

Music

Mr Glick!

Tapering to sharpness, his head rocks, to and fro as though he were pecking at crumbs, while his body sways, that nimble frame so fragile and spare, as, by my side, he presses my fingers on the piano keys, repeating in his Litvak accent, "This is C, this is D, this is E. C-D-E, C-D-E, C-D-E.

Mr Glick! Mr Umglick!

Music.

I am too much of a street-boy, I assault the streets too much, even in St.Kilda, it seems, to which we have moved after the preceding two years in our Northcote exile. Mother would have me tamed — with books, a chess-set, with music.

Books I devour anyway; chess I tolerate; — but music!

The idea!

"'Music softens the character'," Mother says, quoting fat Mrs Tuchinski whose whiskers sweat mercury when she comes in Fridays with an order for her green-groceries. "'Music broadens the personality, too, gives it depth.' Mrs Tuchinski sends her Micheline for music lessons too and see how she has changed."

Mother is right, of course. Micheline Tuchinski, cast from the same template as her mother, *has* changed. At twelve, nudging thirteen, she is becoming a model of refinement, even of coyness. No longer does she blurt out the answers to Miss Bartholomew's questions in class, but raises her hand instead. No

longer does she blink fish-eyed and impatient behind her glasses, but sets her grey-green gaze upon that thin-lipped purveyor of learning who must either look away in search of another raised hand or of flickers of enlightenment in another's face, or yield yet again to the sharper edge of that penetration with a resigned "Well, then, Micheline, you tell the class", which Micheline does, not with her former all-knowing cocky arrogance but with more softly-cushioned unabrasive certainty. And she walks differently, too, does Micheline, with a rhythmically-buoyant tilting of her shoulders and her very ample hips, while her breasts begin to bulge and, when she plays basketball, it is hair, I swear, that is seen to be darkening the moist cupolas of her armpits.

But credit all that to piano lessons?

And because Micheline Tuchinski has changed, I should learn music, too?

I shrug my shoulders, indifference the better ploy to have Mother relinquish the idea. But, standing before the sink peeling potatoes for the evening soup, she tunes her voice to air a melody of her own.

"Every Jewish child," she lilts, her countenance set in reverie while her fingers mechanically shave grimy rind off moist white starchy flesh, "every Jewish child should know how to play an instrument. A person can never know when it may come to use. Look at Heifetz, Oistrakh — and Rabin, Rubinstein."

Customers? I am about to ask, Mother knows them so well, but hold back as she says, "And Joseph Leibholz, he plays, no?"

"The violin," I say, loath to concede more.

"So the violin. For him the violin, for you the piano. Music is music. Broadens character, gives it depth."

Fat Mrs Tuchinski!

"You do like him, don't you?" Mother presses. "You do want him to be your friend, no? He's such a quiet boy, a *deep* boy. Perhaps you will play music together..."

Joseph Liebholz... go play music with an angel among

angels as Mrs Danziger calls him. Joseph Liebholz with drifting dreamy eyes the colour of distant oceans and as unfathomably deep. Joseph Liebholz, weaver of verse, manipulator of crayon, spinner of melody, whom one can worship and glorify or vilify or loathe, but whom, till the end of days, one may never emulate.

But why evoke Joseph Liebholz and not Abe Kaplan, jester, chatterer, gasser Abe Kaplan who is also in my class and plays music too, Abe Kaplan "*The Dunce*", Abe Kaplan "*The Farter*", whose effusions now return with near audible sharpness: "So boring the piano. Plink plink bang bang. Bang bang plink plink. Practice practice practice. Bang bang plink plink. Plink plink bang bang. Makes you want to shoot the geezer who ever invented the rotten thing. Plink plink bang bang. Bang bang plink plink...?"

"Abe Kaplan. . .," I begin, "he. . ."

It is scarcely a duet Mother and I now play, but rather separate tunes, melodies that hardly harmonise, my own painfully plaintive, Mother's more certain, forceful, increasingly suffocating mine.

"You want to be like *him*?! That *shegetz*?! That *monster*?! Rude, wild, with no respect for his parents, who throws stones at his mother, spits *schmutz* on his father. . ."

"He didn't. . ."

". . .and got caught stealing stamps from Coles. . ."

"It's not true, he told me. . ."

". . .and who will yet bring disgrace on all our people, may they, our enemies, not know it. . ."

"Piano doesn't help him. . ."

". . .and who doesn't appreciate his parents' sacrifices so that he may learn and grow up decent. . ."

"I don't want to play. It doesn't interest. . ."

"It will do you good."

"How?"

"Believe your mother."

"How?!"

"Has she ever been wrong?"

"Please!"

"But it's all arranged. Your father has agreed."

"Mother! Mother?!"

I am cowed into silence, turn away from Mother's unyielding gaze, furies rumbling deep within me as the taste of conspiracy wells to my throat. The idea! The sentence! To sit indoors, plink plink bang bang, bang bang plink plink, when I could be outside, out in the streets, *my* streets...

Mother, can't you see it? I can't even breathe...

"He is a poor man but very kind," Mother placates. "Mr Glick. We should support him. After what he's been through. He is also Micheline's teacher. You start Thursday after school. You'll like him, you'll see."

So am I offered up, an offering to music. All because of customers called Heifetz and Rubinstein, because Micheline Tuchinski has suddenly changed and sprouted breasts on her chest and hairs under her arms, because Mr Glick is a poor man who... goodness, what has he been through?... because... because a Jewish child must break his fingers plink plink bang bang to have his character softened, broadened, and have it given depth, and because who knows when it may come to use.

Music!

Music!!

Mother is my escort. Without her, I might not get there, there, to Mr Glick's dim apartment on Marine Parade, my every protest along the way just so much more wind lost to wind coursing in from the vast, open, seemingly boundless sea across the street a truant hop, a step and a jump away.

"This is my son," Mother says meekly at the door, her tone not wholly devoid of awe as she presses me forward with the palm of a hand. "He has promised to try hard... He is in Micheline's class at school... If he has talent..."

I look at this new teacher of mine. Reality mocks expectation. But then what did I expect? A giant? An ogre? Flowing flamboyant mercury hair, the jowls of a Sphinx, the hands of a

Hercules? He is a little man, a bird, all leanness, undernourishment, sharp angles and dryness. His name nailed upon his door reads Abraham Glick, but with violence to none, he could as aptly be Methuselah, so old, so wizened is he — sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five? — his nose and ears honed to the acuteness of attrition, his scalp denuded to the barrenness of rural winters, wholly matted, blotched and prey to blight.

He smiles. Or, rather, his face folding, he *attempts* to smile. The lips just do not quite seem to do his fullest bidding. And he talks, too, his Litvak Yiddish more quiet, more refined, more nasal than the broader earthier Warsaw Yiddish of my inheritance.

"There is not a child alive," he says, looking at Mother and touching my hair, "not a child alive not blessed with talent of some sort. Given the will. . ."

With small eyes frisking about, he gazes at the *Beginner's* volume of *John Thompson's Piano Course* in my hands for which Mother has made a rare and special trip into the city.

Mother echoes, "Yes, the will. . ."

"And the necessity. . .," the teacher adds.

"Do you hear?" Mother adds as descant.

". . .there is nothing, nothing, a child, a man cannot achieve."

"Are you listening?" Mother says, herself listening, clinging to his lips, waiting to hear more. "Mr Glick is a wise man. You will learn, you will learn great things from him. . ."

But there is no more to listen to, no more to hear. Mr Glick does not elaborate. Instead, he moves his hand to my shoulder and licks his lips, his upper denture suddenly coming to life as it dances momentarily to a brisk evanescent tune all its own. Reflex over-riding control, I try to draw away, but his grasp is firm, however frail the cast of his hand. In me, Mr Glick has found prey of a kind. He is the hawk, I the mouse; he the vulture, I but helpless flesh.

"So you want to learn music, heh?" he asks, squeezing my shoulder still more tightly. "Music you want to learn?"

Go tell the truth!

But, then, go lie!

I lie. I look down, study the dull green floral pattern of the threadbare carpet, study too the warp of the mat on which he stands, and find in the fraying toes of his slippers safer harbour for my gaze in the face of the wordless lie to which I nod than in those black-winged prancing eyes that would the readier discover my dissembling.

"Well, then, say goodbye to your mother," he says, releasing my shoulder only to pinch my cheek, "and if you come with me I shall teach you in time the charm, the magic, the miracle of music.

And what charm! What magic! What miracle!

His hand over mine is coarse dry flesh. Beneath it, my stiff unwilling fingers press white keys with jagged thrusts as Mr Glick chants "C-D-E, C-D-E. Loosen the fingers. Relax your wrists. C-D-E, C-D-E."

For five minutes, ten, fifteen, I loosen my fingers to the same routine: C-D-E, C-D-E, with Mr Glick beside me, that lean sparrow nodding, wriggling, scratching a buttock, shuffling his feet. "That's good, that's better, more slowly, now slightly faster, gentler now, now louder. Good, good, good . . ."

To our right, the window hosts into the room yellow mote-specked light. Grime clings to the edges of the glass, the paint lifts in flakes, grey dust speckles the putty. Erratic in its flight, a bird raps its wings against the pane, holds its body, head and legs stretched out in marbled poise and flies away. There is still light outside, muted Autumn light to be sure, but wasted, squandered light as C-D-E yields to D-E-F and D-E-F to E-F-G. Beside me, Mr Glick pouts his lips, sucks them back, looks at his watch, fidgets absently and distractingly, with a button on his shirt. Up close, he smells of soap, an effluvium sweet and cloying like the treacly syrup Dr Ashkenazy regularly prescribes for my tonsillitis. His smell is oppressive. And oppressive too this cage in which I find myself with its peeling must-stained walls, the red and yellow imitation tulips in a decanter catching dust on the piano, the black-rimmed photograph of a perpetually-staring bearded Jew in caftan and skull-

cap equally black, with a pale dumpy woman in shapeless frock and shawl beside him, beneath which hang other photographs, aging stills of tumbledown houses bordering cobbled lanes which pass under cracked stone bridges where bare-footed sunken-eyed children play drearily and beaten, and still more photographs such as my parents, too, possess, though stored discreetly in the pages of an album seldom brought to view.

Cut off from the outside by criss-crossed bars of that dreary window, I am hemmed in, I am stifled. A curse on Mrs Tuchinski, on Micheline, on Joseph Liebholz! Across Marine Parade lures the beach. The sea is green, white foamy diamonds dance upon its surface, and beyond and to the left and to the right I glide in arcs and circles and figures of eight with a seagull, I streak full tilt towards the yachts, I scale the pylons of Port Melbourne, and leap from the tower on Point Ormond where more than once I have grazed a knee, sprained an ankle, or bruised a thigh. And in my imagination, I fly too to the oval scarcely five minutes away where Paul and Gerry and Max assault with body and voice the ground and the air with their playing. The last cricket balls of the season are being bowled, the footballs are being retrieved from camphor, running shoes yield to toe-capped boots, cottons to woollens, and glossy whites cede to the two-toned, three-toned colours of guernseys numbered in worship of running, scrimmaging, flying heroes who, for the next six months, will be emulated, barracked for, urged on, and wept and panted and pulsated over. While I... I... Could I, too, like them — oh, envy burning — run, rise, fly, let loose the shackles of the here, the now, and this constricting, suffocating blighting cage.

But clipped are the wings of my thoughts, and tethered the feet that would run as Mr Glick touches (no more than that, merely touches) my hand to return capricious fancy to the rectangular white teeth before me that are in fact grey and gritty and rough beneath my fingers.

"I know what you are thinking," he says, his thin rhythmic Litvak tone beguiling and his nose twitching above the restless

pouting of his lips. "I know... I, too, a boy was once... And I, too, loved light and greenness and freedom..."

He applies soft pressure on my fingers; his own are bossed and spindled and parchment-fleshed.

"Now go on, D-E-F, E-F-G, D-E-F, E-F-G... Yes, I, too, was once a boy... and day after day I too played upon the piano... and I too said a curse on it, a curse on it... You see, I know what you think... But my father, may his memory be blessed, though a poor man, on this he insisted, on this he insisted... 'Whatever it costs, music he will learn to play', not knowing then — how could he know? — that with his severity, that with his every last *grosz* made from hammering a nail into a last, he was to save a life, to save a life, no, to save a soul from..."

Is that his father over the imitation tulips looking down, so inert, so docile, his lips lost, his mouth concealed behind the vest of heavy straggly blackness? How imagine hardness, severity, insistence issuing from such deadness? How...

D-E-F, E-F-G, D-E-F, E-F-G. Beside me hovers Mr Glick's treacly odour; above me, his father's and mother's silent vigil; and all around walls closing in, unseen but constricting and real, enclosing mustiness, acridity and other pungent smells — of age and decay, of mothballs and wax.

What is he telling me, this Noah, this Methuselah? What is he saying?

I glance at him, look away. The glance he takes for interest.

"He was a wise man, my father... in the way simpleness is wise... Do you understand me, my child, do you understand?"

I nod. I lie. I do not understand, but play on: C-D-E-F, D-E-F-G, plink pling bang bang, bang bang plink plink.

"On a stool by his bench he would sit and hum. Mmmmm, mmmmm. Up and down and soft and loud, sometimes slow, sometimes brisk. Pleasant melodies, homely tunes... lullabies and love songs and songs of praise and songs of sadness... Mmmmm, mmmmm... For he had a secret... or so he thought... .

But it was no secret, for, already long before, Moses knew it and Miriam knew it, and King David and King Solomon and the Prophetess Devorah, they all knew it too . . . ”

What is he telling me? What is he saying? Froth gathers at the corners of his lips, his black beady eyes are alive in their flitting and frisking across mine, probing in ways that make me cower, make me recede within confines ever shrinking as he leans towards me and then swings back, now reaching and touching, now springing back.

“C-D-E-F, D-E-F-G . . . C-D-E-F, D-E-F-G . . . Let go the fingers, relax the wrist, now G-F-E-D, F-E-D-C, G-F-E-D, F-E-D-C . . . To sing was to pray and music was prayer. *This* was my father’s secret, may his memory be blessed, my father believing that whatever the words, whatever the language, only through music could God be reached. . . Did you know that? That only through music could God be reached? . . . ”

The goal-posts are already standing; in its greenness, the turf is eager; Coleman, Johnson and James with their brawny artistry grace the back page of every newspaper. And here, Mr Glick, Mr Umglick, talks of prayer and music and God.

Mrs Tuchinski!

Micheline!

Joseph Liebholz!

Who wants, who wants that I should want through music to have my character softened, broadened, given depth? To be a cissy when out there, five minutes away, and beyond, all worldly praise goes to cunning and swiftness and muscle? To be assailed with legends and God when all I have come for is to bang bang plink plink out the hour to satisfy Mother, satisfy Father, and then to flee at the end into the spacious, the open, the fresh, the blue?

“You are learning well now, you are learning fast. . . Now C-D-E-F-G . . . And again C-D-E-F-G . . . Yes, it is hard at first but it gets much easier. . . Now C-D-E-F-G . . . and C-D-E-F-G . . . ”

A licking of lips follows, a muffled sound of clattering dentures, and potent is the smell of soap, mothballs and wax in the

suffocating dreariness, while every surface and every corner is choked by the wearisome tedium of oldness. Everything groans with age, deterioration, decay. The apartment, the furniture, even the tulips, with Mr Glick oldest of all. Yet it is he who now begins to talk of youth in that murky cavern of grey antiquity.

"You are young still, precious child. What can you understand? When I talk of God, what do you see? A throne, a hoary head, a face burning with magnificence, our Father Abraham to the left of Him, our Prophets to the right, a hand outstretched upon the world and eyes that see your every action, ears that hear your every word, a mind that reads your every thought? If you do, that is fine, for you are but a child. As I too a child was once. And to a child is given the gift of imagination, of seeing in images, in pictures, in forms. . . But to an old man, my child," — Mr Glick rocks on swelling waves — "C-D. . . E-F-G. . . C-D. . . E-F-G. . . To an old man, what is that God? . . ."

Opalescent clouds tinged with evening's crimson cross the setting sun. Yellow light yields to ashen bleakness. No more birds flutter against the window, and silent greyness settles upon the returning yachts and more heavily upon a trawler somewhere far removed and densely shrouded with mist. So does the day shrink and disappear, leaving no light in which to kick a ball or tackle Gerry or Max or head for goal.

And Mr Glick rises. Sways once, twice, a third time as though dizziness comes over him. With his legs he thrusts back his chair. Then, on the crest of a private inspiration he rides briskly towards the buffet from which he withdraws yet another photograph, this one dog-eared and creased, and brings it to me to study, once again laying a hand on mine, this time to give me pause from monotonous motion over those C-D-Es, D-E-Fs, E-F-Gs.

"You have done well for the first day," he says. "We shall do better still next time. But now, look, what do you see?"

A quiver laces his tone, a peculiar agitation. What should I see? What does he wish me to see?

Three men in a huddle.

I see them.

Striped outfits, pyjama-like, the kind that prisoners wear in films I have seen.

I see them.

One man at a piano, a second with a violin, a third behind a cello.

I see. I see.

"Tell me, my child. Have your father, your mother, ever mentioned Theresienstadt? Have they ever mentioned your cousins, uncles, aunts who might have gone in there and never came out?"

Twice already have I lied to him. For a third time now, I nod, but in that gesture there is affirmation this time, truth that rises from some primal memory of a kitchen in Carlton, a cottage in Pitt Street where, new arrivals all, my parents and the Fleischers, the Kopecniks, Elnboigens and Nussbaums pepper and salt its vapours with stories of incarceration and exile and hiding, and spice it with refrain after refrain of names, a multitude of them — Bialystok, Theresienstadt, Paris, Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin — that grow in meaning, force and resonance.

"Here am I," says Mr Glick over my shoulder, his soapy smell searing as he arches a bony forefinger at the pianist. "And that is" — he glances at his watch — "Hoffnung, and the fiddler is Freilich."

A gloomy group, despite their names. All of them perched on a platform. All of them lean, their heads shaven, sunken-cheeked.

"And below, down there. . . no, you don't see them, they are out of the picture and they have no names. . . are your cousins, your uncles, your aunts, kicking up yellow dust as they pass through the gates to hell, to the crowded barracks where lice and typhus and bullets and. . . and. . . But why trouble a young head with horror?. . . A curse upon our enemies that you should ever have to learn of it and. . ."

His hand poised upon my shoulder is oddly light now; it is gentle, unexpectedly solicitous, not at all the claw with which, vulture clinging to prey, he greeted me before.

"Come, let us change places," he says, less emphatic the voice that drops two notches into the quieter polished tone from Vilna.

To strangers I am ever obedient. It is an unsung virtue of mine. A conspicuous failing. I move to his former seat, he manoeuvres into mine. All preliminaries are redundant; with just an upward tugging at his sleeves above his wrists, he launches into a melodic reverberation — a torrent of sound, of rhythm, of arresting vigour, as what under my fingers had been a pallid tortured C-D-E becomes under his a Niagara of sound cascading, eddying, booming, flowing. Meanwhile, outside, the last defiant flickers of crimson founder over the horizon. Congealing greyness darkens the windows as melting within me are all hopes of reaching the oval, of running freely, and of leaping, abandon, caprice. Would he but release me...

But he holds me. With music. With words.

"Look at the photograph again. No, you don't see the guards. But imagine them. Below the platform... Grey uniforms, green... pimply men, boys in helmets, caps, rifles in their arms, their dogs, like them, nervous and jumpy, as our people... our people... Strauss they made us play, these pimply men, and Lanner and Beethoven, the *pride* of that accursed nation, Beethoven — do you recognise this? — the *Fur Elise* — da-da da-da da-da da-da-daa, da-da-daa, da-da-daaa... Beethoven! Their god while they themselves had fallen... fallen... *Gehenna* itself not deep enough..."

Hand over hand, he careers across the keys. His narrow shoulders heave, collapse; his back — the stuff of bamboo — bends and snaps to straightness in the torrent of his music.

"And so we played, so we played," Mr Glick pounds, "Hoffnung and Freilich and I, and as long as we played, there we stayed, Hoffnung at the cello, Freilich on his fiddle, and I at the piano, surviving, surviving, where others... God, God... *Them* He did not hear, but us... Wherever He was... whatever He was... Us He heard... He had given us the gift of music and in our time our music was our salvation — if you know what salvation is? Do you?..."

I do not know, but I indicate yes, the better to be spared further explanation and a longer detaining when, outside, I may still be free, I may still catch Paul or Gerry or Max. Already I begin to nod again, when, above the music, above the words, the raucous ringing of the bell startles me to jumping.

"Ah, so you are here, Freilich," my teacher says, his fingers tripping over the keys in fluid melody, scarcely looking at the visitor who enters unbidden. "Put on the light and get out your fiddle. Is it Mozart tonight or *Raisins and Almonds*?"

To Freilich, I might be mere shadow. He does look at me, but no curiosity as much as lingers in that begrudging glance.

"Does it matter?" he says, his voice gritty, as though crumbs grated in his throat. "As long as we play."

Crevices cutting deep from eyes to chin slice his face into three vertical slabs. His hair, dense dirty silver, is tortured back; his brow is tormented, racked into a knot; his jaws in their hardness might have been bonded with cement. He is a bulldog, cold and tense. Were he to smile. . .

But the very notion is impossible. There is no mirth about him. Only a nervous fidgeting as he fumbles with the clasps of his violin case, removes the fiddle from its boxed captivity, moves to where I stand, the while plucking, scraping, striking at the strings with his bow, and grunts, "Let it be *Raisins and Almonds* then", the two of them, the pecking Mr Glick and the swaying Freilich, setting out upon a mellifluous duet, a piece molten in sweetness and, to judge from their tautness, in exquisite pain as well, quite other than the reverie upon which Mother would be buoyed were she still to sing, as she had once been moved to sing, that tender lullaby in distant half-forgotten Paris, in nearby unhappy unhappy Northcote, and, in moments of forgetfulness, after dinner, when washing up, or ironing, or darning my socks, in the drab dull haven of St.Kilda.

They play, they perform, make music; in the midst of mothballs and wax; under the light of the hooded bulb, under yellow light that throws more shadow than brightness, under dreary light that is more swallowed up than reflected, under light that disappears in those crevices on Freilich's cheeks and creeps into

the folds of his shuttered eyes as, above the music, he hisses, wheezes, almost spits, "For us is this, for us is this, for us, for us!" while bird-like Mr Glick peals and titters in counterpoint, "For our lives, for our lives, for our lives!"

And now, without any ringing at the door, without a knock, another man enters, a bear, a hulk, the gigantic case he carries striking against the uprights of the doorway in his lumbering passage into the room. His face is huge, his jowls like sandbags, the chin heavy and cleft, and his white regal hair is in unbridled chaos, dishevelled as if by perpetual storm. And his eyebrows. . . Eyebrows! Yes, even in the photograph, shaven as is his head, the eyebrows overpower. They are massive, stark, high-arching, coarse and lowering; and they flicker, contract and dance as he enters, they flicker, contract and dance not to the gentler melody that is now in the hearing, but to another more private passionate cascading one, one that — I know, I sense it already — they are about to take up as, with his cello now liberated, Hoffnung — unmistakably Hoffnung — plucks the deeply-reverberating strings once, twice, three times against his companions' sugary descant, thereby compelling them with a rude and vehement force to submit to his dictate.

"*Allegro appassionata*," he says with the same grim authority, glancing — oh, so unseeingly, so vaguely — in my direction, lowering then his massive head over his chipped lustreless cello as his hands flit — the left along the strings, the right with the bow across them — in tortured and torturing frenzy, the sound vibrating, ringing against the vase with its tulips, convulsing with fever, and trembling with turbulence in the dingy room become suddenly too cramped, too contracted to contain it all.

"For us is this, for us is this!" hisses the fiddler Freilich.

"For our lives, for our lives, for our lives!" Mr Glick rejoins.

"Oh listen God, now listen God, please listen God!" repeatedly booms Hoffnung.

The three huddle closer, ever closer, the bird, the bulldog and the bear united, locked in fervent synchrony of sound and

motion, with hands and arms and shoulders, head and back all leaping, plunging, pitching, glints of perspiration glistening above the cellist's frantic lips, Mr Glick's barren skull suffused with crimson, the creases in the bulldog Freilich's face deepening into ravines, all of them starkly rent with agony and spasm and barely containable strain; while there I sit beside Mr Glick, beneath the evening-blackened window, trapped, ignored, forgotten, aching to leave, yet not daring to rise, the walls closed in about me now, all exits sealed, all hopes snuffed out, black photograph in my hand in which three figures begin to move, to play, perform, while somewhere below them, at their feet, unseen, trudge men and children kicking up yellow dust, there snarl uniformed guards to the howling of dogs, the whole evoking a terror that rivets the spine and freezes the flesh to jittery tingling.

The charm, the magic, the miracle of music!

As long as we played, there we stayed...

As long as we played, there we stayed...

Surviving...

Surviving...

Where others...

God!

God!

But out of that incarceration I yet come to be delivered. The febrile cadences are loud and tempestuous. But louder still, even more impatient, and resolute, sustained, is the ringing at the door which, left unanswered, is opened warily to reveal Mother — Mother! — flushed and panting, her gaze hot and panicked as it scours the apartment in a sweeping swoop before it falls, clinging, possessively, on me. What she murmurs, I do not know. There is but a merest flurry on her lips, so white, so drained, as upon each — upon Mr Glick, Freilich, Hoffnung — she turns curious bewildered eyes, while they, locked in movement, sonority and pleading, remain oblivious to her intrusion, oblivious too to my halting hesitant stirring as, gingerly, I rise, place the photograph upon my seat, and take one step, a second, a third, past my teacher, past the fiddler Freilich, past the cellist

Hoffnung, averting as well as I can my face from their pained and separate agonies.

But in my passage, I hear a change.

Having just passed him, the cellist Hoffnung draws wheezy breath, clears his throat and grunts "*Allegro vivace*", to which, without pause, in a unison untouched, the trio, as if gelled into one, strikes up another tune, a brisk lilting passionate melody, Mr Glick pounding vehemently upon the piano keys, Mr Freilich gyrating with every motion of his bow, Hoffnung pawing with enormous hands at the resonating strings, all three of them old — sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five — pinched or creviced or heavy-jowled, launching into another refrain, "Oh, God!" the one, "My God!" the other, "Hear, God!" the third, "Let us live!" "Give us continuing life!" "In music is life!" "Oh, God!" "My God!" "Hear, God!" while, just as, earlier, Mother pressed me forward with the palm of her hand, now with the same palm and with fingers to her lips, she ushers me out, but not before I catch a closing glimpse of the group, that group huddling in motion in a shadowed corner, behind them a vase with dreary dust-laden tulips and a photograph of a Jew and his wife, the Jew, who when he hammered nails into a last, hummed, hummed, hummed, and yet... and yet...

Urged on by Mother, I flee. Along the hallway, down the stairs, into the night, the music in pursuit as I hurl a stone at a lamp-post, kick with vigour at an imaginary ball, and leap high, high, as if to grasp at a star, choking with the very ecstasy of liberation, drawing away from Mother who, from a distance, says irritably, "And what have you done with your music book?" to which I shout back in pure rejoicing "Forgot it at Mr Umglick's!" Mother countering in turn with "Mr Glick! Mr Glick! Remember to bring it home next week. And if you want to stay, then telephone. You were there so long, you drove me out of my wits."

As I land on solid asphalt, I nearly twist a knee. I look at Mother, seeking out under the light of a street-lamp even a hint of irony, or of jest in her expression.

"Next week?" I say. "Again?"

There is no smile, no mirth. Only resoluteness, unbending resolve not to yield.

"He can teach you much," she says, tossing her head towards Mr Glick's apartment, now above and behind us. "Music softens the character, broadens it, gives it... gives it... You heard — gives life."

I catch the direction of her thrust. From a distance, I look back at the Mr Glick's apartment-block. Here and there along its facade, rectangles of window glow with light. Behind one of these are three men; three old men; three old men making music; three old men who for years past have been making music. I look up, root out that window. And suddenly — is it the breeze from the sea that stirs? the swishing, soft and rhythmical, of waves unfurling on shore? the autumn scent of nearby elms and palms? or some quickened awareness of the impossible or the futile? — suddenly, my breath becomes suspended and, in that instant, I feel for them, I ache in the depths of some primal core; and in the hold of that ache I reach out to them, reach out *for* them, reaching with awe that is great, grand, but hopeless, with a melancholy sweetness, too, and with a silent deeply genuine petitioning on their behalf that I come one day, long after their inevitable passing, to recognise as prayer.