintly, then clearly, the rising stench of faeces. Out of custom, he wanted to rise to clean her, her dignity to preserve, but lead weighted down his legs which would not move.

Leaning back his head against his chair, his gaze came to rest upon the untouched strawberries on the trolley before him. The light entering through the window fell upon his face, and, sighing, then breathing slowly, deeply, easily, his body suddenly light and floating on wings unseen, Keppel felt its warmth and knew that it was good.