Laudate Dominum

I have ceased to wonder. After all, I know the answers. And – this must be all too obvious – I don't mean the answers to questions of rock-bottom banality such as 'Did your team win on Saturday?' or 'Oh, do you think it will rain?' or 'Will the Queen abdicate this year or next?' . . .

Hardly. The answers I have, they . . . they . . .

But permit me rather to tell a history . . .

She was – is, Emma Fisher – a small mouse-chinned mother of three, ever dressed in the black of char, a penumbra of midnight pitch besieging the ellipse of her face in which the eyes bear the frail crushed look of collapsing embers and over which the skin is smoothed out and battened to the tightness of a shrunken mask where blue has run through whatever rosier colours of complacency it may at one time have flaunted. Her shoulders, whenever she sits opposite me now, sag with the ballast of an awesome reality and her fingers are coiled on the desk, not in the twine of prayer but in the tight-springed clasp of dolour. Scratch her and, cinder-like, she might disintegrate.

The Fishers were for a long time my patients – Waldo, when he was still a sprouting fringe-haired schoolboy and then electrician's apprentice; Emma when she was still a Poulton starting out as a bank clerk; and then their children, one, two, three, Susan, Julia and little Charlie – Susan arriving in sufficient time to offset too concerted gossip among their real and proverbial aunts. Waldo was an introspective type, as serious

as sin with which, following his mother, he came to be obsessed. He was the grandson of an Anglican minister, long dead, whose son, Waldo's father, had married, out of love – and to widespread consternation – a Catholic girl who, in middle womanhood, capitulated to delusions of persecution, damnation, mortification of the soul and eternal fire. When Waldo, obeying his conscience, if not fully his heart, married Emma, his mother had taken him aside and, between teeth set in the cement of menace, had hissed, 'A marriage begotten in sin will in sin sink into the lap of the devil.'

And yet Waldo and Emma were happy. Waldo worked for an electrical contractor, Emma looked after the growing household. Duty-bound, they visited their parents – the senior Fishers and the Poultons – but wisely preferred the cocoon of their own home and circle, away, when they could help it, from the ill-will that disunited the two older families. Waldo's father, Bertrand, given opportunity, would have been sufficiently conciliatory – he was a man who loved peace and who, because he loved peace, let himself be dominated and henpecked by his wife. But his mother, Ellen, had become a densely-warped mesh of suspicion. The source of her distrust, where it was not the workings of a scrambled chemistry of the brain, was Emma's family. Jack Poulton had the streak of the freethinker in him while his wife Betty was, as she said, Christian without being denominational or Christian with a small 'c'. To Ellen Fisher's chagrin, the Poultons were non-church-goers; Christmas and Easter, so sacred to herself, were to them merely times for vacations away; while if proof of their godlessness were needed, it was clearly seen in their upbringing of Emma who had been so morally slack as to let herself get pregnant before the nuptial ring was yet on her finger. And sin, she said, was not without retribution. Susan was a sickly child prone to earaches and sore throats; Julia suffered from asthma; and little Charlie had been born with inturning fifth toes; and were they, Waldo and Emma to contemplate any more children they should not be too astonished if the next child was born with a club-foot or hare-lip or a

hole in the heart. God watched, God judged, God punished. And Ellen Fisher, too, felt herself to be punished. If the children's ailments were a stigma upon their immediate parents, they were no less a mirror to her own disobedience when, years before, she had married outside her denomination. To atone, she now attended Mass more frequently, confessed when, to her husband, there was nothing to confess, and admonished, reproved and forewarned Waldo and Emma – but Waldo above all – of ultimate humiliation, calamity and hell.

Waldo and Emma could remain reasonably happy in the face of this because for a time Waldo could shrug off his mother's forebodings with duck-backed nonchalance and attribute the children's ailments to simple bad luck or, at worst, to inexplicable, but minor – thank God – visitations.

But the more Waldo denied his Mother's predictions, the more vehement did they become until they assumed the vivid oppressive guise of stark premonition.

'Your father-in-law, a heretic against all faith, will burn in Hell, but you, a rebel within the faith, shall roast.'

'Repent, raise your wife and children according to the true faith or risk agony eternal, agony such as Our Father, Our Lord suffered upon the Cross.'

'Seek redemption, seek pardon, or be forever damned as I am already damned for sins against nature, against Our suffering Lord, against God.'

Even this, Waldo could parry with outward indifference although on each occasion that I saw him, as when I was called upon to treat Susan's inflamed throat or Julia's asthma, he was becoming increasingly morose and ruminating. Emma confided that, at home, he was retreating into orbits ever more private, paid ever less attention to the children and, come nights, turned away from her when she nestled, warm and willing, against him.

Waldo's mother, meanwhile, had developed headaches and then began to suffer fits. Through increasing physical distress, she saw these as God's recompense for her earlier departure

from His ways, but Waldo's father, more practical, however submissive his nature, persuaded her to seek out not the priest but her doctor. By then, the quest for help no longer mattered. The brain tumour had enlarged and spread beyond palliation, and she died soon after its discovery – an aptly wretched death, she would have been the first to admit – but not before proclaiming to Waldo by her bedside, 'My death shall be upon your conscience as my life has been upon mine.'

Not all of Emma's love could now suffice to ensure retention of balance. Waldo did not so much grieve for his mother as burrow into himself where his soul, as he expressed it, had become totally black and his life turned into one long unlighted everlasting night. During one lengthy consultation shortly after his mother's death, in which he ostensibly sought my help for a fictitious stomach ache, he asked whether one man can inadvertently, without inflicting physical injury, be responsible for the death of another. On a later occasion – this time, he presented with stabbing pains in the chest – he wished to know whether a curse had any scientific basis for realisation. And another time still, appearing with a headache, he asked whether brain tumours were hereditary, whether madness could be 'caught', and whether the sins of one generation could be visited upon the generations that followed.

But tell the devil to his face he does not exist. Reassurance, denial, rational explanation – these were to no avail. Science, I said, offered reasons for sickness, physical deformities and even delusions more tenable by far than did religion. I spoke, reducing my arguments to the simplest language I could employ in order to penetrate the half-hearing, half-oblivious gloom in which he sat, of genetic abnormalities, biochemical derangements, hormonal influences and contagious bacteria. I spoke of a child's upbringing and of childhood experiences, of one's choice of school and friends and later of occupation, neighbourhood, husband or wife, and of one's ancestry and geographical location and social circumstances, of one's endowments and predilections, and of such mundane things as sudden impulses, social fads and changes of weather, all of

which – and more besides – cascaded upon the individual in a chaotic convergence, forging permutations and combinations according to the elusive irreducible formulas of chance. A child's tonsillitis had nothing to do with a father's sin, if what he had done were a sin at all; nor was asthma a divine affliction, nor a toe that was slightly inturned. There was no need to invoke God or devil or other mystification to explain observable facts just as no sin had been incurred in his Catholic mother's marriage to his Anglican father nor in his own marriage to his non-denominational Emma. In these marriages, they had followed the one true need common to all – the happiness that mutual love could bring. And as for his mother's death, his conscience could remain forever clear.

I saw, when I rose, that I had spoken to the wind.

'I am cursed,' he said, 'as my mother was cursed.'

I suggested that he see his priest but this he countered with a timid laugh, saying that the priest might confirm what he was trying to escape; while to my recommendation that he attend a psychiatrist, he shook his head with the vigorous shudder of distaste and declared with adamantine opposition, 'I am not mad! I am not insane!'

As he declined also to accept the pills I prescribed, the most practical thing I could offer on each of his visits, apart from patience, was a certificate permitting him to remain off work until the crisis, his depression, had passed.

Emma was not one to complain but, for this, I scarcely earned her gratitude. Susan and Julia attended school but little Charlie remained on her hands throughout the day. With Waldo home with her as well, her normally bright buoyant nature knuckled under a mounting funereal oppressiveness. Neither Waldo's own father nor Emma's parents held sway over him as over the subsequent weeks he bought a score of effigies of Christ on the Cross which he placed on every mantelpiece, cupboard and free surface throughout the house. He bought also wan reproductions of the Holy Family and of the Madonna and Child before which he knelt for interminable hours in prayer.

Yielding to pressure from her parents and from Waldo's father who, having endured his wife's delusions, could not countenance those of his son, Emma agreed to have Waldo certified in an institution for treatment. She called my surgery, but at that time, I was on a fortnight's vacation up north. She called in a colleague of mine, a Dr. Barbery, who tried, first with calm words and then with warnings, to secure Waldo's compliance. Waldo flared, became abusive, called the doctor the devil in white, accused all doctors – myself, above all – of godlessness, paganism and villainy. It was when Dr. Barbery, having drawn up a syringe with Largactil, approached Waldo that Waldo, crazed, seized a sturdy wooden coat-hanger from a nail on the door and brought it down repeatedly over Dr. Barbery's head. Dr. Barbery had no chance. Waldo was tall and slight but too powerful. Emma, a mouse beside him, tried in her way to hold him back but for her pains she suffered a split lip and bruised shoulder. By the time the police were summoned – by a neighbour whose window looked in upon that of the Fishers' – Dr. Barbery lay dead, Waldo knelt in prayer before a crucifix and Emma, hunched over him, her lip bleeding, clasped his head against her bosom and, weeping, stroked his neck as if he were her child.

I returned from my vacation two days later and, learning of the incident which gained front-page coverage in the press, secured admission to the prison cell where Waldo was being held. The cell was small and spare – with a narrow bed against a wall, covered neatly with sheets and a blanket, a bench, a chair, a washbasin and a toilet. Subdued mote-laden light entered between the bars of the window beneath the ceiling. There were no crucifixes, no effigies, no reproductions of the Holy Family, no prayer-book – only a newspaper, an electronics journal and a paperback, tattered along its edges. Rather than any pitching swells of torment, in Waldo's expression there was windless summer-touched calm. His brow, previously furrowed, was smooth; his eyes appraised me with the cool of blue velvet; his fingers, slack and inactive, rested, intertwined, on the bench between us. For one who had killed

a man, he showed inordinate dispassion.

'You were right,' he said. 'A man need not invoke a God or the devil to explain away his actions. His thoughts, his beliefs– yes, I agree – have roots in the world as it is seen and touched and experienced. Sin is a creature of the imagination, yes, a grotesque interpretation for acts that a man's own nature and the nature around him compel him to. Retribution is another figment of the mind as are hell and eternal suffering and damnation.'

He spoke softly with the occasional hesitation in the flow of his speech.

'You were right, of course, you were right. It has become so clear. I can see the very shells on the sand beneath the water. A man is body and mind and feeling interacting with torrents of influences outside of himself, so often so random, to yield thoughts and cause actions that no God, no devil can ever foresee.'

I stayed with Waldo for a half-hour. I let him talk. As I was leaving his cell, he called out after me and said,

'That Dr. Barbery. You know, he could well have been you.'

'Yes,' I said.

Three days later, Waldo appeared in the newspapers again. During the warders' morning round, he had been found hanging by the neck from the bars of his cell window. He had torn his bedsheets into strands and knotted a rope out of these. The Minister for Community Welfare Services would institute an investigation into prisoner supervision in state gaols although preliminary enquiries revealed no negligence by prison authorities. I sent Emma a condolence card and a week later she came with both Susan and Julia to the surgery. She brought with her a sealed envelope addressed to me. For the first time I saw the fragile look of collapsing embers in her swollen red-rimmed eyes and, all in black, she appeared set to disintegrate.

'From Waldo,' she said, passing the letter to me.

Having examined and prescribed medicine for the children,

I sat back, tore open the letter and read, aware of Emma's brittle gaze upon me.

'Your world is too hollow for me,' I read to myself. 'It is empty, mechanical, without spirit, direction or purpose. I need a God, a Being, an illusion, yes, but one that is already there and not of my own creation. My God, my Lord, my Saviour, even the devil – they have deserted me, and even my mother, in clinging to these, however intense her madness, was a hundred times blessed. But I have nothing, only a universe, your universe, where randomness, chaos, chance is god. Chance, you say, is the cause of my children's sore throats, attacks of asthma and Charlie's deformity. Chance alone, according to your doctrine, saved your life just as chance caused Dr. Barbery to be its unprepared unsuspecting victim. But to chance, I, I, Waldo Fisher, already disgraced, shall never be subservient. Above chance and beyond it and beneath it, I am still possessed of final choice.'

Waldo had exercised his final choice, but had he really escaped from the workings of chance? Had his father married within the faith, had his mother not become deluded, had he married a girl other than Emma, had his children been born free of stigma . . . Had . . . Had . . . Had . . . And had I not opened myself to him with my rational scientific answers and had I not been on vacation when he needed help and had not Barbery but another doctor been called whose manner was different or reflexes springier and had . . . the possibilities were endless, each moment, each action, each choice potentially opening out to an avalanche of other possible eventualities. He had not truly escaped but in the end had merely exercised one option to which a chain of chance occurrences, in the mode of a Greek tragedy, had led him.

When I looked up, Emma lapped me, but wanly, with near-extinguished eyes. Susan and Julia, jostling for position, were peering at the instruments behind the glass in the cupboard.

'Why?', Emma whispered, the tremor in her mouse-like

chin so fleeting as it alluded to the letter limp between my fingers. 'Why?'

I said nothing, my silence a cord drawing her out.

'I don't understand. It's all beyond me. A fortnight ago, he was still alive, breathing, moving, talking, sick as he was . . . And now . . . dead . . . and that doctor dead . . . and myself abandoned . . . and the children . . . Why . . .? Where did things go wrong . . .? What is to become of us . . .? What kind of future do the children have . . .? You're a doctor, you know about these things . . . What . . .? Why . . .? What . . .?'

Go tell her the answers, my answers. Go tell her what I told Waldo, about science, blind science, and about chaos, randomness and chance. Go tell her, tell her . . .

'There are things that are beyond explanation,' I said, heavy with my own dissembling, daring to look with grim firmness into Emma's lightless charred eyes. 'We can only trust, have faith in the ways, however mysterious, however inscrutable, of an Almighty all-seeing God.'