PEBBLES FOR A FATHER

Serge Liberman

Today is Sunday, February the second.

In three days' time, Father, my father, would have turned eighty-five.

But he died eight months ago, last June - also a Sunday the second - and, to mark the birthday that might have been, Mother and I visited the cemetery this morning where she sponged his tombstone free of its Springvale dust and placed a pot-plant on it, trusting that it would not so quickly wither as the flowers she has till now laid there each month. Pebbles are more durable still, but these she inadvertently left behind. They will be her offering next month, her demonstration to him that, though death has, after fifty-seven years, finally parted them, yet he remains with her always, day by day and step by step, just as, by night, he appears also time and again in her dreams.

I do not ask in what cast he appears to her in her dreams; but his frequent return has her believe that his dear soul does not yet rest in peace and remark - so out of character in one who, long ago, with loss of family discarded both faith and the superstitions allied to faith - that, maybe, if, in keeping with folk tradition, I, as his son, were daily to recite the *Kaddish* , the prayer for the dead, for the statutory year of mourning, Father may yet find his peace beyond.

Tradition-bound Jewish protocol obliged me to recite that *Kaddish* first before the grave, then again at the memorial *minyan* that same evening and on the evening after. But I have not recited it since. I fail, as I have always failed, to make connection between a man's death, or, given recent history, the wanton, cataclysmic and unearned deaths of millions and the prayer that would have me magnify and sanctify His great Name in the world which He hath created according to His will and bless, too, that great Name for ever and to all eternity, amen!

So I have not recited it since.

I do not recite it as I ought.

And I will not so recite it.

Try, persuade me otherwise, when, to me, following interment, there is, neither in this world nor in any supposed beyond of any sort, any ongoing life, or pulse, or breath, or tremor of expectation, nor mind, or memory or soul. Father, or the man who was my father, he lies now, like all that lived before him and all that will follow and, in due course I myself no less, subject to the macerating pulverizing processes which, necessarily, indifferently and blindly, reduce all earthly matter literally to dust.

Father thus had his snatch of time; through that time, he occupied a fragment of space; and in that time and in that space he had a living name:

ABRAM JACOB LIBERMAN

born Warsaw February1912
died Melbourne June 1996

Beyond this, if anything remains of him, it is the few clothes still hanging in the wardrobe at home, his name in assorted files in this or that department, a smattering of photographs on dressers, in albums, on a wall, and his tombstone, of course, and his wife, his son and his grandchildren, and his dwindling circle of friends, and whatever memories, variously fond and pained, given them to bear until they must themselves in time be swept away

If, then, as Father regularly visits Mother's dreams, he visits mine, too, doing so because it is I, not *he* , as Mother would have it, who is not wholly at rest, and *this* not a year's repetitions of the *Kaddish* will assuage.

Such assuaging must come some other way; not through the formulaic words of a rote text that I have rejected, but through exploration, through memory peeled of its accumulated protective layers, and through play-back.

Whereupon may follow a coming to terms, on the one hand, with that which was, and on the other, informed by kindlier forbearance, with that which might have been.

This morning, on standing before my father's grave, I had a fleeting wish to evoke a man who, passing fingers through my hair or drawing me nearer to himself by a shoulder or smiling as people smile on a balmy day, would say, using the diminutive of my Yiddish name, 'Srulikl, I've never taken you to the museum. Maybe you would like to go?' or 'After

you've finished your homework, what about a round of tennis?' or 'Your exams are coming up. Shall I test you?' or 'Yitzhak Weinstein told me a marvellous joke in the shop this morning. I really must tell it to you.'

But that would not have been Father, my father.

Oh, yes, we did visit the museum together once, doing so by train, which was a bonus delight, and we also did play tennis, again but once, perhaps even twice. However, he did not (and with good reason, could not) test me in my work, while I'm not sure if he ever retained a single joke he heard. Against that, and out of justice and by way of peeking into an alternative future that might have been and envisaging an alternative father I may have had, I must record that I distinctly recall him carrying me on his shoulders to the local school in the mornings, he then thirty-seven and myself all of seven; I recall him, too, treating me once to a light French beer, and taking me to the dentist's after I broke my first tooth on tumbling down a staircase, and gaining distinct pleasure from my coming among the top handful in my class; just as I recall how, years later, now in Melbourne, he took me often on weekends to watch Hakoah play, or, come Sunday, drive me to Yiddish school even when, *contra* Mother, he preferred I should go to Hebrew school (precisely, as he said, so that in time I should know how to recite the *Kaddish* after him), and, later still, how, in the way of fathers everywhere, he would chauffeur me to and from school socials, private parties and youth group meetings, and even to my Saturday-evening dates, sometimes having to cleave through fog at midnight from St Kilda to Elsternwick, Brighton or Balwyn or wherever else I happened to be. And there were times when, still a boy, I would snuggle in his and Mother's bed on an unhurried Sunday morning and press him to tell me of the film he had seen the night before, or when I would go with him and Mother to the local Victory Hoyts or Palais picture theatre, to Music for the People, still in the Botanical Gardens then, or to a Yiddish lecture by a visiting speaker, or a Yiddish play at the Kadimah, and certainly to our 'friends from home' for lunch, for afternoon tea or for full-fledged dinner.

All these are snatches, to be sure; they are details, minuscule perhaps in the vaster order of things, but not for a blinking to be dismissed, disdained or forgotten; for, feeble as they may seem, they are nonetheless redemptive; they are spicules of gold plumbed from the cauldron of memory far, far more crammed with an alchemist's baser stuff, and, in the calm of recall, salvaged now a light-year after that bubbling stewing cauldron has subsided and cooled to a quieter gentler surface sobriety.

There are other snatches, too, which will emerge later in their place. But, for the present, let it be said that what the son who tells this tale has carried about with him most and longest of all is precisely the burning excoriations from both under his father's roof and away from it long after he left it.

No doctor he, the father, but, as surely as the son who the truer doctor became, he knew where the solar plexus could, from fifteen to fifty, most smartingly be struck.

'You keep listening to that racket on radio over and over. Now stand there before the stove and sing me just one of those ... those ... what you call songs.'

'Again you've wet your bed. Do you want we should bind you in nappies again?'

'Marbles, monkey-bars, the beach! Always playing, filling your mind with nothings, wasting time! Tell me, what's to become of you?'

'What's this? Dostoevsky? At sixteen? Oh, no, not for you!'

'Good, you passed your exams. Now go cut your hair and stop looking like a bodgie.'

'You're graduating from Yiddish school? Your mother can go for both of us.'

'You've had a story published, ha? Did they pay you for it?'

'So, Doctor, you are obviously an important man if we don't see you from Sunday to Sunday. I'm surprised you still remember where your parents live.'

'So, Writer, you write for the newspapers, you edit this journal and that, you have a few books to your name, you peddle culture about town. So? What does it all get you? Aren't you neglecting your patients, maybe? Or your family, hm, your wife, your children?'

Distant as, at times, he seemed, he missed little. When it came to aiming his barbs, an archer could not have had a deadlier eye, these barbs being but one volatile ingredient, fifty years multiplied, that could catalyse to a torrid boiling over of the seething cauldron. Beyond this, suffice it to say, without elaboration, that the roof beneath which that cauldron seethed was so wanting for peace, for harmony, for a kindly and a similarly reciprocated kindly word (whether matters between the son's parents had to do with the choice of Sunday school, or the cost of curtains, the size of a gift, or the introduction of sandwiches into their delicatessen) that there were evenings when he fled, when he *had* to flee, his study, for the quieter, gentler tidal and arboreal hushes of St Kilda Beach, where, as an adolescent writer-in-the-making and his mother's son far more than his father's, he would forge in his mind's-eye a drama of

Shakespearean mould in which a key line was, 'Bind these hands lest they do harm, do foul, shed blood!'

Questions arise here:
Where did the son lose the father he might have had?
Conversely, where did the father begin to lose his son?
And what kind of son did the father want?
And what kind of father could have held the son's affection?
And was the father truly a difficult man?
Or the son a particularly difficult child?

Such questions are seldom asked, So the son never learned, and even now he does not wholly know, although perhaps he can still make some sense of it all, however late, even if too late, the learning comes.

The father, at five foot eight and of medium build, walked with a purposeful step. He was connected to the ground he walked, to the streets he drove through, and the houses, garages, warehouses and shops he passed, to the potatoes, lettuces and oranges, first, and then the cheeses, sausages and honey he sold in his successive shops and to the suppliers he dealt with. He was connected, too, to the Yiddish paper he read Friday nights, sometimes to a Yiddish book, or, as already noted, to the Yiddish lectures he attended, the Yiddish plays, to the cards he held in his hands over Polish rummy, and to the soccer of a weekend afternoon and the midday wrestling on TV. And other things engaged him. For forty years, until illness kept him home those nights, he would attend every Martyrs' Commemoration o pay homage to his family destroyed in the ghettos and camps which, by sheer freakishness of circumstances, he had survived. Being a Zionist at the core, he detested any stance, from anti-Zionist Bundism to communism, that veered to the left. While not outwardly religious, he held to tradition and attended synagogue at least on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* (the New Year and the Day of Atonement), and recited the *Haggadah* at every Passover *Seder* , even when, after the son's own domestic collapse, the number around the table plunged from an extended family of eighteen to the original and irreducible three.

The son, standing five feet three and, as a youngster, given more to the slight than the sturdy, tended, even as he walked the same terrain as the father, to be dreamier and to prefer books to brawn (one goal and sixteen behinds kicked in a season from the half-forward flank with his school's house seconds scarcely pointed to exceptional sporting prowess, even if he could put in a decent game of tennis). He tended also towards music which he discovered in the third form through a teacher called Alan Murphy and through radio programs on 3LO and 3KZ; towards art opened out to him by another teacher in Gregory Flynn and the exquisite chiaroscuro of Rembrandt; and towards history through a Miss Anders (could he but trace her!), towards literature through Steinbeck and Chekhov, drama through Olivier's celluloid *Hamlet* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* , and - his own creative springboard - Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* . Further, with high school over, the son, following both parental ambition for him and the educational logic of the time, entered university, specifically medical school as his vocational bent, but thereby entering also into that preliminary world-in-microcosm with its mind-expanding library, campus bookshop, lunchtime forums, lectures and debates, the political causes that fired the generation (capital punishment, Aboriginal rights, apartheid, Eichmann, Soviet Jewry, Vietnam), its innumerable clubs and societies of to be had, and - in keeping with (was it Bernard Shaw's?) dictum about adolescents and socialism - a veering leftward which led him to abhor the rich (and make it patently known) and berate the bourgeois middlemen who made profit of sweat that was not their own, even though (a truth pointed out to him frequently enough) it was precisely by means of the pounds, shillings and pence, and later the dollars and cents, accumulated by such truly hard-working middlemen as his parents that he went through high school at all, and then medical school, and was sent to summer camps and had his other pleasures while they laboured, day-in, day-out, in their twelve-by-fifteen-foot confines redolent with hams, herrings, bread, camembert and silverside with not a week's respite in twenty years.

For all that, the son did delight, it needs to be said, in the things of his parents' world, the works of I. L. Peretz, say, and of Sholom Aleichem, of I.J.Singer and of Melbourne's own Herz Bergner as taught to him at Yiddish school by his teacher-actor Jacob Waislitz; and he drank avidly of the biblical ethics taught there, albeit in their vigorous and avowedly this-worldly secular and humanist form. He did at times, though more and more erratically, accompany his father to synagogue on those high-holy Days of Awe and to the annual Martyrs' Commemorations in the auditorium of the Melbourne Town Hall, and he did, through his schooldays and till the end of his university course, consistently help on Saturday mornings and on holidays first in the fruit-shop and then for long years in the delicatessen.

But make no mistake.

Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, Yiddish lectures and Yiddish theatre, the excursions to the soccer, the Saturday nights *en famille* to the Victory or the Palais, the periodic visits to ship's-brothers and friends, the working side by side in the shop and the pocket-money he earned for doing so; and later, his graduation, engagement and marriage, his own successive celebration of fatherhood three times over, his own father's delight in these no less, and the wider extended family gatherings for festivals and birthdays, interspersed by other occasions remembered for their light, festivity, celebration... For all that, how brittle the connection, how insubstantial the cement bonding father and son. The son, certainly wilful when so moved to be, and more than once obnoxious and capable of unbridable hate even while remaining obedient to laid-down parental dictate, was not wilfully aloof, nor overproud, nor even hoity-toity haughty. But, look right, look left, or above or below, all too seldom could he find common language with his father - even where Yiddish remained to the end their common medium, nor even when, at their physically nearest, they were evening after evening together at the dinner-table. Because, mealtime though it was for the father, was, for the son, it was more an unavoidable interlude between immersion in his year-by-year changing texts spread across his desk, interspersed at different times, amongst other things, with the *The Age* Green Guide, with Camus or Kaufmann, with a ticket to the Union Theatre, and with sixpenny Coles scribblers scribbled in with fledgling scribblings for future stories. Father and son were different and continued to differ in increasingly spiralling ways, giving the lie to that homespun dictum that apples do not fall far from their tree. For they do; and they did, the son diverging ever further from the father, and the father being other than the one that earlier evidence suggested he might have become.

The son must therefore look to other beginnings to assist him in his exploration.

The father, to be sure, was connected, and connected early on, to the underfoot contours, variety and pliability of the Australian terrain. But connected did not mean secure or truly grounded, and certainly he was far from ever feeling at home. Warsaw-born and one of six, he left school at twelve to work in a soft drink-making and trading concern. Whether he had had anything of a childhood or adolescence as commonly understood, the son who writes now of that father never learned (because it never occurred to him to ask). What he does know is that, at twenty-six, on 10 June 1939, he married, and that, at the outbreak of war not three months later, he and his bride, the son's future mother, were in the eastern reaches of Poland, which soon after, over Foreign Ministerial signatures, became part of the Soviet spoils while the western half , including their former respective Warsaw homes, became German booty.

There, in Russia, exiled still further into the forty-below frosts of Sverdlovsk, Samarkand and Fergana, a hop from Uzbek Tashkent, they remained until 1946. There they had a daughter; there, with pneumonia superimposed on measles, they lost that daughter; and there, too, they had a son, who in his turn might have been felled by whooping-cough or malaria, but for the fresh apples the father - how the father enjoyed retelling the story - brought for him daily from miles away. After the war, offered the option of repatriation to Poland, they seized upon that option, only to find themselves, husband and wife alike, orphaned, brotherless and sisterless to the last in a Warsaw whose rubbled detritus impelled them on to a DP camp in Germany; and then still further on to Paris and a three-year respite from uprootedness, in a single fifth-floor room which served, at once, as kitchen, livingroom, washroom, bedroom and factory for making *Canadas* , heavy fur-lined lumber jackets, for sustenance. What the son recalls of that time, he recalls with fondness: the intimacy of close living, the unique smell and appeal of the underground metro, the cinemas, Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of Arc* , so exquisitely ethereal on being set alight at the stake, and the restaurant *Le Globe* , the walks and meetings with friends along the Belleville (the Paris original of his present-day haunt, St Kilda's Village Belle), and the *Quatorze Juillet* parades a proverbial stone's-throw from their *arrondissement,* and his father's show-off pride in his son's ability to identify the provinces of France from the jigsaw pieces of the country scattered face down.

If there were difficulties between father and son then, memory has no store of them; nor is there the will or urgency to delve deeply and draw any forth.

But then, three, four years after reaching Paris, with the Korean War at its height and talk of another European war in the offing, a decision had to be made, a decision the most momentous of all, which, having been made and implemented, led to the descent, at 7 p.m. on Thursday 15 March 1951, after five weeks' tossing about at sea, *sans* family, language or much preparation, down the gangplank of the *Surriento* at Port Melbourne's Princes Pier on to the solidity that was Australia. Mercifully, friends waited on the pier below, good friends, loyal friends, friends from Poland, from Russia, from Paris, themselves come to Australia but a year before. Friends were valuable, then, as friends are valuable always; but help as they

may, friends can do just so much, for, ultimately, new arrivals must, after Europe, by themselves learn to breathe, to move, to think freely again. By contrast, for the son there lay before him every prospect of adventure, its opening paragraph seeing him wear a watch for the first time in his life: his father's second watch, passed on to him lest it be confiscated at Customs as contraband.

Within days of arrival, both the son's father and his mother found employment, becoming in Australia, too, the machinists they had been in Paris. But a new place could mean an altogether new start and a widening of possibilities. So, with the father determined to be his own boss and, thereby, for the first time in his forty years, the master of his fate, they entered, first, a greengrocery and, two years later, a delicatessen, tin the trust that he might thereby accumulate the wherewithal that would in time raise him to the equal of particular ship's-brothers and of others who, with no better start than his own, had gone on to make fortunes hand over fist. - After all, at forty, a strong, healthy, purposeful man has every legitimate hope, surely, that, for whatever he has lost before, he might yet, with energy, industry and vision, be well compensated.

That's not too much to ask, is it?

And so, *sans* family, language and preparation indeed, and as unAussie as he was, he tried, he truly did try, after twelve years of footloose uprootedness, to acclimatize himself, to belong and to establish a firm foothold in a land which he elected should see an end to his running. Hence, in the family's first home in the quietly unruffled, orderly suburbia that was Northcote, he cultivated a lawn in front of the house and a vegetable patch behind; Sunday mornings, out early with bucket and spade, he scraped up the milk-horse's manure as fertilizer for his garden; later, behind the delicatessen, he grew tomatoes in old honey tins filled to brimming with fertile soil. He made some effort to follow Australian Rules, but, on playback, most poignantly of all, on evenings scattered over many years, while the son was in his own room doing as his fancies dictated and his mother was in the kitchen ironing, writing letters or preparing the next day's dinner, the father sat in his own silence at the dining-room table painstakingly copying columns of words from an English primer, reciting them under his breath over and over, trying, truly trying, to master the language to a fluency which, no matter how pure, how exemplary his intentions, he was never to attain. All this, while, when in the fruit-shop, rising in pre-dawn darkness to bring utility loads of Granny Smiths, Waltham Crosses and Valencias from the market, and, when in the delicatessen, driving to smallgoods distributors to buy tasty cheeses in bulk, butter in bulk, honey in bulk, or taking delivery from travellers of square loaves and high loaves, boxes of eggs, crates of drink and long strings of sausages on butchers' hooks, doing his best to conduct conversations with them as with his customers, but in a syntax so broken that his every word marked him, as he viewed himself through their eyes, eternal newcomer, alien, Jew. Not to speak was therefore safer, less self-exposing and less attracting of others' disdain, even if never overtly encountered.

If true belonging through language and shared affinities with the wider world outside eluded him (for even his acclimatization through gardening and self-improvement was essentially a solitary pursuit), so did the realization of his hankering to become a man of substance, to become a somebody, too, among his high-rising peers. As one of them after another ascended through real-estate into the ranks of the moneyed, he too felt the urge to spread fledgling wings to join the flight. A first brief venturing into the field fell to a dispute with a fly-by-night partner. But no catastrophe here; and certainly not the end of willing, whereupon in time he ventured out again, this time on his own. And it was indeed very much on his own. For, while he encountered no outside obstacles to his flight, he was confronted by more than fair quota at home, the laying of virtually every brick of an apartment-block he built attended by the vehement resistance and fretting of a fearsome wife who would rather spurn wealth and its offered comforts, holidays and trips, than incur bridging loans and overdrafts, interest payments and tenant rents and, not to be understated (mirror to the father's unease in the gentile world), the envy and hostility of their neighbours given cause to toss their noses and scorn 'Look, there go more of those parvenu Jews'.

No less did the venture encounter the rebuff of the son, he being the mother's child far more than the father's. But his resistance issued from a different source. To this young, over-earnest paper disciple of socialism, the honest poverty of the 'have-nots' was morally superior to the accumulated wealth and high living of the 'haves'. Dickens, Tolstoy, Sholom Aleichem, Peretz, Steinbeck and Gorky would have been proud of the work they had done on him.

In such a life, how many deaths does a man die, when every loss, and every distancing, and the fall of every domino he has ever set up is another death?

Apart from whatever memory and homage may still have evoked at the annual commemoration, salvaging nothing of his first forty years.

Being marginal outside and increasingly the outsider within his home.

Being able neither to share his vision nor to be buttressed in its realization.

Having every rung of his ambition cut from under him both by mother and by son.

Being helpless before the son's strident tantrums, save through threats, beltings or stand-off silences.

Being helpless, too, before the son's raised barricades against approach.

Being imprisoned in a poky store while beyond its plate-glass window, flew others who were, at every moment, taking out titles on apartment lots, street blocks, cinema emporiums and assorted chain stores.

Sitting evenings isolated, alone, lonely, lonesome, call it what you will, on the living-room settee.

Finding even the rummy he played with friends as his chiefest pleasure under attack for his seeming to do so to excess.

All this, with the last and greatest insult of all being, at fifty-four (the age at which the son finds himself now), the blighting by a coronary that for a solid six months laid him low.

All of these were deaths, deaths of a kind; with the greatest death of all, while living (could the son have but recognized it then) being the loneliness beneath his own roof and, surely, the attendant loneliness within his soul.

He survived his heart attack to bear his heartaches for another thirty years. But there were other deaths along the way.

Distance between father and son (or was it between son and father?) proved beyond breaching, even when the son himself married in due course, had children of his own, and when weekly family Sunday lunches or dinners at his parents' became effectively *de rigueur* . More than with his son, the father gained such pleasure as he could from his grandchildren. They were the interest, he liked to say, accrued from the original investment. But being reticent both by nature and circumstance, being wanting in fluency of English in which they very soon outstripped him, not attuned to children's worlds, children's needs and children's talk, and unable to display overt affection that, unimpeachable as it was, proved awkward or barbing in its expression even when he meant only to tease, he came to hurt, to lose, and to die again when they too at a later time distanced themselves from him, backing away from too binding an involvement.

If, in sum, he was a man to whom affection, both its giving and its receiving, came hard, he had one strategy by which to hold on to the family that he saw drawing away.

He was not rich, but he *was* frugal, so that every cent spent on himself was weighed on the same scale as a dollar. And what he laid aside cent by cent, he lavished, unasked, on his family through dollars counted in hundreds, sometimes in thousands.

'You've received the children's school-bill? Tell me how much it comes to and I'll pay half.'

'The children say they want a bicycle ... a slide ... an Atari ... a computer ....? Find out what it costs and let me know.'

'The children are going to summer camp? I'll pay for them, just let me know when you need the money.'

'Your car repairs are beginning to cost more than the car is worth? We'll go on Saturday to Reg Hunt and choose another.'

'Your house needs air-conditioning? I'll arrange it through someone I know.'

'I hear you can't meet your mortgage? Tell me what's left to pay and I'll deal with it.'

And so on; all this along with other rescue operations when the son's family's outgoings greatly exceeded its income, and coincident with other gifts to the grandchildren and goodly sums entered into their bank accounts on their every birthday. But with what little thanks or appreciation returned.

When a man has lost so much and when so much has died within, true justice would dictate, surely, that he should be entitled to a quiet, restful, reconciled old age.

But even this eluded him.

To be sure, the old-time domestic tempers, seethings, tantrums, barbs and silences receded into a 'what was, was' truce with the past. In their place, illness supervened, and a waning of energy, a dizzy holding on to things, and near collapses in the street, culminating in a cardiac arrest at home, on which occasion his razor's-edge resuscitation by his son and ambulance-men gained him another nine years of life. There followed a succession of

hospitalizations for a coronary artery bypass, a pacemaker, heart failure, kidney failure, a broken, subsequently paralysed arm, legionnaire's disease, and near-death twice, three times; to which, for comprehensiveness, one must add his son's marital breakdown during these years, the grandchildren's allegiances falling off, and their visits to him, whether in hospital or at home, falling away, leaving him to ask one question more than any other: 'Do you know if the children are coming today?'

While never appearing to have known ecstatic joys, nor did he with the piecemeal closing of the shutters upon his life utter a word of complaint. Every tablet, injection, infusion, transfusion, endoscopy and biopsy, he accepted as being in the order of things. With his debility mounting, he found his capacity reined in, his regular long walks to the beach reduced to the nearest corner, then to the park abutting his home, then to the confines of his three-roomed first-floor flat, then to the couch, to the chair, to his bed and finally, when the son's mother, superhuman in what she did for him by day and by night, could do no more, to a hospital bed, even then planning, when he got better, to go down to the park again to chat with friends.

He held on, and, as well as he could, he continued to hold on.

But then came Saturday, June the first. The father was in hospital; mother and son came on their daily visit. He was tired, nauseated, sleepy. Yet he asked:

'So, Doctor, are you busy at work?'

'You need a few dollars, maybe?'

'Do you know if the children are coming today?'

He ate skimpily of his dinner, then took his pills, and, minutes later, vomited all.

Mother and son cleaned him, a nurse changed the sheets.

He lay back, closing his eyes, opening them, closing them again.

Time came to leave, mother and son rose.

He opened his eyes another time.

'*Nu* , Srulik,' he said, 'when will we drink a schnapps to another bride?'

The son laughed, laughing off the question as he had done often-times before.

'We'll see each other again tomorrow,' he said.

The father nodded.

In the event, only half of the deal was fulfilled.

The son saw the father; the father never again saw the son.

For, at ten the following morning, the Sunday, as the son was about to collect his mother on the way to the hospital, the ward sister phoned.

'I'm sorry to have to tell you ...,' she said. 'Just five minutes ago ...' And so on.

Whatever else she had to tell was but script that he already knew to a tee.

Mother and son reached the bedside, with the mother, having witnessed a miracle of resurrection once before, believing it might yet be repeated.

'Sergie, he's still warm! Sergie, you saved him before! Try, try, do it again!'

She struck his chest, pressed palms against his breastbone, as, nine years earlier, she had seen the son do in bringing Lazarus back.

But this time, the father had died the last death of all.

We buried him the following day, and before the grave I recited the *Kaddish* .

I perjured myself and said:

'Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which he hath created according to His Will.'

I perjured myself again at the *minyan* that night, and again the night after.

I have not recited the *Kaddish* since though, at the consecration of the tombstone, unable to avoid it, I will do so yet again.

But let it be known that while it is Prayer Book rote I will be uttering there, *sotto voce* I will pray for something grander, something higher still, saying:

'Magnified and sanctified be Man's great name in the world in which he may create his own life according to *his* will.'

Meanwhile, on our next visit, we will bring those pebbles, and upon his grave I will lay one of my own.

Children ha' mercy on their parents all!

From collection of stories *Voices from the Corner*.