Catherine

1.

Catherine — Kate, Cathy, Kitty, Kitten — how inauspicious a time for her to cross my path!

What would Cybele, picture-postcard Cybele have said to our eventual break-up?, she, though freckled, eczematous and carious, the flimsy stuff of floss converted through photographic gloss to the softness of Palmolive, the toothy radiance of Colgate, and the appeal of Chanel, though, nature be praised, smelling of genuine ocean odours in her eager pubic vault.

"Yes, obviously a Scorpio-Sagittarius incompatibility," she would have said, pouting her lips as was her way, just as the progressive cooling of our own ardour towards mutual iciness had stemmed from a Scorpio-Taurus disjunction, the remarkable thing being that it was totally unforeseen even by herself, by Cybele, that otherwise incontestible, so-emphatic oracle.

And what of Priscilla? — What would *she* have said, Priscilla, catching me on the rebound from Cybele when the fleshy configurations of Psychology majors were no less welcome than those of photographers' models with astral predilections? Now, had she been asked to interpret the break between Catherine and myself, she would surely have thrown Freud and Eysenck, and Adler and Jung at me, and droned bookishly in her way about inevitably different temperaments and interests, attitudes and perceptions, the truth of which could not but be right, if only because common sense, that lowliest and oft-most jilted

branch of sapiens psychology, could not, without insult to the most basic intellect, be wrong.

Catherine, Cathy — no, at such times, Kitty — she warranted no such explanations. She was, pure and simple, the advertisement for life lived for the moment, lived in the hungry pursuit of ever-tantalising here-and-now tactile, olfactory, gustatory and auditory pleasures — dancing, say, at the *Moldavia* till others' nuptial exhaustions before immersion into our own ecstatic orgiastic play; or delighting in three-course dinners with Cabernet or Spumante leavened by the smutty corn at the *Laughing Hen Revue*; or letting herself become almost childishly entranced by the lavish itinerant circuses that came our way where she would gape and gasp, and grasp my arm at the gyrations and teeterings of the acrobats on the trapeze and of the cyclists on the tightrope far above the gawking multitude; or mingling with the festival-hatted folk waving flags and balloons to the cacophony of *Festa* merriment, the crowded riverboats cruising under an incandescent flare of fireworks, with Kitty the while poised on one foot on a low-slung parapet clacking there a wooden rattle won at the laughing clowns. . .

All this, and more besides, much more, life-embracingly more, while I. . . while I. . .

O, how cramped against all this my soul, my soul, my Jewish soul!

That she, Catherine, Kitty, Kate, should even have bothered with me! She, so free, so untrammelled, uninhibited, while I. . .

Again, while I. . .

But, listen. Give the imagination rein. . . Picture a Jew. Conjure up a fist with its knuckles blanched and the fingers clutching — no, not the silver and gold and crisp green notes for which my race, my people, my tribe is so sorely maligned — but clutching within it rather his very soul, that seething, simmering cauldron of urges and hesitations, of hurts and reservations, of Aphrodisian eroticism and Scripture-honoured purity that few, too few, allow in him; and then compare him

with, say, *Vati* and *Mutti* Wagner, Luther or Treitschke giving birth to their own Eros-seeded spawn, or with Father and Mother Chamberlain bleeding forth their own execrable Houston, or *Pere* and *Mere* Drumont or Henry or Gobineau, each couple in its own place, endowing the world with its own modern-day no-less intemperate malignant Jew-hating, Jew-baiting roe.

But they — may no alas-alack for them be said — are now dead and yet the Jew lives on, just as (if parallels of a different order be permitted) poor syphilitically demented Nietzsche, too, is now well-settled pulverised dust, while the God he deemed dead, He, too, endures; neither reality, however — neither the survival of God or of the Jew — affording any particular sense of victory or of superiority, but merely a stirring ever and again of heightened rancour, suspicion and collective touchiness over the legacy left by others' aborted humanity, moral dwarfism and intellectual cretinism. — *Pace*, heirs of Goebbels, Rosenberg and Streicher; whatever your perversions and perversities, I do still find in myself the charity to rank you one rung above the maggots. But what, in the meantime, have you done, what have you done, what have you done to the Jewish soul?

"You certainly do have your share of hang-ups, don't you?" Catherine had said in a moment of banter when I put all this to her. She had even seen fit to laugh.

"No more no less than your own crazed Easter-touched forebears," I had answered, sprinkling pepper to her salt. If my wounds were to smart, those of others would smart with me; were I, in the manner of Shylock, to bleed, others too would bleed with me. I had promised this to myself long before. The day of the lamb being led meekly to the slaughter was past.

Permit me, however, to focus my light more clearly and more sharply upon her — upon Catherine, Kitty, Kate.

She crossed my path, I said. — A concession to poetic licence, that! Rather, that I crossed hers does truth the lesser violence. For fact was that we were brought into contact by the simplest, most inevitable and most mundane of circumstances. Liberated

from my stint as Intern in Professor Armstrong's Surgical Unit, I passed on to Catherine's domain, Harry Kleinberg's Medical Ward, of which she was the ever-energetic, enterprising, incomparably efficient and much-appreciated Sister-in-Charge. Had she been Roberta Williams or Mandy Graham or Teresa Kennedy who serviced the other wards, the final outcome would have been quite different, of course — a nod at Cybele's astrology and a nod, too, at Priscilla's oh-so-earnest but insufferably obtuse pronouncements — but less different would have been the deliberately planned preliminary assault on their sexuality that my fantasies were fancying, these, in turn, and in the event, making of Catherine their actual object. For, all Jewish sensibilities and notions of purity be damned, all apology and self-containment be cursed, after successive breaks with Cybele, Priscilla, Sarah Bender — she, at least, one of my own and parentally sanctioned — and Jenny Coulson, I was bent yet again on conquest, conquest of the crotch, utterly and unreservedly erotic, wholly perverse and totally conscienceless, and unwaveringly ready to launch into the fray with the same devil-may-care bravura of my gentile colleagues, Ricky Durham, Bruce Forster and Kelvin Starling, for instance, to whom girls, and nurses especially as the most immediately accessible of the species, were acorns to be plucked and tossed aside at whim.

"Playing the triangle" was Kelvin's name of the game, while Bruce, raising his eyes heavenward with Raphaelite beatitude, called it "The Horny Quest for the Holy Grail."

They were recent graduates, too, like myself, they were doctors, they were supposed men of the world; yet they continued to purvey a schoolboy humour not yet to any responsible degree diminished.

2.

But were they the instigators of my resolve? — Hardly. In their carefree, careless, care-be-gone phallic wieldings, they were not colleagues particularly worthy of emulation, but, as fly-by-

night consummators of my own vicarious androgynous fantasies, they served as models, as abettors, and as disinhibitors, permitting me to wield weapons far more dear to me: power, domination, a quickened vengeance and the thrill of excelling at their own hedonistic game, indeed at *all* their games, this being but a sequel to the thrust that, in earlier years, had netted me a bag of highly remunerative academic honours, and homage, and high repute — all this a boon, too, to my hard-pressed immigrant shop-keeper parents, where they, my peers, indigenous and anchored in long-confirmed untroubled security, were amply content, where not actually proud and even cocky sometimes, at their adequate, if unspectacular, subject passes. — In short, in a paraphase of that happy bit of confident Americana: anything they could do, I could do better; and, in the doing, I was not about to let the curly darkness of my hair dissuade me, nor the acuteness of my eye, nor the curve of my nose which, in any cartoonist's caricature, would have verged on the hooked — none of these which, in their sum, created a hard relief at once unmistakably, unashamedly and unapologetically Semitic. As the words of another song ran, the onus was on others to take me or leave me.

For that Shylockian pride which I carried over into my internship, I could in large part thank Professor Armstrong; Professor Armstrong, awesome, towering manipulator of the scalpel, papally Catholic, father of seven, silver-haired despite his enviable youth and endowed with an incorrigible propensity to touch — the shoulder of a student, the forearm of a nurse, the hand of a patient, all invariably female and preferably young; the same Professor Armstrong who, with a wink, a half-faced smile and an adjustment of the bow-tie he wore like some public insignia, farewelled me on my last day with his Unit, saying ever so inoffensively at the conclusion of my final ward round with him, "There are castes in this world whose brains by nature outmaster their hands. Surgery is not a skill given to every tribe, but the exercise of the intellect. . . I daresay, young Bensky, Medicine will prove your apter *metier*."

Back-handed compliments were scarcely welcome departing

fare, nor the licence, however jesting, to melt down the Benjamin, the Benjamin Pruzanski, legacy of three, four, five already sufficiently humbled generations, to a pillorying, lampooning, demeaning and derogatory Bensky. If, then, he had thrown bait, I confess that I bit. Pushed, with every pore tingling and hot and prickling with sweat, I snapped, the attendant audience of Registrar, Sister, nurses, students and passing technicians, cleaners and orderlies be damned. I snapped, almost snarled, "Give me a choice and I should choose the merest most humble tribe endowed with intellect above the choicest regal clan of mechanical scalpel-manipulators and needle-wielders!"

Professor Armstrong laughed. He laughed loudly, amusedly, like the King of Hearts, and with deep creases of mirth puckering the outer corners of his eyes. But in tandem with his open bonhomie, those very eyes acquired the hard blue sheen of cold pellucid ice, they were accompanied, too, by a nose narrowing to menacing angularity, his Adam's apple above his bow-tie bobbed in a vertical flutter like some harbour buoy, and he closed the episode with a nasal remark as he turned his back upon any considered reprisal, saying, "Yet there are some, it would seem, even among those castes who would allow their intellects to let them down."

My name, not unexpectedly, reached Catherine before I did. The hospital corridors in their structural straightness and acoustic linearities enhanced the swift unarrested flight of chinwag and chatter; the walls themselves had ears; and tittle-tattle was not an indulgence reserved for hen-parties, hotel counters and charity-balls alone. Hospital dining-rooms, operating-theatres, residents' and nurses' quarters could be buzzing hives of small-talk and gossip no less.

Scarcely had I, the following Monday, begun my first morning round in Harry Kleinberg's Medical Ward than she, Sister Richardson — Catherine — formerly just another ward sister in blue among many whom I had passed in the foyer or on the stairs without particular acknowledgement, thrust a drug-

requisition book under my nose, saying, "Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?"

A hero? — Yes, perhaps, but a flawed one, of whom my colleagues said with palpable commiseration and a clicking of tongues that, after that petulant display of audacity, I would do well to look outside the hospital for future appointment. For, his cheery paternalism, his solicitous touch and his ready ear for those he favoured notwithstanding, around the table of the Hospital Management Board, Professor Armstrong wielded power as malignant as his outward mien was benevolent. If I had nurtured hopes of post-graduate posts, of higher degrees, or of eminent status in the medical hierarchy — and truth was, I had — there were some in that closed fraternity whose particularly influential recommendations I should now have to do without.

The future, then, over the remainder of that Friday and the Saturday and Sunday that followed were suddenly contracted to a circular zilch. But, by the Monday, I had come through the ritual of fretting and anticipatory grief more fortified than cowed, and prepared from the red corner to come out fighting, take on the system, and confront it on its own terms, hitting at it if I was touched, springing up if I was put down, baring my teeth if shown as much as a palm. What might have been a game to some would become bloody sport for me, the aim of that sport being not merely to play, but to lead, to conquer, to exceed, excel. I should yet be Professor Armstrong's equal; I would yet rise above my peers; I would yet render them my underlings, and dominate, become the font of decisions, and exercise most sweet, most delectable, most exquisite power.

Ah, the thought of it! The very thought!

So, when Catherine Richardson confronted me with her "Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?", it was less with corresponding jest than with masked aggression that I countered with "And what will that lady offer in return?"

"Her loyalty, of course," she answered, and added, "Though only on duty."

"That is small return indeed," I said, signing the drug order book with a flourish. "Surely the lady can offer better — off duty?"

"Oh, yes," she said sunnily, taking back the book and flipping its pages to dry the ink, "complete sets of Scott, Eliot and Dickens and whoever else peddled such abominably corny hand-me-down gambits such as this."

I saw the amused play of dimples at the angles of her broad mirthful lips and heard her release a huff of disdain for just those literati in tandem with a dismissive toss of her head.

"My, a nurse who reads," I said, unable to resist, "you don't go in for psychology as well, by any chance, do you — Freud, Adler, Jung, *et al* — or better still, for astrology?"

We were standing beside the trolley that contained the patients' records. Catherine took hold of the bar.

"Only tea-leaves and tarot cards," she retorted, moving towards the first ward along the corridor, "and flirtations with Zen, deep breathing, the Maharishi, ESP, and. . . and a little of the Mosaic. You know — God, the Law, the Prophets, quaint colourful expressive rituals, all those things. . . So, now, dear brazen, valiant doctor, shall we begin the round?"

I was not yet wholly ready.

"The Mosaic?" I echoed after her. "Are you kidding? Judaism, of all things? Lord, and in all that company — Zen, ESP, spoon-bending, the Maharishi, abracadabra mysticism. . . All this with a name like Richardson, seventh-generation descendant no doubt of a convict original, C.of E., the Lord's Prayer come Sundays, the Sermon on the Mount? . ."

She had long fingers, agile ones with which she tucked a rebellious coil of ebony black hair under her cap. Her face, in so far as any face could be open, was open to receive, and — if I had been wholly alert to it, I should have added — open to give as well, her large eyes, raised eyebrows, broad lips and bold glinting teeth all contributing to an air of playfulness and sustained un-selfconsious mirth.

"There are fascinations. . .," she said.

"What would you know about it?" I said, cutting across her.

I had a long-standing innate aversion to gentiles talking about Judaism and Jews.

"Even a. . . what shall we say, even a *shikse*?. . . even a *shikse* can learn about such things, I should think, no?'

"Sure! Sure!" I countered. "But why not study Seventh Day Adventism instead? Or Jehovah's Witness-bearing? Or, best of all, Smiling-death Armstrong's brand of Rock Choppery?"

Catherine took up an exercise book that lay on the trolley and unclipped her pen from her uniform. She brandished the pen lightly before me.

"I had a good friend recently," she said. "You may know him. . . David Appel. And before him, another, Simon Silberberg, also a former intern here and now in Anaesthetics. They taught me various things."

We had reached the entrance to the first ward. A trio of white-jacketed students passed us, and a ward-assistant carrying flowers.

"Aha! I see!" I said, steering the trolley in readiness to enter. "Some people collect butterflies, others stamps, others bottle-tops, and still others match-boxes. Sister Richardson, she has a nose for Jews. Silberbergs and Appels, Dr. Harry Kleinberg and now a hook-nosed caricature answering to the name of Benjamin Reuben Pruzanski, another acquisition among the circumcised, to be placed like some trophy on a mantelpiece or in a glass-topped showcase. Pray tell where you shall be setting me. . ."

A nurse limping on an elevated shoe approached.

"Mr Frimmer's in pain again, Sister. Can he have two more Digesic?"

Catherine nodded, replied with an assured "Yes", added "And see to it, Nurse Davies, that he watches his fluid intake", then turned back to me.

"Frimmer," I said, "another specimen of the Chosen for you, I suppose."

"How did you guess?" she tossed back, then said, "You know, there's nothing as dull as a tongue-tied always-obedient always yes-saying intern like some who have passed through

here. But you, you're interesting, you're spunky, you're aggressive. I can already see that we will have plenty of meat around here to carve with our respective knives. And as for a nose for Jews — I like that. Some people are so marvellously cute when they're brusque. Professor Armstrong must really have got to you. Looks like we're set for a most invigorating three months. But —"

She paused and tossed her head towards the ward.

"But for the moment, I'm sorry to say, Dr. Benjamin R. Pruzanski, in those beds within are thirty lives to be saved and you. . . we. . . had better get down to it."

"Let's," I said, stepping aside to let her lead.

Just inside the doorway, she paused again, waved her hand in greeting, and tossed a crisp "Good morning" to the patients waiting in their beds. Then, as if tickled by some private joke she had just remembered, she turned her fine fetching profile towards me, let out a soft, ironic and melodious laugh, and said, "May I say one more thing?"

"Do," I said.

"Then, for your information, Dr. Benjamin P., my paternal grandfather emigrated from Glasgow a mere eighty years ago, while my maternal one was a Dane. And as for convicts in our family — alas! there are none. My father is a highly-regarded municipal mayor and ne'er a stauncher Presbyterian did ye ever see. His daughter, again alas, his only lass among four laddies, is not the joy he would ha' wished for in his older age, bein' as she is a rebel 'gainst all things virtuous."

"*Touche*!" I said, loser of round one, and bowing in defeat even while arrogating to myself the final word.

3.

Dr. Harry Kleinberg, M.D., B.S., F.R.C.P. (U.K.), F.R.A.C.P., M.Sc., Ph.D. — to whom I was assigned in apprenticeship for the next three months — was a man upon whom one would never deliberately inflict one's mother-in-law. He was a saint — Catherine's, Kitty's word — quietly-spoken, ever a listener,

his hands (as more than one patient was wont to say) divinely blessed, a man who, if ever there were another as wholly intoxicated by his calling, would find in him most harmonious kin. The very portrait of humility, ever unhurried, tranquil and pensively-earnest, it was difficult to conceive of him having passed through childhood, let alone adolescence, just as it was to consider that he might in time age and go the way of all mortal flesh. He was born into his role, pure and simple; and where there were other, non-medical worlds in which he circled, these lay comfortably within the orbit of his quietly-intimate family life and of his synagogue where, come Saturdays, guiding his two young sons in the weekly readings of the *Chumash* while his wife and daughter sat in the gallery upstairs, he would pray with a calm untrammelled air of devotion and unquestioned faith.

Freethinker that I was, heir to ben Abuyah, Uriel Acosta and Spinoza fed to me by my survivor forearm-branded father, there were occasions when I, too, was compelled to present myself as a would-be-worshipper before the Ark, as on the approaching marriages, say, of Manfred Shuster to Sonia Minkies or of Solly Halpern to Susie Weiss, worthy sons and daughters all marrying into the fold, or on a *Bar Mitzvah*, or at the turn of the New Year on Rosh Hashanah, or, nudged by some atavistic chord, on that most sombre, tedious and self-negating of days, that God-intoxicated day of contriteness and humility, the Holy Day of Atonement. It was on just such occasions that I had seen Dr. Kleinberg and had watched him — even before I came into his Unit — watched him perversely, perhaps, nurturing the wish to uncover a flaw, the merest crack in the facade of his seeming sincerity. The shame for such devious intentions as mine rebounded, of course, on me, for doubts about one's fellow always told more about the doubter than about the object doubted. That notwithstanding, however, I could not bury the conviction that Dr. Kleinberg rode the wrong tram. It seemed to me impossible, indeed it was an affront to reason and wholly absurd for any Jew at the time with even the most meagre knowledge of recent history with

God's silence in the face of it, and for a doctor to boot, imperatively alert to the pervasiveness of gargantuan bodily, mental, emotional and moral sufferings, to cling to the fictions and appurtenances of faith against all odds.

But that was Dr. Kleinberg — humble, tranquil, and in himself and *to* himself in every way a master. And more. Presented by a thankful patient with, say, a generous box of Red Tulip chocolates, he distributed the delicacies among the staff; offered flowers, he handed them to a nurse to find a vase; a painting he nailed in a prominent place on a wall; a socks-and-handkerchief set he passed on, tactfully outside the ward, to his Registrar, his Intern, a student — in all this being a far cry from Professor Armstrong who, already the flamboyant possessor of a Porsche, a summer villa and a yacht, eagerly accepted and pocketed everything that came his way. A physician's physician in this modern sophisticated age, had Dr. Kleinberg lived two centuries earlier and roamed the forested foothils of the Carpathian Mountains, he might have been a Baal Shem Tov, a Master of the Good Name, and a folk-healer or a wonder-worker. Had he lived a century later, he might have been the model for a Bontsche Schweig or a rabbi, a scholar or a scribe, whose sure, God-given, God-trusting way of living, feeling and thinking that I, in my own troubled adolescent quest for meaningful roots, had sought to emulate. — Truth to tell, I had failed; I had been tossed and buffeted instead on the oceans of self-exploration like a ship robbed of anchor and pitched between the docks of stringent piety, joyful praise and icy reason offered by the *Chassidim*, *Mitnagdim* and *Maskilim* that had made up a part of my ancestral legacy; it being the last, the *Maskilim*, the "enlightened" who gained final sway, these attaining dominance under the combined effect of my father's death-camp-engendered cynicism, the romance of our own Jewish medieval and Renaissance heretics, the contemporary this-worldly level-headedness of a Russell or Camus, or a Kaufmann or Sartre, and, most odious of all, the loathesome God-denying dignity-destroying cadavers lying cold and marbled

along tiers of porcelain tables in the dissecting-room of the university's Anatomy School.

In Dr. Kleinberg — son of Polish parents come to Australia on the eve of September 1939, his father having been a cantor and slaughterer in Kutno near Lodz — I came to see continuity with warmer, cosier, homelier tradition, but did so, astonishingly only after Catherine — Catherine, of all people, a *shikse* be damned — had said, "Running this ward is the closest thing to working with a saint." Whether she was being genuinely descriptive in so far as anyone talking about saints could be or inclining towards the figurative, I could only guess at; though, tending to associate such expressions with shallow gee-whiz-type hyperbole, I elected to attribute it to the exaggeratedly metaphorical.

But Cathy in time made clear what she meant.

"Oh, I know he's religious and all that," she said, "and in this, I'm sorry to say, Ben, you're not a patch on him. But even if he believed in nothing or held that the Father Creator Redeemer Healer Judge on high was a mere hobgoblin or hobbit or some devilish imp, then just to *watch* him, Ben, the way he *speaks* to people, how he *deals* with them, the things he *does* for them. . ."

There it was: the old-fashioned stuff of sainthood. Performance, attitude, deed — the hoary do-unto-others bit or, conversely, the don't-do-unto-others ethic, the homologous messages of Christ and Rabbi Hillel finding rapprochement transcending all other antagonisms in this gentle descendant of Poland walking the wards of a hospital light years away from his origins.

Ah, virtue, virtue, virtue — could I but follow in Dr. Kleinberg's shadow, ever an ideal, a perfection to strive for and to emulate, and thereby, to bask sweetly serene, knowing both the calm and the fervour of sanctity, such basking accompanied by a heaven-blessed soft-breathed assurance of deathlessness, the light-winged flight to boundless freedoms, an ecstasy in the

discovery of one's worth, one's potentialities and gifts, and the capacity, honed to tingling sensitivity, to see within, to truly love, to feel deeply, and to give.

Ah, splendid idyll — of purity, divinity, redemptiveness.

4.

How removed, however, were such dreamy soft-cored adolescent aspirations from the more tactile, more urgent and far harder stuff of the actual: the almost incessant daily careering through *this* world, the clattering reverberating scuttling up and down the hospital's concrete stairs, the darting along sheerly angled linoed corridors, the day-by-day coursing through pathology departments and antiseptic-reeking wards, all these from eight to six, day in day out, every second night on rostered duty and every third weekend, and forever scurrying over admissions and discharges, setting brisk pace in ritualised questionings about headaches, breathlessness, cough, constipation and diarrhoea, repeated examinations of chests, abdomens, armpits and legs, and repeated instructions, repeated and repeated — "take deep breath in, let it out", "tighten fingers, now relax", "please turn over, now stand up", "your blood pressure's raised the heart's a little strained the liver's been touched the kidneys are failing", and "yes it's diabetes I'm afraid but no not cancer but you could well reduce your drinking cut out your smoking avoid overeating shed some weight some physiotherapy could help and regular exercises at home", and "take these capsules three times a day this tonic should give you pep I will see you in the clinic three weeks from now you should be fully recovered by then fighting fit as the saying goes but let me know if anything goes amiss. . ." and so on, day after day, week after week, with Catherine — Cathy — through all this nearly always there, alert, alive, buoyant, ceaselessly on the move, about her the scent of perfume, of lavender talc and fine perspiration, and Ricky Durham there, too, and Bruce Forster and Kelvin Starling, the three of them as ever brimming with ribaldry, its effect — desire, craving, lust — honed to most

exquisite keenness by the swift inadvertent touch of a nurse's dress in passing, the tantalising masturbatory fantasies of easy lays, everywhere also the pervading ambience of cocksure cock-a-hoop Professor Armstrong, and in their beds, the sick, the soiled, the garrulous and regressed, unknowing catalysts in the chemistry, intensified by proximity, of two beings, one brashly male, the other zestfully female, the pair, Catherine and I, wholly professional by the bedside — "Sister, I'll set up Mr Steele's transfusion after the round", "Yes, doctor, I have already told Nurse Strang" — but behind partitions continually ragging, scrimmaging, sparring in deft exchanges of banter and repartee — "My brother's given me two tickets he can't use for 'Die Fledermaus'", "I didn't know you had a brother", "I don't, but the tickets are for real" — each subsequent outing edging me nearer to the consummation of my most immediate purposes, the conquest, the mastery and the having for having's sake, of crotch and buttock, breast and throat, undisturbed in the folds of her lone apartment, fervid the lust, clammy the flesh, a solitary car or van purring by outside, the window rattling in its frame, with the festivities of *Festa* now behind us, Catherine — Cathy, Kitty, Kitten, Kate — a clear lingering image poised on the parapet skirting the river bank, magically weaving through the crowd, all woman, delicious woman, desired woman, liberated from the desexing dress of sober vocation and wearing brilliant red now, and flame, vermilion, her shoulders, torso, hips all enraging, myself the while watching, thirsting, hungering, swearing: if not tonight, then never, if not tonight, then. . .

With the ascent of dawn, too precipitate, too swift, and the yielding and the having, now, like the *Festa*, also past, the barbs returned, together with the salt, the pepper, the deflation.

"Another Jew to your collection."

"Another *goy* to yours."

"Such is the thrust behind all human history, Kitten — use and abuse, exploitation and despoliation, only always called by other more noble-sounding names. . ."

"And love?"

"Which? The puppy kind or the eternal?"

"The honest, Ben, the genuine and the uncomplicated."

Face over face, hers over mine as she leaned on her elbow, she had blown coquettishly into my face.

"Poor innocent," I could not but snort, saying, "Uncomplicated? Are you kidding? What planet are you on? This is *terra firma* and *terra realita*, Kate, Cathy, Kitten dear, not *terra molta dorme*, or whatever the Latins used to call Dreamland. Your kind and mine, for instance, my loving Presbyterian, lapsed though we both may be. . ."

She nodded briskly in patent comprehension and sniffed down her nose. In the grey light of dawn, I saw the outline of her face; I mapped out its contour, traced over its smoothness, but had to visualise its expression through the imagination.

"Ah, yes," she laughed, mocked, chaffed. "Ah, yes." She grasped my chin. "Us you pump, yours you marry, learning to shave on another's face, as Simon would say."

"A malicious libel, of course, Cathy, worthy, my little vixen, only of an ill-bred mouse-brained Cossack. But even if true, it is a lesson learned from your own fine-assed breed of phallus-waggers, forgive my indelicacy; even though, of us, of course, of us, our maligned, oppressed and painfully-begotten tribe, greater decency is expected, and a higher virtue — shall we call it propriety? — or Kleinbergian saintliness, holiness, modesty and mildness. . ."?

This was when she said, "You certainly do have your share of hang-ups, don't you?" and I had answered, "No more no less than your own Easter-crazed forebears."

"Oh!" she thereupon continued. "Yet if we. . . If *I*, say. . . were to seek and gain entry into your tribe, as you call it. . . if I were to wish to become a part of it. . ."

"Well?"

"Then all would be. . . What's the word?. . . All would be *kosher*, I guess. Love, marriage, the production of little Jewish geniuses growing into adult Jewish geniuses — the 'my son the doctor' syndrome, a mother's and a grandmother's pride and joy. . ."

I clapped a palm over her mouth and turned her flat on her back, myself now leaning over her.

"Madam," I said, foraging for her eyes in the dimness, "you are suffering from an overdose of Silberbergs and an excess of raw Appels even to think of such a thing."

Catherine shook off my hand and rummaged her own through my hair.

"No, it's just a fascination, let us say a predilection I have for... for your kind."

Again I snorted.

"I know just what you mean, Kitty dear. I feel the same towards pygmies."

She shook her head vigorously.

"That's unjust, Ben. I might tease, I might trifle, have my little joke, but I don't lie, Ben, and I don't flatter for flattery's sake."

"Hark ye to the confessions of a latter-day Judeophile," I said. "What are you saying, then?"

"You'll think me patronising, gratuitous, you will, I know. But those patients of ours, Flamer, for instance, and Weiss, or Mr. Frimmer... They're characters — eccentric, some of them, opinionated, quarrelsome even, demanding, and not a few of them never satisfied. Give them the earth, they want heaven as well; bring them a glass of water — why so little?; bring them a jug — why so much, water is cheap here? And yet..."

"And yet they're lovable dears. Is that what you, my sweet, my own, my very own Jew-loving *shikse* are about to say?"

Again she shook her head. With the rising light, her cheeks, her chin, her eyebrows were becoming more distinct. Her stark black hair was in disarray. I had rolled back and lay now supporting myself on an elbow.

"No, not dears, Ben... But heroes. To you there's nothing new in it, but for me... It was David Appel who first made me see it... Every so often a scar from the war, the story of a family killed, the number on Frimmer's arm who, breathless as he is,

still gets up early each morning to put on those leather cases and straps, those. . . those. . ."

"Phylacteries. . ."

". . . those phylacteries and prayer-shawl and starts to pray. . ."

"So?"

"There's strength in that. . ."

"Ah, yes, you should ask my father what he thinks of the matter. And he has a number on his arm, too. He'd say it's all blindness, blindness and delusion, a blinkered clinging to superstition, to fairy-tales, and to a downright primitivism we should have shed long ago. . ."

"The fact remains, though, whatever you say, my hell-bent iconoclast supreme, you cannot deny that certainty of theirs, that conviction. . . Dr. Kleinberg, Mr Frimmer, Flamer. . . despite everything, despite it all. . ."

I sat up, and in mock theatricality struck my forehead with a fist.

"Kitty! My God!" I said. "Hath not a Jew eyes?! Have I been blind? Have I been deaf? Are you telling me that this fascination, this. . . this is a predilection for the Mosaic is in fact a flirtation with the notion, indeed a contemplation to enter as an attested member into our so-marvellous, so-noble, eternally-abiding tribe? Is that it? First, Simon Silberberg then David Appel, now me. . . each of us being primed in turn to be your entree ticket into the Judaic paradise? Is that it? Is that your game?. . ."

"I. . ."

"Do you want wise counsel, Kitty, Kate? Stick to the God, hold to the fiction you already know. Your father's Presbyterian fiction is as good as any that this earth has to offer. To be a Jew, my dear well-meaning Don Quixotic somnambulist, let this Sancho tell you, is to be burdened with history and bowed down by memory. It's to inherit a future, call it a destiny if you will, but not a destiny of grandeur, believe me, nor of splendour, or of glorious salvation or of messianic peace. Oh, no, my innocent one. Don't for a moment believe what you read or

what the likes of Frimmer and Kleinberg would have you believe. Our past has been a legacy of malignancy, our destiny is to be at the receiving end of more of the same. Not a shred of joy lies before us for all our messianic aspirations, not the least assurance of deliverance, nor the meanest hint of redemption or national salvation or whatever else we've been exhorted, cajoled and deluded into believing. . . But. . ."

Fully drawing back the covers, I swung out of bed, rubbed the stubble on my chin, and stretched.

"But if they are heroes, those Jewish brethren of mine, if they are indeed the saints you make of them, and if, as you say, their faith contains certainty, conviction and even perhaps a modicum of truth, then don't tell *me*, Kathy dear, it isn't *me* you have to tell. Instead, tell the world out there. Take upon yourself the evangelist's mantle and let the world outside know. Tell them that we've been a people most unjustly and far too long maligned. Tell them that we truly are God's Chosen; tell them that if they would but look upon us, they would truly see us as a light unto the nations; tell them. . . Tell them whatever you would have them know. Us, they won't even begin to believe. But if *you* tell them and *you* recruit others to the cause, then maybe, just maybe, we might have a few less enemies and perhaps in this Panglossian world of ours a few more friends."

Catherine, too, had by now stepped out of bed. Moving lightly, almost on the balls of her feet, she made her way to the bathroom, on her way brushing a frisky hand against my cheek.

"We're not all against you, Ben," she said. "If it's any consolation, there are some of us you can trust," and added with all the perky cheerfulness of the Ward Sister in her again, "like your own doting hero-worshipping cloud-cuckoo-land dreamy maiden."

"Thanks," I said after her. "I must remember to tell my father next time he mentions the showers, the furnaces and the chimneys of Auschwitz."

5.

And how often did my father talk of Auschwitz?

Or my mother? . . .

Cybele — as I had ribbed her often enough before the heat between us congealed to ice — was either a descendant or a beneficiary of Alexander Graham Bell or owned shares in the nation's telephone network. When she was neither modelling nor consulting the heavenly constellations, she so made the telephone an extension of herself that one might as easily have pictured her without that appendage as without ears. Indeed, one glossy print she sent me from interstate where she had been offered temporary work showed her posing in an ermine fur — and, it appeared, only in that fur — the while holding a tusk-white telephone receiver to her shoulder, winking, licking a lip and beckoning suggestively with a brazen come-on. The astronomical reaches towards which her phone bills must have soared were far beyond my caring. What had irked me was her persistence in calling me at home, and had she never known my number, I would have been the last to grieve. For, more than once, upon returning from the hospital or from some other place when I still lived with my parents, I was greeted by my crusty purse-lipped father with a dry chaffing hard-edged pronouncement: "That *goyishe* onion of yours has been after you again." It took me time to recognise his wry private play upon her name, the unusual, colourful, if almost ostentatious *Cybele* giving on to my father's harder patently contemptuous *tsibel* and *tsibele*, in Yiddish the name given to the homely, less colourful, most commonplace onion.

"Bring her home one day, this *tsibele* of yours," he also said. "I want to see with my own eyes if she is *kosher*."

With Priscilla, mine was the fortune to run headlong into my parents in the foyer of the Rivoli Cinema to which, counter to their more customary stay-at-home, chair-warming habits, they had been inveigled to go by their friends. They had heard that the movie dealt with Jews in wartime Europe (more particularly Warsaw, their native home) and pictured them in a

sympathetic light. Given these inducements, my parents — more so, my mother — felt it disloyal not to go. They were, however, less than edified by film's end when Priscilla and I met them near the door, all of us, except Priscilla perhaps, startled by the encounter on leaving the cinema. The film *did* in fact deal with wartime Warsaw; the Jews in it *were* sympathetically portrayed; but to my parents' consternation, the whole proved a travesty of justice and a whitewash of the Poles. For more than anything, it was a paean to the Polish Underground which, to my parents, had in reality been as anti-Semitic and murderous as both the very nation it defended and the nation it resisted, the role of the Jews in the movie being nothing if not merely ornamental — one scene depicting two Jews buying arms from Poles for use in the Ghetto, another showing a Jewish girl hurling a Molotov cocktail at a German convoy in an ill-fated personal act of heroism.

In the wake, however, of our ill-timed encounter in the cinema foyer, the feeling that they had been duped by the film's pretensions took second place in their concern. What rankled, what must have torn at them like witches' nails, was another, deeper, more grievous betrayal. And they stayed up until my homecoming, which I had deliberately, if unsuccessfully, delayed until the shoulders of dawn, to make their sorrow very plainly manifest.

"You saw for yourself, didn't you?" my mother began, about to set sail upon a turbulent sea of remonstration. "You saw. . . You saw. . . with your own eyes, you saw. . ."

She wore her old, now-shapeless crimson dressing-gown, a one-time Mother's Day gift I had bought her, her eyes were bleary and suffused with weariness, and her greying hair splayed out in convoluted tangles over her shoulders. A memory sprang up of my mother having at one time played small bit-parts on the local Yiddish stage.

"The war the Germans the Poles I mean," she now let go, scarcely drawing breath. "Is this what we Jews died for suffered for your father we and your grandparents uncles aunts and cousins. . .Is this what we raised you for all these years giving you

the best of everything so that you might run around with *shikses* and right before everyone's eyes so that the whole town can tittle-tattle. . . Nachum and Bella Pruzanski's son did you hear he runs around with *shikses* he is bringing them shame O if only the floor had opened up right there when I saw you and swallowed me alive. . . Is this to be the whole gain of our lives is it is it is it can we expect nothing better from you can we. . . we who have given our best years our energies everything only to see you behaving as if you want to send your father to an early grave like that apostate Finkel or drive your mother to an asylum like that Myer Citrynowski is that what you really want is it is it is it. . .?"

My father, having also sat vigil through the night hours, having spent them bent over the pages of the week's *Jewish News* and, in all likelihood, to the ceaseless tune of my mother's repetitious dirges, was less demonstrative. His ways were less dramatic; his teacher had not been the theatre. It had been the harder, crueller, more crushing realities of experience — thin soup, for instance, and typhus, dysentery, festering abscesses, back-breaking labour, whippings delivered simply for being, public hangings for no better reason, bodies impaled on electric fences and the endless stench of charring flesh — all these in him transmuting dramaturgy to disdainful wryness or to words so measured and so quiet that they trapped his hearer into intense, close and concerted attention.

"You're grown-up," he said softly and directly this time, the hour militating against the deployment of his more usual cutting barbs of scorn, his tattoed number, that indelible tool of blackmail, deliberately bared and conspicuous on his forearm. "Perhaps you know, or believe you know, what you are doing. Some things can't be helped. We have to live with the *goyim*, and work with them, buy and sell with them, while you, as a doctor, will have to treat them, heal them, at all times do your best for them and then better still. . . But when it comes to making them your friends, before you sit down to eat with them, make sure they don't hold a knife in their hand or have a fork in their tongue. That way, at least, you might not get hurt

and the rest of us along with you. . ." — he rapped a finger against his breast — "For I have seen; I have felt; I have experienced. And if you want proof, Ben, if you want evidence. . ."

After all the waiting through night's darkness into the early hours, that was all he said. As a final gesture, he simply, turned out his arm. He must have deemed his number, 50726, branded there in blue, more eloquent by far than all the words, whether in Yiddish, Polish, English or French, he had acquired in his more than sixty years of traversing the terrestrial terrain.

In the event, their loss of sleep over Priscilla — "your pretzel", as my father referred to her in a return to his more traditional irreverence — was less than warranted. Priscilla, the most diametrically opposite number to Cybele, was a fill-in come upon the scene at a most fortuitous time, just when I sorely needed a buffer against the surfeit of wound-licking solitude after the final glacial schism between Cybele and myself — puerile jealousy the cause — Priscilla latched upon as one of those proverbial acorns of Kelvin's to be plucked and then be tossed aside. Or perhaps — topsy to turvy — I was an acorn to *her*. Dour, ponderous as she was, overtly the picture perfect of spinsterish bookishness, she was yet, in the moon-lit hours, ready, if unexciting, substrate for the workings of her glandular juices. Her vault was no less accepting that that of Palmolive-Colgate-Chaneled Cybele had been; but the time came, as it had to come, when, preparing me for that which by then I too hoped was inevitable, she said, "Sometimes, I can't find anything to say to you." After that, in the words of the oracle, the end was nigh; but not before she had also managed from certain Olympian heights to add, "People have different interests and temperaments, attitudes and perceptions and so on. I guess there really is little between us, we're oceans apart, and. . . and. . ." — and here, the shoulder shrug, the puckering of her lips and the ascent of her eyebrows said it all — "your being Jewish and all that doesn't help."

I couldn't help but sneer then and deliberately set my profile to its most salient, challenging, belligerently Semitic form.

"Tell me, my prissie Priss," I launched into her, "was it at the

university or in some benighted shadowy Jew-as-devil nunnery that you gained your priceless wisdom, your most divinely-endowed and ineffably immaculate tact, quite apart from your Christian love and tolerance and charity and compassion?!"

Amicability was scarcely the note on which we parted, and it took me by no surprise to learn that she subsequently drifted into a relationship with a law student, the flathead son of a White Australia politician, given for his sport to wearing a T-shirt with skull-and-crossbones on front and back accompanied by the legend "Australia for Australians", "Kikeland for Kikes". To his credit, at least, he did not strut about the campus delivering raised-arm salutes, but that swiftly ensuing Priscilla-Flathead liaison did illustrate to me most vividly, even if only for a while, the essential verity inherent in my father's cautionary injunction.

6.

Safer harbour was Sarah Bender. After Cybele, whom my parents had never met, and Priscilla, whom they had, even if Sarah had come with down on her upper lip, a port-wine stain suffusing a cheek, a horn on her brow and a mass of livid pimples as her dowry, yet would she have been no less welcomed into the family fold than the most flawless Jewish daughter. That she had none of these, but was instead dark, petite, a ready and quickly responsive listener and the picture of courtesy with "Yes, pleases" and "No, thank yous" in appropriate places; that she possessed a B.A., Dip.Ed. and taught at a private school; that her father was a landsman of mine, Warsavians both; and that she wore most sensible clothes and colours and carried no airs — all this certainly endeared her to them from their first encounter, but their readiness, indeed their sheer anxiousness, to accept her followed the mere mention of her name even well before I brought her home. Her degrees notwithstanding, they very quickly recognised in her the domestic streak, and her potential as a worthy wife, a loving mother and a dedicated daughter taking the place of the one they had themselves

wished for but had never had. I daresay she would have been any of these, indeed, all of these. I was certain of it. For, any girl who could boil an egg while holding a degree, as Sarah could, must have had grand potential for domesticity. But she was not for me. By the third or fourth date — this, at her cousin Debbie Bender's engagement party where she introduced me to every tenth-removed member of her family — it was clear that she did love me, but it was a love just as clearly predicated on the M.B.B.S. I bore, on the status this would give her, and on the kind of life it promised. I was less taken by the pedigree of chattering, nattering, vacuous Auntie Hannahs, Uncle Morries and Cousin Barbaras, Beverleys and Brendas, just five random samples of a hundred I would acquire in turn. So, when Jenny Coulson came along, she a slender-buttocked, large-eyed nurse I met at a hospital party, at which Sarah was a flower decorating the wall so well that I left her there, I felt buoyed again, I tingled again, I could once again look forward to adventure, titillation and colour, and to nestling in the finer plumage of a lyre-bird as opposed to the clipped dry and dreary pinions of an ostrich.

With Jenny, however, the promise proved more than the offering — chloroform itself could not have been as soporific — quite apart from which I had no particular penchant for yesterday's breath, unwashed body sweat and vinegary perfumes, all of which, while permissible in patients, were scarcely fragrances endearing to soul or body mates. As a consequence, within the space of a mere six hours, I had gained and given up Jenny, lost Sarah who, to her credit, did possess some pride, and found myself again in the field unattached and unrestrained at just that time when Professor Armstrong saw fit to nettle, challenge, humiliate, and offend.

That I was less than temperate over that weekend that bridged my surgical and medical terms could scarcely escape notice. My room was my haven. I spent the greater part of that Saturday and Sunday spread-eagled across my bed, attempting at times to read, at other times simply staring at the ceiling or scanning my bookshelves, but mostly fretting sweat over my

future, at the same time cursing and swearing, and praying that each and every one of Professor Armstrong's fingers should that day rot with fungus, and planning sweet, bitter and malignant revenge, not only against him, for he was but a cog, but against the whole establishment — the whole Establishment — he represented: the hierarchical, cliquish and ostentatious, and the brash, contumelious and dyed-in-the-wool, self-righteous infallibly papal.

To my parents, the explanation for my sudden uncustomary seclusion was simple; nothing conceivably more so.

Over Saturday evening dinner, my mother was moved to ask, "Aren't you seing Sarah this weekend? Have you had a quarrel?"

The face I showed must have been appropriately morose and, in Romantic terminology, woe-begone, for my father, adhering to the track my mother had cleared, added his bit, and said drily, "That shows, at least, that he cares. I was beginning to think our son, our heir, had no finer feelings."

Their tune, however — a melody best played upon the harp — changed as the truth became increasingly evident over subsequent weeks that Sarah had, as it were, become a closed chapter, with Catherine, by then, well integrated into the next, with my mother, all hopefulness yet, asking, "Do you see Sarah still?" and with my father, his insight as sound as his greying hairs were many, contributing his own single-breathed coda: "I trust you shan't return to your old ways with those *tsibeles* and pretzels, with those *blondinnies* of yours and those red-heads, and that. . . and that whatever you do you will remember you will remember who what where why you are and when you remember remember too remember again remember always your parents remember your people remember Auschwitz remember your history, your tradition, your fate. . ."

As the son of my parents, my duty was ever to remember, as in Hebrew school I was also taught to remember and in Yiddish school as well, until I learnt that the Jewish genius lay not in literature, nor art, nor wisdom, nor even in its much-vaunted highly refined and polished morality, but in its tribal memory,

that memory both cementing the generations and bonding the dispersed, at once linking me with Abraham our Father, rendering me heir to Moses our Teacher, and making me kin to the martyrs of Jerusalem, Masada, York and Kishinev, and, in my parents' own time, of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek.

There was no way, then, that I could have been induced to disclose to him — to disclose to either of my parents — my dalliance with Cathy. And the one time I did venture, with tongue in cheek rather than out of conviction, to say to my father as Cathy had done, "They don't all hate us, they're not all against us", he huffed with a veritable explosion of sound, and raised his eyes till they swam in the cupolas of his eyelids, saying, "Of course not! Did I say different? We are butterflies, we Jews, beautiful magnificent splendid butterflies. Everyone loves us, the whole world, from president down to the smallest child — that is why they like to chase after us, and pull out our wings and our hearts and our tongues. Out of love for us, and admiration and respect. When have they ever shown that they're against us?"

7.

The fact soon enough became apparent to others that between Cathy and myself there existed more than a mere work relationship, a formal Dr. Pruzanski-Sister Richardson interdependence. For a time, our public faces did remain correctly and professionally different from our private ones, but they could not for long be so clearly separated. There were too many give-away signs in the way we greeted each other, or spoke, or turned an ear or positioned ourselves during the twice-weekly rounds with Dr. Kleinberg, keeping side by side and to the rear as he instructed the students around the bedside. Cathy, ever the more alive, the more giving, and the more expressive with that sparkling bright-eyed readiness of hers to jest or encourage or pat a shoulder, an arm, a hand, became still more happily all of these; while I — the coin reversed — in public the more

reserved and the less inclined to jest or infringe with unnecessary touch, became in the ward still more subdued and more pre-occupied, my gaze, at once doting and not a little lascivious, never far from her. My perennial mentors, Ricky Durham, Bruce Forster and Kelvin Starling, themselves having found willing mates with whom to nestle, thought our liaison "bonzer", "super" and "A1", though there were times I sensed questioningly disapproving looks from Dr. Kleinberg. These, however, I dismissed — or preferred to dismiss — as the autonomous workings of an imagination, *mine*, nudged by guilt, that guilt enhanced by my countenancing of his own virtue, heightened by the constancy of the man, and turned almost to shame by the very purity and steadfastness of his allegiance to self, to family and to faith.

What I had not counted on was this: that, where my own heated chemistry had urged upon me the role of seducer, it was I who, my every will and intention confounded, had within a matter of weeks been the one who was caught. In a sense, I was captive; and captivity offended my commitment to freedom; and with my freedom thus curtailed, limits were set upon my ambition, ambition which I was not so easily about to yield, particularly not when those other volatile fantasies of excelling or attaining primacy over the likes of regal Armstrongs drove me on, myself taking anticipatory delight in that moment when I might yet turn my back upon that smirking bow-tied long-fingered lecher and, with a dog-like raising of a leg, fart full-blast in his face.

Cathy was not unaware of my discomfiture, even if she could only hazard educated guesses at the reasons for it. I could scarcely hide it; she could scarcely miss it. For, even as we sat, — whether in the *Art Gallery Restaurant* or in the *Sunset Bistro* bantering about Matron Reynold's unfortunate prickly mole on her cheek, or about Mr. Frimmer's by-then ritual assertion "You're like a true Jewish daughter to me", or about our respective fathers' hob-nobbing with the illustrious lay-politicians of the municipal chambers and of St.Kilda's Acland Street — I remained continually on the prowl, forever fol-

lowing the flow of legs, skirts, buttocks and breasts and the more delicate faces that passed between the tables.

Catherine was certainly not given to blindness.

"Does your *shikse* cramp your style, Benjamin P.?" she laughed on what was to prove our last outing together — supper at *Genevieve's* after Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* at the Carlton Moviehouse. She had just drawn back my attention to herself with a brush of a forefinger against my chin as she scanned me over the rim of a cup of cappuccino she was drinking at the time. "In the ward, we're such a great pair and in bed — don't blush — greater still; but in public places like this, you look increasingly like a fly in a spider's parlour. I sometimes wonder, Ben, why I bother with you. I do."

"And?" I said.

"I guess, if really pushed, I might say there is a little bit of love in it."

I bade her set down her cup and took her hands. They were, as always, pliably willing.

"You're so sweet, Kitty dear," I said, "so sweet.The very unadulterated stuff of sugar, honeycomb, honeydew and fairy floss. But you're sweeter still when you're less serious. Why rock the boat we're in with such terribly, abominably complicated words — like 'love' for instance?"

Her fingers in mine tightened a jot, as did her lips and the corners of her eyes.

"To put it simply, Cathy. Talk of love and you must talk about tomorrow. And to talk about tomorrow is, for me, to evoke the yesterday — or rather, several millennia of yesterdays. I like you, Cathy, I'm fond of you. I've been fond of you from your very first 'Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?' But history, Kate, my dear, history, nothing less, stands against us."

Catherine withdrew her hand and studiously ran an index finger around the rim of her glass.

"History," I repeated. "That will always remain against us, and — forgive the coarseness — a meagre little hood of flesh, that smidgin of Semitic foreskin dividing the nations and sur-

rendered in exchange for a birthright that I first imbibed with my mother's milk and separating the nations beyong reconciliation."

The opportunity for repartee from Catherine Richardson was laid wide open — I recognised this even before I had finished speaking — and, never slow to seize at opportunity, Catherine seized.

"Yes," she said, toying now with the points of her scarf. Her face seemed consumed by shadow, her chin had become firmer, her cheeks tighter, her nostrils flared. "Yes, I forgot. I forgot how, in my very own most dear, most precious Jewish doctor, that little smidgin given up has afforded him the licence to wallow in neurosis, suspicion and defiance and served as a spur to exploitation and revenge for all the things that every half-witted Ferdinand, Fritz and Ivan ever did to his ancestors — the choicest part of the cut being that, while himself denying the most central credos of his faith, yet does he rail against the merest slur seemingly cast against it, yet does he see blood on the hands of all the uncircumcised and uncovenanted among the nations, and crying, crying, incessantly crying, not least even in the bed of a *shikse*, 'Expiate! Expiate! Expiate!' "

"Cathy. . .," I said, looking around to see whether anyone was listening.

She did not allow me to continue. She thwarted me with a brisk shaking of her head and an upraised palm.

"But you're wrong, Benny Casanova. I told you before, Benny boy, we're not all against you. We're not. But if you persist in thinking otherwise, then that's your problem, yours, not ours, certainly not mine, even if you would lump me also with that amorphous mass of alleged Jew-hating Teutons, Jesuits, Benedictines, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Moslems, Trinitarians, Jacobians, Russian Orthodox, Armenians, fifty-headed Gorgons or whatever you will, out there. That's your headache."

Catherine, holding me now with firm unyielding eye-contact, rapped the tips of her fingers on the table. She was warming for a kill.

"But you're wrong on another count, your Highness, your Excellency, your Majesty, Mr. Don Juan. To you, tomorrow evokes yesterday, and yesterday is history, all of it, so you would have it seen, being a vale of tears in which you thrash about and kick, and from which you never let yourself swim free. You *want* to hurt, Benny, *you* want to ache, and grieve, and hate. For your own reasons, you seem to need it. And that, too, if it satisfies your masochistic streak, then that, too, dear sir, is your absolute prerogative. So flagellate yourself to your heart's content; you'll never find a shortage of birches. But when, on sitting in the Sisters' Station, I see and watch men like Harry Kleinberg or Noah Frimmer or Reuben Flamer or Israel Weiss, then that tomorrow of yours, Ben, looms not as a black, bitter and hateful rehash of yesterday, but frankly splendid, optimistic and indomitable. Through their strength, Ben, and their conviction, their humility and their trust — and all this despite their past, golden boy, *despite* their past — they've opened to me a window to the Jewish soul, if that's not too shamelessly rhetorical a thing to say, and through that window, Benny, dear, my blind embittered one, I see light and celebration and the certainty of a continuity such as I, and I daresay you, Ben, with your teeth ever on edge as though you'd been sucking lemons, have never known. You'll think me presumptuous — I'll take the chance — but the irony is that it takes a *goy*, the *shikse* daughter of a civic-minded Presbyterian to point it out to the blinkered Jew."

Had we been elsewhere — in a private place, say — or alone, I might have risen upon my seat and applauded her performance. But, surrounded by a house full of patrons, with the waiter just then approaching with the bill, I settled for a mere rejoinder.

"My, you are evangelical, Miss Richardson. A veritable Paul reverted to Saul. Are you perhaps about to set forth, this time out of Bethlehem, to preach your vision to the pagans?"

As I paid the waiter, Cathy stood up. She took her coat from the back of her chair and doubled it over an arm.

"Take me home, Ben," she said. "You will still do that for

me, won't you?, adding at the door with composed unruffled serenity, "You mightn't know it, Ben, but in your own warped way, you've actualy helped me discover where I stand."

8.

For all the exhilaration offered by Catherine in that most hectic, medical term of my internship year, I felt satisfaction, I felt relief on breaking out of her snare, even if that liberation had been achieved in a less than tactful way, as with Cybele, Priscilla, Sarah Bender and halitotic, acidic Jenny Coulson.

But where did I go from there; or, as Ricky Durham put it, "What now, O Romeo?"

What now, indeed? — Nothing. For the moment, I was content; my medical term was about to end; my next Internship stint — two months this time — was to be spent at the Base Hospital in Warragul in the wilderness of Gippsland, and there was neither time nor virtue in complicating the last fortnight with yet another fly-by-night attachment, however propelling towards such another fling was the very sight of swaggering Professor Armstrong in the hospital dining-room or the crotch-tickling badinage of my peers in the quarters.

With Cathy — with Sister Richardson as she again became — contact during that interregnum could not, of course, be wholly severed. After all, she was still the Ward Sister and I the intern, and medical imperatives compelled us to continue working side by side. Though there were times when in her presence I now felt inhibited and awkward — product of a chemistry manifesting as conscience — she, for her part, smart in her constant blue of authority, remained as buoyant, assiduous and enterprising as ever, was perhaps even more so than before. I could have been mistaken but, towards me, she appeared to assume an amusedly ironic air, a bright-eyed subverting coquetry ever at play when she spoke to me — quite different from the earlier, impish coquetry she had shown — as when she said, for instance, "Do you think, Dr Pru, that Mr. Williams might do with a respirator for his chest, he really

is very rattly?" or "Have you seen Mr. Nugent's pressure sore, Doctor? I think debridement might help". As to conversation beyond the necessarily medical, this had evaporated to near-extinction, words having become rare bullion to be extracted only with guile or by extortion.

"So be it," I said to Ricky Durham, trading notes with him one day. "So be it. There's nothing worse than being plagued by sorry ill-done-by maidens *a la* Byron, Shelley and Keats, or by such *belle dames sans merci* gushed over by fountain-eyed, fairy-floss, melting heart Romantics."

What struck me, however, was the fact that Cathy was spending more time with Noah Frimmer. He was a sick man, to be sure — one coronary occlusion followed in short order by a second had left him with heart failure of such degree that it confined him, diuretics notwithstanding, within a mere ten-foot radius of movement. But it was not that, I was sure, that made her in moments of leisure as much as an inner drive retrace her steps to his bed. And there, they made an unusual pair, Catherine a gay fun-loving twentieth-century gentile sophisticate, he a balding big-eared small-chinned pixie of a man, a character out of Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, a *mittel-mentsch* as my father would say — no great sage, no small fool — one of those to whom I warmed spontaneously in the black-and-white of folksy fiction, but whom, in the roundness of the flesh, I actually pitied, lamented over for their smallness in the world, as also for their unmarked transit through it — not for me that anonymity! — their lack of forcefulness, dering-do and vision of earthy possibilities, and, ultimately, for their intractable innocence and ineffectuality. In three decades, Frimmer's ship's-brothers — men by the name of Kliger, Levinson and Stark — had built splendid high-rise apartments, had assembled ever-expanding chains of retail stores and been honoured through a room here, a plaque there, a hospital wing elsewhere or a portrait hanging prominently of the walls of a wide range of board-rooms. Meanwhile, Noah Frimmer's legacy, by contrast, was simply a married son, two school-age grandchildren, a less than roadworthy car, a bookcase or two of Yiddish books,

and a small two-roomed flat a short step from the Elwood Synagogue, the sum of it being sole fruit of years passed within the damp, flaking and mildewed walls of Kramer's factory in North Fitzroy where, humming private tunes to the clatter of rackety machines, he had until pension-age stitched sleeves beyond counting to ever-depleting, ever-replenished mountains of shirts — all this after having, like my own father, been liberated from a death-camp, but unlike him, having been bereaved of one wife lost in Buchenwald and of another in the Australian Antipodes, she having died of more natural causes, insofar as ovarian cancer attended by widespread dissemination, jaundice and morphine-dependent pain were natural.

And yet, if I sought a shadow of disenchantment in him, or a furrow of envy, a crease of discontent, it was in vain. The remarkable thing was that that little pixie, Noah Frimmer, could still smile, laugh, cajole and be earnest, his face, however grey it might have been because of illness, folding concertina-like in public mirth, quiet pensiveness or private vision. Where, to my father, the brand on his forearm was a condemnation of man and a negation of God, to Noah Frimmer, his number was an affirmation of both.

"The *Maalach Hamavet*, the *Angel of Death*, and the heirs of Amalek have always sought to destroy us, yet the *Ribbono Shel Olam* has seen fit to preserve us to this day. . ."

With patients, as with customers, one did not argue. However, reared in my adolescence on Russell and Huxley, Kaufmann and Spinoza, I did say, "That's one way of looking at it; though another might well point to the one-third of our people that perished."

"We were being tested," he had answered.

"Oh?"

The veins on his bald crusty scalp stood out as dark and sluggish rivulets, his chin sharpened to a finer point, his eyes brightened.

"Just as our father Abraham, bidden to kill Isaac, was tested, and our teacher Moses summoned up Mount Sinai, and Job, and

the Jews upon the destruction of the Temples were being tested. . ."

"And we passed the test?" I said.

"With flying colours, as the saying goes" he said. "For we have remained pure, decent. We have neither imitated nor been reduced to emulating the barbarities of Satan and Amalek. And for that, the *Shechinah*, the radiance of God, continues to glow upon us and the time will come when His word will reach out through us to the world and the gentiles will hear it too and become true Jews again. They will yet return," — at this, he opened out his hands — "and, as much as they have wronged us, it will be for us, both for the sake of their souls and for the sake of ours, to take them back."

I was preparing to take issue with him, when Catherine — when Sister Richardson — entered the ward, outwardly formal and direct, and yet nursing, I was sure, a private damnable mirth very near to her harder surface.

"Doctor," she said, looking me directly into the eye, "there's a new patient just been brought into the third ward. Asthma and hypertension, And he doesn't look at all the proverbial rose."

I managed to redeem that asthmatic hypertensive patient, and saved too an alcoholic exsanguinating from ruptured oesophageal veins and, among others still, a diabetic in a coma.

At the end of it all, I would have liked to say to Catherine, to Cathy, Kitty, Kate, if she were still in the slightest even wont to hear, "Ah, glory! Your hero is certainly soaring in his prime"; but she, for her part, gave not the least acknowledgement to those miracles of salvage, she did not drop a word, nor allowed herself as much as a nod of recognition or an impressed pursing of her lips, neither then nor at the end of my medical term, when, turning heady, sycophantic and flunkey for a day, I also clung to Harry Kleinberg, fawning for the faintest praise for my three months' work, the most subtle suggestion, or a comment, something akin to "first rate", "very good", "well done", "you have certainly earned your keep."

Instead, with the last ward round over, and the two of us,

Harry Kleinberg and I, waiting in the foyer for the lift to take us down to the ground floor, my mentor, that paragon of duty and solicitude turned to me, scratched absently at an ear, and said with a scrutiny that seem inordinately intense, "So, Ben, where do you go from here?"

Catherine passed us just then. She was on her way to dinner.

"Goodnight, Dr. Kleinberg," she said, less in formality than out of clearly respectful courtesy, while me she touched with a wordless swifltly-pirouetting mocking glance before skipping kittenish out of sight down the stairs. I clung to her for as long as I could, tracing her shoulders, her waist, her hips, her legs.

"Warragul," I said, turning back to Dr.Kleinberg. "For two months. I start on Monday."

He shook his head, studying me more closely still with a shuttling brow-knitted contemplative gaze.

"No, Ben, that's not what I mean. I am not talking about you as an intern. That, I know. But you, Ben, call it the... the spiritual you, the private, inner... should I say, the troubled you?"

I was about to offer up some concocted reply, something side-stepping, something thwarting, but he did not wait for a response.

"While we have a minute, listen," he said, clearly indicating that he did not expect a reply. "I heard this in *Shul* last *Shabbat*. A simple story, very simple. A wanderer came to a rabbi of some unfamiliar village and said, 'I am lost. Help me find my way home.' The rabbi spoke with him awhile, then took his elbow and said, 'Come'. He led the man to the edge of the village where he stopped at a crossroads. There he turned to the wanderer. 'This is as far as I can take you,' he said. 'From here, it is up to you. Go. Choose whichever path you wish. One will be longer, another shorter; which is which, I myself do not know. I can only say that wherever you shall find *yourself*, and *truly* find yourself, there shall be your home.'"

That little tale of a little rabbi in a little village did not fail to

find its mark. Where others had in their childhood feasted on spreads of bread and jam given them by doting mothers, I had done so on the most delicate Chassidic spice. With the mildest of words, Harry Kleinberg had rapped me on the knuckles even as Professor Armstrong had done with rattle-snake venom. But where, three months earlier, I had bared my teeth to that surgical cur, on this occasion, I chose first a poker face, then a faint smile, and finally a fleeting laugh, saying simply, "That's cute" by way of response, to which Dr. Kleinberg replied with a patent pall of sadness on my account, "Yes, I suppose it is cute, if one wants to see it that way."

Catherine, Cathy, on parting, proved less reserved. As I shut my last patient file for the term and screwed on the top of my pen, Cathy, who had been filing reports, checking rosters and completing charts, looked up briefly, seized the opportunity as on our first encounter to thrust the drug requisition book under my nose for signing, and said, "So do they come, so do they go. Goodbye and good luck, as they say in the classics. When you get to Warragul may you, like a latter-day Caesar, come and see and conquer. No doubt there is some other panting lonely maiden there ready to dote upon any *Prince Charmant* that may come her way, and, as sure as fairies hide under toadstools by day and emerge at night, you will not be slow in uncovering her."

I reached out for her hand, but Cathy, with a swift receding movement, drew it deftly away.

"Is that all you see in me?" I ventured. "A bed-hopper, a lecher, a mere runner after skirts?"

Cathy took back the book I had signed.

"More to the point, my worthy liege," she said, "is what you see in yourself. Besides. . ." — she shrugged her shoulders and dismissively brandished a hand — "Besides, what does it matter to you what I see in you? Who. . . Or, rather, *what* am I, after all? Am I not just another of your throwaway *shikses*, and, if so, since when does a *shikse's* word really count?"

The laughter may have been defensive; nonetheless, I was stirred to laugh.

"Ah, the Catherine I used to know! Suddenly, I recognise her again."

"Ye.e..s," she said with sudden cryptic pensiveness. "The Catherine you used to know. But not. . ."

She paused, bent over an observations chart before her and entered figures there.

"But not. . .," I prompted.

She did not look up. Absorbed — or feigning absorption — in her work, she licked her lower lip and said, "Not one you would ever bother about."

"And that is?. . ."

She now turned aside to jot a note on the desk calendar.

"And that is?" I repeated.

Her immediate work completed, Catherine stood up. She smoothed down her uniform which had developed wrinkles, put her pen into her pocket, smoothed back her hair, a coil of which had escaped from beneath her sister's cap, and, having no option if she wanted to leave the Station which I was at that moment obstructing, looked squarely at me. She shook her head; she had nothing to say.

Nothing, that is, except, "Forget it, Benjamin P. May you return from Warragul and be spared the clap."

9.

In Warragul, I worked as necessity demanded, but with little fervour, less of dash, virtually nothing of involvement. After a lifetime surrounded by cityscapes, the rural streets were to me discomfitingly barren, human movement was sluggish, while the faces were vacant and inaccessible. I could not respond to the repetitious talk of coal-mines, sheep, cattle, wheat and rainfall. I was a stranger there and I sought to be nothing more, a waif on the fringe of that plain, a solitary itinerant leaf, an anchorite, an exile, save for one bouncy country girl willing enough to warm my feet.

For her part, Senior Nurse Jean Cummings dutifully took notes, passed on orders, helped with infusions, and dispensed

the medication. That her blood pressure readings were not always accurate, that the infusion rates were not adjusted to precision, that sometimes she dispensed one diuretic, analgesic or sedative in place of another, these *petit riens* seemed not to trouble her. Near enough was good enough, and no amount of instruction or elucidation could persuade her that she was dealing with *homo sapiens* and not some equine species, though if a guess were to be hazarded, I would have said that her father's horses undoubtedly received more expert and more stringent care.

It was while serving my stint in that Gippsland backwater that I read in the *Personal Notices* column of *The Age* that Noah Frimmer had died. Not that it had been unexpected. The flimsiest thread had separated him from that silent, vast and timeless hinterland beyond the realm of breath. When, in a moment of lowered guard, I said to Jean, "And so has another mystic gone", she, the portrait of sublime profundity, scion of sensibility, possessor of Einsteinian intelligence, sucked her lips, rolled her tongue around the gum she was chewing, and said, "Was 'e one o' them geezers that wears long gowns an' sandals an' flowers 'round their 'ead?"

I forgave her. How could I not forgive?

"Yes," I said, "They're the ones. And he played the sitar at midnight and plaited his beard and, what's more, sniffed cold water through his nose and insisted even in hospital on sleeping on a bed of nails."

"Jeez," she said. "Really? Yer not 'avin' me on, are ya? Ya sure gets some queer ones."

Yes, indeed, I sure had some queer ones: like the numerologist, one of a small but worldwide disseminated tribe who, tracing his lineage back to King David, calculated the End of Days in our time; like the dowser who insisted that the core of the earth was molten gold; like the spiritualist who derived the word "soul" from the Hebrew for hell, Sheol. But not Noah Frimmer; he was not queer — not he, my evangelist latter-day heir to the Prophets who, to that blue-uniformed sister at that moment some two hundred kilometres away, was a hero, a man

with the tattoo of suffering, a man with scars, yet who, breathless as he was, nonetheless rose early each morning to put on his phylacteries and prayer-shawl and sailed with perfect faith into his devotions.

"There's strength in that," she had said, my succulent transported Catherine.

And now that he was gone?

Now that Noah Frimmer was no more?

I spent the evening alone in my room. To my newly-acquired bed-warming Astarte, I pleaded weariness, left her in the ward, and did not call her as I had intimated though without actually firming intimation into promise. Far-receding flatness, darkness and silence extended outside my window, nothing in it particularly remarkable, nor, for that matter, anything objectionable, simply a mono-tonal inkiness in which dreary houses stood silhouetted against the night, in which, with effort, sheds could be made out, and the church, and the town hall, and telegraph poles, roadposts and the occasional approaching-receding transport truck or car. The Caucasian Steppes could not have been as desolate, nor the Himalayas as apathetic, nor Death Valley as claustrally enervating and stifling.

In that moment, I needed breath. And latitude. And touch. I opened a window, opened the door, wanted the wind to sweep into my face, wanted to be assailed by the scent of mown grass, the sound of a voice, the taste of something — anything — familiar, homely, reassuring. But all was stagnation. I might have been surrounded by ocean, by quagmire, bog, with everything around lying heavily torpid, paralysed, as good as dead. Its very remoteness from the familiar made me doubt the reality of that other world which I had but recently left. How real, for instance, were Professor Armstrong, Harry Kleinberg, Noah Frimmer, and even Cathy, or those evenings drinking Cabernet or Spumante at the *Laughing Hen* and the circuses which had made Cathy gasp, and the riverboats, the parapet, the wooden rattle, the flags, balloons and fireworks we had known?

Catherine!

"Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?"

Cathy!

"Deep breathing, Zen, the Maharishi, ESP and. . .and a little of the Mosaic."

Kitty!

"Another Jew to your collection."

"Another *goy* to yours."

Kate!

"History, Kate, my dear, history, nothing less, stands against us. . . and a meagre little hood of flesh, that smidgin of Semitic foreskin dividing the nations. . ."

And Noah Frimmer!

"His word will reach through us to the world and the gentiles will hear it too and become true Jews again. . . and it will be for us to take them back. . ."

Was it madness, that which followed then, certifiable, moonstruck, lunatic madness?

I escaped. Whether driven by thought alone or yielding to mindless action was to remain forever beyond recall. Whatever the spur, all I knew was that I seized my jacket, scaled down the stairs in twos, in threes, and ran, ran, my breath steaming in the cold air before me, towards my car. In haste, I backed out of the parking bay. The wheels shearing on asphalt squealed and, with a stridor no less violent, I lunged forward into the yawning darkness.

At the hospital's exit gates, I saw Jean. It was half-past-nine. She was leaving at the end of her shift. She saw me too.

"Ben!" she called out.

I had no patience to give detailed explanations.

"I've just had a phone call," I said. "The dog's got rabies. I must get back to Melbourne."

10.

I drove. To the left, to the right, there stretched black expansive seas of tar; before me, frosty circles of illumination thrown by

my headlights guided the way; behind, howled all the furies and horsemen of the apocalypse driving me, driving me, driving me on.

I drove. Against the windscreen and duco, the wind whistled and lashed; I struck a bird; an oncoming truck kicked up a stone.

I drove. Beneath the wheels, the road protested at my haste and recklessness. It sizzled and hissed, while, counterpointing the sibilance, my head pounded, "Catherine! Cathy! Kitty! Kate!. . . Catherine! Kathy! Kitty! Kate!. . ."

I reached Melbourne's outskirts, penetrated its suburbia, headed for South Yarra, came upon her street, halted with a jolt before the apartment where she lived. Looking up at her darkened window, I contemplated for a moment the possibility of heading back, but I leapt out of the car instead, hastened through the gateway, strode along the path, vaulted up the stairs. It was minutes short of midnight: the end of one day and the confrontation with another; the possible end of one life and the opening out upon another.

I had my speech prepared. Catherine, Cathy, if it is in you to forgive. . . Cathy, if you can accept the humility with which I offer. . . with which I offer what can only be called. . . yes, I can say it, I can say it. . . what can only be called pure love. . . Catherine! Cathy! Kate!

I reached for the doorbell, hesitated a hair's breadth from it, placed my finger on the button, heaved, heaved again, set my teeth firm and pressed.

A minute passed; it could have been an hour. A door opened within, followed by a jangling of keys, and a voice, *her* voice, wary, inquisitive, firm, "Who is it?"

"Cathy. . . It's Ben. . . It's me. . . Can I talk to you?. . ."

The briefest pause followed.

"Ben?" she then said. "Ben? Ben? Ohhh, Ben! You mean Lord Ben, His Majesty Ben, His Holiness Ben, Benjamin Pruzansky Ben."

The security chain rattled on the other side. Catherine opened the door. She stood before me in a crinoline dressing-

gown, her dark hair spread across her shoulders, her eyes, quickened from sleep to wakefulness, darting now like swallows about my every pore, her lips playing between mirth, mockery, contemplation and disdain.

"My, it really is Ben!"

She let me in.

"Well well! What tantalising gift of nature do you bring me? Treponema or gonococcus?"

"Cathy. . ."

"Or is Warragul a little cold or dull in August? Or is the female of our species unknown there?"

My speech fell apart.

"Cathy. . ."

"What an elephantine memory you have! I was certain you would by now have forgotten my name."

"Frimmer. . . he died. . . I saw. . ."

"You came a hundred miles or whatever to tell me what I already know?"

"No, I know you know. . . I mean. . . He. . . Something he said. . . I. . ."

"If you want a surgeon for tongue-tie, I can suggest a very good one. He's a professor. His name is Armstrong. He'll set your tongue loose again."

"Cathy, I want you. I mean. . . not in that way, not like before. . . but. . . but as a wife, my wife. . . Whatever's in the way we'll overcome. . . Differences. . . my parents. . . all those things. . ."

"And that little smidgin of flesh? Are you planning to stitch something back on?"

"Cathy. . . I mean it. . . I do. . . I mean it in every way. . . I do. . ."

Cathy stood an arm's length away from me. Softness, or at least a hint of it, crept into her countenance, her lips, her cheeks, her chin. She drew together the lapels of her gown and paused for a prolonged moment in that position with one hand over the other as her gaze danced over me.

Then she spoke. Deep dimples appeared alongside the angles of her mouth and beside her eyes.

"Oh, Ben, Ben, Ben. Dr Benjamin Pruzanski, in the ward always on the ball, a master of observation, quick, astute, sharp."

She reached out, touched my cheek. I, in turn, was about to take her hand. With a movement swift and deft, she withdrew it and laid it across her throat.

"Go, Ben," she then said. "Don't humble yourself so. Stay where you've been all along — on Olympus, on Everest, on Sinai. Don't lay yourself before my feet like some penitent, some petitioner, a suitor? Or I shall be forced. . . I don't want to be forced. . ."

"I am not forcing. . . I am asking. . . asking. . . asking you to be my wife. . ."

Cathy looked away. She circled the walls, the ceiling, floor, smoothed out a fold in the rug with a foot, and said, shaking her head.

"You still don't see it, do you? You're forcing me to tell you, you're forcing me to show you. . ."

She held up her hand, the same which she had laid across the other upon drawing close her lapels, the same with which she had touched my cheek, the same she had put to her throat. The diamond on the ring finger glinted, glistened, mocked.

She followed the transit of my gaze first across that hand, then her face, over her shoulders, down the length of her body and back to her hand again.

"You see, Ben. There is no way I can become Catherine, Mrs Benjamin Pruzanski, when two weeks ago, I consented to become Catherine, Mrs David Appel. Benjamin P., did you truly not notice?"

Were humble pie a thing to be eaten, I would have surely made a feast of it.

"And so to purgatory I go," I said, wishing in that moment that I could disappear instead through the meanest crack in the floor.

"That's up to you, Ben," Cathy replied. "It's up to you

whether you continue to live with your hang-ups, your venom, your spite and your obsessed and obsessive defensiveness, or accept the positive, the stuff of faith, humanity, humility and strength that is in so many of *our*. . . of your kind who have endured more, far more, infinitely more than you. . ."

"Of *our* kind, you were about to say," I said. "Of *our* kind?

"Yes, Ben. The signs were there, right up to your last day in the ward. But you were blind or perhaps you did not give them their due. Perhaps my clinging to Noah Frimmer was a service rendered in the line of duty, you might have thought, or an indulgence or eccentricity like yoga, ESP, deep breathing and so on. But I'm converting, Benny, I've been taking lessons, and learning, reading, studying. . . I'm not there yet, but whatever the formalities still to be met, inwardly I am one of you. . ."

I shook my own head vigorously this time, as if to shake myself free from an absurdly impossible dream.

"Converting?" I said. "Despite everything that in our history would drive any sane man the other way?. . ."

"Just as there are things beyond the pleasures of the flesh, so are there mysteries and purposes that transcend its endurances. Noah Frimmer taught me that. And I recognised something of the kind in Harry Kleinberg, while even David who is scarcely a year older than you is showing signs of it. It is a sense of mission, of. . . direction, of destiny. And mad as it may seem to to you, to you who are so bitter, so cramped, so. . . so decadent, if I am prepared to take upon myself the mantle of Ruth, it is to seek out and discover for myself those mysteries and purposes, and absorb, and share them. And perhaps, perhaps, from me, from my kind, Benjy dear, shall arise another proverbial David, another king, another ancestor of the true messiah."

I had little left to add.

Nonetheless, I did say, "You are crazy", and then, "I guess that at this point, there is no further purpose left in my staying here. What with David and you and your new-found God and the soul of Noah Frimmer and the saintliness of Harry Klein-

berg in your home, my crude intrusion can only create excessive and discordant crowding. I had better go."

Cathy neither actively acceded nor held me back.

"As you wish," she said. "Though you're welcome to a coffee before heading back."

She stood before me like some being I was seeing for the first time. The large eyes were familiar, as also the broad lips, the bold glinting teeth, the long slender fingers and the ebony black hair. And yet this was a different Cathy from the one I had known, a Cathy just as erect, happy, self-assured as before, but possessed of depths till then unplumbed, unacknowledged, perhaps deliberately ignored. And I wanted then to take her by the shoulders, and sink my whole face into her neck, and murmur intimacies into her ear again — genuine, loving, deeply-felt endearments this time instead of those earlier false and flattering, perfidious ones, but brute reality had left me but one single viable option.

"No, Cathy," I said. "There's no point in prolonging all this. If I must nurse my loss, let it be from a distance. And have no fears for me. I'll survive. Survival was a lesson I imbibed with the first milk I ever sucked. It is also the Jew's ultimate and most powerful weapon against the world. Only one thing would I ask of you, one thing only. . ."

Kathy became Catherine, distantly impassive.

"And that is?" she asked.

"And that is. . .," I said, "If ever it occurs to you to think of me, don't be too harsh."

I left then.

If there was desolation in the Gippsland plains, the desolation I now felt in my depths was infinitely greater. Slowly now, I descended the steps, passed through the downstairs entrance and then the gate into the bracing chill outside, stepped into my car, and, looking one last time at Cathy's now-darkened window — was she watching? was she watching? — I switched on the ignition, pounded at the accelerator, once, a second time, and then a third, and drew away.

Driving back to Warragul, to nothingness, *through* nothing-

ness, Dr Kleinberg returned to me. I recalled the fable he had told me, and longed, like his wanderer, for some rabbi, for some fellow mortal, for some other guide to show me the way. But the darkness around yielded no such shepherd nor even a guiding star, and the car-wheels pelting swiftly, precipitately past the milestones back to Warragul, reverberated to a single, continuous, unrelenting tune:

"Oh, you ancestors and heirs of Goebbels, Rosenberg and Streicher, I am lost, I am lost, I am lost, what have you done, what have you done, what have you done to my soul?"