From Olympus the Laughter

'Hey, mister, them's books you jus' thrown in that trash-can,' I heard a rich resonant voice behind me call.

I turned.

A bearded black in fur-lined jacket and woollen beanie was leafing through the two volumes I had thrown away.

'Yes,' I said, too much a stranger in the city to say more.

'Them's a man's life, man, his'n blood, man, his'n sweat . . .'

'Yes,' I said again.

'An' them's his'n mind an' his'n soul you jus' consign'd so easy-like to nothin'ness . . .'

And a third time, I said 'Yes', and, looking at him, he looking back at me with curiosity and disdain, I wanted to approach him then, I wanted to lay a hand upon his arm, I wanted to reach the very core of his human and spiritual being, and to say in an inflexion to match his own:

'An' I beg of you, man, to let that man's soul be, to let it rest, an' let it rest where I did consign it, 'cos it's an old soul and a new one is in the makin' an' in it an' through it shall that man come to realise his sublimest will an' attain to eternity an' sanctification an' mos' consummate peace.'

But instead I turned the corner into Fifth Avenue heading back the way an hour earlier I had come, hearing the black behind me say, 'Lord, some folks! . . . How out o' the dark an' broodin' woodwork they's come.'

* * *

And this morning, along with the customary journals, medical reports, bills and advertising pap, Angelika's letter with the photograph in its fold landed on my desk.

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Seventy-second Street, Jefferson Kincaid's Street, was, like uptown and downtown New York all snow and sleet and solidified ice, the buildings to each side tall and sheer, scar-grey murky-brown barred keepers of secrets between which cars and cabs snail-paced crosstown with short-tempered blasts of horns and raucous cries, and other pedestrians, like myself swaddled in two-ton wraps, hurried by, their shoulders frisking against mine, their gaze sometimes engaging, sometimes clinging, but more often retreating and fugitively private. Already clear to me before, yet did the paradox return in sharpened relief: the bigger the city, the tighter the milling of people, and the more solid the mass of humanity, the more privacy if to privacy he were inclined could a man enjoy. Anomie, they called it, the sociologists, the philosophers of this stamp and that, even writers who should have known better; facelessness in the crowd they called it, and alienation, endowing such privacy with demeaning detracting labels as if it were a fault; but theirs was the sin of blinkered vision, of ignoring the fact that this very facelessness could bring real and enduring solace to those who would shun the complexities of attachment, the ambivalences and contradictions of commitment, and the insistent, binding, unyielding claims of duty.

After a brief and disastrous relationship, I too had known something of that desire for self-effacement. To retreat into a cocoon, oblivious to the rack and pillory of daily living, and be left alone in the darkness and silence of slow gestation would have been as near to bliss as I could imagine. But, to borrow a colleague's word, I had 'cured' myself of that desire, emerging into the light, if only for the blinking of an eye, with a book, a collection of stories which I had brought with

me to show to a literary agent in America. The book, however, was not the only reason, not even the prime reason, for my visit. Rather, coming from antipodean Australia, physically large to be sure but at base still provincial, I sought a new vastness, and enormity, and breadth, and range, flight from the constricting topographical and emotional strait-jackets of over-familiar and increasingly-oppressive faces, buildings, streets and conversations, and exposure to fresh experiences, idioms, tempers and terrains.

All of this I had summed up in a sentence in my notebook:

> 'Freedom to be, to breathe, to feel, to see, to hear; unmolested by inner urgings and outer contingencies, liberated from the fetters of the here and now, untethered from the myopic vision that clings so timorously to nearer anchors far from the bounteous expansive seas beyond. Freedom, freedom above all, freedom from myself, from others, from outer compulsions.'

That might have been hyperbolic, to be sure, but for two weeks I had given myself up to New York, to the robust, vibrant, heady, if wintry Manhattan heart of the Big A. I had bought out all the bookstores from downtown to uptown Fifth Avenue and Broadway, had ransacked every shop and stall in the Lower East Side and Chinatown of its bric-a-brac, and had, with a chill teething into my bones, paid homage to that grand and eternal pedestalled torch-bearer to freedom standing in the midst of ice-encrusted waters surrounding Liberty Island. Nor could I resist, without being criminal, the magnetic pull of a final rehearsal by Barenboim and Mehta with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra or Leontyne Price in *Il Trovatore* at the Met, not to mention – how conceivably neglect? – the artistic ecstasies of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and of the spiralling ascending white-stoned Guggenheim. If gluttony for word, line and musical note were a sin, then I sinned grievously, but remained not in the slightest penitent. And if

my trip to New York was, in any sense, a pilgrimage, towards visit's end, I felt I had worshipped well.

One objective, however, remained to be realised. I could not bring myself to leave New York without at least once visiting Jefferson Kincaid: Kincaid, Professor of Biological Sciences and Social Behaviour and author of two volumes of essays, slender, to be sure, but to me distinguished without equal and entitled *The Delusions of Fixed Belief* and *Quest for Ultimate Truths.*

A hero-worshipper from the cradle, I had filled scores of folders with notes, photographs, biographical sketches and newspaper cuttings of a plethora of writers, artists, musicians, scientists and philosophers, carefully indexed alphabetically, giving to Kincaid the niche between Kepler and Kokoshka in my pantheon of illuminati. It had been with Kincaid's volumes ever by my left hand, both copiously annotated and heavily underlined, that I had written my stories which had been published as *Requiem for a Mortal God.* I was rather pleased with the title which recalled shades of Faulkner but was in reality a misnomer. For were I to follow Jefferson Kincaid to the letter, God was not truly mortal; God was simply not there or, at best, irrelevant. What indeed I was referring to was the death of a *need* for God, the title of the book being but a necessary piece of shorthand. Several readers alluded to its deceptiveness and, of course, seen in context, they were quite correct. However, done was done, and the best I could do was, in a chastened way, to set the matter right verbally whenever the issue arose. The book sold passably well to equally passable reviews, but it failed to generate the serious debate of the social, biological, cultural and theological dilemmas and contradictions that I had in my more buoyant moments of composition seen into as if with crystal clarity. I was no Bellow or Beckett or Sartre, true, but I had hoped for better.

Oddly enough, Jefferson Kincaid's response to my telephone call left me ill at ease. Replacing the receiver on its cradle and reflecting upon our exchange, I deemed it wise to

conclude that any unease was of my own making – the infernal tendency, not yet mastered, to be cowed and to cringe before authority and an atavistic retreat into a state of inferiority – rather than by any direct effect that Kincaid might have had upon me. Indeed, Jefferson Kincaid had come across the cables with the expected American affability, openness and acceptance; and even across the distance I could see, *see* him as a big man, burly, erect, expansive, still the nearer side of sixty with hair copious and chaotic and greying sage-like at the temples; I could see, too, the heavy green polo-neck sweater fraying at the elbows and the brown corduroys fading at the knees; and I could smell, I swear, the smoke of his pipe which, between philosophic Socratic dissertations, he was constantly re-lighting. A conventional picture, to be sure, though perhaps suited more to a Cambridge or Oxford don than to a peer in American academia; but nearing the professor's apartment on Seventy-second Street short of Central Park, pushing against a canine-toothed wind that careened, sometimes whistling, between the sharp escarpments to either side, I felt my earlier disquiet spume to enhanced intensity and loom enormous and stiflingly burdensome, my kindled apprehensions further bellowed to clammy anxiety by a resurgent uncertainty whether Kincaid over the telephone had been genuinely surprised or flattered or amused, and, if amused, whether I had not been, however faintly, mocked.

'So they read me in Melbourne, Australia?' he had asked, his voice rolling, burring with a vibratory resonance. 'And you are taken by my works, by the produce of my brain cells, and have flown over the great Pacific and across this honourable and honoured continent to learn wisdom at the feet of the master? To worship a guru never by your two eyes seen? Or perhaps to see the beast himself in his private lair? Or perhaps, perhaps even, to teach wisdom to the teacher in turn?'

'There are questions that arise from your writings . . .,' I had answered, battling the bent towards meek-voiced regression, 'Matters to which . . .'

'. . . to which you seek momentous durable all-resolving

answers? Or perhaps, perhaps, my wanderer, those ultimate truths I have written about? Ah, yes, ah yes. For that do they all come. But has any creature possessed of a navel sole mortgage upon any answers? And I, my traveller from Melbourne, Australia, was I, too, not with a navel born?'. . . He had given a little laugh and said then, 'But if you be at my door at three tomorrow, we shall engage in a congenial encounter of grey matter, we shall shed light upon your dilemmas, we shall give air to truths that may enter into your fiction, and I shall be delighted to make your acquaintance, I'm sure, I'm sure . . .'

How in keeping with the man, the biologist and sociologist who strode across every page of his books! 'The produce of brain cells.' 'A creature possessed of a a navel.' 'Congenial encounter of grey matter' – Jefferson Kincaid, who synthesised by reducing, who created new perspectives by dismantling metaphysical abstractions into biological fundamentals, who explained and interpreted all phenomena in the most reductionist terms.

As he had written in *The Delusions of Fixed Belief*:

> 'Recognising, then, that behaviour, thought, emotion and belief are predicated upon the interactions of atoms and molecules in living cells, themselves subject to genetic inheritance and to the vagaries of environment acting through the receptive senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell (and intuition, if this be deemed a sense), the conclusion follows naturally that one pattern of behaviour, thought, emotion or belief, is, objectively, as valid as any other. Accordingly, given the manifold variety of influences and experiences (or, to render such more scientifically, the variety of sensory input) to which one is subject, neither behaviour, nor thought, nor emotion, nor belief can ever be universally uniform, nor constant, nor necessarily permanently fixed, even within the same individual, nor incontrovertibly true;'

while in a passage that had given spur to the title of my own

book, this in the afterword of his *Quest for Ultimate Truths*, he had written:

> 'Hence the notion of a God is as fictional as that of the devil and the angels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, as misled, as that of eternal bliss in Heaven and eternal purgatory in Hell, as unsupportable as that of corporeal rebirth and resurrection, and as fanciful as that of witches and souls and copulating Hellenic gods. If any lessons there be in our quest, they are that such quest must begin and end with the basic irreducible inescapable biological nature of man, and that truth – Truth –, until ultimate truths be known, may be such as each man for himself, in the light of his own acquired insights, deems it to be, albeit necessarily bounded within the confines of strict biological and, by extension, scientific verities.'

Heading towards his home, I was carrying both of his books in a satchel together with my own, his for inscribing, mine as a gift-offering. Reaching the entrance to his apartment-block, a tall eleven-storied building of brimstone and wrought-iron grilles across bay windows covered with mounds of clinging snow, I dispelled all anxieties with a resigned devil-may-care heaving of breath and, in the foyer, floored and walled with turquoise tiles, pressed the buzzer to his apartment.

The voice that greeted me through the security phone was a buoyant lively gift of youth. It rang, alive and plastic, even friskily melodious, and it was all in keeping with its breeziness to be met outside the elevator by a bright smooth-cheeked ebon-haired young woman with fine dimples at the ends of her smile and well-ballooned in a gay vermilion dress in the latter, more euphoric, if impatient stages of pregnancy. She was perhaps twenty-three, twenty-four – twenty-five at most –, Kincaid's daughter, my first impression, Kincaid's daughter visiting her father.

'Hi!' she said sunnily, extending her hand. 'I'm Angelika. It is gracious of you to have sought us out, while for Jefferson . . . for him, your coming is a month of Sundays arrived in

one. He has few visitors now. And he has always loved to be among the young.'

In that moment, Melbourne and New York met. The voice, the inflection, its cadence, was inevitably different, to be sure, but from her homely bright-eyed countenance sprang a score of faces familiar, any number of Marys and Ericas, Sophies and Joannes back home whose emergence from memory's cinders kindled a lively and nostalgic flight of *déjà vu*. Even the waxy smell of the passageway, the succession of doors with their peep-holes and the white cupolaed lights along the walls recalled the high-rise blocks at home where, each week, punctually at eight, I scaled the stairs to visit my regular crew of waiting patients.

'The professor for me is a wise man,' I said, 'I can easily see in him a mentor to the young.'

'You *are* gracious,' she said, and laughed.

That Angelika proved to be Kincaid's wife rather than his daughter was an adjustment I made quickly enough. Her jesting 'Our friend from Terra Australia Mysteriosus is here, darling' promptly settled any doubt while the rings on her finger belied the fleeting notion that she might be his mistress. But adjustment was harder when I saw Jefferson Kincaid himself sitting deep within the apartment before the window. No university don, this, certainly not my conception of one with heavy pullover, corduroys, abundant intemperate hair and smoke curlicuing from a pipe held in the cup of a hand. Jefferson Kincaid, I saw at once, sat in a wheel-chair. He wore a red silk dressing-gown, a worsted scarf, chequered woollen socks and fur-lined slippers, notwithstanding that, in contrast to the crystalline chill of the New York streets, the apartment seemed to crush with an enervating heat. And as for the aura of presence one associated with academia and erudition . . . Yes, that had once been there; shades of it remained, evident in the high brow, the large head and the swiftly-exploring eyes; but only shades, for past eminence was being overtaken by those very processes Jefferson Kincaid in writing about biology had written about only too well. His was the face, stead-

ily atrophying and pastily sallow, of any number of Johnsons and Harrisons and Akeroyds back home, patients caught by that biology, and by time, behind drawn curtains to fade there, unwatched, unseen and unremarked into blue and silent immobility and the eternal blackness of oblivion. I knew him to be fifty-eight. In appearance, he could have been sixty, sixty-two, sixty-five; but what of that? – he was in a phase of life, that phase, the last, where age could no longer matter.

Yet, as I entered, he smiled and waved a hand to indicate a chair.

'Pardon me if I do not rise, welcome bird of passage,' he said in the generous rounded tones of the previous day, 'but the lower portion of my humbled anatomy has seen fit to rebel against the higher will . . . But sit you down, sit you down. Angelika my red-winged butterfly shall deliver you of your coat and excess lumber and provide refreshment for the corporeal flesh while we shall partake of the nourishment of the mind.'

Caught off-balance by the unexpected, by the wilted reality that masked my grander conception, I gave scarf, jacket and hat to Angelika with two left hands, and with two left feet approached a lounge-chair, feeling acutely dwarfed in the spaciousness of the room which, despite the outer inclemency, glowed nevertheless with a mellow brightness. Tiered ceiling-high against one wall was a profusion of well-thumbed books, journals and files; prints of modern art hung tastefully-arranged along the others, together with two enlarged framed *Time-Life* photographs of gestating embryos; two elegant chandeliers hung from the ceiling, chrome-plated light-stands stood over puffed-up bean-chairs, and on the table beside his elbow, functionally a desk, stood a telephone, a typewriter, a microscope, piles of papers, journals and books, and a welter of writing appurtenances – pens, rubbers, rulers, liquid paper, paper-weights, scissors, a letter-knife, a letter-rack – beyond which a half-dozen assorted carnations rose out of a ceramic vase, while both he and Angelika – he not yet ill, she not yet

pregnant – beamed artlessly out of a lush-coloured summer photograph.

'Such is the spider's parlour,' Jefferson Kincaid said with a raising of his hands that indicated the compass of his room. 'A universe within a universe. Frail conglomerations of gelatinous body cells bounded wholly by fragile flesh, itself respiring in this humble domicile within a city that throbs to the refrain 'New York' set like a diamond within a wider magnificent grotesque colossal petty beautiful hideous entity we call by so poor a name as 'world.' And beyond that, dear pilgrim from Melbourne, Australia, come, beyond all that? . . . And within, within, my wanderer, within that innermost universe, within the core, within the pit of every gelatinous cell that is the very stuff of our morphology, hm? What other universes, manifestations, revelations dare one conceive of?'

He paused and drew breath, his eyes, black and recessed, burrowing into mine, private quiet merriment kindling in their brightness.

He scratched at a scale above an ear where there lingered the thinnest finest wing of hair.

'Concentric circles these universes, one about the other, fleeing expanding ripples around a stone fallen in a pond, haloes like those that ring the street-lights, aureoles in an autumn mist. These are *my* images for it, and it is for *you* to choose your own, my traveller-friend. *You* must choose your own. And as a writer, as an artist with the gift of creativity in your genes and in your sharpened senses, yours is the privilege of image and metaphor and play with language . . .'

'While I, I am a man of science, of the visible, the tangible, the audible and the deducible,' Angelika chimed in, solicitously drawing together the lapels of his dressing gown from behind, her chin at rest upon his head.

Kincaid reached upward and affectionately took her hands.

'While I, yes, I am a man of science, of the visible, the tangible, the audible and the deducible,' he said with emphasis

and with the strength of pride, 'and must accordingly turn to the resolutely physical to choose my imagery.'

'My perennial philosopher,' Angelika said fondly.

'My little parakeet,' Kincaid retorted in turn, 'my most favoured immaculate dimpled disciple of the test-tube and the microscope slide.'

'Master!'

'Fidelity incarnate!'

Placing my satchel beside my chair, I could not help but smile at the repartee.

'Our regular little game,' Angelika said.

Kincaid pressed her hands.

'Is there anything, anywhere, more worthy of seriousness than games?' he said. 'Is not play the greatest creation, the most excellent invention of all? Would we all, would the whole world but know it and not only the child who is on its account the most multiply, the most bounteously blessed? . . .'

A whistling stemmed then from the kitchen. Angelika left her place behind Kincaid and padded out of the room, tapping my shoulder in passing.

'Thus do I Daniel leave in the lion's den,' she said with a laugh that stirred a momentary homesickness with its balm.

Jefferson Kincaid followed her with his gaze, a doting, clinging gaze that absorbed her form, her movement, her very essence. He bit his lip pensively. Then returning to me, he winced, briefly arched his back, and, with his hands cupped beneath the thigh, moved a leg to a position of comfort. His foot, flaccid and inward-turned, flapped on the foot-rest of his chair.

'No mortal of woman born is deserving of such divinity as one that goes by the name "Angelika",' he said, 'and yet the gods have seen fit to smile so generously upon me.'

He paused, then arched his eyebrows, a quiz-master about to pose a question.

'But am I to presume that in gods, or in God, you do not

believe? Else why should you have sought out your deity-denying guru? Hm?'

He did not wait for a answer. Instead he constructed a pyramid of his cachectic bony fingers, on the apex of which he rested his lips, themselves blanched and dull.

'So, if I may now venture to ask – what message do you bring or with what request do you come?'

The moment had arrived at last for explanation, the repeatedly-rehearsed repeatedly-dreaded moment to justify my visit. Not without nervousness, I took up my satchel and opened it. I hesitated, fearing to speak now, fearing the onset of tongue-tie before that venerated name; but I knew that, whether I spoke or kept silent, I was already either equally blessed or damned, and having come thus far, it was the better thing to speak.

'Your . . . your work, I admire it greatly,' I said, taking out the books I had brought, his two and mine. 'It . . . it may be an imposition, but . . . but I wished to meet with you, to . . . to tell you myself of my regard for your work and of its influence upon my own, and . . . and if it is not too presumptuous, to give you my own book, my own stories, as a token, a gift . . .'

Kincaid nodded graciously and reached forward to accept that collection of mine which I extended to him.

'About . . . about your works,' I said, seeking to draw back his attention to his own two titles that lay in my lap. 'I think them splendid . . . The prose, the force, the evidence, the logic . . . And the ideas . . . As a doctor seeing people at their most elemental, I cannot agree with them more. Indeed . . . indeed, so much so that in my own stories, my own book, that *Requiem for a Mortal God*, I return over and over to the issues you raise – about the chemical basis for behaviour and emotion, and for thought and belief, and about the fictions of after-life, resurrection, and damnation and the soul, and about truths, ultimate truths – the realities behind existence, behind creation, that which people call God and destiny and purpose and choice – all these being truths discoverable only through bio-

logy, only through biochemistry and physiology, through the advancement of science, of science above all.'

Jefferson Kincaid was leafing through my book. Purse-lipped, he nodded, indulgently, it seemed, the illustrious professor listening to the stammering sophomore.

Just then, Angelika returned, carrying a tray of refreshments. The cups rattled in their saucers and steam from the coffee-urn spiralled thickly and aromatically before her luminous face. Beneath the tray, her belly was well on the way to fruition.

'Our Daniel, I see, is not consumed,' she said, deftly manoeuvring the tray into a space on the over-laden table. 'Such hardy stuff in Antipodean climes does thrive!'

She laughed; artlessly, almost waggishly, in keeping with her tongue-in-cheek turn of phrase. Jefferson Kincaid reached for her arm and passed over to her my book.

'He learns his lessons well, our guest, sweet angel Angelika,' he said, visibly more buoyant in her presence. 'Indeed so well that he has made my position in my *Quest* book his very own. For which' – he returned to me – 'for which I must own that I am honoured, I am flattered, touched. Indeed I am.'

Again he turned to Angelika who, having laid my book aside, was pouring the coffee.

'And if my surmise is correct,' he said, 'our footloose wanderer has come before his master eager to learn what the master has since discovered, has since learnt, to tear out, as it were, from his life's work the final page.'

I knew the scrutiny that followed very well – the privately, quietly-amused gaze of my medical professors, lecturers and tutors befuddling already befuddled students for their sport. But Jefferson Kincaid was merciful. He did not maintain his scrutiny overlong. As Angelika set my coffee on the low table beside me, the brew still too hot and steaming for my taste, Kincaid tossed his head, beckoned with a wasted hand, and said,

'Come. Step towards this window.'

I did as I was bidden.

'Look out there, over this gargantuan colossus we mortals call New York, and tell me what you see.'

That there was method in his directive, that I did not question. The games and ploys of masters of their calling were scarcely novel to me, having spent six intensive years in the academic-clinical-laboratory mill back home. But if it was bewilderment I betrayed before Jefferson Kincaid poised in his wheel-chair before me or to Angelika who had just settled down with coffee in one hand and my book in the other, it was less on account of Kincaid's unheralded unexpected bidding than of a flustered uncertainty about what it was he particularly wanted me to see and then knowing where, in describing that canyon-, crater-, Tower of Babel-ridden scape of concrete and steel, black slate and glass, vapour and ice, I should even begin to begin.

I made apt noises, muttered unassailable words: apartment-blocks, row upon row; hotels, their awnings heavy with snow; streets glaced with ice along which wary pedestrians negotiated their way; traffic-lights; taxis; trucks; a deli opposite; a newspaper kiosk, its black attendant blowing at his hands for warmth; workers at a demolition site drinking coffee around a fire; a telephone booth; parking meters; a profusion of signs; Central Park with all its vegetation trapped in snow; and, over-riding these, the spire of the Chrysler Building, Pan Am, the multiple faces of the Rockefeller Center, the Empire State, and, above these still, cloud thick, cloud hulking, cloud engorged, the feeblest stunted glimmers of pearl-white light against all odds struggling through.

'Raw grist for the mill by the imagination to be processed and by the hand to be moulded and cajoled into the refinement of noble art,' Kincaid said behind me in that inflexion of his, so broad, so giving. 'And so magnificent, splendid, massive, wonderful, no? But, even so, not yet have you seen the grandest thing, the very grandest there is to see. So come . . . Over here now . . . To this jungle of paraphernalia on this table where a mortal clings to dogged industry and look you down the shaft of that humble contraption of mere metal and glass

and perhaps you still discover what your guru has discovered there.'

With a sure hand on my forearm, he steered me towards the microscope that stood in the midst of the chaos of journals and books.

I looked through the eyepiece, but what was it – what was it?! – that Jefferson Kincaid so patently intended me to see? For there was little on that mounted slide that was so extraordinary, so rare, so grand that even in my undergraduate days I had not seen – only a spread of tissue cells with dark nuclei in their substance and rose-pink cytoplasm around the nuclei. One feature alone stood out at all: a single larger cell in the centre of the field caught and fixed in the phase of replication, its configuration nearly bi-partite as the symmetrical black spindles of stringy chromosomes receded towards opposing poles.

I described all these as best I could. Behind me, out of sight, Jefferson Kincaid assented. 'M-m,' he said, 'Yes,' 'Indeed, that is so,' but punctuated assent with a near-melodic refrain, 'But what else do you see?,' 'What else is there?,' 'What *else* . . . underlying . . . pervading . . . transcending all these?'

All prickles and perspiration, I was the student again as I sought desperately to please the master, yet did not know by which formula he might best be pleased. The discovery he had referred to was either so obvious or so obscure that for my obtuseness I craved forbearance in the one instance and leniency in the other.

It was Angelika who, with merriment and blessed fulfilment playing in her soft, lapping, clearly-knowing scrutiny, delivered me from perdition.

'If my Socrates you would wish to render a happy man,' she said, 'then let him hear from you the single solitary most marvellous word "God".'

'God?' I said, turning towards Kincaid.

He arched his back, winced with obvious pain, but promptly regained composure even smiling as his gaze upon me flickered as if with private mirth.

'Have my writings so numbed your soul, my friend, so inured you against the apprehending of wonder, of the miracle that Spinoza was wont to call Nature and that to men in black as also of the Cross, the Star and the Crescent is the Deity Supreme?'

Was he jesting? Had he returned to a faith he had earlier so uncompromisingly renounced? Had he abandoned that which, so rational, so honest and so well thought-out had been the very thrust and mainspring and inspiration behind my own creative work? And if reason he had abandoned, together with his earlier honesty and conviction, did he now grant ultimate victory to convention, yielding at this stage of his life to moral cowardice, and turning with cold feet to the championing of thatwhich for so long had been to him a lie? And, if so, was my own deity in Jefferson Kincaid to prove to have clay feet, to be weak-willed and to be unregenerably flawed? – I was beginning to see my pilgrimage to him as a mistake, a fanciful adventure, a plainly silly act destined to end in nothing but cold and doldrumed disillusion.

'I know what you are thinking,' he then said. 'So listen. Between them and myself, we, those men in black and I are one. Where altercation there may be between the frocked and the never-frocked, it lies in differences of perspective, but not of object. Their god, theirs, is the hoary Michelangelan figure of fresco and canvas or the formless disembodied spirit hovering over the waters of the deep – a being of grandeur, of might and of magnifience, the first of all things and the last, all-causing, all-knowing, all-pervading, unto infinity extending, unto eternity enduring, and yet beyond human knowing, invisible, mute, of imagination's gossamer crudely wrought . . .'

'But mine is . . .,' Angelika, so radiant in vermilion, so youthful, so fulfilled, interposed, winking and showing teeth so white, so strong, that it pained me to look back towards the man who had become of health so grievously dispossessed.

Jefferson Kincaid caught the strain. 'But mine is more scrutable, more manifest, and works in ways discernible and

with canniness sublime. And you, fine friend, seen it have you and yet you have not truly *seen* it.'

I remained puzzled, tossed.

'God! . . . God! . . . Yes, you saw the Deity itself – as a doctor you have seen it a thousand, no, ten thousand times – and yet you have not recognised it. In the most flimsy strip of tissue mounted on a slide is it. You will look down and say, "Ah, yes, cells do I see, and nuclei, and within those nuclei laces of frail threaded genes like pearls beaded on a chain, flimsy black tendrils of no great moment and scarcely exceptional which, in moments opportune, one may count and measure and manipulate." And at the most basic level of beholding, my fellow striver after truth, you will most certainly be right. *But*, dear doctor, fine word-smith, fellow man of science, is there anything in this universe as boundless in its distribution as this, as infinite in its variety as this, or as eternal in its self-renewal, or at once force both unceasing and unceasable, mightiest of mighty generator propelling all life, implacable mediator of aging, sickness, decline and death, template for the senses, and springboard for all actions, feelings, beliefs and thoughts? Hm?'

His eloquent rounded tone, even as it issued from a form so withering beguiled. But *was* he jesting?, toying with a novitiate come for illumination but destined to depart more impossibly perplexed?

'The cell?' I said. 'The chromosome? The gene? *That* is your God?'

If, before, I doubted it, there was no mistaking now his earnestness as he held me with a gaze became steady, clear and probing.

'That which giveth and taketh away, that which blesseth with fortune and curseth with misfortune, that which accompanieth the man in his walking, in his standing, and in his lying down and that which granteth life and, in the fullness of days, bringeth death. Perhaps the matter is but one of name. But yes, worthy seeker, yes, whatever name you give it, *that* is my god – in everything found from the smallest to the largest

that in the meanest way respires, in all that vastness as common to Capetown as it is to Copenhagen, as real in Vladivostok as it is in your own home town of Melbourne, Australia, and extending from the very innermost core of this, the crumbling shell of my decrepiting mortal anatomy out to the universe beyond the eyes' furthest reaching and down the generations that shall in turn extend beyond counting. And in that, dear pilgrim, in that, if soul there be, when the body dies and to oblivion fades, in that dark filament, so brittle, so fine, resides forever the soul's immortality.'

I must have frowned at this shift to the language of theology, for Angelika said, her dimples again playing mirthfully beside her lips, 'The professor, it seems, has not pleased his visitor with his teaching.'

As guest, I preferred not to confirm. Nor, however, could I wholly deny. I preferred to prevaricate.

'I am . . . I . . . I am merely marvelling at how . . . at how you reconcile metaphysics with biology . . .'

Kincaid smiled, however askew that smile seemed against his emaciation. Had we been playing chess, his would have surely been the private mirth of one who had snared his opponent in a well-woven mesh.

'Metaphysics?' he said. 'Metaphysics?!' He bit a lip and crooked a finger over his shoulder. 'Must I bid you look through the window yet again?,' he asked. 'Are those vaulting snow-encrusted soaring leviathans wrought of concrete and glass the stuff of metaphysics? Touch them. Breathe on them. Or look too upon the straddling thrust of Brooklyn Bridge across East River – is that metaphysics? Or the Gothic intricacies of St. Patrick's, the library at Forty-Second Street, and the human labours invested in the meanest volume on its shelves, or the wild daring spirit of the Guggenheim, the ecstasy of a Price or Domingo filling the Met, the brilliant scintillating art of a play on Broadway? Lordie, if this be the final wisdom and the judgement, for what have all the generations past breathed and laboured and endured that a man should be blind to the wonders and the grandeur they have

wrought? If it is greater persuasion that you seek, look then about you upon the demonic and the gargantuan, and upon the hedonistic, the kitsch and the chaotic, upon this hungry giant called New York. A Moloch will you see, ever-voracious and never-sated. Feeding on visionaries, madmen, derelicts and geniuses, glutting on revolutionaries, kabbalists, evangelists and fools, all the races, all the nations living here coursing madly, even frenziedly in this metropolis, in this megapolis; yet even this is but a mere pin's-head microcosm of humankind, humankind in turn but one wee rarified expression of nature, nature itself in its myriad forms ever transfigured and transfiguring, created and creating, from the sorriest to the grandest, through a loose mosaic of flimsy stringy strands of threads, these scraggy cobwebs bathed in the jelly of a pale and brittle shimmying cell . . . And all this – the majesty of it, the divinity, the magic and the wonder – all this you would dishonour by diminishing and demeaning it with the appellation "metaphysics"?!'

Angelika had set down my book upon a side-table and now hoisted herself from the chair into which she had sat sunken. In an uncannily-fluid dovetailing choreography of movement, Kincaid reached out to her, she moved towards him, she ran her fingers affectionately over his balding head, tightened his scarf, drew together again the parted lapels of his dressing-gown and stood beside him, resting a hand on his shoulders.

'Yes, wandering sparrow of the south,' Jefferson Kincaid then said, more softly as he tightened his grip about Angelika's hand. 'You have come to tear from my life's work the final page. Well, that page, my friend, is renunciation and just as much is it affirmation . . . renunciation of the coldly rational that would deny wonder, deny unity, and would reduce all thought, action and belief to the random interplay of atoms in the heart, the brain, the blood; but, against this, affirmation . . . affirmation of an infinite, eternal, unopposable force, a creative force streaming through every conduit of nature, this, in turn, an affirmation, too, of redemption, and of resurrec-

tion and of the ultimate immortality of all that lives, and affirmation, finally, of all values that recognise the sanctity, uniqueness and primacy of every life . . .'

He pointed at the volumes *The Delusions of Fixed Belief* and *Quest for Ultimate Truths* that I had left lying on my chair.

'Those books . . .,' he said, 'when you leave here, promise this to their author: that you will dispose of them, throw them away. Yes, consign them to oblivion. You shall find any number of trash-cans in the streets below. And thereby, liberate yourself from them, they are the stuff of mischief and have done too much to mislead. And when the time comes, go home, go back to your native Melbourne, set about your work for the welfare of your fellow-flesh, find yourself an Angelika of your own, make of her your wife, and have about you a brood of children . . . Contemplate your navel, too, if that is your bent, write also if you must, more *Requiems*, more stories, novels, poetry if that is your stronger inclination. But know that not in these lies immortality . . . Fame, perhaps yes, but not immortality nor the hope of redemption, nor of resurrection, nor of truly enduring through time . . . That can only be through offspring, through children, through the fruit of your flesh.'

He heaved, drew his shoulders together as though a chill passed through his body. Yet again did he wince but this time reached out for a pill-box from which he took two tablets.

'And now, gentle, kind disciple and comrade, I must ask you to leave. The flesh is weak, the will is feeble. To dependence on anodynes is mortality reduced . . .'

Angelika indicated with the slightest gesture of eyes that I comply. She left Kincaid's side to fetch my coat and scarf.

'Go,' Kincaid said, himself now drawing together still tighter the lapels of his dressing-gown against a chill that possessed him, 'go out among the living, there where God is in every snow-bound leaf, in every embryo, in every cocoon, tadpole and winter-bird, in the black attendant by his stall, in the workers warming themselves by the fire, in the keeper of the deli, the hotel footman, the clerks in their offices, the

sales-girls in the stores, and the children skating on the ice, and know, know that as this God is a part no less of you, you are a part of the greater all-pervading all-encompassing ambience of this self-same God, and as that God has been in all who have come before you and to whom you are heir, so shall that God be in the issue that shall to you in their turn in time be heir. In them, through them, dear friend, shall you, shall you thus forever endure...'

He then waved a hand as if to say, 'And now – go!'

Fortified against the external cold, I left. Angelika accompanied me to the elevator. She moved buoyantly, held her hands in the pockets of her dress and glowed, healthily, sunnily, as she smiled.

'So, noble Caesar, have you come and seen and conquered,' she said with gamesome pertness. '*That* was Jefferson Kincaid. Did he brush away old cobwebs, offer you the tantalising fruit and the juicy lemons you came to suck?'

'He is a big man, a great man, a strong man,' I said.

She tossed her head and held high her chin.

'Yes, he is big, *and* great, *and* strong. And of mighty will. Holding on, holding out ... holding out for the day he becomes patriarch to generations and sees himself in his coming child reborn.'

'And you?' I asked.

The elevator reached the floor, its arrival signalled by the tinkling of a bell.

'I? ... I am proud,' she said.

I looked Angelika over a last time – looked at her ebony hair, the bright smooth-complexioned cheeks, the dimples and at the belly ballooned in vermilion – and held out a hand. Her own was soft, sure, already tenderly maternal.

'He was married before, I guess you knew, no children, the former Mrs. Kincaid, Stella Kincaid, killed in a plane crash over Colorado. This ... This ...'

She did not elaborate. Placing her hands upon the dome of her abdomen, she had made herself clear. This was to be the child Jefferson Kincaid never had.

'It feels nice,' she said with a perky, open, marvellously open laugh, 'to see myself as a future matriarch.'

The elevator doors were about to close. In that warm scented hallway, under the cupolaed lights, I saw in her again the Marys and the Ericas, the Sophies and Joannes I had known back home.

'May the gods – his God, your God – see fit to smile upon you,' I said.

* * *

And outside, in the street, that rich resonant voice called out behind me.

'Yes', I said to the bearded black in fur-lined jacket and woollen beanie who was leafing through the two volumes I had, in keeping a promise, thrown away.

'Them's a man's life, man, his'n blood, man, his'n sweat . . .'

'Yes,' I said again.

'An' them's his'n mind an' his'n soul you jus' consign'd so easy-like to nothin'ness.'

And a third time, I said 'Yes', wanting to approach him then, wanting to lay a hand upon his arm, wanting to reach the very core of his being, to touch, embrace, lay open before him all that was God within him. But, instead, into Fifth Avenue I turned, hearing the black behind me say, 'Lord, some folks! . . . How out o' the dark an' broodin' woodwork they's come.'

* * *

Within days, I had returned to Melbourne, resumed my surgeries, took up my pen again; and following Jefferson Kincaid's judicious counsel, in calling a succession of Robyns, Ritas and Yvonnes, sought the prospect of immortality through my own in time to-be-acquired Angelika.

And this morning, six more months gone by, frosty winter

now come south, together with the customary journals, medical reports, bills and advertising pap, there came Angelika's letter with the photograph neatly sequestered in its fold.

> 'It was gracious of you on your American journey winter last to extend to us the bountiful honour of your visit. Your book, which Jefferson and I read together, extended the pleasure of your presence exceedingly.
>
> 'Three months ago, our child, a boy, was born. Jefferson passed away just six days before. As events turned out, never shall be given him that immortality, redemption, resurrection he sought, but in sparing him from seeing the child, at least in this, if I recall your phrase aright, did the gods see fit to smile.'

I saw why. But, no, the gods had not smiled. They had laughed and, if they had teeth, they had bared them with a delight malicious and perfidious and malignant. For in the photograph accompanying the note were the unmistakable features of a mongol child.