

On Firmer Shores
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To Eva, Dvora, Jonathan and Noemi
and to the generation before us that gave us life.

Two Years in Exile

1

I wear out my first pair of pants on the fringe of swelling suburbia, where everything is mine. The sandy quarry belongs to me; and the scrub, the rocks, the potholes filled with mud, and the mounds of loam, crumbling and sinking beneath my feet as I watch the builders pushing back the borders. Home is where the feet run most freely, and I make my home anywhere, wherever there is dirt, wherever there is dust.

‘What will your mother say?’

Mrs. Walters, spraying her delphiniums next door, shakes a pitying head.

Oh, to tug at the mole that sits on her chin. What bliss.

She stabs a forefinger upwards, probing for gaps in transparent void, and accuses me with her question, compelling, squeezing from me a display of shame and contrition and of whatever other humiliation she would have me feel. For she is a mother – though Colin’s and not mine – and I am a son, and for each of us there are roles that we must play. So while Mother, my mother, is sequestered in Flinders Lane pumping stitches into the seams of blouses, this other mother shakes her head and probes at the void, cowing me into a shame I don’t feel, my own fingers all the while itching, twitching to pluck at that prickly monster on her chin.

Colin, when he comes home from school, is a good boy. He

takes off his pants, folds them like royal linen, and replaces the holy gear with ragged blue jeans smeared and bespattered with paint and charcoal and grime. School is school; home is not its extension. Not in the Walters' rule-book anyway, where between school and home there is a demarcation, expressed most eloquently in a change of pants.

'What *will* your mother say?' This time more emphatic, crushing her words between teeth of steel, the harsher impact tempered by the swishing and lapping of spray on her delphiniums and gardenias.

'Mother's not home,' I manage, quite irrelevantly.

'Humph.' A puff of wind escapes from flaring nostrils in an upturned nose. Haughtily, mightily, with the airs that exalt her own virtue for being such a real, good, caring, stay-at-home, look-after-baby mother. Not like Mother, my mother . . .

But go betray Mother and tell this paragon of motherhood that I have only two pairs of pants. And that the other pair is in the cupboard, waiting for Sundays and visiting. Go tell this woman that, for folk who one year before came to this country with less, two pairs of pants are gifts of Providence. Go tell her . . . go tell her anything when she is a mother and I a son, and Mother, my mother, sits in a dingy dusty crowded workshop pumping away at a Singer, squeezing from its clatter and hum a pound of steak, a down-payment, a doctor's fee, a bus fare, a shirt. So I mime remorse as well as I can, hang my head, shrug a shoulder, bite a lip and toe into a clump of weeds on the nature strip.

Oh, to pinch that porcupine on the chin . . .

It is her own good lad, going against his will, I'm sure, who delivers me from the leaven of her scorn with a reminder clamoured from the window, 'Mum, the roast is burning!'

And Mum, with an 'Oh, my dear' and a 'Wouldn't you believe?' drops the hose as if it had teeth, and clatters up the stairs on hollow heels to rescue that wretched charred roast whose vapours drift out now, thick and sickly, to suffocate the bowed acquiescent flowers that the abandoned hose is still watering.

Colin's face behind the window is a smirk. There is little else to it, unless vegetable ears and freckles amount to anything. He is a good lad. He changes his pants on coming home, earns a few pennies selling Saturday's 'Globe' outside the Plaza, and shows his flair for music, of a sort, as he blasts his trumpet in a fanfare of violence.

His mother's prodding fingers on his hands, he points to the hose, still swishing and hissing into the roots of his mother's flowers.

'Will ya' be a sport, mate, and turn off the tap?'

'Do it yourself,' I would prefer to say, but I have tasted, felt, Colin's strength before. So I make for the tap and watch, not him, but the rubber tubing shorten and convulse in a final protest and fall limp, like lead now, upon the grass.

'Ta, mate,' he says and ups his thumb. Transfixing a wad of void around his nail before disappearing into the deeper crypts of his red-roofed box that to him is home. Leaving me to wear out my pants on the fringes of swelling suburbia. Alone. Where Northcote ends. Waiting, in quarries, in potholes, on rafters and gums, for Mother's bus, or Father's, to bring them back from Flinders Lane where they pound out a life in this newer distant home.

2

Mother cannot forgive Melbourne, upon which, she says she has merely stumbled. Nor Europe, now left behind. And even while her feet tread the dry dusty earth of this firmer quieter shore, the ship of her existence floats, homelessly, on an ocean of regret and dejection, of reproach and tears.

We tread on our shadows, coming home. Behind us sinks the mutely drowning November sun, as we walk between two rows of red-brick cubes, set behind ordered squares of green, each fringed by delphinium and rosebush in a flush of conformity.

In which Mother is lost.

'Nice day,' says Mrs. Walters, smiling ever so nicely and resting on her broom to watch her husband and son thrash the

shuttlecock through the air. The grass squelches under her husband's heavy bulk, while Colin, thin, lanky and nearly all bone skims over the surface as if to tread harder would mean to cause eggs to break.

'Good weather we're havin',' Mrs. Walters tries at conversation once more. Her mole invites. Only to betray. Like her smile.

'Yes,' says Mother, only now really noticing the weather at all. For factory interiors know no seasons.

"Ope it lasts,' hopes Mrs. Walters, resuming her sweeping in a last ritual before sunset.

'Good shot, Dad.' Colin leaps high to arrest the flight of the shuttle, but fails. Dad trills with the mirth of his success.

'Now serve it to me, son.'

The boy is dutiful. His left hand tosses up the feathered object, his right hand draws back, pauses, quivers and swipes at the white plumage. His straight orange hair, parted in the middle, rises and falls with each stroke, like flaps.

'Hit it up, Dad.' And Dad hits up, wildly, deliberately, giving to the shuttle the velocity of his own laughter.

The plumed cone wings and spins in reeling convulsions, hangs tremulously in mid-air, loses life, falls and thuds upon Mother's shadow at her feet. She recoils as though she herself has been struck. Her lips allow a murmur to escape, but Polish I don't understand and her curse remains her secret.

In one bound, two, three, Dad is over the fence, bending to pick up the battered shuttle and looking up at Mother through flushed amused eyes, his breath strong and rancid, a brew of stale tobacco from the lungs and beer from deeper wells.

'Sorry, dear lady,' he wheezes, his sorrow as true and deep as vacuum.

'You're a bit wide of the mark, Dad,' his son calls from behind him. 'Eh, Mum, did'ja see that shot?'

Dad stands up now, erect, as big and red as an ox. His right forefinger aims at an imaginary mark of Cain on my brow. 'Good boy you got there. Like to see a lad helpin' his mum.'

Mrs. Walters stands beside him. 'Yeh, 'e's a good lad.' She

tosses her head upwards, though really she is looking down.

'Yes,' says Mother again, more nervously, pushing me forward as though the Walters' were evil eyes falling upon me.

Behind her own door, within her own walls, her breath, smothered by apprehension, or disgust, escapes with relief.

Of all misfortunes available to the children of this earth, she bemoans, Melbourne was the one she had to choose. Melbourne, a tail torn from the rump of the world, where she is lost, amongst neighbours, generations, continents, galaxies apart from herself, a foreigner Jew in an Australian marsh. Like satin in tweed, perfume in tar, crystal in clay.

'A wilderness we have come to. What a wilderness this is.'

In the evening, our neighbour sings a song, or strangles it rather in his throat. Sings about a doggie in the window; sings a song he has caught like some contagion he would get rid of by passing it on. Sings, hoots, whoops, croups, then pauses, mercifully, for a semi-quaver rest, to raise the bottle to his trumpet, and then sings again, sucking in air sibilant with froth, throwing a toad's belch into his turbulent sonata for counterpoint. Daytime would swallow up his song, would digest it, absorb it, lose it without real loss in the symphony of clatter and roar of cars and motor-mowers and machines. But the evening is sated and regurgitates the serenade, and lets its breezes take it wherever they will to splash the sky and darkness with a cacophony of echoes. While in our own dim kitchen, Father reads the 'Jewish News', about Ben-Gurion and Peretz, about Jerusalem and Warsaw, singing, if he is moved to sing, in a muted hum, something private, something mellow, not giving his neighbours cause for even the slightest moment to remind themselves of him. While Mother would throttle every sound between iron and collar as she presses tomorrow's shirt, the moisture under the metal hissing, like herself:

'Why this wilderness, this curse, this Gehenna?'

And then the silence. Of midnight. And of Sundays. Of midnight and the wind rattling the window-frames and tree-tops brushing against the tiles or the muffled hum of a distant

car bringing to Mother wisps of memory, memories of crowded courtyards and homely faces, of a Yiddish word and a rebbe's touch, in a cosier world now swept away. And then the silence of Sundays where not even grass stirs, lest its whispers be too loud in the unreality of cool, shimmering morning crystal. Sleeping city. Dumb city lying drunk, until the brittle crystal is broken by a milk-horse still limping from sleep and by the wheels grinding and the bottles rattling behind it. Then silence again, briefer and less durable, breached now by Father as he goes out with bucket and spade to scratch, scour and scrape up from the bitumen the horse's straw-coloured gift to feed his drooping tomatoes and struggling lemon-tree.

Mother hates both the noise and the silence, a silence that is yet not a true silence.

'A wilderness, a wasteland,' she mutters, fingering the curtains as she watches Father at his work of adjustment, and, daring to aim higher, casts her sight upon the empty lots beyond the crossing.

And the street, the cubes of red, the square gardens, the confines of her wasteland do not protest.

3

A wilderness. Five miles from the city's heart, Mother feels as if she were in a country town, a Siberian sovchoz or a displaced persons' camp again. Far away is High Street with its sprawl of shops, offices, arcades and picture-theatres. Further still, a light year away, there is – she knows – a Jewish face, a Jewish word, a Jewish melody. But at our end, her very existence is enshrouded in a pall of silence and of loneliness, while beyond, past the next crossing, along the dry, cracked and dusty unmade road stretches an empty nakedness that, for Mother, is worse even than the silence and the loneliness. And more threatening.

But the nakedness is being covered. This, Mother does not, cannot, will not see. Men in blue singlets and high gumboots

blast the subterranean rocks, uproot wild shrubs, maul the earth and pound it into submission, cowing it to receive the edifices they are determined to erect upon it. The dry hard earth does not yield itself too readily. A thing of pristine virtue, it is too frigid, too severe to penetrate with tact. But muscle, machinery, dynamite and cursing overcome its resistance, and from the barren surface rise up wooden skeletons upon which brick and cement become flesh. Then are doors fitted, windows inserted, tiles slotted into place. Then, in a day, or two, or three, paths become cemented, bare surfaces covered with topsoil, seeds sprinkled, bulbs planted, and the house becomes a home as weak slender shoots become grass and reluctant buds blossom into full flamboyant colour.

So is a house built. So do the little coloured boxes of suburbia grow. House upon house coaxed to completion by the hum and roar of machines, by the vigour of men's curses, and by the laughter of a ten-year-old boy. My laughter. For as I swing by my arms from the horizontal beams and climb upon the rafters of each rising skeleton, in my imagination, which soars, I build it too, reaping as payment splintered knees, calloused palms and grit in the eyes. With my help, the perimeter where we live is pushed back and the city swells, enveloping us more rigidly within the carbon solidity of conformity.

Mother detests the perimeter. Father, with his tomatoes and lemon-tree, tries to adapt. But I, a bird on the rafters soaring high, thrive and flourish and grow within that wilderness. For the wilderness, the vacant lots, the wooden scaffolds, the quarry, the mounds of loam, even the ringwormed patches where puddles form belong to me. Its melody I have adopted, I know its silences, which are not truly silences, and treasure the emptiness. More than Mother could know. It has its own taste, a taste of that deeper more remote Australia that Mr. Cook teaches about. The Australia of open spaces, red deserts, towering gums, shearers, swagmen, jumbucks and wheat. Inspired by his mission to make me one of his Aussie kids, Mr. Cook brings me books, pictures, stories by Lawson, odes to

Clancy and to the man from Snowy River. My appetite he cannot satisfy. He tantalises my nostrils with the scent of eucalyptus and I swallow in mouthfuls whatever he feeds me. And – Mother should never know – I grow to love this country with the fervour of a proselyte, for the wilderness is mine. I become Mr. Cook's best pupil, his model child, his favourite. The questions he poses, he asks me to answer. The answers I give no-one else knows. Mr. Cook, who should know better, beams as he makes his way between the desks towards me, and laughs as he places his thin tendinous hand upon my shoulder, saying, too loudly, 'Well, son, you're a regular Aussie now.' Brian Simpson on my left sniggers, Russell McLean laughs, while Jim Reilly, Fisticuffs Jimmy to the boys, sharpens his knuckles which he will pound into me after school.

'Cissy! Teacher's pet! Sucker-upper!', he hisses behind raised fists. His blows hit whatever target he chooses. His mates urge him on. My left eye swells and darkens, I taste my own blood and tears.

'You're a regular Aussie now, eh?', he mimics from behind his fists. 'So show us boy, show us.'

Mr. Cook, who has stayed behind, now appears. The cheer squad flees and Fisticuffs Jimmy with it. This reed of a man again puts his mischievous hand upon my shoulder. It is dry, unfeeling leather, hairless and cool. It hints at barrenness and reminds me of the eucalyptus and gum, of open spaces and of the legend called Australia. I would like to love it still, but it has become remote, something not of my world at all but something that merely winked and taunted me with scented promises. Even the closer wilderness upon which I have helped to build with calluses and laughter mocks at having fooled me. And under Mr. Cook's withered solicitous hand now wiping my face of its blood and its tears, I weep, I weep, weep for the bruise that throbs around my eye and for the loss of a treasure that might have remained mine.

School ends. It is December. Month of warmth, excitement, festivity. Of respite from school and playground bullies. Of crystal skies and reluctant clouds; of crickets, sparrows, dandelions. Of Christmas, of Chanukah.

Colin stands upon the fence. I pray that it may tumble. His Highness stands upon his throne, casts a haughty eye, or a net, over Father's horticultural cripples, and asks, directing his inquiry to someone not at his feet but perched, monkey-like upon his shoulder,

'What are *you* gettin' for Christmas, mate?', himself itching, bursting to tell of promises made to him

Christmas? What is Christmas?, I ask myself, as I engrave a nail track into that too-sturdy fence. My ten years have not yet taught me. There *was* some fantasy performed at school, on the day before term's end. A Mary, a Joseph, three wise men with long black beards, bearing gifts, following a star, then craning their necks over a cradle which cradled a doll of plastic and straw. Ella Plotkin, the grocer's broad-nosed, fat and ugly daughter, played Mary – for acting at least she had a gift – and Peter Hughes, a blade of straw himself, so thin and so fragile, trembled through the rites of Joseph. While I, small, compact, chosen because unnoticeable, was made an angel in the company of twelve on a platform mercifully at the back.

'Well, mate, whatcha gettin'?'

What is Christmas?, I ask myself. But him I answer, because I must, 'Don't know yet.'

'Well, I'm gettin' a cricket set,' he says, finally bursting, so smug, almost drooling. The palings of the fence creak under the tremulous rolling of his mirth. The fence sways. Now for vengeance, I dare to hope, now for justice. But the fence stands firm. And if Colin has disappeared from his throne, it is because he has jumped off, not fallen nor crashed nor succumbed to my prayer.

'Colin is getting a cricket set for Christmas,' I tell mother. 'What are you buying for me?'

'My precious child,' Mother softens the blow to come. Her fingers, thin, a little crooked, the pulps flattened from pressing all day on seams, ruffle my hair.

'For us, there is no Christmas. Only Chanukah.'

Chanukah? What is Chanukah?, I ask myself, wanting but not venturing to escape from beneath her consoling palm. There is an illustration, I remember, in one of my books. A Temple of marble and cedar, soldiers prostrated before its altar, curtains, candles, lights marking miraculous days. That is Chanukah. And also a time – blessed season – a time for receiving gifts. So, Christmas, Chanukah, what's the difference? Gifts are gifts and know no distinctions.

And I get my gift. A table tennis set – bats, a net, a ball.

'For Chanukah,' Mother says, with love, as the gift becomes mine.

'For Christmas,' I say to Colin, he at my feet now and *I* upon the throne.

I wait for green envy to consume his face – teeth, freckles, pumpkin ears and all –, I wait for those mocking lips of his to set and his nostrils to bristle with the sap of unrewarded yearning. Oh, imminent moment of exultation.

But instead his eyes narrow into foxes' slits and his nose sharpens and his lips tighten, tighten taut into the tensed string of a bow, until drawn to the limit of their endurance, they yield and collapse, releasing shaft after shaft of hissing laughter that lashes and stings, that cuts and pierces. Our two yards combined cannot hold his scorn as it rolls, and tumbles, and trips, and sprawls on all sides, over wooden palings and creeping passion fruit into the Mertons' and the Sullivans', and the Mackenzies' and the Holts'.

'They're for babies!', he hisses, convulsing into giggles. The servant before the throne dares to be master.

I study my bats, see nothing to mock. Their borders are smooth, the edges well-filed; the handle is layered with ply, the palm cups it with professional ease; the sandpaper on their surfaces is clean, glistens as light plays upon the grains.

'Rubber!', he shrills, 'rubber, rubber!'

And between shafts of his taunting, mocking, riveting laughter, in moments of sense between convulsions, his body, his hands, his teeth, his very screech describe the rubber bats that true champions use.

And against the real life-size cricket bat he now brings out from his own house and the red leather-cased ball that mirrors the sun's more muted laughter, my own precious treasure pales, pales from a gift of parental love to a heartless, cruel act of treachery.

5

The wound heals, while others fester.

December is the year's unwinding. Padlocks silence the schools. The hum and roar of bulldozer and drill die away. Dry dust settles upon the building lots, the wooden skeletons stand stunted and stark, and timber and brick lie in mounds in the midst of rubble and loam.

We kick the dust, Colin and I. And swing from the beams, nails barbing our sleeves, rafters scraping skin. We play. Not out of friendship. But merely because we have met in passing and the earth has not opened to swallow either of us. His shirt is a pepper-pot of holes, his jeans are split and grimy and torn at the cuffs. And his heels are worn down to wedges and the uppers frayed. He is a good lad, this Colin, wearing his out-of-school outfit to be torn, mangled, soiled. Out there, on civilisation's perimeter.

And in our dress, he would make of me his twin, as he kicks dust over me and throws wet sand down my neck, and probes and pokes and pulls and jostles, shoulder against shoulder, hip against hip, in a jest and ecstasy that is private.

Then, sated, or bored, he remembers something and has enough of play.

'Ta-ta, mate. See ya' at carols tomorrow night. Ya' must come. At twelve. Outside the Morgans'. Under the mistle-toe.'

And he turns to go home. Leaving dust and sand to settle for

other opportunities.

Mother, at dinner, says her piece about my shirt. And wonders, aloud, who I think will buy my next pair of shoes. We have just finished eating the herrings and tomatoes. Mother is clearing the plates.

'I'll take him to the factory with me,' jokes Father. Whether to buy cheap shoes there or to work for them, I can't tell. But I laugh, to please him, and because I have something to say and need allies.

'I must go to carols tomorrow night.'

Mother is serving the soup. Chicken soup again, with noodles, for the third day in a row. While from next door, a roast tickles the nostrils. A myriad globules struggle afloat, a myriad bare lamps flicker and shimmer and glint upon the surface, reflecting themselves in these agitating oily orbs.

'Yes,' Mother says, 'I will wake you.' The ladle clatters confirmation against the pot.

Father looks at her. But her back is already turned as she steadies the pot upon the stove. And if Father has on his tongue a remark to loosen, he chooses instead to suck it down with the noodles. While I gulp mine with a helping of delight. For, surprise too great to countenance, I am going to carols tomorrow night. Outside the Morgans'. Under the mistletoe. At midnight.

And in the labyrinths of private fancies, I rejoice.

Until Mother, sated without having eaten, her hands knotted at the knuckles, starts to rock and heave in her seat, and sets sail upon an oft-sailed sea.

'We must move,' she says.

Father, having just licked and smacked his lips, winces under what may swell into an accusation.

'Out of this wilderness,' she adds.

The wind, this time, blows more gently. The sails flag. And Mother stops rocking, loosening the rudder she clasps between her palms. And, lapping me with eyes that could quieten storms, she draws breath, her bosom rises and lists, and she folds herself around me.

'My precious one, my little one.' Meaning, what is to become of you?

Thursday night, to be awake at the time of carols, I draw the blind early and sink into bed, even though the colour and smells and sounds of day still nudge at my window. Mrs. Walters waters her delphiniums and gardenias, her husband bays at a reluctant moon, while Colin, their good lad, violates and torments 'Come all ye faithful' on his trumpet. Mother darns my socks in the kitchen, Father reads about Warsaw and Tel Aviv and hums to himself. Fragile breezes break upon my window, crickets chirrup, a sparrow chatters on the sill, then flies away, flies away with my thoughts, my imagination, my dreams, holding them firmly, resolutely, until – until my eyes open, suddenly, to the glare of a blue and brilliant Christmas Day. Wheels, hooves and bottles clatter along the street outside. Then there is silence, fragile, transient silence, followed by the scrape-scape-scraping of metal against asphalt as Father shovels up the horse's straw gift for his lemon-tree and tomatoes.

I could weep, and would, if tears and sunshine were meet companions under the same canopy of blue. But I don't, not until that evening when Colin, sensing blood, or amusement, creeps up from behind and seizes me with devils' claws.

'Don't ya' like our Christmas songs, mate?'

He is over me. As always. I lie spread-eagled on my back, the grass beneath cold and moist and unyielding, his knees pressing down, a vice on my outstretched arms, my own legs achieving nothing towards liberation. His face, freckles and all, scowls. His nostrils, black pits, flare. His mouth is a menacing crypt of fillings and carious teeth.

'We kill Jews, do ya' know?'

Words are his sole weapon, but the roots of my hair burn, as though he has set me on fire. The throb in my arms is as nothing against this fire.

'I am not a Jew.'

This, I thrust into every cavity in his teeth. And into the hollow of his throat.

Which makes him laugh.

I hate his laughter. If I could, I would seize it, throttle it, encase it, bind it to anchors of lead. If I could. But free, as malice is free, his laughter reaches all horizons.

'Colin, darling,' Mrs. Walters calls from her porch, intruding upon his mirth. 'It's time to come inside.'

He leaps up, pressing his knees for a last time into my arms and knuckling me in the ribs.

'Well, must go now. I won, mate.'

Leaving me crucified on grass still moist, my back cold and green, my arms aching, my ears throbbing with the laughter of his scorn. . . .

The wound festers, where others have healed.

I tell Mother everything. A weak shallow vessel, I can't contain it all.

Mother is a rock. Standing firm; absorbing my pain. Face set hard, chiselled marble, with cheeks suddenly high and cold. Touch, and freeze. I tell her everything, tell her more than everything. Adding things that might have happened, probabilities that Colin might have been capable of, had not his Mum, unknowingly, delivered me from his malevolence. I tell her everything. Hoping, praying to heat stone, to force a glow that might make her avenge all hurt and devour that freckled killer of Jews.

Father, too, has heard, but it is Mother who speaks.

'Did you hear your son?'

His silence torments like pain. He puts down his paper and rubs the bridge of his nose with forefinger and thumb.

'Your son is no longer a Jew.'

Ancestry and progeny have parted. The son has abandoned his past.

'What a country this is. There is no God here. See, now, what a shegetz is growing up under our roof.'

My arms ache. My ears throb. With Colin's cavernous laughter. And Mother's submission, and Father's cowed silence.

Just one word against that devil. Mother! Father! Don't beat

him, don't even tell his father. But lay blame where blame is due, and curse him, him, and not me.

Mother salts and peppers tomorrow's soup with her accusations. Father – the hairs in his nostrils are too long and grow also from his ears – enshrouds me with the broad tallith of his hands and searches for contact deep within my eyes. Which burn. Which burst.

'Mother!' I plead. 'Father!'

Mother empties out the cup of her existence.

'We must move from here. See what this wilderness, this wasteland is doing to your son. Little brothers, blessed sisters. How have we sinned? Who is right in this world? And who is wise? And who is safe? Chaim to Siberia, Reuven to the gas-chambers, Sonia to America, Shimon to Israel. Leaves, feathers, scattered and dispersed, while we, silly, blind, pitiful yiddelech sink to the bottom of a barren trough, in exile, without a Yiddish book, a Yiddish word, a Yiddish geist.'

'Mother!', I try again, still seeking justice. Even though the plea sticks in the throat, trapped in a gurgle of incoherent meaningless sound.

And I discover a remarkable thing then. I discover that parents, too, can feel. Mother is weeping. A wind has blown against the rock. And it has crumbled. And disintegrated. With rivulets winding down the crevices and wrinkles beside her nose.

'My lost child, my precious one,' she says, burying my head in her breast, under a new tallith, a tallith woven of love and belonging, which I sense, or know, I shall wear forever. – As Mother wears the number on her arm.

Evening comes and passes. With sleep, for me, a century away, a universe away. Evening merges into night. Darkness overtakes the shapes of chimneys and trees which now disappear, dissolving into the void outside my window. Colin blasts upon his trumpet while his father takes to crowing. 'Silent Night' in the loudest of baritones, then 'Good King Wenceslas' amid the clinking of glasses and bottles and cutlery. Father sits in the kitchen, and Mother too, silently

grieving over their shegetz. From behind a quilt of cloud, stars emerge. Solitary and nameless, meekly unassertive, as if to apologise for their very existence amidst the blare of Colin's trumpet and the scorn of his laughter and his father's raucous song. I watch them, am entranced by them, become as one with them. Until above the stars, Mother's face appears. Pale and drawn, wrinkled and in pain, quivering, throbbing, as each star becomes a tear. Shed for me.

6

Soon after, we move.

Goodbye, I shout to the neighbours. Goodbye Colin. And to you, Mrs. Walters, whose horny growth I shall now never pluck, goodbye. Sprinkle your gardenias with your devotion and shower your good lad with your love. And thrive on the dust of your wilderness!

Colin, swinging on the gate, smiles wryly, or squints, and raises a phlegmatic hand.

'Come and see us some time.'

'Yes,' I reply, 'I will.' The promise is genuine, from the heart, from the heart of a child with plenty to learn.

And before I can say goodbye again, he has turned his back, then takes one step, two, three up the stairs, and disappears. I see his smirk behind the glass of his window and his rash of freckles and that hollow mouth whose laughter has mocked so often. But it is only a memory that lingers there. Not Colin himself, not him. For he has already returned to his trumpet or his crystal set or to devising other mischief.

Goodbye, I shout again. This time to no-one in particular. But rather into the transparent air, idling mutely over green unruffled suburbia as Father places a box of kitchen utensils into my hands to take to the car.

We are on the way. Haii, I want to call out, we are moving! And to move is better than standing still!

Through the rear window, I see the wilderness recede, with each crossing, moving further out of reach. Enough of sand

and tadpoles, of quarries and mud. Enough of building boxes and pushing back borders. I have earned my share of calluses and grit in the eye. Goodbye, my wasteland. I loved you once. Before your people, with their special venom, ruined my love.

Father watches only the road ahead. Mother holds my hands. Her expression is solid. Impenetrable, the firm chiselled marble she must have worn when leaving Warsaw, Russia, Germany, France. Her chest barely moves with her breathing. Only the eyelids, blinking out of necessity alone, yield any hint of awareness.

So we move; come out from exile. Into a fruitshop set in the hub of chaos, in the greyer, rowdier, cruder centre of St. Kilda where Father rises early and Mother breaks her nails over potato and swede and succours the needs of her thirsty soul as she picks out from their boxes the mouldy lemon, the bruised apple, the withered grape. Grey is the colour of St. Kilda and foetid its every corner where I parcel out bits more of my childhood. Not grass, nor tree, nor flower dominate, but glass and brick and spouting and stone, all smudged, peeling, leaking, rusted, cracked. The street stifles under a pall of beer and rotting meat, it reeks of humus and dander, but here, here where the cats breed amongst potato sacks and the Herald boy shouts in adenoidal tones, and the drunkard staggers and reels, begging for a shillin' or a zak outside the Coat-of-Arms, here I thrive, I grow and thrive like some wild and reckless resilient shoot.

Mother complains still, but her cup is drained of its former bitterness. Three doors away is Glicksman's kosher butchery, opposite is Krampel's winestore, and within walking distance stand Rothberg's bakery, Kantor's bookstore and Glazer's delicatessen. Mrs. Tuchinski, fat and breathless, wails about her rheumatism, but recited in Yiddish, which is Mother's bread, the plaint is a melody plated with gold. The Kaplinskis buy from her and the Fleischmans and the Orbachs, each giving wings to memory reaching back into homelier times. And when I tell her of Harry Lewin who is in my class or of Benny Danziger or of Sophie Grundman who is the rabbi's

daughter, an inner light pierces through the shroud of her weariness, to glow, to burn in a private fervour. And she touches my hair. Touches, smooths, soothes, with hands coated with potato dust and love. Mother is gathering together again the splinters of her shattered self.

One evening, in the midst of reeking onions and wilted lettuces, Mother encourages.

'There is a boy in your class. Joseph Leibholz. His mother came in today. He sounds a fine boy.'

I seek him out, but cannot reach him, reach *into* him.

I try. 'Your mother knows my mother,' I say. And then ask, 'What games do you play?'

He stutters from shyness and looks away.

'None especially . . . Oh, . . . chess sometimes . . . And draughts . . .' Each phrase is a minor explosion of sound, each burst a revelation.

'Not cricket or ping pong or tennis?'

I see from his clean neat pants that he is an indoor boy, not one to roll in dust or chase after tadpoles or climb on the rafters of rising houses. When he shakes his head, it is not with regret, but with the contentment in knowing that what he does and what he is suffices.

'I . . . I also play the violin,' he says.

Slowly over the following weeks, I learn that he traverses regions that I have never yet encountered.

He is tall and slender and pale, and hugs the shadows, both around him and within. A fringe of strawlike hair sits over his forehead, his fingers are long and tapering candles of wax. And his eyes are drifting and dreamy, their colour that of distant oceans and as unfathomably deep. He doodles, he draws. He reads music as others read books and, in the shadows which are his alone, composes poems that Miss Quantrell praises in front of the class. I try to penetrate but he will not be penetrated.

'Will you play cricket with me?'

He shakes his head. 'I'm not good at it.'

'What about footy after school?'

'I don't want to.'

'But why not?'

'I don't like it.'

'It's easy.'

'No.'

His distance, his difference, inflames. He excludes everyone, but I can't bear to be excluded.

'All right, then,' I say, 'have it your way.' And in the days that follow, I set about him in different ways.

I kick dust into his face and splash ink over his sketches; I bruise him with my knuckles and poke hard fingers into his ribs. I call him 'Fiddler', 'Cissy', 'Sucker-upper', and mock at him with barbs honed with venom.

He does not whimper, this saint, nor resist, nor retaliate, though he is taller and could swallow me alive. His is the manner of martyrdom, denying the ultimate satisfaction to the victor of seeing pain.

Until one day, after I have tripped and spreadeagled him on the ground, he fixes his eyes, so blue and ocean-deep, upon me and stammers, as though rocks sat on his tongue,

'Why . . . do you try . . . so hard . . . to hurt?'

I have forgotten the original reason; the victim has always been so vulnerable and the opportunity ever-present. I have no ready response, so I laugh. I laugh, with the laughter of the victor, and fill the schoolyard with my mirth which spreads and tumbles and rolls into the street, its spiralling coils to be met there by another's laughter, by raucous hateful echoes that suddenly singe the memory and brand my own mockery with disgrace. For Colin has appeared. Colin. Not the real Colin, but his image, come to taunt the taunter and persecute the persecutor.

Later, Mother, wiping moist and grimy hands, takes me aside.

'Is it true that you've been hitting Joseph and fighting with him?'

I make sounds to deny, but the lie falters, strangles, still in the throat.

'His mother came in today. Is it true?'

I kick at the lettuce leaf trodden into the floor and squeeze a tomato until it splits. Silence is confession.

'What will become of you? Tell me. We have left the wilderness but the shegetz is still under our roof.'

The juice of the tomato drains into my hand. Its seeds slip through my fingers to spill on to the floor. They are your bones that I am crushing, Colin, and your blood that is being spilled.

'What *will* become of you?', Mother asks again, the rock of her fortitude beginning to crumble.

I cannot bear to look. I dread the appearance of those tortuous rivulets in the crevices of her cheeks. But she raises my chin with a hand become grubby and coarse, and sucks at my eyes with her own. Her brow is drawn, and smudged with dirt.

'We have left the wilderness,' she says. 'But have we really brought it with us?'

Jagged teeth of shame gnaw at the marrow of my being as, under Mother's gaze, I suddenly feel for Joseph and sense his pain. His sketches, his violin-playing, his poems – suddenly these return and, through the loom of memory, weave themselves into the warp of my earlier indifference, in turn, to dominate.

When, next day, I sit beside Joseph, I worship where, before, I had mocked. He sketches and I admire. He doodles and I imitate. He reads his music and I, cleaving, search among the dancing notes a pattern, a design, meaning. And when Miss Quantrell recites again a poem of his, I listen, and find it in myself to praise. To praise that which the wilderness, through default, had taught me to despise. The pallor of Joseph's face yields to a softer bashful glow. And gradually, the barriers fall as, caution his mentor, he admits me into the vast ocean of his dreamy drifting eyes where, chastened and converted, I find depths I have never known.

In that moment, I drown Colin. I seize that pagan laughter of his, throttle it, encase it, bind it to anchors of lead. With

delirious fervour, I stifle his father's beer-sodden song and, with bliss too fabulous to contain, I pluck at his mother's bristled mole and trample upon those delphiniums and gardenias which she sprinkles with her very soul. Somewhere lies the perimeter I have helped to extend, the suburbia I have helped to cover. The quarries are filled, the puddles cemented. Little red boxes have taken their place. Somebody else scrapes up the milk-horse's precious gift. While here, far away, even in this grey drabness of my newer home, my joy swells; and rises; and soars. And transcends as, through Mother's and through Joseph's depths, I purge myself of the wilderness, of that wasteland, where a splinter of my childhood has, in our wandering, been lost.

The Kitchen

1

The kitchen in the Pitt Street relief house was the centre in which the most memorable dramas were enacted.

It was there, for instance, that Dora and Benno Elboigen, both survivors of Bialystock, who in private clung to the silence of mutual hatred, emptied themselves of their bitterest grievances and, in shrill exchanges that kept us children from sleeping, threatened separation, divorce and murder.

It was there, too, that Slawa Kopecnik, a refugee from Warsaw, bewailed the emptiness of her life in Australia and it was there that she was saved from suicide by Morris Nussbaum the painter who, coming home early that day, smelled gas issuing into the long gloomy corridor and hurried to the kitchen to discover its source.

And it was there that Arnold Fleischer, a reformed socialist, swept all the crockery off the table with one angry swipe when Victor Kopecnik, a hot-headed unrepentant communist from Lodz, called him a traitor as evil as a kapo. They would certainly have come to blows had not my father, who was affectionately known as 'the Peacemaker of Pitt Street', intervened and, saying quietly that for Jews who had so recently both suffered in the camps of Europe such behaviour was worthy of Cossacks, reconciled them with however grudging a handshake.

tenants gathered around the green-topped table in the kitchen. The words, the rhymes, the cadences were vigorous and musical and I, for one, felt that I was riding on the leaping crests of magnificent verbal waves. But there were few, apart from my parents and perhaps Luba Fleischer who really felt more than polite interest in the painter's verses. No sooner were the readings over than the customary topics of conversation, dispute and rancour were promptly resumed and Morris Nussbaum, biting his lips, sadly gathered up his papers, placed them lovingly into a tattered paper-bag and left the kitchen to return the fruits of his labours to his room. Watching his bent back as he passed through the door, I felt his dejection and pitied him in a childish way.

One day, a Sunday, the Nussbaums invited us to see a house in Drummond Street, a narrow squat grimy white-washed little cottage with a tiny overgrown garden that begged repairs to the spouting, the stonework and the railings of the iron fence.

Standing back on the pavement outside it, Morris Nussbaum asked my parents what they thought of it.

Father, a man of tact, said cautiously, 'Hmm, it's a roof over one's head,' while Mother, intuitively aware that answering a question with a question was the safest of responses, asked with comparable caution, 'Are you thinking of buying it?'

Morris Nussbaum placed an excited hand on my father's shoulder. With the other, he drew his wife towards him. His cheeks glowed, his greying hair glinted white under the sun.

'It's ours already, Itzchak, ours, Miriam,' he said to my parents.

'A dream come true,' added Rebecca Nussbaum, lovingly touching the sagging branch of a withered rose-bush.

Taking a glittering silver key from his pocket, Morris Nussbaum led us inside the house which had been left vacant some weeks before.

The first impression was certainly not a bracing one and Mother sneezed three times.

'A good omen,' Morris Nussbaum said with great delight.

fulfil some special purpose in what remained of God's fragmented world? To the question, he provided his own reply.

On shore, he nurtured yet another dream, one to which he gave vent over honey cake and tea in the kitchen of our Pitt Street house. 'For wanderers like ourselves,' he said, 'living from hand to mouth wherever the goyim were ready to receive us – in Galicia, Sverdlovsk, Tashkent, Ziegenhain, Paris – a home of our own is the nearest blessing to Paradise. In nine months, a year – you will see, you will see . . .'. Counting the specks of paint in his hair as I listened to him, it occurred to me that perhaps they were the days that made up these projected months that Rebecca Nussbaum marked off on the calendar above the stove.

I loved to hear Morris Nussbaum talk. Ever serious, his voice was even and unforced, quite unlike the shrillness of Benno Elboigen in his public quarrels with his wife or as demagogic as Victor Kopecnik's or as cynical as Fleischer's. He brought always a warm homeliness into his conversation and told a story straight, with neither embellishments nor digressions, yet as clear as reality itself. Through him, the kitchen became, for me, peopled with Galicians, rabbis, Uzbeks, peasants, black marketeers and railway guards and sometimes I fancied that I could feel the iciness of a Siberian winter or smell the typhus-ridden corpses in Novosibirsk or taste the golden corn ripening in the Uzbek Spring. Not for him the doctrinaire arguments of Fleischer and Kopecnik nor the acrimonious quarrels of the Elboigens. Like my father, he was a man of peace, a gentle man who in quieter moments would sit at one end of the table hunched with pencil in hand over sheets of blank white paper and write, cross out and re-write in the hold of wrinkle-browed and earnest concentration. Bent over my own homework at the opposite end, I would often raise my eyes and watch him long and steadfastly, watch him with a private delight, because in such moments only I shared in his labours and saw the birth of a new emerging poem.

Sometimes, on a Sunday evening, he read his poems to the

milk chocolate and with little bags of lollies or candy sticks which he bought on his way home from work. Father was not quite as giving, but he did say that after the hunger and deprivation he had seen with his own eyes in the camp at Buchenwald, to deny a child as much as a grain of sugar was to commit a transgression against God Himself.

In that kitchen, too, guests were entertained, mostly recent arrivals like ourselves, Jews from Poland, Galicia and Lithuania who through luck, help and enterprise were already more securely established in their own homes and businesses and were able therefore to ply us less fortunate ones with well-meant advice, suggestions and wisdom. Particularly gifted with a vigorous tongue was Sonia Weisenberg, the Rathdowne Street haberdasher's wife, a doughy fidgety woman with two gold incisors who knew everything and everybody and was bountifully generous with her verbal offerings. Little could escape her hawk-eyed scrutiny, and as for gossip, there were few from Carlton to Fawkner, Victor Kopecnik would say, who could hold a candle to her.

It was she who, telling the story gustily under the bare lamp of the kitchen, provided for us the more elusive details behind the events which later befell Morris Nussbaum, which befell the painter who had saved Slawa Kopecnik from suicide and spoiled us children with his daily apportioning of sweets.

The Nussbaums were Galicianer, though of the more honest breed. With them, when one shook hands, one did not have to count one's fingers afterwards. They were our ship's brethren and of all the tenants in the Pitt Street house were the closest to my parents. Already on the 'Surriento' which brought us from Genoa to Australia, Morris Nussbaum expressed a dream which his introverted wife Rebecca shared with him. God grant him life, he would be a poet in the new land and tell in verse of the sufferings of his people in Europe and carry on, in the distant wilderness of Australia, the tradition of a Yiddish culture that could not be permitted to perish. Why, he asked, had *he* survived when his entire family had been destroyed and his daughter buried in Siberia, if not to

We were five families, immigrants all, biding our time as we accumulated the means to move to more permanent homes and to welcome privacy. The kitchen, situated well towards the back, was the largest room in that house. There, around the table, covered with a horribly-gaudy green tablecloth fraying at the points where it hung over the corners, we ate, talked, argued and joked, while after dinner, when we children – there were three of us – were in bed, our parents played cards, shared their day-to-day experiences, discussed their plans and traded memories of the Europe that had once been and of the camps, the forests and the bunkers where they had, each in his own way, survived. They would spend their evenings under the 100-watt bulb that hung from the flaking pink ceiling by a twisted black cord. On the speckled green Metter's stove in the cooking recess, a kettle, which Victor Kopecnik called their samovar, simmered constantly, while on the mantelpiece above which was blackened by oily soot and eroded by steam, a clock ticked tinnily between a press-iron on its left and a calendar on its right on which dreamy Rebecca Nussbaum marked off the days for reasons of her own. From that same mantelpiece hung a pair of scissors which Benno Elboigen used to cut the children's hair and at the opposite end, a tea-towel or two worn through with use, and forever damp. Under the narrow window was the cracked porcelain sink into which Arnold Fleischer spat thick blobs of phlegm after clearing his throat, and in the corner to its left stood the pantry cupboard with its wire-mesh doors and its newspapered shelves containing an array of biscuit tins, jars of dill cucumbers, jam and peanut butter, as well as sugar, spices, eggs, bread and cereals. We children were not permitted to approach that cupboard without asking, but if Morris Nussbaum or my father happened to be there alone, our chances were better. A gently-spoken tubby childless man with flecks of white paint always to be seen in his greying hair – I was later to learn that a three-year old daughter had died in Siberia during the war – Morris Nussbaum would turn a blind eye to our caprices and would indeed spoil us with small blocks of

The disrepair within exceeded even the neglect without. The colours, the odours, the echoes and the taste of must were oppressive. There was barely a wall or ceiling that was not cracked or flaking and holes gaped in the worn linoleum. In the bathroom, the cistern leaked and thick orange rust had set along the pipes. Every room was dark and airless, the windows smeared or pasted over with newspaper cuttings while the corridor smelled of mice and naphthalene. But the new owners walked through the house with the pride of possession.

'I know it's not a palace,' Morris Nussbaum said, 'but, look, after Siberia, Ziegenhain and Paris, dare a man ask for more?'

When the news of the Nussbaum's new acquisition became known, Victor Kopecnik snorted, 'Bourgeois climbers!' I thought his remark quite unfair as it had been Morris Nussbaum who had saved his wife. The Elboigens, as ever preoccupied with their own ranklings, expressed no opinion while Luba Fleischer the very next day bought for the Nussbaums a shiny aluminium kettle as an early housewarming gift.

The Nussbaums did not move into the Drummond Street house immediately. Nor did we see them in the Pitt Street kitchen as often as before and I, for one, missed Morris Nussbaum sadly. For weeks on end, they spent their every free moment after work and on Saturdays and Sundays mending, plastering, painting and weeding their new home so that they would return only late at night, drink cups of tea through sugar cubes as was their habit and leave early in the morning to resume their labours.

Nonetheless, the dates on the calendar continued to be marked.

When we visited their house once more, Morris Nussbaum had reason to be proud. The cottage had been transformed into a place of light and freshness and showed in every corner and surface and beam the grace of love and meticulous attention. Standing in the centre of their future living room where a mirror above the fireplace reflected their contented, if weary, faces, Nussbaum affectionately and unabashed by our pres-

ence stroked his wife's neck.

'It is ours, Rivke, ours', he said, addressing her. 'After all we have been through, will you let yourself believe?'

And Rebecca Nussbaum, short and round-faced with a scattering of freckles over the broad bridge of her nose looked around into her husband's elated face and could not answer. There were obvious glistening tears teetering in the corners of her earnest chestnut eyes.

The Nussbaums were due to move on a Wednesday. But on the Friday before, Morris Nussbaum returned early from work looking drawn and pale. He had a bruise over one temple and a swollen eye. His movements were awkward and he had about him the smell of beer.

'It is nothing,' he said whenever my mother or his wife expressed concern.

Mother forced him to sit at the kitchen table, poured a teaspoon of vinegar into a pot of cold water and gave Rebecca Nussbaum two hand-towels which she moistened and pressed against the blue-black swellings that looked like bags of ink.

The Elboigens, never ones to buy into other people's troubles, stayed out of sight. Slawa Kopecnik fussed about, chanting 'What can you expect in Australia?', while her husband simply could not rest without declaring that 'only goyim and capitalists ever got drunk' to which Arnold Fleischer banged his fist on the table and called his adversary 'a besotted pig from Hades'. It was once more left to Father to keep them apart while Luba Fleischer, in recommending that Dr. Rosenthal be called, made the most practical suggestion of all.

Mother, agreeing, put on her coat and was about to fetch the doctor. But Morris Nussbaum held her back. 'Look, it's nothing,' he kept repeating. 'The men at work were fooling around. I fell, hit my head. That's all.' He managed a smile. 'I still have my senses.'

As a concession to his wife's plea, Nussbaum stayed in bed over the weekend, emerging from his room only to pass through the kitchen to the toilet which was outside. Once, in passing, he ruffled a hand through my hair and said, 'On

Monday, I will bring you a block of chocolate, so big it will be a feast.'

On Monday, he rose for work, but was already at home sitting listlessly over a cup of cocoa when Rebecca Nussbaum herself returned. He was pressing a palm into his temple and looked at her dully.

'Why on earth didn't you call me at the factory right away? Now maybe you will visit Dr. Rosenthal?'

'For a headache one needs a doctor?'

'Even for an itch one needs a doctor.'

Nussbaum continued to resist. 'Wednesday we are moving. A doctor costs money. And every penny we need. Besides, like I said, it is nothing. A man's not permitted to have a headache?'

Sitting at the kitchen table over my homework, I watched him rise. His brow was puckered and he squinted. His otherwise full shiny cheeks seemed collapsed and dull. He stooped and as he shuffled out of the kitchen, the cuffs of his trousers swept the floor.

'Morris, mine. Please, for me,' I heard Rebecca Nussbaum plead in the corridor.

'Tomorrow,' he said, 'if I still feel like this. Will that make you happy?'

Left alone in the kitchen, I remembered with dismay that he had not brought me the promised block of chocolate.

He vomited that night and again the next morning. Having risen for work once more, he fell while doing up his shoelaces.

Rebecca Nussbaum, appearing in a frenzy at the kitchen door, cried out, 'Itzhak, Miriam, come quickly!'

Not to be denied, I ran along as well.

Rebecca Nussbaum bent over the crumpled heap that was her husband. 'Morris mine,' she wailed, 'my light, my precious'. She supported his head and covered him with kisses. His eyes were open and turned upward; he was grunting with each laboured breath.

'Itzhak!', Mother almost shouted at my father, 'Call a doctor, an ambulance! For God's sake!'

Then an arm began to twitch and then a leg and what had been a grunting became a shrill stridor followed by a sustained jagged snorting as Morris Nussbaum's whole body convulsed violently beneath Rebecca Nussbaum's weight.

An ambulance arrived and took Nussbaum to the hospital. The doctors operated that evening. But the surgeon's bearing as he led Rebecca Nussbaum and my parents who kept her company into a quieter corner of the foyer spoke more eloquently than any of the words he used.

'A haemorrhage into the brain,' he said, speaking with rounded and exaggerated emphasis to make the trio, all newcomers, understand. 'He had no chance. I'm sorry.'

The widow found immediate support on the neck of my father, begging him to tell her that none of it was true.

But the truth would not be denied.

'I am sorry, indeed,' said the surgeon again.

Morris Nussbaum, the painter and poet, was buried the following day, which was Wednesday. As the gathered mourners left the grave, Victor Kopechnik said, 'He always wanted a home, now he has one – for always.' He repeated his remark at the minyan held that evening in the sombre crowded kitchen of the Pitt Street house, thereby sending the widow who was within earshot into further paroxysms of sobbing. The table and chairs had been moved out to make room for the people; a tall candle in a chipped saucer burned on the blackened mantelpiece above the stove; and a rabbi with a homburg and goatee beard intoned the prayers. As Morris Nussbaum had left no heirs or male family, Father recited the Kaddish after him.

It struck me later that that was the first time I had seen my father pray.

It was during the week of shiva that the first tenuous rumours arose. Where they originated, we never learnt, but that Sonia Weisenberg, the haberdasher's wife, gave them wings became quickly apparent.

There had been some tom-foolery at Morris Nussbaum's place of work, a garage which he and two others had been subcontracted to paint. During the lunchbreak, both his

workmates had been drinking. Nussbaum sat apart, eating his customary onion roll with liverwurst and holding his thermos of tea between his knees. There was nothing exceptional in this. Nussbaum, self-conscious about his poor English and his non-Australian customs, had ever been reticent in gentle company and felt that by keeping out of people's hair, he could successfully keep out of their awareness. But on this occasion, the situation took a different turn.

One of the men, a red-headed freckled fellow who was nick-named Curly, was bored. And looking idly about him, at the freshly-painted walls, at the walls left still to be painted, at the sky and at the void, his gaze alighted and settled upon Nussbaum sitting alone.

'Hey, Mort,' he called out, laughing. 'Ya' drinkin' milk, mate?'

Nussbaum smiled, abashed.

Curly's companion, Tom, a stocky broad-shouldered fellow, chipped in. 'Be a man, sport. 'ave a beer. Nothin' better.'

Nussbaum responded once more with a vague reticent smile. Language, custom, sentiments separated him from his 'mates'. He remained in his place but set the thermos down.

'Here,' said Curly, rising and bringing over to Nussbaum a glass brimming over with thick and sticky froth. 'Drink this and be an Aussie. It's on the house.'

Tom rose also and shadowed the leaner, wirier, freckled Curly.

Morris Nussbaum declined.

The men came closer, smiling, pleasantly, broadly, the better to receive their 'Mort' and introduce him to Australian pleasures.

'It don't bite,' said Curly, proffering his arm with the glass.

Countered by another refusal, Curly became dark. 'Mort, don't be such a Jew.'

'Mort' stood up, gingerly, understanding the menace if not quite the reason. Curly and Tom cramped him. Tom giggled, submerging his timidity if not his greater bulk beneath Curly's brazenness.

'Maybe,' Curly said, showing his teeth, 'ya' don't wanna

take a beer out of a goy's hand, eh, mate? Well, here then, catch!'

Curly tossed the glass in Nussbaum's direction. Beer, froth and spray splashed the void, elements of each falling on Nussbaum's cheeks, his overalls, his shoes. In an attempt to catch the glass or to avoid it, he lost his footing, tottered and fell over his thermos and struck his temple, heavily, on the rim of a tin of paint . . .

Without Morris Nussbaum, the kitchen in the Pitt Street house became for me a sadder emptier place, but for everyone else except Rebecca Nussbaum and my parents, it seemed as if nothing untoward had taken place. The Elboigens whom I had come to dislike continued their acrimonious warfare in public; Victor Kopecnik and Arnold Fleischer still wrangled over ideology, the unrepentant communist and reformed socialist ever ready, but for Father, to gouge out each other's eyes in their heat; Slawa Kopecnik as ever emptied out her soul in bewailing the emptiness of life in Australia and Luba Fleischer moved inconspicuously about in the performance of her household chores. Around the gaudy green-topped table, we ate and talked and argued and joked as before and in quieter moments the grown-ups played cards, exchanged memories and discussed their plans. The kettle as ever simmered on the stove and Arnold Fleischer would rise at intervals to spit blobs of phlegm into the sink. Only the calendar on the mantelpiece remained unmarked and there was no-one to read the verses whose musical Yiddish cadences leapt on the crests of magnificent waves.

Sometimes, sitting bowed over my arithmetic or geography homework under the bare bulb hanging from the kitchen ceiling, I would raise my eyes expecting to see Morris Nussbaum opposite me writing and rewriting words on sheets of fresh paper, ready to suffer with him the birth pangs of his blessed verse. But all I saw was a brown flaking wooden chair standing starkly vacant, and beyond, the yellowish grimy wall where a deep ragged crack united opposite corners. And, on impulse, I would tear a page from my exercise book and write,

write words that to me were musical and splendid and exalting, childishly maudlin words that to my awareness sang with the rhythm and lilt of poetic magic. And at such times I was possessed, warmly enveloped by ecstatically sweet sadness and an inner glow that was to recur for many years thereafter whenever I remembered with my own brand of love that saintly gentle ill-fated man.

Plaques

1

Joseph Silber often visited me in the surgery. Ever since, during a routine examination, I had found his blood pressure to be raised, he presented at regular intervals to have it checked.

Vanity about his body had helped preserve his trim slender figure to a point where, at sixty-five, he could pass for a man ten years younger. He held himself erect, and walked with a sturdy step; his hair was silvery and his skin, particularly that of his hands, was smooth and shiny and pink. He had a straight proud nose, a cleft chin and long bristly eyebrows. He kept his nails immaculately clean and took, I knew, a vitamin pill every day.

Although he had years left of living, he wouldn't let himself be convinced.

'The duco shines but the motor rusts just the same,' he had once said, laughing, showing fillings in his molars and a couple of pink gaps between them.

Nonetheless he fed his vanity. He wore, not a tie, but a cravat and cuff-links from Longine's. His trousers were stylish and, for a bachelor, unusually well-pressed and his jacket had obviously been cut to measure. On the little finger of his left hand, he wore an initialled signet-ring and a gold Schaffhausen watch on his wrist. He was wealthy, and dignified – and alone.

'I shan't see you for a while,' he said while I checked his pulse.

'Oh?'

'I am flying up to Sydney.'

'Yes?'

He paused, waited until I had recorded his blood pressure, breathed deeply, then took the plunge.

'Yes. – And why am I going to Sydney? I'll tell you. I'm going to meet my son.'

He had probably expected a more demonstrative response from me.

'I see you understand more than your years suggest. Well, why should I be shy? You are, after all, a doctor and familiar with such things. Yes, I have a son. And, unless he has moved to Israel or America or wanders about in Gehenna for his father's sins, he lives in Sydney.'

He paused.

'If you have time, I'll tell you.'

'I have time,' I said.

'Good. May I smoke?'

'I have no ashtrays.'

'No matter.' He put the cigar back in his pocket and began his story.

'I came here, to Australia,' he said, 'as a young man. In 'thirty-five; before Hitler. I worked on the Shepparton orchards for a while, peddled women's haberdashery, collected bottles, milked cows, and returned to Melbourne where I found work in Jacob Platt's shirt factory. It was then a small factory, on the third floor of a dusty airless building two doors from Elizabeth Street – in Flinders Lane, of course. It had ten machinists, a presser, a packer and Platt himself. He was then fifty, as overweight as a stuffed goose, flush-cheeked and bald, and a man whose smile must have been stolen from him in the womb, but who was as charitable as Melbourne is of rain.

'When the first refugees arrived, he organised a relief society that collected clothes, money and food for the new arrivals. Out of his own stock, he must have donated hundreds of shirts, and having connections in other lines, he obtained vast

supplies of skirts, singlets, shoes, socks and overcoats which, in many cases, he distributed in person. He could have persuaded a dead man to open his fist. He organised concerts, started a reading circle, arranged welcoming parties, and himself visited the newcomers to learn how they had settled into this new country.

'Working close to him, I received some of the glow of his fire. He co-opted me into his society to manage the books and to help him with the concerts. We used the old Kadimah hall in Carlton at that time, a rather spare echoing hall with a dingy stage and drab fraying curtains. We gave charity performances in Yiddish, and managed to raise a rusty-voiced choir, a pianist and a handful of ham-actors more admired for their daring than for their talents. I, myself, recited feuilletons, participated in pantomimes and told jokes as old as Methuselah but very popular if only because it was music to many ears to hear the mother-tongue on alien soil. It was all sublimely amateurish, but in a desert, even water is the sweetest of wines. That was before Jacob Waislitz and Rachel Holzer gave class to local theatre.

'I was thirty-one then and something of a celebrity, especially when I dressed up as a Galicianer rabbi or a short-sighted matchmaker or as a breast-thumping new immigrant ready to meet all challenges in this new paradise. My audience loved it. And they flattered me. "That is an actor," they would say, or "Silber is a Melbournier Schildkraut." Their flattery fired my imagination. I got it into my head someday to play Nathan the Wise and Shylock and to fill that cold bare hall with splendid rolling Yiddish cadences, breathtaking and unimaginable.

'In our relief group there was a shoemaker, a little asthmatic man with knotted fingers who repaired the newcomers' shoes without charge and who stitched handbags for the women. He had a daughter, a lively dark-eyed girl with splendid teeth. Her name was Sonia and she accompanied our troupe and choir on the piano. She worked during the day as a machinist and spent the evenings at rehearsals or helping her father and Jacob Platt with the distribution of clothes to the newcomers. She was

twenty-three and unmarried. Her mother had died young of cancer.

'I lived in the heart of our local Jerusalem then in North Carlton among Lithuanian Jews, Poles, Galicianer, Russians, Rumanians. Here was Goldberg's bakery, there Slonim's poulterers, nearby Spivak's delicatessen. This ghetto away from the Old Home had become a new home. My life was full then. The days I spent in Platt's factory, the evenings on the stage. And after a performance, if a young woman had come alone, I would escort her home and drink coffee with her and if she was modern and not too set upon virtue, I would stay and warm myself between the sheets. Drummond Street, Rathdowne Street, Pigdon Street – these were alive then, not the bare colourless streets they have since become. Goldhar, whom we read, described these streets so well.

'One evening, I took Sonia home. I joked that just as earlier she had accompanied me at the piano, now I accompanied her in turn. It was a feeble joke, but she laughed. Her head must have turned. To cut the story short, she took me home, served coffee and then, without much preamble, while her father slept and wheezed in an upstairs room, she made of me a father. In the following weeks her belly swelled and her face blotched. When she finally told me, I began to hate her. I felt trapped, snared. I accused her of deliberately getting pregnant and gave her money to have the pregnancy ended. I didn't turn up for performances. She wrote me letters which I didn't answer. I moved house twice, stayed away from the theatre, I left Platt's factory, left his relief society and bought my groceries in St. Kilda, South Melbourne, Prahran. In the end, Sonia solved the situation for me. With her father she moved to Sydney where, I heard later through rumour, she had a son.

'As for myself, I entered the fur trade and over the years became successful. I drifted away from my past attachments. Jacob Platt, for all his charitableness, never spoke to me again. My companions who had played with me on the stage, when they met me, didn't know how to greet me and would ask, "What happened to you, Yosl? We suddenly lost you, poof,

just like that," or they would wink and address me as Shylock or Hamlet or Hershele Ostropoler and laugh because to do anything else might have been even less appropriate.

'And indeed, what had happened to me? I became rich, richer than would ever have been possible had I stayed to pump at Jacob Platt's machine. My firm expanded. I have ninety-five employees. My contracts run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. I own flats in Caulfield, Hawthorn, Armadale, Toorak. Last Passover, I visited Israel; the year before, I was in New York, Argentina, London, Switzerland.

'But don't think that the money has been spent only on myself. Charity, too, has got its share. Through the years I gave to every two-bit schnorrer who ever came to my door. Word spread that I was a giver and all the flies gathered to the same honeypot. I collected charities as others collected coins. They sent me letters of thanks and hung up plaques with my name in a dozen places – the Institute for the Blind, the Montefiore Homes, the Caulfield Synagogue, Mount Scopus College, and even in some pokey little yeshiva in Jerusalem and a rabbinical seminary in New York. I have been invited to countless dinners, appeals, theatre evenings, balls. I turn them down although I pay whatever they ask and they, for their part, continue to invite me – for sheer mercenary reasons of course. I don't mind. Until now I've had little else to do with my money.

'And now? With my money, with my gilded cheques, I have bought a measure of renown. People can read my name on any one of many plaques around Melbourne, in Jerusalem, in New York. But what is it all to me? What are plaques if not little tombstones of wood or bronze, dead things themselves, petty monuments to vanity and to an insignificant man's grasping after immortality? And, tell me, what sense is there in buying immortality when the living are deprived, eh? Doctor, I'm getting old, but there is still time to right wrongs. Sonia may still benefit from my money. And for the many thousands that my son is to receive, he too shouldn't be too harsh. They will understand. They will forgive. After all, under-

standing is the beginning of forgiveness, no? Don't you think so?'

Joseph Silber paused, ran his fingers through his silvery hair and sighed. His signet ring caught the light and glinted. I entered brief notes upon his card. He wiped his nose and laughed.

'Well, I've held you up enough now, it's getting late. Now tell me, doctor, what's my blood pressure? Am I about to have a stroke?'

My practice kept me busy. Days passed in steady activity. Six months went by. And one evening, Joseph Silber appeared, the last patient for the day.

He had something to tell me. His manner, his nervous jerky movements, his very hesitation spoke more than words. He wore, not his cravat this time, but a plain brown tie and he had removed his ring. He had also developed a stoop.

'I'm here for my regular check-up,' he said. 'I've been well, but still I thought . . . A man doesn't get younger.'

'Of course,' I said, reaching for my equipment.

And because he didn't volunteer, even though he was bursting to tell, I asked him what had happened in Sydney. His relief was immediate. A spring uncoiled within him.

'What happened in Sydney? What should have happened? I saw Sonia, I saw my son. That's what happened.'

When he saw that I was waiting, he abandoned his reserve. He slid down in his chair, stretched out one leg and crossed the other over it. Then he burst into laughter so that I saw again his grey molars and the gaps between them. His laughter gave creases to his face that I had not noticed before, and also a flabbiness of flesh, an unfamiliar apathy, a pallor – not of sickness but of simple decay.

'It's with good reason that wisdom is not given to fools,' he said. 'What I had hoped to achieve, I don't really know, even now. The devil himself must have scrambled my thoughts. How could I so much as hope to find Sonia? She could have

been married or been living in Israel or America or God alone knows where. She could have been dead.

'Hear. I went to Sydney, desperate now to find Sonia and my son. I owed them so much. The more I thought about it, the more did my conscience burn. I *had* to find them, for my sake no less than theirs. But only then did the difficulties strike home. After all, I knew whom I was looking for, but how describe to my contacts – friends, business colleagues, ship's brothers – a woman I had not seen in over thirty years or a son whose appearance, occupation, even name I had never known. I asked whoever I met. I invented stories about legacies, one-time friendship, family ties, messages to deliver. I spoke to many people. After a few days, I nearly gave up.

'But I found her. Yes. Not through my acquaintances, but of all places, through the newspaper. The 'Australian Jewish Times' was reminding its readers of the Heroes and Martyrs' Commemoration at the Town Hall on the next Wednesday evening. There were to be a guest speaker, a cantor, a choir singing ghetto songs. And they were to be accompanied at the piano by, yes, Miss Sonia Finkelstein. Doctor, believe me, a man goes to seed in his old age. She was living in Sydney and had kept her maiden name – something so obvious I hadn't even thought of it. I checked through the telephone book and, sure enough, I found her name there. Finkelstein, Sonia, Music Teacher, 15 Bon Accord Avenue, Bondi Junction, 30 3853. There were other Finkelsteins in the directory but which was my son, I had no idea. I lifted the receiver in my hotel suite, dialled the first three numbers and then abandoned the attempt. So close, my prepared speech fell apart. I decided instead to confront her face to face. I took a bus to The Avenue giftshop and bought two tickets for the commemoration evening.

'At the Town Hall, the atmosphere was understandably sombre. Men wept openly. A woman screamed and collapsed during the "El Mole Rachamin". The guest speaker spoke for a long time. Three boys, their voices breaking, recited passages from the Prophets; a girl read from Ringelblum's

memoirs; the choir, all in black, sang ghetto songs and, at the end, the audience swelled in "Never Say", singing those proud and fighting words through tight throats and choking tears.

'When the lights came on, people began to move towards the doors. They smelled strangely of mothballs as I waded against the stream. When I reached the foot of the short staircase to the stage, Sonia was standing at the summit. She was fat, her hair was coarse and grey. She wore a black dress with a cheap imitation-ivory brooch between her breasts and her grey coat hung on her shoulders like some shabby sack, unbuttoned and fraying, a legacy of better times.

'She came down but didn't recognise me.

' "Miss Finkelstein . . .," I said, "Sonia . . ."

' "Yes?"

'She waited, lapped me again and again with her gaze and must have recognised me at last though perhaps she tried hard not to believe.

' "Yes?", she asked again, more severely.

' "You remember."

' "So?"

' "Sonia."

' "Yes?"

' "Let's go from here," I said.

'A man approached. He was thin and balding, his skin pasty-looking and grey. "Rehearsals on Monday?" he asked.

' "Yes, Shaya. Once more before Independence Day."

'The man Shaya looked me over, wondered whether he should recognise me, then turned away. Sonia walked towards the exit behind the last stragglers.

' "How is the rest of the family?," I asked. I got the words out with difficulty.

' "The family?"

' "Your son . . . Our son. And his children. Our . . . our grandchildren."

'She stopped walking and turned to me. Her eyes widened. There jumped into them a sudden flicker that gave an evan-

escent lustre to their more constant grey. Her lips set into the concrete hardness of contempt. She tossed her head and walked once more towards the door.

'I thought she said, "A man is a fool".

'I chased after her. "Tell me, what does he do?"

' "What should he do?"

' "What is he? What does he do? Is he a businessman, an accountant, or what?"

' "He works," she said. I waited. "He manages. At the hospital."

' "Perhaps I can help him with something. Or his children might want . . . Where does he live? Where can I find him?"

' "You want to *see* him?" Her skin, once so smooth, had become a terrain of deep wrinkles. Her nose had broadened and she had a mole on her cheek and whiskers over her upper lip.

' "He must be thirty-three, thirty-four," I said. "He is old enough to understand, to forgive. After all, understanding is the beginning of forgiveness . . ."

' "Where are you staying?", Sonia asked sharply.

'I told her.

' "I'll call for you at two-thirty tomorrow."

'She then turned away, hobbled down the outside steps and walked away, leaving me, alone, to whistle at the wind . . .

'The next day was pleasantly clear with only the faintest stirring of the wind visible in the trees. It was a long way to the hospital. Sonia drove, stone-mute behind the steering-wheel. Sonia was silent and I couldn't blame her, but *I* felt the need to talk, to impress. I *had* to tell her about my factory, my furs, my exports, my properties and in more oblique ways about my wealth and my standing in the community. As I did, I saw the angles of her mouth curl and the whiskers above it bristle but I babbled on.

'All that she said on the journey was, "We are nearly there."

'We turned into a broad road, followed its curve and reached the main gates of the hospital. It was an old and squalid building, with winding rusted fire-escapes and flaking pipes

reaching upwards along the dull red facade which showed numerous cracks and strains in its monotonous lattice of brick. Some of its windows were barred. There was smoke spiralling from the hospital's towering chimney. Even the brightness of the day, with the sun shining and the sky cloudless and blue, could not lift from that place its sombre tone, its melancholy, its rank oppressiveness. It was a tribute to my son, our son, I felt, that he chose to work in conditions as poor as these. It hadn't for one moment occurred to me that . . . But wait, doctor, wait.

'We walked along dingy echoing corridors where the paint was peeling and stale brown stains disfigured the walls. Grime had set in the corners of the window-panes. Many of the lamps were bare. Sonia walked ahead of me, wearing the same shabby grey coat she had worn the day before. Her ankles were swollen. Not once did she look back, nor speak except to say, "We turn here" or "To the left" or "The next floor". Time and again, I wanted to ask her, "Sonia, is it really you?", and I had it in mind to turn back, to leave, and in leaving, to shout after her, "Forget it, Sonia, the whole thing never happened. Someday we will wake up and discover this was only a dream." But the echoes of our steps, the rancid smells that came from God-knows-where and the chatter of the nurses, orderlies and visitors who passed confirmed the blunt reality of the situation. I had committed myself too far to withdraw; and my conscience too would not let me escape now.

'On the second floor, we entered a room, a workshop where some fifteen people sat behind looms, boxes, benches and lathes. It smelled of paint, leather and glue. Planks of chip-board leant against the walls, leather bags hung from nails. Near the door, one woman was punching holes into a circle of felt while another was sorting beads into their different sizes. Others were hammering, scraping, weaving, gluing. A young man flitted from one to the other, straightening materials, mixing paints, opening jars, removing wastes. When we came in, he approached Sonia. He was good-looking. I could feel

my pulse throbbing.

“Ah, Mrs. Finkelstein,” he said.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Simpson.”

The young fellow Simpson walked up to a thick-set man bent over a lathe and placed a hand upon his shoulder. The sitting man stood up and turned. He was big, tall and obese, and had a mass of hair combed back, a protruding tongue and thick lips which seemed to suck at air. Sonia approached him, took him by a hand and drew him towards me.

“Albert,” she said, “shake hands with your father.”

I was sure that I heard laughter nearby. But Sonia’s expression was stone, the patients were preoccupied with their separate tasks, the supervisor was bent over a cripple. In the corridor, two orderlies with nothing to say walked by.

“Sonia,” I said, but could add nothing more. Albert stood before me with his hand dutifully extended. His fingers were stumpy, the nails were cut short and covered in dust. His skin was soft.

I heard Sonia say, “Did you expect a genius for a son?” There were razors in her voice which cut into the very soul.

Somehow we spent fifteen minutes in that place. I asked questions of Sonia, of Albert. How long? Why? How did he manage? Who provided? What did he do? What was he making? – Where he understood, he stammered out a reply. His voice was deep and grating. Sonia nodded at his every effort to comprehend.

It is easier to write a long book than a short one. Why prolong the story? After fifteen minutes, Sonia and I left. Albert was back at his lathe. He had probably forgotten about me already.

On the journey back, I felt dizzy, nauseated. My nerves were on edge. Sonia looked straight ahead.

“Why didn’t you write me? To tell me?”

“And you would have replied, I suppose?”

“I could have helped.”

“Or changed address again.”

“But had I known.”

‘ “Yes? And had you known?”

‘ “I would have helped. With my money, we could have found the best doctors, given him the best treatment, sent him to the best hospitals.”

‘Sonia snorted. The angle of her mouth twitched, the mole on her chin quivered, her eyes narrowed and sank into the softness of their swollen cushions. She didn’t say a word.

‘Outside my hotel, I handed Sonia a cheque for two thousand dollars towards Albert’s keep. She threw it back in my face.

‘ “We have managed till now,” she said, “We’ll manage further.”

‘I opened the car-door. “Sonia,” I said. “Will you come to me? We can look after Albert together, take him in with us. We can still make something of our lives. The three of us. There are . . .”

‘She pumped at the accelerator. “But you are already married, no?”, she said. “Your money, your factory, your properties, your reputation, your . . . your vanity. Why do you want a washed-out rag?”

‘ “Sonia!”

‘ “Yes?”

‘ “Sonia, I mean it.”

‘She blinked, shook her head, and pursed her dry grey lips. “Maybe in the next life,” she said.

‘I shut the car-door. Sonia drove away.

‘Later, I gave the cheque to the hospital. They have since nailed up a plaque bearing my name.’

Joseph Silber straightened in his chair and laughed. His wrinkles cut deep.

‘Well, doctor, what’s my blood pressure?,’ he said. ‘Am I going to have a stroke?’

Raphael Lazarus, the Painter

Raphael Lazarus opened the door. Instantly the astringent pungency of paint, oils and varnish stung my nostrils to sneezing. I turned my head back towards the unruly overgrown garden, took one restoring breath of weed, wild brambles and dandelion to the swollen limits of my lungs and dared to face the artist once more.

‘Must ventilate the place,’ he said with a tinkling apologetic laugh as though my sneeze were an accusation.

He was remarkably short, five feet in height perhaps, a slender sandy-haired reed, with parched cheeks collapsed and bristled, brow creviced, and eyes timid and darting like those of an animated nervous scarecrow, the whole investing him with the phiz of a prematurely-aged child. If I didn’t know, from my records, that he was forty-seven . . . A brown beret, polka-dotted with blobs of paint, sat slanted over one ear, a smeared grey smock reaching mid-thigh was purse-strung beneath his chin, and he wore copperdust-brown corduroys and the kind of mock-suede boots that were, in the shops, called desert boots and, in the streets, brothel-creepers. Restlessly shifting his weight, little as it was, from one foot to another, he was wiping his hands in a polychrome oil-cloth with swift, fidgety swipes. His sharp nose twitched.

‘Doctor, thank God you’ve come. It’s my father. He’s had a stroke. Felicity is with him. We were afraid to leave him alone.’

He took two graceless steps back, pivoted top-like on the balls of his feet and led me with swift, astonishingly long if inelegant strides along a narrow acrid corridor on whose cracked grimy lime-green walls hung a profusion of dull canvases and prints. We passed through the dining-room, through the cramped kitchen where the spoils of breakfast still remained uncleared and through a sunless patio to an annexe from whence there arose the clatter of metal and the splash of water.

At the door, Raphael Lazarus stood aside.

'He's in there,' he said, his face folding and unfolding with anxiety. 'You have to save him, you must, or I shall never forgive myself.'

His blue-green eyes floundered in their sockets. He bit his lower lip. A fleck of violet paint was smudged into the dimple of his chin, and for the first time I noticed his pointed pixie-like ears.

Inside the annexe, a two-roomed weatherboard outhouse with a minute kitchen and bathroom, old Max Lazarus, his head ashen, lay propped against a mound of pillows. Felicity Lazarus was wiping his forehead and cheeks, and though no nurse, she did so deftly enough. Unlike her nervous husband, she moved with a vigorous decisiveness; under her tread, the floorboards creaked; the curtains, the bedsheets, the very air rustled as she walked. Only the unwashed breakfast utensils I had seen in the main kitchen detracted from that impression of near-mechanised efficiency I had, through past contact, gained of her. But then, it was still only eight-thirty in the morning and, when there was sickness in the house, such lapses could easily enough be explained away. She was, I knew, older than Raphael Lazarus by three years; she was solid and tall, though, from ever bending towards her diminutive husband, she did possess a mild stoop; and with her prominent ridged nose, with the broad table-land expanse of her brow, and her cheeks and chin stark promontories rising from the rugged terrain of her face, she was no beauty. If Raphael Lazarus were, say, a seagull, she was in every way an eagle. The mystery I had

never been able to master was how seagulls and eagles could so harmoniously share the same nest.

'He is ready for you, Doctor,' she said in a firm tone as she stood back from the old man's bed and folded the towel with quick practised movements. Then, taking up the basin filled with grey soap-sudded water, she side-stepped her husband on her way towards the bathroom, and said over her shoulder, 'I shall be back rightaway.'

Max Lazarus, his eyes shut, their lids immobile and his bald head skewed sharply to one side, was not so much asleep as unconscious. He was breathing deeply and noisily and one thin, toneless cheek fluttered sail-like with each breath. Felicity, by shaving and washing him and combing the two puffs of white hair above his ears, had given him dignity, but not one of which he would ever be aware. His whole right side was paralysed. Like Raphael Lazarus, he too possessed a slender wizened look, but he had more colour in his cheeks – indeed they were unhealthily flushed, almost purple –, and his brow, smoothed out in the sleep of oblivion, did not show his son's tortured crevices of concern. His chances of recovery were wretchedly slim.

Behind me, stood Raphael Lazarus, a coil compressed to solidity, albeit precariously brittle. Against him, Felicity who had returned from the kitchen was a pillar of marble, unmoving as she watched me examine her father-in-law. I had the distinct impression that were Raphael Lazarus her child rather than her husband, she would have held him protectively to her bosom.

'There is little I can do for him,' I said, pocketing my stethoscope as I turned to them, 'except to send him to hospital.'

'Hospital?!' Raphael Lazarus exclaimed as though the word were a sentence.

Felicity was more practical, if also somewhat harder.

'How long do you give him?'

Raphael Lazarus was holding his beret with long thin fingers, his pupils darted in rings about my face.

'He may surprise us,' I said, 'With nursing care . . . , feeding . . . '

'He may survive then?' Raphael Lazarus said, the coil within him loosening.

'He may,' I lied, for his sake, looking with a more telling truthful gaze at Felicity who nodded in comprehension.

'There shall be no need for any hospital,' she said firmly. 'I shall look after him.'

'Felicity,' he said. There was no mistaking the gratitude behind the tremor in his voice. But rightaway the coil tightened once more. 'My God, if he dies, I'll have killed him.'

'Nonsense,' Felicity said to her husband, more in placation than with hardness.

'There, now,' I said. 'A stroke. He's seventy-eight and old people do suffer strokes, you know.'

'But you don't understand,' Raphael Lazarus said, a suggestion of a plea in his voice. 'Come with me. I'll show you.'

Felicity was smoothing the blanket over her father-in-law. She hunched a shoulder, almost despairingly, and with the thrust of her solid chin indicated that I should follow him.

'Perhaps you can talk him out of it,' she said.

His steps this time swift but more mincing, he led me once more across the patio, through the kitchen and dining-room and along the corridor to his studio where the paint and varnish again stung my nostrils and made my eyes smart. Taking out my handkerchief, I suppressed a sneeze.

The studio, a large room constructed on all sides of naked red brick was crammed with canvases, some framed and suspended from thick nails protruding from the cement bridges, others, more, it seemed infinitely more, standing in deep stacks on the floor. An easel stood beside the broad lace-curtained double window and on a cluttered table alongside it, a palette, rags, and a welter of jars containing pencils, brushes, paints, knives, trowels and scissors.

An inordinate degree of versatility and artistic fecundity impressed itself upon me as I looked around – a flamboyant farrago of watercolours, oils, sketches, charcoals and litho-

graphs and the occasional sculpture in bronze or clay; a jumble of still lifes, landscapes and portraits; a profusion of colour and styles crushing against one another in anarchic turmoil. I could almost taste the unsavoury pungency of the air.

Raphael Lazarus, in his element, pranced about, all of a twitter.

'What do you see? What do you see? In this landscape, this face, this apple?'

He kept adjusting his beret and brandished his free hand in every direction.

To my unschooled eye, the works seemed competent enough. In the main, they were faithful craftsmanlike representations of trees, bottles, fruit, faces, houses, cattle, flowers, books.

'They are very good,' I complimented him, 'quite realistic. I would say, very good.'

'No, not that!' he exclaimed, a shrill vehemence in his lean almost burning expression.

'Flattery I don't want, only what you see – in this tree, this flower, this ox . . .'

I was puzzled.

'Decay!' he cried out. 'Age, decrepitude! Are you so blind?'

My bewilderment was too plain.

'Why is it all so obvious to me?' he bellowed. 'Show me a clean smooth apple, a child's face, a new book, a green leaf, a clear transparent bottle, a blooming flower! In all this output, show me a sign of life . . .!'

In a sudden illumination, everything became clear. For all his versatility of form, technique and medium, one idea bound all his works alike a grand and monstrous obsession. Raphael Lazarus was the artist of decay.

Among all the still lifes, there was not indeed one clean smooth apple, nor a single child's face among the portraits, nor a green leaf among the landscapes. Apples, pears, lemons were wrinkled, yellow or green or brown fungus and rot disfiguring their shape and annihilating their sheen. The faces were those of old men and old women, their brows the texture

of scorched parchment, their mouths toothless and puckered, their cheeks sucked inward, their eyes bleary and distant and almost insane, near-dead creatures, either bloated or skeletal, sitting hunched and rigid in chairs the upholstery of which was frayed and torn and dull. And where there was a tree, it was gnarled and deformed, and where a leaf, it was rusty and curled, and where a flower it was withered, its stem sagging, its heart collapsed, its petals shrivelled and bronzed upon the parched soil beneath. There was a clear veering towards the autumnal, the fading, the disintegrating.

'Decay!' he repeated more forcibly, waving back a stray wing of hair over his exposed pointed ear, 'Everything I touch runs to decay.'

'They are perhaps pessimistic, true,' I said, 'but the seeking out and representation of things decayed is a valid artistic approach. The motif is, after all, realistic enough. In my own work, I see decay and decrepitude every day.'

'You *still* don't understand,' he said with burning vehemence. 'I don't seek them out at all. They are there, there, always before me.'

'Sure.'

'No, no, no!' He struck his forehead. His eyes glowed with blue fire. 'No . . . look here . . . at this face . . . Maybe this will convince you.'

On the wall above the fireplace hung a portrait. Obviously of his father. A thin wizened look, the head askew, a high purple flush, one cheek thin and flaccid, the two recognisable puffs of white above the ears, the eyelids closed and immobile.

'A remarkable likeness,' I said.

'Yes,' he tittered, 'Yes, a remarkable likeness. That's how he looks today. Yes. But that painting – see the dust on it, the dullness of the paint, the hairline cracks . . . I painted that portrait not today, not yesterday, but – it's madness – twelve years ago. When he was healthy, with full cheeks, hair on his head, his own teeth, when there was still strength, virility, in him.'

He leapt towards another painting.

'And this portrait here – a past president of the Returned Servicemen's League. He commissioned me to paint him. But in the end he refused to take it. I made him appear too old, ten years older at least. And ten years after I finished it, when he had come to look like this, he suffered a heart attack and died . . . And here is a past neighbour of ours, a councillor's wife – she was fifty-two when I painted her, elegant, dignified, scarcely a wrinkle, and here she looks nothing less than sixty-five, her face bloated, sallow, vacant, victim of the kidney disease that was to creep up on her and kill her just when she reached this stage . . .'

He paused. His lips quivered. His whole body was a galvanised wire.

'Do you see at last? Do you? Do you? This rotten withered apple, when I painted it was smooth and red and succulent, this mouldy cheese Felicity had just brought back from the supermarket, this crumbling flower came straight from our garden, the scorched dog-eared leaves of this book were from a new shining volume I had just bought. Do you understand now? I paint the future. I can't help myself. I paint decay, I paint death. I am the painter, the artist, the *creator* of death! So don't let him die, my father. If he dies, if he dies, I will have killed him!'

That Felicity Lazarus thought that her husband laboured under a delusion became acutely evident. She had, I felt, done her best to coax him out of it and in her poised highly maternal controlled way had asked me to do so as well.

But Raphael Lazarus clung to his belief with the conviction of dogma.

'Your father,' I said, 'the president of the RSL, the Councillor's wife – they're mere coincidences.'

'Once, yes,' he countered, 'even twice. But three times, four, no. They are not the only ones. I had a horse-trainer, a solicitor, a banker. When they reached the age I had portrayed in my paintings – with the banker it was only two years later – they died, the banker by suicide. And I despised myself and came to fear myself. At first I believed that I possessed the gift

of prophesy – I could look at a man and predict the time of his death, I could picture him as he would appear then long before the event. I had been touched by the divine. I was privileged, chosen, charmed, and I kept it as a magnificent secret. I sat by the hem of God. But after the banker, I saw to my horror – how long it took me to recognise it – that it was not by the hem of God that I sat, but on the shoulder of the grim-faced Angel of Death, by my paintings pointing his victims out to him. I was responsible, I, for their deaths. And for the rotting of apples before their time and the crumbling of flowers, the moulding of cheese, the mutilation of books. In the creation of art, I had become a destroyer.'

'There must exist discrepancies you haven't noticed. And you must surely have painted the portraits of others who . . . who have exceeded their age shown on your canvases . . .'

He gripped my arm with thin strong tapering fingers. His eyes were wildfire.

'What will convince you? There are no discrepancies! None! I stopped receiving commissions ages ago, but still I continued to paint portraits – from photographs, sketches, cartoons – . . . I couldn't help myself . . . and in all cases, Johnson, Mao, Picasso, Onassis, Pope Paul the Sixth . . . my canvas was like a last photograph. The only ones still living are those whose portraits I painted only recently. The Prime Minister, the American president, the Queen, the Pope, even Felicity, though God be thanked, she will survive to be a grand old dame. Once, I began a self-portrait, but gave it up in terror of what was emerging. I could ride on Death's shoulder but could not look into his face . . .'

He stopped abruptly. His whole face was a hot tense coil about to spring into burning chaos. Suddenly, he howled. 'Rid me of this curse . . . ! Save my father . . . ! Don't, for humanity's sake, let him die . . . !'

Felicity entered, purpose in her every movement. Tall, solid, slightly stooped, she leant over Raphael Lazarus and took his hand with calm maternal solicitude.

'Raphael,' she said firmly but without harshness, 'the doctor

must be busy. Let him go now. He has many other patients to attend to.'

The coil unwound smoothly.

'Yes,' he said meekly. 'I have kept you . . . But save him, if you love your fellow man, save him . . .'

Max Lazarus was beyond saving. I visited him each day, sometimes twice in the one day, but within a week, he died. As I completed the yellow death certificate, I was struck by the uncanniness of Raphael Lazarus' predictions.

In the evening after the funeral, I visited the Lazaruses to pay my respects. Felicity treated me to tea and biscuits. Raphael Lazarus, dressed in a green crudely-knitted woollen pullover and his copper-brown corduroys, sat withdrawn in the farthest corner of the lounge-room, thin, morose, his face extraordinarily long and pointed, more pixie-like than ever, his gaze unflaggingly upon me like an accusation. When I left, he merely blinked, bit his lower lip and nodded.

Such muteness was an unhealthy sign, I thought upon leaving the house.

Within two weeks, I was proven right. At three o'clock one morning, I was woken by the telephone.

'Lazarus here.'

'Lazarus?! What happened . . .?'

His voice, nervous and trembling, raved.

'I had to tell you. My work, my art. It all adds up to Truth. And Truth is ugliness, decrepitude, death.'

'You rang just to tell me that?'

He ignored me.

'Trees are broken stumps, corn fields brittle stubble, forests become deserts. Even the human body, that pampered molly-coddled thing, is nothing but an ever-rotting, ever decaying chunk of meat. It's a mess of warts, tumours, moles. Wrinkles, pimples, corns. Bloating, atrophy, decline. And *that* is Truth; Truth, that toward which all things tend. Truth lies in

the future, and the ultimate permanent future of all things is death.'

'A fine time for philosophy.'

'It is not philosophy, it is *life*.'

'Well, now that you've woken me, if you want to know what I think, Truth is also the present, the now, whatever is in it that you can see, hear, feel, smell, touch . . .'

'The present changes, crumbles, hurtles towards a future state. Your so-called Truth is a little truth, only relative and evanescent; blink and it's gone. What becomes fixed in eternity is ultimate Truth. And *I . . . I . . . I*, in my work, create the future. *I* create real Truth!'

'Then you should paint dust,' I said.

There followed a pause. I heard Raphael Lazarus breathing into the mouthpiece and then a thin faint humourless laugh. I imagined the point of his nose twitch and his timid eyes blinking.

'You are right. It is an unearthly hour,' he said and hung up his receiver.

But the very next night, he rang again.

'Keats is wrong. Beauty is not truth; truth is not beauty. That's unadulterated romantic piffle. Beauty is ephemeral, relative like your little truths about the present. Truth is death, eternity, dust. And even what we marvel at as delicate skin, perfect form, elegance, shapeliness, the graceful line – it all washes away before it comes to its prime. Of what profit are beauties if they must die on earth?'

And on the following night, I was woken once more.

'Whoever said that the true artist sees the harmony, the wholeness and the tendencies towards perfection in things everywhere was no artist. Perfection is in the not-yet-formed; the formed already decays. That is its natural direction, the impulse as inevitable as the pull of gravity. Beauty is illusory, only decay is real, the dust you spoke of.'

He telephoned me every night that week. My wife became short-tempered, suggested I bring to a halt these nocturnal conversations. The children were being woken, she herself

could not teach effectively during the day, and I, too, felt the torpor of disturbed sleep by mid-afternoon.

On the eighth night, when the telephone rang, I picked up the receiver hastily, ready to deliver the rebuke I had mentally prepared and rehearsed throughout the preceding day.

But it was not Raphael Lazarus. I recognised Felicity's firm, steady, almost masculine voice. In the background, I heard an intermittent outcry rising into a tirade.

'I know the hour,' she said. 'I hoped to cope until the morning. But he's become impossible. He needs a doctor.'

Felicity let me in. She wore a heavy crimson dressing-gown with ragged tassels and old men's slippers, and her hair, thickly streaked with long striations of grey, hung over her shoulders in formless tangles. Her features appeared heavier than ever, her ridged nose higher, her chin bulkier, the shadowed folds around her eyes deeper. From the studio behind her came the rising and ebbing torrent of words. The air burnt stingingly of paint, turpentine, ether and varnish.

'Neither of us has slept since his father died,' Felicity said. 'All he does now is paint and babble and jabber and rant. He hasn't eaten for more than a week. And all he's taken is coffee, strong and black, cup after cup. I have lost all control over him.'

Raphael Lazarus, when I entered the studio, pranced before his easel, palette in the crook of his elbow, paintbrush in his hand, frantically jabbing at the canvas, shouting, howling, declaiming, rambling at the frame before him. On the floor against the walls, the number of paintings – portraits, still-lives, landscapes – had multiplied; the light from the high ceiling glinted on the still-moist shining freshness of the paint. He had evidently been working at white heat and even now he was jerkily hopping about from foot to foot, smacking his lips, blinking frenziedly, turning at intervals to sip hurriedly from his mug, and with his oilcloth wiping his brow of the beads of perspiration gathering there. His collapsed, stark-eyed, unshaven face was a smudged chaotic scape of paint. Preoccupied with his work, he did not see me enter.

'Art . . . beauty . . . death . . . dust . . . truth . . .'

With each word, he jabbed again at the canvas – a brown streak, a yellow line, a grey smudge, an orange blob.

'Art is the burrowing through the ugliness of the world towards beauty. Art is the probing through chaos to uncover harmony. Art is harmony, wholeness, perfection. Art is the exaggeration of natural beauty. Beauty, truth; truth, beauty. Truth is the vital breath of beauty; beauty the outward form of truth. Art is the creation of beauty. Art is aspiration. Art is life.'

I stepped behind him. I couldn't help but gasp. For on the canvas was the emerging face of a tramp, a small tight tapering face, sunken-cheeked, straggle-bearded, unkempt, parched brow deeply-creviced, a misshapen beret askew above pointed ears, blue-green eyes vacant, dull, as if set into terminal oblivion, the whole a grim portrait of dereliction and destitution.

'Lazarus!', I exclaimed.

'All lies!', he shouted, noticing me without interest and turning back to his work. 'Lies, distortions, illusions. Art is truth and ultimate truth is death. And I am the poet of truth and the creator of death!'

'Lazarus!', I called out again, approaching him, laying a hand upon his arm. 'Don't! That is you! Better not to know!'

He broke free. He was drawn and pale, and perspired from lack of sleep.

'Art is truth. And who can escape the truth? I have seen the face of that restless Angel and he has now turned his gaze upon me. I have no time to waste. I must paint. There is still so much within me. Paint! Paint! Paint! What you see around you is a mere fraction . . . A universe still tumbles within me. I can't stop. It's my life, what is left of it, the sole purpose behind my being . . .'

'You're deluded. What you need is sleep, rest. Your whole outlook will then change . . . your perspective . . .'

'My God . . . And I thought you understood . . .'

'You are driving yourself into the ground prematurely . . .'

'My time has been set. I'm not afraid.'

'A few nights' rest . . . a little medication . . . in a hospital . . . and you can defeat that Angel of yours . . .'

'It's fate.'

'Nonsense. You talked yourself into it.'

'You're crazy.'

'You're tired, overwrought, driven. I can help you slow down . . .'

'Ha! Only the devil within takes drugs.'

'For your sake. For the sake of your creativity.'

Felicity, who had been listening outside the door, now entered. She approached her husband.

'The doctor's right, Raphael. Just a few nights' rest . . .'

'I am not tired.'

'For my sake too . . . And yours. You are in a rut. Decay, death is not everything. The doctor is right . . .'

'Let the shoemaker stick to his last. He doesn't know the first thing about art . . .'

'Felicity glanced towards me, embarrassed. Raphael Lazarus continued to stroke and jab at the canvas with brisk movements.

'He's here to help you. Listen to him just this once.'

Alongside him, Felicity was an oak; alongside her, he was a reed. Though sandy-haired, his developing beard showed coarse strands of grey.

'If you continue in the same way,' I said, 'that portrait will be self-fulfilling. You will wear yourself out into a stupor, collapse suddenly, break down, lose your gifts, your personal vision, your sanity. Even a machine constantly driven must wear out.'

Time passed – another quarter-hour, another half, another hour. In the end – the first light was just rising outside – he completed his portrait. He stood back, studied it pensively and, letting hang his brush and palette from his hands, said sadly,

'What difference can it make to me now? I have created my own death.'

The resemblance between Raphael Lazarus and his portrait

was uncannily close. Only his own eyes showed some lustre in them and his beard was not yet as straggled and unkempt as it appeared in the portrait. Were I to believe wholly in his myth, I would have given him a mere two months to live.

In the end, coaxed by Felicity and myself, he succumbed. I administered a tranquillising injection and arranged his immediate admission into a psychiatric hospital.

On the footpath, as he was bending, about to enter Felicity's car, he looked up at me, his eyes searching my face.

'You promise me I can cheat death this way?'

A cool dawn breeze enveloped me.

'The other way, you had no hope,' I said, 'You were driving yourself into his very arms.'

'For your sake,' he said, 'may you be right.'

I heard nothing of Raphael Lazarus for three weeks. Then Felicity phoned my surgery to say he had been transferred to a public hospital. I was out on house visits at the time and my receptionist had taken the call. She had been given no further details.

That afternoon, having time on my hands, I visited the hospital.

I was led to his ward by the sister-in-charge.

'He's having tests,' she said. 'Looks bad. Cancer, the doctors think.'

Raphael Lazarus sat in a vinyl chair beside his bed. He looked more diminutive than ever and his beard, sandy streaked with thick grey, was disproportionately large. His cheeks were more sunken, his nose more pointed, his hair rose higgledy-piggledy in a dishevelled tangle, his eyes were piteously, abysmally dull. He had not abandoned his paint-pocked beret. He resembled his self-portrait more than ever.

'It's you, is it?', he said tonelessly.

'I only heard this morning.'

'They're wasting their time, the doctors.' He sniffed down

his nose contemptuously. 'The doctors! And you, now will you believe? What more, tell me, will it take to persuade you?'

I tried to sound convincing. 'It's not the end,' I laughed.

'Couldn't you have let me be, let me die in my own way? I was painting, I was delirious, happy, transported, creating, rooting the very devil out of me.'

'It's not over yet.'

He ignored me. For the first time I noticed how pale and tapering his fingers were now that they were free of paint, and how deeply sunken were his blue-green eyes.

'Once, I set out to create beauty, harmony, wholeness – I was young still, had fantasies of greatness. I ended by painting something higher. Truth. Truth in all its ugliness, decrepitude, decline. After a while, no-one wanted my work. It frightened them. It brought them too close to death. Buyers did not come, galleries rejected my works. If Felicity had not worked all these years, I should have starved. I myself couldn't work. I had to paint, had to, do you understand, the devil himself spurred me on. It was a matter of spiritual necessity, of the blood. I had to paint, if not for anyone else, then for myself. *And* for the Truth. And, then, not for the Truth as I saw it – subjectivity is a false and fickle mistress – but for the truth as it was, as it is, as it will always be. And now not only my art, but also my life is fulfilling that Truth.'

A white-gowned orderly wheeled a trolley into the room.

'We're off to X-Rays, Raphael,' he said cheerfully.

'You're wasting your time,' Raphael Lazarus said, rising from his chair nonetheless.

'It's not me. It's them doctors that want it.'

There was little of that former fermenting throbbing energy left about Raphael Lazarus as he positioned himself upon the trolley. Small, light as he was, his movements bore a torpid heaviness. As the orderly wheeled him out of the room, he raised towards me a long attenuated arm, craned his goose-like neck towards me and said wearily, with the weariness of resignation:

'You should have left me at home.'

Within a week, Raphael Lazarus was dead.

The funeral was a small affair. Felicity, a handful of acquaintances, myself. The ceremony was short, the sermon, too, very brief, containing some reference to Raphael Lazarus' art but more openly regretting that a man so young – he was after all a mere forty seven – should have been torn from life so prematurely.

I paid my respects to Felicity. Looking through the mesh of her black veil, I said, 'I sincerely hope that your late husband is now at rest.'

Felicity took my arm. She bowed towards me. Her expression, insofar as I could determine it, was suitably restrained, but there was a peculiar levity, even mirth, in her voice.

'I expect that Raphael may well be laughing now.'

The thought of thin, wizened, emaciated Raphael Lazarus laughing haunted me on the way home. It was hot. I had an hour to spare before the evening surgery. On reaching home, I went directly to the kitchen where my wife, herself just returned from school, was preparing dinner. She kissed me, asked whether I wanted an iced coffee and said, 'Oh, yes, there's a parcel in your study.'

'Books?' I asked.

'Doesn't look like it.'

With my iced coffee, I went into the study, glanced fleetingly through the mail – bills, medical journals, receipts, reports – then picked up the parcel. On the back of it in bold letters were printed the name 'Lazarus' and his address.

Curious, apprehensive, oddly agitated, I cut the strings and undid the wrappings. A white card fell out.

'Just a little something to remember me by. Lazarus,' it read.

My wife came in.

'Looks interesting,' she said.

'Probably his self-portrait,' I said. 'You may do the honours,' I added, handing her the parcel that she may remove the last of the wrappings.

She tore the brown paper with the gusto of a child opening a

gift. And when the frame contained within lay uncovered, she stood back, laughed excitedly and chirped, 'Why, how gorgeous! Look! How perfect!'

And I looked, stared; couldn't believe, heard vaguely my wife's remarks that tumbled in a bubbling torrent.

'It's remarkable . . . It's you all over . . . Immaculate . . . A little greyer perhaps . . . a shade older . . . the lips a trifle stiffer . . . but, sweetheart, what an astounding resemblance! . . . The eyes, the cheeks, the chin, they're so life-like . . .'

And in that moment, I remembered Felicity in her black suit of mourning. And I heard laughter, and that laughter, at first tinkling and then oddly clamorous, came from all around, arising from whatever heaven or whatever hell or whatever final niche Lazarus' Angel had taken him to for his everlasting rest. And enclosed by it, that laughter echoed in my ears, shrill and reverberating, and filled the universe and filled the ages – and filled, I knew, that eternal void in which so soon, too soon, I would consummate Raphael Lazarus' ultimate Truth.

Drifting

The day I married Rosemary, my father killed me in his heart.

He had threatened, he had warned, had tried with fatherly embrace to dissuade. The skin of his hand was rumpled leather and printer's ink had burrowed under his nails. In his nearness, he smelled of paper and must.

'If you go through with it . . .'

He had never been a religious man, but at fifty-five acquired a reverence for symbol. Entering his home, he touched and kissed now the mezuzah he had earlier ignored. He hung a mizrach on the eastern wall, wore a skull-cap when he ate, and delicately, lovingly even, sipped from the silver kiddush cup that Mother had bought.

I went through with it.

'We finally made it, Bernie, didn't we?', Rosemary whispered when the ring was on her finger and the handshakes and kisses had done their round. On the steps outside the registry, she kissed me on the brow and her black cherry-scented hair brushed against my cheek.

'Are you happy?', I asked, holding her chin.

'Perfectly,' she said. Aren't you?

'Yes,' I said.

Edward Merrilees, down from Mildura for his daughter's wedding, came up to us. 'You can call me Dad now, Son,' and Cynthia Merrilees, touching my arm, added, 'And I'm Mum.'

The November sun glowed as soft-edged ribbons of light

tumbled through the gathering clouds. People walked past and smiled. An elderly woman stopped to watch. Cars passed. A policeman blew his whistle.

My father was in his press, setting type.

On the way to Phillip Island, Rosemary sat close to me, her head upon my shoulder. I spoke about my father, remembering things I had earlier chosen to forget. – Like the number on his arm. Like his heart attack. Like his pain.

If Father ever floundered in his early days in the oceans of either disbelief or faith, he didn't let the slightest ripple betray. He swam in certainty, however far he allowed himself to drift.

Setting out from Europe, he possessed one overcoat, one watch and one book, a slender volume in Yiddish to which he cleaved throughout the voyage. Often he didn't come down for meals and Mother would carp:

'Itzchak, put away Shpinoza and come and eat!'

'But I *am* eating,' he would reply good-naturedly. 'Feasting even, at a banquet that is without end.'

And he would stay on deck to savour, to dine, to gorge again, while the salty sea-breeze flapped the pages and ruffled his hair.

Shpinoza. I liked the sound. It had about it something exotic and strangely musical. I sang it, twisted it with my lips, played quoits with it, said it harshly like my mother, uttered it delicately with Father's reverence for sacred things. Sometimes, he read to Mother as she embroidered her handkerchiefs, and I sat at the foot of his deck-chair, listening without comprehending, if only to hear Father say, 'Yes, yes, that is true,' or 'Shpinoza is a great man, but no, to this I can't agree.'

Father was a clever man.

But sometimes Mother was displeased. Especially when he spoke of God, about whom he and Spinoza disagreed.

'Not in front of the child,' she would admonish, lifting her

sea-blue eyes from her embroidery, and then say to me, 'Baruch'l, my precious, maybe you want to go down and get a roll?'

But Father, secure in the certainty in which he swam, would answer, 'Why shouldn't he know the truth? God is only an idea, created, nurtured and sustained by the human mind. After Auschwitz . . .'

'Itzchak,' Mother would plead again, more forcefully. 'Please, not in front of the child.'

He would shrug his shoulders, but have the final say. 'One day he will learn it for himself.'

My father's name was Issac, where his father's had been Abraham. And, following ancestral heritage, he might have named me Jacob had he not, at the time of my birth, been full with the spirit of Spinoza. He called me Baruch instead. But where that other Baruch, idol of his veneration, had outside the Law become known as Benedict, on Australian soil his son Baruch was transmuted into Bernard – which he avoided whenever he could.

'My clever Baruch'l,' he would call me, or 'my little Shpinoza' if I had been especially smart. But Bernard he left for the street, for documents, for some later time.

I was eleven then.

That slender Yiddish volume, dog-eared, ragged and stained, retained pride of place among the books with which Father crammed his shelves, long after he had drifted from that anchor that had been Shpinoza. I tried, in later years, to suck its juices and dine at the banquet where Father had feasted, but the lofty Yiddish, the complicated words, the tortuous sentences, all these passed undigested through my boyish brain. I leafed through his other books but these were no less elusive, and I despaired of ever understanding as I watched Father, his hair beginning to grey, reading in his chair, opening one volume and another, extracting, marking, underlining and annotating, through private and unremitting industry gathering sheafs of paper full with his close and spindly script, which he

stapled, bound and filed, taking them out when invited to lecture before the Kadimah, the Katzetler or the Lodzer Landsmanschaft.

'What good does all this do you?', Mother said once, bringing a cup of tea from the kitchen. I had followed her in. 'All day in the press, at night with your books. Is that living? You'll ruin your health. So what if, for a change you don't speak at the meetings?'

My father reached out to me and rummaged his fingers through my hair. Rings had appeared around his eyes and the greying bristles of his eyebrows seemed stiff. He had begun to smell of paper and must.

'Well, my little Shpinoza, and what do *you* say?'

He smiled at the helpless shrug of my shoulders.

'Do you know what Shpinoza would say? "The greatest good is the knowledge of the union which the mind has with all of nature." Knowledge, Baruch'l. There is so much to learn and so much to understand.' To Mother, he added, 'After Auschwitz, Rivke, everything that was said and written before has become all wrong.'

After I had turned Bar Mitzvah, Father often took me with him to his lectures. There were never many people present. Fifteen, twenty, on exceptional occasions even thirty. But he held them in thrall as – it seemed to me – he waded through depths mysterious and intriguing, and created ever-widening ripples around words and names that became through repetition increasingly familiar. The fluency with which he spoke about Europe, Israel, Hitler, God, the assurance that stamped each word on Asch and Peretz, Sholom Aleichem and Leivick, stirred in me, less a pride of the man who addressed the gathering – though pride in him was beyond denial – than a resurgent will to taste again of the delicacies that had made that man. It was at sixteen that I began really to read and to absorb those juices that had thus far eluded me.

I began to buy my own books, cheap second-hand copies I discovered at Hall's.

I devoured them eagerly. But Mother was worried.

'It's unnatural,' she said. 'A boy your age should be outside, in the sun, not filling his head with ideas. You're just like your father.'

'Come now, Rivke,' Father said, laughing, letting the creases play at the outer corners of his eyes 'let him be, he's not as bad as all that. A man is nothing but what he knows.'

And as he looked over my expanding shelves of books, taking down Zweig's Spinoza, Dostoevski, Chekhov, Tagore, he nodded with obvious satisfaction and sucked his lips. Only when he came across Russell's Essays did he waver momentarily and say, 'That's a bit radical for a young fellow, isn't it?', but added with his next breath, 'He does make sense just the same.'

Father's endorsement of Russell transformed flirtation into commitment. What Spinoza had been for Father, Russell became for me. In the years that followed, through matriculation and through university, I experimented with Heschel and Buber and Hirsch, and sought sustenance from the Tenach from which they had derived their source, but it was to Russell that I repeatedly returned, as it was towards Ecclesiastes, of all the Scriptures, that my natural inclinations leant, finding in their this-worldly earthiness a resonance that most closely approximated truth.

Father continued to lecture, but to an audience, I noticed, that steadily dwindled. He began to repeat himself and narrowed the scope of his themes to a preoccupation with the War, the Holocaust, and the relation of God to the Holocaust. His conclusion – that God had died in Auschwitz together with His people – was not a popular one; far less the corollary, that survival had no meaning, nor the deaths of the six million, beyond the actual physical facts themselves.

One evening, during a talk, he unbuttoned a sleeve and bared his arm, and pointing at the dull blue number engraved in skin, said, with a vehemence as uncharacteristic as it was fervid,

'God, if He were there, would not have let this be done to a man.'

The outward certainty with which he addressed his audience remained, but the persistence with which he belaboured the same set of themes betrayed – I sensed – the first signs that he might, in fact, be floundering in a swelling tide of self-doubt. People left the meetings unsatisfied. There was talk that Isaac Walshansky was becoming eccentric.

Meanwhile, at university, I had joined the Rationalist Society and, in time, became its chairman.

Mother, when I told her, bit her lips.

'Bernard, you're drifting away from us more and more,' she said. 'Don't you have any Jewish friends?'

'Some,' I answered, not without some truth, 'but we have little in common.'

Father looked up from the tea he was drinking. He seemed tired and ashen, as though he was driving himself too hard.

'Are you sure that the Society's principles are your own, Baruch?', he asked. He had stopped calling me his Spinoza long before.

'As certain as I can be,' I said, in fact totally convinced.

I was studying history and comparative literature at the time and my library, already substantial, continued to grow.

'I see you've relegated our own thinkers to a corner,' Father observed on one occasion.

I had indeed. Where Buber and Heschel and Rosenzweig had been, I had placed Russell and Huxley and Freud, and in place of Peretz and Asch, I had installed Beckett and Camus.

My circle of friends, too, progressively changed. As chairman of the Rationalist Society, my contacts broadened, bringing me to the notice of academics, post-graduate students, editors of journals, research staff. I whirled in a round of university parties, meetings, lectures and debates. I presented papers on 'Determinism and Chance' and 'The Dilemmas of Reason', and published articles, reviews, critiques.

When, in my honours year, I moved out of home, the physical act of moving was a mere formality. Apart from Sunday dinners, I was seldom home in the day. Mother resisted, protested and predicted the worst; while Father, who

seemed now to flicker where, once, he had throbbed, relented more easily but, echoing Mother, saw fit to warn,

'You're a grown man, Baruch. Go, if you wish . . . But don't bring home a shikse.'

He didn't laugh on this occasion. Instead, he fixed me with an unfaltering gaze, a gaze that sought out a promise, or some assurance, that I would not stray too far. His hair was prematurely white and a doughy flabbiness had set into his cheeks. He had begun to visit Dr. Benjamin about his sleeplessness.

Only long after I had met Rosemary did it occur to me that Father must have laboured under certain premonitions at the time.

I made no promise.

The following March, I began to tutor in literature and started work towards my Master's degree. In May, I met Rosemary and in August, she moved in with me. She had black hair and delicate lips and wore colours that were bright without being glaring. She brought with her a certain sprightliness and there hung about her the scent of cherries.

One day, Mother asked, 'You're not running around with shiksas, are you?'

'I have all kinds of friends,' I answered.

Father merely asked whether I had read Elie Wiesel . . .

Father's health deteriorated. He spent more time before the television set and less with his papers and books. His lectures became infrequent, and in December, Dr. Benjamin discovered he had diabetes.

'There is only one law in this world,' Father said in a mock tone that issued out of his dejection. 'And that is – everything that lives runs to decay.'

Two months later, he suffered a heart attack.

The days he spent in Prince Henry's Hospital were black. Confined to bed, he armoured himself with a solid, inscrutable silence. Mother, thrust suddenly upon the rack of uncertainty, fretted and wept and wrung her hands. She brought Father the 'Jewish News' but it remained on his locker unopened and unread. Even as we sat beside him, he avoided speech, he

avoided touch, and turned his grey, melancholy, almost wounded eyes now upon the heart monitor and now upon the King's Domain where the white turret of Government House rose above the green unmoving crests of trees. Sometimes, moved by some inner prompting, he would sigh or raise an eyebrow or shrug a shoulder. But mostly he remained unreachable.

I spent much time looking at the number on his arm . . .

While Father was in hospital, I stayed with Mother. Rosemary minded the apartment to which I returned when Father came home.

Home again, something new, at first barely perceptible, enveloped Father. If he had, in the days following his heart attack, been frightened or bewildered by the glancing touch of death, he now breathed of a calm that plumbed his inner depths. He slept without pills, sat at ease behind his books, and began to glow again.

It was then that he acquired a reverence for symbol and ritual.

'I have been spared twice,' he said. 'And for that I can only be grateful.'

And out of gratitude, he nailed a mezuzah to every door, made benedictions over the Sabbath wine, wore his skull-cap when he ate and walked to the synagogue on the Sabbath.

One Sunday, upon visiting my parents for dinner, I found him incinerating papers in the back-yard. It was early April. There were apples on the trees and the first issue of lemons was ripening. Father stood beside the incinerator feeding the flames, every so often bending back as a puff of wind blew thick smoke into his face. I started as I recognised the papers full with Father's close and spindly script.

Moving forward to salvage the files not yet consigned to fire, I exclaimed, 'But that's your life!'

Father grabbed my shoulder. He smiled, wryly, as he fed another sheaf of papers to the flames.

'Yes, Baruch. Wasted, wasn't it?'

Some six weeks into his convalescence, it occurred to him to

visit my flat. I was at a Rationalist meeting and Rosemary who had stayed behind to complete an essay, opened the door. He didn't stay. Instead, he turned on his heels, and without a second glance at Rosemary, hurried, almost stumbled down the stairs.

When I visited my parents again on the following Sunday, Mother greeted me first.

'You can still show your face? Do you know what you are doing to your father? Have you thought for one moment . . .?'

Father restrained her with an upraised palm.

'Don't shout,' he said to her as he turned to me. 'Baruch, tell me, is this what I lived through Auschwitz for? Is it? For my sake, give her up.'

His skin which had begun to shine again resumed the matted dullness of leather.

'But she's a lovely girl,' I said. 'You have only to meet her, to talk to her to see . . .'

'Apikoros!', Mother exclaimed, 'I knew this would happen!'

Father again motioned her not to shout.

'No, I will not meet her,' he said. 'Some things are more important. You must know at all times what you are and what *they* are.'

'But I don't *believe*.'

'It isn't a question of belief, but if nothing else, then of respect.'

'I can't give her up now,' I said. 'It's too late. I wanted to bring her home. I wanted to tell you. We are planning to marry in November.'

'Aren't you ashamed?', Mother remonstrated.

Father fixed me with his gaze 'If you go through with it . . .' he began, but didn't finish. He adjusted his skull-cap and repeated, 'For my sake, Bernard.'

Where he had long before stopped calling me his Spinoza, he now disowned Baruch as well.

'They'll adjust,' I said to Rosemary. 'We're not the first in this situation.'

But my parents didn't adjust. Sunday dinners became more

strained and recriminatory. I invented excuses for avoiding them.

I continued to whirl in my own orbit. Rosemary and I prepared for the wedding. Despite my pleadings, my parents refused to meet her.

'Perhaps we *are* doing the wrong thing, Bernie,' Rosemary said.

'Whatever we do now will be the wrong thing,' I answered. 'They won't be reconciled.'

In the end, we made peace with facts. Ours would be a registry wedding, without a reception, without white dresses or flowers or bridesmaids. The Merrilees would drive down from Mildura; my parents would come if they changed their mind. A single photographer would take pictures and a party for friends would follow our return from Phillip Island.

'Hardly the wedding a girl dreams about, is it?', Rosemary said, brushing her lips against my cheek.

Mother still tried to change my mind, pleading at every opportunity. But Father, his eyes averted, said, 'I don't want to talk about it. He's a grown man. He knows his obligations.'

Neither wavered. On the evening before the wedding, I telephoned them.

Father answered.

'There is nothing to talk about,' he said. 'Until now you've been our son. If you go through with it . . .'

On the way to Phillip Island, Father's dry unemotional tone haunted, more tenaciously than Mother's heated shriller complaints. I stared at the road ahead and found it hard to speak.

'You don't regret it now, do you, Bernie?', Rosemary said, touching my cheek. With her hair drawn back by a crimson ribbon, she looked more alive, open, gay.

'Things might have been different, that's all.'

'If we had been accepted?'

'If we had been accepted. And yet the paradox is that, in a way, things couldn't have been different. It's being too harsh to expect them to accept.'

'That's an unexpected change.'

'It's just another way of looking at things. One would have to go back to some different beginning to understand, to a beginning starting not with us, Rosemary, nor even with my parents' coming to Australia, but further back still, generations, to a distant encounter of the Jew with Europe. And even then, the story is only a fraction told.'

Rosemary's gaze upon me, open and exploring, compelled me to continue.

'For the chairman of the Rationalist Society, this is an unusual admission to make, I know, but the truth is this: the history of the Jew is a chain and each generation a link along it. Do you realise what our marriage means, Rosemary? With me, one specific chain has come to an end, its continuity has been disrupted. And in a way it's . . . it's awesome.'

Rosemary kissed me on the ear, but I doubted if she really understood.

When we returned to Melbourne, I swallowed my pride and took Rosemary to my parents' home. She thought it unwise. But I had resolved to force them to meet her, something I should have done long before, but had repeatedly deferred.

It was Sunday afternoon and the weather was mild and faintly sunny.

Mother opened the door.

She had evidently considered such an encounter, for she visibly took control of herself, set her jaw firm and knotted her brow with a forced determination. Her hair lay in careless grey tangles, her eyes hardened to flint.

'Mother, this is Rosemary.'

'You may as well come in,' she said, sizing up Rosemary with one scanning glance.

'Was this the right time to come?', Rosemary whispered, nervously, as we entered the lounge-room.

'And when is the right time?', I asked in return, smiling and squeezing her hand.

There were fruit and nuts on the coffee-table and one of

Father's books in a chair. The room smelled of polish and, strangely, of aniseed. On the dinner table lay Father's open Tenach.

'Your father's out walking,' Mother said, intercepting my gaze.

'How is he?'

'God protects.'

She wore a chequered apron and her hands were moist and white and wrinkled from laundering clothes. Following us into the lounge-room, she made minimal fuss over her appearance. She merely dried her hands, brushed away some recalcitrant strands of hair and with a corner of her damp apron wiped her brow, asserting, although without words, that whatever happened in her household, the daily chores of living had to go on. Yielding to the habits of hospitality, she pushed towards us the bowl of fruit and nuts.

'Here, take some,' she said, sitting down opposite Rosemary who, hands in lap and faintly smiling, let herself be lapped by Mother's scrutiny.

We scraped about for conversation but stuck to the ordinary, the inoffensive, the commonplace – Father's health, Rosemary's Fine Arts, my Master's thesis. Rosemary, to her credit, did not try to impress. In her own buoyant but unobtrusive way, she added her bit and let her quaint and vivid turns of phrase and her poise, more than any exaggerated deference or misplaced brusqueness, reach across to Mother who, I saw, or sensed, in the nest of irrevocability, was not wholly displeased.

We stayed a mere forty minutes.

In the doorway, with Rosemary already outside waiting on the steps, Mother took my arm and riveted me with eyes that were grey and deep and probing.

'You've made your peace with me, Bernard,' she said. 'What else can a mother do, but your father, may his years be many, won't be so easy.'

Father came to me in many forms, though not in the form that mattered most. It was the memory he revisited time and

again, that store and labyrinth in which he remained perpetually preserved and most tenderly revered – as a younger, pulsating man exulting over Spinoza, as the eager scholar gathering notes, as the fluent speaker holding audiences in thrall, as the printer in his press, smelling of paper and must. But he, the man, my father, of the flesh and blood now kept apart, neither reaching out to me nor letting himself be reached.

I telephoned each week. Mother always answered.

'God protects,' she said whenever I asked after him. 'May his years be many, your father is keeping well.'

In May, Rosemary, bounding in, bag over shoulder, buoyantly announced she was pregnant.

'May it be in a good hour,' Mother said flatly when I broke the news, and added as though it were an afterthought, 'Your father's out.'

When I hung up the receiver, I felt suddenly, inexplicably, afraid. 'The greatest good' Father had once said quoting Spinoza, 'is the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature.' – I had never felt myself so separate, so adrift. In silence I went in to Rosemary who was studying at the desk, pressed her shoulders, bent over her, kissed her and smelled the cherries in her hair.

And ever thinking of my father I continued to drift in the months that followed, berthing nowhere, in my reading flitting between Russell and Wiesel in a bid to reconcile the world of reason with the world of madness that both Wiesel and my father had known. Time and again I saw him roll up his sleeve before his audience, saw him expose that blue number engraved on his arm, and I realised, with a jolting abruptness, that if any man had the right to believe or the privilege to doubt, it was he, my father, who had suffered that madness, and not myself who, nurtured in the security of unbeleaguered theory, had learnt of life from mere dabbling in books. And I wanted to run to him often, and lay this new awareness before him, but each time I fell short of action enervated before the image of his wounded eyes, his distance, his silence . . .

The semesters passed. I resigned as Chairman of the Ration-

alist Society and left it altogether. Soon after I gave up the round of parties, meetings, lectures and debates, and near the end of the year submitted my thesis. Its subject, that of manners and morals in eighteenth-century French and English fiction, had become utterly banal, irrelevant and trivial. Rosemary, well into the last phase of her pregnancy, showed signs of swelling. She put on weight, her rings became tight on her finger and in the middle of December, Dr. Ritter admitted her into hospital for rest.

'Well, this is it, Bernie,' she said with a sparkle, sitting up in her bed. 'We can start thinking of names now, can't we?'

'What about Joshua for a boy and Rachel for a girl?'

'I'll sleep on it,' she said with a lively toss of her head. 'Now hold my hand and wish me luck.'

In the corridor, I met Dr. Ritter. Tall, broad-shouldered and greying, he stooped over me as he spoke. His voice was deep and gravelly.

'There is no real cause for alarm, my young man. Your lady's pelvis is a little small and she has a little too much fluid on board, but we shall manage . . . You look worried, my young man.'

It was less worry than destitution that he saw . . .

The academic year over and the campus closed for the summer break, I wandered aimlessly about the streets of Carlton, escaping from the premature heat in a succession of bookstores, record shops and coffee-bars, while back home, alone in my flat without Rosemary's ever-reassuring presence, I watched television indiscriminately, listened to music without enjoyment, and opened and shut a succession of books for which all patience had been drained. I often thought of Father, alone in the press, setting type.

Three days after entering hospital, a Friday, Rosemary went into labour. It was arduous and painful and continued through the night. I sat in the hospital foyer, drinking coffee from the cafe-bar. The subdued light, the dark brown carpets, the lack-lustre prints hanging on the bone-coloured walls depressed me. I felt encompassed by a brittle shell with only Rose-

mary remaining to fill the aching hollow within. Dr. Ritter's remarks about her pelvis and the fluid troubled me incessantly, and, in the silent solitude of waiting, grew into proportions that made me tremble as I sat thinking, remembering, reliving, and mulling over again and again how different things might have been. 'Wish me luck,' Rosemary had said. Luck alone was insufficient. In that night of waiting, aware of the imminence of the birth of my child, I sensed the burgeoning of something grander, something more fervid, more profound, that another might have recognised more certainly as prayer.

And when Dr. Ritter came at seven in the morning to deliver the child, and I saw Rosemary again soon after, weary but quietly content, the baby cradled in her arm, its black eyes blinking, its lips sucking, and its nose quaintly flattened, that unspoken fervid reverberation swelled still more grandly and more profoundly and burst into the flush of ecstasy and the exultation of thanksgiving.

'He's ours, Bernie,' Rosemary said.

'He's us,' I answered, barely able to answer.

'May you both have an easy upbringing,' Mother said when I telephoned her. 'Where is your Rosemary? I'd like to send her flowers.'

'And Father?'

'It's Saturday,' Mother reminded me. 'He's gone to the synagogue.'

It was half-past nine. I shaved, showered and dressed, put on a suit I seldom wore. I found a skull-cap in a drawer and put it in my pocket. Outside, the sun shone calmly, the air smelled of acorns, and a breeze ruffled my hair as I drove across the city to St. Kilda where my father had gone to pray. It was with a lightness of spirit born of resolve that I entered the synagogue.

Slightly stooped, and swaying to the cantor's musical chant, Father seemed at one with the serenity of the place. Above, the dome rose high and dust-laden beams of yellow light tumbled through the windows, converging on the rostrum where the cantor sang. Father, in an undertone, sang with him. Before the Ark covered in velvet, above which arched the legend

'Know Before Whom Thou Standest', the congregation prayed, bound in a solidarity from which I felt myself apart. But in my own way, in the way of inner ecstasy for which I lacked appropriate words, I reached out, whole-heartedly, to offer thanks to Whoever it was before Whom I stood. And I felt for Father then and understood his pain and, with my gaze, clung to him through the remainder of the service, awaiting that moment when I could approach him to deliver the news and be received in turn.

The service over, I watched him as, lovingly, he removed his prayer-shawl, folded it, and with his prayer book, which he kissed, placed it in the locker beneath his seat. His features – the brow, the cheeks, the chin, and more than these his hands – had acquired a certain heaviness, or solidity, that told, I thought, of inner certainty. I wanted to approach him and to greet him. But the congregation began to disperse and I moved with the murmuring current towards the outer steps where, full with the birth of my child and alive with the aura of worship, I stopped to wait for him

Coming out, he saw me, hesitated, looked me up and down, held his breath. There were deep creases beside his eyes. He wore his summer suit.

'Father,' I said, approaching, reaching with words across the physical space between us. 'I have a son . . . You are a grandfather . . .'

I reached out, but the fingers of my reaching met with steel. He brushed past me and descended the steps. There were people still about. I ran after him.

'I know it's been hard, but listen to me. For one moment.'

'What is there to say?', he asked, in that crusty unemotional tone that haunted.

'I came to tell you, as soon as I could. Rosemary . . . this morning . . . she gave birth to a son. That's what there is to say. I have a son . . .'

'Then you have more than I have.'

Nearing the gate, I tried to reach him once more.

'I can't believe it. That you can so totally give us up. *This*

is what you survived for.'

'For this I survived? Apikoros! *You* can talk about survival, when you haven't learnt yet to wipe your nose.'

'Father, don't turn away. Not now. I need you. If there is a God, don't be so hard. Father!'

Turning into Charnwood Crescent, he drew away, walking in the shadows of buildings thrown upon him by the sun; while, left alone and standing at the gate, poised between the synagogue and the street, my private universe tottered about me. Without foothold and without anchor, I floundered, and stood amidst the rubble in the aching emptiness of ruins which, I felt, I knew, not even Rosemary nor my newborn child could ever adequately restore.

Two Letters

So, my dear – dearest – Noelene, you are engaged. Believe me, I do wish you well. Without irony, without stint, without the slightest reservation. In a universe of chaos where happiness is at a premium, cling even to its shadow. Jelly-like, a fragment of slippery protoplasm, happiness has a habit – no, a penchant – for eluding the grasp. I know. And I fancy that you are aware how I know. Mine are hands smeared with butter. I pray that, caught in the clasp of your own, your happiness may even grow. You see, I do believe in the possibility of happiness, only not in its eternity. And that is why I refused to let you ruin your life.

I gave you other reasons, of course. – I was too old for you. My existence was a winding-down, a waiting, a filling-in of time before the inevitable; I didn't have the energy, or the thrust, to begin again; why should a young woman burden herself with an aging man's swelling prostate or cantankerous moods or the hardening of arteries and grey matter into the strait-jacketed rigidity of thought, behaviour and expectation?

And yet, in a sense, I did love you, though I do use the word 'love' in my own particular way. Its conventional meaning I have come to hate; it is almost lascivious in a man of fifty-eight when applied to a girl just out of school (I exaggerate, true, but twenty-four, even with a PhD in the offing, is scarcely the age of full-blown maturity – and you must remember that both my daughters, Judith and Michelle, are older than yourself).

In any case after Joanna, I distrust the word intensely. What we call love is a sieve full of holes. Into it, I once poured torrents of feeling, often violent and irrepressible, whole cataracts of it, but it all streamed out from underneath. An artist is more exotic than a molecular biologist, so who can blame Joanna whose interests ever lay in macrame and mosaics, batik and sculpture, for leaving my world of cold facts and reductionism for that of art and inspiration? As a fully-fledged biologist yourself, you know what I mean, though, mercifully, you are able to divorce yourself, through youth, love, indeed through your very biological instincts, from the implications of biological truth. Your glands are still fresh. Those chemicals coursing in your blood are at their peak, exciting desires and passions that romantics and poets – and the more sensitive psychologists, bless them – label ‘love’. And that is a sign of health. But my own glands – they are atrophied. Physically, I am a man still – that, if I may be so crude, you already know (what a lapse of common sense that night was on my part!) – but distasteful as the thought may be, you involved yourself with an emotional castrato. When I say then, that I loved you, I use the word as a tool of convention, because I know no other more accurate to describe a constellation of desires – a desire to see your freshness preserved, a desire that you may never grow bitter, a desire that you may never age, that you may not undergo the same process of decay that all ‘flesh is heir to’, that you may never die. It is not the adolescent love spent in ogling and – forgive me – in sublimated masturbation, nor of the young adult flesh, throbbing to cling to a woman as its own. It is something more desperate, more of a protest, a desire to oppose and conquer death. And just as I would not wish that you waste your best years nursing my decay, I could not live, I swear it with the ever-present sense of your own ultimate mortality.

That is hardly something I could tell you outright.

When I received the invitation to your engagement upon returning from the laboratory last night, I thought a great deal about you. I sat in the dark, smoked, played Vivaldi – your

favourite – remembered the timid fledgeling who joined my department as a research assistant. It was shortly after Joanna left. Judith was already in Boston with her psychiatrist husband, and Michelle – needles in her flesh – was tramping around Europe, visiting every theatre, gallery and museum, dreaming of ultimately breaking on to the stage. In the dark I sat and remembered. The telephone rang twice but I just sat there. A breeze rustled the curtains through the open window but I made no move to shut it. Cars passed, a drunkard swore, I tasted the salt of the sea. The only times I moved were to turn the record over, first one side, then another, then the first again. Strange, but above the smoke of my cigarette, I could smell the cinnamon in your hair and when I shut my eyes, you stood before me, or rather bent over me, dressed in luminous green, pendant dangling, broad ribbon holding back your hair, your fingers long and supple, and pliant like a pianist's. I grasped them between my hands to offer praise for a project well done, and remembered the quiver of your body as you my fledgeling sprouted wings right under my eyes and, brazenly if I may say so, touched, then took my hand and drew it to your cheek. Noelene, Noelene! I was older than your own father! And right among the petri dishes, pipettes, incubators and tissue cultures. What would young Russell, so earnest a technician, have thought had he entered at that moment? Why do I mention Russell? You may never have noticed, but his eyes, his *eyes*, whenever you were close by – they clung to your very breath. Poor boy! How his juices must have flowed! The first to arrive in the morning, the last to leave, just to be close to you for as long as he could. And then when you left the department to lecture at the Institute, how that boy's bubble must have burst. At quarter past nine, we were still waiting for him. He rarely smiled. And come four o'clock, he couldn't leave the place quickly enough. He left a month later, said he was going abroad for six months, and would then return to full-time study. What precisely, he would decide while overseas. And – would you believe it? – he is back with me. He lay bricks for three months, sold ties and socks for another three,

worked his juices out of his system and now works as diligently as ever. But he is studying at least, one sure gain. Physiology. Part-time. You enchantress, Noelene, you!

What followed your overture was natural enough, though to this day, I can't really forgive myself. I find my excuse in biology that plays havoc with a man's appetites. Like the Ancients who blamed the stars, I find it easier to blame those deranged colliding atoms, that pandemonium of bristling molecules, than to face responsibility for my own lapse, and I console myself with the fact that the same pandemonium – though, in one so young, more excusable – must have possessed you as well. But there is conscience after all, though I know – yes, I do know, Noelene – that conscience, too, when reduced sufficiently is merely the manifestation of the interplay of molecules on a different plane. Politicians find refuge in demagoguery, mass murderers in ideology, the clergy in theology, and I, weak flesh, in biology. The devil, overworked genius, assumes many guises.

Biology. – What to me has always been so self-evident. Joanna could never accept. But then she was – or, rather, became – the artistic type. She rediscovered her interest – and her talent – late in life when the girls were virtually fully grown and when her hands sought activity that would offer, as she put it, some deeper meaning to her existence. From there on, our lives seemed to part. She felt with time the pressure of her age. Eight years younger than myself, she felt, at forty-six, that she was wasting herself, that her life was slipping away, unmarked by any tangible accomplishments other than the commonplace ones of raising daughters and seeing that her husband was fed when he returned from work. I understood her. I did. But my teaching, my research work, the administration of the faculty, as you know, Noelene, claimed the greater part of me. Joanna, acting finally and resolutely in pursuit of her own fulfilment, enrolled in a string of adult education classes and visited galleries and art displays for which, I confess, I had little taste or appreciation. My bent had always been scientific – though, where Joanna failed, you at

least did teach me the beauty of a Vivaldi concerto, the elegance of a Botticelli or the merit of books other than Sherlock Holmes mysteries or Agatha Christie thrillers. So, Joanna often went alone to savour of artistic fare, and one day returned, burning, declaring that she was trapped, that she was stifled, that she wanted freedom – absolute freedom – alone, to paint, to sculpt, to create. That I could accept. Even an obsession is biological. Like her waning periods, her nocturnal flushes, her middle-life ‘blues’. I was prepared, therefore, to bear with that obsession, expecting, as so often happens, the flame to wilt, the simmering cauldron to cool and the vapours to condense once more to sober sanity. But the fire burned more ardently than I had appreciated. She left. That hurt. But what hurt more was the fact that she did not remain on her own. – And here is the irony – or is it a paradox? Joanna is not really free – she is now living with an artist (himself a widower with children), while I, who never sought her kind of freedom, *am* free, and yet in freedom *am* shackled to a solitude I did not want.

In any case, while we still lived together, how was I to persuade *her* who had artistic inclinations that biology – molecular biology at that – explains all workings of life from the molecule to the gene, from gene to cell, from cell to organism, from organism to species; how clarify that biology provides an understanding even of the historical process of life of which a human being is a part, that it explains the functioning of his body, of his mind, his emotions, of his society, and indeed of the entire living environment with which he must come to terms?

True, there was no need to persuade her (you, yourself, model of tolerance for one so young, said as much). But the truth is – or was – that I did like to have things my way. From Judith and Michelle, I did not expect too much concurrence. After all, why deprive them ahead of time of their youthful idealism, their illusions, their – one may even call it – utopianism, in which men are perfectible through their own inner essential goodness or through a belief in God, and in

which the very direction of all human history is towards perfection? That, at least, was Judith's view – a hybrid undigested melange of Plato, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau and Marx (yes, Marx) – before she married her psychiatrist husband Norbert. Michelle was more flippant, flighty, her thoughts ever circuiting an orbit lit by floodlights in which she coursed, an Ophelia, or Lady Teazle or some faint-hearted Masha or Anna or Hedda or Julia, swooning and declaiming, scheming and suffering, basking in the fancied plaudits of critics, audience, admirers. Such vanity. Michelle, Michelle. Dark-eyed and dreamy, a freak mutation of my complement of genes. But Joanna! Joanna was adult, and intelligent – that, I never denied, even those few times you and I did talk about her (something I was naturally loathe to do) – a graduate in history and French, a teacher at Northcote High, the main force behind the students' magazine and co-ordinator of the library. She, at least, *understood* what I said about biology, but *accept*, no, she couldn't. If the molecule is all, she asked, where does music fit into your scheme? And art? And free will? And thought, love (that word again), motherliness, charity, ambition, evil? And curiosity, judgement, foresight, faith? Were these not, indeed your own questions when I made my views known to you? Though, I must confess, Noelene, that from you I had expected acceptance to match understanding. After all, a scientist, a biologist, *my* protege. Which proves yet again an observation I made: how easily people, even intelligent people, sever feeling from knowledge, emotion from reason.

No, Noelene, I don't accuse you of anything, I swear, lest by accusing you of inconsistency I accuse you also for being human.

Which, in a perverse way, reminds me of my faux pas at the beach today.

And what was I doing by the beach? You scarcely need to guess, Noelene. I, for whom sentiment, like everything else, is the product of a particular configuration of cells activated by a spurt of chemical substances – let's call them, after our own

private language, plasma and cerebral x-y-z – yielded to unabashed sentimentality. I went there to see again your eyes squinting in the sunlight, your immaculate body glistening velvety under its glow, your cinnamon-scented hair stippled with sand. I went there to hear again your rhythmic voice, your sensible laughter, your breath as you napped lightly, your head cradled in the cove of my neck. I went there to be a fool again, Noelene, yes, a fool, seeking to recapture time and love and a happiness that my buttered fingers let slip through into a gorge in which it vanished beyond salvage.

I was drinking coffee at a table outside Bill's Fish Grill, a stone's throw from the pier – our pier, remember? Every seat was occupied, the noise rose several decibels above comfort, peace was at a premium. Around me sat a few docile families and aging couples, but mostly the babel arose from a score of young people, the girls in tight, flimsy and colourful bathing costumes that sharpened their features, the youths bare-chested, bronzed, jaunty, vain. Three harassed waitresses incessantly weaving circles between the tables could scarcely keep up with their orders; sweat stained the armpits of their orange dresses. Far out on the razor-edged horizon cleaving blue from blue, a liner floated easily, barely moving. I saw your face among the passengers, Noelene, sailing away out of my existence once and for always, and then – horrors – my own, saw it with a rivetting suddenness as if I was sundered in two, with an odd sensation of disintegration, the one part escaping, with you, towards a freedom immaculate and hedonistic, the other tethered to a bondage, of habit, age, propriety and self, that cold rational self that would call such freedom mad anarchy – anarchy not of behaviour, nor of feeling, but of that overheated x-y-z that would scramble the very fabric of common sense. Even in my imagination, you see, Noelene, I cannot truly let myself go. Our love, our love-making – we are both adult, so we may be frank – was an anomaly, not unpleasant to be sure, nor from the sensuous side to be wholly regretted, but still counter to the grain of wisdom and reason. A man of fifty-eight – who knows but that Judith

over there in Boston might at any time make of me a grandfather? —, a girl of twenty-four, the one winding down, the other straddling the threshold of life in all its fullness, the one blighted, the other blooming; and both scientists, given to rational thought, deduction and insight who, knowing the source of desires and passions from their most primitive well-spring, might the better have been expected to control them. Noelene, my dear, my dearest. Conscience, conscience, conscience. A hammer on the anvil of human weakness.

I drank one cup of coffee, then ordered a second, this time with a generous slice of chocolate cake, and continued to look for you — on the sand, in the shallows, among the waves. All around me were young people, chattering, boasting, joking laughing. Judith's age, Michelle's, yours, and younger still. I was an intruder, together with an old overweight couple who sat fanning the afternoon heat from their faces. At the table to my left sat a sun-tanned girl with just your hair, your breasts, your thighs. She was slender, clear-complexioned; her brow was smooth, her cheeks full, her chin and nose somewhat sturdy, sturdy but elegant, just short of harshness. A young fellow held his arms about her; she held his hand, sipped cola and listened with a leisurely smile to the talk. Were I a sculptor, I should have for all time chiselled and smoothed that picture into stone.

Instead I nearly lost my head. It could have been the sun or the noise or the awareness of youth lost or the crushing knowledge of your engagement. I have not been able to admit it until now, but to deny is to lie.

A man is an animal. But no animal is a fool. I came close today.

Over coffee, I listened to the banter of the young folk around me — in the main, inconsequential talk of sport, clothes, parties, music and the ever-reliable back-biting gossip that is customary fare. Their faces, bronzed, at ease, glowed with health, their bodies burned with unabashed hunger. And if their laughter was any indication, they were happy. Happy, Noelene! Happy! Even ecstatic! And do you know why? Be-

cause their happiness was not a Pandora's box; they did not look into the source of their happiness, did not reduce it to the basic level of reflex or response or upsurge of serum x-y-z, did not see themselves as wound-up biological automata created by the chance merging of one egg among thousands with one sperm among millions, but rather, however deluded, as free beings full of potential and vigour and boldness, able to scale the mountains, the jagged peaks and the tyrannies of life. I know the feeling, Noelene, I too was young once. And it was not for me to disillusion them. Their happiness was thrice a hundred times blessed, if the word be no heresy for so God-denying a savant as I.

But here came the aberration. It was I, I, Professor Carlbach, Head of the School of Molecular Biological Research, apostle of reason and exponent of action founded on the fundamental base of verifiable knowledge, whose biochemistry became scrambled. Sitting in their midst, I became infected with and yielded to their sense of freedom, of future, of purposefulness. Under the afternoon sun, amid the babel, memories – of Joanna, of you, of fancies long withered and crumbed – stirred within me and stretched themselves as from an over-long hibernation. Mortised into a pivot enclosed by youth, and tension gathering in my arms, my thighs, my spine, I wanted to reach out to them, to touch them and enter into their chatter as though I were their peer. My words, Noelene, may not have been these, but their sense was the same: 'Take me in with you; let me be a part of you. My hair, yes, it is turning grey, I know, and wrinkles, true, nests of them, betray my age. They are the mere workings of biology. But our language, our *language* – no, not our mere spoken words, but the passions behind them – this is the same. Through language we are one. Share with me your youth, I shall give you wisdom. Teach me joy and I shall give you understanding. Let me reach out and we shall be one.'

And I did reach out, Noelene. That is the insane part of it. That girl with your hair, your breasts, your thighs. Someone waved at her and threw her a greeting. She responded. Her

smile was a flicker, a flutter so delicate and tantalising that it made me catch my breath. Inadvertently, I sat upright and reached out in her direction. She was scarcely three feet from me. Had she sat a hair's breath closer! Had I bent towards her a fraction more! How her skin burns under my fingers even now, Noelene, even though, fortune be thanked, I did not touch. I stopped short but she perceived my movement. With a startled jerk, she turned her face squarely towards me. Her lips trembled faintly, her eyes narrowed, her entire back stiffened with a tense bristling motion. I looked away, trained my gaze upon the liner now traversed the breadth of the bay, even looked directly into the sun that the pain may sear my thoughts, but I kept turning to her, her softness gelled into frosty caution. She leaned towards her companion and whispered in his ear. Glancing glacially at me, he nodded. Then, standing up, they gathered together their belongings – he, his towel, cigarettes and sunglasses, she, her handbag – bade their group farewell, turned their backs to me and, hand clinging to hand, strode away. Impulse bade me run after them, call out 'I meant nothing by that, come back, I am not what you think.' But they were lost in the crowd. I sat at my table, mortified, my hand encircling the cup of coffee grown cold, every filament of my being feeling suddenly old, decrepit, morally base.

Shortly after, I left.

A mild breeze drifted in from the sea but for me it reserved its sharpest teeth.

I did not return home immediately. The prospect of four walls echoing my desolation repulsed me. I drove instead to the laboratory, expecting among the incubators and refrigerators, the pipettes and flasks, and the dishes and tissue cultures to find restored a measure of stability to the ground on which I stood.

I was alone. The day being a Saturday, the laboratory was vacant. I moved among the benches, touching their solid surfaces, checking the solutions, even throwing feed into the cages for the mice.

I lingered on in the empty laboratory, undecided whether to remain or leave for home – whether to trade one solitude for another.

On my desk lay the draft of my projected Morgan Wynn Steele Memorial Oration entitled 'Biology and the Liberation of the Self.'

Almost snorting, I flipped through its pages, turned to the concluding paragraph and read.

'More than in any previous time, we may say with the strength of conviction that biology yields knowledge, knowledge leads to understanding, understanding to the liberation of the self and liberation to self-control, reason, happiness and peace.'

I gathered together the pages of the draft; biting my lip, I struck the flapping sheets against my palm. Despite the pain, Noelene – what else, if not pain? – I must admit I saw the joke.

Joanna appeared before me then, and Judith, Michelle, the bronzed young faces around the tables outside Bill's, that nameless girl with your breasts and your hair, and in their faces, their gestures, and their laughter I read with a clarity so luminous that what knowledge had until then informed me to be true was in its outward expression patently false. For knowledge and happiness, Noelene, are no kith and kin and one may say – and, ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, I do say! – that happiest may he be who is liberated from knowledge and released from reason.

Without remorse, I threw my oration into the waste basket where its pages came apart, then locked the laboratory and left for home.

I drove through streets cool and subdued. The evening breeze stirred in the trees. Here and there, a window came alive with light. People hurried or ambled along, each on his own course, each circuiting in his private constellation of thought and feeling and purpose. And from within the walls of my own decrepit solitude, I felt love towards them, Noelene, love even for their delusions which I had scorned, and for their caprices, their frivolities, their spontaneity, for their every

action which showed that they were free. For happiness is freedom – if not true freedom, a biological impossibility, then the *perception* of freedom which permits a man to live at ease with his delusions and his caprices, his follies and his fantasies, his appetites and inconsistencies. And for the second time I was prepared shamelessly to reach out, and, by reaching, to break the walls enclosing me and to trade my knowledge for their freedom.

And that is why, Noelene, I am prepared to be a fool again, even if it means damnation, and to appeal to you, even now, to return, to help me let go, to free myself from the tyranny of reason and propriety through which I lost you before. Love is a sieve full of holes, yes, I know, I said so before, and yet, without any lasciviousness intended in a man of fifty-eight for a girl of twenty-four, I love you. But, believe me, it is a changed love, a love prepared to take you as you are, prepared, as it was not before, to risk the fading of your freshness, to risk your growing bitterness, and to risk living with the sense, however desperate, of your ultimate mortality.

I believe in happiness, Noelene. Dare I, dare I cling to hope?

Emanuel.

Dear Noelene,

Congratulations. Believe me, I do wish you well. I shall be pleased to accept the invitation to the reception in honour of your engagement.

Emanuel.

The Philosopher

Pinchas Altshul, restaurateur and free-thinker, would not let himself be saved.

'The sentence has been passed,' he wheezed through an ironic smile, 'and the judge is handing over to the executioner.'

'My, we are morbid,' I had answered, laughing and denying any such thing. 'You'll be well again yet.'

The murky waters of his grey eyes called me 'Liar' but his blue swollen lips said something else. 'I respect you, you are a medical man, so let's be honest.'

He was a big man, had a large head with prominent ears, a mass of silvery hair combed back, the shoulders of an ox and an expanded torso that heaved noisily with every breath. He was sixty-four. A yellow light falling on his face gave a sallow appearance to his complexion.

'Why I'm in hospital at all, I don't know,' he said with a flourish of a hand. 'It only gives you more work to keep an old useless wreck alive.'

'Come now, no man is useless.'

'Ah, the doctor is a philosopher,' he said. 'It's good to see.'

He suffered from heart disease, had had two coronaries within a month and had been reduced from a man passably fit, if overweight, to a dusky hulk for whom more than moderate movement was an effort and ordeal. To his credit, he did not afford himself the privilege of self-pity but quoted Ecclesiastes at me instead.

'To every thing there is a season,' he said, and added 'a time to pluck and to be plucked up.'

He winked as though he possessed some special secret. Then he reached for a pad and goldplated pen that lay on his night-table and wrote something hurriedly. The springs of his bed creaked and his sheets rustled. The late October afternoon light was fading and he bent forward, arching low, his brow tightly furrowed over his note-pad.

Then the task completed, he sat upright.

'Spoken words vanish like the wind,' he said wheezily as he tore off the top sheet of paper and handed it to me. 'The written word can be eternal. Here, keep this.'

He had written in jagged script, 'In this world, there is only one truth. We live, procreate, die. All else is invention.'

Altshul looked satisfied. He scratched his chin with a generous gesture and said, 'Pure biology. That is the truth.'

The next day, whilst conducting my ward round, Pinchas Altshul was away having X-rays taken. But, passing by his bed, I saw an envelope addressed to me attached to the bull-clip of his chart. I did not take his note out immediately but waited until the round was over and all essential tasks performed.

I read his message just as Altshul was being brought back to the ward. Through the sisters' station window, I could feel his gaze – a gaze that was fixed, palpable, intense.

'In this world,' I read, 'A man has only one duty. To be human to his neighbour. All else is commentary.'

'He's a funny fellow, isn't he?', said Sister Mason who, sitting beside me, had chanced to read the note over my arm.

Altshul, straddled on the edge of the bed and breathing shallow rapid breaths, was beaming. His face seemed to fold in some private delight. He beckoned to me.

I examined him and detailed my findings into his file. When I finished, he leaned over and said, in a soft secretive tone, 'You read my note?'

'Yes,' I answered, studying his large bloated face.

'And I am right, aren't I? After all, all that men have in this world is one another, no?'

‘That depends,’ I said, ‘whether or not you’re a believer.’

‘A believer! You *are* a philosopher. Listen. My father, may his memory be blessed, he was a learned man. And I nearly became a rabbi. Indeed, I *would* have become a rabbi had I only possessed the gall to be false to myself.’

He paused, drew breath, then puffed a sibilant flow of air through his swollen lips.

‘Once, I was a believer. I could be nothing else. But Zyklon proved mightier than God. It suffocated Him before my eyes while the ovens reduced His bones to ashes. And ashes, my friend, I could not worship. – I lost all belief then.’

‘Ashes,’ I said.

‘Ashes. The ashes of my wife, my twins, my parents, sprinkled and trampled into the slush and excrement of Auschwitz. My God died with them. You are too young to understand. For myself, I escaped. Though sometimes I wonder why. A man is but an animal and, like an animal, I suppose, just wants to live. I escaped. And survived. Here, in Melbourne, I married again. A Bialystock girl, a young widow whose family too had perished in Europe. A common enough story. I’ll spare you the details. We had no children, but after Auschwitz asked for little and we were sufficiently content. I worked as a cleaner, then a porter, a waiter, accumulated some money and opened a restaurant. I even prospered a little. But what good has it done me? After six years, my wife – she was only thirty-five – she died of a brain tumour. ‘So,’ he said, raising his grey eyes upwards towards his brow, ‘if you have a friend up there, good luck to you. I haven’t. To be a survivor is to kill one’s faith.’

He sighed. ‘Yes, in this world, we really only have each other.’

I became conscious of the smell of ether and disinfectant in the air. A beam of violet dust streamed through the window and I could taste the smoke spiralling from the hospital chimney. Altshul was smiling, as on the previous day an ironic smile. Then, without preamble, he bent closer towards me

and said in a voice that carried across the ward, 'I'm dying, aren't I?'

The other patients looked around and then, embarrassed, turned away. Caught unawares, I acted on impulse, denying through thwarting laughter what, in fact, was true.

'No matter,' he said, 'no matter. I know. The laws of biology cannot be denied. Why should I be different?'

He tossed his head vigorously so that the mass of his silvery hair rose, floated momentarily and fell.

'Doctor, don't let me hold you up,' he said. 'Go. The living, they need you.'

Back at the sisters' station, I said to Sister Mason, 'Altshul's really a very unhappy man. He troubles me.'

She ticked a list of drugs, said, 'Mmm' without interest, and pushed a requisition form towards me to be signed.

Two days later, Pinchas Altshul took a turn for the worse. He became more acutely breathless and spat up blood. A clot had travelled to his lungs; he was blue with physical distress. The oxygen bubbled in the flask on the wall and hissed through the tubing to his nose.

'This . . . is . . . it . . . , doctor . . . , isn't it?', he gasped between short rapid breaths as I drew blood for tests.

'You'll be fine,' I lied. 'As soon as treatment is started.'

He shook his head. 'Please . . . , doctor, be honest.'

'Honest.'

'Give me . . . give me one large dose of morphine . . . Get it over with . . . once and for all . . . I have nothing, . . . nobody . . . to live for . . . '

'Nonsense!', I said rather harshly.

Altshul's face, though large and formidable, was soft at the edges, gently appealing. He watched as I emptied the syringe into three small test tubes and stirred the first. The veins of his neck bulged, the muscles of his chest fell inwards between the ribs with every breath.

'Have pity,' he said.

'You'll be all right,' I parried, feigning concentration on the tubes.

'Doctor, my friend . . . In this world . . . – when you have the opportunity . . . , write this down . . . – in this world . . . a man can have only one hope . . . Not to suffer . . . All else is fantasy.'

'Believe me,' I said, the sharp edge of my voice stressing my annoyance. 'In a short time, you'll be more comfortable, you'll see. Everything is under control. . . ' 'Nurse,' I beckoned, 'bring me one hundred milligrams of pethidine.'

Altshul was sitting upright, propped on four pillows. The grey hairs of his chest spiralled in a multitude of coils. He was gasping. The oxygen hissed. His brow was clammy, his lips purple.

'Doctor . . . ,' he said, 'tell me . . . , what . . . what do you know of . . . freedom?'

'Freedom?! This is hardly the time for philosophy,' I reprimanded him with a feigned frown as I prepared the injection to settle him down.

He shook his head vigorously. 'It's not philosophy . . . it's life.'

'We can discuss life tomorrow. Now give me your arm.'

Altshul complied. The skin of his arm was slack and yielding.

'Just a small prick of the needle,' I said, 'and you'll soon be much more comfortable.'

He wheezed. 'Comfort . . . will be . . . in the next world.'

'Tomorrow we will talk philosophy,' I promised, gathering up the test tubes, tourniquet, spent syringes and swabs. 'But first, today, you will get treatment.'

'Listen . . . ,' he said, 'listen!' The tone was importuning.

'I'll be back later,' I said, 'now get some rest.'

'Doctor . . . listen!'

'Spare your breath. I shall come back soon.' My own tone was resolute and Altshul had no option but to acquiesce.

Sitting in the sisters' station to write out orders for his treatment, I watched Pinchas Altshul through the window. Bolt upright, breathless, his eyes large and grey like an owl's, he looked right and left around the ward as though seeking

some escape. I remembered his past, his losses, his solitude and, in that moment, felt such a swell of pity that I felt guilty for having been so harsh. I pushed back my chair in readiness to return to him, to offer solace, company, whatever he wanted, when Sister Mason walked in and distracted me, saying, 'Nurse Johnson is dressing old Fitzgerald's ulcer. Do you want to see it?'

I went and for the time being Altshul was forgotten.

That afternoon, Sister Mason called me. Her voice over the telephone shook with agitation.

'It's Altshul! Go to the yard! Quickly. He's thrown himself over the balcony!'

When I reached him, a few people had already gathered about – technicians, students, porters, engineers. He was blue but still warm. His breathing had virtually ceased, and probing his neck, I felt the flicker of a pulse, something slow and faint but not yet hopeless.

'Call cardiac arrest!', I ordered as I knelt over Altshul. Bending back his neck, I sealed my lips over his and breathed my breath into him. His chest heaved and fell like limp exhausted bellows. His eyes were caves, the pupils were enlarging. The mass of his hair lay in disarray.

A team of doctors and nurses came running. They brought trolleys, bottles, air-masks. Tumult mounted.

'Threw himself over . . .'

'Had heart disease . . .'

'Has he broken anything?'

'Don't they supervise them up there?'

'His right leg's turned outward!'

Altshul's pulse grew fainter. The cardiograph registered the occasional beat. An intern thumped his chest and applied cardiac massage. I passed a tube into his windpipe and a third doctor inserted an intravenous line. A succession of drugs were injected, but with every passing minute, the outcome became more certain.

After half an hour, the resuscitation attempt was abandoned. All equipment and apparatus was gathered together

and taken away. The staff dispersed and only two nurses and a porter remained behind. Altshul lay on the asphalt, blue and immobile, his pyjamas open down to the crotch, his right leg broken, his mouth open, his eyes glazed. A fly buzzed about his head.

I helped the porter hoist his large body on to a trolley. The nurses wrapped him in a sheet, then he was taken inside. I looked up towards the balcony from which he had thrown himself and saw the heads of a dozen patients who had been looking on.

Later, back in the ward, Sister Mason handed me an envelope.

'It was found on his night-table,' she said, 'and is addressed to you.'

And as she proceeded to tell me how badly she felt about the whole affair – 'Matron is sure to blame me, though how could I have known?' – I opened the envelope and took out a note.

The paper was crumpled, as though it had been screwed up to be thrown away and then straightened out again. The script was spindly and full of jagged edges. The note read:

'In this world, a man has only one true freedom – living, to choose the time of his death. All else is pretence.'

I looked at Altshul's bed, now empty and covered with fresh sheets. A yellow light laden with dust fell across it. I wondered vaguely whether perhaps he might yet have been saved.

A Marriage

Papa, that evening, emerged from his shell. Laying one hand gently upon my veil, he wiped at a corner of his eye with the other, then leaned over, rather stiffly, to kiss me.

'My daughter,' he whispered, 'mein herliches kind.'

A little later, after the dessert, he held a speech. He was visibly nervous, read from his notes which quivered between his white puffy hands and twice lost his place. And then he swayed to and fro before the microphone so that his voice tumbling from the speakers ebbed and flowed in volume quite apart from the tremulousness that underlay each word. Poor Papa! How glad he was when his ordeal came to an end. But there was no denying that pure sincerity with which he expressed his love for his only daughter and wished her all that a father's heart – and a mother's – could wish in her future life with her new husband, his acquired third son, a young man of unquestioned ability, unique gifts and an ambition, too rarely seen these days, to strive for all that was truly worthy in life. During the ensuing applause, Papa, relieved, passed a dumpy hand over his moist balding head and beamed almost boyishly; Mama dropped her eyes; and my brothers, David and Benjy, both older than myself, said 'Amen'.

At midnight, Max and I changed into our travelling clothes, said a hectic goodbye to the guests, kissed our parents and were whisked away. I threw the bouquet towards my bridesmaid who, leaping forward, caught it with both hands.

In the taxi, on the way to our hotel, I said, 'We're on our own now.'

Winking as he tossed his head, Max said, 'Happy?'

I nodded, passed the tip of my finger over his bristly moustache and nestled under his arm.

I *was* happy. Unreservedly. Ecstatically. I felt strong; the future lay open, unknown yet undaunting; Max would create, write the plays that were burgeoning in his imagination and I would help and bolster where I could and shine, in time, in the light of his success.

Max had strong views, ambition and enormous talent.

'What the local theatre needs,' he would say, probing the air with his forefinger for emphasis, 'no, what theatre everywhere needs is a shake-up, new ideas with epic heroes once more and tragic heroes, not the sordid petty melodramas of the kitchen, the bedroom and the hotel bar. Hamlets, Macbeths who stalk the stage, not little Beckett tramps who cling fretfully to the shadows of existence.'

I loved to hear him talk and to read whatever he wrote. He showed me fragments of his projected plays. The language was still raw, the scenes admittedly somewhat forced and heavy-handed, but there was immense energy in them, passion, tension and what to my mind was an artistic manipulation of great themes – of love and loyalty, tragedy and hate, creation and destruction. When he spoke, Papa, too, a shy man who had a deep reverence for culture first nurtured in Europe in the years before the War, listened to him with respect.

'A man who loves books must have a sensitive heart,' he said, expressing an insight into himself no less than into Max and into book-lovers in general.

Mama, however, a practical woman who complemented Papa's more ethereal nature, held reservations. Her intuitions worried her. An idiosyncrasy of hers, she never liked pure white hands in a man, particularly hands with carefully-trimmed nails and faint blue veins that disappeared into the soft haze of surrounding flesh. Like Max's. To her, such hands spoke of vanity and a bent for idleness, but she did not press

her suspicions too hard. She was a sick woman who suffered from diabetes and kidney disease and who, in every aspect of family life, preferred peace to remonstrations.

'I pray only that you will be happy,' she said when Max and I approached her and Papa with our decision to marry.

'I will be,' I said, 'I know I will.'

David and Benjy, smiling strangely – I had hoped they could be more open – wished me luck, kissed me on the cheeks and shook Max's hand without another word. I sensed their disapproval – he was too forthright and self-assured for their liking – but I knew secretly, whenever I heard Max talk, that someday, their reservations would prove unfounded. Ours would be a better marriage than that of my parents and, God willing, more fulfilling than theirs had been.

'Poor Papa,' I said, suddenly filled with pity, to Max who held his arm draped lightly about my shoulders. 'We shall have more luck.'

Max said 'Yes' with his customary emphatic firmness, but I wondered whether he knew exactly what I had meant.

Poor Papa. How he had failed!

A reserved and peaceful man, once a lawyer in Czechoslovakia, his everyday breath was Melbourne, his food, his work as a taxation clerk, the firmness beneath his feet, the cold winds that made him turn up his collar – those things of which he was aware through his immediate senses – all these were of Melbourne and of the present. But in those reaches of the mind which emerged when physical awareness became stilled, he lived and breathed in different realms. He remembered always – could never, would never forget – Prague, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz where his youthful ambitions to become a judge foundered in ashes. Arriving in Australia five years after the liberation with Mama and their two infant sons, he could not regain his poise. The demands of the moment directed him away from any consideration of renewed study into the tedious string of menial jobs – as janitor, shoe maker, waiter – for a solid interminable decade during which he breathed the Melbourne air with bitterness and ate its bread with patent

distaste. Only later, much later, when he mastered the language of his newer home did he secure a position, albeit a clerical one, in which he could put his hungry intellect to use. But dissatisfaction, that sober melancholy sense of life slipping him by, led him into flight – not physical, for he was too responsible a husband and loving a father for that – but from the everyday stultifying chores of reality into private realms where books and papers became his all as he prepared to write someday a book of memoirs to tell the world, as he said, of the wartime struggle of decency and the human spirit against bestiality and evil, and of the ultimate however costly triumph of good. That he suffered was plain. His fluctuating moods, his nightmares, his long silences and increasing references to the past made his pain almost palpable. Yet he persevered, amassing voluminous reams of notes, of information garnered from memories and books, driven – there was no other word for it – by an inner need to harness for posterity his experiences together with those of family, friends, landsmen and acquaintances and of the millions who had perished and whom he had never known. Out of his labours was to emerge an ultimate and abiding credo.

Mama, herself already sick with diabetes and the beginnings of her kidney disease, feared for his health. Knitting in the lounge-chair as Papa at his desk continued with his consuming work, she would say with growing concern, 'Spare yourself, Karol, who is it all for?', and Papa, running his fingers over his balding head and adjusting his glasses as he looked at her, would answer, 'If not for the world, then for our David and Benjamin and Esther; if for no-one else, then at least for them'.

Mama would not argue. She knew – we all knew – that his book would remain unwritten. A man can endure just so much pain, just so much recall; there are limits beyond which even the strongest will not go, and Papa was not particularly strong. That was why, I realised one day, he spent so much time gathering together his information and amassing notes. Were the preparatory work to come to an end, he would be confronted face-to-face with the very task he had set himself,

of baring his soul, a task in the end too excruciating for so sensitive a man. So he delayed continually the confrontation and procrastinated, even pushing it onward into some distant receding future which, on the one hand, he believed, and on the other feared, might still come. Thus taking flight, he receded progressively into those pained labyrinths of his innermost self, leaving, over the years, less room for Mama in those private realms in which his existence circuted. Harsh words never passed between them, yet there was distance, and if Papa was not mindful of it, Mama, I knew from the way she sighed in her neglected solitude or rooted about for things to do, felt keenly the sharper edge of isolation. Her two sons, my brothers David and Benjy, both married, lived of course away from home while I, too, teaching during the day and spending my evenings and weekends in the company of Max, was seldom there. She fell back, therefore, contrary to her one-time outgoing, even voluble nature, to solitary occupations – knitting, crocheting, watching television or reading – using up time as well as she could if not with soul-providing satisfaction.

Nestling under Max's arm, I could not help but sense how hollow their lives had become and, in that hollow without fathom, how unfulfilled.

At the hotel where we were booked into the nuptial suite – the porter had left with a knowing smirk on his merry youthful lips – we drank champagne, the best. Max glowed, laughed, lifted me by the waist and swung me around.

'My little bird,' he said, his moustache a little moist. 'How does it feel to be Mrs. Lehman at last?'

'Wonderful, Professor Lehman,' I said, feeling free and feathery as I glided in his arms. 'Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.'

Though still a tutor in English literature, Max was in line for a lectureship and liked to be called Professor. It flattered him and fed his ambition to rise high.

It excited me to know that I would be by his side as he rose.

'Professor,' he repeated with obvious delight as, his hair

dishevelled now and his eyes the sparkle of champagne, he laid me down upon the bed, stretched himself fully over me and covered my neck with kisses. After the dancing, he smelled and tasted of sweat.

‘One day, Mrs. Lehman, you will be proud,’ he said.

On our return from our honeymoon, a letter awaited Max notifying him of his appointment as Lecturer in the university’s English Department. We celebrated the news with dinner at the Pickwick, then drove to my parents’ home to share it with them. After our wedding, Max’s own parents had left for a holiday in Hawaii.

Shaking Max’s hand with genuine warmth – he was never anything but genuine – Papa said, ‘I never doubted it.’

Mama offered us some of her apple cake and said, ‘That’s very nice.’

Max saw his appointment to the lectureship as being, by his own choice, merely temporary, a means of establishing contacts in the local literary and theatre world and of earning sufficient money in order, some day, to write full-time. In three years, four, five – certainly no more – he would have enough set aside to meet his purpose. For a time, I would continue to teach, he would write and, with the coming of success, so certain that neither of us could even for a moment entertain any doubt, we would turn our mind to family, to having a child while we were still young and able to boast good health. Max was then twenty-six, I was twenty-two.

For the first year of our marriage, we rented a small third-floor flat in Parkville. There was peace, solemn serenity in our lives. Throwing open the windows on waking, I looked out across the radiant parklands and inhaled their calming stillness. Sometimes, when I rose early, I watched with inner tranquillity the athletes on their morning run and the tiny toy-like figurines marching comically across the dew on their way to work. Max, barely ten minutes from the university, slept in. Having prepared breakfast for him and planted a kiss on his brow as he slept, I left for school. I taught with vigour, enjoyed my work, took care over details, gave myself to the

children completely. Returning home – Max was usually there already, reading the morning paper or revising a lecture or writing at an improvised desk in the lounge-room – I prepared dinner, and over the meal we spoke, he of the university and of his projected plays and I of school. We went often to the theatre, indeed saw every new play, good and bad, as it appeared. Max went less out of love than out of duty. 'A budding playwright, to be successful, can never stop learning,' he said, stroking the bristly ginger beard he had, soon after our marriage, permitted himself to grow. Sometimes, we visited my parents, or his, occasionally friends. But most often we merely stayed at home, Max continuing his private work and I preparing my lessons for the following day. The ease with which we became creatures of routine flooded me with wonder but I was happy, content, lacking nothing.

Lacking nothing. No, that is not quite correct . . .

It was Mama who in her motherly way first planted the seed of longing within me.

'You are happy?', she said to me on one occasion when, visiting her alone, I mentioned to her Max's writing and the plays Max and I had recently seen. 'And there is nothing missing?'

Her face, once so youthful, so mobile, had become progressively more bloated, her skin sallow, pasty, sickly.

There was no escaping her meaning. She already had two grandchildren – David's five-year-old boisterous Daniel and Benjy's baby Mirela – but it was in her nature, in her blood, one could say, to believe that family, children, after the decimating devastation in Europe, came before all else, before ambition, before personal comfort, even before security. And she herself – if evidence were needed – was living proof of that belief.

'When David was born – may such conditions never be known again – your Papa and I shared a room with two other families. There was one doctor nearby, an old-asthmatic with a crippled . . .'

Her stories of the transit camp at St. Ottilien were familiar

to me, for years the butter I ate with my bread: the post-War uprootedness, the deprivations, the appalling discovery of entire families destroyed. There were times, on commemoration days and anniversaries, when I swallowed them with my bread and was made to sense, particularly through Papa's intense silences and changing moods, the abyss of anguish they must have known.

'In children is our future,' Mama would say, 'in them our hope.'

Max would not hear of it. When I broached the matter of a child, he scratched his whiskers and laughed.

'Getting all clucky, are we?', he said.

And once, when, after Benjy had left with his wife Elizabeth and their little Mirela, I mentioned it again, he approached me, held me close and passed his fingers down my spine.

'No, my sweet, we're not ready for *that* yet,' he said, and added as he bit my ear, 'Remember our agreement?'

That Max was not particularly sentimental, he himself attributed to his parents' difficult life. They had arrived in Australia before the war, Polish Jews from Lodz who – so Anusz Lehman was fond of saying – after the Kristallnacht in Germany, had read the signs of the future. Recently married and possessing little to keep them rooted to one place, they cast about for another more distant haven that could become their home. South Africa, America, Canada and Palestine had entered into earnest consideration but it had been an unexpected impulsively-written letter from a remote cousin in Australia that had decided the direction of their flight. That cousin had in his letter promised Anusz and Doba Lehman work in his stocking factory but died, still a young man, of a brain haemorrhage, soon after their arrival. Now alone and not skilled in any occupation, Max's father found work of sorts dealing in spare metal parts and his mother stitching collars to shirts in a dingy, dusty, crowded workshop. Dissatisfied, they bought a milk-bar where they spent – 'mis-spent', Max said – twenty-seven years. Confined for long tedious hours seven days each week within the four constricting walls of their dark over-

stocked shop, smelling of chocolates, bread and cheese, selling yet a little more of their strength for every penny, Max had watched their lives deteriorate into disconsolate drudgery, his father becoming prematurely cynical and grey, his mother growing stout, irritable and complaining, both of them unhappy and bitter, at a pinch provoked into argument and mutual blame for the irremediable void of their lives. Later, much later, after selling the shop, they learnt after a fashion to live again – visiting friends, evenings over cards, the occasional vacation away – but in Max who had grown up under their wings during their most embittered years, the sense of their blighted, wasted lives, their smallness – ‘my parents are the mediocre insignificant people of the world’ – forged the resolve to rise above them, to rise high, above anonymity, above mediocrity, and to achieve success and, with success, a name.

‘A name,’ Max said. ‘When I have a name, then we can think of a child.’ He placed a forefinger on my lips. ‘Trust in me,’ he added, ‘will you do that?’

Our lives continued as before. Max lectured, wrote; I taught.

I trusted in him, but a change, at first barely perceptible but then more evident, took place in Max.

‘I have ideas, splendid, grand, vivid, burning ideas. They nag at me, haunt me, don’t let me sleep. But on paper, the black upon the white, they lose their lustre. My plots are wooden, my characters flat. Their hates, so menacing and malicious in my brain, are mere petty ranklings, their jealousies are trivial, their desires so shallow and immaterial that an infant could not be moved.’

I read whatever he wrote. As self-critic, he was harsh; though, at times, it must be admitted, there was justice in his self-flagellations.

‘Give it time,’ I said in the way of consoling. ‘Keep trying. Something will come of it.’

‘Yes, time,’ he said with uncanny vehemence. ‘That is what I need. Six months, a year. To stop lecturing and give

myself over solely to writing. I want six months, uninterrupted, dedicated to one thing only. Six months.'

His frustration rankled, a festering sore, nurtured by his portentous dread of anonymity.

'That would be a good idea – if it would help,' I said.

He stared at me. There was anger in his expression. Buried – I imagined them thinly stretched – between his moustache and beard I could not see his lips.

'And for bread I suppose you would eat the words from the manuscript and for milk you would drink the ink.'

'Max!'

'This life! Gas bills, telephone, electricity, rent! What a narrow, stifling, mediocre existence! How it dulls every cell in the brain. If only . . . if only I could be free again!'

My cheeks flushed with the slap of his words.

'I don't stand in your way.'

He blew down his nose.

'I don't,' I insisted. 'Why do you blame me? Have I ever said anything?'

'Say?! You don't need to say anything. I read it in your eyes. Your hurt, accusing eyes. Blaming me at every turn for denying you a child. Making me bear the load of guilt. How can I hope to create with that on my mind?'

'That's unfair,' I said, approaching him.

He held me by the shoulders, at arm's length, his eyes probing, hard, studying mine.

'Everything I have ever wanted. Vanishing, receding, slipping away.' He clasped me to him with such force I could feel the quiver in his body. 'Going up in smoke.'

He kissed me. I felt his beard scrape my shoulder. He kissed me, not on the lips, but on my neck, his body tense and now somehow remote, his eyes hidden from mine where I could not read, even though I sensed, the distaste with which he performed the ritual of appeasement.

How I wished he would lift me by the waist and swing me around!

How it happened, I do not know. We had, I thought, been particularly careful.

Mama, insofar as she could be stirred to enthusiasm – her diabetes now required insulin for control and she was developing trouble with her circulation – was pleased at the news. Papa touched my cheek fondly and said, 'Mein herliches kind,' and David welcomed me to the Parents' Club. Benjy was away in Warburton at the time.

Over dinner, I told Max. He had begun to come home late, staying back, he said, in his university office to write after the day's lecturing had come to an end. In a flurry of extravagance, I treated him to artichoke hearts and roast chicken with dumplings and placed before him a bottle of wine.

'That's great', he said, but the sharper edge in his tone belied his smile.

The smile then passed off quickly and yielded to a pursing of lips which disappeared, as was happening more frequently of late, between his whiskers and his beard, and to a puckering of the brow and steel-like narrowing of his eyes. This time he kissed me neither on the lips nor on the shoulders, but proceeded to eat, slowly, gloomily, with difficulty, as if with every mouthful he might choke on the food. The wine he didn't touch.

I came up behind him, braced my arms about his bristled chin and placed my cheek upon his head.

'We'll manage, Max,' I said. 'I feel strong enough for all of us.'

'I don't want it,' Max said without emotion, 'not now.'

'What are you saying?'

'You're a woman. You know more about these things.'

'No, Max. Anything but that. I am not getting rid of it. It is *you, me*, both of us. It means something to me.'

'Oh, yes. And to me, too. A ruined life. A humdrum existence revolving on a merry-go-round of feedings and nappie changes. A future trapped in drudgery – like my father's wretched wasted life, like your own father's hollow one filled with plans, intentions, dreams which will go down

with him, with me, unfulfilled, splintered, shattered, into the grave.'

'Be realistic, Max. It need not be like that.'

'Can it be anything else?'

'My God,' I said, 'how can any man be so selfish? How?'

Stung, Max pushed his plate aside roughly, stood up, scraping his chair over the floor-tiles, and strode toward the window where he faced, unseeing I am sure, the darkness outside.

'Max! I love you. I love your work. You have gifts, talents. But those works, they are only words. But a child, Max . . . that is what life, *living*, is all about. Max, please, for once at least, think of me!'

He turned. Max was not given to anger, but there was no denying now the incandescent searing vehemence of his fury.

'Think of you. I can't help but think of you. Your breath is in every breath I take, your shadow stalks my every step, your accusing eyes follow wherever I turn. If not for you . . . if not for you . . . 'Max sought the ungiving air for words. He pressed his temples with the balls of his palms.

'My God, I can't escape!'

But he did escape. He strode toward the door sweeping his jacket from the chair where it hung, the chair tottering, reeling and clattering to the floor, went out and slammed the door behind him.

He returned after two and, though he saw that I was still awake, he did not say a word. In silence he changed into his pyjamas, clambered into bed, pulled the blanket over his ears, and turned the other way.

That silence, sustained when, suffering from the persistent discomforts of advancing pregnancy, I needed him most, hurt more than any physical pain. I tried with words, with a smile, with touch, to reach him, but each time he recoiled as though he had been stung. In silence we ate, sat in the same room, crossed each other's path, shared the same bed. Or if we did speak, it was not face to face – Max could barely bring himself to look at me – but indirectly, through friends who happened to visit or through our parents or my brothers before whom

we were compelled out of convention to act out a charade of harmony and marital bliss. Max came home later still, sometimes not until after eleven when, wordlessly and without eating, he would retire to bed. No more did he show me his notebooks where his plays were evolving – they remained in his satchel which he tossed onto his desk on his arrival home. No more did we attend the theatre together and I had to content myself with reading the occasional review he now wrote for the newspapers. Sometimes, in despair, I screamed at him but my screaming was into the void. He shut himself off from me. I slept badly and became nervous, but when Mama, herself becoming visibly sicker by the day, pointed to the darkening circles around my eyes, I joked that I was not exactly an old hand at pregnancy and reassured her that, according to Doctor Winston, there was no cause for concern. And when Papa, visiting me more often as my pregnancy progressed, commented on Max's absence, I dissembled, protected Max and spoke of staff meetings, evening lectures and reports he was obliged to attend to. Papa, obviously unconvinced, bit his lips but accepted what I said. He had endured enough in his life; I could not add to his hurt with the truth. I felt alone, abysmally alone, and even my work, which, for sanity's sake, I was determined to continue as long as I was able brought me no solace.

It was David who first discovered the truth.

He visited me one evening when I was alone. I was in my fifth month of pregnancy and the fact was beginning to show.

David sat on the couch, accepted the coffee I poured for him, ate a cracker, and spoke of his work, of Daniel, of Benjy's Mirela who was growing rapidly. When I sat down opposite him, his expression normally so placid, became more serious. He had strong bushy eyebrows which now came closetogether. The cheekbones of his otherwise soft rounded face – Papa's face – hardened. He drank the coffee quickly but set the cup and saucer down on the side-table with deliberation.

'Esther,' he said, 'we have always been able to talk, haven't we? After Papa, you always came to me when you had a

problem. Mama senses something and the worry is killing her. Papa, hidden behind his papers, doesn't say much but you are always on his mind. Esther, what is going on between you and Max?'

'What do you mean, "What is going on?"?'

'You look forever tired, you are not as bright, as alive as you were. You're well advanced into the pregnancy, yet Max is seldom home.'

'Max? I already explained to Papa. Max works hard. Lectures, meetings, reports, corrections. And . . . and, on top of that, he is still writing his play.'

David waited; probed my eyes with his own unrelenting blue eyes – Papa's eyes – and waited.

I looked away.

'I don't know what you're referring to,' I said.

'Esther,' he said, rising towards me and placing a firm hand on my arm. 'When a man runs around with other women while his wife is carrying his child, then there is something drastically wrong at home.'

'Max?', I said, withdrawing my arm. 'Max with other women? No, not Max. He is too weak, no, too . . . too sensitive. He is an artist. He is ambitious. Nothing, nobody comes before his writing.'

'Papa doesn't know it yet. Nor Mama. But people are beginning to talk.'

'People always talk. Gossip, rumours, lies – there are always people, stupid people with nothing else to think about, ready to wag their tongues and meddle in other people's concerns.'

'Esther,' David said, raising my chin towards him forcing me to look at him. 'I saw him. Last night, at the Atheneum, with some tall brunette he was fawning over.'

'It couldn't have been Max, then. You made a mistake.'

'Susan saw him too.'

'Then you are both mistaken, that's all.'

'Esther, for God's sake, you know that I don't indulge in empty prattle. If I didn't know, if I didn't see for myself, I

would have said nothing. But I do know and I did see and somehow we have to resolve the situation before it becomes irreversible. I'm afraid, Esther. Afraid – for Mama, for Papa, for you.'

David was a rock. Dependable. Steady. Ready to bolster. I knew that him I could tell all there was to tell and he would listen, as he had always done, with selfless patience, concern, solicitude. But I looked at my fingers, studied my nails, and said,

'David, I am no longer a child, no more the confused bewildered adolescent who ran to Papa or to you at every turn. I don't wear plaits anymore and my pimples are gone. I have grown up, David. Come what may, I am soon to be a mother, and whatever problems I may have, they are for me to solve.'

David held my shoulders at arm's length as Max had done. I thought fleetingly how fortunate Susan had been.

'As you wish, Esther,' he said. 'Only remember, should you ever need me, I shall always be there.'

What had been mere insupportable suspicion or runaway fancy during solitary evenings in the flat preparing lessons or ironing the linen or washing odds and ends, had now become established as fact. Well-intentioned, a loving brother, David had disclosed a truth I preferred not to know, and knowledge of that truth hurt more keenly than the honed edge of any razor.

Alone, once more, I feared the loss of self-control. David had been afraid for me; I became afraid for myself as anger, rejection, hurt, spite and frustration slapped at me with open palms so violent that I felt I might be consumed by their heat. In the grip of hurt, I devised menacing gambits with which to confront Max with my knowledge, I rehearsed to brutal completion repeated threats to leave, I envisaged myself standing firm, with a finger of steel pointing towards the door and insisting that he, not I, should be the one to go.

But when Max, after eleven, returned home, placed his satchel upon his desk and, unspeaking, prepared himself for bed, I held my peace, in the last moment for my parents' sake

resolving not to permit a scandal that might further shatter the beleaguered lives, and seethed instead in the sullen desolate solitude of silence.

Three weeks later, Mama stubbed a toe. She bathed it, painted the broken skin with mercurochrome, and dressed it.

On the same evening, I learned from the Levines who came to visit, that Max's first play was to be staged by the Emerald Players in three months. I could not have sufficiently concealed my astonishment nor Max his discomfort, for Deanne, gazing at Max and at me in turn, said, 'Why Estie, didn't you know?'

Max, desperately embarrassed, coughed into his palm, sipped his coffee and, laughing, laughing in truncated jagged tone, said, 'It was to have been a surprise. I didn't tell her.'

Deanne and Martin Levine exchanged a swift all-understanding glance and laughed with him, politely, more out of refinement, I knew, than conviction.

'Oh, I *am* sorry for revealing your secret,' Deanne said.

Soon after, the Levines left.

I tried to bridge the chasm.

'That's wonderful,' I said, summoning strength to conceal the hurt and smoothe all scars. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

Max raised a shoulder, glanced coldly over it towards me, then looked away. There were rebellious strands of grey in his beard that I had not noticed before.

'Since when have you been interested in what I do?'

'I am your wife, Max. For months you haven't given me a chance.'

He reached for a book on the shelves, impervious to words found the place he sought, and, shutting me out, immersed himself in it.

His studied lack of response provoked, spurred me to speak, the accumulated bitterness swelling into sweeping dashing waves.

'Max, I am *speaking* to you. I am your *wife*. I am carrying your *child*. I *care*. In every *way*. What you are, what you do, what you become. More than you know, more, infinitely

more, I promise you, than your brunette or anyone else that you may be running to for your pleasures. If you want to leave, if you want to separate, say so. But this kind of life is not living; it is a hell, a miserable, despicable, soul-destroying hell. If you don't care about me, then think of the child, your child. In three months, you'll be a father. We must come to some decision. If we are to stay together, then make peace with the idea. If you can't do that, then for my sake, for your sake, for everyone's sake, go, go, and stop tormenting me!

To attempt to deny would be to incriminate himself more deeply. He made no protestations of innocence about his brunette. The depths of the Pacific could not have been more remote and unreachable. Max was an unrecognisable shell of the spirited ambitious self-assured man I had married.

'If you're depressed, then see a doctor; say so!', I screamed. 'If something is still gnawing at you, then tell me! But answer me, for God's sake. I am a human being, not a dog!'

Bowing further over his book, he shrugged his shoulders. 'I have nothing to say,' he said.

I left him then, hurried, almost ran to the hallway cupboard, grabbed my jacket and left, slamming the door behind me as he had done several months before.

But unlike Max, I did not return. I wandered through the dreary streets of Parkville and across the silent shadowy parklands, a figure alone in the stark hollow darkness and walked wherever my feet and mind chose to lead me. A wind stirred in the trees and wrapped itself around me with clawing fingers. Outside the cemetery in Lygon Street, a young fellow asked me the time. He reached out towards me and touched my hair. I started to run, escaping from his coarse pursuing laughter, hailed the first taxi that came into view and, my head and chest throbbing with violent palpitations, told the driver where to go.

'Not to the Women's Hospital?', he joked, looking at my figure.

'No, you bastard,' I thought in the jungle of my thoughts, nearly aloud.

They were not surprised to see me. Mama, limping badly and murmuring 'It had to come to this' made me lie down on the sofa; Papa sat beside me, his pain evident even behind his glasses.

'We didn't want to interfere,' he said, apologetically, as if he held himself to blame.

For the first time in several months, I wept. Papa's shoulder, offering support, absorbed my sorrow.

'The scandal, people will talk. I'm sorry. I couldn't take any more.'

Papa's puffy hand was soft, inordinately gentle, as he passed it through my hair in appeasement.

'Mein herliches kind.'

Where, confronted by David, I was stone, resolutely tight-lipped, before Papa, I become sand and crumbled and told him everything as he, as always, cushioned my pain.

'My strength is in my experiences,' he had once said, 'after Auschwitz, nothing can hurt me again.'

His very expression now belied these words, a boast uttered in an unguarded moment.

'Time,' he said when I had finished. 'To every situation, there is a solution. Tomorrow, yes tomorrow – it's too late now – I will speak with Max's father. Something may come of that.'

Mama, in obvious physical discomfort on account of her bruised toe, returned from the kitchen bringing with her a glass of warm milk and honey. She looked appallingly grey and bloated, sick.

'Drink this, then go to sleep. Your bed is made. Whatever happened, you have to be strong. You *and* the baby, may I live to see it. As for *him* – it's no secret I never trusted him. Those white hands, his . . .'

'Not now,' Papa said, 'Esther has had enough.'

The next morning, Papa telephoned Mr. Lehman from his office. An embittered, cynical, unhappy man – one of the 'mediocre insignificant people of this world,' as Max described him – Max's father nonetheless knew where decency lay. He

swore that he had not been even remotely aware of the situation and promised to speak with Max.

His return call came during dinner. I couldn't eat.

'Anusz Lehman couldn't extract much from Max,' Father said gloomily, returning to the table. 'Only that Max says you left him, that the marriage isn't working . . .'

'Has he tried to make it work?', Mama said testily.

' . . . and that their separation is the best thing.'

'Of course,' Mama said, 'For him.'

'Anusz is ashamed. So is Doba. They had no idea and find the whole matter hard to believe. They will try as hard as they can to reason with him.'

Mama had been to the doctor earlier in the day about her bruised toe which had begun to fester. The pain which she couldn't conceal made her more irritable than ever.

'Hmmp,' she snorted, 'what else can he say?'

For a while, we ate in silence, the only noise being the clatter of cutlery against the plates and the rustle of serviettes. Then, pouring himself a glass of soda, Papa sighed, turned up a hand and said, with a nod of the head, 'Time, Esther mine. To every problem, there is a remedy. But for now, we must continue to live and work as before.'

We continued to live and work as before.

In the weeks that followed, I stayed with my parents. Sometimes, David came with Susan and their precocious Daniel; sometimes Benjy brought Elizabeth and Mirela to dispel the gloom. They tried their utmost, with bright illustrious talk and jokes and laughter, but after their departure, Mama, her infected leg raised on a stool before her, returned to her knitting or crocheting, Papa to his futile labours behind his notes and books, and I to the lessons I had to prepare. Mama, herself in pain, doted upon me at every turn. Doctor Summers had prescribed a succession of tablets and insisted that she rest, but he could as well have whistled into the wind. Mama continued, even against my protestations and offers to do it instead, to wash my clothes while I was at school and brought me a glass of milk or an apple as I sat with my notes at the table.

'You must think of the baby,' she said at every opportunity.

I was entering into my eighth month and about to give up working.

There were bruits in the press about Max's forthcoming play. Entitled 'Guests for the Night', it told of the attempted impossible reconciliation between two middle-aged brothers, one grown wealthy beyond counting through shadowy and unscrupulous dealings, the other his moral opposite, his alter ego, honest but poor. The reporter in 'The Age' (which carried a bad picture of Max smiling with facetious smugness) called it a modern fable; the 'Sun' described it as a 'hard-hitting commentary on the distortion of contemporary values.'

I resolved emphatically not to attend the performance when staged – but knew with equally tenacious certainty that, unless I was already confined I should be unable to stay away.

In the end, I did not see Max's play, but not my confinement was the reason.

Mama's bruised toe, accidentally stubbed against the leg of a chair, had become infected. An ulcer developed. Frank gangrene set in. The smell of putrifying flesh under the soggy dressings was appalling. All of Dr. Summers' efforts to salvage the toe failed and Mama was in constant pain.

'It's the diabetes,' Dr. Summers said gravely, gazing over the rim of his bifocals as he spoke. 'It affects the circulation and makes healing difficult. There is only one course of action left open.'

The idea of an operation frightened, unnerved Mama. Victim of her diabetes, her kidney trouble and her mounting fatigue, she became beset by sombre premonitions. Whereas in her, in contrast to Papa, her past had been bolted against the present with chains of an iron resolve, more and more her memories now seeped through the cracks developing in those restraining gates as she dropped allusions to her parents, her brothers, her sisters destroyed three decades before in Europe. Youth and death came to possess her conversation and in those few days at home before she entered into hospital, she insisted upon her daughters-in-law Susan and Elizabeth bringing to

her her grandchildren whom she then fondled and kissed and touched with a fretful intensity born of black and anxious panic. To Papa, already sorting out his papers for want of occupation, she said with a forced truncated laugh on the eve of entering St. Andrew's Hospital, 'Pray hard, there may be a God up there,' and to me added, 'If it's a girl, remember my name.'

I had cause, in the end, to remember her name.

The first, partial, amputation failed; another became inevitable. Following the second operation, she suffered a stroke, the diabetes leapt out of control, her kidneys, to cite Dr. Summers, 'collapsed' and Mama sank into a coma as ugly and final as the extinction of the sun.

In those interminable weeks of her dying, Papa became a shadow. He refused the invitations of Susan and Elizabeth to come to dinner and ate instead at home, ate without appetite or, rather, picked fitfully at the soups, meats and desserts they brought him. Carelessly shaven, unslept and dark-eyed, he haunted the hospital ward where Mama lay and, returning home, clung to the huddling corners of the lounge-room, sometimes gazing for long empty periods at the place on the sofa where Mama used to knit or crochet or read, and repeating in a frequent muffled monotone, 'What kind of life did I give her, what kind of life, what kind?'

Always the one to be consoled by Papa, I now sought the strength, above my own distress, to console him in turn. But words, in the face of the cold overwhelming fact of Mama's oblivion, against the ugly tangle of bottles and tubes and apparatus that were beyond all reason now sustaining her physical existence – against all these, words came hard. Words were hollow, vacuous, feeble. David, too, the strongest of us all, tried, and Benjy. But words could not touch. The closest I could come to him was, without speech, to bring him a cup of coffee or a sandwich or a piece of fruit and sit close at hand offering my presence alone where I could offer nothing more.

It was during this period – Mama had been in hospital for

five weeks and I was no longer teaching – that Max's play 'Guests for the Night' – opened.

I stayed away; Papa's solitude became mine.

And then, two days later, a fortnight before time, I went into labour. It was in the early morning hours. I woke from a nightmare in which a succession of grotesque screaming gesticulating natives were pouncing upon me for some undetermined crime. Intense pain riveted my belly; for a while I could barely catch my breath. I lay still, suddenly alert, and peered, my eyes sharpening, into the half-light half-darkness that cast mute immobile shadows about the room. And then the pain returned, a cramp unmistakable and stubborn, that penetrated vice-like through to my back. In that instant, I thought of Max. A brief vision, fleeting but vivid, an engraving in relief, Max. Not the Max I had loved and married and tried to sustain but the Max in 'The Age,' facetious and smug, who did not, could not, care about what, in that moment, I was enduring on his account. And once more the pain eased and in the ensuing pause, all my senses were honed to razors. I heard Papa shuffling about in the lounge-room. I rose, went in to him. The overhead light stung my eyes. Dressed in his crimson cotton dressing-gown – a birthday gift from Mama – and in his loose leather slippers, he was busying himself, despite the hour, at his desk.

On its surface lay a pile of folders, books and papers which he was tying with a string. Seeing me, he turned. His eyes, though tired, were unusually clear, their clarity enhanced almost triumphantly by some private resolve. His balding head glistened, his puffy hands trembled. Jaws firm, he shook his head. His voice was hard, tense, bitter.

'They're not worth the price,' he said vehemently. 'Scribble, foolishness, useless. Because of this I denied her a proper life. And now . . . now it is too late . . .'

They were his notes, I realised with a jolt, that he had bundled together. And not merely his notes, but his life's purpose, his experiences, his past unforgotten and unforgiven that he had wanted to declare before the world. And now,

from his manner, it was evident that he was ready to destroy them all and let the ghost of his past settle, however convulsively, in the unmarked unrecorded grave of mere private memory which, when his own time came, would perish too into eternal silence.

And I wanted to tell him not to destroy his work and to console him that upon him lay no blame and that his labours still possessed meaning – if only, as he had said, for his children, for us – and that contrary to his resolve he now owed it to Mama to complete the work – but just then another contraction burgeoned forth with a force that fixed me to one spot and made me gasp.

Starkly awake, prodded to lucid alertness by the cool silence of rising morning, I wanted to say many things, but the pain cut across all speech.

Papa caught my gasp which threw him into indecision. Not knowing what to do with his hands – they seemed to become superfluous as he teetered between me and that knotted bundle of notes, — he scanned me up and down in bewilderment, looking for a sign upon which to act. How I wished that Mama, so decisive, so practical and efficient were there at that moment! Even Max.

‘Mein kind, what is it?’, he asked, his eyes briskly mobile.

‘This is it . . . the baby, I think . . . the hospital.’

‘The very word ‘hospital’ filled me with distaste and unsettled Papa; but called to positive action – perhaps thankful for it – he now tried to be strong on the threshold of the front-door, locking it behind me. I felt as Mama must have done when she had left, looking upon the pictures on the wall, the telephone table, the potted rubber plant and the hallway mirror as if for the last time. There was none of that hoped-for, dreamt-for gladness in the coming event. And the recurring griping riveting pain made it all the more detestable.

At the hospital, as I was wheeled into the ward, Papa leant over me, kissed me on the brow. I felt the sharp bristles of his unshaven chin. He smiled, distantly, weakly, only with the lips but not the eyes.

'Mein herliches kind, think only of the baby,' he said. 'Nothing else matters . . . anymore.'

Five hours later, the baby was born, a pink flat-nosed black-haired wrinkled squinting girl that the sister brought to me swaddled in blankets. I looked at her, tried to persuade myself that she was mine, thought then of Max, of Papa, Mama, my brothers and of the vast troubled horror-stricken world outside, suppressed waves of nausea and pity and mourning that welled up stubbornly within me and, feeling utterly, abysmally depleted, screamed and screamed and screamed, begging whoever was there if they had compassion to take the baby away.

Two sisters hurried toward me. One took the baby; the other grasped my hand and stroked my brow. Then the first sister returned and gave me an injection. I fell asleep.

I woke from a muddled dream to find David sitting beside my bed. He had brought an elaborate bouquet of flowers which a ward assistant was placing into a long-necked vase.

'Welcome finally to the Parents' Club,' David said, squeezing my fingers and smiling, showing his teeth. 'She's a beauty, the little one. A true Kornfeld.'

The mid-afternoon light entering between the slats of the aluminium sun-shade outside my window hurt my eyes.

'Tell Papa,' I said, turning my face from the light, yet not looking at David, 'tell him, when you see him, not to destroy his papers. They are all he has, his purpose, his mission.'

'What are you talking about?'

'About life, David. And happiness, fulfilment, waste. And ugliness and pain and meaningless suffering.'

'Esther, this isn't the time for such thoughts.'

'A toe. One silly toe stubbed senselessly against a chair. Life is so brittle, David, if a person can die because of a toe.'

'Mama is still alive . . .'

'And all their pain. Why, David? To survive hell, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, years and years of heartache and uprootedness and, at last when all seems to be going well, to be struck with a scandal and an unhappy deserted daughter and have it

all end because of a toe. Where is the sense of it all? There is none, none.'

'Esther . . .'

'You once promised me, David, should I ever need you, you would always be there. I need you now. To hold me, to give me of your strength, of that simple goodness that is within you. I am so desperately cut off. Even the baby, the baby . . . I feel nothing for it, except sadness. I wish it had never been born. The world doesn't deserve its innocence.'

David held me; through his chest, I heard the regular comforting pulsating of his heart. He arms were strong, yet tender. He smelled, I didn't know why, of blackberries. I clung to him as to a lifeline.

He tried to soothe, his soft puffy hand – Papa's hand – stroking my hair, with words telling me that to be happy one did not need to look for explanations, telling me that to look for explanations was to make oneself unnecessarily unhappy. What mattered most was the air one breathed, the light that shone before one's eyes, the odours and tastes one could sense in the present upon one's tongue. What had been could never be changed. What was to be, the big things – Mama's illness, the miseries outside, the ugliness, senselessness, evil, waste – these were not in my hands except insofar as I guarded against them in my own life, in my own small way. In the nursery lay my baby, *my* baby. What *was* in my hands was to bring *it* happiness, to offer *it* love and security and tenderness. For the rest, even an oracle could not foretell.

When he left, a sister brought the baby in to me.

'The poor little sausage has been wailing,' she said with a gay good-natured laugh. 'Is Mum ready to offer her a feed?'

Tensely, uncertainly, I unbuttoned my nightgown and slipped an arm out of its sleeve. The baby was so tiny, its face florid and mobile and almost squashed as it gnawed frantically upon its knuckles, its eyelids folded over one another in long irregular creases, its thinly-delicate black hair standing on end. My hands fumbling, I reached out for it. Its head jerked forward and back, revealing its gooselike neck. With the help

of the sister, a big woman in uniform, who kept up a ceaseless ritual patter on how to hold and position and feed little juniors like mine, I laid the baby to my breast, felt against me the vigorous searching quiver of its head and yielded, out of duty, without love, without interest, simply because the sister was there and I could do nothing else, to the hard frenetic gnawing of its firmly-gripping gums. She was my baby, David had said, *my* baby, a true Kornfeld. Yet even as I gave it suck, I wanted to tear it away like a stranger or intruder that had no claim upon the remotest part of me. But the sister, ever-chattering, touching, patting, hovering over me, her powdered face locked into a professional smile, and the baby a stubborn vulture on my breast, gave me no opportunity to cut short the odious ordeal. I could not bring myself to give the little wretch a name.

When, towards evening, Papa and Benjy came to visit and plied me with questions about the baby, all the venom that had welled up during the ritual of feeding burst its bounds, and violently, almost savagely, I flailed about the air and hissed at them to go, to leave me be, to leave me to myself, alone, and undisturbed. Papa, laying his hand upon my shoulder, tried to kiss me. Snappishly I turned my face away. Then Benjy, his breath smelling of the mints he devoured by the packet, leaned over and said, softly, evenly, in muted confidential tone, 'David told me of your state. Remember, Esther, Papa too is suffering. Hurt is not any one man's prerogative. Think of Papa. Mama doesn't have long to go.'

The next morning, I fed the baby with resignation. I took her mechanically from the sister, delivered its mouth to my breast, and then let her lie, without taking interest, in the crook of my arm until she was taken away again. Then to forget, to pass the time, the wearisome hours between feedings, I bought the morning papers.

On the arts and entertainments pages, I found reviews of

Max's play and recognised at once that, despite all the preliminary publicity, it had been a failure. The critic in 'The Age' wrote of the 'inflated sense of the play's importance,' of 'its high-falutin' bombastic unrelieved oratorical tone', and of 'the playwright's lack of balance, perspective and theatrical grasp'. The 'Sun' mildly applauded the theme and sympathised with the author's ultimate intent but found that the play suffered from 'a want of artistry, sensitivity and psychological insight.'

My jaws set in gratified concrete hardness, I read into the critics' words sharply-honed nails which I hammered into Max's egotism with a vigour as virulent as poison, deriving from his public rebuke a sense of vengeance, a retribution that was private and deserving. I remembered Max basking in smugness in that earlier photograph in 'The Age', couldn't help but think of the brunette that had usurped my place. More than anything else, that had cut the sharpest, had drawn the most blood, and was of all his felonies the least forgivable. It pleased me with a perverse delighted pleasure to read and read again the critics' verdicts and to rejoice no less perversely in his failure.

But rejoicing, however churlish, proved too truncated a luxury in which to wallow. Shortly after midday, David, serious, his otherwise full mobile cheeks drawn to pale gauntness, appeared and, fumbling for words to temper the blow, broke the news. Mama had died during the night.

'It's for the best,' he said solemnly. 'She didn't suffer.'

It was not until after he had left, and then Benjy, that I wept. Then Papa came and, wordlessly – for what was there to say? – we wept together.

The duty sister asked in the afternoon and again towards evening whether I was able to feed the baby. Numbly, mechanically, staring at the nurse's badge the lapel of her immaculate white uniform, I said 'No.'

'Don't let yourself go to pieces,' she said solicitously when I had refused a second time. 'Baby needs a strong mum.'

Left alone, I stood by my window, gazing out into the descending darkness. Far below, the gardens, by day full of

sunlight and variegated green, became beset, beleaguered, by dark menacing clumps of clotted shadow, while beyond, towards the city, criss-crossed by tiers and spirals and pylons of light, the buildings stood stark and sharp-edged and monstrous against the tumbling night, mute witness to the arbitrary malevolence and brittleness inherent in life in which a thing as senseless as an injured toe could kill and in which millions upon millions could die, expendable, their one-time existence concealed by the rush of time and the all-encompassing oppression of space. No wonder then that Papa had come to consider his life's task futile; no wonder, too, that Max, driven by the dread of oblivion, wanted to carve for himself a name; no wonder that David, ever so good-natured, accepted so calmly the air he breathed, the light he saw, and the odours and tastes upon his tongue. The responses were of one source, each equally appropriate, there being none to judge except the self which response was of all the most true, none to choose except the self which course of many was the most felicitous to one's enduring authentic inner core.

Against the darkness, in the glass of the broad high window, I saw my tense immobile face rimmed by the ragged graceless cascade of my dishevelled hair, saw the limpness of my shoulders sagging under the combined weight of my blue cotton dressing-gown and my gloom, looked at my flattened belly which not long before had been swollen wonderfully with an object of pride. In the nursery she now lay – asleep, awake, crying, I didn't know – my baby, as David had said, my own, while I her mother denied her from the outset any chance of happiness, of love, security and tenderness in a world already impoverished of sense and gladness. And remorse – frenzied, surging, inundating remorse – welled up from depths uncharted and overwhelming pity for her unprotected innocence made me gasp. I turned, I hurried, I ran, brushing visitors and staff on my way to the nursery.

But I did not get there. Gasping again, I came to a frozen standstill and stared, seeing, unable not to see, not wanting to believe.

At the farther end of the corridor, Max, Max without the pretentious beard, without the affectation or smugness was approaching, searching among the ward signs for my room. And then he saw me. Neither of us smiled as he came close. He pursed his lips, fidgeted with his fingers for occupation, looked at me, looked away, turned questioning, searching eyes upon me again.

'I've just seen her,' he said, nervously, one eyelid twitching. 'She looks like you.'

People walked by. Behind my back, I felt a cool glancing draught as a door somewhere was opened. I wanted to leave him standing there, to move on to the nursery.

'What are you calling her?'

'What do you want from me?'

'She is ours, Esther, ours. No, don't blow down your nose.'

'I suppose I should kiss you or crawl to you instead.'

He shook his head.

'Curse me, swear at me. Whatever you say, Esther, it won't hurt me one iota as much as all that I have already said to myself; it can't hurt one jot as much as the shattering of illusions. That's why I am taking the chance, hoping, however fragile the hope, that we, we, Esther, the three of us can start afresh.'

It was bitterness that spoke. 'For how long, Max? Three months, six months, a year? Until you're ready for another change? Until you find another brunette or blonde or red-head?'

'I'm past illusions. I've been bitten once and the teeth sank deep.'

I said nothing now, took mute satisfaction in his discomfiture. His upper lip under the moustache quivered. His whole face bore an intensity of almost palpable tangible sorry despair.

'I heard about your mother and I am sorry. Perhaps *we*, at least, can still be happy?', he said.

I moved past him. 'I have to go to the baby. She's hungry.'

'Is it possible?'

'You tell *me*, Max, is it?'

Max strode behind me. He was breathing heavily. We reached the nursery. At the display window, I paused, stiffly seeking out the trolley with my baby.

She lay on her side, covered by a white flannel blanket with a blue rim. As before, the round moon-like face, full with creases, seemed flattened, the nose squashed, the delicate black fan of hair standing on end. One closed fist was pressed against the crimson cheek, her small mouth pouted, the full red lips sucked at a knuckle of her other hand.

'Perhaps we can still be happy?', Max had said, asking for the impossible. Two years before when I had glided free and feathery in his arms, happiness had been certain, absolute, pure. But time, ambition, desolation, sickness and death had eroded that purity to reveal a rotting core in which happiness was merely conditional, a brittle illusion teetering drunkenly on a filament stretched taut and ready to crumble into fragments beyond restoration. Or, at best, it was a dappled tapestry of patches, crudely seamed together along ragged margins which the most minute of discordant breezes might forever rend apart.

Accepting that, poise, calm, even hope might in time be regained.

Standing now beside me and looking too upon the child, Max reached out and touched my arm, uncertainly, with caution.

'I still don't know her name,' he said.

His white veinless hand was moist. I remembered Mama who disliked such hands; remembered too her forced truncated sombre laugh, black with premonition, the night before she entered hospital, and remembered finally her anxious remark.

'If it's a girl . . .'

I did not draw away. Max's touch, a little bolder, gained strength. Beside us, another couple come to see their child, were laughing. The mother, her gay face a mass of freckles, was pointing excitedly at their baby, who at that moment

yawned comically and wide. Her husband nibbled at her ear and she giggled, happily it seemed. And standing beside her, I felt the weight of gloom subside and became aware of an easier movement of breath. The light around me seemed suddenly brighter, the darkness outside less menacing, more serene.

I turned, looked squarely upon Max, probed in turn the tension of his searching face.

'Her name's Rebecca,' I said, remembering Mama, and, turning back again towards our child, dared myself once more to hope.

The Ghetto of T-

At the tiny terminal of T-, I stepped down briskly from the airplane and, after paying my fare to a pleasant red-cheeked fellow in a peaked cap, I took my seat on the coach. There were perhaps twenty tourists on the bus and twelve locals. We passed fields, forests, farms. We crossed a viaduct built by ancient Romans. We saw a number of villas, a cemetery, churches. The driver maintained steady patter in an eloquent, if somewhat accented, English and reminded us of what the city, his city, had to offer – a lush profusion of art-treasures, exquisite glass – and leather-ware, superbly-ornamented Renaissance palaces and churches and, above all, the charming hospitality of his people. We would be delighted by T-, of that he was certain.

The driver took us through the modern sector, with its wide streets and imposing edifices of concrete and glass, of which he wasn't too proud, and swung into a narrow cobbled street along which we bounced towards the City Square. Here, we disembarked and separated. All was activity. The Spring weather, pleasantly mild, brought all manner of people out of doors. The Square and its branching lanes were filled with tourists, porters, postcard-vendors, photographers, working-folk and children. Pigeons flew over the rooftops; the hubbub of passers-by rose to meet them. And, looking about me in the fragrant glow, I was in good humour.

I arrived on a Friday afternoon, an hour before sunset. Shadows were lengthening. The Sabbath was approaching.

And though not observant at home, a wave of sentiment towards things Jewish and historical drew me to visit the one-time ghetto of the city.

Following the signs nailed upon the grey stone walls at the northern end of the city, I passed under low-lying arches and between sun-starved lanes towards the ghetto. On both sides, stood drab stolid buildings of five or six flights, their entrances buttressed with heavy steel-enforced doors, their windows barred. The number of people with guide-books and cameras diminished. The sounds of living receded and, as if suddenly, I was in the heart of the ghetto. I found myself in a courtyard of cobblestone and shadow where there stood two wells and a bronze tap from which water dribbled upon the stone at its base. No-one was to be seen and there lingered the hollow silence of a temple. Only the dripping tap disturbed the calm, and a cat licking its paws in a doorway.

Here, Jews had once lived, I thought. I sought out the doorposts. No mezuzoth. Not even the signs – the paler slanting rectangular markings in the beams – of their one-time presence. Nor any name that was meaningful or that could evoke an echo of recognition in my mind. My good humour seeped away into the all-pervading darkness of the square. And the fragile glow that had earlier rested over T- had splintered completely before the leaden shadows, the gloom and the silent twilight. Here, Jews had once lived. I sought still other signs, but found none.

Yet I stayed, a needle to a magnet. Or rather, the ghetto held me. Its odours – of soup on the stove and fish on the grille – its occasional hollow sounds, its haunting austerity held me. I could get no further than the lanes immediately arising from the courtyard. Back and forth I paced before these stolid buildings, trying to extract the very essence from all that remained there. A few women in long black cotton dresses, carrying overladen baskets crossed the yard. They talked loudly and giggled. Their voices lingered after them in withering echoes and then these faded to leave behind once more a solemn silence.

The sombre greyness of the quarter yielded to darkness.

One by one, lights appeared at the windows. I wondered whether any of them might be Sabbath lights.

As I stood there, a man emerged from a house. He wore a hat and carried a book under his arm. He stooped as he walked. If this were a Jew, how self-conscious he appeared. I followed him. He walked briskly, clinging to the shadows as he moved along lanes, under arches and through gateways. I lost sight of him in the darkness but was guided by the sound of his steps. Then a door opened and closed on squealing hinges and even the footsteps were gone. I was standing in a small alcove. I explored my surroundings and found myself barely twenty metres from the original courtyard. The window shutters had been closed and the only lights which emerged were fugitive streaks escaping through narrow chinks around the shutters. I heard again the tap dripping in the square.

Above, a crescent moon encircled by a halo of stars idled between opposing rooftops. Lowering my gaze, I caught something familiar - an arc of Hebrew script engraved into stone over a double doorway. 'Blessed may you be in your coming,' it read, and my memory completed the verse, 'and blessed may you be in your going.'

A synagogue. I saw light within.

I knocked on the door and waited.

From a window overhead, a dry croaking voice responded. 'E aperto.'

I pushed against the heavy door and entered a narrow anteroom filled with mustiness, shadow and dust. I covered my head. A stooped man, wizened and sallow, his skin stretched taut over angular bone and his white hair in disarray, limped down the staircase.

'Vieni, vieni,' he beckoned. He was as old as Adam.

On the walls hung frayed and faded tapestries, sagging under the weight of age and dust. A chandelier of crystal and tarnished silver offered a dull light and ill-defined shadow rested upon all things. A soft murmur came from nearby. I followed my guide. Behind the stairs, he opened a door, stood to one side and, placing a bony finger to his dry lips, motioned

me to enter with a movement of the head.

Ten men stood within – the rabbi and nine others. They were facing the Ark, their backs turned to me. Tall flaking windowless walls and a high vaulted ceiling enclosed the room. In a humming undertone, the rabbi led the prayer. His adherents hummed with him, their lips barely moving.

As I entered, each man in turn turned his head towards me, subjected me to swift scrutiny, nodded and returned to his prayers. Perhaps I was interpreting too much, but I could not dispel the air of sadness and world-weariness that marked their faces and sat on their shoulders. Had the Temple been destroyed a third time, they could not have been more disconsolate.

A boy of Bar-Mitzvah years approached me, opened a prayer-book and pointed to the place. The congregation was reciting the Kabbalat Shabbat. The boy leaned towards me and said something which I did not understand.

‘Perhaps Yiddish?’, I asked, ‘or Hebrew, or English?’

He shrugged his shoulders, then pointing to the rabbi, he said, ‘Nonno mio, speak Inglese bene.’

The rabbi, too, like my guide, wore the years of Adam. He had obviously once been tall but was now slightly bowed. Deep furrows marked his cheeks and brows. His lips were thin, his chin worn almost to a point. He prayed with his eyes shut, rocking gently.

My companion stood constantly beside me, turning for me the pages of my prayer-book.

When the service finished, the worshippers gathered up their prayer-books, shook hands and wished one another a good Sabbath. But they did not leave. Instead, they lingered on in twos and threes, speaking quietly, almost self-consciously. For, between their words and remarks, they turned their heads in my direction and extracted from me with their gaze whatever they sought to find. Awkward among strangers, I prepared to leave. But as I reached the door, the rabbi, coming down from the platform, stopped me with a raised hand.

'My friend,' he said, in English. 'My friend, it is the Sabbath, the holy day of rest for God and man. If He can rest, what is your haste?'

His hands were bony, the sockets of his eyes were deep.

'Where is your home?'

'Melbourne,' I answered. 'Australia. Far away.'

'Far away. Far away. The words of dreamers who believe that the further they travel, the finer their discoveries, the more profound their experiences. True happiness is always at home – but it is healthy to be a dreamer.'

Then his tone changed as he drew closer. His coat smelled of mothballs.

'You have already travelled far and, with God's help, you will travel much further still. But tell me, are you visiting perhaps the Holy Land, Jerusalem?'

He wanted only one answer.

'Yes,' I said, 'God willing.'

'If you will it and it is good, then God wills it.'

The men remaining in the synagogue gathered about the rabbi and nodded at all that he said, though their inappropriate expressions betrayed their failure to understand our conversation.

A man, his hair closely cropped and his nose overlarge, leaned over to whisper into the rabbi's ear. The rabbi transmitted the message.

'Yakov begs you to send him a small parcel of holy soil to him. A year ago, he asked this favour of another traveller, but he has still received nothing.'

I promised to fulfil his request. The man's eyes and lips made a separate unuttered plea, but they seemed at the same time sceptical of my sincerity.

One by one, the congregation departed. It was well into the evening. I was hungry. My original guide thrust his head through the doorway, saw that the synagogue was not yet ready for closing and vanished again; while, by my side, the rabbi's grandson stood, listening. Only the three of us remained.

'Do you have time?', the rabbi asked.

I nodded.

'Of course,' he said, smiling so that the point of his nose and his chin came close. 'For matters concerning God and His people, one must have time. Come! We have a little museum here. You have seen many things already, I know. But come, let me show you more.'

From the prayer-room, we walked up the stairs and along a corridor, the rabbi ahead, the boy close behind. From darkness into deeper darkness we passed, through mustiness and shadow and more dust, until at the end of the corridor, he opened a door and all was light again, for a lamp was burning in the room. I wondered then whether this lamp burned every Sabbath, awaiting the stray tourist who passed this way. How many visitors did indeed come here?

There were three glass showcases in the room, two against the walls and one in the centre. In the corners stood ornate Torah cases on mahogany pedestals.

'Do you see this?', the rabbi asked. 'A Sefer Torah case from the fifteenth century. Look, look upon the immaculate wood-work, the firmness of touch which executed it, the rhythm of the lines and reliefs. A work truly wrought by love and dedication. Its creator, may his memory be blessed, worked upon it for seven years, then died within a month of its completion. The Malach Hamavet permits each man but one perfect deed or work in his life.'

'And this Torah crown,' he said, moving to another case, 'pure, precious silver. For three centuries, it sat upon the Sefer Torahs in the Ark until a heretic, may his name be expunged, flung it to the ground. Since then, it has not been in the Ark nor sat upon any scroll in T-.'

He was reciting legends of long ago.

I asked him, 'What has happened to the people of this ghetto?'

The walls and showcases may have heard, but not the rabbi.

'My friend, examine this tapestry. It will warm your heart. What do you see?'

The tapestry was largely faded. Lacklustre patches covered one-time rents.

I sought out those things he wanted me to see.

'I see mountains', I said. 'I see mountains, valleys, terraces, forests, and in the valleys and along the slopes, there are people, pilgrims I suppose, all facing the peak where there is a walled city. That can only be Jerusalem.'

'Jerusalem,' the rabbi repeated. 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem.' He placed an arm on my shoulder. It was surprisingly strong. 'You do not know how blessed you are to be on the threshold of breathing that city's air. I too travelled in my younger days – indeed, I was forced to travel to survive – and passed through many countries. When the War ended, I returned to T- and Jerusalem I did not see. Perhaps he, my grandson, is destined to reach it. But come further, my friend, over here.'

He showed me other things – shofars, silver breadplates, pointers, illuminated Tenachs – and told me other anecdotes.

But he was showing me the yesterdays, the remains of centuries long gone.

I asked him again, 'What happened to the people of this ghetto?'

We were leaving the museum, this graveyard of legends. The smell of the corridor, in all its mustiness and mildew, returned. The old sexton, my guide, must have left. Only our steps on the hollow floor disturbed the stillness around us.

Downstairs, again, at the entrance to the prayer-hall, the rabbi paused.

'Twice you have asked me the same question. Before you think to ask it a third time, I will answer you. But a man of seventy and more must rest when he talks of weighty matters. Come, let us return here.'

The synagogue, in its emptiness, seemed surprisingly less haunted than it had been during prayer. As the rabbi sat down, the lines on his face smoothened. The boy and I sat on either side of him.

'We were a fine people once,' he began.

He paused. His gaze rested upon the Eternal Light before the Ark.

'Once. Artists, financiers, actors, printers, poets. Their names I need not tell you. A traveller sees and hears many things and forgets much of what he has learned. Remember only that those years, five, six, seven generations ago were the best we have known, the most perfect. But perfection – this you have already learnt tonight – is a one-time achievement only; for men and nation alike.'

He spoke on as if delivering an elegy to times past.

'The later years are merely a chronicle of decline. Wars, military adventurism, defeat, economic ruin, a loss of confidence and balance for both nation and Jew. We found ourselves portrayed as usurers, Christ-killers, kidnappers of infants. You know the tale, I am sure. Then the ghetto, the high walls, the barred windows, the reinforced doors behind which our grandfathers often trembled between zemiroth and prayers for the Messiah to lead us home.'

He passed the back of his bony hand across his brow, heaved deeply and said, 'We were a fine people once. Now we are dust. Who knows the will of the Almighty?'

'Why does this community live so much in the past?', I ventured at this stage. 'Your synagogue, your museum, all those artefacts, your anecdotes – they are the stuff of the past. Of your present and your future not a word. Everything is woven of bleakness, gloom, even . . . even despair.'

The rabbi turned hard eyes upon me.

'Despair? Bite your tongue, my friend. Despair disowns God. We dare not despair.'

'Then?'

'Had we despaired, everything here would have been woven not of bleakness and gloom, but of apostasy, decay and death. There would have been no Jews left here. But we returned and waited and prayed. And now that our people have a home again, in Jerusalem, our hope has been strengthened – not weakened – but strengthened beyond measure.'

'If you have such love for Jerusalem, why don't you leave T-?'

'Always the same question. Why do we not leave?'

Pangs of hunger were gnawing at me. 'What is it,' I said, 'that stops you from leaving tomorrow or the day after?'

'And to leave is such a simple thing? A mere matter of packing bags? To leave the homes of our fathers, to dishonour them . . .'

'Dishonour them?'

The rabbi was looking straight at me. I wavered under his intense scrutiny.

'Tell me, my young friend. Is a Jew permitted to take a vow?'

'To my knowledge, vows are permissible, excepting those involving sacrifice and death.'

'Our fathers, two or three generations ago, made such a vow. They took upon themselves the burden of the Diaspora. So long as any Jew remains outside the Holy Land, so long shall we remain here. We shall be the last to return. This was their vow which is ours to honour. And it is this vow which sustains us.'

'But why you?'

'The reason we no longer know. Nor does it matter. So long as we look to the future, to the day when all Jews will be in the Holy Land . . .'

'The day will never come,' I said with a vehemence bolstered by hunger.

'The day *will* come,' he answered, his chin trembling in defiance, an old man defending his faith. 'The day will come and when we make the pilgrimage to the Land of the Covenant, then we shall know that the Messiah has arrived.'

Had he held his eyes closed and swayed like a man possessed, I would have accepted that he was in a trance or in the hold of some fantastic dream. But he was awake, alert, his eyes alight.

'These are delusions,' I wanted to say. I saw machines reducing the ghetto to rubble, then clearing away the debris as there rose over it edifices of concrete and glass which paid no heed to aging men and eccentric vows. 'Delusions,' I wanted

to say. 'You live for a day that will never come, that can never come. A generation will pass, two, and this community will fade away, without obituary, without tears, without notice. And not even the signs on the walls will remain. And there will come a time when your vow will be broken. Not because the Messiah has arrived, but simply because this community will vanish into oblivion and no children will remain here to study the Law or to guide a stranger in prayer.'

But I preferred not to hurt. I said instead, 'If you will it, God wills it.'

'Yes, God wills it.'

It was late. The rabbi's grandson was asleep, curled like a cat upon the bench. The rabbi lapsed into silence. I had no more questions to ask. I wanted to be outside, in the certainty of wind and stars and nocturnal darkness, in the nest of palpable reality. I stood up to leave. The rabbi accompanied me out of the prayer-room. He was grimacing with some private physical pain. Once again I passed beneath the chandelier of crystal and silver, walked along the corridor and looked for a last time over the frayed and faded tapestries sagging from age and dust along the walls. Decay covered all things like a cruel shroud.

'Also from the fifteenth century?' I asked, not knowing what else to say.

The rabbi opened the door for me. The night was unexpectedly alight. The crescent moon, caught between the rooftops and surrounded by a cluster of stars, glowed like Sabbath candles. A breeze, bearing with it the smell of the sea, blew through the lanes. No lights shone in the windows. The ghetto slept. From the courtyard came the sound of water dripping upon stone.

As I was about to turn away, the rabbi grasped my hand and clenched it between his own dry and quivering palms. His face was mournful. They may have been tears that glittered in his eyes.

'Please, my friend. Tell the world about us. Tell them that we are waiting, waiting for them to absolve us from our vow. Tell them.'

The Juggler

Outside, they call me Bruno. Every hour, peeking out between the frayed daisy-patterned curtains of my showcase, I see them gather in clusters, spectators come to watch in swelling numbers. The penny arcade nearly empties, the merry-go-round revolves with merely a handful of riders and those who have been resting on the benches now rise to approach my window. Here and there, a young fellow pinches his girlfriend's behind, a child licks his dripping ice-cream, an old man gazes up at the clock waiting for the minute hand to strike the hour.

And on the hour, the curtains part and I appear in jester's motley to perform before them my bag of tricks.

Some of them are old-hat. But a mouth still opens in wonder – and not only a child's – as I make tumblers of milk disappear in paper cones or pull out a seemingly endless string of coloured shawls from a velvet-lined box that a moment before I have shown to be empty. There are some who, with curled lips, watch my fingers closely, believing that they know my secrets, but in my art, I give nothing away. Before their eyes, I cut lengths of cord into fragments and restore them into wholes and tear sheets of newspaper into smithereens and unfold them into the original pages with barely a crease. Out of dusting feathers do I produce white flapping pigeons and, opening my mouth, I swallow eggs which emerge from my sleeves. The children beyond the window

gasp with delight as, rapt, they watch, their ice-cream melting, their dark eyes wide, absorbing every movement, as though to blink were to lose a treasure. To them, I am Bruno, the magician, rapturous bringer of wonder.

But Bruno is also a jester, and a juggler as well.

And it is obvious from their smiles that the audience enjoys Bruno the jester. They delight in him, in me, as with a touch I press my scarlet bulbous nose and my dunce's cap rises to execute an aerial pirouette, and as at a tug at that rubicund knob, the capering cap returns to its place upon my balding wrinkled head. They laugh and above their laughter I distinctly hear the crude rollicking snicker of a young man close by as, bending over to pick up my accordion, the posterior seam of my pantaloons comes apart with a tearing wrench to reveal in all their patriotic glory red, white and blue polka dot bloomers over my rump. How they laugh now. And how exquisitely they continue to laugh, above all the children, as with knitting needle and twine, I spiral around the stage, chasing my tail to rectify the breech. I love their laughter and love it all the more when it grows more abandoned as now, one, two, three, I transform the jester into a one-man band and with eyebrows prancing and pupils meeting and diverging, I pedal a padded drumstick against a battered aluminium wash-tub, squeeze sibilant groans from a child's accordion and rattle clacking castanets, all the while playing out upon a mouth organ a medley comprising 'Three Blind Mice', 'Yes, We Have No Bananas' and 'I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts', to which they clap and whistle and to which a grey-haired moth-balled woman with whiskers adds her voice.

But it is Bruno the juggler who holds his audience most in thrall. For where magic and jesting are mere craft, in the throes of juggling lies his finest art. And it is through his art that the real Bruno, that Rudy, composite of flesh and feeling and memory steps out of his motley and enters his soul.

I warm up. A ball on the tip of a finger; my world set spinning, tossed upward, caught, still spinning, on my forefinger, as the other hand sets a second ball in motion, the two

gyrating dizzily in swift vertiginous whirls of white – a simple act, taught to me in the cradle by my philandering father, the great Rene Pianko, who left his wife before I turned three. With the balls still spinning and another ball, a third, poised immobile on the nape of my neck, I bend into an arabesque on point, a posture sustained in tribute to my mother, my beloved mother who, deserted, travelled with Wirth's Circus as dancer, acrobat and tight-rope walker until, noticing her wayward husband returned and watching her from the flaps of the tent, faltered high above the ground, slipped, and tumbled in the shortest second of her short life to a sudden thudding death.

Showing my teeth – in truth, my dentures – I smile at the audience. They, in turn, smile back. Expectantly. A little girl with plaits tugs at her father's sleeve and points at my scarlet nose which twitches in a simulated sneeze. Her sister gapes, catching flies. I wink at her. She flushes and her frozen posture melts, as does mine now giving way to a smooth pirouette after which I let the ball at my neck roll down the length of my thigh and calf, watch it bounce, once, twice, and then flip it upwards to my brow where it oscillates from temple to temple in metronomic motion. – Another of my father's acts, a little trick of my restless, itinerant, hot-blooded father to whom school was the stage and the circus and who, in the company of a succession of rouged and crimson-lipped mistresses, hauled me along a trail of such schools where a ball ranked above arithmetic, a hoop above reading and a mid-air somersault above paper and pen. His stinging flat palm was my most persuasive teacher and my cheeks knew often the wrath of the master who, when he drank, was as vicious and relentless as fire.

How well I knew the sting of my father's black anger! And how well did I learn, too, not only his feats, the staple of my schooling which took me with him to the Tivoli and Bullen's and Wirth's, but also the luxurious hedonistic enchantments that his burning mistresses offered when I came of age, when, as a youngster I felt the first hairs bristle on my chin and sensed

the inflamed turmoil of fantasy, desire and blatant lust throb within my veins. My father was a jealous man. And time came when he could no longer please his women and when, with me by their side, they passed their long painted fingers through my hair, mocked his impotence and reduced the great Rene Pianko to smallness, provoking a white rage which saw him one day seize a dagger from his set of juggler's knives and thrust it to the hilt between the heaving bobbing breasts of the last woman who was ever to laugh at him. He might have swung for the murder but he did not allow himself to be caught. Running from the room, he climbed the fire escape to the roof of the Victoria Hotel where we were staying at the time, slid down the slated surface towards the eaves and, in his last and most dramatic act of all, leapt off the spouting, executed an elegant triple somersault in mid-air, spread his arms like a swallow its wings and, emulating his ill-fated wife, my beloved mother, plunged down swiftly, gracefully and sublimely, meeting his death in totally theatrical style, in the matchless style of a master.

Beyond the window of my showcase, my audience applauds, even a toothless bristled old man who has placed his walking-stick between his knees to free for clapping his gnarled roughened leather-skinned hands.

But enough of balancing balls. Time for the hoops and the discs and for gentle cherubic Appolonia, so like my mother, who protects me always and from heaven watches as I take the rings we once shared and toss them up in swift succession, first three, then four, five, six, seven, describing swirling oval orbits of orange and white over my arms, behind my back and between my legs, while in my chest a dull pressure mounts and spreads to grip my fingers, my throat, my jaw. The pill I have taken before the performance has worn off and I must trust to my guardian angel Appolonia's watchfulness and, if she is nearby, to Juliana's solicitude.

Sweet Appolonia. Hopeful Juliana. – How young I was once. Once, they were knives that I – that we, Appolonia and I – tossed about so blithely, they were flaring torches describ-

ing splendid haloes of fire on the hushed darkened stage of the Tivoli before packed auditoriums in whose black eyes the very flames flickered and danced. How the audience applauded as her body, as brittle as a dandelion, supported mine in a one-hand to one-hand stand, how it sat on seats' edge with breath unmoving as, herself suspended by one leg from a swinging bar describing prodigious arcs, Appolonia held me by an iron ring clasped between her teeth. The Pianko team we were then, in harmony performing and, off-stage, in harmony living fifteen years of contentment, one regret alone nagging whenever thought turned to it – one regret, the barrenness which robbed us of children to whom to impart the best that lay in each of us. The heart was strong then, the hair black and abundant, the skin still smooth and unleathered. Both mine and Appolonia's. But stem the motion of time, halt the ravages of disease. A spinning ball, a hoop, a disc, these may be stopped; but time, disease, these are waters streaming on. My violent father loved many women; I loved one – angelic Appolonia whose glands swelled cruelly with disease, whose downy skin became flecked with dusky bruises, and who faded, faded a pale chrysanthemum, from life.

The hoops spin now, one about each arm, one about each forefinger, gyrating as if animated in contrary motion. Around one leg, another hoop turns, and from my mouth a stick balances yet another disc while a ball trembles on my brow. The pressure in my chest grows tighter; my fingers tingle as do my jaws and my lips; and a flush of heat, worse than yesterday's, spreads to the very crown of my head. Behind me, I hear the closing of a door and I know that Juliana has appeared, her eyes focussed dotingly upon me. – But I have not forgotten, I cannot forget, Appolonia by whose grave come Mondays, I sit, moist violets upon the windswept stone, and talk to her of my love and my loneliness, of my performances and the audiences, and of my conviction that soon we shall be reunited, knowing that from her place, in whatever level of heaven she may be, she is listening to my every word.

The pressure, the tingling, the heat notwithstanding, I go on, must go on. The public watches, expects. For them do I continue. For them do I stand now, inverted, with one hand upon a ball, spin a hoop about my other outstretched arm and set into motion yet another hoop on one leg while a disc rocks and teeters on my other foot.

I hear the people's applause. I see their inverted faces and behind them the merry-go-round, also upturned, revolving ever faster to the strains of an organ-ground carnival tune. The world around me trembles. A mist forms before my eyes and a rushing of sound fills my ears. The floor itself swims in all directions, a suffocating bitterness wells to my throat, and my chest, my head and my arms throb with a crushing agony past enduring, while two metres away, Juliana watches, biting her lips in hope and dread.

Was it yesterday that she came or already a week ago, wearing a green outfit that was tight about her breasts and hips? She brought me strawberries, the most expensive ones, touched my forehead, shoulders and cheeks, and said 'Rudy, believe me, I'm so alone.'

Her blue-grey eyes shone with pleading. Her lips quivered. Her palms were hot.

'Not enough,' I said, laughing, 'that you've become a widow once. You want to be a widow a second time as well.'

My clumsy attempt at humour appalled her.

'Rudy!' she said, then added, 'Why must you begrudge yourself the things that make others happy?'

My energy is sapped. I have neither inclination nor strength to begin again.

'Juliana, I'm too old for you,' I said. 'Look ahead. When I am seventy – if I don't die tomorrow – and burdened with illness, you will be a mere forty-five, still vigorous, attractive, but tied down.'

'I am not a schoolgirl anymore, Rudy. I have stopped looking to the future. There is only one reality. Today. Today. And again today.'

Her exquisite oval face, her blue-grey eyes, the gently

curved nose, the breasts tight under her outfit were all of one piece – appealing, ready to take, to give.

‘And maybe . . . maybe I am a schoolgirl after all,’ she said. ‘I love you, Rudy. So much I dare not let you go to waste.’

I stood by the window of my showcase, the last performance over, but the curtains open. Greyness had ceded to night’s blackness. I saw our reflections in the glass, Juliana’s behind mine, facing me.

‘There was a time,’ I said to her reflection, ‘when I might have answered, “Yes”. But now . . .’

I turned to her, approached her, took her hands, kissed her on the eyelids.

‘But now, it is you, Juliana, who will go to waste if you saddle yourself with me. You’re too fine a woman, young still. For you – I agree – there is only one reality. Today. For me, there are two, yesterday and tomorrow – yesterday which is memory; tomorrow which is death. And whatever is left of my todays belongs to the people – the old, the young, the children – out there.’

‘Rudy . . .’

Juliana tried to persuade. But, even while listening, I did not hear. Her words broke apart and dispersed, puffs of cloud into the void of boundless timeless space, her appeals, her promises, her professions of love dissipated unheeded into ether . . .

And so for the people out there, even as Juliana watches and waits and bites her lips, even as the gaping faces, the floor, the window and the merry-go-round swim in a delirious whirl, even as shrill ringing fills my ears and leaden mist my eyes, even as my heart is being crushed in a vice harrowed with anguish, even as, slowly, to the swelling applause of my swirling audience, the daisy-patterned curtains draw to a close upon Bruno dressed in jester’s motley, even then do I stand on one hand, poised on a teetering ball, and juggle, continuing to juggle in a frenzy of motion, juggling in racked exhilaration my very life through every precious today which – did my audience but know it, did Juliana but know it – may prove to be my last.

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 adamant 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.'

Honeymoon

Was it her idea? Mine? I have forgotten. We agree on all things, breathe almost in punctilious synchrony, penetrate each other, *are* each other in every configuration one could say of body, mind and soul. So the idea of returning to San Remo after twenty years so tantalised, tickled and finally captured both our imaginations that who suggested and who accepted became a mote lost in the jelly of our mutual concurrence.

So here we are, in the crook of a serrated secluded crescent of white beach, she gorging the sun with every exposed pore of her roasting flesh, the darting curious seagulls cawing around her with splintering shrillness, while I sit on a wet jag of rock behind her watching the slow modulation of her breathing, with my eyes fingering her outline and her crevices, their feel still soft and delicious, her skin glistening with the oily sheen of plush brown velvet. If I were to kiss her now, she would taste once more of salt and seaweed and would, I know, with her own lips inflame my flesh to stupidity and fill it, even as she did so long ago, with throbbing and electric heat and seething. She has not lost the trick.

She has filled out, the sharper youthful bones of her shoulders and hips moulded rather than curved into accurate smoothness. Her breasts are that bit bulkier and her thighs fuller, and here and there a stretch mark or a small redundancy of flesh has stolen in. But then I, too, am no longer that slender elastic-fleshed fellow she married. Creeping stoutness is over-

taking me and if it is the work of biological necessity neither of us wages a concerted struggle against it. Vanity is not a dominant trait in our natures, unlike our girls Jessica and Cinnamon for whom the mirror is the pivot of their swelling adolescence. Sensibly, our bodies are to us mere vehicles for the work we have to do. In the darkness, we touch, feel, explore, fuse and cling, and then we become aware anew of the malleability and galvanism of flesh, yes. But the twenty-four day is also composed of light and the hours of light are given to the pressures of the office and the classroom and then the only demands made upon our bodies are not that they retain their youth, but that they preserve their health.

The sun above is heat, is fire. An aureole of punishing yellow spears hurled through limpid unresisting blue space by the smiting blinding disc at its core. The sea alone dares to return its barbs, but these leap only a mite above the blue-green surface and cover the waters of the bay with a laminated wafer of glinting splinters. For the rest, the white sand, the crags, the shrubs and the clusters of bracken and gorse that pepper the shaggy verge between beach and road – these absorb its fury, humbled into torpid submission.

It is this same torpidity that now envelops Madeleine on whose smooth velvet a film of perspiration gathers. Her eyes are shielded by rimmed polaroids, her palms are turned outward by her side, a knee is crooked upright – ever her favourite position by the sea, a pose that has not altered in twenty years when, just married, we lay side by side in this spot, sometimes talking, more often silent, letting mere presence replace the function of speech.

But when we talked –

The world stretched, bewitchingly, before us. The Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic, and beyond, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Venice; Botticellis and Rembrandts; Covent Garden and the Opera; canals and Swiss Alps. Music to be heard, art to be savoured, theatre to be gorged. And, in time, the return to take up the reins of living, of work, and in precious hours to write, to create the books that coursed through the avid blood

some day certain to bring fulfilment, contentment and renown.

Oh, God, if there was a God – the love He instilled in us for one another . . .

The sun battered us then, too, and we would rise up and run and bound tittering through the shallows, spraying diaphanous green jewels over one another and tread warily over giant boulders cropped with washed green lichen and bathed in slime and over cracking crunching pebbles or dance upon their slippery condensations or sway upon rocky knuckles like crazy clowns teetering on tightropes. Around us, the glassy water lapped our ankles, and our toes and our feet sank into the frail yielding sand. But, on stepping back, the forked fangs of the frothy slithering waves filled in our prints and obduracy their essence erased our every effort to leave behind the most minute trace of permanence. Only a shallow etching of our names into a greasy boulder did we leave but moss and slate and clinging black shells have long ago healed the surface wound and obliterated the scar that we had, with love, scratched into that stone.

But do I care?

No . . . And yes.

This quest for permanence, for immortality – it is merely another form of vanity. If the body, the mind, the soul cannot be left on earth as a memorial to one's passage through it, then perhaps one's name may give testimony to a life lived and breathed. But what is the gain in preserving a name when it is a hollow within and not bolstered without by any lasting works, by any buttresses that may honour it?

I ask myself. Tasting the sap of resignation, I ask myself do I care and, gazing across the film-decked vastness of the blue-green ocean before me, piercing the blueness of space to its infinity and the blankness of future time to its eternity, I answer: no. A man is an insect. Eats and shits and breathes and buzzes about fussily for a while and then sinks into eternal sleep. What then is a name?

But the sap is bitter. Those books I had promised to write.

The museums, the galleries, the theatres we had planned to visit.

Madeleine.

Before me she lies while the yellow spears of the seething sun scorch her face, her belly, her legs, her tanned skin moist and gleaming, asleep perhaps, perhaps dreaming, as she so often dreams, about Jessica and Cinnamon or about the school where she teaches ten months of the year or about me who shares her pulse, her breathing, her mind.

We have in twenty years established our own home, raised two girls to bulging adolescence, scratched out with persistence our occupational niche to the point where work is no longer the task of Sisyphus that once brought us nightly to the brink of exhaustion. Our house, two-storied, is an edifice of solid brown brick. A double carport stands beneath it and landscaped gardens front and back bloom and glow with the variegated splash of roses, hydrangeas and huge chrysanthemums and smell with the nurtured redolence of ripening plums and apples and teeth-tingling lemons. Madeleine is forty-two, I have just turned forty-seven. Around us, past neighbours have moved away; friends have drifted or more sadly, have died; marriages have floundered and collapsed; the children of acquaintances have fled their homes and succumbed to drugs or been seduced by all manner of exotic sects promising . . . promising whatever promises the wild-eyed rebellious children are prepared to accept. We have remained firm, intact, our quartet, Madeleine and I, Jessica and Cinnamon, giving succour to those who, distressed or aggrieved or hurt, need another's ear, a shoulder, a word in place.

Ours then is the model life – an envied life, of unshirked industry and good temper and sobriety directed ever towards stability, security, a sound education for the girls with piano, ballet, tennis and art lessons on the shoulders of the more formal instruction of orthodox schooling. In addition to her regular teaching, Madeleine takes night classes as well, while I set out in the early morning to the office, endure an endless

succession of meetings, discussions and deliberations, and return home at eight in the evening or nine, not exhausted but neither inclined to do more than sit with legs elevated before the television set, not actively absorbing but letting the inane programmes seep into me as though I were a ready sponge. When we come together, Madelaine and I talk less of the theatre and of other places, less of music and art, not at all of the Alps in Switzerland and the Venetian canals, but more of insurance policies and mortgages, of new shoes for Jessica and a dress for Cinnamon, of how the neighbour has left his garbage strewn over the pavement and of how Sandra Carr next door keeps her awake with her cacophonous scrapings on the violin.

Within me, a book is waiting . . .

Madeleine stirs, shakes her head to disperse the sand that has gathered in her hair. With a springy movement, she props herself up on her forearms, raises her polaroids to her crown and squints at me. The cupolas of her cheeks are a roasted reddish brown against which the hoops around her eyes where the rims of her glasses have nestled are pale garlands concertinaed into delicate folds. With the tips of her fingers she waves, daintily, coquettishly. My gaze once more sweeps over her form, laps her contour contained in a tight bathing suit the colour of an opening carnation and probes the crevices she has to offer.

Within me, a book is waiting. And there are places to visit, different experiences to savour.

A wind, bearing salt and seaweed on its tail, germinates out of the sea. The green water shimmers with twinkling fragmented wavelets. The frothy fangs extend deeper into our arc of sand and scrub. And behind us, the shrubs sway soundlessly as puffs of sand rise and sprinkle their lower oscillating branches. My nostrils tingle with the breeze. There is a hollow ringing in my ears, a reverberation, an echo, a muted quivering resonance.

'Give it all up,' I hear. 'This is not you. Give it up.'

Our prints in the sand have vanished; our names etched

upon the greasy boulder have been obliterated. But there is still time to leave behind a mark. Sell the house, repay the mortgage, settle for a small flat, resign the directorships, square off the overdrafts, squeeze the purse a little tighter. Shut yourself from the intruding world and nurse your dream, come out of yourself, of *your* self, your true aching burning so-long-suppressed self, once more to explore the depths of your soul as you did twenty years ago when the world stretched so wide, so far, so bewitchingly before you.

'Decide. Act. If not now . . . if not now . . .'

Madeleine stands up, shakes the towel free of sand, approaches me. Her toes slip into the thin white sand which sprinkles off her feet as she steps nearer. Her hips rock with a heavy motion, her breasts heave, her lips are taut in the concentration of effort as she wades through the giving sand. She reaches out a hand to me.

'I just dreamt about you,' she says, 'and our honeymoon here twenty years ago.'

'If not now . . .'

'Madeleine,' I want to say. 'What have we done with our lives? We are comfortable, people envy us our harmony, but what have we achieved, for all our wants and our dreams? Madeleine, where did we go wrong? Let us turn time back these twenty years and start again. We are not young anymore, but nor are we too old. Let's go away! Let us hear, see, feel! There are books still burning within me. Perhaps there is still a chance to leave a name.'

She has taken my hand, smiles. Her eyes squint faintly and there is the slightest parting of the lips which shows a line of her glistening white teeth.

'Even after all these years, I still love you,' she says.

And as I look into her still-fresh, still-lovely face, it hurts me, it physically hurts me to see that she is happy and content, and I cannot bring myself to spoil that contentment. Instead, I hold her riveted to myself, let our configurations fuse once more, cling to her with the desperate mighty clasp of possession and, hungrily, insatiably, hopelessly, kiss her

shoulders, her ears, her cheeks, knowing with silent agony that in her embrace there passes through this world an anonymous life destined to whimper out slowly in an unmarked death.

Before the Law

My father never played golf. In fact, there were many things he didn't do – watch football, drink beer, go sailing, bet on horses.

'That's for them,' he would say, sucking his lips as he arranged his oranges in neat little rows.

'But it won't hurt me to join the team,' I persisted.

'And it won't hurt you if you don't,' he said. 'Your studies are more important. Your father and mother do their part. If you love them, you do yours.'

A quiet life his, spent unadventurously among the smells of cabbage and tomatoes of his fruitshop, spent in the over-riding dedication to one cause – to make of me a man.

'Fill your head with football and you'll become a plumber. Stick to your books and you will be a lawyer, an architect or a dentist, something respectable, a man to look up to, a somebody. Now if you love your father . . .'

I loved my father and didn't join the team.

When I was eleven, he took me to the museum; at twelve, to a concert. A year later, I turned Bar Mitzvah and he bought me the Britannica. But having eaten raw apples the day before, I spent the museum journey in the lavatory; at the concert I fell asleep; and the best use I could put the encyclopaedia to was to colour in the black and white diagrams in Volume one. He gave me a hiding when he found out, but the deed having been done, I didn't see the point of the punishment. He called me

ungrateful, demanded to know what he and my mother slaved for, predicted that nothing worthwhile would become of me.

'You'll be a shegetz, an ignoramus, a . . . a nothing. Is that what you want? Is that right for a Jewish boy? For someone who will be a man someday?'

I tried to become more sensible, grew more serious, and pledged myself to read from Volume 1 through to 24 the entire Britannica. I reached 'Abbey' before abandoning my resolve, but not before I could distinguish between Abbas the first, Shah of Persia, and Abbas the first, pasha of Egypt, as well as between Abbas Hilmi Pasha, Abbas Mirza and Abbas-Tuman, not to mention between Abbeville in Carolina and Abbeville in France. In school, I looked for ways to display my newly-garnered knowledge but neither algebra nor trigonometry lent themselves to such pearls, nor even history which dealt with the kings of England and Captain Cook and the Plains of Abraham where a soldier James Wolfe met his tragic end after defeating the French.

To my friends and classmates who preferred volleyball and cricket, I became a bore. They called me 'brains', 'swot', 'snob'. On occasions, I did join in their games but more often, having lost my earlier interest in sport, I spent the recesses with a book in my hands, munching an apple in the shelter shed and reading, not the insipid texts prescribed by the teachers but the juicier stuff – of Steinbeck and Hemingway and Caldwell – the loftier prose of Conrad, the flowing tales of Tolstoy and Dostoevski and the melancholy but so human stories of Chekhov. I became intoxicated, obsessed. After eating and sleeping, reading became my deepest need.

But my father wasn't particularly pleased.

'And what about your schoolwork?', he asked, picking up a Dostoevski with a hand grimy with potato dust and smelling of leeks. 'For such books you have time when you're older. First, you have to be something, to become somebody, then you can read all you want. Next year, with God's help, you will finish Matriculation and then there is the university. Your father and mother won't be able to work for you for ever. And

if you don't do your part, what will become of you?'

He wasn't ready for my reply. His eyes narrowed, almost menacingly; even before I had finished my announcement, his cheekbones became steel, he stiffened.

'I don't want to go to university. I want to be a writer.'

'A writer I'll give you.'

My mother was in the kitchen. My father called out to her.

'Tamara, did you hear? Your son wants to be a writer, a scribbler. After all we have done for him.'

Mother entered, wiping wet hands in a dirty already-wet chequered apron.

'Is it any wonder? All the books he's been reading when he should have been outside, getting sun, fresh air like other normal boys. Books, books, books all the time.'

My father preferred not to argue. Facing me squarely, his face at fifty grown flabby, his hair become a leaden grey, he said, 'let's make a deal. First you study, become a somebody – a lawyer, a dentist, an accountant, whatever you choose, we'll support you – then when you have finished and are earning money and, God willing, you can support a wife and family, you can do what you wish, even become a writer. Without a secure profession, you'll wander from job to job, become a fruiterer like your father, a plumber, a . . . a God knows what.'

'But I don't want all that – to be a lawyer, have a wife, family.'

'Listen to your father,' Mother said. 'It's for your good, not ours. We know. Our life has been lived already, and we can't change it. But you . . . you have the world before you.'

'I don't care about . . .'

'Do you want to get up at four each morning like your father,' my father said, 'and load sacks of potatoes and orange crates on to a truck and stand in a shop for twelve hours a day, seven days a week?'

'But a writer . . .'

'A writer starves,' Mother said with her customary gentleness, 'lives from hand to mouth, struggles, slaves, begs for

years before he becomes known. Is that what you want after all we have done for you? Is it?

My father, too, mellowed his tone. 'If you love your parents who want only the best for you, do as we say.'

The following year I matriculated with honours and enrolled in Law with half a heart. The pressures of study had curtailed my reading and where before I devoured the books, now I merely pecked at them, flitting from one to another, from Gide to Camus and Brecht, from Turgenev to Zola and Flaubert, reading only disjointed snippets which transformed one-time pleasure into pounding frustration and honed into resolve the deep-seated ache that was the need to write. And I did write. Sketches, feuilletons, even stories that evoked the melancholy tone of a Chekhov if not the art, and rhyming verses, none of which, in my four years at the university, to my sorrow ever saw the light of day. I needed time, I felt – indeed, I knew – but how surmount the exigencies imposed by the need to master company law and torts, conveyancing and equity through a series of dry massive colourless tomes hedged in with legal jargon and gobbledegook. But time was a commodity elusive. I detested the course and had to work all the harder to permit perseverance to see me through where enthusiasm fell short.

And my perseverance did see me through.

On the night of my graduation, my parents held a party in celebration. I had protested, wanted no fuss to be made of the occasion; a dinner for the three of us would be sufficient after which I could withdraw to my room and immerse myself once more in my books so long neglected and in the mound of papers, of fragments – of 'dwarfs' as I called them – which I had crammed into the drawers of my desk. They insisted on some sort of celebration. Twenty people came – among others, the Edelsteins with their ugly daughters, Betty and Rose, all the Wertkins, the Kahans, the Rosenbergs and the Wieners and Haskiel Norich who clapped me on the back with his massive palm and laughed raucously through the spaces between his teeth. Mother had excelled herself. The tablecloth

was new, glistened still in its whiteness. One course followed on the heels of the previous one: herring and tomato, gefilte fish, kreplach, kishke and cholent, chickent, duck, top-rib, and, when all these were over, there were still compote of apple and strawberry and finally coffee and cake.

My father, not accustomed to wine, had drunk too much. He was buoyant, laughed a lot. His cheeks, usually grey, were flushed and the leaden dullness of his hair changed to a shinier mercuric hue. After dinner, he rose to speak.

I wanted to escape, to retreat to my room, to write and write and write, to make up for time lost in four years and more of study to become a something, a somebody in the eyes of the world.

Father spoke, spoke of things that everyone knew: of the black years in Europe and of survival; of this distant land Australia, of its freedom and pleasantness and of the opportunities it offered to the children of migrants. He had the proof of it under his own roof, he said, in his own son who showed how, in one generation, a person can rise and become, with a little effort and ambition, whatever in the world he chooses to be.

When he sat down, beaming at the flow of his own eloquence, the guests applauded. Mr. Wertkin called out, 'Good on you' and Haskiel Norich rose from his chair to clap me once more on the back with his massive palm. I kept my eyes lowered, focussed on my fingers that fidgeted with my knife.

'Don't be so modest,' I heard Mr. Rosenberg say, and Mr. Kahan opposite me added, 'It's not everyday a young fellow becomes a lawyer.'

'No, indeed', my father echoed, 'it's not every day a young fellow becomes a lawyer'.

I raised my head, looked into the laughing happy faces of the guests, of my father, and smiled. A bitter smile, an angry smile, a smile aching with regret.

I had become a lawyer, yes, but I no longer loved my father.

Epitaph

No, it's not pleasure I get, certainly not a perverse relish, but I cannot begin my day without first flipping open the newspaper to page eighteen or twenty-two or thirty-one or wherever the Personal Notices happen to be on that day. The front-page stories come later. International conflicts, rebellions, political strife, cabinet scandals, and economic bungles are important, yes – far be it from me who has seen and experienced so much to deny it – but, in my life, all this is secondary. So, too, are the feature articles, the book reviews, theatre critiques, editorials and letters to the editor, those brief and not so brief indignant protests which I scan in quest of amusement and of illogic, – particularly when written by members of the clergy, the Anti-Fluoridation League, the Right to Life Movement and, for good measure, the Bicycle Riders' Association, letters which the newspaper must feel duty-bound to print. And as for sport – if I had my way, I would abolish these frivolous opiate pages altogether or at best relegate the whole business in two tight columns of forbidding type to some inconspicuous place after Livestock for Sale or Garden Supplies. Indeed, I once wrote to the editor on this very issue but my letter wasn't published.

This habit – no, this compulsion – to turn to the Personal Notices columns began with the deaths, in succession, of my only daughter Batya from cancer and then my wife Hermina through suicide, nearly ten years ago. I can speak of it more

calmly now, although at the time, it took me all of two years to come to terms with facts and with the answers which weren't true answers to questions I had set myself. Since then, I have found solace of a kind in the names, ages (where these are given), and register of bereaved kin, and sometimes in the pathetic little verses telling of stairs to heaven and of eternal rest, of undying loyalty and imminent reunion and all other manner of maudlin sentiments that only a grieving heart – certainly not a rational mind – could ever compose, verses such as I wrote upon Batya's death:

'A jewel given, a jewel taken,
Our light that the darkest hours did brighten,
Our joy divine, sublime, ennobling,
Like a leaf now withered, faded, gone,
Leaving poor again mourning parents
Seeking their jewel among the stars.'

A child born soon after our arrival to Australia, she was eighteen when she died.

In these columns, I am forever looking for familiar names. And naturally, at my age, the catalogue is lengthening. Landsmen, ship's brothers, business companions, acquaintances – one by one, their names appear in black on white. Taubman, Abraham, on January 25th, suddenly, dear husband of Leah, beloved father of Sonia and Leon, darling Papa of Sharon, Justin and Fiona, loved brother of Joseph (Argentina) and Isaac (dec. USA) – May his dear soul rest in peace; Marcus, Pinchas (Pinie), on February 6th, after a long illness, husband of Pearl, father of Michael and Morry, grandfather of Gerard, Michelle, Lucille and Estelle, in his 68th year; Marila Rosenbaum, wife of Benzion (dec.), loving Mama of Sarah, mother-in-law of Paul, devoted Buba of Shoshi and Shuli – Always in our hearts. And so on. They are fortunate, doubly fortunate. Not because they have died, of course; no, not because of that. But rather because they have offspring and because, in dying, here, in Australia, a generation later, they have managed to preserve their name. A generation ago . . . A generation ago, my

parents, like theirs, died without a name. Likewise my brothers, my sisters, my uncles, my aunts, and my numerous cousins. Perhaps they had an identification number at least tattooed on a forearm. That I don't know. Certainly no newspaper column or tombstone or document, nor even a surviving tattered photograph records their existence. If they have an epitaph, it is merely one I carry about engraved in my brain, locked into the tangled nest of memory which rises in all its acuteness and severity at commemoration ceremonies when the cantor quiveringly intones the 'El Mole Rachamim' beside the candelabrum of flickering candles and against the stark black backdrop lettered in white, reminding, if reminding be needed, of the six million martyrs, victims of disease, gas and flame, buried nameless in mass graves now covered with pastures or buttercups or dispersed as ash and smoke into the infinity of space and eternity of time.

Retired, I have ample time on my hands. I see a familiar name in the columns of the morning paper and my timetable for the remainder of the day revolves around the funeral for which soon after breakfast I prepare myself to attend. There is no law – not even that of decency – which states that I must go; very often I have met the newly-deceased only once, perhaps twice, but compulsion – the same that drives me towards the Personal Notices each morning – overrides reason and I take myself out to Springvale where the wind circuits with icy fingers across the jagged terrain of tombstones and the flatter plains of waiting earth beyond, to stand in the midst of other mourners as the rabbi delivers his eulogy in sober tones, as the bare pine-wood coffin is lowered on canvas straps into the grave to the augmented sobs of a wife or son or daughter left behind, and as the moist clay is shovelled in in thick thudding clods to separate forever the dead beneath from the living above, an act in which I participate with the dedication of unspoken duty and after which I pay my respects to the grieving family even though I shall repeat my condolence at the evening minyan. Above all, I make sure that I am noticed.

Whilst in Springvale, I visit also Hermina's grave and Batya's beside her where a deep angular crevice has appeared across the mottled grey stone to separate the 'one' from the 'eight' in her age. For a fleeting moment, as always, I recall the emotional agonies surrounding her dying, the visits to the hospital, Batya's yellow sunken frightened eyes and Hermina's tormented tears and her later madness, and my gaze drifts to the empty plot on Batya's left, an overgrown rectangle of earth vouchsafed, paid for and assured, waiting through all weathers for the father's heart, already sustained by a bevy of pills, to give out entirely. Friends – those who are left – and acquaintances regard such frequent visits to Hermina's and Batya's graves, even after ten years, as expressions of profound unfading loyalty, a view reinforced by my refusal to remarry, even when a succession of eligible widows have presented themselves before me. And it is not for me to disillusion them. But true feeling – the one they speak of – has shrivelled like a fallen sun-parched grape and, if the truth be known, it is before my own still-unmarked grave that I stand the longest, envisaging with total and peaceful equanimity the tombstone I have left details with my lawyer to have erected for me within a year of my interment – a modest stone to be sure, of medium height and unpretentious design upon which are inscribed my name, the years of my birth and my death, my kinship to Hermina and Batya and, below a seven-branched candelabrum, my two-lined epitaph, the same which will appear, if my lawyer is to be trusted, in the Personal Notices columns of the newspaper. At such moments, I remember my family – not Hermina nor Batya – but the ones left nameless under the pastures and snows of Europe or in its skies, and I remember, too, my own years in Buchenwald and my miraculous liberation, a skeleton of forty kilos but one whose identity had not been wholly destroyed.

In this lies my ultimate solace which has grown, not lessened, with the years. Die I must, and against incontrovertible fact I have long ceased to argue. For there are questions to which no answers are true answers, unless what is true is that

which each man for himself designates as true. So death, dying, hold no terror for me. In surviving, it is not merely death that I have escaped but anonymity and I can with unmitigated composure envisage my own funeral, a conventional affair to be sure, but for a childless widower well attended – have I not through my own appearances among the bereaved secured for myself a harvest of goodwill? – and I can muse, as so often before, with the serenity and satisfaction of crystal waters, upon the epitaph that is to appear in black upon white and in gold upon grey:

‘A man who, when Europe burned, did not go up in smoke,
And who in the heat of hell preserved his name.’

In our day, it is almost enough to make the heart leap with delight.

The Ice-cream Vendor

To eat, to sleep, to shit, to wait.

An unwinding of days.

I sit in my chair, feet in slippers, out again, eyes lidded before the television, the morning's paper crumpled between taut ankles, windows rattling, the elms creaking, the howl of winter swallowed up in the crash of waves, disgorged again, closer to the ear, bringing with it the sting of swirling seaweed and bitter salt.

The temper of it! Black in colour, black in mood. Encroaching upon memory's summers velveteed in brilliant greens and goldens and blues. Behind me, the splintered sea shimmering, the sun iridescent, to right and left, the moist plantations, beyond, tall buildings of concrete and glass vibrating, now silver now crystal, changing texture with sleight of illusion.

But no illusion the bell, *my* bell. Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling, high pitched far-extending, calling the children, generations of them, who run to Freddie's cart to yield up their fathers' pennies for an ice-cream, coated with chocolate, the hundreds and thousands a generous sprinkle of colour and sweetness at no extra cost.

When did I cease the rounds? Six years ago? Eight? Ten? The tedium. The fragility. At this age of waiting, a day is a month is a year, yet . . . yet each a mere blinking of the eyes shutting in another image, and another colour, that impinges on memory's retina to fuse there with images and colours that have

come before. Particularly the colours. Motley ribbons tied gift-wrapped around milestones: marriage to Amelia – silken white; Judith's birth – brittle pink; a new home – mahogany, green, sky-blue; anniversaries – silver, sapphire, ruby, gold; and loathesome mourning (no gift, no package this) – black, black, ebon black. Would that gold were followed by diamond's iridescent spectrum. But red – vile menace – strongest among the colours, crushed, stifled, simple hope. Red, scarlet, crimson. The colour of a traffic light changed too soon, of Amelia's coat caught under wheels, of liquid blood streaking asphalt, of the cross on the white of the ambulance, of the carnations, still-unopened, young and fresh, rocked by wind upon her tombstone.

Memory is colour.

And colour is breath and triumph and pain.

And youth.

Behind me, her purposeful step on the carpet, the rustle of her dress, the muffled thud of a chair set back into place. Joanne. Precious. Child of my child. Complexion of ripe nectarines, auburn hair, eyes dappled hazel. Grown tall, poised, assured, alive. Where have the years gone?

Full her presence, her voice buoyant.

'Looks like we're in for a nice storm, Granddad, and your blanket's slipped down again.'

The present returns. Squall over the sea. A crashing. Rattling. Creaking. The television flickering with outside lighting. Thunder. Over my back, my shoulders, Joanne's hands, light, dexterous, steadying, as she draws up the blanket.

'There, that'll keep you warm . . . And, oh, you've dribbled again.'

Those dimples at the reaches of her smile as she bends over me. Those fugitive creases beside her eyes. Freshness. Artlessness. And nectarines. Jonathans. Her mouth – no, not strawberries, but something sweeter, juicier as, tongue transversing her lips, she wipes my own with a tissue.

'I just came in to see if you needed something. Your nightcap before going to bed? Or are you still watching a show?

Humphrey Bogart, is it? Must have been great in his day. You're nodding.'

Hand on my hand. – Velvet on leather. Vibrancy on deadness. What is now on what has been.

'Mum and Dad will be home late tonight. If you need me, Graddad, ring the bell, won't you? It's here, on your left, as always. I'm just in my room brushing up on Louis sixteenth for my history exam.'

How wholesome she has grown. Blue dress, slender waist, gilded buckle on her belt, perfume of peaches, her breasts firm, ready, her hair lustrous streaming over her shoulders. Fortunate man who will be her husband.

'Here's your paper, Granddad. It must have slipped to the floor.'

Don't go, Joanne. Sit with me. It's you, your colour, your voice, not the paper, not the television I want. Tell me about Louis sixteenth. About the university. Your tutors. Your boy-friends. My words are trapped, my sounds garbled, I know. But I can listen, understand, appreciate. That much is left to me.

'And you are doing your hand exercises, aren't you, Granddad?'

Joanne!

'Just ring if you want something. I'm in the next room.'

Lights overhead; five globes shining in their crystal cups. But blackness withal. Blackness of reaching out and grasping void. Of vacuums. Distance. Solitude. Joanne, precious, come back. Listen, hear, even where there are no words. Bring back colour, your perfume, your youth . . .

Youth.

Those commercials on television again. Shampoo, cereals, Coca Cola. Sunny girls, bright dresses, satin skin, shimmering hair. And sturdy fellows, toggled and tanned, straddling surf, leaping high, stirring sand. All smiles and softness; all lure and teasing. Youth. Laughter, intoxication, abandon. The flesh electric, the crotch tingling, ready the breast, the cleft. All thoughts in the present. Concealed the acne, the tooth decay,

the warts. Denied the possibility of disease. Separation, bitterness, law-suits beyond reflection. Not yet conceived the decay to blackness – silent blackness, eternal blackness – of colour, luminosity and laughter.

Joanne, you too? You too, Joanne? . . .

She is back with Louis sixteenth. Studies, examinations, vision to the future.

Before me, Humphrey Bogart once again.

Outside, a swollen lashing of rain, a howling and tumult and a splitting of the skies.

Amelia.

Brittle canations scattered by the wind.

Scatter, too, the blackness. Bring back the gold, the green, the blue. And plantations, the sea, rivers, skies. And ribbons, rainbows, streamers, balloons.

Not for me. My peace is made. To eat, to sleep, to shit, to wait.

But for Joanne. For innocence. For passion. For those flush-cheeked youngsters, generations of them, flying to the cart, pennies in sweaty palms, reaching up, up, lured by quickening summons: Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling! 'Ice cream! Chocolate-coated! Sprinkled with hundreds of thousands for colour and sweetness!'

O memory!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! The bell reverberating. High-pitched. Ringing. Behind me, the sea. Blue, green, splintered sheen. The sun, white flame. Lush plantations to right, to left. Winking silver, winking crystal the quivering glass of the buildings beyond.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! The bell on my left. As always. Its thin steel cold, resonant, glinting.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Lightning glancing. Window rattling. Sudden brilliance seared to blackness.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! Hold back the blackness, eager children, brittle children!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Steps behind me. Brisk. Assured. To purpose given.

'What is it, Granddad? I'm here now. You may stop ringing.'

Joanne! Precious.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Don't age, Joanne. Don't let yourself decay. Cling . . .

'Has Humphrey Bogart finished? Are you ready for bed?'

Cling to colour, Joanne, cling to your youth . . .

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Hundreds and thousands. Nectarines and peaches. Ribbons and rainbows.

'Do you want me to take you to the toilet?'

Hold fast to smiles and softness . . .

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

. . . to bright dresses and perfume, to every touch of passion, the electricity in your flesh!

'My, you are attached to your bell tonight. Are you uncomfortable, Granddad?'

I love you, Joanne. Listen! Hear!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Hear what I'm saying even though I can't get out the words.

'I know what I'll do. I'll bring you your glass of milk. Then take you to bed. Tuck you in.'

Joanne, be spared!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Never age, never die, Joanne. Be spared carnations. Be spared cold stone.

'I'll be back in a minute.'

Deny! Defy! Never age! Never Die!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Blackness, scatter. Eyes, close. Memory, stir!

Sun over oceans, milk clouds in the sky. Come, you children, hurry, run. Ice cream in plenty, chocolate delight, and hundreds and thousands in abundance to make your lives bright . . .

Amelia.

Hundreds and thousands . . .

Carnations . . .

. . . to make your lives bright.

Blackness . . .

Luminosity . . .

Joanne.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Tinsel and Dust

'Dieter!'

'Morrry!'

The last thirty yards I quicken my step, and even run towards Dieter as he waits smiling in his sunny way with his snow-white teeth showing and his dimples cutting deep, at the Jenkins Street corner, two blocks from school

'I was afraid I might be late,' I say, panting under the crammed satchel on my back; to which he answers, gaily, with a devil-take-all wave of the hand. 'Then we should have been late together.'

Dieter and I drift together. It is only natural. The only migrants, we are seated side by side by Mr. Chandler, a gryphon of a teacher who, when addressing either of us, never calls us by name but points at whoever he wants and hurls an abrupt truncated 'You' down the knobbled bony shaft of his clawed unwaveringly rigid finger. To be foreign *and* smart runs against his finer grain but even our gryphon cannot but acknowledge that Dieter and I are, in our separate ways, the most precocious in the class. Nor can he deny – how he must boil – that insofar as twelve-year-olds can be creative, we are the most imaginatively so as well. Dieter who has the eye of a diamond, so sharp and so acute, draws magnificent landscapes and faces in single-coloured pastels, while I who love the sounds and rhythms of words write verses that Dieter without the faintest tinge of guile calls 'clever'. We bask, Dieter and I,

in the sunshine of mutual admiration. Together we wrestle, fish for tadpoles, scale the scaffolding thrown up around rising houses and, with tongue licking lips, remove each other's splinters garnered in our antics. And together we play chequers and monopoly and chess and roam about the quietly-suburban streets of Northcote, passing the days while our parents are at work, his dealing in leather goods a mile away in High Street, mine pumping for a few shillings a day the treadles of the sewing machines in Flinders Lane.

Tinsel against dust, we are known nonetheless as 'the twins', a name bridging the chasm between rollicking amusement to outright scorn where not barbed with the acid venom of sarcasm. For Dieter is tall and blue-eyed and blond while I am chubby and dark. And he is agile, the muscles of his calves rippling when he runs like rhythmically rolling cables under his pale flesh, his movements gazelle-like as he leads the field in whatever sport he enters while I, panting, straining, sweating and awkward invariably bring up the rear. And where I am the more deliberate, the model for Rodin's 'Thinker', he is the more quick-witted and the readier to laugh – however bad the joke – and the more inclined to pass flash judgement, however mistaken, upon classmates or teachers or books or upon the third-rate westerns we sometimes see together at the matinees at the Regal.

To deny envy is to lie, but there are moments, unforgettable, delectable, heart-quickenning moments – would time then stand still – which compensate manifold for my physical shortcomings.

His voice rises from his throat, the 'r's vibrating on metal rails. 'There is a big brain in that little body of yours,' he says whenever – and it is always – I beat him in chess or outplay him in monopoly. And he claps me on the back with genuine bonhomie, even with pride whenever my arithmetic or algebra result is perfect even when he himself, as so often, is well down the list. Words and numbers are not his forte; just as neither sport nor art are mine. Identical twins we are not; rather do we complement one another, like lock and key, the

fact clear to our classmates who impose upon us nicknames without number, names like 'Tentacles' and 'Oyster', 'Brawn' and 'Brains', and 'Picasso' and 'Einstein' which adhere to us like cement long after Dieter and I – eternity is illusory – fall out.

We are different, Dieter and I, but no less than from the Australian boys who revolve in our galaxy. But differences are both seal and razor. Difference unites Dieter and myself; difference cuts us off from the class. We are its butt, the foil of hooligans like 'Knuckles' Bill and 'Bullneck' Kevin who mimic our accents, dare us to call our mothers by bawdy names we don't yet understand or merely mock with ice-cutting fingers and the laughter of the devil the physical juxtaposition of so disparate a pair as Tentacles and Oyster. Dieter who is all wire and strength, they leave alone, content to leaven their burden of spite in mere words, adding 'Fritz' and 'Kraut' to his other names. With me, constraint on their part is not so vital a practice. How enormously it delights 'Bullneck' Kevin to call me 'Yid' and trip me up on the stairs or to clap me on the back with the full force of his concrete bulk or to nudge me into Mr. Chandler who, passing by, turns, seizes me by the collar so that my whole shirt rises under my pullover and in his severe hard-edged way lectures me – pours forth – on proper conduct, terminating his menacing torrent with a remark that bites with teeth far sharper than the most physical of hurts: 'You migrants have much to learn in this country.' In one bad week, I collect souvenirs – a grazed knee, a cut hand, a bruised eye. But that bruised eye is the last injury I know. For Dieter, whose eyes are diamonds, sees 'Knuckles' Bill strike me outside the schoolyard with a clenched fist. He leaps towards us, glides almost in swift long strides, hustles through the crowd of boys who make sport of watching and, amid the cheering and jeering, so launches into 'Knuckles' and so viciously batters him with as full-fisted a medicine as his own that both my assailant and his companions-in-arms thereafter keep their distance and in their assaults upon us confine themselves to the safer harbours of mere verbal taunts, mild innocuous showers

of words that run off our backs like water on hide.

Dieter is my protector and for his protection, mere gratitude does not suffice; but more than gratitude I cannot show until, on another occasion, I become his saviour.

One sultry March afternoon, we go swimming after school at the local baths. No hero I, I content myself by merely paddling about in the centre of the pool in the midst of a handful of boys who, splashing and larking about in the water, create fountains of spray and wave upon wave of foam. Dieter, however, as ever athletic and energetic – and vain – swims the length of the pool times not given to counting, until he is seized at the deep end by a cramp that slows him down and draws him to a halt. Some five yards from the end, a ruffian on mischief bent, dives, crashes, splashes into the water beside him. Dieter's poise falters. He begins to struggle and from where I paddle, I see him lash out and strain for breath before his pained pale face and blond hair sink in a writhing thrashing amorphous shadow beneath the surface. Crisis brings strength unknown to my limbs. Not one to create scenes by frenzied appeals and shouting, I swim quickly, if awkwardly, towards Dieter, grope, reach and find an armpit, hoist him upward, and, taking hold of his arms as he gasps and spouts water, I haul him, my own breath choking, to the safety of the pool's edge where he clings, panting, his chest rising and falling, rising and falling, bellows in their motion. His breath returned, he swings an arm about my shoulders, searches my face which in turn searches his, roams over it with the sweep of his pellucid blue eyes, purses his lips with stifled emotion and passing his wiry white fingers through my wet hair says with the 'r's more guttural than ever, 'Do you know what you are, Morry? A giant. A giant.'

And in that moment, I grow, I swell and I soar, ascending to heights of delight and blissful beatitude.

Then it occurs to me. For six months we have visited each other's houses, yet never have I met his parents, nor he mine. Photographs of his father and his mother stand on the mantelpiece of the lounge-room where we play monopoly, but the

photographs are old and outmoded and his parents stand stiff and formal and smile with lemons on their tongues, their lips and cheeks touched up with a tasteless mauve tint while the pale blue pupils of their eyes diverge and focus upon objects wide apart. If explanation be needed, this lack of encounter with each other's parents is easy enough to explain. Weekdays for our parents are filled – crammed – with work, with ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day of labour in the throes of a compulsion to succeed in this however begrudgingly adopted home of Australia, and naturally – and, in a way, unnaturally – we see little of them ourselves. By contrast, weekends are given to pursuits engaged *en famille*, taken up with visiting and receiving, with riding by tram to Music for the People concerts or to the Botanical Gardens, or simply with whiling away the time, somehow, with newspaper or book or cotton thread, in the quiet unobtrusive leaden repose of the back-yard or the sun-room or the kitchen – in the tranquil wondrous pastimes of suburbia.

Mrs. Greta Schmidt, when finally I do meet her – it is a public holiday, and shops, factories and schools are closed – is a dragon, albeit (and admit it I must) a beautiful one, spewing hot fire with every word. She hates me. Tall and slender, her sharp nose riveting the air, her glistening sun-golden hair tortured into a ribboned tail, her very breasts almost accusing, she frames me with narrowed eyes through which icy-blue pupils send shaft upon shaft of arrows barbed with venom. She hates, despises me from the very first and I see that hatred in her shining granite jowls, cannot help but see it as she counts the pennies I swallow with every jam biscuit and every sip of milk that Dieter has offered me. She is beautiful, yes, but not unblemished, and against her severe beauty, the hollow black space that gapes in place of a molar when she speaks stands out in prominent and abundantly welcome relief.

'From Poland, your parents, ha?', she asks, interrogates, her voice, like Dieter's, rolling forward but unlike his, resounding with the ever-nearing rumbling of a distant avalanche.

'Warsaw,' I say.

'Warsaw?' A huff where a 'w' is intended and the 's' a slur.
'And your father, he fight with the army, yes?'

I shake my head.

'But the Polish, they are brave people. Your father not fight with them?'

'Papa is not . . . a Polish man.' To call my father a Pole is to call him Satan.

'Ach. Papa is not Polish. But not a gypsy?'

'He was sent away,' I say. 'With Mama . . . He was . . .'

'Jewish' is on my tongue, but facing the menace in her flaring nostrils, I falter.

'He was . . . sent away. To Russia,' I say instead, and to impress her even a little, I add, 'To Siberia . . . it is very cold there.'

But not as icy as Mrs. Schmidt whose very laughter, a thin vibrating thread, adds no warmth as she rubs thumb against index and middle finger.

'But you people, you know always how to be warm, no?'

I shrug my shoulders, uncomprehending.

'Money has a long tongue, no?'

Dieter, across the table from us, gives a little giggle, his mother's epithet a joke. Prickling with heat, the tingling flush of an embarrassment vague yet sufficiently real, I nibble at another biscuit, sip my milk – her milk – and say nothing.

But the dragon's fire is not yet spent, nor satisfaction complete. I notice for the first time the gathering wrinkles of age about her throat and focus upon the black gap between her teeth.

'And here, in Australia, in a factory they work, your parents, ha?'

I might be ashamed of my parents' crippled English, of their lack of forthcoming before strangers, of the unchanging dreary drabness of their clothes, but their occupations I feel no need to defend.

'Mama makes shirts. Papa makes pants.'

Her nose twitches.

'And they work hard, no?'

'Yes,' I nod.

'Very hard, of course.'

'Yes.'

'Naturally.' The word in its harshness rolls unnaturally. 'Naturally. *Your* people to work in a factory. For *that* should be chosen, ha? Should make hands dirty? No, no, forbid God, ha? Work hard, yes. Today, in a factory, yes; tomorrow in a shop; but after tomorrow, ha? After tomorrow, other people should make hands dirty. Italian, Greek, good Germans, no? To make your people rich. Like in the old country – in Germany, in Russia also, America . . .'

She would go on. The torrent begun to gush is far from its final tributary. but it is Dieter who stems the flow. Leaning back on two legs of his chair, his hands clasped behind his neck, he topples suddenly. His glass overturns, the milk spills and Dieter barely saves himself from clattering to the floor by gripping the under-edge of the table which his feet have drawn towards him.

His mother is over him. Her hard pale cheeks flush. Her palm swipes at him once, twice, missing the mark each time as Dieter, eagle-swift, shields himself with raised arms and her jaw becomes unhinged in a cascade of abuse upon her son, all the while wiping with a damp cloth the spent milk from the table. Her German which she now unleashes I do not fully understand, but know from Dieter's repeated glances in my direction that not all her invective is over spilt milk and that my presence is not a little responsible for it.

Whether he listens, whether he hears, I don't know. But following his lead, I flee, barely avoiding collision with his father, a solid balding oak of a man with a board-creaking tread who at that moment enters straight into the lap of his wife's continuing vituperation.

Outside, the full effect of Dieter's mother's venom courses through me and I want to run, to run through the desolate suburban streets and through the football oval and the gardens to wherever I can escape those sharp pursuing barbs of the golden-haired dragon. I can't look into Dieter's face, for in his

is hers, and even behind the white-toothed smile and the dimples I see her malice and disdain.

But Dieter, out of range of the house, where neither his mother nor his father peering from behind the curtains might see, places a steady hand on my shoulders.

'Morry, you remember how you saved me one time? At the baths?'

'So?'

'Now I saved you.'

I search his tapering pale-complexioned face.

'The chair, the glass, the milk . . . She was hurting you . . .'

'She did not hurt me,' I say, shrugging a shoulder.

'I did it on purpose.'

I snort. 'Tell me another one,' I say, angry, disbelieving.

'Another one? All right. What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo?'

Mischief now plays on his face. His nose twitches in an effort to keep himself from laughing outright. I shrug my shoulders. What I intend as indifference he takes to mean yielding.

'A woollen jumper with a pocket! And have you heard about the four French kittens, un, deux, trois and quatre who went swimming? They couldn't really swim and un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq.'

His laughter, close to my ear, rolls over the fences in the neighbourhood gardens and tumbles along the street on all sides. What is frozen within me thaws. The hurt recedes.

'How do you keep a skunk from smelling?', I ask.

'Put perfume in his bath,' Dieter says, rollicking in spry gaiety.

His mirth is contagious.

'No, hold his nose. - And what is a crocodile's favourite game?'

'Tell me.'

'Snap.'

Now we both laugh.

'Catch me,' he says, beginning to run. I chase after him,

we elude each other around an elm, then, coming together, wrestle on the moist green lawn of the nature strip. Ever the stronger, Dieter this time puts little effort into resisting me and lets me gain the upper position. As I sit astride his belly, he bends his knees behind me and extends his arms above his head. The muscles of his neck are flaccid. Puckering his brow, he looks up at me.

'My mother, she is not so bad as you think,' he says. 'Tonight I will tell her how you saved me. After that, she will be different to you. She does not know you. I do.'

'She hates me. And my father. And my mother.'

'She doesn't know them. How can she?'

'Why?'

'So serious, you. Tell me, what is the difference between a sigh, a mink coat and a monkey?'

'Dieter! Why?'

Dieter raises his shoulders, heaves with his belly, once, twice, rolls me over with a thrust of his arm and our positions are reversed, my back now on the moist grass and he straddled over me, peering down.

'Or what has a neck but can't swallow?'

'Why?!'

A shrug of the shoulders, a pouting of the lips, a questioning look. The sun behind him rims the shadow of his face with a halo of gold.

'They say you, your people, are everywhere.'

'Me? My people?'

'Die Juden. Jews.'

His words ring like lies in my ears. He – they – must be lying. I am the only Jewish boy in class, in the school; there is not another Jewish family in my street and only three that I can recall in the neighbourhood. If there were more, would Mother, my mother, so bemoan repeatedly the wilderness that is Northcote, the exile where she rarely sees a Jewish face or hears a Yiddish word?

'They are not everywhere!', I say, passion the spirit that gives voice to protest.

He waves the back of his strong tendinous hand against the air.

'As if I care.'

The halo fades as the sun disappears once more behind a cloud. The smile – the white-toothed dimpled smile – by which I know him best returns, broadens. His nostrils dilate in imminent mirth.

'You still haven't told me: what has a neck but can't swallow?'

He waits for a moment, takes his weight off me, rises, pulls me upward and brushes stray blades of grass and twigs and dust from my back.

'So, give up?', he says, 'Give up?'

I nod.

'A bottle!'

And once more his laughter rolls like vaulting waves in all directions and it is pure and clean and contagious and I cannot help but add my voice to his, even though beneath the surface, there runs the stream of vague unease, resentment, hurt.

And time comes, soon after, when Dieter meets Mother, my mother. We are home from school, playing chess in the lounge-room of our house and Mother returns early. The game is nearly over.

Laden down with two string bags of fruit and groceries, her cheeks flushed high crimson with the effort of her perpetual haste, she peers into the room where Dieter and I lie stretched on our bellies, poring over our game. She nods at Dieter who rises on one elbow to say 'Hello,' pauses to study with swift glancing parries of her gaze his hair, his eye, his chin, evidently arrives at a private verdict and, thrusting a final hard rapping glance at me, recedes and continues with brisk clattering steps down the length of the corridor.

Two moves before checkmate, when my rook and queen are hounding Dieter's beleaguered king into final capitulation,

Mother calls me from the kitchen.

'In a minute,' I call back.

'Now!', she says emphatically.

Before Dieter, I prefer to avoid a scene. Grimacing with chagrin while he shrugs his shoulders as if to say 'It can't be helped,' I go.

Mother, barely home and the sun outside not yet set, is already occupied at the stove.

'You saw your mother with those bags,' she says in Yiddish, her back to me as she pours water into a pot, 'You could at least have helped.'

'I was playing with Dieter.'

Her tone is a razor. 'You were playing with . . .' She baulks at repeating his name.

'We are friends . . . We sit together at school . . . He . . . I saved him from drowning.'

'Put the fruit away.'

'But Dieter is waiting.'

'Tell him you're too busy to play with him now.'

I have seldom known her so rock-hard. Her hair is in a bun. Loose strands, some turning grey, tremble as she cuts up potatoes into the pot.

'But . . .'

Her lowering expression as she turns her head cuts me short. It is not the flush of haste that now colours her cheeks but something more vexatious, more galling.

'Such people are not our friends,' she says.

Argue with granite. In obedience, I turn to go back to the lounge-room. But at the kitchen door, Dieter is standing, lean, erect, watching keenly, holding in his wiry pale-complexioned hands the chess-set which he has packed.

'You won,' he says smiling, though not in his normal open way, as he hands it to me.

Mother moves from the stove to the sink, stiffly, without looking at us. I know that Dieter could not have understood her remark, but know just as clearly that he is aware of his superfluity in the house. With his diamond-sharp light blue

eyes and the muscles of his jaw rippling in sinewy tension under the pale flesh, he gazes intently upon Mother's back as though that might compel her to acknowledge him. But Mother does not desert her occupation. The evening dinner becomes her sole outward concern, even though she has set about it earlier than usual and with an application more intense.

I accompany Dieter to the front-gate. His blond hair as he walks with his customary buoyant step before me glistens in the orange light of the sun setting beyond Victoria Street. A mild breeze courses around us and the air is scented with the lively redolence of ripening roses and hydrangeas. Across the road, Mr. King is mowing his lawn. The trees in his garden sway to the rhythm of the breeze. Watching Dieter, I feel the need to make amends.

'My mother . . . she has a headache,' I say, lying with what could be the truth.

Dieter, his muscles knotting into cords, leaps over the gate. Coming to rest on the other side and obviously satisfied with his performance, he grins.

'I just remembered, did you hear about the teacher who was cross-eyed?'

'She's not always like that,' I say.

He cracks his knuckles and bends down to pick up a stone.

'I'm sure you did nothing wrong.'

'Well did you hear about the cross-eyed teacher?' His teeth are ivory as he laughs.

'Really . . .,' I say.

Licking his lower lip, his brow in concentrated furrows, he twists his agile trunk, crooks back his arm to the limit and hurls the stone with the full might of his body.

'She couldn't control her pupils,' he then cries out, watching the stone rise and glide and fall and crack into the very centre of an elm down the street. 'Bull's eye,' he adds with delight, slapping me on a shoulder. 'Did you see that? Did you see that?'

'Good shot,' I say, but without enthusiasm, even his riddle

failing to humour me.

'Ach, you are so serious. One day your face will fall off . . . Well, see you again tomorrow, Einstein? At the corner?'

I nod. He runs in the direction of his house, stops twenty yards away, turns and calls to me, 'Then Picasso will wait for you;' and then, walking backwards, retreating, adds, 'Your mother, Morry . . . she has a headache, I understand.'

The next morning, I don't meet Dieter at the Jenkins Street corner. Instead, my thoughts incessantly circling in swirling eddies, and repeatedly and expectantly looking behind me, I bypass it and take another route to school.

Before my eyes, the clearer eyes of memory than of immediate sight, I see again Mother's tight stretched lips as she says to Father over dinner: 'Your fine young son has found himself a German shegetz for a friend.'

Father wipes his chin where a flat noodle has been clinging.

'And that is the best you can do?', he says.

I defend what is under threat.

'There is nothing wrong with him,' I say. 'You don't even know him.'

'Tell me,' Father says, breaking off a piece of bread which he delivers to his mouth, 'does your friend have a grandfather, a grandmother, uncles, cousins, aunts?'

A peculiar question. I shrug my shoulders.

Father leans towards me. There are crumbs between his teeth. 'Whatever he has, remember this, he has more than you.'

And as I walk to school, I see too the photographs – the old tattered fading photographs with the names and the dates on the back that Mother has taken from her dresser drawer and placed into my hands.

'You are a child still, may you live to a hundred and twenty,' she says, 'but maybe – you will be Bar Mitzvah soon enough – maybe you will understand. It's time, at least, that you know.'

Some of the photographs I have seen before, others have emerged from an unsuspected darkness.

In a force united, my parents sit on either side of me, Father's face close to my shoulder, his breath smelling stalely of cigarettes, Mother more subdued now, her cheeks, her brow, her chin less severe – both pointing, reminiscing, explaining, as one by one, a succession of salvaged faces – young, old, long, short, round, square, bearded, shaven, smooth-skinned, wrinkled faces – passes before me.

'This is your grandmother Baila – she had seven children . . . here your aunt Rebecca – a more beautiful girl never lived . . . your uncle Isaac who played the fiddle . . . your other grandmother Sarah . . . your cousin Simcha – a child, a prodigy . . . If not for the, those . . . those murderers,' (Mother crushes the word between her teeth) 'you would have a family so big, you couldn't stop counting . . .'

And in the descending brooding oppressiveness that binds my parents and myself in an intimacy but rarely repeated thereafter, I become familiar with ugly horrible frightening words, words like Hitler and Nazis, gas chambers and crematoria where all of those whose photographs I now hold were killed because they were Jews.

'And now,' Father says, 'you, child of our martyrs, you are friends with one of *them*;' while Mother, raising my chin towards her own firm steady barely mobile face, adds with the force of a conviction deep-seated and passionate, 'The Germans, they hate us. Such people are not our friends.'

And now as I enter the school-yard, Greta Schmidt confronts me at the gate, that tall slender beautiful golden-haired dragon spewing arrows barbed with venom and words of fire, in her pale-complexioned angular face Dieter's face, in her light-blue eyes Dieter's eyes, in her rolling voice Dieter's voice. And, in that moment, Mother's warning assumes a bodily form as real as the grey gravel grinding beneath my feet, as solid as the sturdy red-bricked building of the school before me, and as clear as the bell that now cleaves the morning air with its shrill piercing startling clamour.

Dieter arrives late; the algebra lesson is well under way.

As he enters, his surprised blue eyes darting briefly in my direction, Mr Chandler, an ogre with malice to be fed, seizes him by the nape of the neck.

'Ah, *you*, is it?', he yelps, private triumph in his tone. 'I'll show you! For homework, you shall write a hundred times, "I must never again come late to school". Now get to your place.'

Behind me, 'Knuckles' Bill sniggers in my ear, 'Your friend has fallen in the fat,' while 'Bullneck' Kevin sprays blobs of ink upon my collar and adds an eloquent 'Yeah!'

Dieter sits down next to me. Intuitively, I edge towards the end of the seat, my eyes lowered and clinging to the exercise book before me.

'I waited for you,' I hear him whisper.

Mr. Chandler, all ears, eyes and a tangle of sharpened senses, misses nothing.

'You!', he hurls down his rigid finger, 'do you want two hundred lines?'

Dieter murmurs a humbled 'No' and for the remainder of the lesson, while Mr. Chandler, gnashing his ill-fitting teeth, laments the brainless obtuseness of the class in not comprehending the simplest of quadratic equations, he draws between simulated periods of attention a succession of grotesque gargoylean caricatures of the gryphon pounding the stub of chalk between his claw-like fingers against the board.

The quadratic equations extend the lesson interminably; my fretting at having to confront Dieter contracts it to a wink.

Go – escape from time.

The bell rings too shrilly, too piercingly. Shoes scrape harshly against the wooden floor, we jostle one another through the doorway, scuttle down the corridor, run, screaming, outside.

In the yard, he won't leave me alone. Showing his white teeth, his whole face bright in the sunshine. Dieter clasps my shoulder.

'What's the matter with Einstein today?'

I draw my shoulder away, as if contaminated.

'You sick?'

I shake my head, purse my lips, watch a group of boys kicking a football on the lawns.

'Tell me, what is grey, has four legs and a trunk?'

'Leave me alone!', I shout.

'He talks!', Dieter says in mock amazement. 'I waited at the corner.'

I try to break away from him. That voice of his, those tendinous hands, his very shadow at my feet stir within me something wild and frantic and desperate. Mother, Father, Greta Schmidt, they haunt me, and also those fading photographs and those ugly words, those frightening words – Nazis, gas chambers, crematoria – that have given to fear, even to terror, a long horrible night of fitful sleep.

'You made me late for school,' Dieter says. 'Because of you I got a hundred lines.'

I glance at him. There are two Dieters. Dieter, the same tall blond muscular Dieter I have known for nearly a year, the same strong swift sharp-eyed Dieter who draws landscapes and gargoyles with wondrous ease, the Dieter who protects me from the venomous caprices of 'Bullneck' Kevin and 'Knuckles' Bill. And yet there is another. How well he hides behind that open face and laughing eyes! The Dieter who really hates me, hates my mother, my father, my people. Would Father, Mother deliberately lie?

I want to break away and yet he clings.

'Nearly two hundred lines,' he says. 'What have I done to you?'

That wild and desperate torrent wells fiercely into the open. My very hands tremble; I feel heat and prickling in my face.

'You killed my grandfather!', I cry out, my voice nearly choking in my throat. 'And my grandmother! Because of you I have nobody!'

'You're cuckoo,' he says, placing a forefinger to his temple.

'You hate us!'

'Well, you haven't told me. What is grey, has four legs and a trunk?'

'The Germans killed millions of us!'

For the first time, darkness clouds Dieter's face. His eyes narrow, he bites his lower lip. His jaws set into stone.

'We killed you?'

'Don't pretend you don't know. With gas! In camps! My mother told me. She lost her parents there, and all her brothers and her sisters. My father too. They can prove it. We've got photographs. I saw them. You killed them, didn't you? Admit it. You hate us, don't you? Why? What did we do to you?'

Flies to honey, a group of boys has gathered around us.

'Fight! Fight!', one of them cries and others, expecting action, come running. 'Knuckles' Bill rubs his hands.

Dieter, squinting, his steel-blue glare searing, points to his chest.

'Germans never killed anybody.'

'Liar!'

'We are good people. You,' he says, now pointing a steady pale tapering finger at me, 'you killed Jesus Christ.'

The boys clustered in a throbbing circle around us, clap, hoot, jeer.

'Yeh . . . That's right . . . good on yer' . . . show 'im . . .!'

'I didn't kill anybody!'

'Everyone knows. Ask my mother. Die Juden, Jews are the devil. They killed our Lord . . . they are everywhere . . .'

'Hit 'im,' cries 'Bullneck' Kevin, so close I can see the tear in his jumper.

He is bigger, stronger, more agile, I know. But rage blinds the eyes to reality and I charge towards Dieter, flailing my arms about desperately.

'Liar!'

'So,' – his tone is marble – 'my friend wants to fight.'

A cheer swells from the watching crowd.

Before my fury, Dieter, his hands in knotted fists, steps aside. 'Try again,' he taunts.

Again I come at him, again he steps aside.

'If you touch me, I'll thrash you,' I hear him say.

'Thrash him! Belt him!', the spectators cry.

They are mere sound now, commotion, hubbub, and an

unclear blur milling in a whirl around me; even Dieter, an apparition now, mobile, lunging, elusive, until in one swift unguarded moment, my feet give way, the gravel rises, the clouds describe vast circles around the sun, all faces converge and I lie on my back, spread-eagled, with Dieter kneeling on my arms, his lean, hard face close to mine as he bores his fist into my chest.

'I warned you,' he says, menace in his eyes.

'Sock him one,' I hear 'Bullneck' Kevin cry.

Dieter rocks on my arms. They throb, excruciatingly, beneath their weight.

'Take back everything you said and I'll let you go.'

To retreat. To call Father, Mother liars?

I shake my head vigorously. A stone digs into my scalp. Dieter's knees sink deeper.

'Say, "Germans are good people" and you can go.'

In his chin, his lips, his eyes, I see Greta Schmidt's dragon-like face.

'Give him one!', the boys around us cry. 'In the face . . . in the mouth . . . in the eye . . .'

I shake my head again. 'No,' I exclaim.

Dieter raises a fist.

'One more chance. Say aloud "The Jews killed the Lord".'

The sun glares, the sky shimmers, the clouds, frail feathers, stand mute.

'It's not true! It's not true! It's not true!', I protest desperately, just as from the school, the bell rings, reverberates, resounds in a saving clamour, even in its piercing shrillness so welcome, so pleasant.

The blow does not fall.

'You lucky dog, you,' Dieter says between his teeth. 'Another minute and . . .'

He rises. The crowd disperses, disappointed, grumbling.

'Darn'd, bell.'

'Shoulda' knocked 'is teeth out, 'e shoulda'.'

'Had it comin' to him.'

Slowly, making certain that Dieter is well clear, I begin to

rise, but fail to see 'Bullneck' Kevin who, coming from behind, thrusts a vicious shoulder against mine, snarls, and hisses in my ear, 'You plucky bastard. But just you wait now.'

I brush the gravel from my back and seethe from fury, frustration, rancour and shame. He has escaped, the murderer, untouched, unscathed, almost laughing – I see him now – as, back erect and shoulders straight, he ambles triumphantly back to class. And that escape I cannot bear. It mocks, it sneers, it taunts. And, hurt, I want to hurt, and injured, I want to injure.

Dieter recedes. He is near the steps, about to enter, about to disappear. Driven, I run after him and, close behind, hurl into his back the most vicious epithet I can find.

'Fritz!'

The name released, it makes its own way towards him. Stillness follows. A few boys straggling behind him pause and turn their heads. Dieter is at the head of the steps. He, too, stops and turns, a cold thin smile on his face, a cruel deliberate malicious smile on lips that form a single word, uttered so softly that it lacerates more strongly than the sharpest razor.

'Yid!'

Home

The ground that Mother trod offered no certainty, would indeed never offer her certainty even if it were hallowed and sanctified by whatever private deity she listed towards. The ground was obdurately solid asphalt, grey and condensed; it rang with arrogant hardness even under her reluctant heels; and not a blade of the most fastidious weed could struggle through. And yet, treading the alien streets of Northcote, of Melbourne, she reeled and careered, as if pitching still on the vaulting waves of the Bight she had left behind when she disembarked, more sullen than curious, upon the massive planks of Princes Pier.

Myself a boy avidly laying an ear to the new terra firma of Terra Australis, I came to learn that home was where the feet ran most freely; home, for Mother, object now of hopeless and hungry hankering, was where *she* had been at her fleetest. Along the skewed banks of the sun-splintering Vistula where ripples and foam licked at the lichened steel of colliers transporting Silesian coal; along the clattering cobbled streets shadowed by huddled spawns of scar-faced tenements; around the squared perimeter of those inner turbulent courtyards redolent with fungussed cheeses, marinated herring and warm slaughtered fowl and the onion-and-garlicked breaths of garrulous tradesmen and cunning shop-keepers, of scholars gesturing in disputation, and breathlessly-bustling ear-locked students and of ragged emaciated mendicants who subsisted wanly on air.

All that had been rubbed into history. The war, *the War*, had put paid to a six-hundred-year civilisation receding through time and suffering generations to Great King Casimir's welcome to the Jews into his Poland. It had levelled Mother's birthplace of Warsaw and had cynically silenced all contending ideologies – socialism, Zionism, chassidism, Bundism, secularism – proving all equally right, all equally false, but had not succeeded, could never succeed, in annihilating memory which proffered securer anchorage than the firmest foothold to be had on the Australian shore. Home, when Mother spoke of home, was not our wide-windowed red-bricked house in Christmas Street which looked out passively upon pat greenness and week-day silence or upon old hunch-backed Mr. King clipping his hedge on a Saturday afternoon to the background blare of horseraces and football or upon the Walters next door leaving en famille for church on Sundays. Nor was home the stretch of suburban crimson-capped boxes mutely divorced from each other by driveways and narrow paths and by the wooden fences upon which, child that I was, I climbed collecting splinters, but which enhanced to the pitch of pain that severance, isolation and estrangement that made Mother complain more than once, and with the barest provocation, about the barren wilderness into which, after Warsaw, after Tashkent, after Paris, she had been tossed. And wilderness to her was any place where not a Yiddish word was spoken, where Sholom Aleichem and Leibush Peretz were not heard of, where one, so to speak, clung to the shadows lest a gentile finger be pointed or a sneer thrown or allusion be made, however subtly, to one's Jewishness. Jewishness, after what had happened, was not a matter for pride. How could it be? It was a birthmark, sometimes – if one were unlucky – borne in a prominent place, at other times mercifully hidden beneath the surface wraps. Nor, the coin turned over, was it wholly a matter for shame. A defect, to be sure, it was still not as mortifyingly eye-attracting as a hare-lip or clubfoot which could never be concealed. Jewishness was merely a thing to be observed, when observed at all, behind closed doors, behind

approximated curtains and with muted voice, among one's own. The lighting of a memorial candle, the reading of a Yiddish newspaper, the humming of a Yiddish tune, the exchange of memories of times and places past – these were the *form* and *content* of our Jewishness on this remote shore. Sometimes, on a Yom Kippur eve, Father might have driven to the synagogue three, four miles away to add his praises and petitions to the general drone, but by the time he left the house, darkness had deepened by many shades, the neighbours were soundly sequestered indoors and the murmur of his Vanguard would not betray his destination. Jewishness – no, not that – the fact of being Jewish was a shadow that clung, contracted, at one's feet, and one prayed under the alien Northcote sky that the sun might not shine too keenly lest the shadow cast be too stark in the eyes of the gentile.

'Home' was Mother's word for Warsaw, more precisely for Praga which lay beyond the right reach of the Poniatowski Bridge that dizzily straddled the shimmering Vistula beneath. It was sufficient for her to say *in der heyim* for the listener who knew to evoke for himself the cluttered confluence of old and new, the graded decline from the magnificent collusion of Classic, Baroque, Gothic and Rococo of the Marszałowska in the south through a succession of tumblings over the middle-stretch conformity of Sliska and Leszno to the wild and perilous putrid slums of Stawki to the north. *In der heyim* also meant the tumble-down flaking mothballed *shtibl* where her father delivered himself, quivering heir of the generations, to his God, the eternal giver of life and certitude; the cramped third-floor, three-roomed apartment where her six brothers and sisters had bickered, teased, debated, bustled and laughed; and the dank coldly-bone-penetrating workshop where kvass was bubbled into tinkling bottles and taken away on listing horse-drawn carts clattering over the paving stones. It was also the terrain where Mother, as a spirited adolescent, drifting from her father's God, had been avid for a world of justice with equality and freedom for all; where with head in the air, eyes to the future and bright brilliant banners in her arms, she

had marched on May Day parades and sung the 'Internationale'; and where she had believed that through hard work and resolute will, she – no, they, her generation – could bring closer the age of the Messiah who would lead the people, all people, towards the Zion faced by her father in prayer, towards that city of peace that stood as symbol eternal for harmony, perfection and brotherly love.

'Home', too, was a city that had not yet been walled, a city that bustled and hummed and, in its mazed interstices, dreamt of many different futures, but not of the future that was to befall it with the black torpor and terror of nightmare. The War teething across its frail perimeter with menacing canines, 'home' became familiarity abandoned, a father's parting blessing and a mother's tears, and family warmth, contentment and order forsaken for the frosts and gelid exiles of Siberia. It became from then on an image portable and elusive, engraved into memory but inaccessible to touch, and in time an image transformed through information and rumour into a monstrous spectre of emptiness, decimation, rubble and orphanhood. It became a rubble graveyard, desecrated and bereft, where mutilated bodies, lives and hopes lay interred in eternal oblivion and silence, along with Mother's one-time strivings for harmony, perfection and freedom and the bones of her father's God and the soul of the perished Messiah.

What she brought then to Australia, descending the gangplank warily at Princes Pier, was a near-empty package – little of matter, less of spirit, nothing of faith. Behind her, beyond the rolling, tossing, sickening green oceans lay Warsaw, Siberia, Tashkent, Ziegenhain and Paris, places abandoned to abandoned time; before her, past the afternoon haze that smudged the nearby warehouses, pylons, cottages and lanes sprawled greyly the mute unknown, secretive, concealed, inert, promising nothing, neither particular welcome, nor expectation, nor hope. From the beginning then, Mother and the new alien lukewarm country offered nothing willing to each other; or, where they offered, and gave, the exchange was coldly equal – the country providing Mother with work in a

drab airless factory in Flinders Lane, Mother in turn giving up her labour, eight, ten, twelve hours a day of her energy, without love, enthusiasm or cheerfulness. It was need, desperate urgency that drove her, for love, enthusiasm and cheerfulness were a part of the rubble left behind and a part too of that long Russian exile of which her translocation to Australia was a mere continuation. What remained to her, of all that was tangible and near was the day alone, the grey morning light to which she woke, the grey daytime light under which she pumped at a machine sewing buttons to sleeves, the grey evening light in which, leg-weary and numbed, she trudged home, to eat, to feed, to iron, to darn, to read the paper fitfully and to lapse into sleep before the next grey day confronted her once more.

That the sun shone over Australia, I knew, but that was *my* legacy, not hers. Hers was in the nature of an alimony, a toneless sunless bequest enravelling in pain, a levelling-out, I came to see, of moods, ambitions and inclinations, daring no more to look too high, lest at the summit there marched false hope, nor gaze too low, lest in the depths, she might founder in despair.

Under the feet, the ground was solid. It was grey and stark and obdurate, and rang (for her, too loudly) under Mother's step. They were the Northcote streets she trod, the Melbourne air she breathed, and, when she looked up, the Australian sky she saw. And they were the odours of High Street she smelled, and human voices she heard and the touch of fellow flesh she felt brushing against her as she shopped, nothing cheap too cheap, on her way from work. To me, because here my feet ran fleetest, this was home. But for Mother, home it could never be. Not for her the deadening suburban silence over orderly green gardens and spaced-out red-brick houses of Christmas Street, nor, on the other hand, the raucous pitch-and-bustle of fellow flesh crowding the fruit-shops, haberdasheries and delicatessens of High Street; nor for her the rancid smells of over-heated lard bubbling in the choked and steamy fish-and-chip shops or the greasy hamburger, the meat

pie or the roast; nor the temperamental sky changing moods capriciously through a daily anarchy of seasons; nor the affected courtesies, apologies and camaraderie of neighbours who, she felt – no, she knew, after Europe she *knew* – looked upon her, the foreigner, the Jew, with suspicion, malice, ill-intent. What to me was solid and real was to her conditional. What to me was certain was to her precarious, fraught with monstrous uncertainty, like a voyage at sea.

But if Australia, to Mother, could never be home, nor could Warsaw, where her tread had known its securest anchorage, any longer stake a claim. There was no returning to the tumbling of Baroque, Gothic, Classic and Rococo, to the shimmering sun-splintering Vistula lapping past her house, to the warmth of family and laughter, to the crucible in which contending ideologies and messianisms boiled and fermented and effervesced. It was all behind her in space; it was forever lost to time. Perhaps, absent-mindedly or in a reverie, Mother could reach out but her fingers would touch upon nothingness. The city of her childhood and youth lay now beyond touch, beyond grasp, an unrecognisable rebuilt city of concrete, glass and memorials from which her roots had been torn out, the soil upturned and the ground rendered forever hostile to her return. What it had been it could no longer be. And whatever the pleasure, whatever the pain, it was in memory alone that Mother could ever attain to 'home'.