# DIASPORA FROM THE JEWISH PERSPECTIVE – A Brief Introduction and a Reading

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Historically, the Greek term "Diaspora", literally meaning "dispersion", was first used to describe the dispersion of the Jews outside Judea after the Babylonian conquest of the Jewish nation, the destruction of its temple in Jerusalem and the exile of its people in the sixth century BCE (Before the Common Era). Subsequent Jewish history was to know many more such banishments, the major ones most frequently remembered being the Roman destruction of the Jews' Second Temple in Jerusalem and the routing of the people in 70 C.E. (Common Era), the serial expulsions of Jewish populations from England, France, Germany and most notably from Christian Spain in 1492, culminating over several centuries of persecutions, geographic confinements, occupational restrictions and pogroms, in the ultimate dispersion of all – through deliberate exponentially genocidal murder in the labour camps, death camps, forests and ghettos of Central and Eastern Europe 1933-1945 during the period that has come to be called the Jewish Holocaust.

I have no intention to dwell on the black arm-band view of Jewish history. Dark as much of it has been over its four millennia, it has been interspersed with periods of national greatness too, whether in its own nation-state of Judea or Israel today or outside to which they adapted, through acclimatisation, adaptation, and integration to the point of assimilation variously in Babylonia, the Mediterranean Belt and the Aegean region, and Spain, the German lowlands, Holland and Western Europe, and, most recently, the Americas, England, France, Australia, South Africa, Canada and so on, where they have attained to high standing in the professions, commerce, government, entrepreneurial activity, the arts and entertainment. Suffice it to say that not for nothing does the Encyclopaedia Judaica run to sixteen thick and sizeable volumes plus periodic yearbooks to tell of all dimensions of this 'classic' long-itinerant Diaspora people, numbering little more than fifteen million in the world today (not forgetting the Gypsies, the Romani, who must also always be remembered in any discussion of Diaspora).

Potted Cook's tour though this may be, the Jewish experience highlights a double interpretation of Diaspora, in Hebrew distinguished by the terms, Golah and Galut.

Golah is a simple and unloaded descriptive statement referring to the expatriate state, to living, for whatever elected personal reasons and preferences, outside one's homeland. Every nation has its expatriates, among the most numerous (though far from exclusively) being the Chinese, Indians, Jews, Italians and Greeks. In the Jewish context, while Israel has some four or five million Jews, the Diaspora from Paris to Melbourne, New York to Capetown, Buenos Aires to Mumbai, and more places besides of course, has the ten million, with most of these, although maintaining a powerful affinity with Israel as their people's homeland and supporting it in many personal and collective financial, representational and intercultural ways, being unlikely to transplant themselves there. They – we, I – by virtue of the term's very definition, live in the Golah.

Galut, on the other hand, carries with it a more painful notion of "choiceless choice", of living in the Diaspora on sufferance, more specifically of living uprooted, displaced and dislocated – in short, in Exile – from one's home following flight or expulsion as refugees (from

individuals such as writers, journalists, politicians, through to whole peoples, among them Jews, Gypsies, Armenians and Kurds), or through not being permitted to enter/re-enter the homeland on pain of arrest and whatever else may follow, or through not being permitted to leave the country of their residence to return to their national home (eg the Soviet Union pre-1970s), or because that homeland has been usurped by another nation, its sacred sites rubbled and the people carried away in captivity, the most poignant expression of the experienced loss being the verse in Psalms, 137:1 –

> By the rivers of Babylon,
> There we sat, yea, we wept
> When we remembered Zion.

Though sung after the Babylonian destruction of Judea, this was a song that could have been sung in numerous places numerous times over throughout the Jewish record. For 1900 years, Jewish Judea did not exist. Its people, moving across the globe voluntarily or by compulsion or necessity over the centuries, lived in one perpetual exile. Theirs was not a matter of choice. From the year 70 CE to 1948, the Jews simply had no resurrected nation to go back to. But the hankering for that nation remained, that hankering, that existential sense of uprooting, displacement and physical homelessness constituting the defining principle of Diaspora as "Exile", as Galut as opposed to simple descriptive Golah.

Having been invited to this Conference as a Jewish writer to offer a Jewish perspective on Diaspora, the best personal example that I can give of displacement and exile is in one my stories, titled "Two Years in Exile", published in my first of five collections of stories, On Firmer Shores, where the sense of dislocation is most clearly reflected through the narrator's mother, essentially a mirror of my own.

As a preamble to the extracts from that story which I am about to read, it is apt to offer here a bit of prehistory.

Both of my parents were born in Warsaw, Poland, into families containing six and seven siblings respectively. They were married in June 1939, just three months before World War II broke out on Spetember 1st, at which time they were in a place called Kosov in Eastern Poland. With the partitioning of Poland through the Ribbentrop-Molotove agreement, they found themselves in the Russian half of Poland, while all others in their families remained on the German side. To the last, as far as we know, all their parents and siblings perished during the war. They alone remained alive, having been deported, first to Siberia and, then, with the German invasion of Russia, to Uzbekistan where I was born. Following the end of the war, they were permitted repatriation to Poland. Having no wish to resume living in the rubbled city of Warsaw that had been their natal home – home being, as I put it, where their younger feet had run most freely - they moved on as stateless people to a Displaced Persons' camp in Germany, then to Paris for three years before immigration permits saw them take a liner at Genoa destined for Australia, once an unthinkable place for them to whom Poland had for generations been their respective families' home.

Australia was for my mother a culture shock. Orphaned, with no language, few possessions, with nothing in common with her neighbours in the suburb where they first found

themselves, trying to make a living of sorts in a factory by day and at home as a machinist by night and on weekends, she long, long lamented the life she had lost, and, even today, at eighty-eight, fifty-three years after arriving in Australia, she has still not been able to call the place into which events have thrown her as “home”, while, of course, the place so long ago left behind, it too she can no longer regard as home.

As the following selections from “Two Years in Exile” illustrate:

Two Years in Exile

Mother cannot forgive Melbourne, upon which, she says she has merely stumbled. Nor Europe, now left behind. And even while her feet tread the dry dusty earth of this firmer quieter shore, the ship of her existence floats, homelessly, on an ocean of regret and dejection, of reproach and tears…

Of all misfortunes available to the children of this earth, she bemoans, Melbourne was the one she had to choose. Melbourne, a tail torn from the rump of the world, where she is lost, amongst neighbours who are generations, continents, galaxies apart from herself, a foreigner Jew in an Australian marsh. Like satin in tweed, perfume in tar, crystal in clay.

'A wilderness we have come to. What a wilderness this is.'

In the evening, our neighbour sings a song, or strangles it rather in his throat. Sings about a doggie in the window; sings a song he has caught like some contagion he would get rid of by passing it on. Sings, hoots, whoops, croups, then pauses, mercifully, for a semi-quaver rest, to raise the bottle to his trumpet, and then sings again, sucking in air sibilant with froth and throwing a toad's belch into his turbulent sonata for counterpoint. Daytime would swallow up his song, would digest it, absorb it, lose it without real loss in the symphony of clatter and roar of cars and motor-mowers and machines. But the evening is sated and regurgitates the serenade, and lets its breezes take it wherever they will to splash the sky and darkness with a cacophony of echoes. While in our own dim kitchen, Father reads the 'Jewish News', about Ben-Gurion and Peretz, about Jerusalem and Warsaw, singing, if he is moved to sing, in a muted hum, something private, something mellow, not giving his neighbours cause for even the slightest moment to remind themselves of him. While Mother would throttle every sound between iron and collar as she presses tomorrow's shirt, the moisture under the metal hissing, like herself: 'Why this wilderness, this curse, this Gehenna?'

And then the silence. Of midnight. And of Sundays. Of midnight and the wind rattling the window-frames and treetops brushing against the tiles or the muffled hum of a distant car bringing to Mother wisps of memory, memories of crowded courtyards and homely faces, of a Yiddish word and a rebbe's touch, in a cosier world now swept away. And then the silence of Sundays where not even grass stirs, lest its whispers be too loud in the unreality of cool, shimmering morning crystal. Sleeping city. Dumb city lying drunk, until the brittle crystal is broken by a milk-horse still limping from sleep and by the wheels grinding and the bottles rattling behind it. Then silence again, briefer and less durable, breached now by Father as he goes out with bucket and spade to scratch, scour and scrape up from the bitumen the horse's straw-coloured gift to feed his drooping tomatoes and struggling lemon-tree.

Mother hates both the noise and the silence, a silence that is yet not a true silence.

'A wilderness, a wasteland,' she mutters, fingering the curtains as she watches Father at his work of adjustment, and, daring to aim higher, casts her sight upon the empty lots beyond the crossing.

And the street, the cubes of red, the square gardens, the confines of her wasteland do not protest.

A wilderness. Five miles from the city's heart, Mother feels as if she were in a country town, a Siberian sovchoz or a displaced persons' camp again. Far away is High Street with its sprawl of shops, offices, arcades and picture-theatres. Further still, a light year away, there is - she knows - a Jewish face, a Jewish word, a Jewish melody. But at our end, her very existence is enshrouded in a pall of silence and of loneliness, while beyond, past the next crossing, along the dry, cracked and dusty unmade road stretches an empty nakedness that, for Mother, is worse even than the silence and the loneliness. And more threatening.

But the nakedness is being covered. This, Mother does not, cannot, will not see. Men in blue singlets and high gumboots blast the subterranean rocks, uproot wild shrubs, maul the earth and pound it into submission, cowing it to receive the edifices they are determined to erect upon it. The dry hard earth does not yield itself too readily. A thing of pristine virtue, it is too frigid, too severe to penetrate with tact. But muscle, machinery, dynamite and cursing overcome its resistance, and from the barren surface rise up wooden skeletons upon which brick and cement become flesh. Then are doors fitted, windows inserted, tiles slotted into place. Then, in a day, or two, or three, paths become cemented, bare surfaces covered with topsoil, seeds sprinkled, bulbs planted, and the house becomes a home as weak slender shoots become grass and reluctant buds blossom 'into full flamboyant colour.

So is a house built. So do the little coloured boxes of suburbia grow. House upon house coaxed to completion by the hum and roar of machines, by the vigour of men's curses, and by the laughter of a ten-year-old boy. My laughter. For as I swing by my arms from the horizontal beams and climb upon the rafters of each rising skeleton, in my imagination, which soars, I build it too, reaping as payment splintered knees, calloused palms and grit 'in the eyes. With my help, the perimeter where we live is pushed back and the city swells, enveloping us more rigidly within the carbon solidity of conformity.

Mother detests the perimeter. Father, with his tomatoes and lemon-tree, tries to adapt. But I, a bird on the rafters soaring high, thrive and flourish and grow within that wilderness. For the wilderness, the vacant lots, the wooden scaffolds, the quarry, the mounds of loam, even the ring-wormed patches where puddles form belong to me. Its melody I have adopted, I know its silences, which are not truly silences, and treasure the emptiness. More than Mother could know. It has its own taste, a taste of that deeper more remote Australia that Mr. Cook teaches about. The Australia of open spaces, red deserts, towering gums, shearers, swagmen, jumbucks and wheat. Inspired by his mission to make me one of his Aussie kids, Mr. Cook brings me books, pictures, stories by Lawson, odes to Clancy and to the Man from Snowy River. My appetite he cannot satisfy. He tantalises my nostrils with the scent of eucalyptus and I swallow in mouthfuls whatever he feeds me. And - Mother should never know - I grow to love this country with the fervour of a proselyte, for the wilderness is mine. I become Mr. Cook's best pupil, his model child, his favourite. The questions he poses, he asks me to answer. The answers I give no-one else knows. Mr. Cook, who should know better, beams as he makes his way between the desks

towards me, and laughs as he places his thin tendinous hand upon my shoulder, saying, too loudly, 'Well, son, you're a regular Aussie now.' Brian Simpson on my left sniggers, Russell McLean laughs, while Jim Reilly, Fisticuffs Jimmy to the boys, sharpens his knuckles which he will pound into me after school.

'Cissy! Teacher's pet! Sucker-upper!' he hisses behind raised fists. His blows hit whatever target he chooses. His mates urge him on. My left eye swells and darkens, I taste my own blood and tears.

'You're a regular Aussie now, eh?' he mimics from behind his fists. 'So show us boy, show us.'

Mr. Cook, who has stayed behind, now appears. The cheer squad flees and Fisticuffs Jimmy with it. This reed of a man again puts his mischievous hand upon my shoulder. It is dry, unfeeling leather, hairless and cool. It hints at barrenness and reminds me of the eucalyptus and gum, of open spaces and of the legend called Australia. I would like to love it still, but it has become remote, something not of my world at all but something that merely winked and taunted me with scented promises. Even the closer wilderness upon which I have helped to build with calluses and laughter mocks at having fooled me. And under Mr. Cook's withered solicitous hand now wiping my face of its blood and its tears, I weep, I weep, weep for the bruise that throbs around my eye and for the loss of a treasure that might have remained mine…

The wounds heal, while others fester.

December is the year's unwinding. Padlocks silence the schools. The hum and roar of bulldozer and drill die away. Dry dust settles upon the building lots, the wooden skeletons stand stunted and stark, and timber and brick lie in mounds in the midst of rubble and loam.

We kick the dust, Colin and I. And swing from the beams, nails barbing our sleeves, rafters scraping skin. We play. Not out of friendship. But merely because we have met in passing and the earth has not opened to swallow either of us. His shirt is a pepper-pot of holes, his jeans are split and grimy and torn at the cuffs. And his heels are worn down to wedges and the uppers frayed. He is a good lad, this Colin, wearing his out-of-school outfit to be torn, mangled, soiled. Out there, on civilisation's perimeter.

And in our dress, he would make of me his twin as he kicks dust over me and throws wet sand down my neck, and probes and pokes and pulls and jostles, shoulder against shoulder, hip against hip, in a jest and ecstasy that is private.

Then, sated, or bored, he remembers something and has enough of play.

'Ta-ta, mate. See ya' at carols tomorrow night. Ya' must come. At twelve. Outside the Morgans'. Under the mistletoe.'

And he turns to go home. Leaving dust and sand to settle for other opportunities.

Mother, at dinner, says her piece about my shirt. And wonders, aloud, who I think will buy my next pair of shoes. We have just finished eating the herrings and tomatoes. Mother is clearing the plates.

'I'll take him to the factory with me,' jokes Father. Whether to buy cheap shoes there or to work for them, I can't tell. But I laugh, to please him, and because I have something to say and need allies.

'I must go to carols tomorrow night.'

Mother is serving the soup. Chicken soup again, with noodles, for the third day in a row. While from next door, a roast tickles the nostrils. A myriad globules struggle afloat, a myriad bare lamps flicker and shimmer and glint upon the surface, reflecting themselves in these agitating oily orbs.

'Yes,' Mother says, 'I will wake you.' The ladle clatters confirmation against the pot.

Father looks at her. But her back is already turned as she steadies the pot upon the stove. And if Father has on his tongue a remark to loosen, he chooses instead to suck it down with the noodles. While I gulp mine with a helping of delight. For, surprise too great to countenance, I am going to carols tomorrow night. Outside the Morgans'. Under the mistletoe. At midnight.

And in the labyrinths of private fancies, I rejoice.

Until Mother, sated without having eaten, her hands knotted at the knuckles, starts to rock and heave in her seat, and sets sail upon an oft-sailed sea.

'We must move,' she says.

Father, having just licked and smacked his lips, winces under what may swell into an accusation.

'Out of this wilderness,' she adds.

The wind, this time, blows more gently. The sails flag. And Mother stops rocking, loosening the rudder she clasps between her palms. And, lapping me with eyes that could quieten storms, she draws breath, her bosom rises and lists, and she folds herself around me.

'My precious one, my little one.' Meaning, what is to become of you?

Thursday night, to be awake at the time of carols, I draw the blind early and sink into bed, even though the colours and smells and sounds of day still nudge at my window. Mrs. Walters waters her delphiniums and gardenias, her husband bays at a reluctant moon, while Colin, their good lad, violates and torments 'Come all ye faithful' on his trumpet. Mother darns my socks in the kitchen, Father reads about Warsaw and Tel Aviv and hums to himself. Fragile breezes break upon my window, crickets chirrup, a sparrow chatters on the sill, then flies away, flies away with my thoughts, my imagination, my dreams, holding them firmly, resolutely, until - until my eyes open, suddenly, to the glare of a blue and brilliant Christmas Day. Wheels, hooves and bottles clatter along the street outside. Then there is silence, fragile, transient silence, followed by the scrape-scrape-scraping of metal against asphalt as Father shovels up the horse's straw gift for his lemon-tree and tomatoes.

I could weep, and would, if tears and sunshine were meet companions under the same canopy of blue. But I don't, not until that afternoon when Colin, sensing blood, or amusement, creeps up from behind and seizes me with devils' claws.

'Don't ya' like our Christmas songs, mate?'

He is over me. As always. I lie spread-eagled on my back, the grass beneath me cold and moist and unyielding, his knees pressing down, a vice on my outstretched arms, my own legs achieving nothing towards liberation. His face, freckles and all, scowls. His nostrils, black pits, flare. His mouth is a menacing crypt of fillings and carious teeth.

'We kill Jews, do ya' know?'

Words are his sole weapon, but the roots of my hair bum, as though he has set me on fire. The throb in my arms is as nothing against this fire.

'I am not a Jew.'

This, I thrust 'into every cavity in his teeth. And into the hollow of his throat.

Which makes him laugh.

I hate his laughter. If I could, I would seize it, throttle it, encase it, bind it to anchors of lead. If I could. But free, as malice is free, his laughter reaches all horizons.

'Colin, darling,' Mrs. Walters calls from her porch, intruding upon his mirth. 'It's time to come inside.'

He leaps up, pressing his knees for a last time into my arms and knuckling me in the ribs.

'Well, must go now. I won, mate.'

Leaving me crucified on grass still moist, my back cold and green, my arms aching, my ears throbbing with the laughter of his scorn....

This wound festers, where others have healed.

I tell Mother everything. A weak shallow vessel, I can't contain it all.

Mother is a rock. Standing firm; absorbing my pain. Face set hard, chiselled marble, with cheeks suddenly high and cold. Touch, and freeze. I tell her everything, tell her more than everything. Adding things that might have happened, probabilities that Colin might have been capable of, had not his Mum, unknowingly, delivered me from his malevolence. I tell her everything. Hoping, praying to heat stone, to force a glow that might make her avenge all hurt and devour that freckled killer of Jews.

Father, too, has heard, but it is Mother who speaks.

'Did you hear your son?'

His silence torments like pain. He puts down his paper and rubs the bridge of his nose with forefinger and thumb.

'Your son is no longer a Jew.'

Ancestry and progeny have parted. The son has abandoned his past.

'What a country this is! There is no God here! See now what a shegetz is growing up under our roof.'

My arms ache. My ears throb. With Colin's cavernous laughter. And Mother's submission, and Father's cowed silence.

Mother! Father! Just say one word against that devil. Don't beat him, don't even tell his father. But lay blame where blame is due, and curse him, him, and not me.

Mother salts and peppers tomorrow's soup with her accusations. Father - the hairs in his nostrils are too long and grow also from his ears - enshrouds me with the broad tallith of his hands and searches for contact deep within my eyes. Which burn. Which burst.

'Mother!' I plead. 'Father!'

Mother empties out the cup of her existence.

'We must move from here. See what this wilderness, this wasteland is doing to your son. Little brothers, blessed sisters. How have we sinned? Who is right in this world? And who is wise? And who is safe? Chaim to Siberia, Reuven to the gas-chambers, Sonia to America, Shimon to Israel. Leaves, feathers, scattered and dispersed, while we, silly, blind, pitiful yiddelech sink to the bottom of a barren trough, in exile, without a Yiddish book, a Yiddish word, a Yiddish geist.'

'Mother!', I try again, still seeking justice. Even though the plea sticks in the throat, trapped in a gurgle of incoherent meaningless sound.

And I discover a remarkable thing then. I discover that parents, too, can feel. Mother is weeping. A wind has blown against the rock. And it has crumbled. And disintegrated. With rivulets winding down the crevices and wrinkles beside her nose.

'My lost child, my precious one,' she says, burying my head in her breast, under a new tallith, a tallith woven of love and belonging, which I sense, or know, I shall wear forever. - As Mother wears the number on her arm.

Evening comes and passes. With sleep, for me, a century away, a universe away. Evening merges into night. Darkness overtakes the shapes of chimneys and trees which now disappear, dissolving into the void outside my window. Colin blasts upon his trumpet while his father takes to crowing. 'Silent Night' in the loudest of baritones, then 'Good King Wenceslas' amid the clinking of glasses and bottles and cutlery. Father sits in the kitchen, and Mother too, silently grieving over their shegetz. From behind a quilt of cloud, stars emerge. Solitary and nameless, meekly unassertive, as if to apologise for their very existence amidst the blare of Colin's trumpet and the scorn of his laughter and his father's raucous song. I watch them, am entranced by them, become as one with them. Until above the stars, Mother's face appears. Pale and drawn, wrinkled and my pain, quivering, throbbing, as each star becomes a tear. Shed for me…

Soon after, we move.

Goodbye, I shout to the neighbours. Goodbye Colin. And to you, Mrs. Walters, whose horny growth I shall now never pluck, goodbye. Sprinkle your gardenias with your devotion and shower your good lad with your love. And thrive on the dust of your wilderness!

Colin, swinging on the gate, smiles wryly, or squints, and raises a phlegmatic hand.

'Come and see us some time.'

'Yes,' I reply, 'I will.' The promise is genuine, from the heart, from the heart of a child with plenty to learn.

And before I can say goodbye again, he has turned his back, then takes one step, two, three up the stairs, and disappears. I see his smirk behind the glass of his window and his rash of freckles and that hollow mouth whose laughter has mocked so often. But it is only a memory that lingers there. Not Colin himself, not him. For he has already returned to his trumpet or his crystal set or to devising other mischief

Goodbye, I shout again. This time to no-one in particular. But rather into the transparent air, idling mutely over green unruffled suburbia as Father places a box of kitchen utensils into my hands to take to the car.

We are on the way. Hai, I want to call out, we are moving! And to move is better than standing still!

Through the rear window, I see the wilderness recede, with each crossing, moving further out of reach. Enough of sand and tadpoles, of quarries and mud. Enough of building boxes and pushing back borders! I have earned my share of calluses and grit in the eye. Goodbye, my wasteland! I loved you once! Before your people, with their special venom, ruined my love.

Father watches only the road ahead. Mother holds my hands. Her expression is solid. Impenetrable, the firm chiselled marble she must have worn when leaving Warsaw, Russia, Germany, France. Her chest barely moves with her breathing. Only the eyelids, blinking out of necessity alone, yield any hint of awareness.

So we move; come out from exile. Into a fruit-shop set in the hub of chaos, in the greyer, rowdier, cruder centre of St. Kilda where Father rises early and Mother breaks her nails over potato and swede and succours the needs of her thirsty soul as she picks out from their boxes the mouldy lemon, the bruised apple, the withered grape. Grey is the colour of St. Kilda and foetid

its every comer where I parcel out bits more of my childhood. Not grass, nor tree, nor flower dominate, but glass and brick and spouting and stone, all smudged, peeling, leaking, rusted, cracked. The street stifles under a pall of beer and rotting meat, it reeks of humus and dander, but here, here where the cats breed amongst potato sacks and the Herald boy shouts in adenoidal tones, and the drunkard staggers and reels, begging for a shillin'or a zak outside the Coat-of-Arms, here I thrive, I grow and thrive like some wild and reckless resilient shoot.

Mother complains still, but her cup is drained of its former bitterness. Three doors away is Glicksman's kosher butchery, opposite is Krampel's winestore, and within walking distance stand Rothberg's bakery, Kantor's bookstore and Glazer's delicatessen. Mrs. Tuchinski, fat and breathless, wails about her rheumatism, but recited in Yiddish, which is Mother's bread, the plaint is a melody plated with gold. The Kaplinskis buy from her and the Fleischmans and the Orbachs, each giving wings to memory reaching back into homelier times. And when I tell her of Harry Lewin who is in my class or of Benny Danziger or of Sophie Grundman who is the rabbi's daughter, an inner light pierces through the shroud of her weariness, to glow, to bum in a private fervour. And she touches my hair. Touches, smoothes, soothes, with hands coated with potato dust and love. Mother is gathering together again the splinters of her shattered self.

One evening, in the midst of reeking onions and wilted lettuces, Mother encourages.

'There is a boy in your class. Joseph Leibholz. His mother came in today. He sounds a fine boy.'

I seek him out, but cannot reach him, reach into him.

I try. 'Your mother knows my mother,' I say. And then ask, 'What games do you play?'

He stutters from shyness and looks away.

'None especially ... Oh.... chess sometimes. And draughts . . .' Each phrase is a minor explosion of sound, each burst a revelation.

'Not cricket or ping pong or tennis?'

I see from his clean neat pants that he is an indoor boy, not one to roll in dust or chase after tadpoles or climb on the rafters of rising houses. When he shakes his head, it is not with regret, but with the contentment in knowing that what he does and what he is suffices.

'I ... I also play the violin,' he says.

Slowly over the following weeks, I learn that he traverses regions that I have never yet encountered.

He is tall and slender and pale, and hugs the shadows, both around him and within. A fringe of straw-like hair sits over his forehead, his fingers are long and tapering candles of wax. And his eyes are drifting and dreamy, their colour that of distant oceans and as unfathomably deep. He doodles, he draws. He reads music as others read books and, 'in the shadows which are his alone, composes poems that Miss Quantrell praises in front of the class. I try to penetrate but he will not be penetrated.

'Will you play cricket with me?'

He shakes his head. 'I'm not good at it.'

'What about footy after school?

'I don't want to.'

'But why not?'

'I don't like it.'

'It's easy.'

'No.'

His distance, his difference, inflames. He excludes everyone, but I can't bear to be excluded.

'All right, then,' I say, 'have it your way.' And in the days that follow, I set about him in different ways.

I kick dust into his face and splash ink over his sketches; I bruise him with my knuckles and poke hard fingers into his ribs. I call him 'Fiddler', 'Cissy', 'Sucker-upper', and mock at him with barbs honed with venom.

He does not whimper, this saint, nor resist, nor retaliate, though he is taller and could swallow me alive. His is the manner of martyrdom, denying the ultimate satisfaction to the victor of seeing pain.

Until one day, after I have tripped and spread-eagled him on the ground, he fixes his eyes, so blue and ocean-deep, upon me and stammers, as though rocks sat on his tongue,

'Why. . do you try ... so hard ... to hurt?'

I have forgotten the original reason; the victim has always been so vulnerable and the opportunity ever-present. I have no ready response, so I laugh. I laugh, with the laughter of the victor, and fill the schoolyard with my mirth which spreads and tumbles and rolls into the street, its spiralling coils to be met there by another's laughter, by raucous hateful echoes that suddenly singe the memory and brand my own mockery with disgrace. For Colin has appeared. Colin. Not the real Colin, but his image, come to taunt the taunter and persecute the persecutor.

Later, Mother, wiping moist and grimy hands, takes me aside.

'Is it true that you've been hitting Joseph and fighting with him?'

I make sounds to deny, but the he falters, strangles, still in the throat.

'His mother came in today. Is it true?'

I kick at the lettuce leaf trodden into the floor and squeeze a tomato until it splits. Silence is confession.

'What will become of you? Tell me. We have left the wilderness but the shegetz is still under our roof.'

The juice of the tomato drains into my hand. Its seeds slip through my fingers to spill on to the floor. They are your bones that I am crushing, Colin, and your blood that is being spilled.

‘What will become of you?' Mother asks again, the rock of her fortitude beginning to crumble.

I cannot bear to look. I dread the appearance of those tortuous rivulets in the crevices of her cheeks. But she raises my chin with a hand become grubby and coarse, and sucks at my eyes with her own. Her brow is drawn, and smudged with dirt.

‘ We have left the wilderness,' she says. 'But have we really brought it with us?'

Jagged teeth of shame gnaw at the marrow of my being as, under Mother's gaze, I suddenly feel for Joseph and sense his pain. His sketches, his violin-playing, his poems - suddenly these return and, through the loom of memory, weave themselves into the warp of my earlier indifference, in turn, to dominate.

When, next day, I sit beside Joseph, I worship where, before, I had mocked. He sketches and I admire. He doodles and I imitate. He reads his music and 1, cleaving, search among the dancing notes a pattern, a design, meaning. And when Miss Quantrell recites again a poem of his, I listen, and find it in myself to praise. To praise that which the wilderness, through default, had

taught me to despise. The pallor of Joseph's face yields to a softer bashful glow. And gradually, the barriers fall as, caution his mentor, he admits me into the vast ocean of his dreamy drifting eyes where, chastened and converted, I find depths I have never known.

In that moment, I drown Colin. I seize that pagan laughter of his, throttle it, encase it, bind it to anchors of lead. With delirious fervour, I stifle his father's beer-sodden song and, with bliss too fabulous to contain, I pluck at his mother's bristled mole and trample upon those delphiniums and gardenias which she sprinkles with her very soul. Somewhere lies the perimeter I have helped to extend, the suburbia I have helped to cover. The quarries are filled, the puddles cemented. Little red boxes have taken their place. Somebody else scrapes up the milk-horse's precious gift. While here, far away, even in this grey drabness of my newer home, my joy swells; and rises; and soars. And transcends as, through Mother's and through Joseph's depths, I purge myself of the wilderness, of that wasteland, where a splinter of my childhood has, in our wandering, been lost.

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