A Universe of Clowns

Serge Liberman

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"we live
as much as we believe;
we love
when faith is not enough."

Manfred Jurgensen

By the same author
On Firmer Shores

Several of the stories which appear in this volume have been published previously:
"Envy's Fire" and "Words" in *Melbourne Chronicle*
"Greetings, Australia, To You Have I Come" and "Sustenance Was I to the Needy" in *inprint*
"The Real and Doubtful Virtues of Silence" in *Matilda Magazine*
"The Next in Line" in *Brave New Word*
"Friends" in *Kivun.*

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To Eva, Dvora, Jonathan and Noemi
and to all who would dignity and humanity preserve
even in the hours of deepest darkness.

A Universe of Clowns

It was madness, he knew, an insane and irrepressible madness transcending the mere want of tact. How mischievously, maliciously, already scheming, Martin and his crew, gorging their mouths with savouries and cream puffs and smiling their knowing satisfied fox-like smiles, had whispered in the corners amongst themselves. But it was not simply a question of tact. What had happened *had* to happen. He had wanted it. Elizabeth had wanted it. And to find other excuses was futile. It was not the brandy nor the headiness of New Year's Eve, nor the abandon of the old to the new and the lashing out in new directions with new impulses that the passing of the minute hand from one year to the next engendered. It was more than that, far more. It was love — yes, love, however old-fashioned and suspicious a term for a man nearing fifty with almost adult children —; it was love *and* helplessness *and* despair, the culmination so natural after long aching weeks of watching her slipping, her cheeks sinking, her brow tightening, her chin becoming that jot sharper, her orbits that whit harder, her fingers that mote leaner, he himself, professor of medicine, totally impotent, knowing that for all his expertise and for all the science built up by a thousand other professors, he could do nothing to repeal the sentence that hung over her without relenting. . . .

Elizabeth. Young. Fresh. His patient. His — dared he say it? — lover. So easy her breathing, so tantalising still her smell of cherries and sweat, the warmth of her buttocks against his thigh, her spine quivering, even in her sleep, under his touch. And her repeated truncated little groans — not of pain, the Lord be thanked, if a Lord there be, — but of some deeper if transient sleep-encrusted contentment.

But for himself, sleep had fled. Emerging from her, deliciously exhausted, he had napped — an hour, two — then woke, suddenly, to the assault of darkness and heavy shadow, to the still-unclear forms of remembrance and to the cool bracing breeze stirring the curtain through the open window. From the kitchen came the sound of steps and of the fridge being opened and shut, of the tap running, of a kettle being set harshly on the stove and the rasp of the toaster lever

being depressed. All of them abrupt angry movements directed, he sensed, he *knew,* at him by Barry who had come back home again.

To have taken her to the hospital New Year party at all was a mistake, an indiscretion, a lapse — an impetuous but unshakable decision out of character to one normally given to reflective deliberation — and patent grist to the mill of ever-avid departmental gossip. But then to take her home — and as good as to proclaim the fact, whether in tipsy jest or in mockery or defiance, to his colleagues or, rather, subordinates — therein lay the stupefying madness that made people rub their hands. What they thought, he had no need to guess. Small limited men, despite their academic attainments, they possessed small limited thoughts that ran most naturally to the seamy, lascivious and prurient, particularly Martin Lauder, the assistant professor, whose specialty, apart from endocrine diseases, was the telling of lewd indecent jokes. But Barry — what did *he* think, what *could* he think, knowing Elizabeth to be a patient in his father's ward, a woman of twenty-five, young enough to be an older sister, then seeing her in the lounge-room of their home, half stripped in petticoat and bra, her hair down, his father's shirt unbuttoned and his belt unfastened, coming home as he did so unexpectedly early and angry, or thwarted, from his own celebrations? He was courteous, discreet, yes, but his pursed lips beneath that moustache, his darting metallic eyes, the way he tossed his head and raised his nose spoke a condemnation more damning than the basest words. He, the father, would have preferred to hear his purist son scream, "You dirty old bugger!" and be done with it. And then perhaps an opening might have been left for an answer or an explanation. But go explain to a twenty-year old, a mere fourth-year medical student whose mother was still alive and legally married to his father, that what he saw was not degradation, much less debasement, when from the first he did not let himself be reached by the touch of words. Startled, his son had regained his poise quickly enough, said, if somewhat unconvincingly, "We're moving on to another party, I've come for my tobacco and pipe" and, after rummaging in his room, had left the house hurriedly, deigning to look not at Elizabeth who had by this time put on his mother's orange floral dressing-gown, but throwing a fierce glance at him, his father, who, out of decorum,

however belated, had buttoned his shirt and refastened his belt.

Barry's story had been an excuse, a confabulation, he knew, for after the boy's escape, he heard no hum of an engine, no movement of wheels, saw no head-lights through the lounge-room window. His son had left, where otherwise he would surely have stayed, to roam the streets, to brood, to spill out, ejaculate the venom out of himself, as he did whenever the pressure of his anger or frustration grew too intense. Elizabeth, caught unawares, her long black hair free of the crimson ribbon that had held it back in a tail, her increasingly pale cheeks showing heightened colour, her brow puckered with embarrassment, said "That puts you in a fix, doesn't it?" and he said "I'll talk to him in the morning," wanting, for her sake, to run out after him there and then and to find the boy, to grab his arm, catch his eye and to explain, explain all that needed explanation. Instead, they fell upon each other, reaching, pressing, clutching, Elizabeth whimpering through sudden tears "To this, my last year" and he responding "I shall do, my darling, my pet, all that is in my power to do," the two moving unabashed, naturally, freely, to the bedroom where the curtains rustled and a sharp invigorating breeze fanned the fire that welled, turgid and explosive, within them. . . .

Lying awake in the darkness, listening to — wanting to shut out — Barry's angry movements about the kitchen, the evening and its aftermath returned to him in pellucid clarity. The sumptuous smorgasbord, the alcohol without apparent depletion, the brilliant lights, the music, laughter, loud talk, he, as so often, at the centre of it, surrounded by a cluster of second assistants, registrars, interns and students, all listening, laughing, appreciating his anecdotes of visits to Montreal, Boston and Mexico, clinging to him, he knew, each of them wanting above all to be noticed and recognised, to be mentally registered in their unspoken competitive quest for appointment, reappointment and promotion. Liberated by drink, they listened and laughed affably enough. But he had also seen the current beneath the surface. For it was Elizabeth that they watched, stealthily to be sure, but unmistakably, unable, he knew, to withhold completely their attention from her, not merely because there existed such an intriguing disparity of years between himself and her, nor because liaisons between physicians and their patients were

(officially at least) frowned upon and somehow unsettled their sense of propriety, nor because Elizabeth was so impressively elegant, articulate and beautiful — though all of these were true — but also, less tangibly, elusively, because that elegance, intelligence and beauty was to prove — who among them did not know — so transient and each in his own way, even under the influence of drink, was attempting to reconcile inevitable reality with denial, the stubborn conflict at the very root of mute mortality. He had been flattered that she should merit such attention, and, continually holding a full glass in one hand as he told his stories, he had fondled her neck, her shoulders, her hair with the other, feeling her stiffen and relax, quiver and subside in ready, ever eager, submission. And he knew then, all doubts dispelled — could he have been so certain of anything else — that tonight he would enter her, penetrate her, not with the fumbling curiosity and agitation of a neophyte but with the exhilarating fullness of love and felicity and possession.

Certainty was no close kin to prudence. Some time after midnight — Auld Lang Syne having been sung and the revellers beginning to depart — Martin Lauder approached him, touched his elbow, winked, his eyes sparkling like the riesling in his hand, and asked, showing his teeth between curled lips, "And how will you talk with her on Monday?", a reference unmistakable and caustic to Elizabeth reverting to the role of patient. And under the brilliant lights, against the music and the laughter, he had announced with a bravado too loud and brusque, "Tonight, dear fellow, tonight is what counts. Monday is a generation, a universe away," leaving the assistant professor and those in close proximity in no doubt of his expectations. Realisation of his stupidity struck him even before all the words were yet out, but, uttered, they were beyond retraction and he saw the flushed faces of the remaining assistants, registrar and students broadening into knowing smirking grins as this, the latest story, spread. More than for himself, he felt for Elizabeth who, not having heard Martin Lauder's question, remained oblivious to the ensuing sniggering, and, shortly after, aware that he was adding fuel to the fire of gossip, yet not very well able, for her sake, to remain, he fetched Elizabeth's coat, helped her into it, and together, having said their farewells as if their parting could not be more natural, took their leave.

In his Volvo on the way to his home, Elizabeth, laying the tips of her long fingers upon his arm, said, "Looks like we'll be the talk of the town," and he replied with a thwarting laugh, "We already are, we already are."

"Gossip is like water," she said.

"Like water?"

She smiled. "They can't do without it."

Her profile, lit up and darkened in succesion as they passed under the yellow lamps, was all of one piece, firm, tense, expectant. Her excitement, pulsing ripples of emotion, fused with his own. His thighs tightened, trembled, relaxed.

"Elizabeth", he said, fondly.

"Did we do the right thing?"

"Done is done."

"And you're sorry?"

Martin Lauder returned to him. The wink, the curled lips, the causticity, the whispering in the corners, the obvious scheming, the smirks on the faces of his underlings.

"Let them stew," he said angrily.

Elizabeth sat back in her seat.

"Michael, I'm afraid", she said. "No . . . Yes . . . about that too . . . my illness, yes. But also when we left, there was something eerie back there. Everyone was pleasant, cheerful, gracious and all that, and yet — I was all the time on show, a curiosity, an intruder, yet an object of amusement."

"Nonsense."

"And you, there will be complications, won't there? Had I known, imagined. . . ."

"Elizabeth. The eeriness in there was the creation of small minds. They love nothing better than gossip. I wanted you. These last weeks, seeing you in the ward, or in the clinic, giving you the injections, drawing blood for tests, having to hold silence when the dams inside were bursting. I wanted you. After Betty . . . believe me, with you I came alive again. That is something that those old women will never, ever understand. I am fully alive again. . . ."

"And later?"

"Later?"

"When . . . when I'm gone?"

Her touch became suddenly firmer. He slowed the car and looked at her.

"Each day," he said, "has twenty-four hours. Together, Elizabeth, we shall stretch it to twenty-five. Eh?"

Twenty-five hours in a day. A rash promise. An impossible promise. Yet how often were hope, and gratitude, based on the impossible. Elizabeth was grateful.

"Just give me the strength," she had said.

In the kitchen, a chair scraped. A spoon or a knife clattered on the table. A cup rattled against its saucer.

"For what is to come we shall both need strength," he thought now as he swept back his cover, sat on the edge of the bed and manoeuvred his feet into his slippers. Elizabeth turned but continued to sleep. Rain rapped against the window. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness as he made his way to the kitchen.

At the table, he saw his son eating toast smeared with cheese and jam, drinking coffee and reading the previous morning's newspaper. Upon his entry, Barry stiffened and raised his head briefly and returned to his pre-occupation, a new bristling tension in his cheeks, his shoulders, his every movement.

"Night vigil in honour of New Year's Day?" he said to the boy, moving towards the stove to pour coffee for himself.

His son's jaws, already firm and angular, hardened. Brusquely, he flipped over a page, bowed his head lower, showing nothing of his head save the dense forest of his copious dishevelled wavy hair. The professor, carrying his cup, approached the table, reached for an apple in the fruit bowl, and, rubbing the fruit to a gloss in his pyjama shirt, sat down.

"Good party?"

Barry grunted, drawing his neck deeper into his shoulders. The professor was poised for whatever his son had to say, knowing that nothing anyone said from now on could be as harsh as the grilling he could, if only he ventured, give himself. The boy scanned the pages before him obviously absorbing nothing. The father caught the hard flaring nose, a replica of his own, the lips pressed between the teeth, the heavy obviously angry breathing. The boy's moustache twitched.

The rain now pelted against the window.

"Looks like a wet New Year's day ahead."

Again his son grunted, then blew down his nose, contempt as palpable as stone.

"Some way to begin the new year!" he said bitterly.

"First, I break up with Kathy and then I come home to find . . . to find . . ." He thrust his chin in the direction of the bedroom.

The boy's armour was breached. At least now, he might be reached.

"It's not as you think."

Barry flared.

"As *I* think! I'm only your son. What do I count? And Sue, when she finds out. She's only your daughter."

"Good. Let it out, all of it, whatever's eating you."

With a brisk adult movement, Barry gathered together the pages of the newspaper and folded it. He half rose but then sat down, encirculing his cup between his hands with such severity that his tendons bulged.

"God, she's your *patient!* I've seen her in the ward . . . I have myself spoken with her, examined her on one of our teaching rounds. How could you? Barely older than myself, than Sue. The esteemed brilliant exemplary Professor Bainton for whose patronage a dozen registrars would stab each other in the back. . . You took her to the hospital party. And they all saw . . . The master teacher, the master researcher . . . You'll be the laughing-stock. . . And how shall I face my mates at the hospital, the son of Professor Bainton who has taken up with some teaser half his age and if that's not enough his own patient? Couldn't you think of me? Sue? Mum? . . ."

"Your mother's well looked after. And Eliz. . . Miss Donohue is not a teaser."

"Yes, Mum's well looked after. In a hole of a nursing home . . . And what of your position, your reputation? . . . With one stroke! How many are waiting to step into the great Professor Bainton's shoes? Haven't you told us yourself?"

Barry stopped abruptly. Professor Bainton watched him stand up stiffly, gather up his utensils with swift agitated clattering movements and pace erect and defiant to the sink. There he turned, the plates still in his hands, and with a virulence quite out of keeping with his more customarily guarded self snapped so venomously that the tone no less than the words riveted him on the horn of an incandescent searing coil:

"How long does she have anyway?"

In that moment, more vicious than he had imagined conceivable for Barry, Professor Bainton sensed, feared, he had

lost his son. Particularly close they had never been — his work (teaching, researches, lecture tours) which had ever absorbed the greater portion of his time, energies and patience, had militated against continuous mutual growth. Formality rather than fresh spontaneity had marked their communications, and the fact that both he and his son were outwardly so alike — analytical, reasoning and deliberate (allowing for his own impetuous lapse and the occasional volatility excused by the boy's youth) — rendered intense warmth and intimacy elusive. But neither had there developed that distance that separated not a few of his colleagues from their children. And for that, particularly after Betty had to be permanently institutionalised and he was left with Barry and Susan in the large — now too large — house, he had cause for satisfaction. He hoped — prayed was not too strong a word — that Susan, when she returned from her holiday interstate would not prove so harsh.

"How long?" he repeated after his son, coolly, aware that the opportunity for explanation was inexpedient, even past, perhaps forfeited. "Take out your Harrison's, find the chapter on lymphoma on page whatever-it-is and find your answer there. Then maybe you will also learn the meaning of humility. And one more thing — whatever happened between you and Kathy, don't take your anger out on us."

"It's late," Barry said, dropping the utensils in the sink with another clatter. "I'm tired. I've had enough for one night, for a year." And he strode out of the kitchen, snorting "Professor Bainton lectures me on humility! Indeed! Crap!"

Twenty-five hours a day. He had now to make them begin.

He was watching Elizabeth's movements as she prepared breakfast. Her white long-fingered thinly-veined hands worked dexterously. She placed the orange kettle on the boil, lightly set down the cereal bowls and coffee cups on the table and smeared the toast with brisk agile practised strokes. She wore his wife's floral dressing gown and her long hair flowed, a lustrous stream, over the collar. Now and again, she looked at him and smiled, and said "This beats cooking for oneself alone" or "Do you like your coffee strong or mild?" Several times, he beat back the impulse to rise and hold her, disquieted intuitively by the agitated coursing of a deep-seated presentiment. Last night's events, he knew, were the cause of it, but what eluded him was the direction from which

the first enactment of his foreboding would arise. Barry, who, he was sure, had not slept, had left at seven-thirty on a day's outing to Mornington. The air seemed static, the last drops of the night's rain still clung, immobile, to the windows. In the garden, the plums hung heavily on the branches, the grass was moist and muted, scanty grey clouds traversed the scape of matt blue sky. Too still, too quiet, too calm. Not the hum of a wheel or the chirp of a cricket.

Elizabeth poured coffee. "A penny for your thoughts," she said.

"Just waiting for the phone to ring."

"On New Year's day?"

"Especially this New Year's Day."

He was glad she didn't push. Stepping behind him as he sat at the table, she placed her arms about his neck. He almost tasted the cherries in her hair.

"Do we begin the twenty-five hours today?" she said. Her voice was jaunty, touching the hem of laughter.

"This minute," he said, reaching upward to draw her face nearer towards him. "Where shall we drive? Get away? Ballarat? Sorrento? The Dandenongs?"

"Anywhere," she said, sunnily, dancing back, tossing her head in animated abandon. "As long as it's far from the smell of floor wax and ether. From white coats and fawning students. And from serious and stodgy mumbling professors, present company, my darling, my Michael, excluded."

"I trust you mean Martin Lauder."

"Is he the worst?"

No. A pirahna-eating pirahna is worse."

"How unkind you can be. The ever-courteous fair-minded and tolerant Professor Bainton. Against your own colleague too. So much for professional solidarity."

"And what on earth is that professional solidarity?"

"Not getting knifed in the back, I guess."

He liked the way she laughed. With her whole face, her inviting lips, the creases fleeting from the corners of her eyes, the tip of her shapely nose. He remembered the ease with which he had entered her and recaptured once more that exuberant ecstacy of love and possession.

"Well, is it to be the hills, the gold-mines or the sea?"

"Such temptations, What does it matter? Wherever there is light, fresh air and health. Wherever a person can be carried out of oneself and blissfully forget. Forget."

Elizabeth became suddenly serious.

"Why didn't you answer Barry's question, Michael?", she said. "Tell him how long I had left?"

He caught her eyes. Acute, probing, penetrating; black, glinting, alive.

Standing, she sipped her coffee and studied him in turn over the rim of her cup.

She did not wait for a reply.

"Yes, Michael, I heard. I woke when you left the bed, heard everything he said."

"He's young still. Hasn't learnt yet to watch his words. . ."

"Don't apologise for him. He was right after all, wasn't he? About you, your position, your reputation. Had I known . . . But I so wanted to be with you. . ."

"Can you see any knives in my back? . . . No? . . . Then everything's alright. Except that the first twenty-five hours are fast slipping away. Time to clear up, get dressed and go. And to pay homage to the finer works of nature. The green hills, the forests, the clear air. . ."

"The freedom. . ."

"The light. . ."

"Abandon. . ."

"Vegetation. . ."

"Life. . ."

"Right! I'm leaving in fifteen minutes. If Mademoiselle is ready, she is welcome to come."

Wiping her hands breezily on a tea-towel, she left the kitchen, already removing the dressing-gown from her shoulders as she walked. He gazed after her, an adolescent panting with puppy-love. Remove the eyes from her for even a winking and she would vanish. He clung to her, remembering, wondering whether this was how, so long ago — Was it twenty-five years? More? — he had felt towards Betty. Delight, exultation, and infinity of purpose, of power, of potentiality. It *was,* he knew. But how atrophied had that love become, how it had died, first through familiarity, then enervating concern and finally irreversible alienation as Betty over the years fell to unwonted fears, suspicions and religious hallucinations and delusions that, against all will, necessitated her institutionalisation. He visited her still. But the moat around the granite fortress of her dementia rendered impossible all access and made his visits, inevitably brief, sombre pilgrimages of duty rather than of veneration.

The girl, the young woman now dressing in the bedroom had from the first encounter — a visit to her bedside as part of a working ward round with assistants, registrars, interns and students in tow — been his resurrection, and last night's confession that through her he had come alive again was no mere metaphorical licence but irrefutable unimpeachable truth. At forty-eight, at the peak of his profession, his patronage sought after, his researches into blood disorders quoted extensively in specialist medical journals, his name synonymous with brilliance and eminence — the students flattered him with the epithet "Prof. Brainton" — he felt that he was only at the beginning of his life's work and he worked with a rediscovered verve, exhilaration and zest and, he now recognised, with a sense of invulnerability that had as if with a momentum of its own, led to the now no-longer retrievable lapse of the previous night.

He rinsed his cup under the tap and was about to go after her when the telephone rang.

"Now it begins," he murmured, his earlier disquiet returning to the surface. The clock showed half-past nine.

"Bainton," he said.

"Not too early, I hope. Keating here."

"A happy New Year to you, Henry."

"Some way to begin a new year."

Barry's identical words returned to him.

"Oh?"

He could hear the chairman of the hospital's board of management take a deep breath.

"I'll come to the point. . ."

"Last night?"

"Yes. . . There's been a lot of talk . . . I needn't tell you, unpleasant talk."

"Gossip is like water."

"Like water?"

"They can't do without it."

"It's more than gossip, far more . . . serious. Unless the situation can be . . . can be clarified to everyone's satisfaction and . . . resolved, there is every sign that the issue will escalate, become an official matter."

"Is there someone after my skin?"

"There is nothing personal in this."

"Henry. The New Year festivities are barely eight hours past and already you're on my back about unpleasant talk,

escalating issues, official matters. Someone must be stirring. Otherwise, why the hurry?"

"I want to warn you before you become too deeply involved."

"With Elizabeth?"

"With Miss Donohue. And to protect you while I can. But I and the board have a responsibility to the hospital, to its staff, both medical and non-medical, and to its students. Propriety. . ."

"Spare me the speeches, Henry. I understand your position. For my part, there is nothing to clarify."

"There is nothing in it, then?"

"On the contrary, there is everything in it and therefore there is nothing to clarify."

"I see. . . Will you then consider transferring her to another unit, let us say under Martin's bedcard and you . . . you . . . how shall I say it? . . . give up treating her?"

"Martin is an authority on endocrine diseases. That is what he knows best. But blood disorders, with all due respect . . . She's my patient, Henry. There's no question about it. As long as I am attached to the hospital, I shall be her physician. And not only that. She shall be my private patient and off limits to my registrars, my interns, and all students."

"Have you thought through the implications? She has, I am told, a terminal illness. Do you believe, under the circumstances, that you can. . . maintain the right perspective, the emotional distance — quite apart from all ethical considerations?"

Elizabeth returned. She walked on the balls of her feet, wore a bright yellow sleeveless frock, low-heeled shoes, a scarf about her neck, and had tied her hair back with a broad red ribbon. Her pale brow was puckered in seriousness, she pouted her lips pensively.

"Yes, Henry," he said, extending a hand to her. "I am quite aware of the ramifications."

Elizabeth gestured to him. "Do what he says, Michael, whatever it is."

Over the telephone, the chairman of the board said, "I tried to warn you. The board meets in two weeks and the matter, once tabled, will become official. You're making my job hard for me."

Elizabeth pressed his hand, "Tell him. . ."

"Please Henry. I lost the taste for melodrama with puberty."

"For your sake, Michael."

He shook his head at her.

"Think. . .," he heard Keating say.

"I've thought, Henry."

"Very well, then. To each his fatal flaw. Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Elizabeth Donohue. May I ask one favour of you? Don't think ill of *me*. But I have my responsibilities, my duties, my. . ."

"I won't hold you accountable. Goodbye, Henry . . . and, yes, thanks for trying. I hope you'll be where I need you when I really need you."

He replaced the receiver. Elizabeth faced him. She wore light red lipstick and a thin layer of powder that added colour to her cheeks. She was beginning to use artifice where, before, the natural had sufficed.

"Why, Michael?"

"No rhetoric, please," he laughed. "Besides, you know quite well why."

"Your reputation, your career is on the line . . . Is it all . . . Am I worth it? What will happen afterwards?"

"I have it!" he exclaimed, drawing her close and kissing the tip of her nose. "The Dandenongs. We're sure to find a nursery to buy some pot plants. And perhaps pick up some cherries or strawberries as big as your fist. There's a place. . ."

"Michael. . .!"

"Is it to be the Dandenongs then? Crisp fresh air, no floor wax or ether, no white coats or students, no hospital boards or mumbling professors. Only you, me, the forests in which to lose ourselves — and everything else be blowed."

"Michael. . .!"

"There, we can't be touched. Not by scheming predators, nor by melancholy, nor by the future. There, enclosed by a dozen gums, is a corner where time stands still, where Adam on waking first discovered Eve and there is no snake to spoil the whole business. There, the air is spun with magic and everything is green and the silence is that of living eternity — tranquil, unruffled, profound. And not a wind stirs. Not a breeze, a ripple, a leaf."

He felt her stiffen and the firm points of her breasts against his chest.

"If that were only true, Michael, if that were only true, I

might not be so . . . so . . . I suppose, I might not be so afraid."

He could not, of course, treat her to living eternity, nor find for her that Eden sequestered among the towering gums that crowded the hills. They were a part of the impossible promises he made and of the fabulous fantasies he wove. Yet how necessary they were, the promises and the fantasies, and how urgent.

Leading her up a steep narrow track from the road where he had left his car, holding her securely by a hand, he studied her — he could never have his fill of her — and had the image of a leaf, its stem withering, weakening, and breaking off, orphaned from the branch that gave it life. So thin was her neck, that withering stem, even though she tried to screen the signs of fading behind the vivid red of her nylon scarf.

The night's rain had cleared; the trunks, boughs and leaves of the trees and shrubs were moist and the undergrowth sagged without crackling beneath their feet. Above, the sky was a silvery blue, the sun struggled desperately to shine and dense grey clouds drifted torpidly across its face. Protected by vegetation, they felt no breeze, but the air was cool, bracing, keen. He was glad he had persuaded Elizabeth to wear her cardigan and jacket.

Along the slope, they rested, sat on a fallen tree-trunk while Elizabeth recaptured her breath. Her face was lean and her cheeks a mottled blue, and she blew out a puff of steam with every breath.

"I thought I could make it in one go," she said, smiling through her heaving and leaning her shoulder against him.

"The summit won't recede, I promise", he said "even if we wait here a quarter-hour." And he told her of his previous visits to the hills, of the long circuitous mountain hikes he had undertaken in his teens — "about three generations ago" — and the bush-walking trips through unmarked woods and scrubs nearby.

"I was quite an adventurer once, but the bones stop being able to take it after a while. We used to pilfer eggs from the farmers' chicken coops and set those squawking chooks on a merry dance, and trespass through gardens without number, picking whatever lay or hung ready to be picked — strawberries, grapes, tomatoes, cherries. Until one day, a farmer's dog nipped a pound of rump from one of my

companions, a slow-moving fellow — now professor of obstetrics in Sydney — with plenty of flesh to spare. It was literally a case of once bitten, twice shy, and after that we behaved."

"You *were* a devil, weren't you?" she said with an open quaintly boisterous laugh that made her cough. Brassily, he noticed. The glands, pressing within, were still enlarging.

"The blessed sins of boyhood. — And you, of course, were an angel without equal. Or let me guess — chubby freckled flat-breasted tree-climbing tomboy in ragged jeans and ballooning sweaters beating the boys in football and chasing after them with mudpies, in time to grow, against all the predictions of nature, into the most exquisite princess a thousands suitors would give their right arms for."

"But of course. The very stuff of which fairy tales are made."

"The Ugly Duckling and Cinderella rolled into one. Hans Andersen would be proud."

"I was really a spoilt brat. Too beautiful. Demanding, getting, demanding again. Never satisfied. Always hungry after toys, dolls, rings, musical boxes, brooches, ribbons. . . My father was a toy-shop owner. So you can imagine. Some trinket or other every week, whether I needed it or not, which I used not for myself — they were mostly cheap and gaudy — but to tear out the eyes of the other girls in my class or to make them bend to me. 'Show me the answers to this homework, and I will give these earrings;' 'Let me win the game, and the bracelet is yours.' A conniver, a schemer, ready to throw a tantrum if I didn't get my way. Like that other little girl — when I was good, I was very very good; when I was bad, I was horrid. You would have hated me."

"I daresay I would. If my Susan were like that, I'd send her to bed with bread and water for a week."

"And she'd deserve it."

"And then the magical metamorphosis. A waving of the wand and presto — a redeemed soul, a veritable saint."

Elizabeth's breathing eased. It had taken a long time, he thought. They would need to go up the rest of the way more slowly. Or was it perhaps wiser to return to the car?

"It wasn't like that. I am old enough to know that nothing ever is. Fairy tales are one thing, but maturity has its price. Father died suddenly when I was thirteen. A stroke. Mother followed six months later. Heart failure, the doctor said.

Heartbreak I should think. I went to live with an aunt, my father's eldest and only surviving sister who lived with a hoard of cats and was already touching the other side of sanity. Rather than she looking after me, the roles were reversed. Nonetheless, I finished high school, enrolled in the physiotherapy course, left after six months. The load of studying and caring for Aunt Edith was too great. I worked for a time in a solicitor's office. Then she died. The house was sold. In her will, she donated all her money to the R.S.P.C.A. I went to live in a flat and in time opened the boutique. — Not great material for a distinguished professor's girl-friend, is it?"

Her gaze fell on a moist twig she had picked up and was now bending between her fingers. The angle of her mouth which he saw on profile was raised ironically, a Mona Lisa smile, distant, dreamy, elusive. He turned her face towards him. Her pupils, flickering, were fathoms deep. He tried to reach her evolving depths.

"Better than a hundred PhD's," he said, smelling, tasting once more the cherries in her hair, feeling himself rise as she placed a palm upon his thigh.

"I'm all right now, Michael," she said, beginning to rise. "We can go up again."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"It's easier to go down."

"Should I give up living now?"

She stood before him, her jacket and cardigan open, her yellow frock smudged with green. The red scarf around her thin neck heightened the colour in her face. She smiled. "Treat me, Michael. Be my physician. Look after me. But don't, Michael, please, don't molly-coddle me. Even twenty-five hours in a day is too short and over in a wink. — I'm ready. Shall we go?"

He was glad for Elizabeth that the path, although more winding, became less steep. She negotiated the passage well, treading over the undergrowth that straddled the path and sweeping aside branches of wild shrubs that rose before her face. At the summit, they stopped. They stood in a narrow gravelled clearing where the air was suddenly damp and chilly and a spiralling wind blew.

On the side opposite their ascent, a dizzying precipitous thickly-wooded slope tumbled towards the flatter gentler

fields and gardens below. A squat stone parapet bounded the clearing on that face, and tufts of low-lying cloud slithered by.

The day proved scarcely one for sight-seeing, he was aware — the sun had vanished, a fugitive behind low thickening leaden cloud, and in the distance the grey mist of a steady drizzle hung over the blurred amorphous intangible terrain of the city — and, standing directly behind Elizabeth, holding her shoulders and sniffing the air which smelled of soggy gum and wildflower, he suggested that they return before a storm burst upon them and they were caught in the inevitable downpour. But Elizabeth, who had folded her arms tightly around herself, stood, mute, unmoving, before the parapet. He was a head taller than her and he bowed his face to kiss the cherries in her hair. And in that moment, he felt a tremor flutter and ripple across her shoulders. And then an unmistakable quiver, a shaking and spasm. He turned her around. She was sobbing. Tears coursed in rivulets down the deepening furrows beside her nose, clung momentarily to the angles of her lips and rolled on, glinting beads.

He held her elbows; she pressed her fists against his chest.

"Why me, Michael, why me?"

She was searching his face for an answer he could not give.

"Look down there, Michael. Hundreds of thousands, millions in their little houses, alive, laughing, singing, even crying, troubled, fretting, but, God, alive, alive, with something to go on living and working for, while I . . . while I . . . am no longer part of it, a solitary cloud adrift, a broken-off branch, cast out from the current that still flows down there. Hold me, Michael. Not as you held me last night, though that was love, too, but as if you want, desperately want to keep me back from the precipice . . . I love you, Michael, I love you, I don't want to die."

He clung to her, not solely for her sake, but also for his own, perhaps more for his own, once again, as so often before, keenly conscious of the awesome enormity of his impending loss, and conscious, too, of his impotence in the face of her advanced inner disease to do more than to prolong her existence — again for her sake, again for his — by a mere handful of months and to make her passing at best one of ease, avoidance of abandonment and freedom from pain. In that moment, he merged with her and felt her body press firmly, forcefully, desperately, as if to enter his own. And in

that moment, too, the first heavy drops of rain began to fall, the wind grew sharper and the branches in the trees keeled and swirled with heightened vigour. And still she pressed into him, her hair, her brow, becoming wet against his face, his own cheeks cold with their wetness, his arms pressing her in turn, crushing her, as though to deny that growing impotence and the futility of hammering upon the door of the inevitable.

They drove back in silence, their wet clothes steamy and pungent in the heated warmth of the car. Elizabeth nestled up to his arm, dozing. He thought of Barry, Martin Lauder, the chairman of the hospital board Keating, remembered Betty, suddenly wanted Susan to be at home. The rain fell continuously, the windscreen wipers hummed in monotonous rhythm, the wheels hissed on the roads, splashing up flitting splinters of spray. It had become prematurely dark, the New Year's day unseasonally black and melancholy. He turned on the headlights as he circuited down the mountain slopes.

What had seemed like madness in the early morning hours became an inevitable act. In taking Elizabeth to the hospital party, he had acted on impulse but the impulse had been stronger than himself. Nor could Elizabeth have refused. He had never given credence to fate. Events, attachments, even sickness, he had since his student days looked upon as the workings of chance, the random inter-acting of an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions together with the parallel or concurrent events taking place outside himself yet entangling him in an intricate mesh where the ruffling of one corner sent mighty currents through the entire lattice. Free will, choice, had its part to play as did its philosophical foil, determinism, but overlapping large corners of each was the inescapable inexorable pall of chance. So it had been chance that had brought him to Elizabeth or Elizabeth to him. Had he not, for instance, been professor of medicine. Had his researches not been into diseases of the blood but, say, into kidneys. Had he been employed in another hospital, in another state. Had he been away on Sabbatical or on a lecture tour. Had Elizabeth not developed or felt that ominous lump in her neck. Had she lived elsewhere, been admitted to another institution. Had Betty remained sane. Had he not felt the pressure of his years upon him as, nearing fifty, he had reached his peak and before him stretched the prospect of unruffled uniformity and private emptiness. Each of these

elements — and more besides — could have been different, each subject to the slightest turn in the wheel of chance to create new probabilities and radically different results. Yet, viewed from a different perspective, from that of the outcome, perhaps it was fate, after all, fate following its own inevitable obdurate course, however illogical, chaotic and inextricable to the observer or the actor it may have seemed.

So that first encounter, and all that followed from it, may well have been destined, and to escape from it would be merely to pursue a different path along one's destiny. But, though he might have considered it wisest, he had not in fact, escaped, but, rather, had become all the more absorbed in Elizabeth, as she lay, beautiful and ill, in her hospital bed or walked along the corridors during weeks of tests and treatments. Try as he might to break free, rationally aware of the implications, he had become all the more enmeshed in the web of destiny's weaving until he was compelled to confess to himself that his days, his work, his thoughts acquired a new and finer tone and the future was still capable of salvation.

Perhaps she had noticed how he had lingered on that first occasion by her bedside, surrounded by assistants, registrars, interns and students. The intern caring for her related her medical history but he, contrary to his normal practice, had questioned her again, looking all the while stubbornly into her sometimes gay, sometimes serious face, trying to fathom gleaming depths apparent in her eyes, watching the movements of her inviting lips, her chin, the tip of her nose, the long dark lustrous hair straddling her shoulders across the broad white pillow. And he had spent an inordinately long time examining her, sounding out her heart and lungs, palpating for other glands and liver and spleen, until he became conscious of muted coughs and the restive shuffling of feet around him. With his retinue in tow, he had moved on, but the ward round over, and feeling restlessly disquieted, he had returned to her alone, ostensibly to elaborate upon the medical details in her story, in truth to absorb more of what he perceived as an inner depth, elusive and unfathomable, yet desired. Confronted by her, it was this — desire — that he recognised in himself, something erotic to be sure, but also something more, a stirring of the spirit or of the blood — he had felt the ringing heat of it in his head — that transcended the physical alone. And this time, she had sensed it, he was sure, as she responded to his questions, his examining touch,

his explanations, with a hesitation, bewilderment and curiosity she had not shown before. Reason dictated distance, but emotion drew him closer. And in the contest between reason and emotion, wisdom, he knew, was the ultimate casualty. It was he who gave the nursing staff instructions for her care, who drew her blood for a succession of tests, who drilled into her hip for a specimen of marrow, who gave her the first of a series in intravenous treatments. "If you're not careful," Martin Lauder had joked, "you'll be demoted to a junior's level of pay," and on another occasion, "See that the interns don't call in the unions." But he could not help himself. And what at first was wariness or bemused inquisitiveness on her part became, in time he felt, saw, knew, a reciprocating fervour and dependence and, in the end, old-fashioned love. . .

"A penny for your thoughts," he heard Elizabeth say. She was awake, looking up at him and smiling. He realised he had been frowning and pursing his lips, and his hands were tight about the steering-wheel. He relaxed.

"Ten cents for yours."

"Just look at me and you can't help but guess. Home, a shower, a change of clothes. And something to eat besides. Now what about yours?"

"Aspects of the electrochemical diffusion of plasma proteins in gamma-D multiple myeloma."

"How exciting! Tell me more," she laughed brassily. "The first of ten easy lessons in how to become an eminent professor.

Elizabeth had recovered her poise and for that he was grateful.

"I woke from a curious dream. I was on a ship in the middle of the ocean. No land anywhere about; not a soul — neither passengers, nor crew — only the captain down below locked in his cabin writing in his log-book. What he wrote about, goodness knows, for nothing was happening. The ship wasn't moving, neither forward, nor sideward, nor even rocking. The water was glass. A seagull hung transfixed in midflight. Suddenly, there was a knocking on deck, a slow dull monotonous ringing as though someone were hammering against a metal railing. Straight away, the captain came clambering up. He was wearing a long white coat, his pockets bulging with books, papers, torches. Around his neck hung a stethoscope, in one hand he held a quill, in the

other his log-book, the pages fluttering. "What is happening? What is happening?" he cried out, racing madly about the deck, following that with "I must write it down! write it down! my life depends upon it!" frantically splashing blobs of black ink from his quill on to the blank white pages of his book. Then he scuttled once more down the steps, locked himself again in his cabin, while I remained alone on deck staring at that seagull that winked and winked and winked. — Well Dr. Freud, what does it mean?"

"The things you ask of me! I'm only a simple-minded pragmatist. If mysticism was my forte, I would have been a psychiatrist."

"Try, Michael, try."

"It means that I shall never abandon the ship."

"And the seagull?"

"A deceiver, pure and simple."

"Let it be," he heard her say, unconvinced, "Let it be."

At dinner — an extempore meal consisting of steak and canned peas which Elizabeth insisted on preparing — she was brighter. They had showered together, she had combed her hair, changed her clothes and now wore once more Betty's orange cotton dressing gown over a neglige. They were alone. Barry, having returned before them, had left a pithy note on the table — "I'm sleeping at Paul's tonight" — and Susan was not due from vacation for three days. He looked forward with keeness to her return; she was, for a twenty-year old, a nurse just graduated, particularly sobre and mature — although he did wonder whether even she might draw limits to what she recognised as acceptable from her father. However, self-confessed pragmatist that he was, he preferred to confront the matter when it arose, just as over the entire weekend, he had put out of mind, though not uniformly successfully, the need for Elizabeth to re-enter hospital on the following day, Monday, for another treatment.

"There were times I fancied myself an actress," Elizabeth was saying, "A Sarah Bernhardt stunning her admirers with grand rhetoric, playing Shakespeare's Shrew to Olivier's Petruchio, if ever he did indeed act the part, or Hedda Gabler or Strindberg's Julia. Old-fashioned roles, but dramatic, extending the scope for my one-time vain impetuous nature. Living with my crazy aunt sobered me considerably; studying physiotherapy and then having to abandon it to earn a living — all those put paid to any adolescent plans for grand scenes

and renown. I can't regret it anymore but the shame is that for nearly four years I haven't been to the theatre whereas before there wasn't a play of even glancing merit I didn't see. And of course, I was going to be a great dancer, a Pavlova, and then a concert pianist, although my ballet lessons — Mother's original idea, she thought my legs were too fat and needed trimming — came to a halt when I was ten and poor Father couldn't keep my rump pinned to the piano stool for more than twenty minutes at a time. That, too, I can't regret. As Father was so fond of quoting — he was not an original man, however loveable — "You can't put an old head on young shoulders," and I grew up, wanting, but not achieving, and yet, once I bought the boutique, I became utterly — really — utterly content."

Professor Bainton held up a fork.

"*I* spent my early years becoming a modern Sherlock Holmes", he said, "adviser to governments and kings. Scholarships got in the way. I couldn't very well squander them."

"You haven't done too badly."

Elizabeth laughed. Her face was oval, slightly tightened over the bony prominences of her cheeks and chin. Her teeth were solid and square and a splendid white. He liked the way the tip of her nose twitched when she laughed.

"I'm not complaining," he said.

"I love you as you are. I don't think I could love Sherlock Holmes. All scrutiny, cold analysis and probably never home at night."

He wondered at the precision of her verdict.

"Were you for all your other sins", he said, "by any chance a reader, one of those voracious types?"

"I'm not exactly a dumb fish, you know. Father bought the trinkets, but Mother who herself read everything ever written by Bernard Shaw and Somerset Maugham each week brought me books from the library. Later, I bought my own."

"Infinitely more interesting than my books, I'm sure — 'Modern Principles of Clinico-Pathological Research', 'Trends in Current Haematological Diagnostic Technique', 'Physico-Chemical Separation of Gene Proteins'."

"But, Michael, were it not for those very books, we might never, never have met. Isn't that possibly so?"

Chance? he thought. Fate? Each volume a rung on the ladder to the professorship; the professorship in turn creating

the opportunity unforeseen for the encounter with Elizabeth and the opening of the gates to new quickening unimagined vistas of love.

And he did love her. He could scarcely wait for the table to be cleared and the utensils washed to take her into the bedroom, shed her dressing-gown and negligé, and penetrate into her once more with all the appetite, exploration and fire of the previous night. Which he did, and to which she again responded with that reciprocal hunger which, he knew, was a hunger not for him alone but for her very existence which she tried by clinging — tenaciously, obdurately, urgently — to preserve. And for the same reason, and in a complementary way, he clung in turn to her, again in the silent darkness, promising her the impossible and weaving fantasies of twenty-five-hour days, of living eternity and of Eden until, obviously drained, she fell asleep.

Martin Lauder was the first to greet them when they entered the ward. The assistant professor, forty and balding, and wearing rimless glasses, looked Elizabeth up and down, winked at them and said,

"Nice party, Saturday, don't you think, *Professor?*"

"You're in early for a public holiday. No tennis match or cricket to go to?"

"All in good time. Can't neglect my children," Martin Lauder said with a laugh, sweeping a broad arc around the ward with his arm.

"First time he's ever come in on a holiday," Professor Bainton said to Elizabeth as they entered the room reserved for her.

At the door, Elizabeth paused, touched his arm.

"Michael. The seagull."

"The seagull?"

"My dream. The seagull winking, winking, winking."

"Superstition, Elizabeth. A coincidence."

"A deceiver, Michael. Remember? — Suddenly, I'm afraid."

"Of Martin?"

"Pirahna-eating pirahna."

"I was only kidding, in a moment of levity.'

"Impossible promises I can stand, Michael. I am ready to believe. But falsehoods, no. You meant what you said about him. He's here to cause trouble."

"Elizabeth. Look out there, through the window. The rain has stopped, the sun is out, it's a warm day. The parklands are green and the trees rich in colour. You can see the flag flying over the town hall and the streets are quiet. . ."

"Michael. . ."

"Now, here's your suitcase, get changed, hop into bed and look out through the window and consider how much more pleasant it is to think about what you see than about Martin Lauder . . . And in a quarter-hour, I'll come to take the blood for the test and give you the treatment later. All right, Elizabeth, my precious?"

He kissed her. She puckered her brow.

"All right?"

Her dark eyes mellowed, she smiled with a faint upturning of her mouth.

"Doctor's orders?"

"Doctor's orders." He paused at the door, blew a kiss off the palm of a hand and left.

Martin Lauder hovered about in the corridor.

"Royal treatment for a princess?" he said, indicating Elizabeth's room with his chin.

"And how are all your children?"

"Fine. A waste of time coming as far as they're concerned."

"Then I guess you'll be leaving soon. Is it cricket today?"

"I had a whole day of it yesterday. Braved the weather. I'll catch up with some work today. My growth hormone assays aren't quite as accurate as I'd like."

"Then I'll see you later. Or tomorrow."

"Yes . . . Wait, Michael!"

"Yes?"

"Michael, I don't want to pry. But Keating rang me yesterday. The board is sure to. . ."

"Yes, I spoke with him as well."

"How serious is this . . . this relationship between you and Miss Donohue? I may need to argue in your favour. . ."

"She's dying, Martin."

"I know that . . . But. . ."

"That's all anyone needs to know."

"You can trust me, Michael."

"Thanks. By the way, are you applying for the Chair in Sydney?"

"I've decided to stick it out here. It's not worth uprooting the family, having the children start new schools at their age. Besides, it's an expensive business, shifting. . ."

"Yes, quite. Now, if you'll excuse me, Martin. . ."

He went into the utility room, found a tourniquet, syringes, needles, swabs and returned to Elizabeth. She had changed quickly into a pale pink nylon night-gown and was waiting for him. She had a small flat mole at the base of her neck which he had not noticed before.

"Well, you're quite used to this by now," he said, slipping the tourniquet up her arm.

"I should be." She squeezed her fist as he pierced the vein. "The touch of a master... Tell me, is Martin on your back?"

"Ah," he said shortly in the tone of reprimand. "What did I say to you before? About looking through the window instead of thinking of him."

"Yes, Professor. Your word from now on shall be my command. I shall forget Martin Lauder and all nastiness and all annoyances." She closed her eyes, counted aloud "One . . . two . . . three . . .," opened her eyes again and said, "Good, I have forgotten. Now I shall lie here quietly and gaze out upon all the beauty beyond my window and wait until the morning paper is brought around."

"You are such a child, Elizabeth. So fresh, delightful, I could swallow you alive. . . Right, I'll come back as soon as I have the results."

She pressed shut her eyes, nodded briskly, and threw a kiss at him with her lips.

"Big Daddy."

He met his registrar and intern conferring in the Sister's station where he went to fill out a pathology request form.

"Good morning, Professor Bainton," they said, almost in unison, glancing at each other furtively and smirking.

"Good morning, Peter, Jack."

"That specimen," his registrar, Peter Sealy, said, "that's Miss Donohue's, is it?"

"Yes."

"How is she?" asked the intern.

"I shall be giving her the intravenous drugs later. Otherwise. . ."

"Can we help?"

"No, I shall look after her. And, one thing, can you keep all students away from her when they start back?"

His subordinates nodded, again smirking to each other.

"Any problems in the ward?"

"Only Albert Johnson with his myeloma. The bone pain's not responding, he's as good as bed-ridden."

'Mmm. Step up his analgesics. Jack, will you do something for me and take this specimen down to the laboratory? Tell them I want the result within the hour. I'll be in my office."

"Yes, Professor Bainton."

"And Peter. Will you go down to the pharmacy and bring back two ampoules of nitrogen mustard and vincristine?"

"I'm about to start the ward round. Can it wait until that's over?"

The registrar spoke with uncustomary firmness. He was solid and broad-shouldered and had a round face with a high brow and big nostrils. His gaze did not waver under the professor's searching scrutiny.

"Very well."

In his office, he sat down with Elizabeth's file. Running his fingers through his hair, he read it through again.

Donohue, Elizabeth. Age 25. Single. Parents deceased: father — stroke; mother — heart. No siblings. Owns boutique. Allergies — nil. Presenting complaints: Lump in neck two months. Recently more out of breath on exertion. Nocturnal cough. Vague abdominal discomfort. Occasional sweats. Appetite fair. Weight change uncertain but feels that clothes are looser. Bowels, bladder — normal. No headaches, dizzy spells, blackouts. Examination: colour (?) pale. Two inch lump in left side of neck. Axillae — two mobile glands in left, one in right (two centimentres). Chest — slight wheeze in left lung. Abdomen — liver and spleen both enlarged two fingers below the costal margins. No other masses. Central nervous system normal. Chest x-ray — enlarged glands in mediastinum. Liver biopsy, bone marrow trephine — extensive cellular infiltration. Diagnosis — Stage IV lymphoma. Treatment — cytotoxics, steroids. Initial response favourable; late response disappointing. Prognosis poor.

Elizabeth. He saw her face behind the writing. Oval, harder at the edges, the searching pupils embracing and deep, the lips alternately pouting in a kiss, opening in a smile. Not entirely unlike Betty who was, however, more filled out and plainly neurotic in her movements. In his hands, in that file, he held her life, the barest final summary to which existence

could be reduced and, closing his eyes, he tried, desperately, to fill it out, giving himself up to the evocation of her voice, her smell, her touch. He smelled again the cherries in her hair and remembered with a start that on yesterday's excursion to the hills they had brought back no pot-plants, nor strawberries, nor cherries as big as a fist. That had been the first of what would prove to be an inevitable series of broken promises.

But broken promises were the least difficult to countenance. More taxing would be the outright lies. And most arduous of all, the truth.

"Impossible promises I can stand, Michael," she had said, "but falsehoods, no."

Yet go tell her the truth at every stage of her decline that the disease, for all the efforts to contain it, for all the physical discomforts, even sufferings, she was about to endure — that the disease was slipping out of control and that the best one could do was to prolong her existence another day, another week, perhaps a month. And yet how not to tell her when she knew she was dying and was ready, for the sake of life, for the sake of love, to endure all to have that existence prolonged that trifle more?

Henry Keating may indeed have been right. "Do you believe, under the circumstances, that you can maintain the right perspective, the emotional distance — quite apart from all ethical considerations?"

With others, yes, he had managed. Perspective, distance had been, with experience, sufficiently easy to acquire. Bluff bravado, futile promises, false encouragement, even blunt truths — to each patient according to his desires as reflected in a turning of the face, a darting of the eyes, a quiver of the chin, the hunching of a shoulder and the dogged clinging to obdurate silence or the exceptional open appeal for untouched, untainted facts. But with Elizabeth — each promise to her, each falsehood, each truth would be a promise, a falsehood, a truth to himself no less from which, his office door shut, he could not divorce himself as, in the past, with an easy conscience, he had learnt to do. For, more than ever, he felt at one with her, and were one of them to be touched, no wave could be stirred that did not at least ripple through to the other. Elizabeth. Elizabeth. Even with Betty in her illness, he had not been so involved.

Was his wife's illness also part of that web of chance, or of fate? That creeping madness of hers, the hallucination of bread turning to flesh and of wine to blood, the ceaseless praying, the repeated supplication for forgiveness for imaginary sins, culminating in her nocturnal naked dash through the streets shouting "Stone me, I am Mary Magdalene, stone me, for I am unworthy!" She had never recovered, had lost all recognition of him, calling him "Father, my confessor" and also of her son and daughter whom she disowned as the offspring of the devil copulating with her. In the end, she was institutionalised. He continued to pay towards her care. But inaccessibility, and helplessness in the face of her insanity precluded him from close involvement and when he did, out of decency, visit her, he had sat for brief periods in a chair before her, watched her writhing face and hands and listened, unspeaking, to the catalogue of sins for which she deserved — demanded — the direst punishments. In a sense, she was already dead, beyond feeling, pain and rational anxiety, perhaps on that account among the blessed. Unlike Elizabeth, who had still to experience those flights of anguish no less than of physical distress, for which strength, inordinately abundant strength would be called for on her part and for which two nights before she had appealed to him. And it had fallen upon him, through chance, or fate, to treat, sustain and succour and, in the end, he knew, to close her eyes.

The telephone rang.

"Bainton."

"Haematology here. The results for Miss Elizabeth Donohue."

"I'm ready. Read them out."

He jotted the figures on a page in Elizabeth's file.

"Thank you," he said and dialled another number.

"Switchboard."

"Professor Bainton here. Please page Dr. Sealy for my office."

"Right away, sir."

He put Elizabeth's file to a side, sat back, gazed at the photographs of Betty, Barry and Susan on his desk, then looked outside at the view — of the gardens and town hall — which, it occurred to him, he shared with Elizabeth looking through her window. He thought of the New Year's party, of Martin Lauder, Henry Keating, the impending meeting of the

board and decided that, madness though his act had been to display Elizabeth in public, he would have had it no other way.

The telephone rang again.

"Peter Sealy here. You wanted me?" The voice was firm, even curt; for his registrar, unusually so.

"Yes, Peter. Did you get those vials yet from the pharmacy?"

"No. After the round, I became snowed under with paper work."

He waited for the registrar's offer to fetch them rightaway. No offer was forthcoming.

"And you're still too busy?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Continue with your work. I'll get it."

"Very good. Is that all?"

"Yes."

Once he had the registrar eating out of his hand. Was this new coolness another outcome of this indiscretion, a reflection of his loss of prestige and credibility as a model of scrupulous propriety?

"Done is done," he murmured and rose.

Returning from the pharmacy, he encountered registrars and interns along the corridors and on the steps. They greeted him deferentially as they passed but he was conscious of their amused tittering behind his desk.

"She's a beauty."

"A teaser."

"Lucky fellow."

"Playing with fire."

Martin Lauder met him in the corridor of the Professorial ward as he walked towards the utility room with the vials.

"Back to the days of internship, Michael?" he said, winking from behind his rimless glasses.

"How are your assays progressing, Martin?"

"Can't get myself going. A man has to be dedicated to work on a public holiday at this stage of life."

"You may as well go to the tennis. Nice day for it."

"No, I'll stick around. Go down to the library. Read a bit."

"Not for me to tell you what to do." Seagull, he thought as he left the assistant professor to prepare the syringes for injection.

The ward sister walked in.

"Sister Simpson, please set up an intravenous trolley. Normal saline. For Miss Donohue. I shall need it in ten, fifteen minutes. And draw up an ampoule of Largactil and give it to her."

"Will you be inserting the intravenous or Dr. Sealy when he returns from morning tea?"

"I shall."

"Very good, sir."

"By the way, Sister, how long has Dr. Sealy been at morning tea?"

"We did a brief round. He wrote out a couple of forms and went to the dining room with Dr. Michaels. Maybe half an hour ago."

"Thank you," he said, looking at his watch.

Elizabeth, when he entered her room, was completing the cryptic crossword in the morning newspaper.

"I need help," she said. "An eight-letter word, begins with 's', fifth letter 't', 'e' at the end, and the clue is 'old damaged boot'?"

Her brow was furrowed, her lips pouting. The sunlight, entering through the window, fell lightly upon her hair, her face and bare arms. He thought her more desirable than ever.

"Try 'sabotage'," he said.

She leapt to activity. Her face relaxed to smoothness and she smiled so that her teeth showed strong and white between her lips.

" 'Sabotage', of course. Michael, you're a genius."

"No," he said with mock modesty. "Just a little clever."

"Well, then. I suppose you want to get down to business," she said, placing the newspaper and her pen upon the night-table beside her and indicating with her eyes the trolley that had been brought in and the saline flask suspended from the stand. "Sister just gave me a needle. . . Which arm shall it be?"

"Were all my patients so chirpy, I'd be working in an aviary," he said.

"It's you, Michael. It's you."

Unspeaking, he set about inserting the intravenous line into her arm. He felt, rather than saw her wince as the broad sharp needle pierced her skin, and bit his lips as though the pain were his own.

"The worst part of all this is having to keep one's arm still till it's all over," she said. "I'm a natural wriggler."

The worst part of it was still to come, he thought. Not immediately, but later.

He emptied the syringes into the intravenous tubing.

"I shall be raising the dose of your tablets. More than the last time. The combination of injection and tablets may make you nauseated. Also more than last time. The needle you received was to forestall that. But let Sister know if you're uncomfortable."

"The things you do for me."

"Out of love, Elizabeth, my precious. Out of pure, unsullied, unadulterated love."

"And to love is to hurt."

"And to suffer," he added.

She was studying his face, aware, he knew, of the ambiguity of his remark.

"You or me?"

"We're now of the one water. Stir one part, the other ripples."

"Oh, there's a poet in the scientist, too," Elizabeth laughed. Once more, he detected the brassiness in her laughter and a wheeze besides. It terminated in a bout of coughing in which, for a full distressing five seconds, she couldn't catch her breath.

He poured her a glass of water which she took with a shaking hand and sipped.

"That *was* nasty," she said finally, her cheeks suffused and taut.

Those glands, he thought, those glands. If they don't shrink. . .

"Is laughter contrary to doctor's orders?" Elizabeth said, her composure regained, her lips turned up in a faint smirk, her eyes soft, showing amusement at her own ability to jest.

"Not in my book," he said, taking her chin in his hand. "Never."

The drugs having been given, he proceeded to dismantle the infusion. He placed a band-aid over the site of the thin puncture in her forearm. How bony her wrist had become, he thought, how thin her arm and her fingers exaggeratedly long.

"The needle Sister gave you will probably make you tired. Rest now. And I shall return later."

"May I dream of my favourite doctor?".

He leaned over her, held her face between his hands, kissed her. She responded, her eyes shut. A quiver of her body transmitted itself to him. The pressure of his hands intensified.

"I love you, Elizabeth. Believe me. How I'd like to be able to explain. . ."

A shuffling of feet, the rustle of a uniform, the expression of startled surprise made them separate abruptly. In the doorway stood Sister Simpson, perplexed, scarlet with embarrassment, mumbling.

"I came . . . I'm sorry . . . I came . . . to see . . . I'm really sorry . . . if you needed . . . needed anything."

He saw Elizabeth's gaze dart in turn between him and the sister in the doorway. She held her fingers to her lips. Sister Simpson stood on one foot, petrified, rooted to the floorboards, uncertain of her next movement, whether to endure the professor's certain wrath or to flee. But there was no merit in remonstration. The girl, for she was but a girl, scarcely older than Susan, twenty-one, twenty-two perhaps, and still keen, had been doing what she perceived as her duty. That her timing had been so inopportune was scarcely a deliberate fault to be chastised and he held his peace, preferring to avoid scene that might escalate an already delicate situation into a melodramatic scenario.

"I have finished, Sister Simpson. You may take the trolley away."

Awkwardly, head bowed, her eyes conspicuously averted from Elizabeth and himself, she gathered up the equipment and wheeled out the trolley, striking it in her agitation against the foot of the bed.

"Sorry," she murmured, unable to leave quickly enough.

"Will she talk?" Elizabeth asked when the sister had gone.

"What can it matter? Any further talk is merely gilt on the lily."

"But your reputation . . . your position. . ."

"Let's just work to get you well, shall we?"

"Michael. . ."

"Shall we? . . . Now you must be tired. Have a nap. And when you wake. . ."

"When I wake, I'll be cured. Is that it? Prince Charming will be standing over Sleeping Beauty and she will rise from her bed, healthy and rosy pink, and her prince will take her to

his magnificent palace where, surrounded on all sides by dutiful handsome servants in livery, they shall live together happily ever after."

"Something like that," he said. "Be strong, my precious."

In the sisters' station, Sister Simpson was filing reports. At his approach, she stiffened visibly and drew up her shoulders. She shrank still further when he addressed her, as though she were expecting censure.

"Sister. Should Miss Donohue require anything, you are to notify me."

"Yes . . . yes, sir," she said, nodding exaggeratedly. "I shall, I shall."

His hands were suddenly empty. He returned to his office.

There, on one side of the desk lay a pile of proofs for correction prior to publication, on the other a number of folders containg the results of his latest researches. There were letters to be written, others to be answered, lectures to be prepared and papers to be reworked before submission. There were also journals to be read, two books on haematology to be reviewed and a conference itinerary to be drawn up.

But he had no mind for any of it. Betty, Barry and Susan gazed at him from their frames. Elizabeth's file lay before him. He saw her oval tightening face, thought of Martin Lauder, Keating, the members of the board, Barry, Peter Sealy, Sister Simpson. How much wider were extending the ripples of the waters he had stirred. How much wider still would they extend?

"Let them stew," he had said the evening before last and she had responded by confessing her fears of something eerie pervading the New Year's party. His own words he now recognised as crass bravado, the denial of the malice that had been set in motion. In the corners, illuminated by the brilliant lights, the music loud and vigorous, stood Martin Lauder with his crew, smiling, winking, his balding head shining as, scheming, he looked into every crevice that could be widened, that might in turn engulf his superior and free the prime position for himself. Formerly keen to become full professor in Sydney, he had decided to stay put in his present department, nor for the reasons he had offered — the difficulties, cost and disruptions involved in moving — but because under his very nose had opened a possibility, an opportunity that would be madness not to seize. To the

seagull, winking, winking, winking, as he haunted the corridor of the professorial ward, ambition was without confines. But, even given this, what would be the limit to his actions?

He gazed through the window. Yesterday's silvery-blue cloud-filled sky had yielded to a richer ultramarine. The sun shone white. The treetops swayed. The flag over the town hall fluttered. Beyond stretched the uneven jagged expanse of office blocks, warehouses, factories, shops, houses. Cars and trams coursed along the broad roads and narrow streets. People, minute automatons from his height, walked along the footpaths, heading for the matinees, picnics, art exhibitions, sports matches, outdoor displays. Even on a public holiday, the activity of living, brisk animation, eagerness, verve. A seizing of the horns of life; seize now for tomorrow you die.

Her face was now among the trees.

"Why me, Michael, why me?"

He knew the answer, had in the course of twenty five years of professional experience evolved his own answer, but to reveal it to Elizabeth would have been to rub the salt of cruelty into her wounds. For the answer could not be more prosaic, more wantonly banal. It had nothing to do with fate, bad luck, cosmic forces, or the will of God, but with something as commonplace as a faulty piece of genetic material or a protein molecule or a cell gone haywire, causing the proliferation of new masses of cells regulated by a purely biological mechanism that, through scientific unravelling, defied and denied the mysteries and obfuscations conjured up by the clergy and philosophers and dreamy artists. The mystery of life, the mystery of death — they were not mysterious at all, but made mysterious by those who, ignorant or weak-kneed or wishful for it to be otherwise, could not face the possibility of a universe devoid of higher meaning or purpose or design.

But go tell Elizabeth.

There were times when it was wisest to suppress the truth (or Truth — another invention of romantics), and acquiese, if not to fictions and fabrications, then at least to the non-committal balm of silence. So, in silence had he clung to her yesterday, for *her* sake and *his,* while the rain fell and the wind grew sharp, aware that to lose her was to be left with nothing but his own knowledge of meaninglessness and the

rack of aching hollowness and void. Against the enormity of death, nothing mattered, other than the preservation or prolongation of life. Ambition, competition, status, success, creativity, the scaling of heights — these were all subsidiary, a filling-in of time before the inevitable. — Or, could it be that they were, instead of a denial of the inevitable, or an attempt to transcend its harsh threat of anonymity and oblivion, a frantic reverberating protest that cried out, through wealth, honours, books, journals, works of art, "I have been here! I have been! World, know my name!"? What drove Martin Lauder? What had driven *him* this past quarter-century in his rise to professional eminence? And after Elizabeth's death, what would remain other than the basic animal instinct to live and endure and the biological fact that his own organs were not yet sufficiently worn or diseased to bring about his decline and demise?

But he was looking too far ahead. More important was the immediate concern to preserve Elizabeth. There was Barry to mollify, the board to confront and the inevitable round of work — correspondence, lectures, papers, reviews — to be done.

"Just give me the strength," Elizabeth had said, and to himself he had thought, "For what is to come, we shall both need strength."

How he needed it now!

He looked at his watch. The morning was nearly over. He left his office, took the lift to the hospital lobby. The ladies' auxiliary had set up two long wooden tables on trestles, laid out with flowers, cakes, umbrellas, handkerchiefs and blouses. He selected a flower arrangement — gladioli, carnations, a bottle-brush and greenery —, wrote a brief message on a white card, and paid the uniformed woman attending him.

"Please deliver the flowers to Miss Donohue in the Professorial ward."

"Glad to," the woman said, smiling. Genuinely, he thought, whole-heartedly, unlike the knowing tickled registrars and interns he had encountered that morning.

"And if she's asleep, please do not wake her. Then just set the flowers down on the table beside her."

"A mouse won't be quieter," she said.

Good simple soul, he thought, as she set off on her errand.

Turning, he saw Henry Keating approaching up the outside steps.

"No end to it, is there?", he said to the chairman of the board.

"Shall we have lunch first?"

"I've eaten," he lied.

"You're making a mistake. There's a flurry of activity. Talk, telephone calls. I must have spoken with almost everybody on the board. They just kept ringing — Bill, Julian, Bernie, Tom, Harry. . . We value your services too much. Nobody wants to take the matter further. What happened on Saturday night can be regarded as a lapse, the high spirits of New Year's Eve, a bit of alcohol, you got carried away. . . Look, none of us is above error or . . . or indiscretion."

"And the conditions?"

"As I told you yesterday. Transfer her to someone else's care . . . sever the relationship. . . There are the younger staff to consider, the interns, students, nursing staff who must be shown. . ."

"Thank you for warning me, Henry."

"Michael, before you go up . . . a couple of people are pressing for an earlier board meeting, a quick resolution of the situation. . ."

The lift doors opened. Martin Lauder stepped out. He nodded at his superior, then turned to the chairman of the board.

"Going to lunch, Henry? Yes? Good. I'll join you." Then he looked back. "A splendid flower arrangement, Michael. Must get one like that for my wife."

As he returned to the ward, Sister Simpson, obviously wary and still ill at ease, approached him.

"It's Miss Donohue. She's been vomiting."

"It's the treatment. Draw up an ampoule of Stemetil."

He entered Elizabeth's room. She was changing, slipping a blue night-gown over her head, the pink one lying soiled and wet on the floor. He saw the prominence of her ribs, and her breasts still shapely and firm bobbed with her movements.

"Michael!" she exclaimed when she saw him. "Hardly a pose in which to catch a lady."

There was a tremor in her hands; after vomiting, her shoulders were slightly hunched.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Shall I say 'Very well, thank you' or tell you the wretched truth? What did you put in that infusion? Gelignite?"

"You won't need that cocktail for another week."

"Thank God. . . And just as your flowers were brought in. . . Such is my gratitude for your consideration. They're beautiful, Michael, beautiful. And the card . . . 'A little trinket from Big Daddy.' You *have* got a sense of humour."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Sister Simpson entered, a syringe and swab in her hand. She held her eyes averted.

"Just a needle for the nausea," he said.

Elizabeth turned over, offering a buttock to the sister.

"My, that needle stings. . . And all for the love of Mike, to coin a phrase."

The pun appeared to elude the sister who, her task accomplished, dashed from the room taking the soiled night-gown with her.

"Poor thing," Elizabeth said, "she's all in a dither."

She was too conspicuously buoyant, spoke too fast. Yesterday's outburst in the hills seemed all but forgotten. Was she erecting around herself a bold facade, an audacious impregnable bravado in the face of her consuming disease? Or was that deep primeval instinct for survival transforming itself into denial of her condition and, more, to a genuine hope, indeed conviction that she might yet come through? In either case, there was danger — in the one, the threat of annihilating collapse of all her defences into chaotic disarray, in the other, the risk of descent into despair, retreat, isolation and inaccessability, an inaccessability in which he might lose her long before she became lost to him through her demise.

He reached for her hand, seeking, he knew, reassurance that she was still his.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

She smiled, her lips not parting this time but rising at the corners. He felt the tremor still coursing, however faintly, through her.

"I dreamt of you. You weren't a sea-captain this time, but I'm blowed if I remember what the dream was about. Except that I was in a big room. A mass of people were pointing at me and yelling and you were sitting on some kind of pedestal

looking down upon everything or judging everything . . . Pontius Pilate, you."

"Now don't *you* start with any religious fantasies," he said in jest, pressing her hand. "Betty has nourished me with a lifetime's supply."

"Those people with their gaping mouths may be my accusers and you may be Pontius Pilate, but I am not about to suffer for the world's sins. God knows, I have had little enough time for any of my own. And even then, it's only been in the past two days, if to love you is sinful."

"A greater sin hath no woman known," he said.

"Forgive me, Holy Father", she said, turning her dark eyes towards the ceiling in mock penitence. "But you, Michael, who know so much, tell me. Is God, too, a fantasy?"

"No," he said. "Not entirely. There is a God — *if* you believe in one."

"And you don't?"

"In my life, in my work, I have had no need to create one for myself. Except for the mystical possibility that I treat while God cures, our paths have never crossed. But I am no mystic. I deal with test tubes, cell cultures, pipettes, machines. I don't have all the answers, but God, Elizabeth, is not among them."

"Some comforter you are to me."

He had gone too far. He had transgressed his own resolve. There were times when it was wisest to suppress the truth and acquiesce to silence.

"Impossible promises you could accept," he said, as though to excuse his transgressions. "But falsehoods, Elizabeth — remember?"

"If not God, what then?"

He felt the pressure of her fingers, the searching scan of her gaze. The heat in her speech was subsiding.

"A ludicrous situation, this," he said. "You have just vomited your heart out and here we are talking theology."

"Which all goes to show, Michael, my darling, that theology is a subject for all seasons and occasions."

He released her hand, stepped towards the night-table, and smelt the carnations in the flower-basket.

"Elizabeth," he said, biting his upper lip. "In all fairness, there is a question I must ask you."

"Oh?"

He didn't look at her but saw her out of the corner of his eye, saw her half-turn towards him and lean on an elbow.

"Might you not feel more . . . more at ease . . . more, how shall I put it, secure to be treated by someone else? Someone who is not . . . who is not so involved with you, who can stand back and . . . and have a different perspective on things?"

He felt rather than saw her scrutiny.

"Michael," she said, in a tone which reassured him that she had not taken flight from her situation as he had feared. "Close the door. Don't let the world in. Hold me again. Firmly. Till it hurts. Hard, harder, till I can't breathe. I don't care. Promise me something. Promise me that you'll never abandon me. I couldn't bear it. You wouldn't tell Barry how long I have left. I don't want to know. However long it is to be, I shall pray that it be a little longer still. Another day, another week — it doesn't matter. This thing, I know, Michael, can't be beaten. I'm finding it hard, but I am making my peace with that. But if you step aside . . . if you step aside, there is no point in enduring this. I have no-one else, not even a mad aunt who feeds caviar to her cats. God knows the times the notion has crossed my mind of putting a quick end to all this, to be spared the agony, not of pain — no, I am not afraid of pain — but of thought, and always it's been you, you, you, Michael, who by just being there, infinitely more than with the injections and the tablets, have given me the strength to endure. Deprive me of that and I have nothing, nothing, and that is the worst of all."

He held her, touched her cheeks, her shoulders, her hair, smelt the cherries about her but was also conscious of that more rancid smell — of decay, of disintegrating tissues, of spreading cancer — so familiar to him, but not since his student days so despised for its affirmation of finality.

He felt her slacken. He released her. She lay back against the pillow, drew her blanket towards her chin. Her oval face framed by her dark dishevelled hair seemed suddenly fragile, particularly her eyes which looked at him lamely. She yawned, her chin quivering.

"That really tired me, Michael. I think I'll sleep again. Till tomorrow, or the day after."

He kissed her on the brow, stepped away. When he reached the door, he heard Elizabeth say, "You haven't promised me yet, promised not to abandon me."

He smiled, even as he became more acutely aware of the implications. "I promise."

He sat in his office another hour, absently read a journal article, flipped through the pages of a book. The words, diagrams and graphs were a blur. Deciding that the reviews would have to wait, he packed his papers, looked in once more upon Elizabeth who was indeed asleep, left instructions with Sister Simpson, passed Martin Lauder on the steps and, getting into his car, drove home.

Over dinner, Barry, sitting opposite him at the table, was still angry, refusing to look at him.

"Made up with Kathy?" he asked.

Barry shrugged a shoulder.

"How was your day in Mornington?"

"It rained," the boy said curtly, as though that explained all.

"That's why you returned early? It rained in the Dandenongs as well."

"So?"

"Just stating a fact."

Again Barry shrugged a shoulder. It was nothing to him.

"You're still steaming. Say what's on your mind. Spare yourself an ulcer."

"What's there to say? Everyone's talking. All my friends know. Some think it's a big joke, others feel that a professor, of all people, should set a better example."

"And you? What do *you* say?"

"You're my father. I'm in the middle of it all."

"No, Barry. There is no one 'middle'. There are a number of circles. They all overlap, like separate waves or ripples spreading outwards and everyone involved is in the middle only of his own circle — myself, you, Miss Donohue, Henry Keating, Professor Lauder, my registrar, Sister Simpson. Some of them you don't know, others you have probably seen around the hospital."

"So?"

"So it means we each of us have our own cross to bear."

"But the whole thing is so unnecessary, a fiasco. . ."

"Barry, two months. You asked me the other night. Miss Donohue has two months, perhaps three."

"Enough to ruin a lifetime's work."

"For that, even a sneeze is enough."

"Do you expect me to cry for her? Or for you? Shed tears of contrition and beg your mercy and say, 'Oh, Father, I didn't know. Forgive me, I've been naughty'?"

"No, Barry. No tears. It will be enough for me if you understand that people have a right to some semblance of happiness or of salvaging a little solace where there is little left."

"Whatever the cost?"

"Sometimes, whatever the cost."

"But that doesn't alter the facts. She's your patient. You've . . . you've slept with her. . . It's immoral."

"Is that what your friends are saying?"

"Those who don't find it a joke."

"And is that what you say?"

"You are my father! How can I judge?"

"But you are judging. By your whole manner. And you have judged me guilty. So, if you are the judge, go a step further and pass the sentence. Am I to give up Miss Donohue to the isolation of a terminal illness for her remaining two or three months; am I to cease treating her, even when she has expressly refused anyone else; am I, for the sake of propriety, to resign from my professorship, indeed from the hospital staff?"

His son was silent, held his head low, jabbed at the steak before him with the prongs of his fork.

"Perhaps now, Barry, you can see what I mean by humility."

The boy did not raise his head.

"You're in a mess, aren't you?" he murmured. "Whichever way you look at it."

"You're maturing. It's good to see. But where will you be when it's all over?"

"Do you leave me a choice?"

"Some have deserted their fathers for less."

Barry threw down his fork. It clattered against the plate. He scraped back his chair, stood up. He was tall, solid, his moustache quivered above his lip.

"What in the name of hell do you want of me? I don't know! I don't know! I thought I knew. Even earlier today, when my mates talked as they did. I was so ashamed. . . But God, I don't know. *You* tell me, what's the right answer?"

"There is only one right answer. And that is what *you* choose it to be."

Outside, the light was fading. The shadows of the fence, the plum-trees, the incinerator in the back yard were lengthening. The branches stirred, the leaves fluttered.

At eight o'clock, the telephone rang.

"Bainton."

"Keating here."

"Yes, Henry."

The chairman of the board coughed self-consciously.

"I've spoken again with Bill, Martin, Bernie, Tom and so on. . . I also had a telephone call from my counterpart on the Universities Appointments Board. It seems that someone contacted him privately, at his home, highly indignant at your behaviour, at the influence it may have on our junior staff, at the moral repercussions and so forth. He refused to divulge the name of his informant. He rang to verify the facts with me. Believe me, for your sake, I tried to underplay the whole business."

"I suppose that next the Medical Board will be on your back and also the Medical Assocation."

"I had hoped to contain the matter, paper it over as it were. Now it has escalated and is showing all the signs of being an unpleasant, possibly protracted and, I fear, an open affair."

"When is the board's next meeting?"

"We have called it for tomorrow evening. At this stage, the sooner the matter is resolved, the better."

"I quite agree."

"It will mean some definitive decision on your part."

"Yes. May I call you back in fifteen minutes?"

"I shall be waiting."

He walked through the house. Barry was in his room, reading. Never had his home felt so empty, not even when Betty had finally to be certified insane and institutionalised. In the corners of the lounge room stood flourishing rubber plants, on the walls hung originals and prints, the lights cast few shadow. Susan's room was vacant, awaiting her return. His study, as ever, lay in chaos, with books, journals, papers and photographs all about. The guest room was musty, stale, unaired. He drew apart the curtains and opened the window. A cool draught wafted in. He thought of Elizabeth, almost felt her touch, smelled her hair. He thought, too, of Betty, Martin Lauder, Barry, Henry Keating, Susan, Sister Simpson, Doctor Sealy, thought of the scandal that was

escalating out of all proportion and of the imminent repercussions of his single indiscretion. He looked out upon the falling darkness, counted the stars already visible above, fixed his gaze upon the pale quarter-moon suspended immobile in the sky. Against the immensity of space and the enormity of death, little mattered — neither honours, nor status, nor success, all of these ephemeral, sometimes not worth the candle burned in acquiring them. One thing alone counted. Life — itself ephemeral, to be sure — but the foundations upon which all else existed and, against this, whatever companionship or solace or consideration or love, however old fashioned, that two people, each adrift, could offer one another.

He returned to the kitchen, telephoned Henry Keating.

The chairman of the board lifted the receiver on the second ring.

"Henry. I shall not attend the meeting. Tell the members this: I beg the three months' leave due to me. In the meantime, you may advertise my position. Martin will naturally occupy the chair in my absence until a new appointment is made. I shall fulfil all outstanding obligations, complete my papers, review the books assigned to me. All this I shall do from home in my own time. Doctor Barker, my research assistant, shall continue with the projects currently under way. I shall put this in writing. The board shall have my letter by tomorrow."

"You're resigning?" The chairman sounded incredulous. "I was hoping there might have been some other way. . . And Miss Donohue?"

"I shall discharge her from the hospital to my private care elsewhere."

"She's so important to you then?"

"Goodnight, Henry."

"Michael. . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

"I appreciate your position. Good night, Henry."

"May God deal with you kindly."

He replaced the receiver. Barry had come in and was standing before the door, book in hand.

"God, where will all this end? She means so much to you? So she wasn't just a fling?"

"Was Kathy?"

The next morning, Elizabeth greeted him with a show of sprightly buffoonery.

"Ah, my gay cavalier returneth to still the heart of a pining damsel," she said.

"Still reading fairy-tales?"

She had just washed, and her cheeks, flattened, even slightly sunken, shone and her hair was combed back and held by her broad red ribbon. Her dark eyes seemed just that little more prominent than before. She held out her arms.

He kissed her lightly on the brow.

"What's wrong with these?" she said, indicating her lips.

Self-consciously, he looked towards the door.

"They know not to barge in anymore," Elizabeth said. "But you look so preoccupied this morning."

"Does it show?"

"You look like the emperor without his clothes."

Like the professor without his chair, he thought. He wondered how much it cost her to be so gay.

"Circumstances have changed since yesterday."

"Circumstances?"

"Do you still trust me?"

"What are you getting at, Michael?" Her deep pupils were immobile, immense with curiosity.

"A crazy idea. At first. But — I've looked into it, thought about it overnight — feasible. This treatment, the blood tests, the infusions — they can all be done from home. Susan is returning tomorrow. She's a qualified nurse. You can wander freely about the house. I shall be there all the time, we. . ."

"You'll be there all the time? . . . Circumstances have changed. . .? . . . But your work here, your lectures, research, papers. . ."

She stopped in mid-sentence, turned aside her face. In profile, its oval shape assumed a bony leanness, her neck was becoming scraggy. She raised her fingers to her lips. Her expression was tightened, clamped in pain.

"I am unworthy, Michael."

"Look at me. Yesterday you were in a big room. A mass of people were pointing at you and yelling and I sat on a pedestal looking upon the scene and judging. Let me remain the judge of your worthiness."

Elizabeth gazed through the window. The flag over the town hall had been removed.

"Once I fell in love with a clown. Shabby jacket, baggy patched trousers, dunce's cap, flaming nose, straw hair, shoes outturned and too big for him, prancing about the circus arena, laughing at his practical jokes, weeping enormous tears when sad. He made me laugh even when he cried. And I was going to marry that clown so that I should always laugh. And I would sew more patches on his outfit and fix the buttons on his cap and kiss his nose. But the circus moved on. My clown was gone. And my dream. And I was disconsolate, threw tantrams without provocation, was unmanageable. Until Father bought home a clown from the shop and I could still cling to my dream."

She paused, sighed, turned to him, took his hand. "I'm so afraid, Michael," she said. "What's on the other side? When I die. Will it be only darkness, or is it another world altogether, a world of light? I hope, I hope. I hope it's a world full of clowns."

"Yes," he said, "circuses and clowns."

Elizabeth lay back her head, closed her eyes. "I'm just trying to picture it." She smiled. How gaunt she was becoming, how thin. She opened her eyes. "I'm all right again," she said. "When are you taking me home?"

He left Elizabeth, told a blushing Sister Simpson of his intention to discharge Miss Donohue, went down to the board room, placed a sealed envelope on the chairman's seat, then returned to his office where he gathered together piles of folders, papers and books and the photographs which he took down, making several trips, to the car. He gave instructions to his research assistant who had just come in, left a note on the secretary's desk and returned to the Professorial ward. Martin Lauder was speaking with Doctor Sealy and the intern.

"Henry told me the news last night," he said, approaching. His expression mimicked seriousness but the eyes behind the rimless glasses glittered. "I'm sorry that the matter should end like this. What will you do now?"

"What will I do?"

Martin Lauder nodded. As well as the eyes, the balding head glinted. He saw the nose twitch and almost detected what he thought was a wish.

"For the next three months," he said, "I shall talk about seagulls and clowns."

* * * * *

Susan nodded, alert. Just returned from holiday, she looked tanned, fresh, receptive. If she thought the situation as explained to her by her father irregular, she did not by any word suggest it, although he knew that she was puzzled, troubled, mystified. Nor did she balk at the task he requested of her although she did ask, naturally he thought, what was to happen to her position at the hospital where she was engaged for the forthcoming year.

Elizabeth was in the garden. She sat in a cane chair, reading, the heat and light of the sun thwarted by a big patterned garden umbrella. She wore a sleeveless cotton frock that exaggerated the growing sharpness of her shoulders and her ribbon around her hair.

"And she's . . . she's dying," Susan said, looking through the window. "She's so young . . . so beautiful . . . and she looks well enough."

"Dying takes many forms," he said. "Surely you've worked in hospitals long enough to know that."

"But she speaks as if nothing is the matter. When you introduced me, she smiled, was cheerful . . . didn't look at all gloomy, as if . . . as if. . ."

"She may yet teach you a lot."

He was grateful that Susan had, outwardly at least, accepted Elizabeth. Although she had much to learn, she showed those traits of maturity that were a ready receptacle for the experiences she would gather up in time. Since her mother's incarceration the woman of the house, she had prematurely gained expertise in the management of a household, had learnt to be cheerful without being flippant and had developed an acute sense of responsibility and concern that, to his inevitable satisfaction, had earned her a succession of awards for general competence in her years of training. Although not the only consideration in his decision to bring Elizabeth home, knowledge of Susan's capability had played a contributory part. As for Barry, the boy had looked askance upon his father's action, but short of placing Elizabeth into a private hospital could come up with no other satisfactory suggestion.

As he sat with Susan, now talking generally of her holiday, Elizabeth entered, coughing. She held her book in one hand, supported the hollow of her spine with the other.

"I must have been sitting too long in one position. My whole back hurts. I've had the pain for several days, but I've said nothing."

She coughed again, brassily.

He looked at Elizabeth, frowned. The glands; now the bones. She was taking her tablets as prescribed. She was not due for another infusion for a further five days. He remembered her file. Initial response favourable; late response disappointing. Prognosis poor. He saw Susan scrutinise Elizabeth, then throw a swift meaningful glance at him. She understood.

"We shall need to get you a more comfortable chair," he said with a laugh. "I shall also place a board under the mattress. That ought to help. Susan, will you telephone Sterling's and have them deliver a four-by-six foot board, three-quarter inch in thickness?"

"For today?"

"If they can. And when you've done that, bring in two Panadeines."

Susan left.

"Pleasant outside?" he asked Elizabeth.

"Warm." She stood before him, hesitated, then approached. "Michael, promise me something. Please don't hide anything from me."

"Hide?"

"My back. The way you and Susan exchanged looks just now when I came in. It's not just the chair, is it? Or a simple sprain or a muscle or whatever?"

"You're becoming too sensitive, Elizabeth, my precious."

"Please, no secrets, no muted whisperings, no shadow talk, no molly-coddling. It's hard enough as it is without that as well."

Her chest was heaving a little. Her breasts behind the frock were small, tense, also heaving and subsiding with each breath. Her lips were thin, her jaws firm. Her gaze unwavering, she reached out to him from the very depths of her dark hardening eyes.

He nodded. "Impossible promises, yes. Confabulations, no."

During the night, he woke to the repeated convulsive quivering of the bed. Elizabeth was shaking beside him, now and again a muffled cry coming from her direction. He raised himself on an elbow. Elizabeth was sobbing into the pillow.

Her skin was clammy, her night-gown damp with perspiration. He leant over her, pressed his body against hers, reached for her face. She took his hand, covered it with her lips. He felt her tears wet upon his fingers, and he pressed her tighter, drawing her to him and clinging, clinging with the clasp of stubborn and desperate possession, so lying with her unspeaking, gazing into the darkness until just before dawn, Elizabeth, once more quieted and serene, fell asleep.

There followed a near-frenetic fortnight of activity. He sensed the flurry of unuttered panic in Elizabeth who insisted, sometimes against his stated judgements, upon outings to the shops, the theatre, cinema, restaurants, parks. There were two days — those directly succeeding the second infusion which he had set up in the visitor's room of the house — when she roamed dully in Betty's orange dressing-gown about the house, nauseated, fatigued, and disinclined for any occupation. But for the rest, she would not be subdued, walking up stairs, along slopes, through crowds, despite her cough, despite her pain, despite the vice that was relentlessly constricting her breath, causing her to rest at progressively shorter intervals. He advised moderation but, squeezing his fingers and kissing him on the ear, she had answered almost impishly "Twenty-five hours a day, remember?" She talked more quickly, laughed with unchecked exaggeration, related one upon the back of another, childhood recollections of dolls, clowns, trinkets, excursions, books, theatres and games. Into the lounge-room, she brought her dead father, mother, aunt, her teachers, friends and acquaintances, and a string of neighbours, customers, passers-by. She grasped at him more avidly, coughing and grimacing with pain, yet begging him to hold and enter her, her yielding giving body in turn burning and perspiring with the mingled violence of passion and disease. She filled the bubble of her existence with a frantic fervid heat and he felt, feared, *knew* that very soon it had to burst.

And burst it did. Leaving her inert, leaden, torpid, barely able to rise from her bed.

"I can't go on, Michael," she broke out. "I've tried, I've tried, God, how I've tried."

"It's a temporary setback," he said, examining her as he had done every second day. "You're due for another blood test and, if that's clear, then another course of treatment."

For the first time, the whites of her eyes were tinged with yellow. New glands had grown. Fluid had accumulated in the chest and her liver was swollen, untouched by previous treatments.

"Don't be a seagull," she said. "We left Martin in the hospital. Don't bring him in here."

How much easier it was to deceive, to attempt to appease even when there was no appeasing. Or was it, in this instance, to appease himself, to deny and, by denying, to console himself that she was not totally escaping from his grasp? Fact vied with wishful thinking and, contrary to the principles which had always governed his research work, he was ready, if given the minutest ground for it, to reject fact. It was Elizabeth herself, with her almost perverse insistence upon truth who prevented him.

He drew blood from her, sent Susan with the specimen to the nearest laboratory, then returned to sit with Elizabeth. Her neck was thinner than ever, the mole at its base more prominent.

"You're quite a heroine," he said.

Elizabeth smiled, shook her head.

"No. An actress. Remember what I told you once. The Shrew, Hedda Gabler, Julia. Playing roles, pretending to be someone else. These last two weeks, I played another role, pretending not to be Elizabeth Donohue. But the curtain had to fall and I was Elizabeth Donohue after all. The trouble is — there are no curtain calls."

She twined her long lean fingers between his.

"What about you? So absorbed with myself have I been that. . ."

"And I've been so long confined to the laboratory and the lecture room that I've forgotten one could live so intensely. Were the circumstances different, I would not have exchanged the past two weeks for a dozen papers in the journals."

"We'll see what you say later . . . when . . . when I'm gone."

"Scout's honour," he said, saluting with his free hand.

"I know. I believe you. You've given up more for me than I'm worth."

"That is for me to say and that, Elizabeth, is something I shall never say."

"Hold me, Michael. Hold me back from that precipice. I don't want to fall into it even if at the bottom, in that other world, there is a universe of clowns. I stopped loving my clown long ago. I don't want to go after him."

She pleaded with him, silently, with her eyes, her brow, her lips. Speech gave way to gesture, to touch. A hand through the hair, on the cheek, on a hip. An evanescent twitch of the nose, a furrowing of the brow, a smile, a grimace, as though even words, the most sophisticated of man's creations, no longer sufficed to convey the inner wrestlings, the mutual reaching out and clinging. In silence, he sat beside her as he had so often seen visitors to patients do in the hospitals, as he had himself done on his futile traumatic visits to Betty. For all his professional expertise soundly built upon the foundations of book-learning, journals, original research and seminars, he felt helpless and all the more acutely so when the laboratory rang through the result indicating a depression in her blood count that precluded the use of any further infusions.

The result in his hand, he stood by the kitchen window, looking out. Susan came in. She had been helping Elizabeth wash, change her night-gown, comb her hair. She set about preparing the midday meal.

"Bad?"

"We've run out of time," he said, aware that it was yet only time, albeit of a different sort, that was left to her.

"When I helped her change, she was in a great deal of pain," Susan said. "The Panadeine's not helping."

"No. . . She'll need something stronger."

He heard the postman's whistle and went outside. The sun was glowing; glaring white light fell upon the asphalt, the red rooftops, the gardens. He brought in a journal, a telephone bill and two letters, one from the hospital, the other from the Universities Appointments Board, almost identical, both regretting his resignation and thanking him for his services in the past. The letter from the hospital board signed by Henry Keating, carried a hand-written postscript: "Whatever the collective verdict, as a human being you shall ever have my trust. God protect."

He screwed up the letters, then smoothed out the one from the hospital, tore off Henry Keating's postscript which he placed on his desk, and threw the rest into his waste-paper basket.

He sat behind his desk, gazing at the board chairman's note.

"God protect."

"God protect."

God.

God bless them that believe — that *can* believe — in God, he thought. Like gentle humble Henry Keating. And God be merciful to those whom He has failed.

Elizabeth came in. Gaunt now, slightly bent, her hair spread across her shoulders, her cheeks lightly powdered, her lips faintly rouged.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said.

"I'll give them to you free of charge," he answered.

"I'm glad you can still joke."

What else, if not humour, was left? he thought. And stories?, fairy tales?

"Once upon a time," he said "there was a poor shepherd boy who loved a princess. He wanted her so much, he left his pastures, deserted his flock. The princess was flattered, kissed him gently on his eyes, and went away. And because of that kiss, the shepherd boy continued to live and wherever he looked there was light and brightness, for with that very kiss, she had planted the sun in his eyes."

Elizabeth added her own ending "And for all the princes that the princess ever saw, it was the shepherd boy she remembered and loved best of all."

She placed her hands about his neck.

"There are to be no more treatments, are there?"

He shook his head. "No."

She understood.

"Thank you for speaking the truth," she said.

Her pain intensified, her breathlessness increased. He prescribed ever-stronger analgesics which either he or Susan administered. Sometimes, Barry came in but, at a loss for something to do or to say, and, besides, not fully reconciled, left without staying. Thereafter, Elizabeth seldom left her bed and finally not at all. Her skin was falling away from her, her cheeks sank, her jaundice mounted and her belly swelled. Susan, finally summonsed to duty, changed her, washed and combed her, turned her in bed and raised her up against her pillows, sometimes soliciting assistance from her father who stood or sat nearby in almost constant vigil. Over the days, Elizabeth's periods of lucidity were fewer, conversation

became brief and fragmented and, in time, rambling. Often, both in wakefulness and in sleep, she winced in pain and moaned and when it seemed too great, either Susan or her father administered another injection.

To pass the long drawn-out days — each day, he thought with irony, now truly lasted twenty-five hours — he tried to read, to correct the proofs, to revise his papers. But the texts proved elusive. Her wincing, her moaning, her very presence carried him back and forth across the recent months, his thoughts assaulted by recurring batteries of memory that urged themselves upon him with dogged obduracy. — The first encounter, the burgeoning love, the New Year's party, Martin Lauder, Henry Keating, Peter Sealy, Sister Simpson, Barry, the day in the Dandenongs, the weeping at night, the intense compression of living into the finite time of a frenzied fortnight.

"Why me, Michael, why me?"

"A penny for your thoughts."

"Ten cents for yours."

"The seagull — it winked and winked and winked."

"Royal treatment for a princess."

"With you I came alive again."

"Gossip is like water."

"Professor Bainton lectures me on humility! Indeed! Crap!"

"Should I give up living now?"

"The Ugly Duckling and Cinderella rolled into one."

"Pontius Pilate."

"And I was going to marry that clown."

The moaning became incessant, and the grimacing, and the wincing. Elizabeth was sleeping fitfully. He stood before the window. The summer heat still clung to the earth. The rooftops blazed. The trees stood erect, torpid, unmoving, for there was no breeze. Now and again, he heard the hiss of wheels and the rumble of a distant train. But against the infinity of space, all was silent; and against the infinity of time, inconsequential. Always eminent among his peers, he felt suddenly small, and insignificant, and he saw the work of his past twenty-five years as paltry, not worth the candle. There was no sense in striving, in attaining. Death put paid to all. Ambition, position, creativity, wealth — all of these were mere shadows that the human eye perceived as light. If there was meaning to it, where did it lie? With God? Chance? Fate?

Could it all be explained, as he had so tenaciously held, through evolving reason and science, or were there in deeper strata or in higher realms mystical layers as yet undiscovered but intuitively known?

He turned to look at Elizabeth. Some things he would never know. But if one could not discover meaning, at least one could offer peace. . .

Moving to the dressing-table, he drew up five full ampoules of Morphine, a hefty dose, into a single syringe. If there was a God, He had failed to be merciful, and where mercy was not extended by God, it was mere man upon whom the duty fell.

Elizabeth lay propped against the mound of pillows, her breathing shallow, her eyes closed. He touched her brow, her cheeks, her hair which had become dishevelled. Now and again, her eyelids fluttered and he wondered whether she could be dreaming. None could ever know. Arching beside her, he took her emaciated arm, created with his grasp a tourniquet above the elbow, transfixed a vein with the needle — how often had he done so before — and emptied the syringe with a single downward thrust of his thumb. Then he sat beside the bed, holding her wrist, and watched and waited.

Susan entered. She had brought in the morning's mail. An invitation to a seminar on kidney disease, a Diner's Club application form, again a journal, a letter from the State Medical Board. Intuitively, he knew its contents. He opened it last. It informed him of a complaint registered with the Board concerning unseemly professional behaviour and that the Board would be pleased if he could present himself to the Secretary to clarify the allegation.

He thought of Martin Lauder. How far the tentacles of ambition could reach — if this were indeed the work of Martin.

"Trouble?" Susan said.

He shrugged a shoulder, indicated Elizabeth.

"What is trouble?" he said. "Against this. After this."

Elizabeth's breathing had slowed, deepened. Her eyelids had ceased to flutter. Her skin was cool and moist.

"Do you want something, Dad?" Susan asked.

He shook his head. Susan left the room.

He held her fingers, remembering.

She had been an orphan in the world, marked — by God? by chance? or by something more prosaic such as a faulty gene or defective protein? — to die. He had not been able to give her life. That was beyond the scope of any man. But in that life, he had offered and received the most that any man could offer and receive — companionship, solace, consideration and love — and, apart from life, she too, he knew, could not have requested more. And in the end, with the simplest of gestures, an emptying of a syringe he had given her peace.

He squeezed her flaccid hand and sensed the stirrings of a vague though burgeoning elation. He looked into her face. In its final immobility, there was beauty, serenity, grace.

And he remembered.

"And because of that kiss, the shepherd boy continued to live and wherever he looked there was light and brightness, for with that very kiss, she had planted the sun in his eyes."

"And for all the princes that the princess ever saw, it was the shepherd boy she remembered and loved best of all."

He hoped that she now found herself among the clowns.

Envy's Fire

My father was a little man, with little ambition, little talent, little initiative, little achievement. While he remained a small-time shoemaker, his landsmen, ship's brothers and friends had become manufacturers and builders,and while he sat day in, day out in his little shop, they took vacations for months on end, sending him picturesque postcards from the beach at Surfers Paradise or from overseas. His shop in Fitzroy was a narrow dingy place with a grimy window looking in upon yellowed newspapered shelves holding a half-dozen pairs of dust-laden women's shoes and two or three outmoded hand-bags, while inside, the walls were a dirty leaden grey and the floor whose bare boards were smeared with black and brown polish was strewn with remnants of leather, bent nails, some with their heads snipped off, and bits of string. It smelled fustily of leather, lacquer and dust.

He had few customers and these mainly from among the poor — pensioners, sales girls, labourers with large families, and a few Maltese, Italians, Greeks and Turks who lived in the commission flats that rose high and box-like in the street behind the shop. To them, he sold his labour cheaply — often giving credit — and if my mother had not worked as well, serving in Keppel's grocery five-and-a-half days a week with the self-denying dedication she gave to everything she did, there is reason to suppose that even the rent towards the flat in St. Kilda in which we lived might not have been met. Certainly, despite my scholarships, I would not have been educated towards the lectureship in English I was in time to attain. Most of his time, my father spent in the doorway of his shop, without particular expression watching the passing trade of Smith Street — young mothers wheeling babies in squeaking prams, old men with walking sticks, housewives in a hurry, businessmen emerging satisfied from the corner hotel, migrant children chattering spiritedly as they idled to and from the nearby school. To everyone he nodded, bowing his balding head ever so slightly in deference to all and sundry who came by his way. At other times, when he was not bent over his last, humming an obscure unrecognisable melody in a droning monotone as he glued down a fresh leather sole or

hammered with quick deft strokes a rubber heel, he sat on his stool, reading, nearsightedly, by whatever light entered through the grimy window. He read a lot — the daily "Age", Friday's "Jewish News" or a Yiddish book — but for all his reading, he held few opinions of his own. He was more given to agree than to dispute and if a customer or a friend made an observation that instinctively ran against his grain, he would nod, smile meekly as if embarrassed and say in a hesitant but conciliatory tone, "Yes, I see what you mean; there may be something in that". Sometimes, he took out the stub of a pencil from his smeared grey apron and on a paper bag or along the margins of a newspaper jotted words which struck him as he was reading or gazing blankly out of the shop. On occasions, in the evenings after returning from work, he would enter my room where I was studying, he would run his eyes over the titles that were accumulating on my bookshelves and nod approvingly — he was always nodding — saying as he pointed first to his temple and then to his heart, "In the end, the real world is in here and here". He would then leave and while my mother prepared the next day's dinner or ironed the clothes or chatted with our neighbour Mrs. Fainkind in the kitchen, he would retire to the lounge-room where he would read sometimes until midnight and make notes in Yiddish in a little fifty-cent notebook that was curling at the edges and dog-eared in the corners. Seldom did I have much of importance to say to him — I whirled in my own livelier orbit of student life, parties, concerts and football matches — therefore seldom did I intrude upon his privacy and for that, I often felt, my father who held himself shyly remote, was not entirely ungrateful. I shared his roof, his food, even his ties, but unlike other sons not his being.

I was not particularly proud of my father whom, in a phrase I garnered first from Steinbeck, I came to see as a mouse among men, so reticent, acquiescent and colourless was he. In the fourth form, I envied Mark Wechsler his father who told lively humorous sometimes bawdy stories by the yard and later Paul Kagan, my classmate, whose own father, a coin and stamp dealer, was a man of the world, much travelled and articulate, a huge imposing man always smartly-dressed, with a broad sturdy brow, white elegant hands with long fingers and unchipped nails, deep wrinkles of mirth alongside his all-comprehending eyes and abundant hair which rode in rich silvery-white waves swept back vigorously

in all its fullness. And there were other fathers I came to know — men of substance and opinion, of ambition and achievement, immigrants too who had come with merely a suitcase, like my father, but who were laden with mines of initiative and forward vision that seemingly put behind them the past of a Europe destroyed and buried that past under the more durable and securer concrete and steel foundations of flats and factories and supermarket chains. If in the new land, there was gold to be had, my father, though he was not blind to its reflection in others, never touched it with his own fingers, himself clinging instead to what I saw as the dress of a quaint old-fashioned vanished past peopled by naive rebbes, naive socialists and naive visionaries alongside little tailors, little shoemakers and little saints who held a tenuous and — as the reality of history was to prove — a precarious foothold in the wider world of men. To my ever-recurring dismay, whenever I thought about it, my father was cast from the same mould and, circulating by predilection in the sphere of more sophisticated friends and their worldly-wiser fathers, there were occasions when in his presence I was, even involuntarily, ashamed. His stunted English as he asked for a packet of cigarettes at the milk-bar or for three tickets — when I still went with my parents — to a picture show jarred my ears and my sensibilities and I would at such times sidle away from him and pretend preoccupation with whatever distraction presented — a poster, a bill-board, or the traffic outside — the less to evade that jarring than to publicly deny any kinship or connection with him. I hurt him, to be sure. But this I learnt not directly from my father who when wounded silently nursed his wounds in private and unfathomable retreat. Rather, I learnt it from my mother who, noticing, would say with a sharply-honed penetrating barb in her tone, "Are we giving you the right to study and be somebody so that you should be ashamed of your own father?" I protested and denied and, however reluctantly, returned to the family shadow by way of proof, but had to acknowledge that my mother certainly knew how to rivet a nerve with the truth. I would then walk beside or behind him, already at sixteen a head taller than he and sturdier, and promise myself — vow — that I would be different from my mouse-like father, that I would be like other outgoing, articulate, clever, achieving fathers, and attain to heights where a man did not live and die without a ripple in the waters of life but where he stirred the

currents and the waves himself with the full force of his gifts.

And *I* had gifts. Quite apart from the praise and prophecies lavished upon me by my teachers and my parents' friends, I recognised my own worth and felt, indeed knew, my potential to be unlimited. Where my classmates wrestled with a problem in maths or agonised over the interpretation of Chaucer or Keats, to me they came like breathing. In my final year at high school, I was leader of both the school's chess and debating teams and contributed amply — a story, a poem and an essay about non-conformism — to the school journal. My mother fretted that these diversions might stop me "getting on", as she termed scholastic success, but by year's end, I could present her with a string of honours and two scholarships that would enable me without excessive hardship to my parents to pursue a university career. Their one disappointment was in my choice of courses. Inclined towards literature and sociology, I enrolled in the Faculty of Arts. They — particularly my mother — would have preferred to raise a dentist or lawyer, an architect or engineer. These they understood. My own choices left them bewildered. "What can you *do* with other people's scribblings?", my mother asked in a harassed display of philistinism, "and what is this sosho . . ., sosho . . .logy?" My father, however, became more easily reconciled. Bowing his small balding head as he scraped with the tip of a knife the grit from under a chipped thumbnail, he said simply, "What goes into a man's head is never lost".

Entering into university, I came to nurse and nurture another more edifying ambition. To write. And more, to have my writings known, or rather to become known through my writings. I dreaded littleness, anonymity and, at life's end, oblivion such as that towards which my father, sequestered in his dingy shop for days, months, years on end, was heading. A man was born for greater things. It was true, I knew, that opportunity had cruelly eluded my father. Born at the wrong time in history, the third son and sixth child to an invalid asthmatic father, he had lived in Warsaw, become apprenticed to an irascible punitive shoemaker upon completion of primary school, and in later years had been driven, upon the German invasion, from that city to wander about the steppes and forests of Siberia before returning west to the devastated city that had been his home. Thereafter, he drifted along currents not of his own making, coursed

through a series of byway stations — through St. Ottilien where he met and married my mother, through Paris, through Marseilles, through Genoa — before arriving with his battered suitcase at the remoter, quieter, more mysterious shores of Australia. I often wondered whether he took time to look around. Within the first week, he was settled as a process worker at Julius Marlow's, barely raising his eyes to the wider world, it seemed, until much later — some ten years later — when he purchased with whatever copper he had saved the narrow mouldering shop in Smith Street from a recently-bereaved widow who needed the money. That money, had he been a different man, he could have invested more wisely, more profitably, as his ship's brothers had done, but the scope of his lateral vision did not extend beyond the pavements that lined his daily route between our St. Kilda flat and his shop and it held him within the straight confines in which was harboured the stultifying fate of mediocrity, insignificance and littleness which I came to despise. It was that insignificance, that littleness and that narrow vision that I sought above all to transcend.

Academic success, as before, came easily. I completed my honours degree within the minimum four years, embarked on a Masters thesis dealing with changing social movements as reflected in Enlgish literature since Chaucer and obtained first a tutorship, and then a lectureship in English in the Faculty of Arts. Along the way, I had written articles and book reviews for the campus magazine and for two years headed the university's debating society.

These years were not, however, free of their disappointments. I came to collect a veritable treasure-trove of rejection slips for my creative work. Under the influence of Camus, Kafka, Eliot and Beckett — all of whom were in vogue at the time — I wrote in my spare time stories, verse and one-act plays which I typed, bound and submitted with almost loving solicitude and heady confidence, only to see them returned to my letter-box with little more than appended preprinted notes regretting their unsuitability for this, that or other magazine. Failure — a novel pill too bitter to swallow — drove me harder. That I possessed creative gifts, I did not doubt, I could not doubt. But what lit the tail to more dogged, and sometimes frenzied work was the desire, or need, to have them publicly acknowledged. Thus driven, I wrote; wrote between lectures, between reference work, late at night, in the

early mornings; wrote about alientated professors, hallucinating students, uncommunicative couples, remote fathers, rebellious sons; wrote about nature, fate, godlessness and chance, and wrote about futility, absurdity, emptiness and death. The ideas came readily enough — but not, to my growing chagrin and frustration, the success.

In the year that I completed my masters' thesis, my father fell ill. He was then nearing sixty-five. He was totally bald, had become short-sighted to the point of relying on a magnifying-glass for reading and had developed high blood pressure and heart disease. As long as he was able, he drove to his little shop every day, returning home towards late afternoon too weary to eat or read or scribble notes into his dog-eared fifty-cent notebooks. He spent more time in the kitchen, stirring his spoon in successive cups of black tea, his face dark and wrinkled like a winter leaf, listening absently to my mother and to Mrs. Fainkind as they chatted, as ever, about recipes, their husbands, their sons or the price of tomatoes. At such times, he seemed to me more pathetic than ever and his littleness in the world struck still more forcibly as an affront to all that I believe a man should be. And seeing him wither and wilt within a shrivelling shell, my own dissatisfaction with myself mounted as did my apprehensions that I, too, for all my academic attainments and success, should, in that one pursuit that had come to matter most, make no ripple, no mark, and like my father be consigned to that ageless anonymity and oblivion that enveloped his existence. If I wept when, in the end, my father died — he had suffered a stroke and lingered without dignity for three weeks in a coma before dying — it was less because he was my father, I knew, than because of the irrevocable ugly waste of a life that he had come to represent. In keeping with custom, I recited kaddish after him, sat shiva with my mother for a week and let my beard grow. But, within, the acts were hollow and, to my nagging shame, insincere.

For more than a year I had been living alone in a flat near the university. Upon my father's death, to keep my mother company I moved back home.

One Sunday evening, disinclined for any particular activity, — another story and poem had been returned in the preceding week — I sat in the lounge-room gazing idly over the Yiddish titles in my father's bookcase. My mother was ironing in the kitchen and every so often I heard from there

the hiss of heat upon moistness. Languidly, I reached out for one and another of my father's books, flipped through their pages, and returned them to their shelves. In some, I noted my father's pencil markings — words, phrases, sentences underlined, and brief annotations made around the margins of the pages. This held no surprise for me. My father had never been able to read without his pencil stub in his hand, a habit which I, who seldom took voluminous notes, regarded as quaint but also reflecting a distrust in his own capacity to grasp at first reading an author's meaning and intent, a limitation which confirmed me in my long-held opinion of him. On the bottom shelf of the bookcase, I saw a pile of uneven newspaper cuttings, already yellowing from exposure, with the same now-fading markings in the margins and on top of that pile an open shoebox containing a score or more of those cheap dog-eared notebooks with which I had seen him occupy himself in the evenings after work. Although they had always lain exposed in that box, I had never taken interest in them until now when idleness and vague curiosity made me reach out for them.

I had, despite many years of growing up in Australia, retained a good knowledge of Yiddish, and to my astonishment which made me sit up as if thunderstruck and which brought creeping tingling goosepimples to my flesh, I realised — such a thing had been beyond conceiving — that my little bald-headed wrinkled reticent colourless unambitious unachieving father had also been a poet. One after another, I turned over the pages of his almost-mangled notebooks to discover in his script, minute and cramped, verses which in their Yiddish rang with a rhyme and rhythm more lyrical and moving than anything that I had ever written.

Quivering with the unexpectedness of my discovery, I read:

I fiddled away my dreams on strings unseen
Playing silent song on surfaces serene,
While coursing deep in the crypts of being
Cadenzas crashed in torrents steaming.

Turning the weathered page, I came across a simple quatrain that surprised me, my father never having been a particularly observant man.

Pure the dawn as is the dew
None so homeless as the Jew,

Strong the sun and might the sea
None that yearns so strongly after Thee.

And towards the end of what must have been his last notebook — his writing had become uneven, jagged and spidery — my father emerged, uncovered, in a guise unexpected because never sought.

Sweet summer once shone in the face of my son,
My silken-haired, my wide-eyed child
Transforming my wasteland into a kingdom splendid.
Remote now our souls, touching but rarely,
In his breath the chill of winter,
In my own that of abandoned dying.

There were more, many more — entire poems, fragments, single lines — contemplative in the main, depicting at times in almost tactile forms the broader gamut of his experience, ranging from the close warm tradition-bound existence in his old Warsaw home through years of uprootedness to his brooding sense of homelessness in the new land, of crumpled dreams, abandonment and isolation.

My father had never read Kafka, nor Beckett, nor Camus. Where I — as I recognised now — wrote my stories, poems and plays about futility, absurdity, emptiness and death in vicarious imitation of my mentors, myself living a life of comfort, companionship and outward success, my father had written out of the depths of personal pain. *He* had dreamed, *he* had experienced, *he* had suffered uprootedness, abandonment and isolation. And he wrote about what *his* soul had known and comprehended and felt. Where I had been derivative, he had been honest; where I had been hollow, he had been pure.

And in that moment, I came to hate that honesty and purity that mocked my own work; I came to hate, despite myself, that little man, my father, who had in all past years been bigger than I; and I came to hate the poems, the fragments and the lines that were in my hands, branding into my flesh and my brain my own dishonesty, my lack of creative gifts, my failure in that which mattered most. And I could not contain my hatred, could not subdue it, as hand over hand, I threw all my father's notebooks into the shoebox, carried them under my arm to the backyard outside, where, with a motion that would allow no retraction I thrust

them into the incinerator in which a dying fire left by neighbours flared as little tongues of flame leapt up to lick and embrace the curled dog-eared pages of the notebooks. I watched, watched, with fascination and trembling and abhorrence. I saw the pages glow, blue, orange, crimson, saw them shrivel into charred blackness and saw them crumble into grey ash which fell and settled on the amorphous glowing cinders in the incinerator's depths. Above, a handful of stars towards which isolated ephemeral sparks flew appeared through the clouds, the air was still and all about there hung the concentrated silence of entrancement.

At that moment, my mother, holding a pile of ironed clothes in her hands, looked out through the bedroom window and asked, "What are you burning at this hour?"

And hunching a shoulder and raising a palm as though it were nothing, I said "Rubbish", knowing — realising, too late, too clearly — that it was my little father's soul that was burning there, his life after life that was dying and his stature that was crumbling into oblivion everlasting.

Greetings, Australia! To You Have I Come

I am the first to catch sight of land!

Prancing about the uppermost deck in pursuit of a quoit grown black, ragged and greasy from exposure and overuse, I came to a necessary halt at the rails beneath which the tattered ring rolls, trembles and spins into the frothy swirl below to disappear into the waters that fan out greenly turbulent behind the ship.

Behind me then I hear footsteps ringing on metal. Quick, firm, angry, resolute steps. Surely the captain loping forward to admonish me for the loss.

To stay rooted in one place? To wait for fury, shame, retribution?

I run towards the bow where innocence might be the easier to feign.

The steps pass — a purse-lipped sailor on some private errand — but it is there, in that corner, while whistling in the wind, that I see it — a shape, something swelling, something broad, amorphous, grey, creeping legend-like out of the eastern horizon.

"Father! Mother!"

Electricity charges my feet. All clatter and clangour, I clamber down the stairs. I pound along the gangway, torment the passage with echo and find the deck where Father and Mother sit, two bodies side by side sunken into canvas chairs, each huddled, curled against the wind.

"Australia!" I shout. "Look! There!"

Excitement? Tumult? Surprise?

None of it to greet my discovery. Only a few passengers passing by pausing to look, one man, blind in one eye, saying "So it is," and another rummaging through my hair declaring "Isn't he a clever boy?"

"Father! Mother! Look!", I shout on, leaping in turn to the rail and back to my parents.

Father sighs, shuts the Yiddish book he has been reading. Mother, marble-cheeked, rolls her knitting into her bag. Together, a mechanised pair, they rise. At the rail, they stand stiffly, squint as with their gaze they try to slice through the harbour's gathering mist. The wind, devious and persistent,

probes under Mother's handkerchief, from there to prise out a coil of black hair, a coil which falls like a question mark upon her brow. Her exposed cheeks freeze to violet and she pinches them to restore colour and warmth, herself the while shivering within her heavy grey worsted coat, her legacy of an abandoned Paris. She presses Father's arm. He, adrift, it seems, on another vessel, does not appear to respond to her touch.

"We have done the right thing, haven't we?" Mother asks, yet again, as so often before.

And as so often before, fugitive creases flit from the corners of Father's mouth and eyes.

"God alone can judge," he says with an upturning of the hands.

God. Again God — for five weeks past, Father's guide,support, judge. Even though it is Spinoza that he has been reading and Sholom Aleichem, Peretz and Sholem Asch.

I squeeze between them, wonder again where is that God that Father has lately so often invoked.

To the west, now behind us, the sun is drowning beneath a crown of flame. Inland, harder, sharper edges emerge, chiselled out of stone, not blue, not grey, yet both, as first the pier appears and then the derricks, the sheds, towers, trucks and gates and, then too, the lattice of rails along which little red carriages crawl in sluggish motion. From the water below rises a tang of sea-weed while with the taste of the sea-salt and bitterness all about, there merges something more rancid, of grease, decay and sulphur that bring sour bile vaulting to the throat. On the lower deck, a sailor is imperiously shouting orders in Italian and on looking down I see crushed against the rails a host of folk leaning over, dozens of them waving — hands, handkerchiefs, shawls — as though to tell the new land of their arrival. But only the sea-gulls, squealing in their circuits, seem to respond at all.

Nearby stands a sparrow, a small woman, undernourished and dull-eyed. Her companion beside her is more of an owl, heavy-jowled and beaked. Her eyes flit and flicker, large black spheres oscillating in gluttonous startled motion.

"Australia," murmurs the sparrow dismally into her scarf.

"May we find better fortunes here than over there," says the owl.

To which Father — if he were a bird he might in that moment be a rooster — draws himself up, pouts his chest, brightens as he sees solid structures usurp the shape of smoky fantasy, and feels impelled to utter into surrounding space a spirited "Amen."

How close now that solidity, that firmness. After five weeks, an end to pitching and rolling, an end to reeling stomachs and searing bile, an end, also, to the ceaseless circuitous talk whereby Father with the Sosnowskis and Kalbsteins in toe have been prosperous in the new land. Millions of words have they sprayed into the spray of the sea about them, together, from Genoa to Fremantle, have they set up partnerships, in wisdom have they bought and sold and made fortunes hand over fist and come to own half the streets in Melbourne without yet having set foot in it.

How close that solidity, that firmness. How immaculate the fantasy spun by the grown-ups, a fantasy illustrious and sublime that touches all, all except Mother who has sat, day after day, knitting her memories quietly into a cardigan or a shawl, her lips pressed pale between her teeth. Somehow, the ocean, the inescapable vastness of green water and foam, the bitter air and the impenetrable darkness of night at sea have cowed her into inordinate submission. She cannot rise, she cannot fly. Wherever she moves, reality chains her to itself and reality for her is the limbo of the present and the harshness of the past, a chastening past that clips any wings she might care to flutter when Father or his friends confront her with the future. But there are moments, precious because rare, when she does bow to what might pass for hope, when, drawing me to her side, she whispers secretly into my ear, "For you, my child, for you have we left Europe."

Now, stiff before the rail, Mother bites her lips again, with palpable distaste honing her nose to sharp severity.

But Father, with Joel Sosnowski on his other side, actually begins to laugh. To laugh, so that all his amalgamed molars show. To laugh, as though the first hundred pounds were already in his pocket.

His hair prances in the wind. The lapel of his jacket flaps wildly.

"It's not Poland," he says, "it's not Paris, but it's soil under our feet. It's home."

"Home," Mother huffs.

"Home," I murmur, catching shafts of Father's gaiety.

Home. I gulp the sea-air in draughts, knowing these to be the last, taste the new now-expanding country to which a tugboat, brown, rusted and rickety, is towing us in a narrowing arc. I break away, clatter up and down the gangway, fore and aft, root out whatever is solid before me, trying to gorge myself upon the whole fringe of coastline with ravenous bites, returning to report, trusted scout, every new particular that rises from the growing giant that is Australia.

"Look, Mother! Houses, Father! Trees, sand, cars, lamps, people!"

I glow. Burn. Touch me and be burned.

"He *is* a clever boy," says Joel Sosnowski. His fingers pinching my cheeks sting with scorpion's pincers. May his own fingers touching my cheek be consumed by their fire.

And then comes the first touch with Australia. Steel against timber — I hold my breath —, the ship gliding into port, bumping once, twice, three times against the wharf, quivering with jerky jolts, rocking to rest as weary wavelets of murky water lap around her stern. All about there is a hubbub now — sirens, whistles, creaking wheels, scraping steel, clattering feet, but more than anything voices, *voices* — laughter, greetings, exclamations, squealing — voices escalating to a chaos of sound that wraps around the whole milling mass of sailors, officials, passengers and visitors as they hurry, scurry and seek, each to his own purpose, each to his own design.

On the port side, the gangwalk is lowered.

I tug at Father's elbow.

"Let's go down now, let's go down!"

"Wait," he says, holding me back. He scours the swarming platform for a waiting face. "Another minute. Two."

A minute now is an age, two a millenium. Beside him, I stand, wait, watch, my feet at the same time ready to run, to spring, to soar. Nearby, hoists whirr into motion. Crates rise, touch the clouds, swing, glide, dive. A breath away, trolleys scuttle. Beyond, carriages shuttle along ringing rails. Successions of cars arrive, depart near iron gates. And in the ears, the wind whistles, seagulls screech, men in overalls gesture and scream. And then the first of the passengers descend. Descend, stumble, fall into the embrace of ecstacy, fervour, delirium. For Joel Sosnowski the clasp of a brother, for Lea Kalbstein the tears of a sister, for the sparrow a

cousin, for the owl a friend. A profusion of kisses down below, cascades of laughter, brisk passionate little dances, arms about shoulders, fingers to cheeks.

For a while longer, we watch. Two millenia now. Father. Mother. I. Father, hair in wind-lashed chaos, still rooting out the faces in the throng. Mother frosty. And I — I. . .

I. . .

Young heart. Plaything of the maudlin and of mawkish passions. Victim to others' pleasures and tears. I watch. The throat of its own accord constricting — ecstasy, grief. Tremor through every pore. Goosepimples along the arms. And yet heat, inner heat, prickling, tingling, as a sense of brittleness — or is it vulnerability, exclusion? — fixes me to immobility, steeled by an awareness, acute and sour, that there is joy below which we, Father, Mother, I, do not share.

For we are orphans, a huddled self-contained isolated group as, with Father in front and Mother behind me, we take the first steps down the gangway to the firmer steadier ground that is Australia.

We are orphans. No relative, no friend awaits us. Only Reuven Altman from the Welfare Society, an ox, huge, florid, beaming, his shoulders humped from stooping, his hands the hands of a giant as he extends one to Father —

"Welcome to Australia, my suffering brother!"

— then to Mother —

"May this become your home, my sister!"

— then to me, doubling over, all glow and golden canines, with a buoyant bellow to ask my name.

I tell him, feel the moisture, warmth, force of his clasp.

"Another member of the work-force," he booms loudly and laughs. "New blood, young blood, a gift to the land. — Now come with me, I shall take your bags."

The pier, as he strides along its length, is all his. We tread quickly to keep pace with him.

"This is Melbourne," he says, the very horizon falling within the arc described by his sweeping arm. "*There* is Queenscliff and opposite — no, you can't see it — there is Portsea. But that is for the rich, for them," he says, "not for us," then turning his massive face squarely upon us, he pouts ample lips, raises his brow and adds, tone of mellow tenderness, "my children."

Then he is off again, pace and patter again swift and vigorous.

"A golden land this, some say. No, it's not gold. But opportunity, yes, and work, if you are willing to accept. Here is no Vilna nor Warsaw nor Lodz. Here, a Yiddish word is a pearl, something rare. We have a Yiddish theatre, a newspaper, a choir. But there is more, much more that needs still to be done. You, my brother, you, my sister, you survived. By God's will, it must have been for some purpose."

By the gates, he bundles us into a black Vanguard, starts the motor twice, releases the handbrake and — oh delight, delight — we are away, behind us the sea, the ship, the pier, the emptiness of weeks as we drive through streets growing grey with drizzle and evening, through streets spacious and narrow, straight and tortuous, flat and rising, trams down the middle, tall buildings by the sides, and houses, milk-bars and recessed churches and bill-boards, signs and flashing lights, and bustling women scurrying in all directions and paper boys crying out outside hotels — through all these streets and through quieter, darker, gloomier ones, turning finally into a drab rough-surfaced bumpy road to stop outside an ill-lit cottage — an ancient terrace in the heart of Carlton — where a single room has been prepared.

And here we bundle out again. Jaded by weeks of ocean and empty scenes, my legs discover freedom. No rails, ropes, banisters now to limit my caprice. No tilting, reeling, keeling to shuttle me, a quoit, across the deck. Liberated, I leap about, seek out, explore, even in the rain, eyes, hands, feet, taking in the garage, the factories, gardens, shops and potholes, everything, *everything* in one vast ravenous grasp. Father, ever-practised, makes straight for the door, while Mother, standing slightly hunched and huddled at the gate, adrift, still drifting, between the Vanguard and the house, falters, struggles visibly with her will and enters only after the soldering of some mighty unspoken resolve.

"No, it's not Paradise," says Reuven Altman touching her arm, a giant beside her, "but for three months, six months — people have known worse."

No palace our room. A mere box. Cracked green walls cobwebbed in the corners, a single dull unhooded bulb, bare table, scarred chairs, two double beds, mattresses sagging, ragged perforations in the roller blind half-drawn and askew across the grimy rain-peppered window, and the smell of mothballs, damp and mould. All drab, spare, oppressive.

Oppressing Mother; Father, I know, as he opens a suitcase, feeling the accusing bitterness of her silence and seeing it in the oval mirror above the fireplace from which, when their eyes meet, Mother looks away.

"Patience, calm, we shall manage," he says in an offering of placation. But he, too, then turns away, words alone, he knows, unable to shake the impact of lostness and tedium wrought by the surroundings.

Reuven Altman, out of the room at that moment, returns with, towering over, Luba Fleischer, a comical pop-eyed goose wiping her hands in a red chequered apron.

"Well, then, I can trust you, Luba mine, to be good to them," Reuven Altman booms as ever, bending over and bracing her shoulders with his huge all-encompassing arm. "For you, too, were slaves in Egypt, eh?"

"But of course," Luba Fleischer says, clicking her tongue. A mole sits on her cheek, a cyst with hairs over an eyebrow. Still young, she has the makings of a double chin. "There is soup on the stove and brisket that just needs warming."

Talk of food. My tongue, palate, lips grow moist.

"That is more than good of you," Father says.

"Psha," Luba Fleischer bursts out with a little explosion. "It is nothing. After Europe — if *we* can't show a little charity towards one another, who will?"

"The words of an angel," says Reuven Altman, his own words resounding in every corner as, laughing, the gold of his canines glint even under the dull light of the globe. "You two," he adds, bowing first to Mother, then to Luba Fleischer, "should become good friends."

Mother promises nothing. Still dressed in her coat, although unbuttoned now, she raises her chin towards Father and says, "You go and eat. And take the child. I shall stay here, I'm not hungry."

"Just a little soup," coaxes Luba Fleischer.

"I'm not hungry," Mother says again.

Reuven Altman, with a flourish — have I ever seen anyone so massive, so huge, so florid? — looks at his watch.

"You are in good hands," he says, nodding in tribute to Luba Fleischer.

Then, lifting my chin with his hand which is enormous yet soft and tender, his eyes, the black of their pupils ringed with grey, root out mine.

"You have the whole world before you, my young man. Watch. Grow. Listen. Learn. Do your lessons. Think no foolishness. Make your blessed father and your dear mother ever proud of you."

Then he releases my chin but the tenderness remains. I float on feathers, soar on the ringing resonance of his voice, ready to promise anything, anything, as, retreating, he leaves, huge, luminous, golden, bowing in tribute as he passes through the door.

Shortly after, Father breaks bread in the new land and drinks a glass of wine poured for him by Victor Kopecnik. The little kitchen — if it seats seven, it can seat seventy — smells of garlic, matzo balls, fried onion, kasha, simmering oil. Not the grease and detergent of the ship penetrating every mouthful or the salt and seaweed odours of the relentless sea, but something homely, distant, in memory belonging to Paris where Mother, preparing for dinner the Esperanto of a Jewish recipe, manufactured smells as savoury, tantalising, sturdy as these. But now it is Luba Fleischer at the stove, salting, stirring, smelling, tasting, while Arnold Fleischer and the Kopecniks sit with us — with Father and Mother who has relented and with me — at the table.

"To the future in a free land," Father says, he laughter tinkling like the glasses he clinks with Victor Kopecnik and Arnold Fleischer.

"To health," says Victor Kopecnik.

"To prosperity," says Arnold Fleischer.

To which Mother, not drinking, but witness, mutters a curt "Amen."

In time, we eat. Mother concedes to a glass of tea. Conversation sprouts wings, flies. Alights like butterflies, now on one leaf, now on another, aloft again in scintillating circuits which I sense even if I cannot fully comprehend. Names, dates, places whirl around the dusty bulb, impinge upon the walls, touch the ceiling. Each person has a story to tell, an observation to stress, an opinion to express. Fingers probe the void, hands gesticulate, words, words, words spray the air like the spray at sea. Victor Kopecnik, dribbling soup down his chin, talks hurriedly, with a lisp. It is not in Slawa Kopecnik's nature to speak softly. Arnold Fleischer insists on trifles. Words revolve, as on the ship, recurring circuits of things that were, that are, will be. Warsaw, Hitler, 'thirty-nine, Auschwitz, 'forty-two, the Kopecniks to Paris, 'forty-

seven, Kaplan to Canada, Frankel Brazil, Sosnowski, Kalbstein, Menzies, the Communist Party, Russia, the Internationale, Australia, security, fortune, future. Europe is behind you. Here, you are safe. Here, you are free. Find work, be patient. Your young one will thrive here, he'll be whatever you want him to be. Time. Time. He'll be whatever he wants to be.

And remembering Reuven Altman, I watch, I listen, I try to learn, sucking at the words with delirious delight.

The meal over, I leave the table, drift — exploring — down the passage. Behind me, Slawa Kopecnik's high-pitched shrill shrills on; her husband soars on the crests of his own sibilant ardour. Fountains of words continue to gush. Paris, Warsaw, Siberia; bunkers, barracks, brigades; Melbourne, Carlton, Home.

I step outside, confront an evening that is alien, but moist, cool, redolent with the neighbour's flowers — orphans in this street of concrete and brick —, their odours mingled with the acridity of compost in the gutters and the tarriness of rubber and grease. Opposite, in silence its stagnation, stands a garage; near the corner, a huddle of factories, graffitied grated gates concealing interiors, stark script — peculiar names, words, numbers — straddled across whitewashed stone, playground for quicksilver shadows cast by bilious yellow lamps pitching before capering capricious breezes.

Memory burgeons. Fleetingly. Touching with flickering breath. Receding. Andre, Gerard, Jacques. The school of Rue Rodin, lemon meringues at midday, prize-giving, the first tooth lost in bodily somersault down a flight of stairs. And feet ringing on stone around Bastille on Quatorze Juillet, across Place de la Republique, along Belleville. And solidity and sunshine and snow, under skies, between edifices different and remote, separated now by time and by oceans into which a tattered quoit has tumbled and disappeared, flight in fear leading to a glimpse, then a vision of land arising grey, amorphous and creeping, a growing gentle beast stretching upward, gliding closer out of a long and mute horizon.

Australia!

Australia!

Beyond the end of the street are other horizons, opaque cyanic blue settling over the Indian black of low houses, pealed rooftops and sluggish traffic, all obscuring that vision,

mine, that would reach out to it even now, no matter the hour, and ferret out the sheep and the hopping creatures and those furry bear-like animals I have read about in my French Larousse under the heading "Australie", and in my chase glimpse the world, that world out there promised to me by Reuven Altman. But shadow, unfamiliarity, timidity — the ultimate blight of adventure — keep me rooted to the gateway, the cold of its iron rails against my back, the creaking of its hinges yielding kind comfort against the unknown.

Out of the unknown but close at hand emerge crowing noises, punctuated by screeches, cackles, yelps and caterwauls. Not animals these, neither dogs, cats, parrots, nor fowl, but three boys, running, whirling, reeling, sundering vaporous air apart with the cacophony of a menagerie. One is a reed, the other round, the third neither tall nor short, nor slender nor broad, forgettable against his companions were he not the one with a stick striking avidly at lace-iron railings and swishing whippingly at void. From around the corner have they come, turning from Canning into Pitt Street, careering between footpath and roadway in heedless abandon, while against the gate I lean and from that quiet station watch and ogle and stare.

It is the squat round one who brakes to a halt before me. Even lightning is slower than he. Scarcely can I blink before his pudgy palm clamps my shoulder as with the other and with a raucous " 'ey 'ere!" he beckons to his fellows who, in turn, come running, the one with long strides, the other with smaller steps, that stick of his still lashing at air. They may be freckled, pimpled, beginning — all of them about twelve already, perhaps thirteen — to sprout whiskers. Evening's shadows, the darker kin of those gloomy swinging overhead yellow lights, whish in fever across their faces, their fluid shapes cavorting wilfully, out of their formlessness the boys' eyes with the light falling upon them gaining life, flickering, shining, now playfully, now curiously, now menacingly.

"Whoa!" drawls the tall one, drawing up on an imaginary horse.

"Whee!" cries the second, cracking the void yet once again. The vibrations of his stick reach my ear.

The little fat one holds up his free hand. The leader, he is obeyed. Silence waits for him to speak, which he does, with

words coming between hard-set teeth, their tone that of questions, searching, lip-skewed camaraderie.

But go understand him! What words are they that for all his smile are coated with marble hardness? "Reffo." " 'Nover ov'em bastids." "Nuboy." "Juboy."

Pressing for anchorage against the gate, I feel its moist coldness in my back, together with another, clammier, moistness — of perspiration and vague dread.

The leader claps me on the back, shouts "Yipes" in peculiar triumph, winks in mischief bent to his fellows.

He seizes me by an arm. His companions enclose my other side. Space becomes a cage. The steam of their breaths laps at me with unwelcome warmth. The tall one, the horseman, now so close, smells of rancid soap. The middle one sports a sicklier smell. First, he farts, then sniffs, clears his throat, and spits. A thick blob of spittle appears on his lips. There it hangs, clings and swings, finally finding its liberation, dropping, heavily, to land on his shoe. The leader laughs. The horseman bursts out "Bewdy!" The spitter, himself laughing, threatens them jocularly with his stick, then more menacingly turns to me. His eyes are mice, flitting schemingly between me and the blob on his shoe.

I would cry out, but with that weapon swaying before me, I smile instead, making sounds in efforts to form comprehensible speech.

"Je . . . Je ne . . .," I try. "Ich bin . . . arrive aujourdhui . . . fun Paris . . . de Pari . . . France . . . oif a shif . . ."

"Wow," says the horseman.

"Getim," says the fat one. Once again, turning to his fellows, he crooks a finger and winks.

Babel has come to Carlton. I reach with words; with other words do they respond; but nowhere lie the crossroads where they may meet. The phrases I have learned, knotting my tongue and breaking my teeth over them upon the boat — "Thank you," "Good morning," "How do you do?" — of what good are they to me here as first the fat one, then the horseman, and, last, the farter grab my arms more tightly still, burn my wrists with Chinese twists, and have me squat, then kneel, then bow, pressing my face towards the farter's spittled shoe, they the while laughing, hissing, snorting with some brutal frenzied passion as over and over they shriek "Lickit! Lickit! Lickit!"

Perhaps it is the result of their own clamorous merriment, perhaps I have myself screamed out, but arising in confusion from that ever-more-tightly constricting cage are other noises, an anarchy of voices and of shuffling, scraping, clattering and stridency as, one after the other, my arms are released, the pressure on my head is leavened away, and there follows the ringing of feet on asphalt and a high-pitched refrain piercing the thin moist air: "Kikies! Buggers! Bastids! Pricks!" "Kikies! Buggers! Bastids! Pricks!"

In a huddle they surround me now. Father, Mother, the Kopecniks, the Fleischers. Arnold Fleischer has chased the boys around the Rathdowne Street corner and returned; Luba Fleischer, all solicitude, repeating "What did they want, the shkotzim? Did they hurt you? What did they want?", taps my head, my shoulders, my waist; while the Kopecniks, Victor Kopecnik clinging to Father, Slawa Kopecnik to Mother, try to succour, console and subdue, saying, "They mean nothing. They're only shkotzim, hooligans. They have nothing else to do."

Perhaps Father listens. With his "Yes, I understand, they are everywhere," he is prepared to believe. Troubled by doubt, he will ever turn his face to that which he can more readily accept as comforting fact. But it is Mother who trembles for them both, for us all, who fears, grieves, sees black in the whitest cloud, in pearl, in snow, and apprehends with palpitation every deviation, uncertainty and change. Never mind that humiliation has nearly reduced me to burning tears. Never mind that, for me, what began as expectation and adventure has crumbled into hateful chaos. Never mind that Reuben Altman's gentle marvellous words have suddenly fractured into open lies. Never mind that. . . Never mind anything as Mother, snorting venom, grabs my hand, pushes past Father and the Kopecniks and the Fleischers, and tows me behind her into the gloomy corridor of the drab ill-lit cottage, murmuring, hissing, seething, "Even here?! For this have we come?! For this have we bled?! For this?! For this?! Everything for this!"

Words

When he had begun to lose Rita, Shraga Sztayer was now no longer sure.

Driving along Burke Road from Caulfield towards Balwyn, where his daughter lived, he peered through the swollen rain, drew in his shoulders to gather warmth and thought of her. He considered turning back — his purpose in going might be madness anyway — but he knew that his mind, unless satisfied, would yield no peace. Despite his gloves, his fingers were numb and crops of goosepimples bristled over his skin. Outside his window, a tram clattered by and the wet road hissed metallically under the wheels. The idea of approaching his daughter for money appalled him and he felt the shame of it to his teeth but prayed that, despite their distance, she would not be too severe.

In the hold of a subterranean quivering agitation, he thought of Rita.

A child of his middle years, she had always been far closer to her mother — when she let herself come close, at all — whose slender, balanced, gentler features she had acquired. But where Esther, his wife, had been constrained and withdrawing, Rita bore herself with an assurance that, although commendable, became progressively more unsettling. She did not fuss, was forever uninhibited and spoke her mind with a brashness that bordered on the arrogant. Up to her adolescent years, she had been manageable enough, if not wholly compliant, but with the first signs of quickening maturity, she became impetuous, haughty, severe. It became evident that she had few friends and when he had confronted her well-meaningly, at thirteen, with that observation, she had retorted with dour abruptness, "They're all dumb, dull, dreary."

"But every person needs some companion", her mother had counselled, seeking to penetrate the girl's fortifications in her own quite retiring manner. She suffered from "nerves" at the time and Dr. Tauber, himself drawn and sallow from overwork, had advised her to avoid all stress.

"I can get by", the girl had answered, straightening imperiously so that her forming breasts bulged firm.

Rita "got by", winning admiration, if not affection, for her superlative scholastic performance, her debating skills, her clearly superior intellect. But she remained, at bottom, a person alone.

If she had, however, suffered from her aloneness, she had not been one to show. But he did perceive in her the transmutation of her isolation into the pursuit of pleasures private and deeply personal. She read widely and deeply, nurtured an early interest for theatre and symphony concerts, played the piano with some proficiency and, following his own example, had, at fifteen, taken to writing verse of considerable maturity and poise. To his own "Ashes of Time" which had just been published and which he had given Rita as a gift, she remained distinctly cold, even critical.

"Always the same, the war, the camps, the gas-chambers, always the black side of life."

Across the yawning chasm, reaching out to her, he had tried to explain.

"A poet writes about what is deepest within his soul. That, Rita mine, after what your mother and I have been through, is deepest in mine."

Her nostrils had flared as she blew down her nose.

"Never become a poet", he had cautioned, as close to jest as his tone could manage, hurt more by that single gesture than by the severest critic in the press.

Where the chasm was bridgeable, it was Esther who, urging tolerance in the daughter and forbearance in the father, had straddled the gulf of years, of interests and of temperament that stretched between them.

To Rita, whom she approached with a gingerly tread and with a deferential reverence for intellect, she said, "Rita, my precious, your father, yes, your father and I have experienced worse than hell. It hurts us more than you can know, precious, to see you turn your back on that."

While to Shraga, eighteen years older than herself, a war-widower when they had met and married in Paris, a man governed more by intuition and emotion than by reason, she had counselled, "She is only a young girl, Shraga. It is not for us to impose the burden of our past upon her shoulders. It can, Shraga mine, be . . . suffocating."

That sense of suffocation, he came to appreciate too late, possessed not so much his daughter as Esther herself. It was at about this time that her "nerves", for many months

precariously poised, crumbled into what he was much later to describe as "the rubble of a disintegrated soul". Receding into the straits of narrowing orbits, she slept badly, suffered recurring nightmares, gave way to fits of incomprehensible and uncontrollable weeping, and walked about devitalised, dazed by the succession of remedies that Dr. Tauber had plied her with.

"Everything is so futile, so meaningless", she said when she could be drawn out of her consuming silence. "When I remember Mauthausen . . ."

He tried to reach her.

"We survived", he said, bending over her, touching a cheek with consoling fingers. Her lips trembled. He probed the depths of eyes increasingly remote and found himself floundering. "That is sufficient in itself", he added.

"We survived, yes. But for what, What for? It all gets swept away. Living, breathing, suffering, having suffered."

"There is the future to think of. And Rita. And us. What has passed . . ."

"What has passed is part of us. Forever. Your own poems, Shraga, are witness to that."

The August light, a calm luminescent glow, free of harder edges and touching delicately, might have repudiated her despair, but failed.

"May God forgive me, but the life He gives us is empty, hollow, without meaning."

He began to caress with words. "Look around you, Esther. Everything is alive. Out there, millions like ouselves are laughing, working, making plans. Suffering, too, yes, and sick and crippled and seedy, but glad in spite of that of being alive. That is far from emptiness."

"Shraga, my precious, you whose cup has always been so full, what do you know of emptiness? Emptiness is inside, in here, in the soul."

She stopped coming into the shop, talked at night with her murdered parents, startled easily, as if wounded by every sound. Dr. Tauber fed her with pills . . .

In September, she gassed herself.

That had been eleven years before.

Behind the hammering rain, the shops and street were lost to greyness, bereft in the downpour of their sharper forms. Where there were trees, their crests swayed frenziedly, while above, the sky, in places black, lowered with what to Shraga

Sztayer was envenomed malice. He thought again of turning back. His reason for going at all became an indulgence. But he drove on, peering through the fog gathered on the windscreen and listening to the wipers as they hummed in their oscillations, punctuated at their extremes by metronomic clicks.

They had come to comfort, his friends. Barfuss, Zeitelbaum, Aronowicz, Glust. Simcha Lamdan the critic had laid a hand on his arm and Feierberg the printer had pressed his hand. And he, the mourner, had been abundantly grateful. And grateful again when Rita, now sixteen, sat beside him on her mourning stool and, in a surfacing of intimacy, said with a choke in her voice, "Father, we shall manage."

"The language of reunion has no sweeter tongue" he wrote long after,

"Than love laid open, bared and sung,
Between two kin, strangers sharing,
Come close, come close, touching, caring."

How much it had cost Rita to come so close, he could only guess, but knew the effort to have been considerable. For, the week of mourning over, she regressed into the cocoon of her former ways and became again resistant, unreachable, severe.

Shraga Sztayer, then sixty-four and twice-bereaved, had clung to her nonetheless, no matter the pain; but was more often left clinging to her shadow. Over dinner, which Rita now prepared, he tried to make conversation and, where common ground was evident, she responded sufficiently to leave him satisfied. But satisfaction proved too truncated a thing as evening wore on, with Rita sequestered in her study over her books and Shraga Sztayer confronted with the full face of dreaded solitude in which he could not yet collect his thoughts. Seeking respite, he would bring her cups of tea, a scone, a bar of chocolate, anything, and pause on one foot to look over her shoulder at whatever lay open before her and study the titles and read her notes and offer to test her knowledge. At first, she had not resisted. But when his attentions were becoming more frequent and his stays more prolonged, she had pursed her lips and said outright, "Father, please, I can't concentrate". And when that formula proved too lame, she had transferred her place of study to the Public Library, giving as her reasons the

which contained the volumes and journals she required. His evenings thus turned hollow, he became impatient for the moment, at ten o'clock, when she would skip down the Library steps and hurry briskly, her bag swinging, towards his waiting car. As he drove home, he had twenty minutes with her. And for that he was glad, however superficial their communication or palpable her protest. For she *had* protested, more than once. "Father, you don't have to pick me up, I'm safe." To which he had answered with a diffident laugh, "Look at it this way, my precious, I am only doing an old man a favour."

Rita was then in her matriculation year and showed her precocity with a string of firsts in all her subjects.

Shraga Sztayer was proud, though his pride, he knew, could not remain untinged.

"If only your mother had lived to see this", he said, placing a hand upon her shoulder which Rita, exalting in her success, did not attempt on this occasion to withdraw.

Long-secluded, Shraga Sztayer began to emerge from the shell of mourning. The shop, the exigencies of daily routine, the brief snatches of Rita's company had thus far sufficed and sustained him. But after eight months with Rita now staying back at the university to study or attend plays or write for *'Farrago'*, the hollow evenings became less bearable. He rooted about for something to do. And found occupation in his papers — stray words, disembodied phrases, fragments of verse — which he had upon Esther's death consigned to the darkness of his drawers. He began to write again, and in his solitude reached deep into his pain. Night after night, he filled the sheets before him, jotting, striking out, arranging and rearranging, creating out of the amorphous dust of memory an edifice of suffering in which Auschwitz, uprootedness and death echoed repeatedly to drown out whatever softer voices had once entered his verse. Sometimes the telephone rang, and he let it ring. Sometimes a friend — Aronowicz, Feierberg, Glust — came to visit, but he ignored the summons of the door-bell and stayed in his room instead, behind drawn blinds, to spin out his private web of anguish.

In this way did months of evenings pass.

Rita no longer blew down her nose at his creative work — and he credited that to her developing maturity — but neither did she show particular enthusiasm for it. She merely circled orbits different from his own. He saw it in the titles of her

books: Elements of Psychology, The Shaping of Personality, Foundations of Social Psychology. He saw it, too, in the theatre reviews she wrote for *'Farrago'*, in the predominantly non-Jewish company she kept, and in the mode of dress — kaftan, beads, sandals — that she assumed in her third year at the university.

"Rita", he had said one day when she had transformed her hair into an African friz, "I don't want to criticise, but you're all the time growing away from me."

"That may be, Father", she had answered with a shrug of a shoulder, "but I'm sorry, I can't live in your past."

His daughter, at nineteen, was a handsome girl, if made somewhat ridiculous, he thought, by the fad of fashion that she sported. To his regret, Esther's rounder, gentler features in Rita were hardening — the cheeks rising a jot higher, the nose a whit sharper,the chin a trifle sturdier — but a visible innate elegance adhered to her, the more striking for its severity.

"I don't ask you to live in my past, only to understand it and not look away. It is your past and your people's past."

"I know all that."

"And it doesn't mean anything to you?"

"Yes, but it's not everything."

Nathan Rubin had been more forthright. A post-graduate student of biology and Australian-born, though of post-war refugees from Poland, he was twenty-four, highly earnest, and solid, with huge shoulders, a thick unruly tide of black hair, a ripe voice and an intelligence behind the rising brow that was confident if not always correct.

"Auschwitz has become an obsession with your generation", he had said on their second or third encounter.

"An obsession? It's the embodiment of evil in our time. Can any man, of any generation, now ignore it?"

Nathan Rubin with Rita beside him sipped tea, then said, "I am not ignoring it. I see it . . . I regard it from a different, even a biological perspective."

Shraga Sztayer studied the younger man's face for traces of irony or misplaced jest but Nathan Rubin, he decided, was too humourless behind his heavy glasses to be anything other than serious.

"Biology", Nathan Rubin explained, "holds the key to the understand of life's processes. Not philosophy, nor metaphysics, but simple, humble biology. Behaviour all comes

down to genes and genes to molecules and one day we shall understand such events as war, murder, love, loyalty in this way."

"And martyrdom, and Auschwitz?"

"Everything."

"You talk out of books", Shraga Sztayer said, "but . . . I have experienced."

Nathan Rubin was relentless. "Yes, yes", he said slowly, thrusting his bulk forward towards Shraga Sztayer, "but experience when extreme — I see it in my own parents — can be a narrow-minded teacher".

How deeply the younger man had wounded, Shraga Sztayer never disclosed. But after that, he stood back from Nathan Rubin and accepted him — tolerated him — only because Rita, in love with dour intellect, loved him in her way and he, the father, was unable to dissuade her. In due course, Nathan Rubin and Rita were married and for three years, painful to himself, they had lived in Boston. When they returned, it was to a university lectureship for Nathan and a Masters' degree for Rita. Their ideas had not changed but they were more observant of tact, he noticed, and had mellowed in their manner. Rita was then twenty-four and he wondered whether she might soon settle into motherhood.

At the top of Burke Road, Shraga Sztayer turned into High Street where he stopped to buy Rita a box of Red Tulip. Chocolate was one weakness she had never given up. The rain had eased but, crossing at the lights, Shraga Sztayer had to push against the wind and the cold air bit with jagged pincers. Although the time was barely five o'clock, the afternoon was already grey and dismal and spent. He felt oppressed. The idea of taking — borrowing — money from Rita appalled him, all the more as he sensed that it was his own vanity he was pampering. But having come thus far, he could not bring himself to turn back while from behind — and he now remembered Barfuss — the publisher's exasperated voice pressed him on.

With Rita away, his shop sold and time his most enduring companion, Shraga Sztayer had continued to work on his poems. He fed them with memory, experience and pain and there were moments when, in the heat of inspiration, he throbbed with the pulse of his own creation.

For a long time, until well after Rita had returned, he showed his poems to no-one, but when he did, now confident

of their final shape and their force, he was unprepared for the criticism which they brought. Feierberg, the printer, was guarded and even Simcha Lamdan, the critic, distinctly cool. Having expected better of his friends, he withdrew from their company, conspicuously detaching himself from them, and nursed his disappointment in private. But it was Barfuss who, hitting the hardest, drove him most solidly upon the ground of his own resources.

A man of forty, the publisher's balding head shone, his thick lips were moist and his glasses glinted. His father and Shraga Sztayer, ship's brothers, had been friends.

"The poems in themselves are beautiful, Shraga, but the public, yes the public, is a fickle beast. And — look, Shraga, we're close enough for me to be frank — the poems, apart from their beauty, well, they aren't exactly empty but they don't say anything anymore."

"They don't say anything?!"

Shraga Sztayer had risen to his feet where he teetered as he slapped the sheaf of papers that made up his manuscript into his palm.

"Listen", he said, "here, to this!

'There are silences that fill the soul
Where love, where faith reside in wordless worship. . .' "

"Shraga, I told you already", the publisher placated with a rhythmical lilt, pitying with his whole expression but remaining inaccessible, "they are beautiful, but . . . Shraga, I'm sorry."

"A fig for your beauty! What lies here is my soul!"

"I believe you, Shraga, but the public. . ."

Barfuss stood at the door, his hand poised on the knob ready to open.

"The public. The public simply doesn't *want* to listen."

Barfuss dropped his hand and lowered his head. He toed into a corner of carpet that had lifted.

"No, Shraga, that's not it. I hate to say it, but for all their beauty and their good intentions, your poetry has become too abstract, too remote, too — I hate the word — too sterile for the general reader." He raised a palm. "No, before you speak, listen to me. Europe, Auschwitz, Siberia — they're behind us. The people, yes, the people are tired of the same reworked themes. Your 'Ashes of Time' ten years ago were appropriate. They were good poems, substantial, sensitive,

significant. But today . . ." He paused, then with his hand again cut across whatever Shraga Sztayer was beginning to say. "Our reality today is Australia not Poland, Israel and not the vanished shtetl. Our problems are of identity, belief, culture, affluence, of children turning away, of parents unable to reach them. A poet who wants to leave his mark must adapt and respond to change, and progress in the same direction as society around him. Withdrawal, retreat into the warp of exhausted themes is escape from his fundamental responsibility."

"Exhausted themes! Barfuss. Joel. I lost a wife and child in Auschwitz. There is only one true theme for the Jew of today. Auschwitz and survival. In our time, the rest is commentary."

"Now tell me this", Barfuss said, pointing at the manuscript in Shraga Sztayer's hands, "how do you hope to reach the youth in this way? It is they, after all, who must bear the burden of our continuity. *They* won't read your poems about the War, not even the best of them. It's hard enough to persuade them to read Yiddish, let alone Yiddish poems about a war they haven't experienced and will never, *can* never understand."

"But I can't stop writing."

"I know, Shraga, I know. That is every writer's curse. His protest against oblivion, his striving after a dustbowl of fame. But am I not right? Take your own daughter now."

Shraga Sztayer winced and felt the need to defend. "But Rita is different."

"Oh? And how?"

Challenged to express, he had found the differences immaterial. He nodded at Barfuss, conceding the point.

"You see, Shraga", the publisher pressed home, though not with malice, "even your daughter is of her generation."

Shraga Sztayer now stood by the door.

"You leave me no choice", he said to Barfuss who, sitting on the edge of the desk, suddenly looked bored.

"No choice?"

"I'll publish the poems myself, that's all."

He saw Barfuss turn up his hands and raise an eyebrow as if to say, "That is your decision, not mine", and angry, beaten, hurt, he left the publisher's office.

What was from the first an impulsive declaration gave seed in the days that followed to further burgeoning thought. The

idea, increasingly persuasive, clung to him tenaciously and, in its sway, he made enquiries, calculated his resources — wanting by far — thought of his friends, shilly-shallied between alternative courses of action and, in a night of sleepless brooding, decided with a desperate thrust of his imagination to borrow from Rita to publish his poems. His decision soldered into the solidity of resolve, he determined to act quickly lest the vigour of his decisiveness begin prematurely to wane. He set out in the late afternoon when certain of finding Rita at home. He prayed only that she should not be too hard.

Shraga Sztayer arrived at Rita's house during another downpour. Enshrouded by the prematurely darkening light, the house normally elegant in its russet brick and stylish high-arched windows looked excessively subdued. Before it, the dull shrubs, bushes and trees sagged heavily under the pelting rain and along the path lay broken leaves and severed petals beaten flat in the soil that darkly smudged the concrete. He smelt the rain among the foliage and from somewhere more remote came the rancid sicklier odour of burning rubber.

To his disappointment, he saw both Rita's and Nathan's cars in the carport. He had hoped to catch Rita alone.

It was Nathan Rubin who opened the door. Obviously surprised, he looked at Shraga Sztayer, then at the rain and again at the visitor, his father-in-law, before him.

"Come in", he said, moving aside his bowed massive frame from the doorway. Shraga Sztayer caught a hint of a smile, but only a hint. More conspicuous were the high forehead puckered deeply between the eyebrows, the tightness in the jaw and a distant, unmistakable hurt in the eyes behind his thick heavy glasses. "Yes, come in, give me your coat."

"You are home early", Shraga Sztayer said, to make conversation.

"Yes", Nathan Rubin said, "it is unusual".

From the kitchen Shraga Sztayer heard the hiss of something frying and smelt fish and eggs along the hallway. Rubbing circulation back into his bitten hands, he walked towards the kitchen where through the doorway he saw Rita, her back to him, bending over the sink and rinsing celery under running water. When she turned upon his entry, she straightened, reached for a tea-towel and exclaimed, "Father!".

"It is nothing, nothing", he said, placating with his hands and laughing weakly. "A man alone gets lonely, wants to see his daughter." He heard Nathan's heavy tread behind him.

Rita squinted, unconvinced. A loose curl of her black hair had worked itself over an eyebrow and with a upward puff of her lips she tossed her head to restore the rebellious wave. She wore an orange apron with flowers into which she reached for a tissue.

"Well, sit . . . sit down", she said. In her cheeks, her chin, her eyes, Shraga Sztayer saw her mother. Despite the years, the resemblance stayed.

He sat down. Rita turned to the stove, preoccupied — even annoyed, he thought. Nathan Rubin drew back a chair and set his mass into it, spreading his thighs and dropping his hands between them.

"A miserable day", Shraga Sztayer said, again looking for conversation.

Rita, turning over two fish fillets in the saucepan, nodded weakly. "It's a miserable day all right." Nathan bit his lip and sighed. Outside, behind him, a shrub of tall hydrangeas struck against the window. The rain continued to fall. Shraga Sztayer had seldom seen his son-in-law so pensive and untalkative. He saw his own coming as a mistake, wondered again how he might set about his purpose, and remembered with a jolt Barfuss' words and wondered for the first time whether the publisher might not in fact have been right.

"You might as well stay for dinner", Rita said, not looking at him.

Shraga Sztayer wavered. "No, no, I didn't intend to stay. But a cup of tea I will have."

Nathan Rubin stood up. "I'll make it, darling", he said to Rita. Then setting the kettle upon the flame, he bent over Rita — he was enormous against her — and said in his deep ripe voice, "Can I help with anything else?"

Pursing her lips, Rita shook her head and squeezed his hand. Nathan remained standing beside her as she prepared the salad.

Shraga Sztayer felt himself an intruder. Such affection between them he had not yet seen. Such affection towards himself, Rita his daughter had never shown. And he wondered vaguely how they had acquired what to him had been so unsuspected. Uncomfortable, he rooted about the room. He smelt the fish, tasted the garlic, and his gaze came

to rest upon Nathan's briefcase leaning against the buffet.

"Tell me, Nathan", he said, looking squarely at his son-in-law and sensing here the cue to his own purpose. "How is your book coming on?"

He expected Nathan Rubin to become the lecturer again, ready to thrust himself forward in a delivery of sound. But Nathan merely turned to switch off the gas.

"My book?", he said. He seemed distracted. "Its day will come. Besides . . . it's not the most important thing."

Three months earlier, when setting out upon editing his papers for inclusion in a text, he had been effusive, exuberant, almost arrogant. "Biology provides insights that other disciplines never can", he had said. "That is what my book's about." Now the fire was gone.

"It's not going too well then", Shraga Sztayer said with what almost sounded like satisfaction.

"Biology can explain, elucidate", Nathan Rubin said, pouring water over the tea-bag in the cup. "But it makes disappointment no more bearable or less painful."

"That's what *I've* always believed", Shraga Sztayer said and wondered whether Nathan Rubin, the encrusted academic might be turning to his own view.

Nathan placed the cup in front of Shraga Sztayer and offered him sugar and milk. He remained standing. Rita tossed the salad and rinsed her hands.

"You're sure you won't eat with us?", she asked, her tone weary, subdued.

"I'm sure, I'm sure." Then in a burst, he came out with it. "I wanted to tell you. My own book is ready. Yiddish poems. Fifty of them. I'm calling them 'In Dust We Fade', and intend to publish them myself."

He had hoped they might be less cool.

"That's nice", Rita said, reaching into the cupboard for plates.

"May it be in a good hour", Nathan Rubin added. His heavy black brows were knit and he showed the flickerings of a smile. "About the War? Auschwitz?"

Shraga Sztayer nodded. "And some very personal poems", he said. Barfuss, he remembered, had called them beautiful, but empty, abstract, remote. The publisher hounded him. He held his breath momentarily as the dread thought assailed him that those months, those years of pained solitude he had not lived but misspent in the spinning of mere

private empty meaningless abstractions. It had not been so, he told himself, but was now no longer sure. Time had passed perspective had changed. Feierberg, Lamdan, Barfuss — "My God, are they right? Don't the poems say anything anymore?"

Rita prepared to set the table. She drew a deep breath. "Nathan, will you please bring in a tablecloth?"

Nathan Rubin, nodding, left the kitchen and walked down the hallway where he opened a cupboard and rummaged about the shelves.

Shraga Sztayer, recognising opportunity, sat upright. He had Rita on her own. He looked at her. The face, though serious, was still beautiful, as it had always been. It was also a little mellower than in former years. The cheeks were high but fuller, the lips softer, the chin rounder. Only her eyes seemed different, having gathered dark, duskier rings that even recently had not been there. It occurred to him fleetingly that she may have been crying. He stood up. He thought briefly, bitterly about his manuscript waiting to see the light. He remembered again the fifteen-year-old girl blowing down her nose, remembered Esther whose life had been suffocated out of her, remembered the years he had spent alone. And he saw now how Rita had matured, in a way he had not expected. Rita, the schoolgirl, the student, the orphan was a woman now and, in a distantly familiar way, he felt distinctly proud.

He walked over to her. She had her back turned to him again as she placed the food on the plates. In the hallway, Nathan had found the tablecloth and was lifting it out of the cupboard. He remembered his poems, the anguished creations of his loneliness. "God, give me strength", he prayed. "If not now. . ."

"Rita", he said.

He reached out to touch.

At the sound of her name, Rita's shoulders quivered and her head shook. Suddenly, Shraga Sztayer couldn't understand. She was sobbing.

He turned her towards him. He saw her face in a pained grimace, her hands tearing at a tissue. "Father, Father", she said, "I didn't want to tell you — why should you be troubled too? But I must, I can't help it. Nathan, too, is terribly upset. I've been having tests, three months now, and Dr. Gelbert told me the results this morning. It's been such a

miserable day. Father, oh my God, do you know what it means to find out you're . . . you're sterile?"

In her grief, he felt her come close. She fell upon his shoulders. She smelt of celery and faintly of chives. Behind her, against the black sky, he saw the pages of his manuscript fall apart and scatter and all his labours — the careful words, the polished phrases, his anguish over death and Auschwitz — come to nought. Whether it still rained, he couldn't tell. The wind blew hard and he heard the hydrangeas beating against the window. He felt the taste of dust on his tongue as more than she to him he clung to her.

"Rita, my daughter", he said, touching her hair, her cheeks, her shoulders, "my child. Oh God, my God, how well I understand."

Passage

After the Bar Mitzvah boy's speech, delivered between the main course and the mousse, Mendel Kozminski, one of the guests, approached Itzchak Glatstein at the head-table.

"Mazel tov, zeide, you must be very proud," he said, shaking the older man's hand.

"Proud? My word! Did you hear the speech? Jewels, his words, pearls."

As he laughed, Itzchak Glatstein showed his teeth, and wrinkles, plentiful and deep, concertinaed at the corners of his yes.

"And what did you think of him this morning, heh? The way he sang his portion in shul. . . His grandmother wept from joy."

"A clever boy, a lovely boy," Mendel Kozminski said. "He has a golden head."

"May all God's children be so blessed."

"Amen."

As Mendel Kozminski, having said his piece, ambled back to his seat, Itzchak Glatstein looked once more at his grandson who, sitting between his parents, positively glowed. In his newly-tailored velvet suit and his red bow-tie, young Justin looked quite a dandy. He must have said something smart for his mother leaned over to peck him on the cheek, his father and sister burst into lively laughter, and even the rabbi smiled.

The band struck up again and played long-familiar folk melodies from home — as it was affectionately called, "fun der heym" — that brought several of the guests to livelier animation. They clapped and hummed and sang, and the faces of those old enough to remember shone.

"May all God's children be so blessed," Itzchak Glatstein repeated, this time nudging his wife to have her share his pleasure.

"He's a darling," Leah Glatstein said in response, absently plucking at pink and white carnations before her.

"Can you imagine it, Leah? — How many of our generation have survived to see their grandson's Bar Mitzvah?"

"It's a miracle," said Leah Glatstein, looking into meditations of her own.

"We should be grateful."

Itzchak Glatstein, at seventy, indeed swelled with gratitude, wondering sometimes, in moments when he thrilled to the tremulous stirrings of his spirit, how he might contain it all, as he wondered now, his throat constricted in the delirious suffocation of joy. For, God be thanked, he had survived. And endured. And thrived. Even though there had been a time when, daring to contemplate the future, he could not see beyond the next day and even that had been uncertain, indeed unattainably remote.

He had not always been so grateful. Buchenwald had sorely chastised his faith, the back-breaking seemingly interminable days in the quarries, the death of comrades, and the unremitting hunger all together lashing at his sensibilities, while somewhere his wife and infant son, if still living, wandered or languished in some other corner of Europe. What had sustained him in those long months, through typhus and dysentery and the rancid stench of faeces and flesh, even long after he could only guess at, but gave credit of a sort to the obduracy of animal instinct, to the viability of a deeper, unsuspected, because untested, physical resilience, and, more enduringly, to the indiscriminate haphazard workings of what he came to designate as chance. If during those interminable months of suffering, he had not cursed God for his affliction, neither did he at war's end, praise Him for his deliverance. When the liberating forces entered the camp on the eleventh of April 1945, it was not heavenward that he turned his face, but rather to an American soldier, a pimply youth of barely twenty, upon whom he threw his emaciated body and to whom he clung with the steadfast clasp of thanksgiving.

And it was to yet another mortal, a harried oficial of the United Nations Relief and Welfare Agency, that he cleaved when the news of his wife's whereabouts became known, clinging this time to the man's lips with an intensity that approached adoration. He joined Leah and the boy, now turned eight, at the St. Ottilien railway station, where they were waiting, in the Spring of the following year on a day of inauspicious rain and unseasonal hail. The trio, drawn into a huddle, got drenched, but having endured worse — he in

Buchenwald and Leah with David in the hoar-frost and frigid exile of Siberia — they were prepared, willing even to accept whatever adversity mere nature could devise for them.

Seven months had they remained in the St. Ottilien DP camp, marking time, until, handed the opportunity, and a direction in which to move, they had packed their possessions into a single borrowed suitcase and boarded the train that was to transport them westward, away from Warsaw, their pre-War home, away from the scenes of their enduring, away above all, in so far as it was possible, from the reverberating echoes of a life stalked by the past.

In Paris, their next stop, began the process of reconstruction — a webbing together of the tatters of Europe's bitter legacy. Work, money, clothes, food, even humour assumed a new, yet distantly familiar, importance; the will, so sorely battered, could once more be cajoled into looking to the future; while the spirit could draw breath again, eager now to entertain and be entertained, with neither guilt nor excessive melancholy, at the Opera, the cinema, or more simply over coffee in the Belleville where one might discover again, with surprise and gladness, a recognisable face from home.

There were many among the survivors who had coursed the same westward stream. And for a time, Itzchak and Leah Glatstein, even in their homelessness, felt consoled. But the human stream moved on, gaining impetus from the alchemy of rumour and fear, rumour and fear of continued war and of further incarceration, of menaces real if again not fully comprehended. And it drew the Glatsteins with it, carrying them across the vineyards of France and through the unspoiled Pennine Alps, taking them to the port of Genoa where an old, rusted, mottled liner waited, chartered to transport them over vast waters to a distant, safer, quieter unmolested haven that was Australia.

That had been in 1950.

If the new country did not appear instantly hospitable, it permitted the newcomers at least to draw deep unhurried breaths as, tentatively, they sank fresh roots into mercifully unresisting soil. Within a week, the staples of living were attended to. Work was obtained; David, now twelve, despatched to school; the first utensils and pillow-cases bought; the teeth broken over English phrases gleaned at the factory and practised before the mirror in the single room

offered them by the Jewish Welfare and Relief Society. The pangs of exile and homesickness did gnaw at the sensibilities where left unguarded, and there were times when the anxiety of mind swelled with doubts almost too burdensome to contain. But Itzchak Glatstein decided early on that to the devastation of the past there was no turning back and he set his face to building, at forty-two, upon the rubble of his earlier life.

And trusting to his own labours, he had built well. The twelve to fourteen hours a day spent behind the machines in Flinders Lane and at home stitching collars on to shirts might have assumed a mystical quality, had he at the time been that way inclined, as, piecemeal, with Leah's support at every step, he accrued the means, first, to move to a house of their own in growing Balwyn, and, in time to establish his own shirt factory in North Fitzroy. At fifty-five, he was comfortably placed; at sixty, could turn his resources into real estate; and, at sixty-five, secure and content, could sit back, to contemplate his success, to nurture his spirit and, chief among his delights, to enjoy his grandchildren in their growth.

But there had been crises along the way. When David, in his third year in Commerce, brought home Jennifer Griffiths, a fellow student, his action was as unexpected as it was unnerving. Though sometimes volatile and certainly strong-minded, David never had been wilful. And if he paid little heed to Jewish sentiment, Itzchak Glatstein came to recognise, it was because he himself, Itzchak, and Leah has subordinated Jewish observance — Sabbath candles, worship, Pesach, Chanukah — to the more immediate need to establish roots and fortify the new foundations. There had followed arguments, importunings, recriminations, tears. David talked of marrying Jennifer. Leah wouldn't hear of it while Itzchak, the father, alternately threatened and begged, evoking his years in Buchenwald, their wanderings through Europe and the deaths of millions as witness.

"Is that why we suffered, what we survived for?" he asked, "So that you should cease to be a Jew?"

To which David pouted his lips, blew down his nose and said, "But that's all in the past and this is Australia," leaving his parents no way of reaching him.

The matter had strained the household for eight months and then blew over. For reasons which Itzchak Glatstein

never learnt — his son was scarcely forthcoming with confidences — David stopped meeting with Jennifer and ceased to talk about her. Instead, he paid more attention to his studies and, quite unexpectedly, took also to reading Jewish history. Itzchak Glatstein had been gratified by this change of heart and, more, came close to rejoicing when, months later, David brought home Irene Pruzanski, a student-teacher who spoke mame-loshen with fluent ease. And rejoice he did when, shortly after, David and Irene became engaged.

Their subsequent marriage had proved a festive affair, and, in time, the newly-weds proved a well-matched pair. Industrious — David as accountant and Irene as teacher — and clear-sighted, they beat the straight unquestioning path to security and comfort, embodied in telling solidity of mortar and brick. Itzchak Glatstein had blessed them — in a secular way, which, after Buchenwald, was the most natural to him — and had prayed, again in a secular way, that the couple could be spared even a fraction of the uprootedness and exile he himself had known, and proceeded to bolster his prayer with practical acts, now in the provision of a lounge suite, now of light-fittings, or a buffet, curtains, carpets, and, upon Justin's birth, a complete selection of baby furniture.

These might have been halcyon days. Itzchak Glatstein prospered; he saw David well-established; Justin, after initial tardiness, thrived; and Irene, as though she were his own, fondly called him "Dad". Australia, he was pleased to say, and to repeat whenever occasion arose, had dealt gently with him through the years.

He had learnt long before to temper enthusiasm with moderation, but he found himself nevertheless unprepared when Leah, his wife, disturbed and almost shattered his euphoria. Uncharacteristically, Leah had become irritable and tired, slept badly, ate poorly, and lost interest in everything that, earlier, had mattered — her appearance, her household, her grandchild. Itzchak Glatstein dismissed her moodiness light-heartedly as the "change of life" and for a while, nothing more was said. But when he saw Leah beginning to waste, he grew more alarmed and persuaded her, against considerable resistance, to visit a doctor. There followed tests, specialists, pills and, at the end, the terrible, life-darkening revelation that she had bowel cancer.

Leah fell apart, even as Itzchak Glatstein, himself shaken, did his utmost to sustain her, and it seemed for a while that she would refuse all manner of treatment. "You've gone through worse than this," he had said, "and survived." But regressed into her own dark and morbid cocoon, she answered, "I had more energy once and living seemed important, but now. . ." He pleaded with her to take treatment, repeatedly and passionately, as did David, and Irene who, in the flush of her second pregnancy, gave Leah the most worthwhile reason for continuing to live or, at least, to care. And Itzchak Glatstein had prayed then, prayed again, not in a secular way now but with a fullness of spirit, beseeching God, "Oh God, my God", to intervene to give courage to Leah and strength to himself.

It was only with the birth of Sharon that Leah relented and underwent surgery. And Itzchak Glatstein who, in times past, had lost his God, discovered Him again and praised Him and thanked Him for His mercy and he prayed yet again, his spirit throbbing, buoyed now by the surgeon's assurances that surgical intervention had been in time, the cancer wholly removed and his wife restored to former health.

Stirred by a fresh lively melody, Itzchak Glatstein emerged, serene, from the interstices of memory and thought.

At the tables before him, the guests sat chatting, laughing, clapping. The music played, and Itzchak Glatstein watched the lights as they shimmered in champagne and trembled on the crystal of necklace, brooch and ring.

"God, my God," he murmured, "it *is* a miracle."

He was among survivors, Mendel Kozminski, Nahum Geist, Sigmund Benedykt, Jacob Flantz, redeemed from Buchenwald, Treblinka, Theresienstadt, Belsen, secure now and prosperous in a country far from home.

"Leah, mine," he said, touching his wife's arm, "who would ever, who *could* ever have believed. . .?"

His wife had wept earlier in the day, when in the synagogue she had seen her grandson sing his portion before the Law. He had understood her emotion then. As he often said, "If anyone's heart is made of sponge. . ." But he was not prepared now, in the wake of the homely music, the colour, the shimmering glitter, and the zestful noisy movement of the guests in song and laughter for another display of tears. She was straining to contain herself but her exertion, however

disguised, only heightened the distortion of her features, her lips pursed, the point of her nose pinched, her cheeks sucked tightly inward. Glatstein saw her turn away from him but pressing her arm now where before he had only touched he coaxed her back.

"What's the matter?" he asked, jesting without jest. "Has someone pricked you with thorns?"

Leah turned towards him but, before the guests, kept her face lowered and fidgeted with her rings.

"Don't you see what this means?" she said, bringing a hand to her mouth.

"This?"

"The Bar Mitzvah. . . This. . . The little one. . . He has now become a man . . . a Jew . . . a full Jew. . ."

Something of that illness of hers came back to weigh upon Itzchak Glatstein then, the most fleeting of images of Leah's one-time destitution, but transcending even this, striking with sudden menacing violence was another vision, that recollection of quarries, of frost, barbed wire, overflowing hospitals and mortuaries, and the rancid smell of death, the ugliness of brutality and the futility of martyrdom. Faces returned then, countenances little different from those before him, of Kozminski and Geist, Benedykt and Flantz, whose eyes were shot forever blind and voices forever silent, cheeks scalloped, brows grimy and transparent, hands mere tuber, boss and bone. And in their midst, he saw Justin, his grandson, a man now, skeletal, emaciated, yellow-eyed, bowed beneath a burden his fragile body could scarcely carry.

From several seats away, his son's boisterous laughter brought him back to the firmer yet gentler firmament of reality. The rabbi had told a story and Irene and Sharon were also laughing, while Justin, so like his mother with his finely-curved nose and dimpled chin, tittered in the tide of the prevailing merriment. His cheeks, red apples, shone.

Glatstein leaned towards his wife. He scanned the lines of her face, the crevices, grooves, ravines in flesh grown course, old, weary.

"No, Leah!" he appealed with burgeoning urgency. "Put it out of mind. . . His burden shall not be that wish was ours. . . A better world . . . yes . . . a better world than ours waits for him, Leah, for them, for both the children, yes, for both of them."

Leah nodded, bit her lips, held her eyes fastened to her hands.

"How many miracles," she said, "tell me, how many can the Ribbono Shel Olam still perform?"

Itzchak Glatstein did not answer. He looked up instead at the children. They were happy, carefree was the word, innocent still.

"Preserve!" he murmured, "Preserve!"

As he watched them, lapping them as if to absorb, Irene caught his attention. Smiling broadly, showing her even white teeth, her eyes prancing in their radiant blueness, she waved her fingers at him. Then, wiping her lips with her crimson napkin, she stood up and came towards him. In her red chiffon dress, her pendant and ear-rings of pearl, she was, at thirty-seven, still remarkably handsome. He took her extended hands and drew her towards himself. And as he leant over him to kiss and be kissed in turn, he smelled her perfume and held her tighter.

"Well, Dad," she said as she straightened, her hands still in his. "You must be very proud tonight."

He heard the music, looked once more at the guests, then at Leah, at the children. Once again he tasted his past. He wondered fleetingly whether either past or present were at all real, whether the one were at all continuous with the other.

"Proud?" he said, squeezing Irene's hands and kissing them; then, as Leah had done, looking away, suddenly uncertain, vulnerable, oppressed, "Yes, my precious, yes, yes, a thousand times yes," praying silently for the perpetuation in eternal peace of Leah's miracle.

Sustenance Was I To The Needy

Thank God — God? Why God? — no, thank goodness, my last patient has left. The fly-wire door is shut behind him. The smell of ether prevails. Paula, efficient beyond praise, has filed all the cards, has gathered in one bundle the day's takings which she leaves as always rubber-banded in the cash-tin, closes her handbag after lightly powdering her still-youthful cheeks, pauses (hesitates?) at my door for a moment to ask "Do you want me for anything else?" — how suggestive this always seems, even now — and, faced with my negative response, a shut-eyed shaking of the head as I replace my instruments in my case, she leaves, saying over her shoulder, "Till tomorrow, then."

She draws shut the surgery door securely behind her. Through the lace curtains I gaze, watch, even in the failing violet light of evening, to see, no — I confess — to admire, until she disappears from sight, her elegant well-trimmed body, her dignified tread and her smooth intelligent soulful face, that — in its way — beautiful face which she turns, smiling ever so fleetingly, to the window behind which I sit. A paradigm of practicality, fidelity and common sense, though she did, on one occasion, it must be admitted, lose her head. Why any man has not snatched her up. . . — A mystery even to myself who, against the routine daily stream of coughs and colds and bladder infections, is confronted with an inexhaustible succession of human mysteries. How elusive, how inscrutable those deep rending ravages of love, of love-sickness, of love turned sour, of innocent childhood become grievously errant, of sound minds grown sick, of meanness, aging and decay and, ultimately, inescapably, of death. Evelyn, far from clarifying any mystery for me has merely compounded it immeasurably.

I am, at last, alone. Outside, cars pass, trams clatter by, now and again I become aware of someone calling out or laughing or running past in pursuit of God — God? — of goodness knows what. But these sounds I can shut out. Practice has enabled me to retreat into a cocoon where the only visible and tangible reality is comprised of a desk, a book, paper and two pens — one red, one black — and, of

course of my thoughts which circumscribe all these. For above all, I am a man who thinks. Not necessarily profound thoughts, to be sure, but I categorically refuse to let my mind lie fallow. Even at fifty, I believe unshakably, despite the claims of researchers, that the grey matter may be continually developed — vide Titian, Michelangelo, Russell — and to forego any opportunity so to develop it is a crime, yes, a crime against nature and an irresponsible capitulation from duty.

But if I think, I am also a man who feels, though I do at times fall short on perception — a romantic rationalist (some who know me would even call me sublimely naive, impractical and sentimental), not the kind who bangs his thumb when hanging pictures on a wall — no, not that sort — but nonetheless not totally of this hard, furious, materialistic, rugged world. I am at my happiest away from people — though here I do exclude a few of my patients and Marianne my younger one —, secreted alone in my surgery, my private lair, my nest, after-hours my impregnable retreat, rummaging among papers and newspaper clippings, underlining passages in Russell's books and Buber's (hence my red pen), and making notes in black, on system cards which stand in rectangular cardboard boxes on my desk before me.

And what do I so assiduously make notes about?

Let me give an example.

Russell writes: "I believe that when I die, I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is none the less true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting"

I like the way he doesn't mince words. I admire his directness, his reasonableness, his utter certainty, in contrast to my own ceaseless wavering between the Scylla and Charybdis of disbelief and belief, arising out of the call to reason on the one hand and the appeal to deeper emotional yearnings on the other. For even as I jot Russell's sober words on one blue-lined filing card, I am quite capable of writing, "Lift high your eyes and see Who created these" on the very next.

And then I add my own dribs and drabs.

"How ironic, tragic, comical, melancholy, absurd everything is. And all of these at once."

And: "No order, only chaos; no guiding hand; random evolution, blind forces, blind chance; choice that is no choice; predestination with neither origin nor end; only cross-currents of people, events, experiences, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, deeds, colliding in their millions, willy-nilly, thrusting ever forward along paths unpredictable, creating, as if by accident — indeed, solely by accident — happiness, contentment, sadness, desolation, waste."

And for whom do I write all this?

For myself alone. It could happen, it is true, that someday — after my death — Paula will find these scribblings, or perhaps it will be Marianne or Sarah — how the idea tickles my vanity — but both in the first instance and in the last resort, they are for myself alone. For go persuade a world so stuck in the quagmire of thinking in terms of the dichotomy between will and determinism, between choice and design, that a third component exists, that of chance, a component no less potent if not indeed more so than these.

In this, Sarah's Bernard and I are not so far apart. And yet. . .

Sarah, my elder daughter, I seldom visit. Not because there is bad blood between us. Over the telephone, she is as solicitous as a nurse. — Do you have enough to eat? Shall I bring you chocolate cake? How is your ulcer? Apart from home visits, do you go out at all? But her husband and I are forever at odds. Over trivial things, to be sure, abstract things, yet sufficient to undermine whatever common language might exist between us. Were I to come, Bernard would receive me courteously enough, even draw up a chair opposite me where, as if in readiness to engage in conversation, he would take out from his breast pocket his pipe, studiously stuff it with tobacco and through a corner of his mouth blow out spiral curlicues of white smoke as a prelude to talk. Sarah would be in the kitchen preparing biscuits and tea.

"Many patients?" Bernard begins, in the clipped economical way he uses whenever he speaks to me.

"Same as always."

"Quite. Of course. Statistically, for a doctor one day's activity ought to be like the next."

He is a mathematician, a logician, ever ready to find pattern where I see randomness.

"My statistics have faces," I say, "and fears and tensions and the capacity for experiencing, feeling, thought."

"Quite," he says again, neither chastened nor particularly persuaded. "But as I see it. . ."

As he sees it. Thirty-one, his face rugged, his brow a cliff rising high, he sits on a cloud, looking down. As he sees it. . .

A man, *Man,* is simply an arrangement of basic elements common to living and non-living matter alike. And men as individuals are the mere molecules and atoms of society in which only the fact of motion is absolute and the effects of that motion governed by chance alone, by randomness, in the extreme by chaos. But — and it is here that Bernard pretends originality, as looking up into his thick eyelids, he presses the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb, (and it is here too that we differ) — there is order even in chaos, there is one vast rule, one law, that has thus far eluded us, not because it does not exist but because our mathematical tools and our reason have not yet proved adequate to the task of discovering it and because we have not yet hit upon the right questions to ask. That law, or Law, when it is discovered, shall replace that concept we now call God.

That is his position, his thesis, his belief, to which he clings with the dogmatism of a convert. Though, unlike a convert, he has not suffered. He is without doubts, secure in his dogma, not aware that dogma is a dictatorship of the mind, nor aware that not faith but doubt is an acquisition won through long and hard experience.

And men without doubts I cannot abide.

And yet, privately, I cannot begrudge him his certainty, if only because I too once knew the security of certainty and its buoyancy and poise and sense of purpose.

Evelyn was then twenty-one and I two years older, just graduated from medical school, in love — how quaintly old-fashioned an expression —, engaged, the world before me, a mass of sickness, suffering and deprivation to alleviate and a multitude of confused and wandering souls to redeem. Yes, I say it without blushing. Upon me was vested the call to cure the ailing, to restore the afflicted, to sustain the needy. And most wonderful of all, I felt strong, replete with unfenced hope and equal to the task. Yes, I say it without blushing. Evelyn, if she were here, would attest to this without the faintest hesitation.

The world stretched before me . . . a mass of suffering to alleviate. . .

My box of cards, repository of splintered fragments of other man's widsom no less than my own gibberish, contains something about that, too.

"In the dark night, glowing summer turns to autumn, all its riches are transformed into a great poverty. And the man begins to complain because of his wretchedness: for where now are the ardours of love, the intimacy, the gratitude, the joyful praise, and the inner consolation, the secret joy, the sensible sweetness? How have all these failed him? And the burning violence of his love, and all the gifts which he felt before. How has all this died in him?

A mass of suffering to alleviate. . . Indeed!

There are times when dreams turn to nightmares, or to wistful memories, memories of something gone and irretrievably lost. Is it one's childhood, one's adolescence, one's talents, one's hopes?

Marianne, bright sunshine, recently become a mother, does not understand. Sarah understands, and accepts without demur. And Paula, too, — she understands but refuses to accept, even though after that lapse of hers, she no longer hints at it.

Lost, those dreams lost.

Evelyn.

Why Evelyn?

Had I but recognised the signs earlier!

An intense, sensitive woman. The eyes, the hands of an artist. Slender, long-fingered, soft at the core. Sometimes morosely temperamental, more often vulnerable. Vulnerable and bewildered, and inviting — her eyes, her lips, her voice so plaintive — to be held and protected and loved. Evelyn. Flush-cheeked bride. Fidelity personified. Solicitous to patients who would call, consummately watchful over her growing daughters, paying for her lavish concern with the blinding ravages of pounding paralysing migraines. And here lay the trap, the price of being too close. Another patient, seen in the formal structured setting of the surgery, would not as easily have slipped through the mesh. Migraines become more frequent, more prolonged, would have triggered a succession of tests — at least, x-rays and scans — and a consultation with a specialist. But nearness bred an ever more constricting myopia — or was it denial? — and by the time

the first clear signs of weakness in a leg presented themselves the tumour had progressed beyond any treatment other than palliation.

Sarah and Marianne, the one eighteen, the other three years younger, did not blame me. But even if they were to blame it could not sear as scorchingly as the simmering of my own conscience, or as relentlessly as the refrain reverberating madly in my own brain whenever I laid hands upon the continuing succession of patients come to spill out their symptoms and anxieties before me. I *do* feel, I do. And I question. I cannot help myself. I do that too.

Why Evelyn, then? Why her? Why Evelyn?. . .

"God gives, God takes. Who knows the ways of God?"

"Fate."

"Biology. Birth, growth, sickness, decay and death from which not the smallest nor the purest creature is exempt."

"Such things are beyond understanding."

So, my comforters — Levine, Marshall, Phillips and Arnold — comforters who did not comfort, for they merely repeated the platitudinous nonsense of helplessness I had myself used so often — and dishonestly, I came to see — in consoling a breaved mother or husband or child.

Yet when, some time later, Mrs. Hoffner came weeping over her six-year old recently killed in a road accident, honesty — even though I knew the answer — still eluded me.

"These things are beyond our understanding," I said, feeling the sickness of the child's senseless death and of my own lie weighing lead-like in my chest. "We must *trust* that his death was not without meaning, that it had a purpose, though one which we can never know."

Yet *I* knew.

The child's death had nothing to do with God — goodness, no —, nor predetermined fate, and free will, certainly not.

Young Gregory had elected that moment to ride his new tricycle in the street. He had pedalled it down the driveway of his house, lost control of it, careered on to the road where a car passing at the same moment rammed helplessly into him and threw him, a rag doll spiralling through the paralysed air to thud limp and bloodied upon the black bitumen thirty feet beyond. Five seconds it took, perhaps ten, though in that horror-filled instant, witnessed by both parents who instead of grief had anticipated the child's boundless glee, a millenium might have passed.

How to account for these horrendous seconds?

May I pose some questions?

Had the Hoffners not bought that tricycle? Had Gregory's birthday for which that gift had been bought fallen on another day? Had young Gregory, unaware of danger, not chosen that moment to ride it in the street? Had his parents forbidden him to take it outside? Had his father been near enough to stop it careering out of control? Had the gate been shut? Had the driver of the car set out a minute earlier or a minute later? Had the driver travelled by another route? Had he driven faster or more slowly? Had the sun — if it shone — not shone in his eyes? Had it rained, the rain keeping Gregory and perhaps the driver indoors? Had. . .? Had. . .? Had. . .?

God? Design? Free will?

And what of Evelyn? Had she not been so intense, so sensitive, so prone to migraines? Had her genes, her upbringing, her nature, her constitution been different? Had her body's defences been more vigilant and those malignant cells not grown so relentlessly? Had I not been so preoccupied in relieving the distresses of others to be blind to the creeping evil on my own door-step? Had nearness not fostered the balm of denial? Had she not married a doctor, but a plumber, a locksmith, a lawyer? Had she not entrusted herself so unquestioningly to my judgement?

Once more, an unending string of "had's", a profusion of variables — and these are but the iceberg's tip — interplaying to yield an outcome noxious, abominable and diabolic.

So when Mrs. Hoffner came weeping over her child, I lied with platitudes. Upon me had been vested the call to restore the afflicted and sustain the needy. And so, my own conscience burning with disgust, I sustained Mrs. Hoffner — and later, others as well — with soothing fictions and lulling mystifications. For what consolation was there in talking of chance and bad luck and the random willy-nilly collision of a myriad minute disparate trivial details into one gigantic monstrous cataclysmic consummation? I ask. Who shall give answer?

Yes. Lost, those dreams. In my surgery I sit, day in day out, eight, ten, twelve hours a day, listening, examining, prescribing, and still the misery outside is not depleted. Mrs. Johnson contemplates leaving her wife-beating husband, Mrs. Rowlands cannot sleep for fear of prowlers, Mr. Turner, losing weight by the stone, is shrivelling to nothing,

the Bennetts' asthmatic child isn't growing, young Mrs. Dent is miscarrying for the third time, old Mrs. Fogarty's pneumonia has relapsed. One rallies, another succumbs. One improves, another ails. And amongst those who visit are many — bronchitics, alcoholics, cirrhotics, psychotics, addicts — who will never improve. So it shall always be. The law of thermodynamics applied not to energy but to disease.

"You let it trouble you too much," Paula said just three months ago when I had, in a quiet moment, mentioned the fact. "You can only do your bit. . ."

Reasonable, wise, always — no, nearly always — level-headed. And thirty-two, graceful, and dignified, a touch of colour ever-present in her cheeks. And, mystery among mysteries, unattached.

That day, she had brought strawberries, large scarlet juicy ones that neither she (she said) nor I (she knew) could resist. Another time, it had been cherries, and yet another, enormous succulent peaches. But that day was different. She wore a sky-blue outfit that clung tightly to her well-trimmed body and followed avidly the smooth elegant contours of her rounded hips and breasts. My last patient hadn't arrived. I stood by the sink, plucking the green asters off the strawberries and biting into the luscious yeilding fruit. Unnoticed, she had come up beside me. She smelled of carnations. Her speckled cinnamon eyes sparkled with an uncommon shimmer; her expression, ordinarily so composed, was soft, mellow, brittle.

"You can only do your best."

"No-one's best is ever good enough," I laughed. "A man is an ant pushing a mountain. And the mountain, of course, is misery, disease."

"Is that why you drive yourself so?"

"No," I said, in a precious, because rare, moment when I could yield the truth. "I'm past that."

"Mrs. Nagel, then? Your wife? After all these years."

An inspired guess? A stigma engraved on my face? My guilt scar?

"A man has to live," I said, drifting once more into the easier tide of confabulation, "and somehow to pass the time."

She herself may not have willed it but her hand, unexpectedly strong, stilled mine as it picked another aster off a strawberry.

"No, it's not that, is it? — A man has to live for something and not just to pass the time."

She paused, searched my face, her flickering eyes groping for anchorage.

"And a woman," she said, more quietly but adding emphasis with a pressing of her hand, cool with nervous perspiration.

I drew my hand away.

"Paula. . . Yes. . . No. . . You are right. A man, a woman has to live for something, yes. . ."

Her eyes, her lips, her breasts were eager; her hair glistened in a cascading stream; her hands, suddenly redundant, sought occupation. She moved the punnet of strawberries three inches.

". . . but your life is before you. Don't pant after an old man and waste those precious years nursing a crock."

"Simon!"

This time I took her hands. Marianne came to me at the moment, sunshine, swollen and radiant in the aureole of pregnancy, loving, sensitive, her mother's child. "Why, Father, must you begrudge yourself the things that make others happy?"

Why indeed? A wife, companionship, conversation, laughter, a brandy over dinner, delight in grandchildren, an evening at cards, at a lecture, at the theatre.

"Do what others do."

Yes, Marianne, my dear one. You are right of course, of course you are right.

But the energy, my precious, my light, the *energy*. To begin hand-holding again and family dinners and small talk — the refrigerator needs repairing, the carpets ought to be changed, Margaret Kingsley's Rupert is graduating next week — and Saturday evening suppers at the Martins and more small talk or a torpid film or a concert or a play to which I must go so that marriage does not become for Paula — if it is to be Paula — a prison. No, Marianne. Let there be rather a petering out, a quiet bow before the curtain falls, a gentle largo best spent in the undistracted pursuit of the familiar, of the known routine of my daily work and the quiet rummaging, after hours, among my papers, my filing cards, my books.

I held Paula's hands, which yielded, willing subjects.

"No, Paula," I said, "I dare not rob you of your youth."

"I am not so young any more."

"You deserve more than I can give."

"Why must you deprecate yourself so, deny yourself when so close is someone who loves — yes, I have not had the courage to say so before — who loves, wants, needs you above all else?"

"Fantasy, Paula. Out there are a million more suitable, more worthy. It is you who deny yourself. Go out, look, grab. Grab before you turn around and wonder where your years have gone. Youth, youth, youth. Use it, fill it, drink from it, drain it of every drop. . ."

"And you?"

"I have my work, my papers, my books. I ask for nothing more."

"Simon. . ."

At that moment, my last patient entered. When he had left, we did not, could not resume our conversation. Paula had regained her composure, her cheeks were pinched pink and powdered, her every action directed purposefully towards closing up for the night.

Through the window, I watched her till she was out of sight.

That was three months ago. . .

It is now nine o'clock. The crickets outside the window have struck up a madrigal, an occasional car hisses by, the street lamps glow murky and yellow, my own reflection beats back at me in the glass which separates me from the night's ponderous blackness. And, here, in my cocoon, with silence my companion and darkness my shroud, I scribble page after page of flapdoodle telling the tale of an idiot, full of sound but no fury, and signifying nothing.

A young man came to me this morning. Twenty-three, a philosophy student, one would have supposed him to be articulate, yet in his turmoil he groped for words.

"I am tired all the time," he began, "and I can't shake that tiredness off. I would only sleep, each day is an effort, the senses are dulled, nothing seems to matter to me anymore."

Here lay the key. "Nothing seems to matter anymore."

"When I see how others have a goal . . . join in marches . . . engage in rallies . . . shout about freedom, security, peace, I can't . . . I would like to be among them . . . but I am

not one of those who can march, carry banners, shout. . . And, along . . . it's all so futile. . . A man is a mere ant facing an enormity of . . . of . . . of evil. . . And my books don't help . . . I have no cause . . . commitment . . . purpose."

His eyes on his fingers, on the floor, on the window behind me, he talked on this vein until he paused, sighed, said desperately "I don't know what to do" and stopped.

I sat opposite him, waited, saw that he had exhausted himself, and spoke in turn.

"You can only do your bit," I said, "and your best. You are too young to be old. I agree, yes, there is much that is wrong with the world, that needs to be rectified. But no-one demands it of you to rectify it wholly. But to desist from doing your bit, however small, through your studies, your knowledge, your gifts and later your work is to let your life, still an inexhaustible well of potential, run to such waste that one day you shall find it impossible to excuse."

And I said that causes, commitments, purpose came from the tasks one set for oneself and from the people one associated with, and that happiness — or, if not happiness, then contentment — sprang from communion, companionship and exchange, for in this world, other people were all one really had.

No, the irony is not lost upon me. That I, the doctor, should cite to my patient the words of my receptionist as my own; or that my preaching should be so at odds with my practice. But sustenance must I be to those in need, and here I must ask — are my shams, my fictions, my hypocrisies, (harsh words which I do not evade) in any wise different from those of a priest or a lawyer, a politician or a retailer of last week's goods? And another question — could I, dared I, under the circumstances, be the paragon of honesty and spill out before that young groping searching patient with his future stretching out before him my own semen of resignation, indifference, renunciation?

Evelyn, Paula, Marianne. Give me the strength to be young again, as that man is young; give me the strength to begin again, to extract from life its last, however meagre, juices, that I may enjoy the companionship it has to offer, the shared humour, the physical and emotional entanglements that, were I indeed young again, might pass for love or adoration. As that young man said — a cause, commitment, purpose.

"Father, do what others do. Why must you begrudge yourself the things that make others happy?"

"A man has to live for something, and a woman, too. Why must you deny yourself when so close, so close is someone. . .?"

You are right. I have never doubted. The very walls reverberate with your wisdom, your common sense. But the energy, Marianne, Paula, the strength. "In the dark night, glowing summer turns to autumn, all its riches are transformed into a great poverty. And the man begins to complain because of his wretchedness. The ardours of love, the intimacy, the gratitude, the joyful priase. How has all this died in him?"

Marianne, my sunshine. Paula. Must it be? Paula, if I were to telephone you, even now, even though it is nearly ten o'clock and the night is silent and the streets are dark, would you consider it madness? I am a man who thinks. Yes. But were I to cast all reason into the sea and release the emotion trapped in its depths, Paula, might I, dare I still have cause to hope? . . .

Is it madness?

How the hand clutching the receiver trembles, perspires. As it did the first time I ever rang Evelyn — was it really so long ago? And how shrill the ringing of the phone, so piercing against the taut strings of the senses. Is it madness? Am I fifty, playing at being twenty-one? Replace the receiver. Now. Before she answers it. Before the waves carry me away into entanglements for which I have no strength.

The phone rings, rings, stops ringing. A voice empties itself into it at the other end. An abrupt, hard, masculine voice, churlish at the disturbance at this hour.

"Hello!"

"Wrong number," I say.

"Who do you want?"

"Paula . . . Paula Winter. . ."

I am not given to prayer. But I pray behind closed eyes that he will say, "You're right, wrong number." But instead, he thunders "Wait a moment" and then in a more distant muffled tone, says, "Kitten, there's some fellow wanting to speak with you."

There is still time to replace the receiver. Paula need never know. Better, indeed, that she should never know. . .

"Hello." Her voice, curious, hospitable, self-assured.

"Paula."

"Yes?" Then, "Dr. Nagel! Has something happened?"

"I rang . . . wondered . . . wanted to know if you were free . . . if we could meet. . ."

"I shall be in tomorrow as usual."

"No, not in the surgery, but. . ."

A pause. Her breathing softly audible. Then, "I see."

". . . to talk, have coffee, supper. At Toto's, I thought."

Behind her, the man's hard voice, "Kitten, who is it?"

"One moment, Victor," she says to him, then returns to me. "Dr. Nagel, Simon. I can't. Things have changed. I . . . Victor. . . Do you remember? A woman has to live for something. Remember? Grab before you wonder where your years have gone. Remember? Youth. Fill it, drink from it, drain it of every drop . . . Victor . . . I. . ."

"I understand, Paula. I'm sorry. A lapse on my part. I thought. . ."

My cheeks burn. My hands quiver. Humming fills my ears. The walls laugh.

Who is it that is so amused, that toys so capriciously with a man? God? Fate? Is humiliation — and with humiliation, suffering, anguish, decay, death — the result of some predetermined chain following a cruel mysterious logic of its own? Is it the fruit of a man's own imbecility, the culmination of his own choices, the denouement of the illogic, chance, chaotic interplay of all these?

Had Evelyn not died? Had Paula not declared her love? Had Marianne not been so insistent? Had I never been a doctor? Had that young man not come to me today? Had I stayed my hand and not raised the phone? Had Paula not been at home? Had my parents never met? Had I never been born? Had. . .? Had. . .? Had. . .?

On my desk before me lie the cardboard box bulging with system cards, a heap of clippings, paper (both blank and with scribble), a book by Kaufmann, two pens — one red, one black, and covering them all, my future. I lean back in my chair, press with finger and thumb until they ache my burning eyeballs, give myself up to the throbbing clamour of my pulse. Outside, the crickets have sung out their madrigal, a solitary tram clatters by and a breeze rattles the window in its frame. While within, in this room, this surgery which is my whole life, I sit, solitary and detached, at the fringe of a vast

gigantic hollow and think how tomorrow I shall have to face Paula and my shame. . .

Sustenance am I ever to the needy. Who is there that shall sustain the sustainer?

The First Lesson

"Do I have to?"

I don't want to go in. I hate Grandmother's deepening yellowness, the symmetrical bosses of her brow, her harrowed knuckles, and her eyes, when awake her staring eyes, shrivelled black kernels in walnut shells hollowed out. And the smell! The ether that Dr. Rosenthal always leaves behind, the all-fingering vapours of a pan left too long, and the settled rankness of unaired rooms, all of it stale and throat-congealing despite the lemon-tinged deodorant that Mother discreetly and practised lavishes about the room.

"A glass of orange juice," Mother say. "That's all Nana asked for. Now that's not too difficult, is it?"

Those are her words.

But words ride on formations of lips, on play of eyes, on waverings of tone. She looks at me, glances at her visitor, — in truth, Grandmother's visitor — and focuses upon me again. Words say one thing but "Don't embarrass your mother in front of the rabbi," lying outside the audible range of hearing is nonetheless the truer message. While in Rabbi Segal's softly-smiling silence and unsolicited scarcely-perceptible nod rests the eloquence of command to do Mother's bidding as if to do anything less is shameless and unseemly.

Go, a boy not yet twelve, resist the combined pursuasion of such eloquence.

So, already before I have yet poured the drink, I set my jaws to steely endurance, grit my teeth against distaste and take deep breaths of whatever freshness is to be had to ride the tide of anticipated suffocation.

"He must be a great help to you," Rabbi Segal says, all solicitude, as he watches me clink jug against glass in the pouring of the juice, himself rolling his emptied glass between white palms leaving steamy prints against its sides.

"He has only one grandmother," Mother says, "and she, poor soul, has lived and suffered to see only one grandchild. And now how long that will last. . ."

The wind in her sails rises towards a sigh then suddenly falls.

"Yes, yes, the lot of her generation," Rabbi Segal says, buoyed momentarily on the same waves as Mother.

"If you only knew what she went through . . .," she begins, "the running . . . the hiding . . . the forests. . ."

"But I know, I know," Rabbi Segal breaks in, rolling his lips so that his goatee points forward like a fallen exclamation mark.

"But you're so young still," Mother ventures, "how can you. . .?"

None can be more gracious. Rabbi Segal places a fine spindled forefinger on the tip of his bulb-tipped nose. "But I have read," he says, "and I have heard. And. . ."

His "and" remains unattached. It trembles on the motes of dust tumbling through the window. He adjusts his skull-cap, looks around as if in search of something and, to my dismay, finds me.

"I am glad to see," he says, "that you are teaching your boy the observance of the fifth commandment."

His gladness brims over his rimless glasses.

"He's not a bad boy," Mother says. "He's. . ."

"Hmm," Rabbi Segal hmms. "Tell me, my young man, do you know the fifth commandment?"

Standing before him, full glass in hand, I feel then the price of Father's rediscovered religion. Seldom one to pay heed to ritual, he has since opening his own factory begun to attend synagogue services every Saturday. For one thing, having become his own boss, he is now free to observe the Sabbath. But more. As he now often says, putting sentiment to words, "God has been good to me in Australia and the least I can do is to give Him thanks." Whenever he says that, I look at Mother. And Mother never fails me. "And if He had not been so good. . .?" she says, her head tilted to one side and one eye squinting in amusement. "You always were a cynic, an apikoros, weren't you?" Father then says, to which Mother answers, "Well, after Europe. . ." "And yet," Father counters, "Your mother who has suffered more still believes", at which Mother sets the lid upon all further discussion with the declaration firm and final "She, more than any of us, has earned every right." Father is not to be dissuaded and when ingenuity fails me and I find nothing better to do — a rare event, for is not the kicking of a football even with snot-nosed Lennie infinitely better? — I tread on my shadow beside his own in procession to receive my share

of awe and to deliver with him my own small modicum of thanks to Him who presides over the Ark and pulpit and bimah.

It is Father, then, who has petitioned Rabbi Segal to visit Grandmother and Rabbi Segal, young and newly-arrived, out to impress, a fledgeling, to use Father's word, still keen to serve his congregation as well as apprenticeship demands, eagerly — for me, too eagerly — obliges. And that on the very afternoon when school closes early for a teachers' meeting.

Confronted now by his question, I wait for the floor to open up and swallow me out of his sight.

"Well," he says, smiling, if the mere stretching of lips can be called a smile, "the fifth commandment."

It is not bashfulness that binds my tongue. Now had he asked me the fifth rule in football. . .

"Of course, he knows, he's just shy," Mother saves me — or saves herself. "He's a good boy. He honours his father and his mother and he loves his grandmother. . ."

"Very good, very good," says Rabbi Segal. His eyes are black mice darting all over my face. "But do you know, my young friend, what it *means* to honour your parents?"

"It means . . .," I falter, glancing at Mother, acutely aware of the many times I have fallen short of truly honouring them, "it means you do what they say . . . listen to them . . . go messages . . . all those things. . ."

"Aha!" says Rabbi Segal. He leans forward abruptly. I have fallen into some web he has woven. "Yes. Yes. All true, all true. But there is more, my dear boy, more." He prods at air. He is behind his pulpit again. "Something higher. Something deeper."

The floor won't swallow me up.

I gaze at the surface of the orange juice in the glass I am holding. In that moment, even flight to Grandmother's in her musty room is the height of attraction.

"I . . . I . . . I . . .," I say.

Rabbi Segal reaches out. His fingers in my shoulder are pincers. His voice rises to a raspier pitch. A sermon clamours for release.

"When you honour your parents, when you honour your parents, my boy, you honour God. And is not God, my boy, above all the first and the eternal parent of all?! Ha?! . . . So. . ."

Mother leans towards him.

"Excuse me, Rabbi," she says.

The flicker of a flame is not as swift as that of Rabbi Segal's eyes towards her. Having set sail, he must complete his journey.

"So," he repeats, "when you take that juice in to your grandmother, you are indeed taking in the juice but, more, you can ask your mother, you are also in your way making an offering to God. And for that offering, you earn a thousand rewards."

Mother's expression is the very mask of seriousness. She tilts her head and squints, in what Father calls her cynical way.

"Excuse me, Rabbi," she says again, glancing at him. Then she turns back to me. Her tone — it is, I can't mistake it — her tone is the one with which she mocks Father when she asks "And if He had not been so good?" "Go," she says to me, "better make your offering now. A boy shouldn't let his grandmother remain thirsty, should he? Rabbi would be the first to agree, I'm sure."

The folds beside her lips relax. Since the onset of Grandmother's illness, it's the closest she comes to a smile. I nestle in the embrace of a secret that has in that moment been forged between us.

Rabbi Segal clears his throat.

"I should be the last . . . the last to hold him back," he says.

Grandmother, when I enter, is a pillar. Upright against the pillows, gaunt, yellow, distant and, always, staring. Not like the grandmother smelling vaguely of aniseed and peppermint, the grandmother ever bustling, doting, cuddling, the grandmother left now to the memory and to the photographs on the dresser in the corner by the window. Grandmother. How her smell — of rancid meat, last month's fish — scorches the nostrils. If only I did not have to come so close!

"I've brought you your orange juice, Nana."

"Has he gone yet?"

Her mouth without her dentures is a cave, her voice a rasp.

"Gone, Nana?"

"Your father's new friend."

"Rabbi Segal?"

"God's bearer of wisdom."

I approach her. Holding my breath against her nearness, I shake my head. Grandmother takes the glass from me. Her hands are warped knotted cords.

"Talks too much," she says. "Knows everything. Knows nothing."

"What did he want, Nana?"

Her lips, dry and puckered like a crumpled leaf, stretch, thin out. What she intends as a smile grotesques into a scallop-checked grimace.

"*I* should know?! . . . He came to see. . ."

She sips her drink. Thick orange drops spill on to her nightgown. She is all but oblivious to them.

"He came to see whom he was going to bury when I'm dead."

"Nana!"

"You child, you."

"Nana!" I say again, though I don't know why. — Or I do, but the notion of impending loss seeks to stifle awareness.

Mother stands before me then. She has just brought Grandmother back from the doctor. Grandmother is in her room. Father returns from work. He has washed his hands, rubs them expectantly. He is ready for dinner.

"Well, what did the doctor say?" he asks.

Mother is straining the noodles, the water streaming through the sieve with a ringing into the sink.

"A black day," she says. "A black day. . . She's got. . . May it be granted only to our worst enemies."

Father purses his lips, says "Mm." He needs to be told no more.

But mysteries are beyond my enduring.

"She got what, Mummy?" I ask.

"A sickness not fit for a dog," she says, then turning to Father adds, "Dr. Rosenthal says it's in the liver already."

Once more, Father is the model of articulateness.

"Mmm," he repeats.

Won't anyone say a straight word? My curiosity burns. Perhaps it is not my place to ask. But try to restrain me.

"Does that mean she'll die?"

Mother switches off the flame under the pot of soup. Her back is turned to me. I see a shoulder rise and fall, a gesture I have long learned to liken to a question mark.

"We mustn't talk about dying," Father says. "Maybe the doctors can . . . maybe with God's help. . ."

"From your mouth to God's ear," Mother says with sharpness as Grandmother whom I see suddenly with different, with clinging, eyes comes out from her room.

"Nana," I say now. "You shouldn't talk about dying. Daddy says. . ."

"Your father says if we don't talk about it, it won't happen. Is that so?"

Can I do anything but shake my head?

"No? Then what *does* he say?"

She has finished her drink. I take the glass from her. Her fingers touch mine with their gruesome boniness.

"He says that the doctors can help you. . . And . . . and God, too."

"My child, my child. How earnest you are."

The black shrivelled kernels of her eyes hold me.

"Listen. . . Your mother will surely be angry with me. She thinks I might catch cold. . . But just the same, go, open the window."

"The window. . . Should I, Nana?" I ask, though nothing in that moment is more welcome.

"Go on. . . Why should an old woman die . . . I'm sorry, my precious, why should I live out my life in a stuffy room? Go on now."

I scarcely need further bidding. I am not one given particularly to the appreciation of flowers — the study of nature is to me as exciting as a clod of clay — but the sudden rising smell of geraniums outside Grandmother's window and of moist grass and the flowering rose-bushes in Mrs. Fremont's garden next door carries with it a myriad savoury blessings. I swallow whole draughts of air and delight in the cleansing breeze that fans my face.

"That's better," Grandmother says behind me in her raspy voice. "Now . . . what did your father say about God?"

I turn towards Grandmother, look into her tight-skinned collapsed yellow face which has become unusually alert as she peers pack at me. And a sudden recognition occurs to me then. This is the first time I have ever heard Grandmother speak of God. From Father's glancing comments, I have taken it for granted that where Mother is sceptical, Grandmother believes. Yet never has she mentioned God by name nor do I for the briefest moment recall her ever going to synagogue, not on the Sabbath nor on those days — the New Year and the Day of Atonement — when the synagogue is

otherwise crowded. Rather, while Father insists that I accompany him, Mother and Grandmother remain at home, their sole concession to ritual being the lighting of a candle on the holiest of days.

"Well, my young one," Grandmother says, "what *did* your father say?"

"Daddy said . . . he said that God may help you get better. . ."

"Aha!" she says, pointing a knobbed tapering finger past me. "You have opened the window for me, my precious, my blood. Now look outside. I want you to point out to me where you see God. My own eyes have grown too weak."

Caught by her ploy, I gaze outside but turn back immediately.

"But Nana," I say. "God can't be seen. He's . . . he's invisible."

"Oh?" Then you can't see him either, my child?" Grandmother says, lifting her face so that her chin looks unduly sharp. "But the rabbi — Rabbi Segal, is it? — the one who knows everything, he says that God is out there and He shall look after me. That's what he said. Or something like it. . ."

"But he should know. Don't you believe him, Nana?"

"Psha!" Grandmother says. "The greenhorn."

Where Mother snorts down her nose and Father says "What do you *say?!*" Grandmother's disclaimer is a volatile "Psha!"

"Now tell me, my precious. Where are your uncles, your aunts, the children who would have been your cousins, your Grandfather Tuvi, and your other grandfather and grandmother, mm?"

I could scarcely not know. A candle burns in our home twice a year. On the Day of Atonement and on the Day of Commemoration to remember our family killed in the war. The meaning of this second candle far more than the first I have imbibed with the first drops of Mother's milk.

"They were killed, Nana."

"And — may your father forgive me for asking a child who should be out playing in the street such terrible questions — where was the rabbi's God then to look after His people? Or your father's God?"

The best I can offer is a shrug of the shoulders.

Grandmother, who on previous days has spent most of her time in bed or in her chair, her thin body propped against

pillows and her face for the greater part of the day skewed to one side, is unusually animated. Dr. Rosenthal has not yet been to give her her daily injection. Rabbi Segal's visit, I sense, has uncovered some private nest and into that nest I am being drawn to be entrusted with a precious secret.

For the briefest of moments, Grandmother winces with pain but her pain she has from the outset made a point of not sharing with me.

"He wasn't there," she says, shaking her head. She looks suddenly like a rag doll. "He wasn't there. . . Just as He isn't here . . . in this room . . . outside the window . . . above the clouds . . . in the trees. . ."

I remember the rabbi's words.

"When you take that juice in to your grandmother, you are indeed taking in the juice but, more, you are also in your way making an offering to God."

I don't care about the thousand rewards he has promised. But if Grandmother is right and there is no God there, to Whom then have I made my offering in bringing the juice?

"Nana . . .," I say.

"But your mother, may she live to a hundred and twenty, is also wrong," Grandmother says, untouched by my attempt to reach. "I shouldn't speak against her to her son, I know. But child, my child, I speak no evil. . . She doesn't believe, your mother, I understand her. She lost nearly everything, nearly everyone, and you too must understand her. But she is wrong not to believe."

What has promised to be a secret has evolved into mystery. Rabbi Segal believes, Father believes. They are wrong. Mother doesn't believe. She, too, is wrong.

"Nana . . . what . . . how . . . why. . .?"

I set out to ask questions but, elusive birds, they defy formulation.

Just then, Mother appears with Rabbi Segal along the driveway outside. The rabbi is leaving, together with his fifth commandment. Mother sees me by the window, freezes, calls out.

"Shut that window this minute. Nana will catch cold. She will . . . she will. . . Do you want. . .?"

Rabbi Segal waves, smiles, nods. With his free hand, he tugs at his goatee. He is the model of self-assurance, of ease with his knowledge or, if I am now to believe Grandmother, with his error.

"What did I say to you, my pet?" Grandmother says behind me. "Mummy is angry. She won't accept that I won't live forever. But no matter. Shut the window. You saw what I wanted you to see."

I shut the window just as Dr. Rosenthal in his car draws up before the house. I would rather keep the window open. I hate the closeness in Grandmother's room. I prefer a hundredfold the geraniums, the wet grass, the roses. But though not always the most obedient of sons, I comply, rebellion being saved for later days.

Duty done, I turn back to Grandmother. The grimace straddled across her lips is that of pain not of a smile distorted to the grotesque. Erect, a brittle reed, she draws up her knees, contracts her shoulders, holds her breath, then, the tension suddenly falling away with the regression of the spasm, she collapses back on to her pillows with a sigh the depth of chasms.

"Do you remember, my flesh, the story of how your mother and I survived?" she says then.

I nod. She need not tell me. The lines on my hands are not as familiar to me as the tale of the Polish farmer and his wife who hid Grandmother and Mother, then fifteen, in a cellar of their home, and of the nuns who later adopted them, the nuns whose crosses they wore, whose Ave Marias they learnt, whose bread they shared.

"There He was," Grandmother says. "In people's hearts, wherever there was goodness, because God is the goodness that is in men and there are those who by their love preserve Him and those who by their evil kill Him in their hearts . . . so. . ."

From the hallway, I hear the approach of steps and voices — Dr. Rosenthal's, Mother's.

Stay out! Stay out! A moment more! This at last is Grandmother's secret. . .

". . . so He is in you . . . in your mother . . . your father . . . in every person who is good and cares for others and . . . and. . ."

They are at the door.

". . . if you ever want Him, then look only into yourself. He is all the goodness that is in you."

They enter. Mother. Dr. Rosenthal, the doctor a tower, greying, imposing.

"Ah, a tete-a-tete between the generations," he says, all smiles as he lays his case upon the bed and flicks open the clasps. "It warms the heart, it warms the heart. He's a good boy, your young one."

Mother is less giving.

"Go now," she says to me, ice in her tone. "The window he opens . . . his grandmother so ill. . . Pneumonia he wants her to get on top of everything. . ."

I glance at Grandmother, at Dr. Rosenthal, at Grandmother again.

"He's done no harm, I'm sure," Dr. Rosenthal says, laying a massive hand upon my head, while from her bed Grandmother lickes her lips, tightens her eyes, opens them again and says with the rasp that is ever in her voice, "Remember, my precious. Remember always. Remember."

Grandmother mercifully doesn't suffer. She dies peacefully enough. With a little huff at the end of a gasp with her sunken eyes already closed, just as I enter to bring her back her pan.

Mother, her nose twitching, calls Dr. Rosenthal and Dr. Rosenthal, marble-cheeked, rings the Burial Society.

On receiving the news, Father leaves the factory and hurries home, meeting at the door two men in polished black carrying a stretcher to take Grandmother away.

"Keep out of the way," Mother, her blue dress rumpled and wet, bites at me. "This isn't for children. Go, eat something!"

But go and eat!

I stand on one foot, hovering, a cuckoo between the rooms, stretching my neck, peeking, listening to the hushed murmurs of practised efficiency as the men in black roll Grandmother up in stiffly starched sheets — the murky yellow of her attenuated skin dirty against their laundered white — and transfer her, one at her head and one at her feet, while the middle sags, on to the stretcher where she disappears under the folds of green canvas shackled with straps. And then they carry her out, taking little steps, though she has become so light, as Father in his creased grey jacket holds open the door and follows them, the merest breath behind, down to the gate.

It is then that Mother weeps.

"What did I tell you to do?" she lashes at me with words stiffened with ice, herself melting as she enters the room that for long months, become suddenly so short, has been Grandmother's, shielding her agonised face with hands tendinous and blanched, her shoulders heaving, convulsing in the swelling frothing tide of her grief. But when Father, loosening his tie and brushing back ruffled prematurely whitening hair returns and says in that wry way of his "Only God lives forever," she steels herself against his further efforts to console, strips the bed of its soggy sheets and opens the window to disperse the smell, the smell of ether, effluent and must, so acrid and stifling that Grandmother, in dying, has left behind.

When we bury Grandmother the next day, the wind bites with canines. The grass between the graves smells of dung, and shrivelled leaves tumble over the tombstones, driven by the moaning wind. The tails of Mother's black scarf flap and slap like a cracking whip. Father's new felt hat nearly blows away and I almost laugh, keeping control only by looking at old Tuczinski with the crazy rheumy eyes whom Father calls more Marxist than Marx and at Grandmother's one-time neighbour Levenberg who, shivering reed-like, blows into his palms and stamps his feet. Other mourners stand around. Past neighbours, old friends, cronies. Even Joseph Milstein who, over eighty, has left his sickbed to pay respect. Beyond them the oaks sway like old men, and, above, arches a rainbow, a hazy timid band of colour struggling weakly through the swollen clouds.

Rabbi Segal offers consolation. With the movement of his lips, his goatee wags.

"A Jewish soul has departed, returned to its Maker. The soul of a woman who, like the brothers and sisters of her unhappy generation, knew what it meant to suffer, to lose family, to be uprooted — miraculously to survive the ardours of Poland, for years to struggle in Paris, Australia — and yet to endure all without harshness on her lips or hatred in her heart or loss of faith. Only because of such folk does the world endure. A Lamed Vavnik, a saint of the highest order, may her memory forever shine in the hearts of her dear ones."

The first fat drops of rain fall, yielding a hollow patter against the pine of Grandmother's white untarnished coffin. Someone opens an umbrella and a handful of mourners

huddle under it. Rabbi Segal glances upward. His black eyes — the eyes of a greenhorn as Grandmother called him — disappear under eyelids that flutter. Standing opposite him, I taste the sap of the nearby oaks and imagine Grandmother breathing inside the box, her skin still that tawny dirty yellow,and clamouring, though unheard, to be let out. My face, my hair, my skull-cap are getting wet.

"She was ever a woman of God," says Rabbi Segal raising his arms so that his shirt-cuffs show beneath the sleeves of his rain-coat. "And now that she is gone, He too weeps for her. He shall watch, ever watch over and preserve her soul."

He has more to say, would say more, but instead steps back, gives a signal and watches — we all watch — as Grandmother's coffin is lowered, respectfully slowly despite the rain, on broad canvas harnesses into the waiting pit. Tuczinski wipes his watering eyes. Levenberg wipes his dripping nose with a buttoned sleeve. The wind's pincers tear at the flesh.

Father is the first to shovel earth upon the coffin. Climbing the mound of loam beside the grave, his feet sink in, his black shoes polished for the occasion becoming smeared with thick clay that smudges also his trouser-cuffs. Out of respect, he wears his newest suit. Bending low so that his hat tilts forward on his head, he grips the shovel and with a husky grunt heaves the first load of heavy damp fragmenting clods into the pit. His brow puckers with the effort. His jaws lock. In quick succession, one thud of falling earth follows another. Each thud releases its echo. With the first, Mother gasps; with the second, she sobs; and with the third, weeps openly until I cannot tell, looking at her pained white face encircled by her scarf, what is rain and what are tears.

And so Grandmother disappears. The mourners come to grieve make her disappear. Father, Tuczinski, Levenberg, even the invalid Milstein who shaking stiffly, can barely move, even I who can't resist shuffling a grassy clump of earth into the grave — we, all of us, one by one, make her disappear, disappear under layers of loam, in the rain, in whistling wind, enshrouded by the smell of wet leaves, crumbling earth and dung. Make her vanish, — forever, it suddenly strikes me — in five minutes of shovelling dirt, in a plot of land in the Springvale cemetery where — as Father said earlier on the way — destiny, Jewish destiny, has brought her, twelve thousand miles away from the leaking

draught-bitten cottage in Lodz where, sixty-eight years earlier, she had been born.

And I look at the rabbi, his fingers entwined around his prayer-book screening it from the rain; I peer again into the grave, I see, see in the depth Grandmother's crumpled yellow face with the bosses on the brow and the black shrivelled eyes; and I shiver for reasons other than mere cold. I feel also the rain in my face and the shiver swells into a tremor, turmoil brews, and then heat, fervid and prickling, burns in every pore as the slap of eternity prises out protest with an irrepressible cry "Nana!" cast into the grave into which the clods of loam are still being shovelled, their impact muted now as the mound rises. Father's hand finds my shoulder. It would urge me to silence but I wrest myself free of it, move away from him, retreat, and pin to an astonished fixity the rabbi opposite me, his gaze immobile behind his rimless glasses.

"He's not watching!" I cry out. "He's not guarding her! There is no God up there! Nana said! He was never there in the sky, in the clouds, in the trees! He is with her, with Nana, in there! He is her goodness. . . He is all the good. . . He is . . . He. . .!"

Through the haze of clouding eyes and rain, I see Tuczinski and Levenberg and Milstein and Mother and the others, puzzled, staring, mouthing words.

"What's got into the boy. . .?"

"He's taking it badly. . ."

"Poor boy . . . he'll miss her. . ."

"They must have been close. . ."

"They shouldn't have brought him. . ."

"He's only a child. . ."

Father reaches for me again. His grasp, a vice about my arm, strait-jackets any attempt of mine to find release. With the other hand, he holds my chin. His face is a mask of embarrassment, hurt, perplexity. Beads of moisture sit on the brim of his hat. Someone holds an umbrella over us.

"You're too young to know such things," he says. "You're. . ."

I struggle against him. To be mollified by words is to forsake Grandmother, to forsake her truth. With my free hand, I point at the rabbi.

"But he doesn't know either. And he's supposed to know. He's . . . Nana said. . . She. . .!"

"Now listen," Father says, "the rabbi is an educated man. . ."

"But he doesn't know, he doesn't know!"

Mother, cowering under the rain, the ends of her scarf flapping, joins us while Rabbi Segal is weaving through the huddle of mourners towards us.

"Hush," Mother says severely, all razors, "this is not the place."

Father says "Have respect."

While from behind us I hear someone else say "The old one must be turning in her grave at this."

Rabbi Segal reaches us. His shoes are layered with dark brown clay. He raises a placating hand. Father lets go of me. Mother, biting her white lips, steps aside. Around me, the tombstones, the oaks, the gate call me to flee but heavy immobility roots me to the soil. I dread the imminent voice of the pulpit, the self-assured harshness of his tone, the unyielding skewer of his gaze.

There is no flight.

And the rabbi does an unusual thing then. He squats before me. The hem of his raincoat scrapes the mud but he pays no heed to it. I fix upon his goatee, avoiding his eyes.

"You're a clever boy," he says, placing a hand upon my waist. "I saw it rightaway."

I shake my head vigorously. Trees, people, tombstones, clouds are a blur. I don't want his words, his falseness. I would stop my ears were I able.

"Nana said. . ."

"I know what your grandmother said," he says calmly, unruffled. "I talked with her too. I know what she believed. . ."

Lies! Lies!

"You couldn't. . . You don't. . ."

"And I know what your father believes . . . and your mother. . ."

I would rather that he were holding forth a sermon. For calmness I am not prepared. He is beguiling me with softness. And, beguiled, resistance flags.

Still I fan the dying flame with bellows.

"Nana said there is no God out there. . . And you say . . . you said . . . Nana said God is the goodness in people's hearts, in people, in them. . ."

"But she believed. She believed, you see. She never went to synagogue but she was in her way a very religious woman."

"She was good. . ."

"And that's the same thing, my friend. Being religious does not depend only on what you believe. It is what you *are,* what you *do*. . . That is the first lesson of all. Everything else comes later, do you understand? Do you?"

I stub the toe of my shoe into the loam. The wind vaults into my down-turned face. The rain is easing. The rebellious flame within wilts, fades.

Do I understand? Do I understand?

I nod. To save face, I nod, though some embers of discontent still glow. I look at Father, Mother, Rabbi Segal, Grandmother's grave. Anger is spent; only bewilderment remains. Of those around me, who is right, whom am I to trust, whose God, if God there be, is God, the true unchangeable irreducible God?

The return journey home passes at snail's pace. The roads in late afternoon are congested with traffic. The wheels of the cars hiss on wet asphalt, rooftops and shop windows gleam, the trees are heavy with moisture and the clouds are grey, wolves not yet shorn of menance.

Father sits erect behind the steering wheel, his hat and shoulders wet from the rain. Mother is contracted within her coat. Every now and again, she sighs as though some demon within her were seeking release.

And near to home, it finds it as, heated, she erupts, "The scene . . . the scene. . . And at his grandmother's grave. If she could only have heard . . . her only grandchild . . . she would have turned over a hundred times."

Father, not accusing, not defending, waves a nonchalant wrist.

"He's only a boy," he says. "What do you expect? What can he know?"

The pique runs momentarily deep but, nearer the surface, the question exposed, it swirls in eddies, broadening eddies, questions yielding questions, thoughts yielding thoughts: What can I know? Could I but know? Shall I ever know? Shall it ever be given to me to know?

And as we turn into our street and approach our home which shall now forever be depleted, I feel nonetheless Grandmother's presence by the gate, hovering benignly — not the grandmother shrivelling to oblivion amidst the odours

of decay, but that other earlier caring doting bustling grandmother, the grandmother of photographs and memory, benevolence enshrined, that grandmother from garnered wisdom and endurance saying to me now "God is all the goodness that is in men — if you ever want Him, then look only into yourself," and, in the eye of that image, whatever heaviness weighs upon me suddenly lifts, there is freedom in my limbs, lightness, buoyancy in the breath, and a resolve that forms, mellow and sublime, a resolve as earnest as a vow to strive towards goodness, obedience, service and to open myself to the flood that — later, much later — I come to name as holiness that I may be a vessel worthy to be filled with that splendid Presence that others, in their way — Father, Rabbi Segal, the mourners by the grave — endow with the name of God.

So, when Father, musing aloud, says on reaching home, "That young one of ours still has a lot to learn," it is no longer pique I feel coursing in the nether depths of my awareness but rather wellsprings of excitement rising up and the impulse to cry out, exultant and alive, "But I know, Daddy, I know, Mummy, I know now, I know now, I know, I know!"

Moscow! Moscow!

The moment had to come, that hard dreaded moment of limbo when, waiting for the taxi outside the theatre, she was no longer Irena Sergeievna buoyed on the pretence and artifice of imagination and craft, but Rosalie Richter pelted and beaten and stung by kicking wind and memory and by shifting shadows in a reality from which to escape could only be at a price. To right and left, the streets were scuttled of people; misty haloes ringed the turbid yellow lights; while, nearby, buildings stood eerily sombre, menacing, their formal solidity surrendered to the all-congealing jelly of night. Could time be suspended!, the performance infinitely prolonged!, the fall of the final curtain eternally delayed!

She turned up her collar, braced herself against the cold. Her thighs taut, cords binding the muscles, she stamped her feet for warmth.

"Damn you! Damn you!" she cursed again, cursed at the doctor, remembering, unable to forget, as she waited.

The way the doctor had looked at her that morning. At once pitying and knowing! The way he had talked to her, so mellifluous, conspiratorial!

"I *am* sorry, Miss Richter, my dear, but science is science and I can't make the test change, you know. But. . ."

He paused, leaned forward, rolled his pen between stubby fingers, and raised an eyebrow. There was some indecency on the way. She looked at the test slide between them and held her breath.

"But my partner . . . he can help you. . . Everything sterile. . . Only half a day and it's over. . . Confidential. . . Not a word. . . No fuss. . . No. . . If that's what you want, of course. . ."

She knew, did not know, felt she knew, knew she did not know what she wanted. To carry the wretched beast within her; or to have the thing removed, destroyed; to carry it and to rear; to carry it and have it given out. The ordeals! The complications that were to follow! Had she only the strength to choose, calmly, rationally, without the spectre of possible regret, whatever her action!

The doctor twirling his pen, riled her. That eager, too eager readiness to help, that presumptuousness, the pat formula that implied personal gain from the advice he tendered peeved her to the quick. His cynicism jolted, and, in the face of it, any resolve for decisive, definitive action fell away. She could have been struck, so hot did her cheeks burn. She could not contain herself. Feeling herself ensnared, she rose from her seat, her legs jelly beneath her, and flared and lashed and screamed at the man in antiseptic white, screamed till she felt the very spittle on her own chin, "I am a person, a human being, a woman, not another bloody uterus to be scraped!" And then she ran — escaped —, the doctor's astonished expression behind her; behind her, too, the overturned chair, the smell of ether, the glare of the nurse in the doorway, and the faces, those flitting fleeting faces of others in the waiting-room — curious, hostile, embarrassed, amused. . .

"I am a person, a human being!" she fumed again, looking for the taxi that simply did not come.

But now, alone, isolated in a street grown dark, angry with herself for not accepting Gerard's offer to join him at Pellegrini's, it was not that earlier bravado, so passionate and liberating, that she felt, but futility. And constriction. And impotence. Conviction had flagged. A worm could not feel smaller, nor so superfluous, so reduced to the lowest definition.

"Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!", the words forced themselves again, the outburst not alighting so much upon the doctor this time as upon herself, upon Joel, upon that embryo rooted within her, upon everything — the oppressive buildings, the gloom, the wind, the passing cars, the taxi that hadn't come — upon everything that impinged upon the immediate compass of her senses.

But even this proved scarcely liberating. Turning one way as she waited because it was as good as any other, she caught sight of her photograph in the showcase outside the theatre. Nausea swelled. And loathing. And disgust. The very image before her was fake — its guise of wholesomeness, the smile, the glint in the eyes, the face set at a studied angle to temper the angularity of nose and chin. She would in that instant have smashed the glass and torn that glossy effigy to shreds were she, too, by that action to have been torn to annihilation or were her cheapness redeemed or betrayal rectified.

The betrayal. That had hurt the most. More than the doctor's verbal slap. More, infinitely more — because perhaps naively she had expected too much — than Joel's hard stinging open-palmed *physical* lash across her cheek.

The infatuation, then the love, had started simply, naturally enough. She, an actress, Joel a fledgeling director learning his art beside Gerard, Gerard a large man with a shock of magnificent silver hair, benign and clear-visioned, erudite and innovative, a father-figure to any who might for whatever reason have felt orphaned. First, there had been a few joking remarks from Joel during rehearsals — they had met over Mother Courage — then after-show coffee, then telephone calls, the occasional dinner at Cyrano's or La Bouillabaisse, culminating in the excursion to Phillip Island to see the penguins wading in at night. They had returned late, emotionally intoxicated, the darkness and the hour giving Joel the courage, or licence, to reach, to grope, to suck at her lips with his own, both moist and wild, and to bite at them with teeth widely-spaced, the while continuing urgently to probe while she, resisting, edged away, withdrew, the car-door on her side the limit of her retreat, until her protests and movements waned and her thighs yielded finally to his deep ecstatic and exhilarating entry in sublimation of a heated ritual.

Breached once, she found it easier to yield on other occasions, indeed welcomed those delirious afternoons, evenings and, when Sybil was out, nights, until, for reasons he never disclosed, Joel retreated into emotional distance, moved to another theatre group, retreated — he said — to write a play of his own. Perplexed, seeking in herself the blame, it was she who now tried to reach him, but his telephone rang often without answer or, if answer Joel did, he was invariably unable to speak, as he was, he said, in the midst of entertaining friends, or occupied with a play-reading, or on his way out to some engagement he declined to share with her.

She had then felt the first stirrings of unease in her throat,the first tinglings in her tightening breasts, the first awakenings to a possibility that for two anxious weeks riddled her with misgivings, panic, rationalisations, tormenting hopes and escape into flights where what she suspected and feared were mere fantasy. The doctor's confirmation of her suspicions, however unsavoury the

accompanying rider, rekindled, however tentatively and, she knew, irrationally the hope that, for decency's sake or in acknowledgement of his complicity or in a reawakening of his affections, Joel might still agree to some reunion; and, leaving the doctor's surgery, fuming still at the man in white, she made her way, trembling, heady, febrile, electric, towards South Yarra where Joel rented a bachelor flat in the heart of the elegant set.

He had let her in. He could not very well have done otherwise. But a smile would have cost a treasure while annoyance, or indifference at best, he displayed for free.

"So," he said, when, already aware of the futility of it all, she told him, "what do you want of me?"

"You, Joel, you!" she had answered vehemently. "It's you I want. . . The child inside me is ours. And after what we've known together . . .Joel, I still love you. . . What, tell me, what have I done wrong?"

Joel was close enough to touch, yet the furthest galaxy could not be further. Lips puckered, he poured himself a vermouth, offering nothing to her. He wore cream slacks, a tennis jumper, white shoes. He rolled his glass between his palms.

"No way," he said, "no way," assuming, she saw, the theatrical pose of a haughty Caesar. "I'm having no snotweed kid around me."

The nausea of pregnancy swelled to merge with the more intense nausea of entrapment, of air-depriving constriction.

"I . . . I. . ."

"Look. You want money? . . . A hundred? . . . Two hundred? . . . How much is it nowadays?"

A corner of his mouth twitched. He reached for his wallet. Rosalie remembered how, having inherited a goodly sum from his late father, money was to him no object.

"Joel!" she said. "If you're at all human. . ."

Joel flourished his glass. He could have been playing to an audience. His eyes pierced, his voice cut, his every gesture sliced with razor sharpness.

"Do what hundreds, thousands of girls do every day. What's one more? You've got a future. *I've* got a future. Why bridle yourself with a bloody millstone?"

He probed the air with a finger. He was Hamlet scheming. She had seen the pose before. It was the stuff of theatre, of

imagination, of artifice, while the reality embedded deep within her cried out against pretence.

"You pig, you!" she screamed out, "you foul-skinned weak irresponsible bastard!" falling upon him and beating out her accumulated venom at the doctor upon his chest, so that the Vermouth in his hand spilled on his immaculate white outfit.

She felt the hand before she saw it. It stung her cheek mightily; she stumbled; she heard him spit "You bitch!" in a voice scarcely his own when, reeling, she then saw the door open and shut quickly, glimpsing in that instant a crimson-lipped brunette in tight yellow slacks and pullover startle and gasp. She grabbed hold of a chair. Joel pushed past her. He ran out. "Margaret! Margaret!" she heard him call. "There's every explanation!", and then, "She means nothing to me, believe me, I swear!" His voice, suddenly grown pitiful, and plaintive, drowned out at the foot of the staircase, lost in the tide of a woman's shrill sneers and ugly laughter. Rosalie drew herself up to whatever height her suddenly-burdened form permitted her, looked about the elegant room with sickening distaste and walked out, struggling with every exertion against the brutal inclination to dissolution to hold on to poise, to strength, to erectness.

She had turned to Sybil then, Sybil, a psychiatric nurse, her flatmate, her prospective travelling-companion for their projected trip, to America, to Europe, the two thrown together by a two-line advertisement in "The Age". Sybil, to judge from her volubly-abundant clinical tales, exposed to schizophrenic girls, addicts, attempted suicides, alcoholics and the solitary, would understand, would know, would advise what to do and draw the sting out from the wounds. But Sybil was asleep. Sybil was a creature of the night, walking the wards of Prince Henry's Hospital by torchlight, then retrieving by day whatever sleep the night had deprived.

"Sybil," she had whispered by the bed, then "Sybil!" more loudly, more pressing, touching, shaking a shoulder. "Sybil, I must talk to you. Sybil, it's urgent!" But Sybil, her hair dishevelled over the pillow, mumbled in a drawl, turned, drew her covers up over her head and slept on while Rosalie circled the flat, sat down, rose up, made coffee, let it grow cold, felt the constriction of the four walls upon her and the very future become suddenly contracted, warped and impenetrably black, until, desperate, she ran back into the

bedroom, with one swipe stripped the covers from her sleeping companion and, frantically, cried out, "Sybil! Sybil! Sybil! Wake up! Tell me, for God's sake, for my sake, what I must do!"

With Sybil, too, she quickly recognised her mistake. Not that Sybil was annoyed at being woken, though she was not at first entirely pleased, nor that she did not listen to Rosalie's frenzied disjointed outpourings with whatever ear professional training and an easy camaraderie had honed in her. But in the end, all that she had done was to summarise the dilemma. "*I* can't tell you, Ros. Only *you* can decide. Give up your career, live on a single mother's pension, perhaps place the child in a creche while you're working, go to your parents for help when the child comes, forget for the time being our trip — or, get rid of it, be done with it, carry on as before and hope you will never regret what you've done."

"It's a living thing," Rosalie had said then. "That's the worst of it. It's a living thing. . ."

"I know," Sybil had answered; flatly.

"But what would you do, Sybil, you Sybil, if you were me?", she pressed, almost pleading.

And Sybil had said, not with pity nor judgement nor superiority, but simply and truthfully, however hard the truth was to take and however insensitive in its rationality it then had seemed, "But, Rosalie, *I* am not you."

Standing outside the theatre contracted against the cold, she remembered how Sybil had placed an arm about her shoulders just as Jocelyn Buchanan playing Olga had done scarcely a half-hour before in that final passionate declamation, "How cheerfully and jauntily that band's playing — really I feel as if I want to live!" and remembered how, as Irena, taking her bow at curtain call, she had quelled whatever humiliation, abasement and hurt the day had brought her until, as Rosalie, unable to stem the tide that had welled in her throat, she had run to the backstage toilet, there to hide and to release the swollen torrent of tears, emerging finally when, spent, she felt she could present herself once more. By then, only Gerard, delayed by administrative details, and the stage hands had remained. Gerard had invited her to join him for coffee at Pellegrini's, saying, "You look troubled, Rosalie, your performance tonight showed it," but with a shake of her head, she denied, and

declined the invitation, heading for the telephone to call the taxi. "If you want to tell me anything, Rosalie," Gerard had added, "I shall always be ready to listen"; but the problem, was hers and hers alone, as Sybil had implied, and, putting on her coat, she had forced a smile, said a mere "Thanks", and left. On his way out, Gerard passing her outside the theatre door, said "Changed your mind?" and, denied, walked on. She watched him recede, the large man with the magnificent hair, the sturdy step, the total inner certainty; saw him wave as he turned the corner, and, diffidently, she waved back, resuming then her pacing before the theatre.

Then she had enough. The taxi delayed, herself cold, unnerved, and driven by renewed distaste from that mockery that was her clean shining showcase effigy, she hankered suddenly after all after Gerard's company, swore "Bugger you!" at the imaginary dilatory taxi-driver, draped her coat more firmly about her and turned resolutely, almost sprinting, in the direction of Pellegrini's. It was not Gerard's advice she sought, nor even an ear to listen to her predicament, but rather his presence — no more, merely his presence — that transmitted, conferred by radiation, security, certainty, breadth and self-mastery, that sense of personal strength that permeated his sonorous tone as he impressed upon Jocelyn Buchanan the requisite resonant pitch of Olga's concluding speech: "The years will pass and we shall all be gone for good and quite forgotten. . . But our *sufferings,* our sufferings may mean happiness for the people who come after us. . . There'll be a time when peace and happiness reign, and *then, then* we shall be remembered, *kindly,* and *blessed!*"

At the Bourke Street corner, she collided with a scowling middle-aged couple. An old man with a newspaper under his arm stepped out of her way. She saw, did not really see, in her haste, the darkened shops, the picture theatre, the office entrances, the cafes pass her. She heard, did not really hear, the voices of people, their laughter, bluster, swagger, or the hum of cars, the clattering of trams, the grating of brakes. She felt, did not really feel, the wind in her eyelids, the dust, the bustle, the swirl about her. She knew them to be there. They were always there. Nightly exposure, experience, knowledge, dictated their ever-presence. In its human gyrations, this night could be no different from any other. Reason also vouchsafed the fact. But now none of what the night

contained could touch her. She was, she felt, severed from her surroundings and even metaphors of separation, of alienation, could not wholly apply to her. The literary parallels in inferior verse of driven shrivelled leaves, of solitary clouds, of ships adrift at sea — however detached, themselves, from their source, they were still of the world, the palpable, tangible, physical world, while she rode — was buffeted — on crests of inner turmoil, impervious to external influences now, yet in search — she knew, this she recognised — of anchor in Gerard who might restore to her by his mere presence the solidity, reality and durability of stone, the strength of worth, the belongingness — belongingness above all — to place and time which the doctor, Joel, Sybil had, each in a different way, undermined.

As she hurried, one line, hers, Irena's, reverberated: "If only we could get back to Moscow! If only we could get back to Moscow!"

But what, where, was Moscow? Her parents' home? Her apartment, shared with Sybil? That sense of direction and poise secure before her encounter with Joel? The coloured floodlights, the chalk, grease-paint, ochre and rouge, and the flight into fantasy and vicarious life before an audience moved, stirred, enlightened, amused, enthralled, out there in the dark rows, silently breathing, shuffling at times a foot, coughing muffled into a palm?

"If only we could get back to Moscow!"

She reached Pellegrini's, scouted about the entrance, scoured the tables through the broad plate-glass windows in the abutting lane. Every seat was occupied. Inside were couples touching fingers astride the sugar bowls, overweight young men sucked spaghetti between writhing moist lips, girls sipped strawberry and orange granitas, well-nourished men with high red cheeks talked and gesticulated, and lean, be-jewelled, dyed-haired women, veritable dowagers, smoked cigarettes through ivory-tipped holders. They were no part of her; she was no part of them. It was Gerard she sought, massive, silver-haired, broad-shouldered, amused, benign Gerard, who indeed was there, lounging at ease, arm over a chair, leg over thigh, gesturing in his easy flamboyant way before two youngish men in suede jackets and corduroys, actors themselves, she recognised.

Her courage suddenly failed her. She wanted Gerard to herself, unshared, undivided. To be buoyed by his strength,

his attention directed wholly upon her alone. If by chance, he were to turn and see her before the window, she would have entered, willingly enough still. But to enter now, unbidden, however earnest his earlier invitation, seemed too brash an encroachment, and she felt herself too unworthy, too debased to impose herself upon him before company. She did, however, pause before the window, contriving to linger there a little longer by pretending to have caught a stone in her shoe, but the delaying ruse yielding no result and herself thrown off-balance by an over-gay youth running ahead of a group of laughing fellows behind him, she emerged, beaten, into the noisy bustling illuminated footpath of Bourke Street, where, biting her lips and suppressing what may have been tears or anger or frustration or simple nausea, she hailed the first taxi that passed.

The driver, mercifully, was not a talkative man. Vapid conversation was the very last of her needs. She gave him her address in Windsor, saw him deftly turn the meter handle, sat back against the cracked vinyl of the seat, feeling its springs gouging into her, and watched for distraction the play of light on the driver's face. The doctor, Joel, Sybil, Gerard returned to her. And Martin Simpkin, as Chebutykin, singing "Tarara-boom-di-ay. . . I'm sitting on a tomb today," and Michael Paul, as Andrei Sergeievich, wheeling the pram and asking the old deaf porter Ferapont, asking the audience "Oh, where has all my past life gone to? — the time when I was young and gay and clever, when I used to have fine dreams and great thoughts, and the present and future were bright with hope?" And she saw herself, as Irena, sitting on the swing in the background, turning her face away, almost bursting as the words, so often repeated in the ritual of performance, suddenly acquired a directness that so riveted her that, were she to have the next line in the play, Gerard's strength notwithstanding, she would have surely melted, only discipline and movement rendered automatic through endless rehearsal and repetition seeing her through to the fall of the curtain. Michael, as Andrei, had also spoken of freedom and light. Sitting in the taxi, the street lamps flickering upon her, a living creature embedded within her, she felt acutely and irrevocably trapped, and the darkness she now sensed, the opposite to Andrei's light, had nothing to do with that other starker darkness of the night outside. Where, once before, in her parents' home, she had escaped entrapment and dark-

ness, these now seemed beyond escape. This darkness was nothing less than blackness, and that blackness bore the silence, the finality, the eternity of the grave. A door had been nailed upon the future, a future that, in the wake of her brother Judah's parting words, she had resolutely, and confidently, vowed to forge for herself.

She had been in the sixth form then, seventeen, and living with her parents in a drab terraced house in North Carlton. Her parents, aspiring to little, capable of little, had attained to little. Harry Richter had been a baker employed by a small concern until a back injury sustained while fixing the spouting above the kitchen shunted his existence on to rails running within the confines of a fortnightly pension cheque, while Paula, his wife, ever in fear of advancing age, sickness and decline, grasped at every device she could conceive to retain the notion of her beauty against all threat. Over-rouged and over-powdered, with scarlet streaks of lipstick drawn in thin tensile ribbons along her fleshy lips, she prowled about the house in a tawny dressing-gown all day, not venturing outside save to fetch the morning milk, returning often to the slanted mirror in her room or to the yellowing photographs in her album telling of better days, the while never missing an occasion to pick the bones of her impotent husband, her profligate son, and her stupid indolent daughter. Rosalie's father, too unenterprising and without means, besides, to do anything but bear with her, spent his days wandering about the streets chatting with neighbours or remoter acquaintances, or simply sat outside the cemetery to watch the passing traffic of Lygon Street, thinking thoughts that she, Rosalie, could never penetrate. She herself, bound still by obligation, though no less by pity and lack of options, had also held fast, enduring her mother's plaints with pert rejoinders and outright insolence which did nothing to breach her mother's self-focussed obtuseness. It was Judah, her brother, older than herself by two years, who broke away. Fed up to the eyeballs and beyond, as he said, with the incessant wranglings and rantings about him, he packed into his tiny second-hand Mini whatever he deemed of value — his record-player, a stack of records, a tattered pennant dating back to his junior basketball days as well as a few handkerchiefs, shirts, underpants and socks — and left. In the preceding two years, he had taken to brick-laying, car-selling, can-processing and serving at a petrol-station, all of

which shamed him by virtue of their manual nature. He had expressed some hope for the better when he confided in Rosalie that he was settling with a photographer's model in Richmond. But that liaison, too, came to nothing. He came home once more, this time to fetch his bag of golf-clubs he had left behind. None of them had seen him since but he did use that last occasion as he slammed down the boot of the car to say to Rosalie, "It's too late for me, pussy" — their mother could still be heard ranting in the background — "but the world out there is for those who make something of themselves, for those with the strength to look ahead. Pray to God that you don't let them get you down."

"Them" had been their father Harry Richter and their mother, Paula. Rosalie had fondly patted her brother's bristled chin and said, laughing, "No, my Bohemian brother J., there's no way they will get me down."

She didn't let them get her down. Her parents' manifest inadequacies as integrated individuals which she was ready, if not to overlook, then at least to forgive, had nurtured in her a resilience laced with a quietly-burning defiance and resolve in time to step out of the mould of clay that heavily grounded them in stagnation. Already on the threshold of matriculating, she was now looking ahead, as Judah had advised, and felt as a natural extension of her extra-curricular school involvements the bond of the stage with its glitter, fantasy, amusement and limitless paraphernalia. Taking her cue from her mother, although in the hours when the lights in the rest of the house were extinguished, she painted her lips, dabbed rouge on her cheeks, rubbed shadow around her eyes, combed her eyebrows to sharpeness and put on old dresses imagining them to be satin, and ragged shawls fancying them as furs, and posed, gestured, grimaced and mimed before the mirror, contorting her face, fingers, arms and torso in the roles of an Antigone or Puck, a Juliet or Jocasta, or, extending herself beyond her age, of a Lady Teazle. The floodlights luminous in her imagination, she stood in the centre of their beams, all severity, levity, grief, ecstasy, arrogance, humility. In its focussed glare, she loved, wept, importuned, trembled, sneered, laughed, suffered anguish. Her hair she loosened, plaited, tightened, bunned, threw into chaos, her mirrored self as audience, seeing in that audience of one an audience of hundreds cheering, applauding, accepting, acclaiming. This was the door to the future she

was approaching in her final school year; this was the door she opened when first she enrolled in evening drama classes; this was the door she now found after five years suddenly nailed because of an indiscretion, a flickering love match, that had burnt out after a mere handful of weeks.

What tore at her still more viciously now, adding shame to the sudden black constriction of time, was that that prophecy of her mother's, if as such it was intended, had been fulfilled. Finding part-time work in a gift-shop to pay for the evening courses which in time increased to full half-days, she had finally accrued sufficient financial resources and personal confidence to step over the threshold and down the outside stairs to stand on the asphalt, to feel its firmness, and to test the light of independence or, as in language growing more sophisticated she termed it, of liberation. In the hankering after liberation, there had been a scene to be sure, but one more scene on the tail of earlier ones in number nearing infinity left no deterring impact upon her resolve. She left, not fed up as Judah had done, nor even despairingly, but with a sense of buoyancy, expectation, and relief, laughing privately at her mother's garrulous parting sally, "I suppose you'll go out now, get yourself conned, and end up with a bun in the oven or some such thing!"

She did not feel herself "conned" — love with Joel had been mutual and genuine, however brief — but the result was the same. The bun was in the oven. A seal had been set upon the future. And future was now blackness and incarceration in caged domestic routine, unless she yielded to the doctor's insinuations and Joel's exhortations; and future, were she to yield, was ugliness and guilt, waste and recrimination and possible sterility; while the image of wide-kneed exposure and anaesthetics and of being shunted, dumb submissive animal, through corridors and operating theatres to be scraped out by a man in white with the concern he would give to breathing caused her to huddle deeper into the darker recesses of her vinyl seat, the better — if unsuccessfully — to recede from whatever assaults threatened from without. And, with misted gaze falling upon the flitting yellow lights, upon the inert trees and posts that lined the footpaths, and upon the dormant black solid buildings beyond them, she did feel their assault, if only because they were a part of a reality which, however adamantly she might close her eyes, she could not in any way blot out.

Nearing home with its foreshadowed emptiness — Sybil, she remembered, was again on duty — that reality struck her all the more acutely. The anticipation of solitariness intensified it. Walls could protect, but walls could also isolate, and isolation, harnessed to the rack of ever-circuitous thoughts of blackness, futility and entrapment threatened with uncertainties more fearsome than any that even the unwalled darkness of night imposed upon her awareness. Caught in limbo between the wished-for retreat and the need for space, she leaned forward, sank back, leaned forward again, finally directing with a devil-be-hanged resolve the driver to alter course and to take her to St. Kilda, to Fitzroy Street, where even now, approaching midnight, there would at least be light and activity and voice and where she could still opt for solitude while moored in the midst of surrounding movement.

The driver obliged, but this time not without comment. There was a hint in his tone — unless she imagined it — of mirth, knowingness, even of something lascivious as, rubbing his bristles with the palm of a hand, he said, "Goin' out on the town, are ya?"

"My flatmate's a singer at the Casablanca," she lied, as though compelled to render some personal apologies. "I've decided to join her there, then go home with her."

The very feebleness of her reply sent a flush to the roots of her hair.

"Sure," the driver said. "I got a brother with the State Opera, did ya' know?"

Outside the Pizza Bella Roma restaurant in Fitzroy Street, she bade him stop. Counting out her change, he placed each coin with a studied thrust into her palm, then clasping her hand, pressed her fingers tightly and said, "Think of me, poor Charlie drivin' 'round town while you're havin' your fun, won't ya'?"

Slamming the door behind her as she stepped out of the taxi, she shouted "Pig!" at the driver. He might or might not have heard. Whatever the impetus — whether her shrill incensed ineffectual expletive or his own salty allusion — he raised his chin, laughed with merriment that could only have been private, and pressing on the accelerator squealed through a narrow reckless semi-circle across the tramlines and around a central pole to return the way he had come. Another car passing close, too close, veered searingly to a

side and jolted to a screeching halt, and Rosalie, compelled to turn, her pulse quickened and skin galvanised in the expectation of inexorable impact, saw its owner pound at the horn of his car with florid fury and heard him scream "Ya' bloody mongrel!" after the taxi driver who, upping a thumb through a lowered window, was hurtling wildly out of hearing.

"Lucky you got here at all," she heard someone close say into her ear. "Man like that ought to be locked up."

Startled, Rosalie turned. Behind her stood a dark curly-haired fellow in roll-neck pullover, a leather jacket and jeans. His nose was sharp; his chin jutted; a smile stretched like a fixed inscription between the dimpled limits of his lips.

"Say, do you live around these parts?"

She saw the cocksure way he rubbed an ear and became aware of two other fellows behind him standing in the entrance of a haberdashery shop watching with amusement their companion's gambit. The smoothness of the man's approach and the assumptions behind it set her jaws to firmness. This could be a mere game they were playing and, at other times, she might have matched game with game; and were game to turn to menace, would have protected herself with laughter as her brother Judah, not particularly clever in the acquisition of skills but not wholly devoid of earthy wisdom, had often enough advised.

Menace was there. Suspicion was near enough to certainty. But laughter this time did not come. Yet, to cast the fellow off in a way feeble and limp that would leave to him the victory of venture was to add a further wound to the others already festering in her.

She snorted, facing him square-on.

"Have you heard of Moscow?" she said.

"Moscow?"

"Moscow," she repeated, edging past him. "Either you go there or I do. But not the bloody two of us together. Now go get yourself another bed!"

She walked away, her knees jelly, her limbs quivering with her own audacity. The men in the darkened doorway laughed, emerged to join their companion. "Hey, you got me all wrong," she heard behind her. "What I meant was. . ."

She did not wait to hear what he had meant. The advances of smug strangers in Fitzroy Street while the rest of the city huddled itself in its down of dreams had but one meaning —

the intended relief of whatever tickled and itched between the knees. She walked on, past the butcher's, past Topolino's, past the amusement centre, and would have joined, lost herself in a current of people if such a current were there; but in the crisp coldness humming in eddies from the sea, any flow was sluggish, any motion only dull and haphazard, born less of indolence than of indirection in which solitary men, drunkards, derelicts and heavily-painted girls in bright jackets and slacks, hugged doorways, shadows, benches, waste-baskets and lamp-posts. She had come to be among people, to be in a crowd, and yet to be alone. Her miscalculation piqued her. Her expectations, nurtured in better, happier times when she had walked here in mid-evenings with Joel, had been scrambled. Alone she was indeed, but alone with the loneness of others whom Gerard, himself a tenant of the darker hours, was fond of calling the flotsam and jetsam of the night.

Flotsam and jetsam, too, was she then as she passed a cafe outside which two Greeks were laying bets on a matter she couldn't comprehend; flotsam and jetsam as she passed an unshaven loose-jowled man in ragged overcoat, curled and snorting on a bench, the neck of a whiskey bottle protruding from a pocket; flotsam and jetsam as she passed a violet-checked huge-torsoed man reeling on the footpath, pursued by a weathered runt of a woman who shook a fist and screamed with drunken shrillness, "I'll throw ya' out o' the house yet, ya' besotted bastard, ya' jus' wait 'n' see!"; and flotsam and jetsam as above the woman's shrillness there rose the approaching then receding stridor of an ambulance siren followed by the whine of a police car which caused two fellows, one in his twenties, the other scarcely a teenager to melt into the wall next to the doctor's surgery in Jackson Street, then to emerge, the older one to say "Thirty dollars I said," the younger to plead "Twenty's all I got", and the other to reply, cold and severe, "Then go rob a bank this stuff's pure mate not just any shit. . ." She was of a kind with them as a wind brought a blast of sea-air with its astringent taste of salt, sea-weed, sulphur and refuse; as she passed Cyrano's where, again in better times, Joel had quipped, tongue-in-cheek and cornily — but so amusingly then — "I shall be your ever-admiring Cyrano and you shall be my Roxane"; as she hurried from the place, fled, her cheek smarting again with the sting of his slap, fleeing, as if by

flight she could flee from memory, from reality, from the being deep within her that like a parasite was eating away at all that she had stored up for the future.

The absurdity of attempted flight struck simultaneously with the blast of a gelid current of wind hurtling in from the sea, and, outside Peter's shoe store, she slowed her pace, braced her shoulders inwards and looked blandly towards the Casablanca discoteque ahead, outside which a group of youngsters were smoking, jostling, laughing, swearing, writhing in simulated dance. A brief, too brief, memory of parties, of dressing-up, of expectations, and of the touch of fingers along the spine, around the neck, over her eyes, and lips, flitted through her, buoyed her ever so evanescently on a rising wave only to dash her, as other memories surged within, against the coarser sorely-abrasive terrain of a hard-grained shore. She was nearly abreast of those youngsters when a lean marble-boned chisel-limbed woman in black pullover, black tights and high heels stepped out of a doorway and barred her way. She seemed young, but it was a youth, Rosalie saw, to which she clung desperately, a legacy sustained through the artifice of lipstick, powder and thick eye-shadow to conceal the brittle cracks, folds and crevices of some deepening dissipation. The woman leaned towards her, menace potentially brutal, unfurled her lips, showed her teeth and sneered, "Now piss off, dear, this is my beat!"

Creatures of the night, Gerard had called them, as well as flotsam and jetsam, though with his customary charity. "To condemn is to hate," he had once said, "and no artist — an actor least of all — is permitted to hate." A globe-trotter, he had scoured the dark-hour life of New York, Paris and Hong Kong, and looked upon all things with a sobriety which caused him never to raise an eyebrow at what to others seemed potently outrageous, unsavoury, criminal or indecent. Rather, he would sit back in his chair, cross one leg over the other, interweave his fingers behind his massive head and smile — smile with every crease of his large splendidly-plastic face — and say, "If only I, *I,* my dear, could be an innocent again, wear glasses with rosy tint, be swaddled in diapers again, suck at my mother's breast. . . How splendid! Sublime! Perfect! . . ."

Confronted by the young, no-longer-young woman, Rosalie tried to capture and hold to a splinter of Gerard's charity. She smiled, in so far as she felt herself capable of

smiling, turned up a palm and said, shaking her head, "I'm no danger to you, I'm. . ."

The woman, thin and stark in black, eyed her up and down, pursed her bitter lips to rank contempt and snorted. "Piss off anyway!" she said, gesturing Rosalie on her way with a thumb.

She did not enter the Casablanca, but, impelled, driven — irrationally, she knew — to prove her harmlessness to the trollop, she aimed instead for the Dairy Queen cream bar just beyond. Its fluorescent whiteness beckoned; its drifting savoury sweetness, balm to the day's accumulated unfed hunger, drew her; its very emptiness, save for a lone customer and the attendant who was wiping the counter, offered a measure of poise that the street denied. She did not reach its door, however. Outside the discotheque, a crew-cut ear-ringed fellow wolf-whistled at her; another, winking to the clamour of approval, called out, "Hey darl, ya' wanna' make it with me?"; while a third, this one pimply, red-haired and fat, danced gracelessly around her, clapping his pudgy palms aloft, his buttocks nudging provocatively at hers as the white flesh of his exposed belly, the chill weather notwithstanding, writhed jelly-like over the belt of his pants. There was laughter, all reserve abandoned, as one after another, the youths swayed to and fro suggestively before her, in their reaching out, in their rocking, shuffling and gadding about her, forcing in her the suspension of all conscious breath and the piecemeal loosening of tenure upon whatever equilibrium she felt she still possesed until, walking on, shut-eyed and goosefleshed, she sensed — Mercy, her protector — that she was safely past.

The tumult of mirth and banter exploded wildly into commotion of another sort, into a crescendo of sudden violence, of chaotic screaming, alarm, sibilance and cacophony. Jolted, her reflexes taking possession of her with a vice of their own, Rosalie turned. She saw, heard the young folk running, saw their backs, heard the leather, the rubber of their shoes ringing, pounding on asphalt; she saw, heard windows screech to openness, saw puzzlement, curiosity, irritation on nest after nest of protruding faces, heard shouting, at first unclear and remote, reaching her with the electricity of vicious rumour, "There's been a shootin'!" "A fella's bleedin' to bloody death!" "Call an ambulance! . . . the police!" "Oh, God!", and it was then that the report

registered in her, that hard harsh clap and echo that her awareness had, a moment earlier, in the hold of dread construed as the mere backfiring of a car. And torn, then drawn, a filing to a magnet irresistible, she followed the crowd, and quickened her step, the shops, the overhead lights, the traffic flitting past her with diminishing clarity and distinctiveness till, she reached the Jackson Street corner where, outside the doctor's surgery, a swelling, from all quarters-converging crowd milled around a central hollow from which there sounded a sickly whimpering and whine as one man in a dressing-gown thrown over pyjamas pumped fruitlessly at the doctor's bell, cursing "Answer, you bastard, answer, for God's sake!", and another threw stones at the dark barred windows upstairs.

She became trapped in the crush, those towards the centre condensing to harder solidity of mass, others behind pressing her inward, the steam and midnight acridity of their breaths, their odour of sweat, and the tremor of their excitement feeding her own like a contagion violent and unyielding. Voices, shouting, importunate, crude, continued to blast into her ear, an ox of a man stepped on her toes, she felt an elbow whip once, twice into the very pit of her belly. She turned, writhed, sought retreat, escape from that mass. But the flotsam and jetsam, grown more numerous, crushed ever more heavily upon her; rather than backward, she was pushed forward, through every cranny approaching the shrinking hollow where, upon reaching it, she gasped, felt the sickness of it all welling in turbulent waves from her stomach to her throat as she saw, two clammy-shirted men beside him administering however primitive the aid, the youth, the teenager she had seen bargaining over drugs but minutes before, kicking, wriggling, reaching, his acutely-wizened face, his pullover, his hair and the ground around his head glistening with trickling tarry liquid under the murky glow of a yellow light.

"Someone give me a fuckin' 'andkerchief, a tissue, damn you, a towel!" called out one of the men as he pressed upon the wound in the adolescent's neck, while the other, holding a wrist and listening with an ear to the chest, muttered in synchrony with the boy's fading whine, "Oh, hell, hell, where's the bloody ambulance? God, he's going, he's going! If there's any pity on this earth, hurry up, will you, oh God, hell, hell!. . ."

Impotence, goosepimples, frenzy assailed her. Rosalie wanted to give — a handkerchief, a scarf, a shawl. But she had nothing. She cringed with the very shame of her ineffectuality. She cringed, too, as memory once more smote her, quivered as she heard that resurgent anger within burst out "I am a person, a human being!"; as she heard further her own echo as Irena, Irena, crushed, smitten, adrift, appealing to Olga "What is it, tell me quickly, what is it, for God's sake?!" followed by Chebutykin's bland fatalistic "The Baron . . . It's the Baron . . . he's just been shot!"; as she saw herself under the lights, in country dress and cotton shawl crumbling in Olga's arms, wailing, this last night in artifice and reality coalesced, "I knew it, I knew it, I. . ."

She rocked with the predatory gathering, bit her lips with horror and cold, closed her fists with a tightness that imprinted her nails into the very flesh of her palms, holding back, every muscle called upon to work, the nausea stirred by the sight of a life petering bloodily to oblivion, by the ease, so absurd after all that was invested in it, with which existence could be extinguished, by the wantonness — mortar pulverised, powder in wind, crystal crushed — that rendered breath and heartbeat and mind so trivial, so cheap, that for the mere difference between twenty and thirty dollars, men could wrangle and murder and die. She had known all this, from reading, from hearing, from performing. But the confrontation with black reality brought concreteness and immediacy to that which earlier, for all the ugliness and waste she had been privy to in her home, had been abstract, the stuff of imagination and untouchingly remote.

"Hell! Hell! Hell!" the words pounded at her, echoing the panic of the man bending beside the now-immobile unconscious youth, as to the cries of "Move back!" "Right! Everyone go home!", "Show's over!", she felt the crowd sourly thinning around her to permit two policemen and two ambulance attendants wheeling a trolly enter into that inner sanctum of terror. To the older officer's question "Who knows anything about this?", a hubbub of voices welled about her.

"He's a druggie. . .!"

"I heard the shot from Theo's . . . came running. . .!"

"God 'e was bleedin' like a pig. . ."

"He was warned, poor bastard. . ."

Rosalie, carried by the volley, stepped forward. "I . . . I . . .," she began, speaking into the officer's shoulder, faintly, scarcely audible before hurriedly stepping back, and further back, seeking facelessness in that moment in the midst of the dispersing crowd before she complicated her existence still further by admitting to have seen, heard, the dispute that culminated — the ambulance attendant was shaking his head now as he covered the youth's body with a sheet — in murder. Films, television had taught her the tedious side of crime, the inextricable entrapment in red tape, in the maze of police stations, statements, identification parades, affidavits, trials, prosecution and defence overbearing in interrogation; and the vision of that ordeal, suddenly so acute and total, drove her, however quickly not quickly enough, from the scene, back to Fitzroy Street, back the way she had come, past Theo's again, past Topolino's, past the Pizza Bella Roma, aware of movement, wind, seaweed, and the caustic smarting of her eyes, her own motion propelled by images of caves, cages and graves, of dark hollows lit up weakly by flickering lights, of that creature — hated, pitied, living, constricting — gnawing at her within, and by the jolting sense of brittleness and vulnerability and detachment of everything around, by the impermenance of it all, save that of death, of death, of death which, so bland and inoffensive on the stage was as grotesque in its ugliness as . . . as. . . There was no word for it. It bore comparison to nothing in her experience. Whatever else had to her once seem odious, monstrous and ravaging fell short by an infinity of the transcendent starkness of hapless futile death. She hugged the shopfronts as she fled, ready to regain certainty and solidity to fuse with them, ready, too, if any familiar being were suddenly to emerge, to cling to him, to her, to Gerard, Sybil, even Joel again, and nestle in caressing huddled warmth, flesh to flesh, contracted ball.

And then outside Umberto's, the first pains griped at her, not intense, nor prolonged, but startling in their suddenness. Rosalie felt again the whipping of the elbow in her belly, drew breath and hurried on, looking around, scouring the footpath behind her for the two policemen in pursuit and along the road for the rectangular rooftop glow of a vacant taxi. And as she veered to the kerb, the pain seized her again, this time more cramping, transfixing her back, as, slowly, stickily, she felt warm moistness run down the insides of her

quaking thighs. A flush of relief, even happiness, rose within her, and released in her a jubilant "He was wrong, the test was wrong, the bastard lied!" before the truer reason pelted her with brutal vigour.

Somewhere close, she heard a woman giggling, and above the giggle a man's drunken banter in a bellow haranguing, "Your bloody room's as good as any! Your bloody twat's as good a prize as any!", while not three feet from her, a car drew up, its occupants, three scraggy young men in leather jackets, singing "'Twas on the good ship Venus" as the one closest to her upped two fingers with crude ugly laughter.

Had she been physically struck, as Joel had struck her, she could not have turned more quickly in recoil. She took to flight once more. Grimy wrinkled newspaper tangled itself in her legs, dust scoured her eyes, an awning overhead flapped with whip-like reports. Looking back towards Topolino's, impulsively glancing — not daring more — at the scene of madness where the doors of the ambulance were now setting the seal upon a youth's oblivion, she saw the post-office and hurried, ran, towards the telephones. Her cramps waxed momentarily, then waned, but the sodden panties clung to her; her thighs rubbed unpleasantly against each other as though smeared with jelly; she rummaged through her purse to find a silver coin and, trembling, her teeth set on lemons, she dialled, misdialled, dialled again. There were dial tones, and clicks, and ringing, then more ringing, and more, an age passing between successive whirrs, until a toneless switchboard voice replied, took her message, and at length connected her through.

"Sybil!" she almost screamed into the mouthpiece when her flatmate's familiar voice inquisitively answered, "Ward 2 East?". "What can I do I'm bleeding Sybil it's pouring I'm bleeding . . . bleeding . . . like a pig!"

The ensuing pause, the silence, short as it was, was eternal.

"Rosalie? . . . Rosie? . . . Well, there's your solution," she heard Sybil say. "Someone up there loves you."

"Sybil?!. . ."

"You're losing it, Rosie, it's on its way out. Wherever you are, get to the Women's. Don't panic. Go to Casualty. They'll treat you right. They'll do . . . you know. . . And Rosie . . . you know what this means, don't you? Our trip's on, sweetie, it's on after all."

Rosalie rammed the receiver down upon the hook.

"You bitch! you bitch!", she fumed on the way to the hospital, "You bastards! mongrels all!", the street-lamps flitting by and the wind slapping against the taxi's windscreen adding counterpoint to her curses. And the throb of indiscriminate fury pounded more violently still as, scarcely glancing at her, the Casualty clerk wrote her particulars into a dog-eared book, as a fat-ankled sister in soiled bloodied white ordered her into a gown and on to a couch, as a flighty scatter-brained nurse thrust a thermometer in her mouth and carelessly read her blood pressure, and as, first, one doctor, then another, prodded her and probed under the too-white glare of an incandescent light, the second declaring matter-of-factly before she had yet covered her naked spread-eagled thighs to decency, "There's nothing for it but to take you to theatre and stop all this!"

Within the cubicle, trapped by her gravid, now-bleeding body, caged by a ceiling too low, by curtains drawn too close, with the air redolent with the sourness of disinfectant and ether and floor wax as doctors, nurses and orderlies noisily brushed and bustled about the ward, protest stifled within her."I am a person, a human being!" she wanted to yell again, but, yielding to the futility of it all, she remembered, so sudden the memory, the frenzied flight of frightened cows, she saw again the family's bitch delivering scrawny premature pups through a swollen crotch, could smell the dogshit and manure that her father had scraped Sunday mornings to spread over his tomato patch and sprinkle around the pear-trees. All of it ugliness, indignity, abasement.

Again and again, the cramps recurred. She winced, drew up her knees, gasped, hissing "Bastard" through pursed rigid lips. Above, the lights shimmered, glittering jelly, Haloed there was Joel, a mere moment but a moment too long, foppish in white, in succession smirking, livid, plaintive, fawning, vanishing then in the incandescence, only his voice, too close, desperately calling "Margaret! Margaret! She means nothing to me! I swear it! I swear it! I swear!", at which she clenched her fists to trembling and set her teeth in marble, the readier to meet menace as vision fell to vision and voice yielded to voice.

"You'll end up with a bun in the oven or some such thing."

"But my partner . . . he can help you. . ."

"If only we could get back to Moscow!"

"Pray to God that you don't let them get you down."
"If you want to tell me anything, Rosalie. . ."
"But our sufferings, our sufferings. . ."
"Piss off anyway!"
"Someone give me a fuckin' 'andkerchief. . ."

Time straggled. Memory rent her — her mother, Joel, the doctor, Gerard, Sybil, the killing, flight, the glare of the ceiling lights and the burning odours around her, all of these fettered her to a chain of inevitability, threatening now to stifle her, to toss her upon an ocean of cadavers, the thing within her living, dying along with her, as leaden breath-constricting pressure transfixed her chest and whatever saliva formed in her mouth she found intolerable to swallow. Cleaned once of the blood along her thighs, she felt the sticky warmth of yet another trickle and tossed her head from side to side, the metal bed on which she lay rocking with her, its springs and wheels and attachments clattering and squeaking in raucous protest to her "No . . .I won't . . . it isn't . . . They'll kill. . . Don't let. . .!" until the sister in dirty white walked in briskly, all temper suppressed, said "Won't be long before they take you," swept back the sheet with one broad gesture, coldly dictated, "Now roll over, dearie, and let's see your behind", and thrust a needle into her buttock which spasmed with a searing stinging that turned to molten throbbing. Turned on her side, she saw a carcass of beef hanging from a butcher's hook, then mice scurrying between the legs of the chairs, and the remains of a cat in a gutter, crushed bone, ravaged fur, and pulped innards smeared and lying in a scum of congealed blood, flies in swarms scavenging the corpse with hungry frenzy. And that other scene of bloody death returned, she tasted again the sea, felt the dust in her eyes, heard a woman's giggle and a drunkard's garrulous banter. From somewhere close, she heard too a toneless voice say "That one in there" and started as the green curtains around her rode back on their rails and a young bearded orderly in blue beckoned, tugged at her arms, her leg, saying "Take it easy now, love, don't want any accidents, come over here, we'll get you through all this soon enough." Inside her, she imagined the thing living, dying, also had a beard. And madly, she giggled, reached up but missed the orderly's face. "Hey, hit your funny bone, did you, love?" he said, flipping the sheet over her and moving to the foot of the trolley. The corridors were white and long, the

corners dizzying, the elevator nauseating, the faces — of doctors, nurses, housemaids — a blur. They were elongated, the faces, distorted, ever-changing, leering, accusing, threatening. One pair of lips, too thick, too close, said "What do you want to do that for?"; another menaced "You're killing it, you know,"; and a third "If you was my daughter. . ." On her way, doors opened and closed, rubber squealed on linoleum, pipes hissed, water rushed in torrents. Warmth, then cold, streamed along her arms and paralysed her legs as vapours engulfed her and bitter clagging dryness stiffened her lips. She drew her hand away from touch, but another's hand continued to cling, weighing it down with lead-weight perserverance as whiteness and glow capitulated to greyness and then to darkness which exploded in turn miraculously and magnificently to the turbulent radiance of burning suns beneath which she floated, yellow and red-sailed yachts rocking on cerulean waters nearby, swaying on waves that lapped at their prows and carried her gently, so gently towards a luxuriant coast where a peasant woman pointing with a scythe said "Moscow's a stone's throw away" and a tall massive white-haired man draped an arm about her shoulder and puffed into her eyes and said "If you want to tell me anything, I shall be ready to listen," leading her to cry out, though she didn't feel herself to be speaking, "Tomorrow I'll go away and teach at a school somewhere and I'll take the baby with me and I will love it and smother it with love and I'll go on working and working and that young fellow's not really dead it was only a game there is no Jackson Street nor any Fitzroy Street and besides it's daytime and this is Moscow Moscow Gerard a real place not an ideal like you say not a state of mind but oh God it is innocence innocence lost and recaptured and happiness beauty pure fresh immaculate where there are no bleeding pigs and murdered barons and I must tell Sybil to come on this trip and I must tell Judah and I must tell everybody everybody everybody oh God oh God oh God" and not a step from her Irena wept and then Irena laughed, her teeth not white as in the photograph, nor shining, but blue, her lean skewed body rocking on a swing as she laughed, that laughter rising shrill and cackling and stridulous until it could scarce be distinguished from screaming, her whole face now blotched and livid blue, her own screaming laughter joined by that of others as, suddenly, all blackness again, the seething suns crumbled and she began

to run, masses of young people after her and the sirens of police, past Topolino's, past the post office, past the bank, her ears pounding with accusation and menace "She's the killer!" "Won't be long before they take her!", "She mustn't be allowed to escape!", "She must be punished!", to which over her shoulder she pleaded "I didn't I didn't I didn't!" as hands, a rash of them, seized her and brought her down and held her, gripping her head, her arms, her legs, vague male voices repeating from distances remote "It's over it all went well open your eyes now," and she opened her eyes and closed them again as orbs of focussed light crashed upon her awareness and circles swam and spun and vibrated, nausea gorging in her throat like fetid gall. "Well, we've cured the problem," she heard the same voice say and then a second deeper one, more muted, as if muffled by a mask, "I dare say you'll be more careful next time."

Light followed darkness, darkness followed light. The darkness of eyelids; the light of a torch, a corridor bulb, the glow from an adjoining room. Now and then, she started to the clatter of ringing metal, to the touch of fingers upon her wrist, to the pressure of a cuff closing about her arm. She swung on swings and ran down streets, swam in seas and clambered through hollows. Hollows. Hollows. Repeatedly through hollows in which faces in profusion appeared along with voices and echoes and smells, and other hollows, empty bloodied hollows, reeking of antiseptic and ether, from which something close yet something hateful had been removed, causing her even in her darkness to weep and to laugh, cold tears and spittle on her pillow smearing her cheek, sheets and blanket tossed and rumpled with the restless twitching of her limbs.

And then, as if suddenly, she opened her eyes and the greyness of sky glinting with fugitive arrows of sunlight made her squint. Tentatively, she faced the day again and contracted at the approach of a slender long-fingered nurse who, straightening her covers with expert briskness, said, "My, you did have a long sleep, didn't you?"

Rosalie looked at her dully. Her gown clung to her with clamminess. A pad lay soft and soothing between her legs.

"Has anyone been here?", she asked. "Does anyone know?"

"Too early for visitors, Rosalie, shall I call you Rosie?", the nurse said. "And as for knowing. . ."

"It doesn't matter," Rosalie said. "It doesn't. . ."

"Well, I suppose you'll be wanting a wash and some brekkie. Odds are you're leaving today."

Rosalie nodded, turned, pushed herself on to an elbow.

"Well, here's your towel and there's soap in the bathroom."

The nurse walked over to another patient, said "How's the pains today, Tess?", nodded at the reply and left the ward.

Tess, a pale doughy woman with small hands, grimaced and said, "Ya' could by dying', they don' listen to ya'."

Opposite her, another woman, a shrivelled weed with transparent cheeks sucked into troughs looked at her blankly, while in the next bed, another still, younger, willowy and handsome, preened her lush cascade of hair before a mirror, clicked her tongue, and said, "Yes, well, you know. . ."

Rosalie stood up. The ward spun. She clung to her bed till the haze passed from before her eyes and the jelly in her legs set to firmness, then stepped towards the window where she found more solid anchorage at the window sill.

"Careful now," she heard the young woman say behind her. "Don't want to hurt yourself."

She did not look at her. Rather, she let her gaze fall upon Cardigan Street below where cars, people, children, passed. From her height, they were small and seemed to move mechanically, puppets in a toy-shop wound by keys and moving straight or turning corners or tracing paths that meandered higgledly-piggledly across a vast untouched untouchable landscape. They passed in ones, in twos, sometimes in threes; yet each on his own path, with his own direction, known and unknown, was encased in solitude, each just one more piece of deadwood in the flotsam and jetsam that made up the mass of what Gerard, at more charitable times — or was it with tongue in cheek? — called suffering humanity. Something of her dream nudged at her, but it was unclear, elusive. Something had lived and died within her, but instead of the relief she thought she ought to have felt it was rather an emptiness that remained, a hollowness, in which all anger, frenzy, chaos has been dissipated and transformed into enervated languor and fatigue. She was one of a kind now with that flotsam. Aiming higher, she had nonetheless been dragged into it. There was blood in the streets and brutality and dissipation and rankness and waste, and friendships that were brittle and attachments that proved devious, and what

was meant as laughter turned instead to leering and what was offered as soft touch left behind a thousand bruises, and . . . and . . . Toozenbach was right, it would ever be the same, not only in a couple of hundred years' time but in a million years in which life, *living,* would continue to follow its laws without concern for men, and . . . Masha, poor Masha . . . in which nothing would matter and everything would be just as wild grass, for no-one would ever know why cranes flew and why childen were born and why the stars shone in the sky and . . . and. . .

Rosalie touched a window-pane. To her fingers, it was cool, it was smooth.

"Someday," she remembered, "people will know why such things happen and what the purpose of all this suffering is. There won't be any more riddles. Meanwhile, we must go on living and working. Yes, we must just go on working."

And then that fragment of dream returned to her. Even against the greyness through which brighter sunlight was struggling to emerge, she saw the peasant woman pointing her scythe on the luxuriant shore. She stood easily, untroubled, in colourful dress; her face was open, full, receiving. "Moscow's a stone's throw away," she said.

And Rosalie took firmer hold of the window-sill, scanned again the brightening streets below, and, sensing the burgeoning of something tender within her, of something gauzy and exquisitely fragile, she gasped, even as she saw the smallness and the mechanical weaving of the people below, and murmured soft and quiveringly fervent into the void, "Oh God, I am I am I am. We are we are we are."

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. Manoeuvering 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 east 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, strangly 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 downards 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-lesser 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, avocadoes 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.

All My Children

A rock. A rock, would you believe? How much can a mother take from her son? That the window behind my shoulder was shattered — all right, so it's another expense. I've so many, that . . . I found thick cardboard, boarded up the hole and will have the glass replaced when I can afford it. A widow's pension is scarcely a gold-mine. But poor Benjy sleeping inside! If not for the bars of his cot, who knows that rock might have — I dread to think of it — might have smashed his little skull. Four months old and so brittle. An eggshell is harder. And Seamus just stood there at the gate clenching his fists, laughing, swearing, taunting "you won't get me, you hag, you won't get me!" while on the lawn the twins, Darren and Mickey — bless their innocent souls — were prancing about as if the whole thing were an adventure and Becky clung to my skirt and Claudia was out somewhere gallivanting about the streets, getting up to goodness knows what with the boys, and behind me, poor Benjy, awakened, was wailing out his miserable heart.

I rushed inside. Becky, hanging on to me, nearly tripped over the step.

By the time I came out, carrying Benjy, still sobbing in my arms, Seamus was gone, fled with the two dollars I caught him stealing from my purse. The twins pointed excitedly to a side-street, but by the time I reached the corner, running with Benjy who clung for dear life to my blouse, he was nowhere in sight. He didn't come home for his dinner, nor even when Claudia, moody and insolent as usual, finally went to sleep. "School day tomorrow," I said to her at ten, "better get to bed now." "Get off me back," she snapped, "I'll go when I'm ready." But mercifully she went. I remained at the kitchen table, my eyes on the clock, counting the minutes as I had done so often waiting for Alex to return home from one of his drinking sprees. Finally — how I hated myself — I rang the police. They found him smoking in the back of a van, and drinking — can you imagine it? a fourteen-year old boy — and brought him home just after midnight. They were pleasant enough, those young officers, but they asked so many questions. They insisted on knowing what had

happened. Seamus, leaning against the fridge, a habit he learnt from his father, glared at me with such a mixture of fear and taunting that I said merely that I had punished him so severely earlier in the day for being disobedient that he had run away. — What could I do? Betray my own son? When, for what he is, he isn't really to blame?

I wonder sometimes whether Alex is not still in our house haunting us. If I were at all superstitious. . . My mother believed in spirits, but I don't. And yet when I remember the nights he came home dead drunk carrying a dozen bottles of beer he had stolen, *stolen,* from the hotel where he worked and boasted about it, what's more, in front of the children, or when he brought home whole cartons of cigarettes in his arms, also stolen, though he seldom smoked, and then I look at Seamus, I wonder . . . I wonder — the same red hair, in both unruly, the same flushed cheeks, the puffy eyelids, thick lips and those large blazing eyes, in Alex darting with suspicion, in Seamus with mischief; and even the words, the language, "You hag, you hag," when, drunk, he beat me about the head as though I had been the source of his calamities, of the repeated sackings from his jobs, of our poverty, as though I alone were to blame for our six kids, our overgrown garden, the cracked flaking walls of our house, the torn linos, the draughty lavatory that froze his backside — I won't repeat his expression — whenever he pulled his pants down. And there was that other word, "bitch", which he spat out between pursed lips and which caught the twins' fancy as they paraded up and down the corridors, mere four-year-olds chanting "bitch-bitch, bitch-bitch" whenever they saw me. Go thrash their hides when they can't even know what it means.

Or maybe it's in the blood, or goodness knows, in the stars. Is such a thing possible? Alex's father drank himself to death before he was forty, his mother was killed by a train, and his only sister died from some mysterious cause. She was barely thirty-five. There is a rumour that she was strangled in a hotel in Fitzroy, but the matter has always been kept hushed. He had an unhappy childhood, I know. I knew it even when I married him. Perhaps that was *why* I married him, despite the warnings of my mother who believed in the stars and read tea leaves and palms. But I thought I could make him happy (isn't that love?) — he was such a child. I couldn't help but give in to him, though it was long before I heard him say that

girls were good for one thing only, something I'm sure explains Claudia's freeness with the boys in the neighbourhood. I can't tell her that I was already carrying Seamus when I married her father, but how prevent her from making my mistake, Claudia, a thirteen-year-old, self-willed, not unattractive, with sharp breasts, a smooth figure, long blonde hair and tantalising eyelashes, a coquette and a tease as eager as Adam's Eve? The horror of it is that my mother, before she died, predicted for Claudia a fate similar to her aunt's. . .

I don't believe in sin either, but perhaps Seamus is a punishment of sorts.

When the police left, warning Seamus, "Be a good boy, son, and you'll stay out of trouble," he moved from his place beside the fridge and kicked the leg of a chair which scraped across the floor and toppled against the stove where Benjy's bottle stood in a pot ready for warming. "Don't scare me, they don't," he said, "and you neither. Never caught Dad they didn't and you wouldn't pimp on me, would you?" Already at his age, Alex's smell of beer couched his words. The wonder was that he could hold the drink without staggering or dropping to the floor. And where he got the stuff from, the devil knew, though I had a good idea. Even with the two dollars he stole from me — who would sell him grog? He is a minor, after all. The police he told he got it from one of his older mates. And the cigarettes, too. I didn't want to create a scene. The children were asleep, and to wake them . . . "Where'd you get the beer?" I asked quietly, not to get his back up. "And the cigarettes?" Behind his grin, he showed all his teeth. The dull kitchen light couldn't do justice to their astonishing strength and whiteness. "A cinch," he said. "They way the pubs leave their windows open. Dad would've been proud of me." Go, beat him when his skin is as thick as hide? Throw him into the street at midnight like a common thief? Curse him, threaten, warn? What does a mother who loves her children do? Even when one of them has thrown a rock at her and nearly killed his brother and stolen and taunted and then gone out and stolen again? He's Alex all over, my mother used to say . . . I moved nearer to him, not knowing what I would have done even had I come close, when Becky padded in, timidly, shielding her eyes with a puffy hand and murmuring that she'd had a bad dream. As in the morning, she clung to my skirt. Seamus, leering, his

eyes darting, was drawing away. "Go to bed," I said, "we'll have a good talk tomorrow," knowing with relief, I must admit, that the talk would never come to be. He left all right, but not before he slammed a fist into the wall beside the door and spat out "Hag" with all of Alex's beer-sodden venom. It was as if . . . as if I were hearing Alex's own voice rising from the grave. Almost instinctively, I cowed to escape his blows. his blows.

Becky should have brought me a measure of peace, but she is such a fretful child whose eyes have seen more than seven-year-old eyes should ever have seen. How she would cringe in a corner during Alex's rantings when, bustling about the house in blind fury, he would lash out and slap and punch and thump and blame me for everything that was wrong in his life and treaten to kill himself to pay me back. He fed me the same medicine for five years. But when does someone begin to believe? His threats always seemed to be a means to get his own way. As I said, he was a child and even after we married, he never really grew up. And though he kept on giving me children — he refused to let me have my tubes tied — I believe that he was terribly jealous of them. Perhaps he even hated them. I know that he never kissed them. Besides, he was so selfish, always thinking of himself first, that to kill himself, for whatever reason, seemed so much against his nature. But that first overdose frightened me to hell. And of all the children to find him, it had to be Becky, who came running into the backyard where I was hanging out the washing, crying, "Daddy's on the floor. He knocked the lamp over and it's broken." The ambulance took him to hospital. Five days later, he was home again, threatening to do a better job next time. For weeks I didn't sleep. How could I? Always afraid that I might wake to find him blue or in a fit or . . . or dead. I became so desperately exhausted. With five kiddies at the time and him. And he was out of work, roaming about the house from morning to night in a dressing-gown, drinking, swearing, bickering, bashing. I pushed myself with every ounce of strength. I had to, but . . . but a human being is not a machine, is it? A little oil, grease, a tune-up and it keeps on working. One day, I collapsed, took to my bed, wouldn't eat, wouldn't drink, wouldn't talk to anyone. How the children suffered, poor darlings. Alex was in a dither, coaxing me to eat or at least to rinse my mouth out one minute, the next screaming that he couldn't

cope, ordering me to get up to feed the children, threatening that if I didn't instantly leave the bed, he would walk out and find himself another place to stay. The twins were impossible, pouncing on my bed, pulling my arms, tugging at the covers while all I wanted was peace, peace, peace. It was on Claudia's shoulders that all the housework fell. And how she and Alex quarrelled over every little thing. She was forced, poor creature, to grow up too early; she stayed home from school for a month. And the things she didn't see then, or hear! The doctor who was called in — Alex wouldn't hear of it at first, ("The money, the money," he repeated like a broken record) — recommended a complete rest, suggested I put the youngest children in a foster home for a while, even advised that I go away. He was a nice doctor, a kind young man really, but . . . but — well — he wasn't wearing my shoes, was he? So he prescribed pills, a tonic, gave me an injection and patiently explained to Alex what I needed most. Alex clung to his every word, nodding, promising, reasurring the doctor that he would do everything in his power to help. — Help. Some help! No sooner had the doctor crossed the threshold than Alex darted for his bottle, and by evening was his old predictable recognisable self. It was about that time that I became pregnant with Benjy.

Even though Seamus most resembles Alex to look at and the twins have picked up their father's swearing and Claudia has been warped — horrible word, isn't it? — by his ideas, it is Becky who reminds me most strongly of him. And Benjy. Those fears of hers, the nightmares, the bedwetting, nail biting, cringing, whimpering — they are all his work. They are the scars in her that he left behind. As well as the rest of the mess. In the end, he did as he had threatened — on his fourth attempt. What a turmoil everything had been in just before; and what a turmoil just after. I'd scarcely brought Benjy home. He'd been born premature, a frail child, his skin like thin glossy paper, his face as thin and scrawny as a rabbit's. Whether he'd survive was touch and go. Then I developed an infection and stayed in hospital for a week longer than expected. Two days after I brought Benjy home, we had to call the doctor again. Darren and Micky had weeping school sores, Claudia developed tonsillitis; Becky complained of stomach pains which the doctor diagnosed as nerves and for which he prescribed a sedative. Seamus, I learnt, had been out during the night stealing from the

neighbours while during the day he stayed away from school. First his class teacher, then the headmaster rang to find out what the matter was (he had been seen at least three times smoking along the edge of Berri Creek). And Alex — good old Alex — while all this was going on was hitting the bottle as hard as ever. I tell you, I must have killed a Chinaman.

There, in the kitchen, with Becky on my lap, her head nestled between my breasts, her fingers tightening about me whenever I made a move to stand, the clock now showing half-past-one, my eyelids dropping, I sat. Outside was black, except for the reflections of the light in the window; and every so often a branch of the elm in the back-yard scraped against the tiles on the roof or against the spouting. I remembered Seamus hurling that rock at me and the twins prancing excitedly on the lawn, with Darren chanting "Bitch-bitch, bitch-bitch," a refrain taken up by Mickey; I remembered Claudia, growing up too quickly, loving to show off her lovely figure to the boys, stroked Becky's hair as I felt her heart throbbing fearfully through her little troubled breast. From his room, I heard Benjy begin to whimper, as I remembered Alex with his flaming red hair, his flushed cheeks, his thick lips even as they seemed to swallow the neck of the bottle, and I thought, sincerely thought, how lucky he was. And yet, and yet, I wanted him back. *Despite* his drinking, his swearing, his beatings. He'd had a hard childhood; I couldn't bring myself to blame him for what he had been. Perhaps it was in the blood or in the stars. Life had been hard with him, but without him — Benjy's whimpering increased. His bottle was in the pot upon the stove. I tried to rise but Becky clung, weighing me down. I remembered, and memory hurt. But how much more pain would the future hold? If my mother sat in my place, my mother who studied palms, tea-leaves, the stars, what would she have seen? Alex's soul running through Seamus, Claudia's belly swelling, like mine, before its time, or her body strangled lifeless like her aunt's, the twins growing up wild and unruly, (hooligans before their teens, my mother predicted), Becky set forever in the mould of a nail-biting timid mouse needing pills and tonics to help her cope? — "Cry, Benjy, yes, cry your little heart out," I said, listening to the rising wail, staying, weighed down by Becky and weariness, in my seat. Did he have his grandmother's eyes that they could see ahead? Did he cry out for what he could foresee of his own unhappy life?

I don't believe in destiny or in any ideas that the future can't be changed, regardless of what my mother used to say. I may be wrong, I know. Alex, his own father, mother, sister and now Seamus and Claudia — all of them provide sufficient evidence to prove my mother right. But I am ready to hope. For the sake of the children, if it will keep Seamus out of gaol and Claudia respectable and alive and Becky sane and the twins on a steady path and baby Benjy always innocent, yes, to hope that out of the rubble even a splinter may be saved with which to begin to build a better life and to break the dogged hold of my mother's stars.

The Real And Doubtful Virtues Of Silence

The Kellys upstairs are the noisiest people I have ever known. Except perhaps for Rosie Flew who by eight in the morning has her radio switched on full blast to the cacophanous caterwauling of rock or pop or the raucous inane pattern of an inane announcer. The difference is that the Kellys make their noise at night. He is, the neighbours say, a fitter and turner — whatever that is — and she a ticket-seller at the Regent. I suppose the neighbours are right. Why should people lie? But I do wish that Mrs. Kelly would at least bring me a ticket for a matinee. Just once. Or twice. Probably, though, she scarcely thinks about me even though I live in the flat directly below hers. But, to her credit, she did ask me once how my "poor dad" was when he was laid up in bed with pneumonia. In any case, the point is that the Kellys only *meet* at night. He, Harold — Harry — Kelly departs for work at half past six each morning, holding a paper bag with flat sandwiches in one hand and a rolled-up plastic raincoat in the other — curiously, even in summer (but in these parts, that's not really stupid) — while she, Mavis, doesn't leave till ten; and in the evenings, he returns at five, or at the latest six, both his hands this time carrying a large parcel which jingles and tinkles and chimes as he goes up the stairs — he is wearing his raincoat which is open and flaps around his knees (what else can he do with it?) — while she doesn't come back till nine. By then, Harry has had his few and his voice which, when sober, is as clear as — let's say — a cricket on a summer's night, has taken on a rougher edge as if, if it were physical it could best be described as a grindstone — gravelly, creaking, abrasive. Or perhaps like emery. Anyway, it's obvious what I mean. Perhaps, when Mavis comes home, they talk quietly for a while — I don't know, of course, because quiet can't be heard — but sure enough after a half hour the first stridulous refrain somersaults out of the Kelly's windows or somehow bores metallically through the walls, the floors, our ceilings and punches sieve-like holes in every last corner of protective space. And that refrain, when it comes and as I sit behind my homework, — I am hopelessly fidgety and restless until it comes — is ever the same. It's like

hearing the same play over and over again. Or the umpteenth rehearsal.

"Yer' never 'ome when I want ya'!"

Her voice is not so much shrill as burring. There is much clinking of glass and sometimes I wonder whether she too has her share of the froth he brings home.

"And whatcha' want me for anyway?"

"Yer' a woman, ain't ya?"

"And a good woman to ya, don'tcha' forget it. I make yer' sandwiches, leave yer' dinner for ya, keep yer' house so's ya' won't have to lift a finger more than ya' have to. . ."

"The sandwiches. Blimey. They're soggy by the time I eat 'em. And as for yer' dinner — if I wanna eat charcoal, I can get it cheaper at the chemist's. Gawd. . ."

"And when did ya' last take the rubbish out?"

" 'ave a heart. Me back. I didn' go to that chiropractor quack for six months to spoil 'is work over a can of trash. . ."

"An' when didya' last take me out? — Think, 'arry, when did ya' last say, 'Mavis, let's you an' me go to a show together or a dance or even for a walk like we used ta' do'?"

"On me God-blessed soul, ya' making' me cry, Mavis. Ya' wanna start a flood? I ain't got no Ark to save us, ya' know."

"Me start a flood?! With the amount of grog ya' put away an' the torrents ya' piss, ya' could drown all them people in China! And with a bit more, in India as well."

"You does it with yer' gob every day. . ."

"An' if ya' didn' booze yer' money away, I wouldn' 'ave ta work to pay for the rent, the gas, the 'lectricity, the food ya' eat, and I could be 'ome when ya' wanted me. . ."

"Year, go on. Blame me drinkin'. . ."

"An' when did ya' last take me out? — Think, 'arry, when did ya' last say, 'Mavis, let's you an' me go to a show together or a dance or even for a walk like we used ta' do'?"

"Yer, go on. Blame me drinkin'. . ."

"An' when *I'm* ready, yer' so damn' stoned and shrivelled . . . Ya' think yer' fun ta be with?"

At this point, indignation is honed to sharpness, though Harry's voice, in scraping against every wall and surface within range, becomes a rugged field of abrasions. Once, when the Kellys first moved in, the neighbours used to crack open their windows, shout desperately into the darkness "Let's have some peace for God's sake!" and grind and

clatter their windows shut again. But now they remain unseen and silent. I'll bet anything. though, they're listening. . . Like me. . .

"Shrivelled?! I'll kill ya' if ya' say that again. I'm as good as any man ya' ever 'ad."

"Ha! Pump, pump, fizzle!"

"And what about you? Yer' just a soggy rag!"

"Pisspot. . ."

"I'm warning' ya'. . ."

Back and forth; the night is crammed to bursting with their verbal ejaculations. Strident, sibilant, shrill, cracked, terrible. The bottles and the glasses jangle; sometimes, something — a bottle, a boot, an ashtray, what? — falls, adding a touch of counterpoint and bass to their mounting nocturnal descant. The air itself pulsates with reeling, tempestuous, convulsive echoes of sound. I love it. I find the turmoil warm and comforting and quaintly serene. I delight in the certainty of it, in its predictability, its inevitability. Buoyed up on the clangorous foaming waves of their clamour, I find immense calm, and the easiest thing in the world is then to drift, content and amused and tranquil off to sleep. Indeed, once they went away for a long weekend, to Seaford I think, for three nights. I tossed and turned, desperately counted the quarter-hours that passed, looked repeatedly and hopefully up at the Kelly's windows and only fell asleep at last when total exhaustion overtook my brain — only to be jolted to stark trembling sweating terror, unslept, by the piercing primitive cacophony of Rosie Flew's radio. I was so glad when the Kellys returned. So glad that I stayed up on purpose and wrote down every insult, every threat, every curse on three whole sheets of foolscap torn out of my geography pad.

The same story every night. But nightly more virulent. Harry must spend his day at fitting and turning thinking up new insults, while Mavis, I guess, having nothing better to do than to read Cinema News between patrons, probably burrows into her very soul to disinter fresh taunts. An archaeologist rooting about the depths of history for artefacts could not be as enterprising. Last week, she told Harry, her own Harry, to hose the garden. But without a hose. All he had to do was go on drinking, undo his zip and just stand there. The next night she said that if an ant found its way up his leg and took one bite — it didn't need to be a

big bite neither — there'd be nothing left up there. Mavis is not exactly what one would call well-bred.

Tonight, of course, they're at it again.

They have reached the stage where Mavis says "Pump, pump, fizzle!"

But tonight, the script changes — earlier than usual.

"I'll pump, pump, fizzle you!" Harry howls.

There is a squeaky squeal. "Oooh!" That's Mavis. Is it delight or surprise or expectation? I don't know. There follows a scraping of feet, a floppy pattering, a scratching of chairs, of a table, of goodness knows what else. One would think that they are chasing one another, or at least, one is chasing, the other escaping.

"I'll show ya'! Pump, fizzle. Pump, fizzle."

This time, a bottle clatters to the floor. I know it's a bottle. I hear it crash and crack and glass tinkles ringingly on their worn linoleum.

"Hey, what's the hurry? Has the bee stung the fly tonight?"

"Shut yer' trap! Just once!"

"Ooh, the hare's on heat!"

"Please! Mavis!"

A creaking laugh. Mavis. Mavis with one, two, three too many? "Wipe yer' nose, 'arry. Yer' drippin' snot and yer'll dry yerself out b'fore ya' get ta' me."

"I warned ya'. I'll kill ya' so 'elp me God!"

"Yer' drunk. A sozzled befuddled crapulous plastered inebriated pisspot." (It seems she's just swallowed a dictionary whole).

"I want ya'!"

"Ooh, yer' rising. How can ya' raise yerself when ya' couldn't even raise a flag?! An' suddenly ya' want me."

"Yer' me wife."

"Yeah, I forgot. But even a wife a real man treats with respect. Worships her feet. Like she was a goddess like . . . I seen it. Cleopatra, Juliet, Helen of Troy. I seen it in the pitchers. . ."

"Ya' seen too much fancy stuff. . ."

"Fancy stuff?! Leslie 'oward. 'Oh, Juliet, wherefore art thou?' and Richard . . . 'im . . . Burton. Ah, man. Real muscle and blood and legs. Calves, thighs . . . Ya' can feel the sap that creeps, spurts, flows between 'em. Yeah, 'arry. Yer' a shadow 'gainst 'em. I ain't no Liz Taylor, but gawd . . . A

woman 'as a right to somethin' better'n a dipso. . ."

"I warned ya'. . ."

More pattering, scraping, scratching. And clattering, a squeal, a slam.

And then another squeal, almost a scream. A note of alarm.

"Whatcha' get that for? Whendcha' get it? Don' be a fool. Put it down!"

"I warned ya', Mavis!"

"Yer' bein' melodramatic. Like in the pitchers. Yer' drunk. 'ow can ya' shoot straight when yer' piss goes crooked and when ya' couldn't spit a toad straight in the eye?!"

"Shut up, Mavis!"

Somewhere nearby a window is shunted open with a screech and a crash. Then another. I look through the pane of my window. There are heads protruding over window sills, necks craned towards the Kellys'. Something is happening that is different from the normal. There is a titter of imminent explosion, of crisis, climax that begins to paralyse.

"Any idea what's goin' on?" says Jim Saunders straining at his hair.

"Wish I did, mate," says Albert Crimmins.

"We're in for a show," says someone else, I don't know who.

A peculiar throbbing hum pervades the building, and an excited mounting buzz as window after window is thrown open to the audible but invisible scene. Bill Bridges who lives directly opposite us has even come outside. He fidgets as he gazes up at the Kelly's flat. He is a concrete hulk of curiosity, bewilderment, anxiety. He bites his lips and shakes his head.

"Make me!" we hear. Mavis, her voice the screech of a crow.

"I'm yer' 'usband. The man ya' married. 'arry Kelly. 'arry Kelly, not yer' Leslie 'oward or yer' Richard Burton but 'arry, 'arry, 'arry with blood in 'is veins, in sickness an' in 'ealth, remember, till death us do part. . ."

"I married a man, 'arry, not jelly, a tower of flesh an' muscle an' strong black 'air, not a . . . a . . . a . . . 'arry!"

"Mavis!"

A thunderclap in the flat above. Powerful, echoing, sending the very guts to the throat. I'm not sure but I might want to vomit. I know that my ears ring and I have gone all sweaty and white. And it doesn't help to see Bill Bridges dart

around like a chook without its head, running towards the stairs, then scampering away, crying, "Oh, my God, oh heavens, oh my God."

"He's done 'er in!," someone says.

"Na', he wouldn't be so dense."

"Bert's right. She's copped it!"

"Hell!"

The buzz swells into a furore. Voices, a tumult, babble, pandemonium, panic. Rosie Flew sticks her head out of the window. Her father Wal pulls her roughly back inside. At the other window, Violet Flew is howling, goodness knows what. There is a quarter-moon above, but if anyone else notices it but me, I'm not sure. For the rest, there is a horrible darkness about the night and I expect — is it demons? — to leap with dripping fangs out of every shadow.

And then we hear it. At first indistinct, muffled, hoarse. But it becomes unmistakable. Something eerie, grotesque, vulgar. A whine into the night. A monstrous howling, a baying as though a pack of dingoes — or what I imagine to be dingoes — inhabit the flat upstairs. All the neighbours are paralysed. Move a finger and the universe will snap. Even my breath seems to have stopped. Only the sky is alive with that outlandish inhuman baying.

And then follows the second jolt. Bill Bridges jumps a foot. I jump two. Another thunderbolt, just as stark and as brutal as the first. And then a softer though no less ghastly whimpering that convulses, fades and finally stops.

It seems that the very wind had brought them. Sirens. Flashing lights blue and amber. Police, ambulance-men, a doctor, two photographers — one from the police, another from the press. All long-faced, hurrying, resolutely efficient. Each locked into his known understood slot. A hammering on a window, a coarse vocal appeal to open up, a key scraping unsuccessfully in a lock, a thwacking of a shoulder against the door, a searing cracking of wood, a splintering of shattered glass. And then for a while, quiet — only muted voices, murmurings, the shuffle of feet, the occasional flash of a photographer's bulb, the periodic call to a sergeant or an ambulance man.

What is going on up there?

Everyone is embarrassed to be leaning out over their sill, to seem so inquisitive, to be prying so avidly into another's misfortunes. But go tell them to withdraw, to step back, close

their windows and return to their stale humdrum cocoons nourished by the make-believe dreams of television when right before their noses is being enacted the very stuff of life that makes the flesh really creep and the spine quiver and the eyes smart with the devouring throb of sheer curiosity. They are punishing themselves with the agony of waiting for a resolution — as I am waiting — but, oh, how exquisite the pain, the very soul enraptured on the turning rack. Even Bill Bridges, frantically flitting from window to window, puffing with mad fury at a cigarette, is enjoying it now. He is important. He tells everyone his opinion — a different opinion to each so that all his opinions remain open and he can say at least to someone 'See just as I said' — and, dumb, or shaking their heads, or nodding, they listen to him, waiting, their swift eyes darting repeatedly from his gushing face towards the upstairs windows, the steps and the policemen and detectives who come and go.

Then a black van draws up before the flats. Two men in silver-buttoned uniforms and grey peaked caps step out and, one of them carrying a concertinaed stretcher, march in practised unison up the dull steps to the Kellys. Shortly after, they come down again, the stretcher opened out, a long hump down its middle, covered with a black tarpaulin. And after them, two ambulance orderlies carrying another stretcher, followed by the trail of policemen and photographers. There is an accompanying pounding down the stairs and a clatter and scraping, and also a succession of muted hard-lipped instructions given by the doctor who sidles beside the stretcher holding high a flask that shines with moonlight.

And from the stretcher, covered with a white blanket, there arises that inhuman whine, and a wheeze, and every now and then a convulsion, a sob and an outburst that I can just make out.

"Why'd you let me do it, Mavis?. . . I loved ya', I did . . . an' I was ready to join ya' up there, but I missed. . . Me heart was in the wrong place or somethin'. . . Wait for me in 'eaven and I promise ya' I'll never booze no more an' I'll take ya' to a show, just you an' me and we'll go dancin' . . . like we used ter'. . ."

Harry's voice drifts away, is lost in the scuffling of feet, the babble of other voices and the coursing of the wind down the path. He is shunted by the orderlies and the doctor into the back of the ambulance and the doors are shut. And then the

ambulance sirens away, its amber light flashing; the police cars screech in a turn; the black van has already taken its leave; and the photographers share a joke and also go on their way. For a time, Jim Saunders, Albert Crimmins, Wal Flew and Bill Bridges lay bets on whether Harry will live or not, Violet Flew with Rosie beside her screams "Shame on youse", and, one by one, the windows are shut and fastened noisily, Bill Bridges goes back indoors, the neighbours return to what must seem now the dull depressing uneventful catacombs of their own four walls while outside it's as if nothing has happened.

But still, it will be strange getting used to the quiet.

King Lear Of "The Gables"; or A Christmas Concert

Poor Arthur!

I was due to take over from my colleague Michael Bennett at "The Gables" Geriatric Hospital in the new year. So, when he invited me to attend the Christmas Concert to be held by the patients — "You may as well see what you're in for," he said — I accepted willingly.

That there was excitement in the camp was inevitable, certainly among the staff who felt keenly the need to impress the patients' relatives — sons, daughters, even grandchildren — who had been invited for the occasion. The atmosphere, brightly illuminated by a dozen fluorescent globes, hummed with chatter, laughter and expectation. True, there were bored, lonely faces, too, in the audience, particularly among those hugging the doorways ready to escape. But withdrawn into their private cocoons of indifference, they were few, quietly morose and, in the main, unnoticed. Most visitors, however, huddled in little circles about Grandpa or Grandma or Uncle or Auntie and showed some degree of lively animation. Nibbling at savouries and potato crisps and sipping their beers, they told stories and laughed and marvelled at the surroundings, the "lovely pitchers" on the walls, at the multi-coloured streamers and Santas and holly leaves that had been strung across the converted dining-hall. The tables had been pushed back into a far corner, the chairs assembled in long green rows, and a makeshift platform, bearing a piano and a microphone, erected towards the front.

It was from there that Doctor Radford, the superintendent, tall, genial, imposing and completely at ease, bade the audience to take their seats, the participants in the concert in the front row.

Who could refuse the worthy man? The little clusters broke up, young and old made their way good-naturedly to the seats and, comfortably settled, fixed their gaze expectantly upon Doctor Radford.

Holding the microphone to his lips and brushing the long robust fingers of his free hand through his virile mass of whitening hair, he addressed his audience. Little mobile

wrinkles of mirth played at the outer corners of his benevolent eyes.

"Let us tonight imagine," he began, "that we are one big extended family. Well-known to one another, comfortable in each other's presence, ready to share in the pleasures to be proferred by your fathers and mothers, your grandads and grandmums."

The audience looked at other members of their "family" and tittered.

"And they *shall* be the pleasures, to be sure. No talent quest this; there are no judges, there shall be no prizes. But talent there is, too often untapped, unsuspected, ignored, locked in darkness behind jammed doors until a team such as ours at "The Gables" discovers the key, the oil and hinges, as it were, and brings it into the light of day."

An enthusiastic member of the audience showed his appreciation. He began to applaud but stopped abruptly and bashfully when he saw that no-one else jointed him.

Doctor Radford beamed and addressed the zealot.

"You may collect your cheque from me later."

The audience laughed, though I did notice, here and there, vacant immobile dull-witted elderly faces in their midst.

"But the evening is not mine. It belongs to our esteemed senior citizens. And it is upon them that I shall now call. You will hear 'Silent Night' sung by Mrs. Winifred Bilson, 'Galway Bay' by our resident Irish laddie Mr. Patrick O'Flaherty and our own beloved 'Waltzing Matilda' by Mrs Constance Whitehead. Mr. Alfred Measham, a one-time barber, will relate some amusing stories. Miss Elizabeth Cruickshank will play a piano medley of popular melodies, Mr. Rupert Forbes will recite Paterson's 'Clancy of the Overflow' a la Peter Dawson, and finally, Mr. Arthur Reynolds" — here Doctor Radford indicated with extended arm a lean bent bald man in the front row — "will deliver a passage from the great English bard's 'King Lear'."

"So he's going through with it, after all," said Michael Bennett beside me, then added, "We couldn't stop him."

"And now," Doctor Radford said with an extravagant flourish of a large hand, "may I introduce to you Miss Hazel McKenzie, our devoted and resourceful occupational therapist, a lass of many talents who will accompany our performers at the piano. — Hazel."

A woman approaching thirty-five, barely a "lass" any more, stepped forward, and briskly, smiling between teeth too large for her otherwise foreshortened face, went up on to the platform. Doctor Radford, the perennial gentleman, offering his hand in assistance, bowed to her.

Then on a cue, an older woman of seventy if a day, dumpy and doughy-cheeked, her hair tinted for the occasion, tripped forward with quick short steps. A burst of applause from a bevy of supports accompanied her. From the end of one row came the cry, "Good on yer', Mum!"

Doctor Radford stepped back, sat down unseen behind the piano, and "Mum" — Mrs Winifred Bilson — folded her hands between her breasts. Miss McKenzie struck the first chords and Mrs. Bilson, faltering but slightly, raised anchor and launched into song.

"Oh, God, Winnie dear, you can do better than that," said Michael Bennett beside me as the first words "Silent Night, Holy Night" broke forth in a shrill jagged quivering shriek that made the audience titter and giggle.

But the singer was oblivious to the audience. She held her eyes shut, lost in flabby wrinkled folds of flesh, swayed tremulously on the turbulent waves of her song and rocked her head on rising mighty crests of cacophanous sound as holy infant so tender and mild slept in heavenly peace.

The verse at an end, the singer opened her eyes, stared glazedly into the audience, clamped them shut once more and, clasping her fingers together still more tightly, set sail again in a reptition of the song. Michael Bennett beside me groaned. Miss McKenzie pounded the piano keys more forcefully to make herself heard, but Winifred Bilson, irrepressible, and in any case lost in the oceans of her passion drowned her out. Only when she was about to embark on her third voyage did Doctor Radford, smiling benevolently, emerge from his retreat. Applauding her and repeating "Very nice, thank you Winifred, very nice indeed," he took her gently by an elbow, bade the audience show its appreciation and escorted the now awakened, at first bewildered and then beaming old lady back to her seat. Once more, a cry sprang out from near the aisle, "Well done, Mum, we're proud o' yer' ", followed by a gust of breezy hilarity.

While the audience was applauding, the sound of sobbing arose from the front row. There, hunched over, his shoulders heaving, his bald head quivering, the man pointed out by

Doctor Radford as Arthur Reynolds was weeping. He sniffed, snorted, snivelled. Three women in their forties sitting immediately behind him leaned forward. One rested a large coarse hand on his shoulders. Another whispered into his ear. He became placated.

"Good old Arthur," said Michael Bennett. "Next thing you know he'll be choking with laughter."

Mr. Patrick O'Flaherty and Mrs. Constance Whitehead who followed Winifred Bilson sang as if overawed by the occasion. With the Irishman, the tune was certainly that of "Galway Bay" but the words were beyond recognition. They were lost in the mesh of a thick deep-throated vibrating brogue. And as for Mrs. Whitehead, a tiny shrivelled woman of seventy-six with a pinched nose and pixie-like chin, she made a stiff self-conscious gesture inviting the audience to join her in her "Waltzing Matilda", but receiving less than a half-hearted response from the gathered "family", she battled dourly through all the verses of her chosen song, heaved visible signs of relief when the ordeal was over, and scurried rabbit-like from the stage.

Hazel McKenzie, smiling between her big teeth and clutching her music sheets, followed after.

This time, a protracted insane chuckling sound arose from the front row, a thin fragile cackle that simmered, waned and simmered again, rising in little explosive convulsions punctuated by jagged snorts as though some weird inhuman creature — a dog, hyena — were being tickled in the ribs.

"What did I tell you?" Michael Bennett said.

In unison, the three women sitting behind Arthur Reynolds leaned forward again.

"Chekhov," Michael Bennett said.

"Chekhov?" I echoed.

"The Three Sisters," he said, indicating the women. "The old man's daughters."

Doctor Radford, introducing the next performer, cast a quick glance at his cackling patient and raised his voice tactfully to divert attention.

As Doctor Radford had promised, Arthur Measham, the one-time barber, himself a balding man with a florid mobile moon-like face did relate some amusing stories. That they were ancient and corny seemed to disturb no-one. The audience laughed encouragingly. He was in good form.

Succeeding him, the acts of Miss Elizabeth Cruickshank and Mrs. Rupert Forbes were pale offerings indeed. The pianist, a severe bird-eyed wizened reed of a woman sitting stiff and spinsterly behind the piano, served up a tinkling pot-pourri of aged tunes, humourlessly interspersing honky-tonk levity with ponderous renditions of "Greensleeves," "Ash Grove"and "Londonderry Air". As for Mr. Forbes, every inch the retired Army colonel and later civil servant, with jowls, whiskers, immaculately-parted hair and haughty gaze — he was, alas, no Peter Dawson. His voice was a grater, coarse and rough, its range as meagre as gold in Hades.

"Just as well young Clancy's not around to hear this," Michael Bennett said.

But the audience — Doctor Radford's "big extended family" — was in sufficient good humour to be generous in the allowances it made to artistic aberration and, to judge from its applause, gaiety and chatter, obviously did not share Michael Bennett's cynical misanthropy.

"That's uncharitable," I said.

"Wait till you hear our friend."

"Our friend?"

With his chin, he indicated Arthur Reynolds who, in response to Doctor Radford's call, had risen with difficulty from his seat and was now shuffling pathetically towards the makeshift stage. I looked at the three sisters. One of them, obviously the eldest, was standing tensely, her gaze fixed rigidly upon her father. The others held their breath.

"Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Logan, Mrs. Strauss," Michael Bennett said, pointing to the sisters in turn. "At least one of them visits old Arthur each day. They take it in turns."

Doctor Radford, dexterously manoeuvering the awkward Arthur Reynolds to his position before the microphone, was maintaining the steady patter. Wherever the old man was placed, there he stood.

"Our Mr. Reynolds," Doctor Radford said in his cheerful deep finely-modulated voice, "was an actor long before Sir Laurence Olivier was a twinkle in his father's eye, as the saying goes. In his time, he performed with the Camberwell Players, acted in a number of comedies at the old Savoy, and reached his zenith in the Melbourne Repertory Company's production of 'King Lear'. It is in this role that we shall see Arthur Reynolds this evening as he brings that noble king to

life before you. Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, brothers and sisters — King Lear!"

A few people applauded. The sisters, one, two, and three, bit their lips.

Arthur Reynolds looked anything but royal. For a full minute, he stood before the microphone, a bowed, bald man with vacant eyes, and dressed in a grey suit become too loose for him and a creased bow-tie sitting askew beneath his stubbled chin. For a full minute, not knowing what to do with his hands, he smacked his lips, scratched at an ear and blinked.

In the audience, feet shuffled impatiently, a girl giggled, her mother leaning over said "Hush."

When the first words came, they were an explosion. Arthur Reynold's face was contorted in a grotesque grimace of distance, confusion and void, although the narrow eyebrows knitting together gave hint of burgeoning emotion.

> "What?!" he howled. "Deny to speak with me? They are sick?
> They are weary?
> They have all night travelled?
> Mere fetches; fetch me a better answer!"

Mrs. Strauss, the youngest of the daughters, looked around, embarrassed. Mrs. Richardson, expressionless, held her gaze fixed upon her father. Mrs. Logan between them, looked at the floor.

Arthur Reynolds smacked his lips again. His dull eyes blinked. Then he snickered madly, stopped, scratched his nose, reached into a nostril and set forth once more, this time his voice rising too shrill and high-pitched.

> "Darkness . . . and devils!
> Horses my saddle! Call my train together!"

"Forgive him, O Father William Shakespeare," said Michael Bennett, "for he knoweth not what he doeth."

"Ooohh!" the performer then shrieked, raising a thin white wiry hand upward where it remained as if suspended.

> "Better . . . better . . . better thou hadst not been born better not to have pleased me!"

"Pity his daughters," Michael Bennett said. "But he insisted. . . They have really been so good to him."

"Suspend . . . suspend thy purpose," the actor then howled, "if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Dry . . . dry up in her the organs of increase
And from her de . . . de . . . derogate body never spring
A babe to know her! If she must . . . learn,
A child of spleen create
Let its wrinkles stamp into her youth of brow
With cadent tears fry . . . fret channels in her cheeks
That she may feel to l . . . laugh . . . laughter and contempt
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is . . . it is . . . it is . . .
To have a childless . . . to have a child . . . to have a thankless child!"

The speech ended, old Arthur stood bewildered, his thin arm still in the air. He looked to right and left, obviously saw nothing. His tie had become still more askew. The audience applauded, the suffering daughters breathed more easily, Doctor Radford stepped forward.

But the old man had not yet finished. Once more, he drew himself up. His bald head glistened under the fluorescent lamps; he stared into the space before him and lowered his arm to shoulder height, extending a rigid quaking finger, stark and unyielding as if in accusation.

"Doth any here know me?!" he cried out.

The three sisters sat bold upright like a marble in their seats.

"This is not Lear!" Arthur Reynolds shrilled.
"Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?. . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

Who first noticed, it was hard to say. But in the audience, there arose a titter. It spread quickly, especially among the children who gave in to more open rolling laughter, and then among some older individuals wanting in tact. Others lowered their heads to suppress their merriment; others still coughed into their palms. Mrs. Richardson, the eldest, stood up, said, "Oh, no!" and bade her sisters get up with her. And

in the midst of the merriment, a child's clear voice rang out, "Look, Mum, Dad, he's wee'd in his pants."

And it was true. For in the middle of the old man's declamation, a stain appeared, at first small and round in the region of the crotch, then, expanding and extending, ribboning black and tortuously, a snake, down the length of a trouser leg towards the baggy cuff.

"King Lear, my word," said Michael Bennett, nudging me in the ribs.

Arthur Reynolds was clearly unaware of the stir which he had created. Standing, grotesque in his pose upon the stage, he repeated again and again the last line of his delivery.

> "Who is it who can tell me who I am?
> Who is it who can tell me who I am?
> Who is it. . ."

Miss McKenzie and two nurses, realising what had happened, hastened to the platform. Doctor Radford was by Arthur Reynold's side and was leading him away by an elbow. But it was the sisters, the old man's daughters, Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Logan and Mrs. Strauss who took him swiftly and expertly under their wing.

Doctor Radford tried with humour to divert attention, but the bemused eyes of the audience still clung to the performer as the three sisters guided him down the steps.

"It's just a small accident, Father," Mrs. Richardson said. Leading her father by his thin bony hand and avoiding the stares of those about them, she bore the air of a martyr, but it was a martyrdom which she had no intention of enjoying.

Her sister, Mrs. Logan, taking her father's other arm also obliterated the surroundings from her awareness. She consoled her father, if consolation was to be needed. "A wonderful performance, Dad. King Lear and all. The real thing. You were the star of the evening."

It was Mrs. Strauss, the youngest, who must have felt the ignominy of the situation the most. She was certainly the most embarrassed. And embarrassment ignited action. She flushed crimson as she followed down the aisle on her father's heels. She turned her small chiselled face to right and left, flared black, her eyes angry and burning upon the audience, raised a menacing palm and shouted in a voice amazingly forceful for so small a creature:

"What are you ogling at, you beasts, you peasants, you . . . you insensitive creatures?! Have pity, respect. He's an old man, after all, an old old man!"

The huddled group with Arthur Reynolds in the centre pressed down the aisle. People, in no way touched by the woman's outburst, smiled, giggled, pointed. Children clapped their hands. Michael Bennett who should have known better snorted "King Lear," and I, too, who would soon have old Arthur as my patient, stared after him.

At the door, they paused. Arthur Reynolds, looking with his dull stupid eyes at his daughters, reached out to each in turn. He was smiling at them. Yet it was not a smile. It was something grotesque, a mere crooked stretching of the lips.

Mrs. Richardson, Mrs. Logan and Mrs. Strauss closed in upon him.

"You are such fine, such gentle ladies," Arthur Reynolds said in a thin whining voice that I barely caught. "If only . . . if only my daughters . . . my daughters . . . if only *they* were like you."

The Next In Line

"Catherine!"

"Yes, Mother."

"The pan!"

"Coming."

In the bathroom, Catherine Holden hurriedly swallowed the two aspirin (the second dose in two hours) and replaced the bottle and the glass in the cupboard. Bending down to pick up the bedpan from beside the toilet bowl, she caught sight of her fifty years in the mirror and grimaced, grimaced from pain, distaste, disgust, though even disgust had become too tame a definition for the antipathy she felt towards the whole situation.

"And none too soon," her mother, Bessie Richardson, said vexatiously from her bed when Catherine entered. "If you're such a sluggard now, how will you be in five years' time? Or ten? Or. . . Thank God I shan't live to see it. . ."

"Well, if I'd been born with wings. . ."

"Then they'd be clipped like an emu's," the older woman snorted, tossing her head, itself starkly bird-like with its salient beaked nose and hard black beady eyes blinking like a camera shutter in sharply osseous sockets too large for them. She pushed down the covers and manoeuvered herself into position.

Her daughter crouched on the bed behind her.

"All right, now, lift!"

The patient rocked gracelessly from side to side as her daughter, tugging, raised the back of her nightgown and forced an arm under the jagged buttocks whose flesh had turned to autumn. With the other hand, Catherine Holden pushed the bedpan forward, holding her breath as a spasm of pain splinted her lower back.

"Have mercy!" Bessie Richardson yelped. "Not so rough! Are you after gloves for your birthday? Next thing you'll know I'll have bedsores like your Uncle Albert after he broke his hip. . ."

"Uncle Mick. . ."

"Albert, Mick. In any case, they were the end of him. What with his sores, and bronichal pneumonia. Lord, they

were foul, those sores — you could put your fist in them. . . I can still smell them. Flesh rotting like a carcass in the desert. . ."

Bessie Richardson sniffed and twitched her nose.

Catherine Holden, duty done, pressed her dress to her bosom and backed away. She heard the flush of water hissing, then tingling against aluminium arising from the bed. Then, perched on the pan, her thin clawed hands drawing up the covers, Bessie Richardson farted.

"Mount Vesuvius," Cathering Holden said, less amused than trying to thwart revulsion with humour.

"A speech from the Prime Minister," her mother said — her standard jest which the ninety-first time around, had worn thin.

Catherine tightened her lips, yielding birth to deep dimples of annoyance at the corners of her mouth. She pressed her back against the door, the better to relieve her pain and to maintain distance.

"Well, he's better off where he is now," Bessie Richardson announced from her throne. "Uncle Mick, timid soul. Never a day's happiness in his life. A churchmouse, so poor, working in that airless toolshop all his years, from fourteen to sixty-four, a cough like a consumptive's, his wife a battle-axe, his sons bleeding him of every penny, dead a year before retirement, his tombstone scarcely standing a week and already scribbled on and chipped by vandals. No rest even in death. . ."

"*That* was Uncle Albert's. . ."

"Uncle Mick's!"

"Have it your way."

Her mother did not answer immediately. Catherine saw her draw her shoulders inwards and grit her dentures as she strained on the pan. She half-expected her mother, in consummation of her labour, to murmur "Ahh" with relief.

Instead, the old woman's shoulders relaxed, her cheeks, chin and brow ebbed from the high tide of gathered tension, and she fixed her gaze upon a wart on her arm at which she began to scratch. Catherine, herself infected with the inclination to scratch, raised a hand to her breast but selected an innocuous spot around her navel.

"Though I must admit," her mother resumed, "it could just as easily have been Albert. A ne'er do well, if ever there was one. Plays football as a kid, breaks his toe; lands a job in

a timberyard, loses his finger in a saw; climbs a scaffold to clean some windows — first day there, trips over the bucket, topples down like a sack of onions, cracks his skull. He was all of forty-eight when we put him underground."

The vapours of Bessie Richardson's anal exertions were now becoming manifest. Custom and tact and the awareness that, at a different age, her mother had had to endure her own ordure, held Catherine back from blunt action. She sniffed once, twice, tightened her jaw, then held her breath. She had too easily, too unseeingly, she now cursed herself, let herself be trapped by her mother's adopted invalidism, and from duties once assumed she could not now renege. Her stomach in her throat, she looked to left and right seeking diversion.

"You may open a window if it'll make you feel better," she heard her mother say coldly regally, and under her breath Catherine cursed the old woman more vehemently for so bluntly highlighting her discomfiture.

Nonetheless, she complied, none too reluctantly, moving to the window as briskly as decency and the drawing in her back would allow, training the mesh curtains to the sides, unclasping the metal latch and easing up the window that grated unpleasantly with a brassy rasp. Leaning out, she took deep breaths of the Spring-moistened hydrangeas that grew outside but they reminded her too poignantly of evanescence and she turned away.

Her mother's voice had grown more strident.

"Mary didn't even cry. Went to poor Albert's funeral, all dressed in black. She looked the part all right — dress, shoes, stockings, veil — but not a tear. Then inside three months, she moved in with that union bloke of hers. 'Got to live, you know', she used to say, 'Ask Bill. He'll tell you'. Like a parrot. It became a regular chorus. 'Got to live, you know, got to live, you know'. As if she were dying and clutching at a straw. And she died all right. Barely eight months later. Rat poison. In her garden. Accident, Bill said. Misadventure, said the coroner. While I reckon her Bill just up and knocked her off."

"You're fantasising," Catherine Holden said testily. "You always have."

"Fantasising?! Then what, pray tell me, was the meaning of the note on the table when Bill was found with his head in

the oven: 'Some goes with poison, others with gas. Forgive me, Lord'?"

"Proves nothing. Could have been suicide on Mary's part, too."

"Not she! 'You got to live, you go to live'. Remember?"

Despite herself, Catherine turned her head for another breath of garden air.

"Then why. . .?" she said.

"He got tired of her, I guess. Like . . . like your dad got tired of me and. . ."

Bessie Richardson flicked her tongue across her lips.

". . . and made off with that stripper."

"Mother! He went into the navy!"

Her mother shook her head as if with pity.

"*That* was fantasising. He made off with a stripper."

Within Catherine, turmoil and resentment flared.

"But you always told me. . ."

Bessie Richardson flourished a wasted hand in the air.

"But he came back, your dad."

"Enough!" Catherine wanted to cry out. "I don't want to hear any more! Shut your face!" But transfixed, she could not deny her whetted curiosity.

"He came back?"

Bessie Richardson's voice lept up ten decibels.

"Beating his breast, crying, 'I'm sorry, Bess, I'm sorry, Bess, I love you after all', drunk to his eyeballs, his breath a brewery, the gutter in his cuffs, and full of syphilis. . ."

"And you threw him out?!"

"Last I heard of him, he was found cold in his bed at the People's Palace. . ."

"You're inventing all this! You're nuts!"

Bessie Richardson on her perch contracted again. She pressed her hands into her belly, bit her lips, shut her eyes tightly and quivered. For all her effort, her gain was a blast of wind.

"The Prime Minister's at it again."

She scratched at a sunken cheek.

"But if it suits you to go on believing he went into the navy and drowned in the Pacific, that's all right by me."

Catherine Holden became aware of intensified pressure on her chest. Speech came with difficulty.

"Then why, why, for heaven's sake, are you telling me all this? So long, so long after?"

"For peace sake. To leave this world without a lie on my conscience. May the Lord forgive me my other sins."

"Liar! Hypocrite! Witch!" Rancour rankled within Catherine. The image of a man, in this instance her father lying dead — cold, blue, oblivious and unbreathing — unnerved her.

She sought release, but the walls, the foetor, her mother's venom hemmed her in.

"Finished with the pan?", she said desperately.

Bessie Richardson ignored the question.

"Don't grieve for him now. He wasn't worth your tears. He wasn't much of a father. Anyways, if it was a father you wanted, you ended up getting one."

"Jack was not my father. He was my husband."

"He was old enough. Twenty seven years between you. . ."

"He was a good man."

"So long as you licked his arse."

"You ought to talk."

"I'm your mother."

"*He* was my husband."

"Ha. Your best years wasted. Living with a man getting more cantankerous with the years and jealous and suspicious. No children. . ."

"The child was stillborn. . ."

"And then his sickness. . . Slow, slow wasting away, his muscles useless so that you had to feed him, wash him, wipe him. Bedridden three years. No life of your own. . . Remember?"

"So what's different now?"

"I'm your mother."

"And this is living?"

"I'll die soon enough. Then you'll be free. I'm next in line. Albert's gone. And Mick. And Mary. And Bill and your dad and your hero Jack. I'm next in line. You heard Dr. Kelly. The heart's irregular, the blood's anaemic, the arteries are hardened, the kidneys are brittle. Living is just one regular journey towards dying. That's all it is and on the way full of misery and drunkenness and accident and waste and death and. . ."

Catherine, supporting her back with a hand, burst out, flame in her cheeks.

"For God's sake, for my sake, stop, stop this confounded incessant talk of death, of dying, of . . . of. . ."

Bessie Richardson reached under her pillow for the toilet roll. Her bird's head bobbed up and down.

"My, my. You suddenly been stung by a bee or something?"

"Mother! I'm suffocating, stifling! Remember Mary — you got to live, you got to live!? Remember Mick, the flesh rotting? That's not his rotting flesh that you're still smelling. It's mine, mine! While I'm looking after you, selling myself to you. . . While. . . Here, Mother, look! Look!"

Wincing, Catherine moved towards her mother, her fingers tearing frenziedly at the buttons of her dress.

"Look!"

She pulled down the shoulder straps of her dress, her petticoat, her brassiere to expose a breast, large, misshapen, rigid and festering, weeping into a towel that had been draped about it.

"I denied myself for Jack, denied myself for you. . . Never lived. . . Truly lived. . . And now, it's beyond cure. It's in the bone, in the spine, in. . . No, not you Mother, but I, I am next in line and . . . and, Mother!, I haven't lived, I, I. . ."

Bessie Richardson looked at her daughter's breast, then at her face in which for the first time she recognised a certain leanness, then through the window where a draught was rummaging through the curtains. She turned the toilet roll between her hands.

"Catherine," she said, drawing herself upright, her voice hard, remote, colourless. "Take the pan away. Living. Dying. What's it matter? It all stinks. It's all a sewer. It's all sheer sheer shit."

Kitty Cat

Orphaned soon after birth, Oscar was raised by a bevy of aunts who could not get him off their hands quickly enough. He was not wholly unattractive — looking into his deep black plaintive eyes, Aunt May could sometimes forgive him everything — but his club foot which cost the family a small fortune in medical expenses and the fact that he wet his bed well into his tenth year did not endear him to his protectors and gave cause for much merriment amongst his cousins who were born on the rosier side of health.

Cousin Ellen, Aunt Bertha's freckled red-headed daughter, was not so much the cruellest as the least imaginative. Seizing opportunity when Oscar was setting the dinner-table, she stretched out a leg and looked the other way. Oscar, whom experience should already have taught to expect mischief of any sort, teetered on the leg with the irons, toppled awkwardly and fell, the scraping, squealing and thud of his own falling drowned by the heart-clamping clatter of shattering plates which scattered like fugitive white mice to every corner of the kitchen.

Ellen was the first to leap up.

"You clumsy, clumsy, clumsy ox!," she said, giving further industry to her feet as she thrust the point of her leathered toes into his ribs. And then Aunt Bertha, too, was upon him, her face an overripe angelina plum as she belted the huddled cowering boy with a sodden tea-towel whose stiff corners stung his neck and cheeks.

Cousins Ian and Bruce, Aunt Rose's darlings, played other games. Playing cops and robbers, Oscar was always the robber; playing cowboys and Indians, he was always the Indian, roles in which, favouring his gammy leg, he would invariably find himself easy captive and tied to an oak with leather straps while the brothers ran off, laughing, to play cricket or football or to catch yabbies in the creek, leaving him to the heat or rain until Aunt Rose preparing the dinner reminded them of their absent cousin.

But cousins Mary and Edith, Aunt May's randy twins, had the most fun. Luring Oscar to the shed behind the house, they grabbed hold of him and pulled down his pants. Mary

prodding and probing with avid fingers, Edith squealing, herself reaching eagerly to feel, jeering through broad white teeth and juicy lips how such a little shrivelled sausage can at night so wet the bed. Oscar would push and pummel at their lithe elusive mobile bodies and draw up his knees as best he could. But the girls, wily and determined, their little adolescent breasts beginning to rise, would reach from behind and claw and pull so that his stomach throbbed until, satisfied and trembling, the twins would depart with tittering giggles and demurely go inside the house to attend, however abstractedly, to their homework or their piano practice, leaving Oscar doubled over to nurse his pain, whimpering with the very shame of nakedness, infinitely more acute than when Aunt Bertha in front of Ellen rubbed his nose in anger in the coarse uriniferous sheets of his bed.

His uncles had little to do with him, except when occasion presented — and between his malicious cousins and complaining aunts, occasion was found readily and often enough — to ply a heavy hand upon him, Uncle David with his leather belt, Uncle Albert with a rod and Uncle Leo with a bare massive stinging palm which they applied — for this, Oscar felt at times a sense of recompense — with equal alacrity upon their own brood as well. From them, he kept his distance, if only to avoid an admonitory clout on the head should he come too near, but knew that once they came for him, not the biggest house or the deepest yard or the highest fence could ever put paid to their determination and save him from another rancorous fervid full-blooded thrashing.

If he had no reason to be happy in his cousins' company, neither did he find contentment out of it. Left alone, the days for him were long. Unable to climb trees, scale the rugged sharp-stoned slopes of quarries, chase yabbies, do more than bowl from a standing position or play a dead bat in cricket — football was, of course, altogether out — he sat often on the stony or grassy rim of desertion, watching dully, less envious or self-pitying than abandoned unless it occurred to his cousins and their friends to make more hilarious sport. Then they remembered him, first to his delight, then to his pain. But more often, he was his own company, propped against a wall or lying on moist grass, creating ships and rockets and monsters out of the clouds, his thoughts revolving in the circus of day-dreams in which he escaped his cousins, his uncles and his aunts, to Jamaica or Mount Popocapetl —

what wonderful exotic names! —, in which, heroically, his leg still in irons, he ran the fastest mile or walked across the Niagara on a tightrope. How they would be sorry, all of them, when they saw his picture in the newspapers or saw him on television, a hero being paraded in the streets between ten-deep rows of cheering crowds; and they would come to him bearing gifts and kneel before him and beg to be pardoned — Aunts Bertha, Rose and May, Uncles Dave, Albert and Leo, and Cousins Ellen, Ian, Bruce and the twins Edith and Mary — and he would . . . he would . . . — what *would* he do? — accept their flowing tears with all the sweetness of forgiveness?, or stand like a king, angry, lowering and firm, a rigid finger stretched forth banishing the repentant supplicants from his presence forever? But, awakened from reverie by a passing stranger, by his cousins' nearby laughter or by a cawing magpie flying low, he felt the firmness of the wall in his back or the cold moistness of the grass, and those dreams — mists before the eyes — evaporated, leaving a hollow echoing emptiness as the hard insurmountable reality of stone and tree and grass and of the irons on his leg flooded over the entire colour-filled terrain of his too short-lived fancies.

Nor did the hours at school offer relief from tedium. Seldom invited to answer a question in arithmetic or to write a sentence on the blackboard or to tell the class of some interesting happening — his speech no less than his gait was tedious and wearing of patience —, he sat at his desk in the farthest corner of the class and carved lions into its wooden top or gazed through the window with animal interest at the janitor heaping cartons, paper and garbage into the incinerator in the yard. The bell rang, he entered the class; the bell rang, he left; and sometime in between, his name was called and recorded in the day-book as having been present. As for the rest, arithmetic, reading, spelling, drawing — these passed him by in the slow empty train of oblivion.

Little wonder then that Oscar's final report card registered a chain of Fails, the only Pass being recorded against the heading "Conduct". Indeed, for sheer silence and unobtrusiveness in class, no other could have excelled. Aunts Bertha, Rose and May, learning that their nephew had to be kept down in the same grade, were distressed. They came together to confer, but new resolutions were meagre. Swallowing their scones dripping with jam and cream and

flushing them down with tea, they decided in unison that the boy "just did not have it up there" (here Aunt Bertha indicated her temple), that private lessons over summer would prove too costly (another operation on the ankle six months earlier had already cost enough, and, besides, there was their vacation in Torquay, Cowes and Queenscliff to think of), and that he was too young by far to send out to work. Ah!, they would continue to care for him as before — after all, who else could take him? — taking turns to feed him, to meet the bills, to protect him, yes, to protect him, he was really so defenceless.

And so, nothing really changed, if change was to be seen in of Oscar's circumstances.

But a change there was, if barely remarkable.

The twins, Cousins Edith and Mary, were New Year babies and for their birthday, their father Uncle Leo brought home a kitten, a plump orange furry animal with slitted green eyes, short white whiskers and a snow-white delicate patch on the very crown of its head between the ears. This, besides the splendid bicycle Uncle Leo and Aunt May had bought the previous week for Christmas. (Oscar, not forgotten, had received from the three families a set of chequers, a copy of "Treasure Island" and a pair of summer pyjamas. Looking upon these meagre gifts, he had secretly wept within, even as he kissed each of his relations upon the cheeks in thanks).

The kitten which was named Ginger — "all orange pussies are called Ginger," Aunt May had insisted — became quickly pampered. The twins Edith and Mary rolled it on its back, tickled its purring belly, let it cling to their tunics by its claws, and fed it milk, meat and fish and whatever leftovers remained of their meal, all of which the little animal accepted with obvious gluttonous delight. Where it had been plump, it very soon became fat, and if its indolence and sluggishness were pardoned, it was because its tender age, its trusting expression and its soft delicate fur still rendered it cute and loveable and worthy of the sisters' endless moist-lipped kisses. And one day Oscar kissed it, too, but only when he was out of sight of his cousins. For Edith and Mary, stroking the yielding neck of the purring, mewing animal lying languid in their arms, had cautioned him soon enough that Ginger was *their* pet and that kittens, when they grew into cats, hissed and scratched and bit at little boys who peed in their beds and wore irons on their leg. God alone help him if he

held it, fed it, touched it, for it would, as sure God made little apples, scratch out his eyes. And laughing, satisfied with themselves, they pranced away to other games, the kitten trailing after them for a distance.

Left alone one day, Oscar sat against the oak that grew behind the house and watched the little orange animal. For a time, it leapt about and chased after flies, swiping at them with a swift clawed paw, its tongue thin and crimson between its teeth, its short white whiskers dancing to the twitching of its mouth. And then, as if weary of its sport, it rooted about the foundations of the house, peered into the basin under the garden tap and sniffed at a muddied pair of sandals left outside by Edith before settling down immobile beside them, drawing under itself its paws and closing its eyes as it basked in the warmth of the afternoon sun. Oscar watched it. It sat barely ten yards away, oblivious to its surroundings, its full rib-less sides expanding and collapsing with every breath. Oscar chafed at its torpid disregard of him. He wanted to touch it, stroke it, fondle it, take it to his own chest as Cousins Edith and Mary had done. Finding a twig beside him, he tossed it at the kitten. The animal opened its small green slitted lustreless eyes, reached a languid paw towards the offending object, looked at it indolently and returned to its repose. Oscar had expected a more giving response. He tossed another twig, a bigger one, and then a stone which bounced and rolled and struck the kitten in its flank. Thus roused, it leapt up and vaulted a short distance towards the house from where it peered at Oscar and mewed squeakily at him.

Acknowledged, Oscar rose to his knees, his movements hampered and rendered awkward by his leg-iron. Remorse at have bruised the defenceless creature touched him. He held out a hand rubbed his fingers together and coaxed in a conciliatory tone, "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty. Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty."

The kitten, at first wary, then reconciled, bounded towards him. It sniffed at the extended fingers, stroked its small round head against his thigh and placed a paw upon his arm. He brushed his free hand through its downy orange fur and felt the purling rumble of its soft plump purring body. Then, picking it up with both hands, Oscar held it close to him, held it tight and felt the coursing of a happy delicate thrilling vibration within his own body as he lowered his face towards

the yielding creature and kissed it, at first timidly, then more resolutely on the snow-white patch between its ears. His face tingled, his hands quivered with uncommon excitement, his teeth were set on edge with the very delirium of something new, a tantalising wordless emotion of closeness to a living being that clung to him with the same intensity as he to it. He wanted to play with it, and the kitten, nuzzling at his neck, seemed willing enough. But there were few ways in which to play with an animal. He grasped it tight, then held it at a distance, set it on its short hind legs, then raised it aloft by the belly so that its trunk arched above his head and its legs dangled helplessly. The kitten purred, mewed, squealed. Oscar squeezed its belly more tightly, saw its green eyes widen, and then rolled back on the grass, falling heavily as his splinted leg wrenched beneath him, the kitten rudely jolted with the sudden jagged jerking motion. He felt the animal stiffen, then felt it writhe with gathering frenzy as it snapped with its teeth and struck at the void with its sharp-clawed paws.

"Kitty, Kitty. Kitty, Kitty," Oscar placated it with sound, the while crooking his elbows, drawing it close, then raising it once more. "I'm only playing, Kitty Cat, I won't hurt you, Kitty Cat, I promise, you're my friend, Kitty Cat."

The kitten continued to wriggle, scratched at the void, hissed.

"You wouldn't scratch Oscar's eyes out, would you, Kitty Cat? Edith's lying, isn't she, and Mary too? Kitty Cat is Oscar's pet, too, and Oscar loves Kitty Cat. Does Kitty Cat love Oscar?"

Its fur bristled, its tail stood erect, its ears were rigid. Oscar, in a quiver, swung it from side to side, rocked it, jerked it, tossed it, caught it, watching with trembling agonising fascination, agitation and delight as the little animal struggled frenetically.

"Edith and Mary are naughty. Uncle Leo is a bad man. Auntie May is a witch. I hate them all. They are cruel and they hate Oscar. Kitty, Kitty, Kitty Cat, you won't hate Oscar too?"

The kitten, struggling, lashed out with a desperate claw. Oscar felt the searing pain of tearing in his wrist, but his hurt, as he let go of the animal, was of a different sort. Burying the heel of his splinted leg into the ground, he jerked himself upright, grasped his injured arm on which a thin rivulet of

blood ran down to the elbow and, suddenly remembering Aunt Bertha, hissed, "You little monster! Ungrateful creature! I hate you, I hate you, I do!"

The liberated animal had scuttled away and was hiding beneath the long verandah at the back of the house from which, quivering, shivering, panting, it stared at Oscar. Oscar, rooting about him, found a stone and hurled it at the petrified animal, but the direction was wide of the mark and the stone tore through the outer wire door to strike against the wooden one beyond.

Too late, he heard, then saw, Cousins Edith and Mary coming up the path to the back of the house. Edith was wheeling her bicycle around the corner; Mary, her freckled face a shiny crimson, was skipping, laughing, talking aloud. Running ahead of Edith, she appeared first and, rooting about her, called out, "Here, Ginger Puss, where are you?"

Oscar clambered to his feet. He tried to hide behind the oak, but the iron on his leg betrayed him. He winced with the burning rawness of the pain in his wrist. Caught, riveted to one spot, mortified into immobility, Oscar stared aghast at Mary and Edith. His breath stuck in his throat. He trembled. Cousin Mary, her face suddenly eager as well as flushed, caught sight of him, saw too the thick scarlet smudge on his forearm, heard at the same time the mewing of the kitten under the verandah.

"Whatcha' been doin'?" she shrilled at Oscar. "What'sa matter with Ginger? Ya' chase her under the house?"

In vain, he tried to evade her, but Mary was upon him. Edith had dropped the bicycle to the ground and was coaxing the kitten from its retreat.

"Ginger's frightened," she said, kneeling beside the verandah so that her panties showed over her buttocks, "she's frightened to death!"

Showing square white teeth between sneering mobile lips, Mary lunged into Oscar. Her nostrils flared in the semblance of anger, but her eyes, her large circular gleaming grey eyes, in so far as Oscar could tell from eyes, betrayed a deeper wilder reckless pleasure.

"Ya' scared 'er, didn't ya', admit it, didn't ya?!" she jeered, striking his shoulder with a fist.

He retreated a step, felt the oak in his back. "It scratched me," he whimpered.

"Ya' was warned, wasn't ya?!"

"I was only playing. . ."

"Ya' 'ad no right to' play with 'er," Mary shrilled, knuckling his ribs, "She don't like little boys that pee in bed. Ya' was warned. Ya' learned yer' lesson and serves ya' right. — Ya' got 'er, Edie?"

"Yeah," Edith said, approaching, cradling the orange animal in her arms as she stroked its head. "She's frightened as 'ell, poor thing."

"Ya' hear, ya' bugger?" Mary leered, grasping Oscar by his bloodied arm. "Ya' scared Ginger out of 'er wits."

Oscar yelped in pain as her grip burned his wrist. Tears welled in his eyes; he sniffed back the watery rheum that trickled down inside his nostrils. His white lips twitched and he flailed his free arm to fend off Cousin Mary who was gripping him in a vice.

"Whatcha' say we do with 'im, Edie? Pull down 'is pants again?"

Oscar, his pained moist black eyes darting frantically between the twins, intuitively pressed his legs together.

"Cut off 'is little sausage with a knife, I say," said Edith, holding the now-placated animal to her neck and laughing lasciviously, salaciously into Oscar's ear.

"No!" Oscar cried out desperately as he flailed about with his arm and kicked with his healthy leg. "Let me go, you're hurting me, let me go!"

He heard their laughter, their shrill ugly raucous obscene laughter, and saw their faces, in their lewdness odious mirror images of each other. Edith had set down the animal and he felt their pressing closeness, felt their hands reaching between his legs, felt too their breaths in his face. He sank his back further against the oak, kicked out wildly and desperately, and heard Mary yelp and leap back, hopping howlingly on one foot and grasping the shin of the other between her hands. Edith, wrought to vengeful anger at the offence done to her sister, pounced upon Oscar, pinned him against the tree and brought up a broad blunt vicious knee into his crotch.

Oscar crumbled. Pain, intense, savage and throbbing, penetrating into the very pit of his stomach, made him writhe in a cold sweat upon the rough mound of roots at the foot of the oak. He felt the prodding of pointed shoes in his ribs, was aware of movement about him, saw the ground, the tree, the sky and the clouds spin in a violent murky turmoil of motion

and, heaving once, twice, three times, spilled himself out of all the bitter, rancid, turbid contents of his stomach.

"Ya' cripple," he heard above the ringing in his ears, "ya' bloody, bloody, bloody cripple!", followed, as the sisters receded, by a softer mellower solicitous drone, "Poor Ginger, darlin' Ginger, 'e'll never hurt ya' no more."

The pain subsided, but not the hurt. And the hurt burgeoning even more wildly, its fires fanned by the bellows of impotent fury, he retreated into the chaos of hot burning fantasy. He would show them, show them all, particularly Edith and Mary whom he would, one day, make walk the plank of his ship in the deep shark-infested waters of the Indian Ocean. They would tremble, petition him, their thick-lipped freckled faces pale with pleading, their eyes, those grey glinting lecherous eyes that but a short time before had gloated over him, mad, insane, starkly deranged with horror. And he would stand on deck, his back firm against them, his ears deaf, forever deaf to their whimpering, whining, whingeing plaints. How sorry they would be, both of them, and Aunt May, too, and Uncle Leo who would weep and wring their hands and kneel before him, begging for pity he would never give. How sweet the vengeance, how blessedly sweet in other places and circumstances to see their eyes ripped out of their sockets by vultures in the desert, to see their flesh torn off them by the sharp-toothed ravished pirahna of the Amazon, to see their bodies crushed by slithering striking pythons and swallowed whole. — Oh, revenge, joy, delight!

Throughout the remainder of the afternoon, the fever of his imagination mounted. It doubled with the very sight of Edith and Mary eating their dinner calmly and oblivious to him, yet sharing between them a sordid secret; it leapt with every word of Aunt May who, swallowing a mouthful of potato and roast beef, remarked accusingly, "There's a hole in the wire door that wasn't there this morning"; it soared as Uncle Leo, his shoulders massive and his neck bull-like and engorged, narrowed his beer-sodden blood-shot eyes in search of the culprit, causing him to quiver within with an agitation chaotic and turbulent. He hated them, hated them all, the twins, Aunt May, Uncle Leo, Ginger. He would show them; how he would show them all!

Towards evening, his mind dizzy with schemes, Oscar prepared for bed. As he switched off the light in his room,

Aunt May, as always, called out from the television room, "Have you been to the lav?", after which there followed the customary titter from the twins Edith and Mary rummaging about in their own room. His duty done and the overhead light out, he lay still in his bed and listened. He had not drawn the blind and the light from the quarter-moon that he could see between the torpid clouds shone dully into his room. His injured wrist which he had kept hidden from Aunt May and Uncle Leo throbbed. He remembered again with loathing the writhing, scratching, hissing animal and the loathesome ignominy that had followed at the hands of the twins. And his hatred for them all flared with the searing seething scalding heat of memory.

Lying alert and open-eyed in the dark, he listened and at length heard one of the twins switch off the light in their room. Only the muffled irregular voices issuing from the television set in the front room of the house disturbed the silence — the distant muffled voices and the closer immediate sound of his own excited breathing. Resolved, he rose, pulled his pullover and pants over his pyjamas, put on his shoes, fastened the iron about his leg and slowly opened his window. A sheath of cool rose-scented air wrapped him about, made him tremble and heightened his delirium. Slowly, awkwardly, he climbed out through the window, dangled several inches above the ground and let himself drop. A cluster of stones grated beneath him and he stood still, listening acutely, holding his breath. Hearing nothing but the rustle of the breeze in the neighbour's bush of chrysanthemums, he took a few steps along the narrow overgrown path between the house and the fence, found a wooden box at the further end of it and carried it back to the window where he placed it on the ground in preparation for his return.

Then, steathily, his chest throbbing with swelling exaltation, he crept towards the back of the house. The yard was cool, silent, haunted. He watched the black moving shadows, decided they were those of trees and bushes billowing erratically in the breeze and, seeing that they held no menace, stepped softly towards the tap and basin against the back wall of the house. A yellow bucket stood there. He placed it under the tap, tilted it at an angle and filled it with water. He watched the splintered reflection of the moon flickering in its rising surface, then looked up at the quarter-moon itself and at the pale stars and black turgid clouds

above. He was struck by the immensity of space, felt afraid, yet was tremulously elated. His limbs pulsated, his fingers were numbed with the cold of the air and with his excitement. He blew at them, then seeing the bucket to be full, heaved it out of the basin with a jerking movement that caused the surface to rock and rise and splash over on to his feet. And then he set it down.

Moving towards the verandah, he was about to whisper "Kitty Cat" but changed his mind. Instead, he edged slowly along the wall, step by step, setting his splinted leg down gently, with deliberate caution upon the narrow concrete path that ran there. And then he came upon the shallow cardboard box with its matted sack as mattress upon which the orange kitten lay, its head curled inward upon its folded paws, its plump sides moving evenly with every breath. Oscar pounced upon it. "You won't scratch Oscar no more," he snarled at it, ecstatically, with sibilant harshness. "Oscar won't let you no more, no more." Too late, the animal became aware of its assailant. It rose on its hind legs, kicked, scratched, mewed and hissed, but Oscar held it firmly grasping a fat fold of flesh behind its neck. He hoisted it above him, looked into its grotesque face.

"Aunt May hates Oscar, Uncle Leo hates Oscar, and Edith and Mary — they hate Oscar too. And Kitty Cat . . . Kitty Cat. . .? Kitty Cat loves Oscar maybe, even a tiny bit, a teeny weeny bit?"

The animal wriggled and writhed under his hand, its legs lunging, pushing, twitching in all directions. Oscar shook it, sharply, roughly, viciously, jubilantly. He carried the frantic creature towards the bucket. His cheeks burned, his eyes smarted.

"But Kitty Cat is Oscar's friend. Why did Kitty Cat scratch him today? Does Kitty Cat love Edith and Mary and says that Oscar is not its friend?"

The pads of its hind paws touching the water, the kitten screeched shrilly and lurched suddenly with a desperate frenzied upward thrust that, sending reverberations through Oscar's body, almost caused him to lose his grasp. But, recovering, Oscar seized tighter rein upon his quarry and with an ardent, swift, determined movement thrust the squealing writhing animal into the bucket where the moon fell splintered across the water's surface. The animal's screeching ceased abruptly. The water became turbulent. Waves rose

and splashed and fell with the chaotic thrashing beneath. The bucket, pelted within by convulsing feet, tottered briefly but remained erect. Oscar trembled. His body glowed, cold sweat tingled down of his back, a violent insane pulsation pounded in the pit of his stomach. He felt dizzy, his throat was constricted, a delirious refrain coursed repeatedly and madly through his brain.

"Popocapetl . . . Edith and Mary . . . Kitty Cat . . . Kitty Cat . . . Popocapetl . . . Edith and Mary. . ."

The animal became heavier under his hand. He felt it twitch. Then its movements weakened, faltered, ceased. The water lost its turbulence. The moon returned to its surface. The air was still, the shadows silent, the stars mutely limp. Oscar reeled under an onslaught of nausea, intoxication and fever and knelt light-headed and dizzily in the wet puddles around the bucket until the sensation passed. The refrain pounded in his ears: "Popocapetl . . . Popocapetl . . . Mary and Edith . . . pirahna . . . Kitty Cat . . . pirahna. . ."

The animal, when he lifted it out of the bucket, was grotesque, heavy and bloated. Its fur was matted, and dense, and dripping with water. Its legs were limp; its tail hung between its paws; one eye was open and no light shone in it.

"Kitty Cat won't scratch Oscar no more, Kitty Cat won't," Oscar said into its dead unhearing ear. "And Edith and Mary won't kiss Kitty Cat again and say 'Poor Ginger' and laugh at Oscar no more and hurt him and call Oscar 'cripple' no more. . ."

Carrying the animal by the neck, Oscar crept back the way he had come. He turned the corner of the house, stepped cautiously along the narrow overgrown path between the wall and the side fence against which the neighbour's chrysanthemums were gently beating and, passed his own window towards the room two windows beyond where the twins were sleeping.

Softly, even as his pulse convulsed, he laid out the turgid bloated creature upon the window-sill and watched for an entranced moment the spreading glistening tentacled rivulets being squeezed out from its coat and coursing down the face of the brick wall beneath it. But only for a moment. A rippling tantalising breeze swept down the narrow path. The chrysanthemums behind him stirred more vigorously. For the first time, he became aware of the crickets whistling hoarsely and tunelessly near his feet. He remembered Popocapetl and

Jamaica, the vultures, pirahnas and pythons in the deserts and the Amazon, the gigantic crashing waterfall over Niagara and the glorious procession along the streets between row upon row of cheering, jubilant crowds. And with a rising tumultous exhilaration too prodigious to contain, he raised a cold wet fist and rapped vigorously once, twice, three times upon the window and, dragging his splinted leg behind him, hurried away.

He was just stepping upon the box beneath his own window when the first riveting scream came. Whether it was from Edith or Mary, he couldn't tell, but he did see the sudden flood of yellow light explode across the path and the irruption of two shadows bobbing and rolling and jostling within the opalescent rectangle of light.

"Ginger! . . . It's Ginger!"

Hoisting himself up hurriedly, quiveringly, on to his window ledge, Oscar felt the box sway and totter beneath his feet. It clattered to the ground and struck the fence. He struggled to haul himself into his room but his splinted leg hampered him. He hung suspended, reaching, kicking, pulling. He heard the rasp and rattle of his cousins' window being prised open, saw to his mortification Aunt May's head emerge in the light, heard the angry hissing of his name and then a chaotic tumult of shrieking, bellowing and screaming and above the voices of Uncle Leo and Aunt May the aggrieved howling of his cousins over the animal which one of them had lifted inside.

Oscar clung to the window-ledge, kicking with his legs against the void. The refrain reverberated compulsively through his brain: Popocapetl . . . Kitty Cat . . . Pirahna . . . Kitty . . ., echoes of horror and frenzy devoid now of meaning or magic. The sharp edge of the ledge pressed against his chest, his arms ached under the tension of his struggling weight. Before him, the door of his room was thrust open and the full glare of switched-on light smote his eyes as Aunt May, livid, stiff, and grotesque with menace strode into the room. Behind her, the twins in their nightgowns jostled one another screaming: " 'e did it! 'e did it!" into the night. And then too late he heard the heavier sturdier paralysing tread of Uncle Leo crushing the gravel along the side-path, saw above him the rise and descent of something massive and rigid and felt with an agony that brought his stomach to his throat and a grey mist before his

eyes a sledge-hammer thwack of a baseball-bat cracking into his back. He felt it again and once more, each blow accompanied by a roar as Uncle Leo, huge and towering, bellowed from what seemed to have become a distance: "You bugger. . .! your beast. . .! you godless piece of trash!"

Oscar struck the rough gravelled ground with a thud as his legs gave way under him and struck his head against a corner of the wooden box. Above him, he heard the remote bellowing of Uncle Leo and the shrill assaults of Aunt May and the twins and felt the riveting prostrating ache in the small of his back. He howled with the pain and tried to turn, to rise, to shield himself from his uncle towering threateningly over him, but his legs would not move. He lay crumpled on side, whimpering, sobbing, whining. Uncle Leo, standing over him, hands on hips, glared at him.

"Get up, you animal!" he commanded, "Right now if you know what's good for you!"

Oscar felt the prodding of his uncle's shoe in his ribs.

"Right away, I said!"

Aunt May shouted, "Do you hear?!" and the twins howled " 'e drowned poor Ginger what done nothin' wrong. The cripple — 'e killed, 'e drowned our Ginger!"

"Right away!" Uncle Leo repeated, his tone harsher, more menacing.

"I can't," Oscar whined.

"Stand up!"

"I can't!"

Terrified, Oscar saw Uncle Leo arch towards him, reach out for his arm and drag him up roughly. His legs would not support his trunk and he hung heavily and limply from Uncle Leo's hand, his whole body drawing back to the ground beneath him. And suddenly he felt himself fall again as the hold upon him slackened and a pall of terror consumed Uncle Leo's face.

"Oh, my God," he heard the massive form over him cry out. "Oh, no, oh, my God!"

"What is it?" Aunt May shrilled, a quaking quiver in her voice.

"His back, his legs, he can't stand. . ."

"Oh, no. . ."

"He's . . . he's. . .!"

"Oh, no. . ."

And above the alarmed horrified affirmations and denials of them both, Oscar, crumpled, whimpering, immobile, heard the raucous piercing howling of the twins as their voices rent the darkness of the night. "The cripple . . . 'e drowned poor Ginger, killed poor Ginger that never done 'im nothin' wrong!"

Friends

Once, two boys in short pants and unkempt hair, we had vowed eternal friendship. We were thirteen years old when we met and possessed just sufficient naivety to make adult recollection embarrassing. Spontaneously, neither needing to ask nor be asked, we gave, received, shared and took pleasure in the sharing. Together, we walked to school talking about our night-time dreams or raced through the rain, laughing all the while as though to lure the sunshine out from hiding to join us in our play. In the park, we climbed the highest maples, fished for tadpoles in muddy creeks, wrestled like cubs upon the lawns, and then, tired of these, gave ourselves up to talk, to talk of big and intangible things, like life, duty, service, purpose. Andre, his eyes glinting behind his heavy dark-rimmed glasses and his brow a field of furrows spoke about the books he had read and talked of the world as a huge place in which there were numerous countries and men of all colours who dressed and behaved in fascinating ways. And he talked of the poor in Africa and Asia and of a man called Albert Schweitzer and of how noble a deed it is to relieve men of their sickness and pain. And, moved by example, we decided to become doctors when we grew up, like Albert Schweitzer, and dedicate ourselves to the performance of good deeds and the relief of suffering, and to do this, side by side, for the rest of our lives.

But while we were in the fourth form, Andre's family decided to return to Paris from whence they had come several years before. On the dock, we promised to write and one day to meet again. The ship was long out of sight before I turned for home.

Short pants gave way to trousers, unkempt hair became subdued, games yielded to earnest study. In high-school, I found myself in turmoil, not knowing what I wanted, oscillating like a metronome between extremes. Belief and scepticism, acceptance and rejection, the desire for commitment and the need for withdrawal — these nagged at me without respite, turning my adolescence into one lasting image of confusion. I matriculated comfortably enough, but

my future turned itself over a thousand times. I wanted to do what was useful, but medicine, law, engineering — the obvious courses — held no appeal. Without really knowing why, and allowing myself to drift, I entered university, choosing politics and history in some vague expectation that one day I could use that knowledge to write or enter politics or develop a new concept or philosophy that might make some crucial impact.

I spent four years at the university and grew in militancy with every year. More and more, I joined in student demonstrations, wrote for student papers, lectured on capital punishment, Biafra, Vietnam, and advocated a radical stand to do away with government, privilege and reaction and with the corruption that I saw as rampant in high places. I was listened to and in a way I felt important, a student leader with something to say. I emerged from the university with a Bachelor of Arts Honours and, once in the marketplace, with the realisation that I had taken myself too seriously. I found work as proof-reader with a publisher, then as clerk with a building firm and later joined the staff of a newspaper as reporter of local events. I thought more seriously of writing. But ideas came with difficulty and my efforts foundered as I realised that, at bottom, I had nothing worthwhile to say. The best that I could produce were evanescent frivolous stories for an inferior newspaper and a string of short stories that were returned soon after submission with a string of rejection slips. Reality had outstripped my ambitions, and existence, once so full of promise and good intentions, became reduced to a series of depressions as I woke to the nest of conformity, mediocrity and insignificance in which I, like the rest of society I had hoped to change, had made my bed.

It was then that I decided to travel abroad.

With guide-book and camera, I made my way across Europe. Madrid, Amsterdam, Venice, Rome, Zurich. In awe I stood before the Rembrandts and Tintorettos, was moved by the eloquence of Michelangelo, edified by the mastery of Titian, Ghiberti, Velasquez, Veronese. They were precious hours that I spent in the museums and galleries, seeing at first hand the grandeur to which a man could attain, given a vision and a will to create. To create. The very phrase resounded with numerous possibilities. I felt regenerated and it suddenly seemed simple to return, in spirit if not in reality, to that

earlier innocence before dreams had turned sour and ambitions had been thwarted.

Memory swelled into nostalgia. And in its sway, while flying over the Alps towards Paris, I remembered Andre, and remembered, too, our naive vows, our more earthly promises, our plans. Borne on the cloud of sentimentality in which childhood became a thing so pure, I decided to seek him out.

I found Andre's name in a telephone directory and waited until evening to call him.

We grappled briefly with names and places and dates, and, remembering me, he greeted me with expressions of delight and surprise. He laughed a lot.

"Julian! Julian from Melbourne!", he said in accented English. "It is only yesterday. . ."

"Twelve years of yesterdays", I answered with a laugh.

"So long already? We must celebrate. I will tell Josette. Come tomorrow evening — for dinner."

"Tres charmant", I said, knowing no other French.

"Bien. We will have much to talk about."

The next day, I set about discovering Paris. It was March. The weather was warm, the sky a dull blue, and thin patchy clouds drifted continually across the face of the sun. On that day, I was the typical tourist. I visited the Louvre and Jeu de Paume, strolled along the Tuilleries, browsed among the shops of the Champs Elysees, circled the Arc de Triomphe and climbed the Eiffel Tower, taking photographs wherever I could. By evening, I was tired, but in a blissful way, and looked forward to meeting Andre to talk about, among other things, the art and taste and balanced beauty that I had come to see as Paris.

Andre lived in a two-storied red-brick house set in the centre of a spacious garden which smelled of carnations and moist freshly-mown grass. In the far corner were a swing and a sandpit and a tricycle stood alongside a rocking-horse; beds of azaleas and pansies lay beneath the windows and the paths were tiled with slate. His was a quiet neighbourhood, a district of shaded oak-lined avenues and well-tended gardens. Between the branches, the last strands of daylight were vanishing. I felt the coming of rain.

A child with curly ginger hair opened the door. Behind her, striding down the corridor, came Andre. He had grown tall

and solid, with a shock of hair combed back and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses above his firm nose. He held one hand outstretched to meet mine and the other prepared to brace itself about my shoulders. He had dark rings around his eyes, as though he had not slept for a long time.

"Is it really you?", he asked, laughing.

"The same. You have hardly changed. Taller, sturdier, but Andre behind it all."

"But you I would never have recognised. It's marvellous. Tell me, how long are you staying in Paris?"

"Three days."

"Pshaa, a mere breath. In Paris, a *week* is not enough, nor even a month. . ."

From the kitchen came his wife, a blonde, attractive, relaxed woman. She was about twenty-five, had a smoothly-rounded chin and a nose that was best described as Grecian. Brief introductions followed. The little girl who had opened the door disappeared and returned promptly with a doll for me to look at, one which closed its eyes and purred when laid down.

"Tres belle", I said in a French that broke my teeth. "What do you call her?"

Andre translated.

"Soussy", lisped the child.

"Very pretty", I said.

"The doll's name is Francoise," explained Andre's wife who herself was called Josette. "Michelle calls her Soussy for short."

"A charming child", I said.

"Since you telephoned," Josette said, her accent nasal but not unpleasant, "Andre has spoken of nothing else but you. His best friend at school, his nearest rival in class. You were going to study medicine together, help the sick, the poor, become famous. All those things."

I laughed. "Andre, you still remember?"

"Of course. Can a man forget the sweetest wine he has ever tasted?" He sounded as though he were quoting. "Ah, childhood. The wrestling on the grass, the beatings, the little jealousies, those petty rivalries over — what was her name? — Mary?, Margaret?, in the second form." He took me by an arm and led me to the dining-room. "And our promises. We were going to turn the world over." His eyes flickered

behind his glasses. "We were such children, no? You see, I remember."

Josette excused herself with a laugh that tinkled and returned to the kitchen. "Michelle", she said, "come and help Maman."

Andre poured two brandies, offered me one, sat down and described a generous arc about the room with his free hand.

"How do you like my little palace?", he asked as though it were the most appropriate thing to say.

I had already looked about me. A quiet placidity rested in that place, and good temper, order, concern. Wallpaper of subdued colour and conservative pattern covered the walls. In several places hung reproductions of artists who mixed colours with pleasing effects if no great depth. Two chandeliers scattered the light diffusely and a thick white carpet told of easy affluence.

"Have you lived here long?", I asked him. "In this house?"

"Three years." He was twenty-eight but there were grey streaks in his hair. He studied his fingertips as he had so often done in moments of earnestness and began to talk. "We lived near Place d'Italie, close to the hospital where I worked, for two years after we were married. A nice area, but too noisy and cramped. I worked, made some money. Josette gave private piano lessons. Her parents — her father is an obstretrician — helped us a little. Then we moved. Here, out of town, we have the sun all day — no smog, dust, factory smells. In Spring, this is Eden itself. And for the child, what is healthier than fresh air all year round, and sunshine? — But tell me about yourself."

Josette returned, carrying a tray. Michelle followed with a bowl of salad.

"One lives and works", I said, "and prays that the bread will come in."

Andre smiled. "For one who can come to Europe from Australia, the bread cannot be too difficult in coming. But tell us, how do you like this city? Beautiful, no?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Michelle who stood by his arm and teased her with his brandy. "Ici, ma cherie. Un peu?"

"Andre", said Josette.

Michelle, alive and keen, tasted the drink and grimaced. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes filled with tears. They

glistened and danced. Pearls. Childless, I felt deprived of something precious. We laughed.

"Let us begin to eat", said Josette, serving the first course.

Dinner passed pleasantly, a more than welcome respite from the cheap stuffy restaurants and coffee-houses in which I had eaten since beginning my journey. After his initial enthusiasm, Andre spoke relatively little. By way of apology, he said that he had been kept up for most of the previous night by a difficult case. A patient had become quite acutely ill and the diagnosis had remained obscure until the morning. By contrast, Josette played the vivacious hostess. With feminine curiosity, she probed into my personal life. What would I do after my journey? What did my work entail? Which magazines did I work for? Was I, perhaps, engaged? I gave brief and precise replies. Feeling no pride in my work, I was not disposed to elaborate. Nor did I reveal my deeper ambitions, to write, the fruition of which, at that moment, seemed as remote and inaccessible as the past itself. Josette used her hands for emphasis and asked her questions with a charm to which it was impossible to take exception. But in their company I sensed, more than I had anticipated as likely, the hollowness of my existence, its solitude, its barrenness.

We ate and talked. Michelle asked if I liked Soussy and, through Josette, told me about her kindergarten. Andre smiled absently.

"Do you know", Josette said, sweeping a stray blonde wave behind her ear, "that this is one of the few evenings that Andre manages to spend at home? He is forever at the surgery or at the hospital or attending meetings, going to seminars. For this rare occasion, I must be grateful to you."

"There were worse times", Andre said.

"That is true, of course. When he worked only at the hospital."

"I am a man for myself now. No superiors to please, professors, colleagues, others. I work for myself. I work hard, yes, but enjoy it."

"And you make a good living, I see", I said, indicating the wallpaper and the chandeliers.

"Hard work has its just rewards", he said.

"You are satisfied?", I asked.

He seemed puzzled. "You are not?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

During the last course, conversation became more sluggish and I was grateful when, after coffee, Andre suggested that we go driving.

"But you're tired", I protested, more out of courtesy than sincerity.

"What of it? A man is flexible in his needs. This is an occasion. Come, I will show you a part of the city — my favourite part."

I thanked Josette who in turn thanked me for remembering an old friend and wished me success. Her hand was smooth and warm. She smiled with her eyes. "You will write to us, no?", she asked at the door. I pinched Michelle's cheeks between my fingers. "Is Soussy sleeping?" I asked. She said something which Josette translated. "She said Soussy is sleeping because she still has to grow."

"How precious you are", I said. Sleep was gathering in her own eyes.

It was ten o'clock. We drove to the Ile de la Cite. Few people were about. Like the sun during the day, the moon now hid behind the clouds. Under the glow of the street-lamps, the white stone of the bridges glistened.

"Here one finds peace", Andre said. "A man can straighten out his thoughts here."

I looked along the length of the dark brooding waters, at the bridges, the lamps, the long buildings silhouetted against the night. It was cold. I turned up the collar of my coat.

"There is a comforting stillness here," Andre said. "During the day, one is always hurrying about, anxious to get things done for the many people who depend upon one's services. In the evenings, solitude and meditation are a blessing. Over there", he pointed, "is the Notre Dame and there the Conciergerie. You will no doubt visit them while you are in Paris. Opposite us, on the other side, is the Left Bank. And the university, of course, is there as well." He paused and cracked his fingers. That was one habit of his I had forgotten about. "The students are making the headlines again. When I passed through there, I must have been one of the docile generation. Study and examinations. No time for anything else. But today they talk of upturning society and establishing a new order. But what sort of order, even they do not know. They have one saving grace, these students — they mellow and become as middle-class as the rest of us."

I recalled my own involvements as a student. "Andre", I said, "have you grown so old before your time?"

He removed his glasses and rubbed the inner corners of his eyes. Another habit that I suddenly remembered again. "In this world", he said slowly, "surely you must know this too — one cannot remain a child forever. There comes a time when a man makes a reckoning with himself, asserts those values that he deems important and rearranges his priorities. There comes a time, too, when one realises one's ineffectuality in the face of the iniquities that pervade society and must make peace with the regret that not the best-intentioned of men can eliminate them. Our students have not yet seen this. In the end, all one can effectively do — and here the choice is solely one's own — is to perform one's small bit in this world in the trust that someone, a neighbour, a friend, a stranger, has lived a little longer, a little more happily, or a little more comfortably. — But, really, I am too serious. Let us walk on."

Splinters of light floated on the surface of the river, sometimes rising above the ripples, sometimes sinking. From far away came the sound of loud talk, of laughter, of running feet. The evening haunted me with memories. The years returned to me in a whirl, wasted years ridden through with aimlessness and the fitful pursuit of sunbeams, tremulous beams which illuminated the future with a false glow. And I recalled the excuses, the postponements of work and action, and the rationalisations fortified into elaborate mental structures to mitigate the pain that came from the lack of tangible achievement.

Free of wind, yet biting, the air set in suspended motion on our shoulders. For want of conversation, Andre shivered and commented on the coldness of the evening. I agreed.

Then, rather suddenly, he added, "Do you remember the evenings we knew back home? They were just like this."

Yet such evenings we had not shared. Warm evenings when we sat by the beach, windy evenings when we raced each other home from the pictures, even cool evenings when we sat indoors bent over a game of chess — these we had known together but not the chilly windless kind which found two friends with nothing to say.

"Yes", I answered.

We walked along the streets and over the bridges, beneath which the Seine wrestled with the clouds. For a moment,

under a street-lamp, we discovered each other's eyes. Then they fled from one another, fugitives before some terrible truth. We had drifted apart — forever. In that glance, I read a question and an accusation.

"Julian", it asked, "what has become of you, after all the promise that was in you?"

I wanted to answer but I had no answer. Instead, I cried out with a vehemence that cracked the ice of evening.

"And what of you, Andre? What of the vows of friendship, of performing great deeds together, of discovering fame. Remember Albert Schweitzer? Is a house outside Paris all you really want from life and bondage to a routine of work and sleep and mere homely comforts?"

He looked at me. As before, he seemed puzzled and, I thought, hurt.

"I do my bit", he said softly.

We parted soon after, two strangers, two remote souls standing in one small corner of a vast indifferent universe. He offered to drive me back. I declined, saying I preferred to walk. Much had happened that day and I wanted, I said, to assimilate it at leisure.

"Je comprend", he said without conviction, and smiled with difficulty as we shook hands. I thought of Josette and Michelle and deep within I wished them well.

Andre's car disappeared around a corner.I remembered a ship vanishing over the horizon long ago. I stayed in my place for several moments more, then with a shrug of the shoulders turned back to the hotel.

The Fortress

At sixty-five, at an age when his acquaintances, few as they were, were making their pact with their Deliverer, melancholy thoughts of loneliness and death began to plague Max Widowski's spirit. The more he aged, the more did the face of death nauseate him with dread, and bitterness, harsh and unbidden, burgeoned, mounted and cascaded in torrents within him. — He must die soon. He must die and leave a world where nothing real and tangible would remain to give evidence of his passage and enter yet another world, mysterious for some, but for him lonely and black and void and eternal.

Day succeeding day, a wolf in his lair, he wandered about his house, without purpose, without direction. Inspired by a sudden thought, he hurried to his study or to Daniel's room, only to find, when he arrived there, that he had forgotten his original intention and was seized by yet another impulse to enter Elizabeth's room or the kitchen or the garden, the need again having been dissipated by the time he reached the place. He dressed carelessly, neglected to shave, did not go to his factories and stores and could not find his tongue to speak with people. His foreman who telephoned daily, he dismissed with cursory remarks and sealed his ears against the neighbours' children that their cries and screaming may not disturb his already-tenuous peace of mind. Languidly, he gazed upon the deciduous elms, the rose-bushes and the mute docile houses across the road. With torpor, deep and numbing, he traced the movements of children and of passers-by, and imagined that the earth was slowly splitting apart and swallowing up everything that either stood or walked or lay upon it. Nothing can survive forever, he thought, nothing can survive in the sight of God. And, brooding, black and oppressed, Widowski became jealous, gripingly jealous, of Him who had eternal life, and with vehement acrimony loathed the God he had at an early time, in suffering, denied.

If the days revolved around a tense and restless coil, his nights were disturbed a thousand times. Weary from boredom and morbid thoughts, he sank into his bed welcoming the forgetfulness and ease of mind that the

darkness of night might bring. But sleep became elusive. He tossed about the bed to no avail; he saw images in the darkness, pale faces and corpses, distorted and grotesque, that made his skin ripple; and when, at last, his eyes closed upon the night, the slightest noise — the distant barking of a dog, the rustle of the curtains, the shuffling of tree-branches in the wind — woke and startled him so that he sat up, starkly, alert, trembling and berried with perspiration. When merciful dawn rose to relieve his nocturnal torment, he was exhausted and pale, and his entire body shivered from sleeplessness and agitation.

His days were black, his existence barren, his future void. He would die — and everything on earth would remain as if he had never been.

Having nothing to look forward to — his wife was dead, Elizabeth married, David boarding out — Widowski went back on his years to brighter days that had boasted of his authority, his enterprise, his shrewdness. Single-handed, barely a handful of years in the new country, he had built up a hosiery factory; he had then branched into knitwear and millinery and broadened his compass, in time to buy out a chain of clothes stores and saturate them with diverse styles and sheer volume that ultimately captured the loyalty of at-first reluctant, even suspicious, customers. He had become prosperous, and prosperity swelled sponge-like with the purchase of real estate far afield. Wealth was the by-word at every mention of his name, and daring, vision, forcefulness — ruthlessness, some people said — the qualities most often brought to mind.

But all these things were evanescent. He knew very well that prosperity was subject to chance — as his very wartime survival had been; the slightest turn of a wheel could destroy him, along with his factories, his stores, his fortune. And, all said and done, people's memories were short. They, too, were human and, therefore, mortal. Who would, in years to come, remember his success? Who would know of the empire he had established? Who would acknowledge his authority, his prestige? All that would remain on earth would be a name fading on a gravestone, a notice in the newspapers, perhaps an obituary in the Jewish News, an arrangement of mute letters spelling "WIDOWSKI'S" on the frontages of his stores, and disloyal children who would seldom recall their father with anything but spite. What he sought, wanted — he

could not but admit the very fact to himself — was something more lasting that would stand firm for years, for a century after his own bones had decayed into dust.

And one morning, as he looked upon everything as though for a last time — for, menacingly intertwined with the desire for permanence, the very thought of suicide was ever circuiting just below the surface of action — he conceived a scheme, a plan, to erect to himself a building, a solid edifice, there where it could not help but strike the eye, there where through its use, his name might elude, escape, the ultimate crushing oblivion of death as once, in the camps of Theresienstadt and Dachau, he had done in body. Like lightning on a summer's day, it came to him and struck him with its barbed shaft and kindled at first a cautious, then throbbing, excitement.

But what? Where? For whom?

An old-people's home? A children's centre? A library? A hall? A gallery? A gymnasium? What?

His house, as if suddenly, became too small to contain him. Desolate roaming became frenzied restlessness as he passed through the rooms. He felt the need to touch — anything: linen, the door-handle, a window, the corrugated aluminium of the sink, timber, steel — through touch returning him to the solid grounded reality upon which his hold had perilously loosened. To feel hardness, predictability through the tips of his fingers; to rediscover familiarity and, through familiarity, new life, renewed breath, breath which earlier so cramped, so stifled, expanded now to its limits as, suddenly claustrophobic, he fled into the garden where the elms, roses, grass, dander and vapours of the nearby cereal factory blended into a vigorous harmony of redolence and fecundity and crushed through their very forcefulness the torpor of the preceding weeks.

But again the questions — What? Where? For whom?

In the street, cradled in blossoming sunshine, children idled banteringly on their way to school; students headed towards their colleges or the university, men and women hastened to work; old folk returned from the shops with the morning newspaper, milk, bread. Here, a dog sniffed at passing heels; there, a cat arched its bristling spine to the touch of a stroking hand. Cars hummed by, their drivers anchored to private thought; next door, two painters redecorating his neighbour's house whistled and joked; a train rumbled in the distance, or

a tram; and a bus jammed with people passed before him. He swallowed liberating draughts of morning crisp air, and swelled out, reached out, of himself. All around, people *lived*. They breathed. They moved. They cared. Above all, cared. Life was a blinking of an eye, and yet there was sufficient importance in it for them to fill that blinking with running, banter, thoughts and plans and, unquestioningly, to cling to it, often desperately, however acute might sometimes be the pain, however hollow the future left to many — to the old, the sick, the abandoned. It was biology he knew — first-hand experience had been the most forceful and instructive of teachers, however, harsh; it was biology, euphemistically transmuted into that importuning beast, the will to live — however absurd that will, destined as it was like all running, planning, thought and hope to flicker and fizzle into the rigidity and ultimate crumbling in the silent eternal darkness of the grave.

Standing on solid grey unyielding asphalt, his blood again warm as it tingled through his flesh, he recognised once more the same will in himself as purpose, replenished and renewed, burgeoned to awareness. To build! More — to create! Not to this life as he had done until now with his succession of factories, stores and apartment blocks on properties that had come easily to him — and for which he had paid a father's price — but to his future life, the life of his *name* which alone might endure beyond the final crumbling of his flesh. And, watching the current of activity pitching around him, it was towards the young that his thoughts extended, not to the prancing children for whom awareness was still new or evanescent or fastened to concrete happenings alone, but to the older students who might best acknowledge a name and carry it in their setting memories the longest. For that reason, an old people's home, where awareness and memory cascaded too rapidly down the slope of brevity and decay, he dismissed without elaboration, and a gallery and gymnasium which were but the province of a few he veered from as well, and turned his face to the university where he might erect an office block, a theatre, an auditorium. It was the thought of Elizabeth's children, Sharon and Naomi, who might some day be given reason to glow at their grandfather's name and of Daniel whom he might yet reach, rebellious son though he was, that hardened fancy into resolve.

Already he had a name for that which he would build. It

rolled in his awareness. — The Max Widowski Auditorium. He savoured the sound. The Max Widowski Auditorium.

The building rose before him, clear as marbled certitude, in his imagination. A massive, oval, domed edifice. Brown birch. Sturdy polished and resilient timber. Mosaic windows. Murals. A spacious sloping hall in the style of an amphitheatre, cushioned seats, a stage, foyer, cloak rooms, offices. Venue for concerts, stage plays, orations, reviews. A hall — no, not a hall, it could only be called an auditorium — such as he had seen in Sydney, in Adelaide and further afield on visits in the previous year to Israel, Europe and New York. A thing of beauty — he would see to that — and of utility, he saw it stand, saw it stand as his ultimate memorial, in its grandness and permanence telling of a man, a Jew, who, born in remote Lithuania, had endured hell and who, surviving, destitute and naked, had attained to the ease of wealth and who, through this creation had touched the hem of eternity. Death was not to be avoided, but its harshness levelling all to oblivion could be cheated. And in its very grasp — for a second time in his life — he had discovered, and was about to forge, the ploy to cheat it.

Liberated from gloom, a more jaunty mood now seized and cheered him. To the discomfiture of his salesmen and foremen, he encroached upon their domain, in the stores himself measuring customers who had come to browse or buy, in his factories hovering with pride of ownership over his employees as they cut and pressed and pumped stitches into sleeves, collars and hems on their machines. With regained buoyancy which laced his tone with driven urgency, he spoke to his estate agent, his bank manager and his lawyer, made enquiries of his accountant into his resources and visited a succession of university administrators — chairmen of planning, building and finance committees — who listened with interest, if not commitment. He learned from them that a new public lecture hall — if he so wished to call it, an auditorium — such as he described was a welcome addition to their university, but each was constitutionally bound to bring the proposal before his respective committee for consideration. Asked from behind quizzical eyes and brows creased in curiosity what lay behind his scheme, he laid his palms upon the table, fixed each man with a straight unwavering gaze and said, "I am grateful for what this country has given me."

Verbal exchange was followed by written correspondence.

Impatient and ever ready to seal transactions with a handshake, Widowski had no recourse but to comply, as with all previous transactions, with the demands of officialdom whose many cluttered abrasive wheels ground slowly. A man could live and die a hundred times between two letters, he thought. But go, move mountains. He began to fear, when for weeks on end he received no reply in the mail, that the entire scheme had been forgotten or shelved or abandoned, and with rising anger and frustration, he accused the chairmen of the committees of talking through the sides of their mouths, of playing games with him — a foreigner and a Jew — and of incompetence, indolence and dishonesty. His anticipation each day shattered anew by the absence of response, he wrote angry letters to the administrators he had spoken with or telephoned their offices in succession, but the letters he destroyed before posting and the receiver he replaced before speaking, turning his mind to other schemes that might bend before his will with greater plasticity. But none drew him with the same appeal. Once again, he became despondent. Thoughts of death returned. He felt again the aggrieved horror of an unmarked life.

But the mountains moved.

It had taken five months, but in the end, the university authorities had approved the scheme. If he were still of his original disposition, negotiations could begin, contracts settled and tenders invited. His generosity was appreciated and, the scheme culminating in success, would be suitably acknowledged.

At the centre of the university grounds, fronted by the Union Building and skirted on its other three sides by the Law School, Faculty of Arts and the Library lay an acre of lawn and pavements. Students, free for an hour, ate their lunches there; tables displaying literature promising worlds made better by socialism, Christianity, rationalism and yoga nestled against one another; there, without self-consciousness, lay young fellows and girls coiled in embrace; faculty heads, lecturers and tutors strode along the thoroughfares, serious, laughing, oblivious or melancholy.

Widowski repeatedly toured that enclosed acre, feeling the solidity of asphalt and the mute submission of grass beneath his feet, alive to the knowledge that this, in one sense the property of the university, was in another to be his, his, his.

Even before it stood there, he saw that edifice, he trod its carpets, touched its beams, visualised its dome and its murals, read the plaque declaring his gift on its outer wall and saw his name engraved large in plated gold above the entrance doors. The sense of purpose in having lived, endured and survived became restored and meaning returned to his being — to his having been — that transcended the mere possession of temporal wealth and influence. If only Rebecca had not died so prematurely — "worn out", to use Daniel's recriminating phrase — she would in time have comprehended the thrust behind their labours, those long hours of driving themselves, the early deprivations after their arrival to the country, the sleepless nights, the ambition, the anxieties. It was not money alone he had striven after — though it had been money that had saved them — but security, invulnerability and the creation of options, should the threat of annihilation ever recur. Elizabeth, born in Paris in transit, yet a child of Australia — of calm, ease and freedom —, but now married to a struggling printer who, out of stiff-necked pride, refused his help, might yet come to understand these more pressing needs; and Daniel, too, if only the foolish youth and perennial student would extricate himself from the web of fancy he had woven about himself — of becoming a writer, a poet — while he subsisted on a brittle string of part-time jobs — serving in a coffee bar, tutoring high-school students, proof-reading for a publisher, — the while awaiting that miraculous breakthrough that, in a harsh world of competition and cynicism, might never come. But not money was all. Nor security. Nor influence. Nor the opening of options. These were necessary, vital, to be sure, but evanescent. Where death levelled all, only one thing remained, one fact alone — the fact of having been. And that fact subsisted solely in the ultimate preservation on earth of one's name.

The project was assigned to a firm of architects whose senior partner Carl Stillman, who personally undertook the task, was a sturdy man of fifty-five with a rampant shock of grey-white hair, thick lips and a gaze that grasped at once the grand design together with the minutiae of which all that is grand is composed. He had travelled widely, had studied architecture in its endlessly diverse forms in Paris, Amsterdam, Lebanon and Japan, and had published, at his own expense, a splendidly-illustrated volume entitled "Out of

Sand the Grandeur". At one time named as respondent in a divorce suit, he had subsequently retreated from social intercourse, had remained a bachelor and given his free hours to the study of religions, becoming conversant with the teachings of Buddha, Lao-tze and Confucius, with the laws and rituals of Judaism and the strictures of Islam as well as deepening his already-ingrained knowledge of Christianity. He spoke English, French and Italian fluently, quoted from Dante, Shakespeare and St. Augustine with ease, and had displayed competent landscapes and still-lifes in a number of galleries around Prahan and North Melbourne. Evidence of his designs was sprinkled about the City — office blocks, a student hostel, a luxury hotel — and a brief biographical entry had been incorporated into the most recent Who's Who.

Widowski, when he spoke with him — having discovered the architect's identity, he was driven to make his private vision known to him — felt the extraordinariness of the man more by intuition than through direct knowledge. Against himself, Stillman was a big man. His forehead rose high, his eyebrows were thick, his eyes steady and his chin and cheeks as though chiselled out of marble. He was immaculately dressed in grey suit and tie and wore on the fifth finger of his left hand a signet ring embossed with the emblem of his profession. Softly-spoken, he yet gave off an air of unruffled assurance and dependability and Widowski felt — knew — that, his vision accepted, it had been weighed on unseen scales, its merits set against its shortcomings, and judgement pronounced with the poise of authority and control.

And yet Widowski felt ill at ease. The architect, who as well as drawing the plans had agreed to supervise every phase of the construction, had a dusky flush over his cheeks and, when they walked together across the university grounds discussing the proposed edifice, was compelled to pause at intervals to regain his breath.

"You should see a doctor," Widowski had offered on one occasion, but Stillman had merely shrugged a shoulder, stamped a heel to test the firmness of the soil and said with a faint conceding nod, "My doctor watches."

A time-schedule to begin work was set and Widowski made out the first substantial cheque as advance payment. He had, as benefactor, insisted upon sitting on the building committee. But from the first, there were delays. A dispute

over wages arose between the contractors and the builders, then between the contractors and the building committee, a dispute which Widowski resolved by promising over-award wages. Then a vociferous group of students protested the submerging of their area of green beneath a structure of concrete and brick and were only finally appeased, after prolonged and tedious argument, by a promise to reserve the foyer of the proposed auditorium for their display stands and to extend the hours of service of the attached coffee lounge.

Every delay buffeted Widowski into a renewed frenzy in which he telephoned Richard Bellows, the chairman of the building committee, and Stillman, the architect, daily for reports on progress. Bellows, a man practised in the grinding workings of bureaucracy repeatedly proferred the formula "They are yielding, progress is under way" even when signs of progress, to judge from students' placards and notices posted around the quadrangle, were negligible, while Stillman, listening to Widowski more then responding, remained unperturbed.

"The race is not to the swift", he said slowly and softly into the telephone. "The almond blossoms early but ripens late. Rather be the mulberry, the last to blossom, the first to ripen. Who rushes is often late."

Almonds! Mulberries! Replacing the receiver, Widowski huffed down his nostrils, cursed, and gritted his teeth. It was his life, his name, his epitaph no less that he was negotiating with Stillman. Yet all that the architect could talk about were almonds and mulberries. "I might not be alive when your mulberries are again in season," he wanted to shout at Stillman, but how penetrate the mind of one who coursed with the tide, yielding, unprotesting, mute, of one who himself nourished no ambition nor particular desire nor apparent hope? He must beat against the very rock of the other's temperament and even then not dare to expect that he left more than a handprint upon that unshifting stone. Returning and crossing repeatedly that quadrangle of grass and pavement, he confronted his mortality anew and cursed that reality that saw not the slightest hint of conversion of paper into beams, of plans into structure. And once again, hollowness, horror and futility coursed through him as he skirted the brink between tedious life and sometimes welcome, inviting, alluring self-administered death.

But the breakthrough came. One Monday morning, the construction workers moved in; a high wooden fence of smeared adjoining palings was erected around the perimeter of the quadrangle; and earth-movers began to pound and to purr. Watching, once more buoyant and hopeful, Widowski saw the lawn being turned to loam, saw those dark matted clumps of earth and grass being driven away, saw the hole in the ground deepening and extending into an enormous quarry. He understood that to create height, one must first create depth and, impatient though he was to see the appearance of the first tangible structure — a beam, a rod, a slab of concrete — rising from the foundations, yet he bade his time, complimenting Stillman when he saw him and hinting, then declaring openly that were it not for him, for Widowski and, more remotely, for the fate that had befallen him at an earlier time, that projected auditorium might never have been. He had hoped for a more demonstrative response from the architect, but Carl Stillman, wheezing faintly, looked into the excavation where two workmen in blue singlets and helmets joked as they measured the terrain, pouted his thick lips and said, "The agent is the man, the honour is to God." Widowski, momentarily chastened, promised himself not to reveal too much to Stillman but an inner compulsion gave vent to words that would not stay confined behind barred teeth. "Who would have believed twenty-five, thirty years ago, when I came here without a penny. . .," he began, not completing the sentence, to which Stillman, calm and dispassionate, said, "Who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver."

Stillman was extraordinary, Widowski saw, a sober unsmiling man of thrifty words, yet endowed with aphorisms for every occasion; and, slapped repeatedly by the architect's softly-spoken measured replies, he came to resent the bigger man, to chafe also at the other's assumed superiority, to scorn the seeming lack of personal ambition which mocked his own driving, and to deplore the passivity of the other man's nature. And he began to keep his distance, less likely thereby to be stung, and, when, unavoidably, they met, he nodded briefly at the younger sturdier man, quickened his step and strode away as though he had just remembered something pressing.

Those slaps to the face brought to his memory others.

The day having passed, divided between his factories, his

stores and the university which drew him with the irresistible centripetal force of a gigantic magnet, he faced once more the solitude of evening, its empty-handed barrenness, the restless waiting for the next morning to hasten towards light, the while, even behind accounts, behind the afternoon newspaper, the television set or a book, recalling days that — had the choice been his — might never have been. The day, for instance, when Rebecca in a trough of bodily fatigue and mental depression had hanged herself in the shed; the day when Elizabeth, having slipped from his control, and pregnant, had insisted upon marrying her abrasive arrogant black-nailed printer (and in a registry office, what was more); the day when Daniel walked out, leaving on the kitchen table wedged between the salt and pepper shakers in the midst of unswept crumbs a note scribbled hastily on unlined paper:

> "Stuff your notions of security! I don't care a fig for them, nor your money, your properties, much less for Medicine into which you would drive me. I am going to be a writer. A poet, come what may. Escape at last from those obsessions of yours that have stifled my very breath for so long. To be free of them! Once and for all! Not enough that you drove Mother, worn-out, to an early grave nor that you killed, yes, killed Elizabeth's love, you want now to bury my soul as well. But that you shall not have! *That* I shall not give."

"A writer!" he snorted again as he had done when the first impact of the letter had passed, but did not this time add the effusion of his anger that had riveted him then: "A scribbler! Starve! Starve then, and come crawling back when your belly's empty!"

For Daniel had managed, had survived, more adeptly than Widowski had expected — or hoped. His son, accustomed to comfort and easy service, should have foundered in the chaotic battering ocean that was the outside world; yet a year had passed, more, and still the boy was out there, not giving the slightest indication of returning. And more, if there was any truth to the rumour, he had settled in with a gentile girl, a Doreen McKinley, or was it McKenzie, into a flat somewhere on the perimeter of the university, coming home sometimes to take away another pile of clothes, a pair of shoes, books.

The ingratitude!, he smarted. Elizabeth. Daniel. For whom, if not for them, his labours, the self-deprivations, the weekends and nights spent behind the machine upon arrival

and then in the factories and the stores? And what of Rebecca's labours? Were they indeed solely to pacify his delusions, as Elizabeth had tossed at him, or for herself, Rebecca — or for them, the children, that they may never know, nor need to know the deep aching hollow destitution of scratching out a living. He had made a mistake, yes, but had there been any overt indication that Rebecca was losing grasp of her mind — he would have made peace with less, would not have driven so hard to achieve, acquire, attain. He recognized her despondency only too late, and for this, neither Elizabeth, nor Daniel, both buffeted by the separate adolescent traumas they were passing through, had forgiven him.

Elizabeth, in time a student-teacher, was the first to rebel, bringing home her Albert, a tall, shaggy-haired, unshaven, broken-nailed printer from Beacon Press. He, Widowski, had not approved but all his attempts to separate the two merely intensified defiance. He had hinted at first, then pleaded, offered inducements — a car, an overseas trip, whatever she wanted. And when these failed, he had resorted to threats which, though at the outset were mere bluff, with repetition solidified into resolutions he could not bring himself to retract.

"Not a cent will you get from me!" he had shouted during one of these arguments that had become customary fare. "Not a cent, do you hear?!"

But Elizabeth had merely shrugged her shoulders, a barely perceptible action which served to fuel the fire further.

"You've had it too easy all these years — a big house, freedom, elegant clothes, posh hair-dos, an education, security . . . security that I, yes, that I have built up with my own hands almost from dust. And now you want to sink into a life of struggle with that . . . that letter-setter of yours — with rent to pay, gas bills, electricity, telephone and later, children to feed and bring up."

Elizabeth had blown down her nose, a gesture she had learnt from him.

"Money is not everything. There is also love, decency, humanity. Because of you, Mother. . ."

He cut across her accusation.

"Love?! Decency?! Humanity?! *You* who, at twenty, don't know how to wipe your own nose, give *me* lessons?! Tell me, my sweet, where was love when your grandfather

was gassed and your grandmother shot? Where was decency when Jacob, my brother, your uncle, was strung up on gallows like a side of meat, and my sisters, your aunts, lay dying of typhus in Belsen? And humanity? Where? Tell me now! Do you know why you are here today?

Elizabeth made a wry face.

"Money," she said.

"At least you do know. Yes, because of money and because of the greed of guards, soldiers, peasant. I *bought* my life. And your mother's. Bought it for cash — at railway stations, cross-roads, even in the labour camps. If we were to rely on love, on decency, on humanity. . . Ha! — And all our comforts here, these too I bought, but I did it honestly, through hard work, for you, for your brother, for all of us. If you marry that gypsy of yours, if you. . . You'll come running, I swear it, but the door will be closed. Remember! The door will be closed!"

She had moved in with Albert, in time became pregnant — to spite him her father, Widowski, angry and shamed, had huffed — and informed him of her intention to marry the printer. Faced with facts, however unpalatable, Widowski had been prepared to relent. She being his only daughter, after all, he had offered to pay for her bridal outfit, arrange the ceremony at the synagogue and pay for the wedding reception at the Southern Cross. But even more than Elizabeth, Albert, whom, as a manual worker, he did not credit with independent intelligence refused, rejected, his offer. A non-believer, veering politically to the far left, he despised with equal venom both religious ceremonial and the possession of wealth. Religious belief he stigmatised as baloney and wealth as theft, and openly scorned his prospective father-in-law's striving after acquisition and the supposed security it promised, predicting the end of the capitalist system and the advent of an order in which wealth would be shared more equitably and in which no grasping factory-owner and landlord would lick the fat of another's labour.

Widowski did not attend the wedding at the registry office and forbade Daniel, then nineteen, to attend as well.

But the boy disobeyed and, before leaving for the ceremony, had pointed a stern finger at his father, and said, "Whatever she's done, she is still my sister and, don't forget, your daughter."

Yet he could not find it in himself to forgive her then.

Four years had passed and Elizabeth, who, he knew, now mother of two children, was feeling the pinch of need, had not come running. They met sometimes. On the children's birthdays, he brought gifts for Sharon and Naomi — a walking doll, a pram, a huge furnished doll's house — which they pounced upon with innocent delight. But when, in passing, he had surreptitiously forced an envelope into Elizabeth's hand or left a cheque on her kitchen table or in the drawer, he found it soon afterwards in his own letter-box, accompanied neither by note nor explanation.

Where he had been in error remained unclear to him. And, at a deeper level, he came to wonder also where, in his whole life, he had sinned. For, coinciding with Elizabeth's marriage, he was entering into his sixties and those deeper levels were beginning to preoccupy him. Success had not brought him that sought-after contentment or security or certainty. In Daniel's early progress through medical school, he had entertained hopes of some measure of further achievement through his flesh and blood, but Daniel, more disposed to the philosophical and literary than the scientific, and growing restless with the demands of a university course which, having entered almost blindly, more to fulfil his father's expectations than his own inclinations, he despised, had dealt a further blow to any claim to equanimity that Widowski had made. With the boy's angry — or was it petulant — departure from home, emulating the action of his older sister three years before, Widowski, alone in the house grown too large for him, felt suddenly vulnerable. And vulnerability evoked black memories of camps left behind, memories which, reaching down to those depths of which he again became aware, stirred echoes of a faith long estranged and long denied in the pursuit of poise and resilience and those options that had once before secured survival. He tried again to pray to the God of his early manhood, murmuring by rote the formula scorched into his memory by a harsh and nervous teacher. But the prayers, heavy and burdened, anchored things that they were, did not rise to the wanted heights. They weighed instead dull and leaden in his blood and twined themselves with premonitions of death, futility, waste and decay. And he cursed that God Whom he could not reach, berated Him for punishing him for alleged sins that could not be sins and loathed with envy that unfeeling,

unheeding eternal Being that from His distance toyed with men and mocked their best intentions and smote the very eyes of those who seeking succour, seeking meaning, turned to Him.

That loathing, reawakened, now turned against Carl Stillman who, in his quiet aphoristic way, also mocked his attainments and designs. The architect loomed in his mind, disturbed his evenings, racked the night. In his dreams, he saw the man's large face hovering over the hollow in the ground, his thick slowly-moving lips directing a team of blue-shirted gum-booted labourers in their work. He saw, behind the tentacled mesh of scaffolds, sheer facades of grey stone rise from the quarry, saw huge beams straddle, as though in flight, the cavernous chasm between opposing walls, saw plate-glass windows beat back the sunlight with eye-burning glare. And rapt, watching, soaring, he saw the scaffolding fall away, the workmen receding and the building stand, a colossus amidst lesser forms, testimony to his wealth and memorial to his being, seeing it stand as *his* until, emerging from the arch riding over the entrance, he read the name engraved in gilt, the name not his but that of Carl Stillman, beneath which the architect's eyes flickered and winked, his thick grey lips set in a leer. And Widowski woke, startled, sweating, eternity deprived, to the hollow darkness of night that hung muffled around him with the silence of the grave.

At first keeping his distance to avoid the barbs, Widowski now clung to Stillman, suspicious that in his softly-spoken unruffled way, the architect might claim the building as his. It was not wholly impossible for, though the original conception was his own as was the donation towards the scheme, yet were the plans and execution Stillman's, and if the auditorium were to stand in its projected grandeur, it would be no less a testimony to the creative force and skill of the architect than to his own acquired wealth and beneficence. And, at the thought, Widowski burned with resentment at the need at having to share his creation with that other man who had not suffered as he had done, nor laboured long cycles of day and night, nor lost wife, daughter and son in pursuit, in the new country, of the security and poise that were nothing more than reasonable.

But though the dreams clung to Widowski, yet did Stillman assert no claim. The architect visited the construction site

every day, talked with the foreman, tested the stability of the scaffolds, tapped the rising walls, felt with his feet the soil beneath him. Sometimes, Widowski, arriving at the same time, saw Stillman standing retreated in thought and wondered what schemes the other might be brewing. But Stillman betrayed no hint of any. Standing together, speech at a premium — for other than of the building, they had no common concern —, Widowski was aware of the architect's wheezing as, remote, almost aloof, the other was gazing into the hollow where the construction was taking place. And unable to desist, prodding, probing for clues that might give flesh to his fears, he tossed his head, indicated the rising foundations with his chin, let out a faltering laugh and said, "You must be pleased when you see your work," to which Stillman, biting a lip and rubbing his chest, answered in a tone that yielded nothing, "I do as I understand."

The weeks, the months passed too slowly for Widowski. May, June, July came, went. And then the wetter months, during which the slippery boggy earth, the perilous rafters, the frequent downpours impeded the work. But progress there was. He saw it, not from day to day, as did Stillman with a suggestion of satisfaction ominous to Widowski, but rather week by week, when he suddenly discovered that the southern or the western wall had climbed by a further height or that a space for a window became apparent or a staircase, a doorway, a platform. Repeatedly, he asked the architect when the building might be completed, to which Stillman, breathing heavily, replied, "Look not down but upward. He will grant us life to see it."

It was during one of his visits to the university that Widowski encountered Daniel. His son, bearded, bespectacled, carrying a handful of books, had seen him and momentarily glanced about him for a route of escape. But, reconciled to the presence of none, he moved in Widowski's direction with more animation, the better to show that he was in a hurry.

"Ashamed of your father?" Widowski said, blocking the boy's path.

"I have a lecture to go to."

"So go," Widowski said, not moving.

Daniel's eyes darted from his father to the narrow space on either side of him. His father made room for other passing students, but for him the opening seemed to contract.

"What do you want from me now?"

"You belong home."

The boy shrugged a shoulder.

"Is your shikse more important than your father?"

"I don't want to argue."

"Argue? Just a question. Man to man."

"Then stop treating me like a child."

"Now who is arguing?"

The futility of the conversation apparent to him, Daniel narrowed his eyes. The lips receded in the beard curved into a sneer.

"And what are you doing here anyway? Become a student, have you?"

The tone, to Widowski, was patently derisive. Once, he would have launched into the boy with an open hand or a belt for insolence. Such times had passed. Words alone now remained with which to reprimand, but words alone were no longer sufficient. His son was beyond all reach.

"You want to know why I am here? Come then. I will show you."

"I have a lecture."

"Only a minute it will take."

Daniel gritted his teeth, but came. Taller than his father, but more slender, he walked beside him. Widowski sensed his reluctance and felt a perverse satisfaction at having his wilful son ensnared.

At an observation point around the construction site, Widowski stepped aside and urged Daniel to move before him. Progress had been made. The lower reaches of the building had attained to ground level and, now, new scaffolds, uprights and beams jutted higher. New staircases of rough unpolished concrete had been laid, broad gaps for windows were apparent and apertures for doors and recessed alcoves, the whole still crude and graceless, but unmistakably solid, massive, of one purpose. Around the structure, earthmovers purred, cranes hoisted and lowered huge grey slabs of stone, and workmen shouted, whistled, swore.

"This is what brings me here," Widowski said, describing an arc with an extending arm. "This, I am building — a hall, a theatre, no, an auditorium."

"In your name, I suppose," Daniel said, harshly.

"In my name."

The boy looked over the structure in front of him. Widowski, wanting, ready, to point out its separate features, moved alongside him. But, in the face of Daniel's rigid stance, his narrowed eyes and his jaw, even beneath the beard, set in marble, he said nothing. He hoped for a comment of surprise or appreciation or favour, but knew that his son would not yield. Already, he regretted having opened himself to the boy.

Almost swivelling on the balls of his feet, Daniel turned. He stared into Widowski's face — a hard, contemptuous stare.

"Very nice. Now will you let me go to my lecture?"

"Is that all you can say?"

"Look. What do you want me to say? To do? Kowtow before you? Bow and kiss the feet of a man who doesn't know what next to do with his money?"

Daniel, erect, severe, glared. He lossed his head. He flared.

"It's money, all money, only money. If you could buy souls, you would. If you could buy eternal life, that too you would. What you do comes out of here, your pocket, not from here, your heart, or here, your brain, from your very being. You merely buy — factories, stores, buidings, labour. But you don't *create. Create.* You. . ."

Widowski felt the rising heat in his blood. He interrupted the boy, seeking to contain the deluge.

"And for that my son, the great poet, the writer, the scribbler, turns his back on his father."

"It's your *world.* Your *world.* I can't live in it. It's your values. Security! Security! Security! That's all I grew up with. Surrounded by a fortress, an empire set up by money, whatever the cost — to Mother, to Elizabeth, to me — in case, just in case, another Jew-hater comes and threatens us again with our lives. Look! What was, was. This is another age, another country. I sympathise with your past suffering — you told me the facts often enough — I understand it, have always understood it. But I refuse to be possessed by it. . ."

"You've had everything too easy."

"I want to taste the world outside. And write about it, create, create, create. Not buy and be stifled, not buy, yet sell myself . . . myself. — Now, will you let me go to my lecture?"

"Go!," Widowski said, resigned to the futility of argument. "And may you never have the need to say to yourself or your children 'My father was right'."

Elizabeth, when he visited her on Sharon's birthday a fortnight later, was scarcely more impressed. She had evidently been told by Daniel about the building at the university for, during a lull, when conversation was meagre and strained, she alluded half-heartedly to its progress.

Remembering Daniel's outburst, Widowski had no wish to provoke his daughter who was in obvious sympathy with her brother. He knew that the boy often came to dinner at Elizabeth's and probably brought his shikse as well.

"It's coming on," he said. "A memorial to the family name, to your grandparents who perished in Majdanek."

The lie was too obvious, but to retract was impossible. He heard Albert who was listening without particular interest in his chair blow down his nose.

Shortly after, having kissed Sharon and Naomi goodbye, suddenly feeling again the weight of age and the imminence of death upon him, he left. Although it was still mid-afternoon on a Sunday in September, the streets seemed black and despondent, remote, lost to time. He felt himself acutely separated from everything both living and inert and drove home in a vacuum that knew neither warmth nor smell nor flavour nor sound. Here, a car passed, there a pedestrian, a cluster of children, a mother wheeling a pram; above, the branches of trees moved with minute shudderings, and sparrows flitted and somersaulted among the leaves. But they were no part of him. They belonged to a world now alien in which perhaps there *was* a God, in where there *was* family, love, pleasure, spirit, faith, in which there *were* outreachings of the heart and mind that the pocket could never buy. He felt again the loss of tenure on his life and the thought of suicide in imitation of his wife recurred. But there appeared before him an image of Theresienstadt, he remembered the shuttling across Europe in foul stench-ridden cattle-cars crammed with decaying and dying flesh, recalled the hunger, typhus and deprivation through which, somehow, human beings, including himself, had endured and survived. The suddenness of the vision jolted him and he grasped the steering-wheel firmly, let down the window, and took deep breaths. Heat rising to his face, he recognised the absurdity

of that impulse to death — the absurdity of surviving hell in clinging to life, yet ready to end life so senselessly, shabbily, meanly. And he knew — God or no God, purpose or no purpose, love or no love — that as he had made his bed, so would he have to lie in it. He had his businesses to attend to, the auditorium to see through to the end. Whatever value he gave to his life, it lay not in the present but rather in the future, in the memorial he was erecting. But that was no reason for denying the existence in his hand. He would live, see out his days, forge that life-after-life from stone and gilt, and lie in death, when his time came, secure in the knowledge that others more favoured from early on had yet achieved far less than he.

Widowski had made peace with his children's coolness to his scheme, and yet, in the weeks that followed, he did not remain untroubled. Stillman unnerved him. Not through anything he said — Widowski couldn't wholly fathom the architect's allusion to time, perfection, master builders and mortal tools, though he considered them innocent enough — but rather because of his more sustained remoteness and engrossed deliberations that ignited in him the fear, first apprehended in his dreams, that the architect might quietly, surreptitiously, make final claim upon the building. He *knew* that Stillman could not legitimately do so, but *felt* that he might, knowledge and feeling, in all his previous ventures married in finely-tuned harmony and success, now so acutely and disconcertingly, discomfitingly divorced within him. And there was something else about the architect, something that did not quite accord with his fears, yet which, the perspective perspective of vision rotated, intensified them acutely. Stillman was sick. Only with the progression of the weeks, of the months, did Widowski become alert to the fact. The wheeze, faint and purring, was an ineradicable part of the architect, like his shock of grey-white hair, his suit, his signet ring. Widowski had become accustomed to it and, after his initial suggestion that Stillman see his doctor, he gave it little thought. But the ever-mounting breathlessness, the creeping duskiness in the other's cheeks, and the slowly-deepening eyes receding into sharpening sockets made the fact inescapable. Stillman was not only sick. He was dying. And from a dying man, Widowski knew, there was nothing to fear, except that it brought the reality of one's mortality closer to home and magnified the urgency of the work. The

man himself, however, with one foot toeing the other side of life, could not threaten, nor harm, nor take away that which was another's. What was such a man's gain, after all? — Yet, here lay the very dread. Stillman *could* take away. He could take with him Widowski's name and, through that building, into eternity preserve his own, just as Widowski himself, dreading oblivion, had intended, desired intensely to do. Why else the architect's abiding interest in the scheme, his insistence upon personally drawing up the plans, upon overseeing the construction from the very foundations, upon visiting the building site day after day, ill as he was, as doggedly as Widowski himself? Suspicion rankled, the more so as Stillman, in his distance, gave nothing away.

The nearer the project approached completion, the more anxious did Widowski become. To himself, he wished that if Stillman were indeed fated to die, he might in fact die soon. But immediately he reproached himself for entertaining so crass, so base a thought. To that depth, the depth of depravity, he would not stoop, not after himself having known times of death and struggle and survival. He wished instead, hoped, that the architect might rather withdraw from the project, the building now so close to the end that it no longer required Stillman's supervision.

Stillman, however, stayed. Indeed, he intervened in every phase of the construction still more sedulously than before, he spoke to the foreman and labourers with ever-greater urgency and knit his brows more deeply than ever. A peculiar tenseness, uncommon in the man whose every word had earlier been measured, transmitted itself to Widowski. Widowski sensed, recognised, the architect's race against contracting time. Stillman's plight made his own impatience keener. The days, the nights, for him stretched towards infinity, even as Stillman's zeroed in towards extinction. Once out of his factories and stores, his hands sought occupation. Would that his name were already engraved on the arch above the door. Would that the building were already clearly, boldly, indisputably, his. Would that he were able to detach himself finally from Stillman whose existence had, without his will — even against it — become pinioned to his. The architect haunted him. His remoteness was sinister; behind those knitted brows lurked pernicious designs to wring from life the last — that only — thing that it could still offer a dying man — a legacy, a memorial, a name. Better to

have it out with him once and for all, dispel all illusions, pretences, doubts; let Stillman know his hopes were vain, his scheming futile. Widowski burned.

And burning, the day came when he could no longer restrain himself.

It was January. The building had attained to its full height. The stone walls had been scrubbed, the windows polished; the scaffolds were being dismantled and the enclosing fence removed to restore that severed acre to the university to which it belonged. Still to be completed were the lawns, the flower beds alongside the concrete paths, the dedication plaque, his name in gold above the door and in bronze high upon the southern wall.

The day was hot, forty degrees, the sun was high. Widowski came upon Stillman wiping his brow and blowing away the heat through thick puckered lips. Widowski thought suddenly of Daniel, of Elizabeth. He remembered Rebecca, felt acutely the emptiness of his achievements. The perspiration clinging to his back, he leapt at Stillman, leapt with words at once urgent, pressured, demanding.

"Even today. In a hell like this. Many flats I built. Blocks. Ten, twenty, even twenty-four. And factories. Big buildings. One storey, two storeys. But the architect — not once I see him. Not once. But you — every day. In cold, wet, in fire like this. So much this means to you, this building, this . . . this. . . So much to you who has built so much, so many, so big? I think, and think, and do not understand. . ."

Stillman, tall, increasingly gaunt, his collar become too loose, bowed towards him. The focus of his eyes was sharp, the sharper for their being recessed in sockets grown too large for them. Beads of sweat glistened, glass splinters on his brow.

"You repay a debt," he said calmly. "I repay a gift."

"A debt? Gift?"

"A debt for what this country has given you."

Widowski remembered the unabashed lie he had told the chairman of the planning, building and finance committees of the university and that he had repeated, already a safe unquestioned formula, to Stillman early on. The architect's memory was too acute. He wondered whether Stillman might be mocking him. He felt the need to defend.

"It has given me much," he said — reasserted —, aware even as he said it of the very falseness behind his assumed

solemnity. "Even this, my . . . my building, this theatre, auditorium will never repay what I owe."

Under Stillman's scanning gaze, he felt the prickly heat of his brazenness well into every pore.

"Yes," the architect said, flatly, turning his gaze to a workman who was lowering a platform of the scaffolding, and retreating beyond accessibility.

Widowski was dissatisfied. Across the space between them, he sensed the architect's contempt. He tried to draw Stillman back.

"I mean it, it is the truth!" he said. "I am grateful. That is why I build. This country has been good to me. I . . . I. . ."

Stillman's profile sharpened, tightened. The visible corner of his eye narrowed, sending out a spray of creases towards his temples, his cheek became more deeply scalloped as he sucked in his lips, the tip of his nose curved faintly. He was obviously battling the heat.

"It is the truth!" Widowski repeated.

Stillman nodded. He did not look at Widowski.

"True is what each man believes," he said.

The architect's remark was spoken calmly, with neither haste nor emphasis, yet it rang in Widowski's ears like an accusation. Widowski, ignoring, or unable to heed the counsel of wisdom that dictated silence, flared.

"And you! *You!* What gift do you repay with my building? Yes, my building! Every brick of it, every stone, every piece of timber bought with *my* money."

Stillman remained unruffled.

"Forgive me," he said, "but money is a loan. A loan, like life itself."

"No!" Widowski shouted. "It is mine. I worked for it. Days, nights, Saturdays, Sundays. Every cent honest, not a cent cheated, stolen. . ."

"And yet — may I be personal? — you are an unhappy man."

The sun burned. Widowski felt the heat in his face but was uncertain how much of it rose from the fire in his own blood. The architect's insight too searing, too close, he felt the compulsion to deny.

"Unhappy?! I! No. I have everything. A fine house, factories, shops, investments, children, grandchildren. . ."

Stillman probed his face as he spoke. Feeling the weight of the other's eyes upon his own, Widowski looked away.

"You have reasons to be happy," Stillman said, "and yet you are unhappy. What is yours is not yours. You have it merely on loan. What you say is yours belongs not to you but to time. And you are aware of it. That is why you build this hall — to escape the scorn of time. I know. I see. I understand. I do not condemn you for it. But, to me, such are the strivings of unhappy men."

Widowski wiped his brow, his neck.

"That is not why I build," he insisted. "I am *not* unhappy."

Stillman took a deep breath. His lips turned upward at the corners. He blinked. The grey-whiteness of his hair glistened mercuric in the sun.

"I am mistaken, then," he said. "Let it be. Let it be."

But Widowski, driven, could not let it be. His own question remained unanswered, his fears not yet subdued.

"But you," he said harshly, seizing Stillman's arm as the architect turned away. "You. Coming here every day, even on a day of fire, to something not yours. Why, why, — if not to take away what is mine?"

Stillman turned back. His long withering face showed an unfathomable sadness, pity, pain.

"Why do you attack me?" he asked. He held out his arms. The sleeves of his suit rose above his wrists. He wheezed faintly. "*I,* take away from *you?* Look . . . look at these hands. What do you see?"

Widowski looked, saw what he had already seen so often before in the architect — the long spindled fingers, the joints like bosses over which the skin, thin, contracted and pale, had been stretched taut. The signet ring, loose on its previous finger, had been transferred to an adjoining one.

"You see but do not say. The truth is too delicate. It is better, easier to lie — to oneself, to others."

He paused. Widowski bristled at what seemed a deliberate barb.

"I shall tell you then," Stillman continued. "I am beyond hurt. I made my peace with the truth long ago. It is death you see. Pale, wasting, destroying death."

"Have you seen a doctor?" Widowski said, weakly; irrelevantly, he knew.

"A human doctor, yes. But I am in the hands of one still higher."

He raised his eyes briefly into the shimmering blueness of the sky.

"It is to Him that I repay my gift."

"With my building?" Widowski instantly flared, threatened again, alerted once more to his irrational fears.

"It is your building, yes, but my offering," Stillman said.

"It is not yours to give."

"It shall bear your name, but the building is mine. You have bought, but I have created. Your name shall live on before the eyes of men, mine shall dance forever before the eyes of God. Your immortality I don't begrudge you, mine shall be the more eternal. To you God has given a loan, to me He has given a gift, and to Him I offer my work. His gift has been that of creativity, my offering is that of perfection."

In Widowski, turmoil burgeoned, confusion, and perplexity, as apprehensions, impotence, contrition and regret wrangled within the renewed sense of his hollow and ultimately barren existence.

"That is why you have come every day?" he said mutedly.

"It is given to every man to create in life one perfect thing. This is mine."

"And you are not taking away my name?"

In Stillman's last ironic pitying smile before he turned away, bowed and becoming skeletal down his neck, Widowski saw that that was no longer — had never been — the issue. He looked at his auditorium, saw it in a new light. The scaffoldings removed, it stood grandly, a prodigious towering mass of grey austere stone set off on three sides by rising pilasters of polished timber and, along the southern face, by broad tinted windows framed in steel. A dome, immaculate in its roundness, glistened like silver under the white burning sun, the shafts of light fragmenting into blazing splinters that pierced the eyes. Not a line was spare. Nor a shadow. The building conveyed the sense of having been conceived in its entirety from the outset, of having been born mature and vibrant without having passed through the troubled process of growth and development from a modest ill-defined seed. More — and this struck Widowski with a force that made him hold his breath when he recognised it — the very wholeness of the conception imparted to the structure a unique simplicity, of a kind that could cause the most common labourer to say, "I too might have done the

same." Herein lay true inspiration, true beauty, perfection; and dedication, love, commitment.

Turning, he saw Stillman walking away. His suit hung on his shoulders. His gait was slow, his tread measured, clinging to the ground as if protracting the purchase on earth-bound reality still left to him. For an instant, Widowski saw his own back receding into the distance.

To each his own delusions, he thought, reflecting upon Stillman, but knew immediately that architect was not deluded. Rather he was everything that Widowski was not — a believer, a visionary, a mystic, a man at peace with himself and his God.

And more — much more.

As Stillman disappeared from view, Daniel flaming in sunshine came before him, angry, accusing.

"If you could buy souls, you would. If you could buy eternal life, you would. What you do comes from your pocket, not from your heart, your brain, your very being. You merely buy, buy, buy. But you don't create, you don't create, you don't create."

And Stillman from a distance echoed, "You have bought, but I have created."

Bought, created, created, bought.

Widowski became aware of the heat. It pounded his brow, scorched it with its dryness. Noises purred, rang, hummed in his ears. The shimmering blue above him made his head spin, the orb of whirling white burnt his eyes, blinding him, and his throat welled with nausea. The thought, the terror of imminent death petrified him into immobility.

"My God," he murmured. "Not now, not yet. Have mercy"

Groping, he found an upright post remaining of the surrounding fence. He steadied. A passing workman grasped his shoulder.

"Ya' OK, mate?"

The voice sounded remote and brassy. Sight returning, multi-coloured butterflies flickering luminously before him, he nodded.

"The sun got to ya', 't seems," the workman said. "In this 'ell, an old man oughta' wear a 'at. Or 'e'll get 'imself a decent stroke."

Widowski found his car. He leaned back in his seat until his hands ceased trembling, then began to drive away. His

head throbbed, his eyes smarted. The streets seemed narrow; he felt constricted, stifled. He turned on the air-conditioner but it offered little relief. All around, the air was on fire. Before him, the asphalt shivered like a shimmering mirror, hissed like simmering water, like seething oil. He saw the figure of Rebecca against the glow, saw Elizabeth, then Daniel emerge into the light. He knew that it was memory, imagination, taunting him, but the clarity of his wife and children terrified him. They were pointing their fingers, rigid, outstretched in accusation.

"What have you done with your life, Max?"

"I have built, Rebecca, built. . ."

"Bought, Father, not built. . ."

"A secure life. . ."

"Stuff your notions of security!"

"For all of you. Out of ashes. After Dachau and Theresienstadt. . ."

"That was another world."

"The past."

"A man has a right to build for himself a life. . ."

"But how much have you destroyed along the way, Max?"

"What have I destroyed?"

"Our love, Father."

"Our happiness."

"And Mother's health. If not for you. . ."

"You bought your life, yes, but sold your soul."

"You built but, in building, you also destroyed."

"And what have you of it all now, Max? After all these years? . . ."

"A name, Rebecca, Yours, mine. On my auditorium, a name."

"Also bought. . ."

"Created!"

"Stillman is the creator."

"The perfection is his."

"As he said, it is given to every man to create in life one perfect thing."

"It is given to a man to perform one perfect deed."

"What is yours, Max?"

"What is yours, Father?"

"What is yours? Tell us, what is your, what is it, what is yours?"

Their voices rankled. Arriving home, his hands empty as he scurried without purpose between the rooms, he could not escape their claims upon his thoughts. He also remembered Stillman and, stiffening, felt again the cold touch of mortality. Around himself, he had raised a fortress, as Daniel had said, an empire called "Widowski's" of brick and stone and dense solidity, and yet not since Europe had he felt so vulnerable. The fortress proved withal a brittle shell, its centre a cheerless hollow from which the stuff of life — love, family, solidarity, warmth — had steadily seeped. No building, no creation would rectify the destruction his obsession had wrought. No name bought, engraved in gold or suspended in bronze would annul the void that enclosed him, even alive, like a shroud around the dead. No memorial could exalt an existence stripped of communion, tenderness, God; or of laughter, loyalty, care.

Once more in the days that followed, he wandered about his house, dressing carelessly, not shaving, brooding in circles about his life, about achievement, destruction, death. Then during the nights, enclosed by silence that would not let him sleep, he wrote long letters to Elizabeth and Daniel, confessing his error, laying bare the ache of his solitude, begging that they understand, forgive, accept, just as now he understood the love of Elizabeth for Albert and Daniel's need to create. For security without soul was the refuge of a cave, affluence without creation was the wealth of a beggar. And as he wrote, Widowski knew that Stillman, the believer, the mystic, striving after his last act of perfection in homage to his God, would have understood.

Widowski no longer visited the university. The chairman of the building committee wrote to inform him that the construction of the auditorium was completed and that the official opening would be held in the first week of the coming academic year. The Chancellor would be delivering the main address and the honour of his own presence was requested.

Widowski read the letter twice, three times, then, folding it carefully, tore it into shreds.

A week later, he read in the death notices that Carl Stillman had died.

Composed, mellow, buoyed by the vision of a perfect deed, he took out pen and paper from his desk and wrote to the chairman of the building committee. His hand was steady, his thoughts clear. He would be grateful, he wrote, if

the university authorities made moves to render his bequest of the auditorium anonymous and accept the name of one more worthy than he to replace his own. And may they, in his memory, inscribe upon the doors the motto "In creation is eternal life."

He sealed the envelope, addressed it, and, cleansed, he went out into the bright, open, sunlit streets, walked briskly to the post box on the corner, where tranquil, buoyant, the very weight of gravity rising from his shoulders, he dropped the letter through the slot.