

Envy's Fire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quivering with the unexpectedness of my discovery, I read:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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