

## On the Isle of Curaçao

Ah, yes the enchantment. The enchantment to be had in that Caribbean Eden where, on the Fairisky's entry into St. Anne's Bay, the twilight played gold and crimson on the darkening silver-sheened untrammelled waters; where the oil refineries stood sturdy and silent and already softened by mellowing light to the left; where the headland rose to a smooth low shoulder to the right; and where, beyond the prow, past other ships bunkering in the port, stretched the pilot station and pier with their warehouses, derricks and forklifts while the dockworkers and customs-men awaited our arrival, standing with hands-on-hips patience born of practice, habit and matter-of-fact routine.

'*Amici mei*, you will be enchanted,' Captain Silvestro, massive, immaculate in white with gold braid, and gregarious, had promised us earlier that afternoon. His hair was lush, white and swept back in magnificent waves, his voice deep and resonant, his hands large as he opened them out in a florid generous so-Italian flourish. 'A fly on the globe of the world, this Curaçao,' he said, 'a little spot like dust . . . *Ma, la magica, amici, la magica!* . . .'

With that, he proceeded to itemise and elaborate with all the nuances of voice, expression and movement at his command upon the topography, the climate, the fragrances, the quaint and multi-coloured colonial houses as in Amsterdam of old, the floating market and the cafes, the polyglot of Spanish, English, Dutch and Papiamento tongues, the syna-

gogues and the churches, and the souvenir shops of the capital Willemstad.

'To our Jewish passengers,' he said in passing, 'tonight, *amici*, you will be able at the Synagogua da Mikve Israel, the synagogue the oldest in the Western Hemisphere . . . you will be able to welcome the lovely bride del Sabato . . . While to everyone I will say . . . many, many souvenirs and cheap freeport things you can buy - cameras, jewellery, china, tape recorders, crystal, linen, silver, Curaçao liqueur, mmm! the best of all liqueurs, from the peel of the lovely oranges of Curaçao . . . And this too I will say . . . if you are not rich or . . . or if you are not like iron . . . more safe is it then to keep your money on the ship . . .'

If, upon hearing of the synagogue, I had been prey to anxiety about reaching it in time, I need not have let myself succumb. I had not counted on the late setting of the equatorial Antillean sun - the sun, when I looked at it, a phosphorescent gilded orb setting staidly and leisurely through a lush-striated wash of cadmium, carmine, indigo and lavender, the fingers of its light extending over ocean, harbour and emerging silhouette in a broad, far-reaching, generous encompassing. By six, we berthed; by seven-thirty, had placed foot on the hearth of that exotic trans-Atlantic outreach of Netherlands dominion; and at eight-thirty, saw myself passing through the just-opened central portal of the Mikve Israel beneath the lintel which, in gold engraved on rich mahogany, bade me be blessed in my coming.

The taxi-driver, strong-featured and dark, hybrid issue of Lord knew what turbulent cross-coursing currents of history, without prompting had assumed the role of guide, from behind his wheel and in an English intonated with Dutch and Spanish colouring, recounted a narrative of Spanish discovery, Dutch conquest, land settlement, governors and gentry, in the flow dropping names as illustrious as Alonzo de Ojedo, Christopher Columbus, Peter Stuyvesant and Prince William Charles Henry Friso of Orange-Nassau, names that rang with resonance and evoked images of greatness, pageantry, bril-

liance and esoterica so far a cry from the bumptious self-satisfied insularity and plebeian backwardness of antipodean Melbourne that had for so long till then been my adopted home.

That same sense of splendiddness, abetted by the perspective of history, struck me also in the Sala Consistorial, the communal-hall opposite the synagogue proper across the inner courtyard. There, on tables, in display-cases, on corner stands, all set apart from a central table set for the after-Sabbath-service *kiddush*, were candelabra, spice-boxes, Torah crowns, breast-plates and pointers, all of finely-wrought solid silver or of filigree, on their rims inscribed in calligraphy ornate and fine the names of still other folk, folk from Amsterdam, Portugal and Brazil come in times of Inquisition and of expanding West Indies trade, four three, two centuries before. In the midst of the locals come for the Sabbath Eve service and surrounded by a vigorous motion of loud, boisterous, easily-tickled tourists, Americans all, except for an elderly couple, co-passengers on my ship, I wandered about that museum, that repository of a man's permanence and immortality, studying names and dates that opened up vistas of time and of space far outside, but immeasurably enriching, my own narrow till-then cocooned primordial existence.

'You are now witness and part of noble history,' I heard someone say close to my ear.

I had been stooping over an engraved *Havdalah* plate studying its inscription and elaborate design. I straightened, and found my companion to be a sturdy balding slack-cheeked man in brown suit and skull-cap, standing with one large hand on the window-frame and smiling with an amicable benevolence that sent deep creases darting in clear mirth from the corners of his eyes.

'That plate belonged to Hakham Ishac Carigal, successor to Hakham Samuels, Hakham Mendes da Sola, and fore-runner of the beloved and wise Hakham Yahacob Lopes de Fonseca who was followed a generation later by Hakham Aron Mendes Chumaceiro from Amsterdam. You stand now where

great men have lived, breathed, loved God and watched with fatherly care over their children.'

I nodded.

'Yes,' I said. What else was there for me to say?

'You read Spanish, maybe?' he asked then, turning towards a Torah-case on which he pointed at a line of script.

'Only English,' I said, 'and . . . and Yiddish.'

He drew himself up more erect than ever. He adjusted his skull-cap, patently beaming.

'*Emes?*' he said, '*Men redt noch biz heint Yiddish oif der velt? Zer angenem dan mit aich tzu bakenen. A mentsh fun Got alein geshikt.*'<sup>1</sup>

His own Yiddish was that of my parents, not Galician, not Lithuanian, but Polish, more specifically a Warsaw, Bialystok or Lodzer Yiddish. That he should have doubted its continuing currency in the wider world struck me for a moment as strange – rather was it for me to doubt its currency on this remote far-flung Sephardi island spot of dust – until I saw that his question was delivered with tongue well in cheek. That I should, however, have been God-sent – that seemed more the stuff of hyperbole, the kind of remark often accompanied back home by a pinching of a cheek, a hand ruffled fondly through one's hair, a strong affectionate clap on the neck.

At that moment, one of the Americans, the most vocal of a very vocal group, announced the imminent beginning of the service.

'*Kummt, mein yungerman,*' my self-appointed mentor said, '*m'vet gein davenen*'<sup>2</sup> . . . Let us go in . . . My name, by the way, is Solomon Alter . . . I live here . . . work here . . . import-export . . . And you seem to me a fine young man, a *feiner yungerman* . . . From Australia, no? . . . That is where your ship comes from, no? . . .'

He was clearly well-informed. As we crossed the courtyard,

(1) 'True? Yiddish is still spoken in the world? My pleasure is it to meet with you. A man sent by God himself.'

(2) 'Come, my young man. We will go to pray.'

his every step firm and purposeful on the Spanish-patterned tile, he said, 'You are surprised, my friend? . . . Do not be. In my business, I must know these things . . .'

He secured for me a skull-cap and prayer-book from the visitors' box and led the way into the synagogue, bowing as he entered. He was a picture of elegance and confidence in his every movement. His suit sat on him without a fault; his shoes were polished to a sheen; his skull-cap sat on his scalp as though it were grafted there. Over the doorway through which we passed, I read, '*May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem.*'

'Come sit with me,' he said as we moved into his tier. 'The *Siddur* is in Portuguese and Hebrew . . . We have our own order of service and I will be honoured if you will let me guide you in our prayers.'

In his shadow, I followed him towards his seat. Looking about me, I was struck by the spaciousness of the synagogue interior, by its basic simplicity of design, its high white walls and arched windows at each end, by the long tiers of richly-ornamented benches, all aligned around a central platform – the *theba*, as Solomon Alter called it – on whose balustrade stood four brass candle-sticks and separate holders for the Torah bells, and over which hung a splendid massive chandelier, one of four, with numerous sconced candlesticks that threw a brilliant white light everywhere befitting the arrival of the Sabbath bride. Sand covered the floor; the Ark was open to reveal scrolls in embroidered mantles, a dozen or more, and above it were the two Tablets of the Law over-ridden by the legend '*Remember the Torah of Moses, my servant,*' while illuminating them was the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Light in a separate glowing ornamented chandelier.

As we sat down, Solomon Alter, opening his prayer-book and mine, said,

'We do not have many young Jewish families on this island. You may count them on your hands. Young people altogether we have not many. I have myself a daughter and there are a few boys here, but again you can count them. But

what I want to say is something different. Last week, a Jewish boy on this island had his *brith*. In thirteen years when, God willing, he shall stand on that *theba* to celebrate Bar Mitzvah, this building, this synagogue shall have stood two hundred and fifty years. A quarter of a millennium. Think of it. Two hundred and fifty years of Jews – Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, with visitors from Europe, America, and Australia now – all come to worship in a place where for a long long time there has been peace and safety and freedom.’

Leaning towards me, he peered into my face, his expression grown more earnest. He pursed his lips.

‘Do you understand what I am saying?’, he said.

The words, accented with whatever other languages laced his speech – of which Spanish, Dutch and Yiddish at a minimum were three – were clear enough. But his question along with the accompanying change in his expression implied more than the words on the mere surface conveyed.

I nodded comprehension, but he, Solomon Alter, now placing a large firm hand on my arm, drew his brows together, shook his head and said,

‘Perhaps later, if you will honour me as my guest at the *Shabbes* table, I will explain.’

‘A mystery?’, I ventured.

‘A thing of *pikuach- nefesh*,’ he said, ‘the saving of lives.’

With a word, he had laid before me a conundrum where the clues did not quite cohere.

‘*Pikuach- nefesh?*’, I said after him, ‘the saving of lives?’

He nodded, once and briskly, but raised a hand intimating silence, for the rabbi, a young smooth-chinned man, clearly of mainland North American origin, now stood on the *theba* before us about to begin. I was left, throughout the service, to make sense of Solomon Alter’s remark that seemed at once so portentous and mysterious, a mystery indeed as I had ventured albeit merely in the semblance of jest.

Wordlessly, but with pointing, nodding and timely turning of pages, Solomon Alter, regularly bowing low, guided me through the service. While the Portuguese of the prayer-book

was unfamiliar, except in so far as I could decipher words of clearly Romance origin, I was more at home with the Hebrew. Where Yiddish proved a secular Esperanto in the world, the Hebrew of the liturgical and Biblical texts was a religious one. But what both struck and delighted me still more piquantly was the sheer musicality of the service, the melodies in their lilt and harmonies and rhythms possessed of a distinctly classical Iberian resonance, the greater wonder of it all being their preservation and enduring potency to stir even after two centuries and a half, and more, of usage. And they did stir! While outside, in the Sala Consistorial and in the courtyard, the Americans may have been loud and boisterous, even shrill to the point of abrasiveness, to a man, to a woman, they sang now with a moved, moving choral unison that within those high, white, now-age-hallowed walls evoked and bound their voices with those of the generations past who had, through the vestibules and corridors of history, worshipped with the Carigals, de Solas, da FONSECAS and Chumaceiros. To their voices, Solomon Alter added his own, a deep basso rich and clear, delivered I thought at first with over-theatrical airs, but I became persuaded – I ought not to have doubted – with a genuine reverential love of the divine.

Myself far from devout – by any standards an *apikoros*, an armchair heretic, all knowledge I possessed of ritual and prayer acquired at Sunday school rather than under the domes of synagogues back home –, I could not help but wonder from whence came that veneration shown by my host, a man so outside the current of world affairs, somehow misplaced or derailed – dared I say, lost? – on an island that, were one to blink while flying over it, would be totally missed. Misplaced or derailed, nothing more certain, even if that certainty stemmed from intuition rather than from volunteered, disclosed and uttered fact. He was not native to that place. With his Yiddish, his physical resemblance to any number of my parents' friends, with the unquestionably eastern-European Ashkenazi features, he was a late arrival to this tiny postage-stamp island on the surface of the terrestrial sphere. But if there were

truth in this, why, of all places, when Jews had, over the preceding three decades, sought out the Americas, Canada, South Africa, or, like my parents, far-flung, but at least substantial, Australia, had he disembarked on this blister, this pimple, this innocuous mole that punctuated, almost like a single full stop, the vast physiognomy of the physical and the human world?

The rabbi in his address, directed at the American visitors above all, captive audience for the occasion, might have appeared to offer an answer. Standing on the *theba* and swaying on the balls of his feet as if to add stress to his words, he said,

'We are not of the mainstream of Jewish life as you, my friends, know it. We are not a wealthy people, we are not a politically or socially or, regrettably, culturally-endowed folk. We are, here, but a tributary. But this tributary, ever since Samuel Coheno first set foot on our shores for the Dutch West India Company three hundred years ago and more, this tributary has never dried up, while in other places – need I remind you who must surely know of Jerusalem of old, of the cities of Babylon, Toledo, the Ukraine and Europe but recently? – in other places, our parent-brother-sister communities large and small have disappeared, been decimated, ravaged to ruins, and deported. Yet, like a saving remnant, we are proof of the resilience and endurance of our people; in us is invested the mantle of continuity; small as we are, while others of our people have undergone attrition or vanished, we remain forever witness to ongoing, splendid, colourful history sanctified.'

Such inverted, almost solipsistic reading of history was scarcely to my mind beyond dispute – even commonplace Melbourne was not above such self-conceit – but Solomon Alter, for one, as he set the pace with long strides on our way to his home, did not dispute it. Rather did he say:

'May our worthy Rabbi Aryeh Silas Jacobi forgive me, but in front of visitors, before his mainland countrymen, he is inclined to the rhetorical. *Er hot lib a bisl tzu redn*, he likes to

talk. Weightier matters he reserves for *Shabbos* mornings when our good American *leit*, our kinsmen, see fit to drink in the sun along the beaches or buy out our markets and souvenir stores, leaving him to sustain his local faithful with finer wisdom of Torah and Talmud without the theatre. But, all the same, truth there is in his words'. He paused, then said, 'The Fairsky, I understand, is sailing in the early hours for Europe, no?, and then you shall be flying, flying on in time, to Lod, to Israel, to Jerusalem, not so?'

To a question he had asked as we ate salted herring and drank red wine at the *kiddush*, I had broadly outlined my itinerary.

I nodded.

'Yes,' he now said. 'Yes, very fine. In the places you intend to visit, you show yourself to be a true child of our people, *ein emeser getreier zun*. It is a fine pilgrimage you are undertaking, in some ways even a holy one. But this, *this*, remember. That pilgrimage is to dead or ailing places. Amsterdam, for us, is now kaput; the ghetto of Venice is dead; the ghetto in Rome pure ruin; Dachau has been a nail in the coffin of our people, and Israel, Jerusalem – God above!, who knows what awaits the children of Zion gathered there? You read the newspapers, no?; you listen to radio, no? Is the land again to be a place of war, destruction, exile? Is it? Is it? For is there not turmoil out there, everywhere, wherever there are Jews, and also danger and risk, the Jews nowhere to be secure, nowhere secure, while . . . here, here, at least . . . even in the flow of history, here there is safety, there is safety, freedom, peace . . .'

He had used the same formula as before – safety, freedom, peace.

He did not elaborate. He pointed out instead the Ashkenazi Synagogue we passed, the now-darkened shops, the houses with gables red in the daylight and with walls of rose, olive, blue and yellow stone. To all sides, the streets were broad; they were clean and fresh; dark-skinned well-built negroes moved along them swift and sleek; while all around I smelt the ocean air, tasted its heady brine and felt in my face the capricious

stirring of a tantalising Caribbean breeze. Solomon Alter talked of oil, talked of trade, talked of the rugged forbidding limestone terrain, and of Curaçao liqueur, the drink of princes and paupers, from the skins of the finest local oranges made.

'To you,' he then said, slowing his pace outside a wide spacious many-windowed house that proved to be his home, 'we are far away, beyond the reach of nowhere. Before your journey, you knew nothing, I swear, about us. *Ober ir zent nisht alein in dem*, you are not alone in that. But before we enter . . . Look around you . . . Look there, beyond the harbour, beyond the lights - there, under those stars, less than an hour away, lies Venezuela, and just a little further the whole of South America; Now turn around . . . There, to the north, the United States. By plane twelve hours from here, Africa, London and Lisbon, while to the west, just a little further, China, Russia, Japan and your own rich sand-and-mineral-filled continent with its token concession to habitation. We are, you see . . . *ihz zehet, mein freind* . . . we are at the lever, the hub, the pivot of the world, and could you but see it, could you but know it, *Yiddishe kinder*, all my Jewish brothers, sisters, children out there, would you but think of us, this could be your last and quietest and safest haven in the world.'

As Solomon Alter opened the door, a girl, a young woman of twenty-one, twenty-two, came down the corridor.

'*Gut Shabbes*,<sup>3</sup> *Tate*,' she said.

'*Gut Shabbes, mein kind*.'<sup>4</sup>

Dark and tanned, she bore herself with easy elegance; she wore a frilled white blouse and blue skirt and around her neck a delicate gold necklace from which hung a filigreed Star of David.

'*Mein tochter, Rachel*,' Solomon Alter said to me, introducing his daughter. '*A gast oif Shabbes nachtmal*,' he said to her, '*fun Australie gekommen*.'<sup>5</sup>

(3) 'Good Sabbath, Father.' (4) 'Good Sabbath, my child.'

(5) 'My daughter, Rachel. We have a guest for Sabbath dinner. From Australia come.'

'Australia,' Rachel repeated, raising the eyebrows and smiling, light and curiosity in her expression. 'Melbourne? Sydney?'

'Melbourne.'

'Mmm- It is a nice city I have heard . . . With a river . . . many gardens . . . a new gallery . . . a concert hall, a . . . a music bowl you call it . . . outside . . . in the open air . . .'

If Curaçao was a spot of dust on the map of the world, I had never imagined Melbourne to be anything more. And yet, she was far better-informed of my home-city than I had ever been of hers.

'Ask anything,' Solomon Alter said, not without pride, 'and my Rachel will know.'

'Father!,' Rachel said, placing a hand on his arm. 'Some things,' she then said to me, aiming at modesty. 'Not all.'

'*Nu, mein sheins,*'<sup>6</sup> Solomon Alter intervened. 'Will you set another place at table for our guest?'

'*Mit fargenigen,*'<sup>7</sup> Rachel said, and turned back towards what I assumed was the dining-room, though not before looking me over with a swift, lively, seemingly-all-encompassing scrutiny.

'Not every father is so blessed,' Solomon Alter said, hanging his suit-coat on a stand in the hallway, leading me then to the lounge-room to one side. 'My wife, *zichrona l'vracha*<sup>8</sup> died nearly ten years ago; David . . . that is, my son . . . left home for New York . . . he's a journalist with NBC . . . two years earl; and Rachel and I . . . we are on our own. With friends, of course, good friends. But if she were to leave . . .'

He wore short shirt sleeves and, in that moment, as he turned up his hands in a gesture of forsakenness, I caught sight of a number branded on a forearm.

'If you only knew it,' he said, 'You find yourself at this very moment in Eden. But there is no serpent here, no tree of

(6) 'Well, my beauty.' (7) 'With pleasure.'

(8) 'May her memory to eternity be blessed.'

knowledge that may lead you to sin. From here, you won't be driven out. No Hamans, no Torquemadas, no Hitlers will ever follow us to this place. And after Europe, a man, a Jew, is surely entitled to a place of unmolested rest . . .'

'Yes,' I said. 'That is what made my own parents choose Australia . . . Melbourne . . .'

'Mmm,' he then mused. 'Australia. Tell me . . . Tell me. Do the people there have a national costume . . . Like the Czechs, the Mexicans, the Swiss? . . . What I mean is . . . Come this way . . .'

I followed the direction of his beckoning. In a corner of the lounge-room, which was large and, in its harmony of upholstery, light-fittings and curtains, tastefully furnished, stood a tall broad mahogany wall unit, on its every shelf a tier of eight-inch, ten-inch dolls crowded close and dressed in national costumes, modern clothes and the trendiest high fashion gear. Every detail was immaculately correct, whether hem or sash or trill; whether colour, padding or pleat. Here and there, a miniature flag identified a figure or a national pair. It was a display with special love, almost with fetishism endowed.

'Rachel's work,' Solomon Alter said, 'Not one bought but each stitched with the finest care. I am her father, she is my daughter, I know, but I must say it . . . She is a gifted girl . . . She has her mother's eye, her mother's hand . . . And . . .' - he pointed behind me - 'turn around . . . she's such a reader. Look at this bookcase. Books. Books . . . All right, books, that you would expect, but here, *Time*, *National Geographic*, *Vogue* - five years, six years of issues, not one missed, she has read them all. Ask her about anything, she will know . . . people, places, customs . . .'

I thought in that moment of the matchmaker of Chassidic folklore softening a prospective suitor for a prize most exquisite and beyond resisting. I preferred, however, not to attribute motives as unsubtle as this to his uncourted hospitality, to his intrusion upon my own unobtrusive privacy as I had studied the memorabilia in the Synagogue hall. Of such

things were only fairy-tales and B-, C-, D- grade Hollywood-inspired schmaltzy movies made.

Just then, Rachel, herself, appeared at the door, her hair just that more smoothly brushed, I sensed, and announced,

'No ship is this, we have no bell, but dinner, *Shabbes* dinner, *messieurs*, is ready.'

'Come, my friend,' Solomon Alter said. 'Do you wish first to wash your hands?'

We washed and took our places around the Sabbath table. Everything was there. The lighted candles, the *challah* under the embroidered cloth, the wine in a silver cup, crockery and cutlery of the best, crystal glasses, immaculately-pressed napkins; the smell was the familiar smell of my trans-Pacific home – chopped liver, herring, chicken, potatoes, chives – while the whole room, with portraits, prints and photographs on every wall, glowed under a splendid chandelier with the lambent whiteness of high festivity. Solomon Alter at the table's head recited the *kiddush*, passed around the wine, broke bread, salted it and handed one piece to Rachel and another to me. We then sat down to eat.

In no way had I – could I have – aboard ship imagined that in this manner would I spend that Sabbath Eve. The respite from standard bulk-cooked maritime fare was one thing, but the company – the paternal-filial harmony, the light, the warmth, the homeliness – all these, if ever I saw fit to balk at the cost of passage and talk my travel agent down, in these moments, so short, overall too short – to resort most tritely to the tritest of triteness – they were worth every last bent cent. For three weeks, nearly four, had I been orphaned, as every lone traveller adrift in sea or sky is orphaned; in that Curaçao interregnum, however, I was part of family again, adopted to be sure, with that family itself depleted, but nonetheless a part of it, the easy conversation, the goodwill, the generous acceptance all there, all there, all there. And whether it was of Melbourne that we spoke, with its suburbs, gardens, people and my doctoring there, or of Curaçao with its wild goats and parakeets, its orchards, ship-building docks, annual carnivals

and Rachel's teaching, or of Italy, Paris or Jerusalem, future stops along my travels, every moment was laced in a web of enchantment, enchantment that by far exceeded anything that Captain Silvestro, immaculate, distinguished and talking of the floating markets, cafes, fragrances and languages could ever have foreseen.

The meal over, grace recited, time urged return to the ship that was setting soon to sail.

As Rachel, moving swiftly, deftly and with comely poise, cleared the table, Solomon Alter, bowed over me paternally, laid with a hand upon my shoulder and led me back to the lounge-room. He offered a liqueur which he pressed upon me.

'*Zugts nor . . .* Tell me, can you leave Curaçao without tasting that which royalty itself would give its eye-teeth for?'

We sat on opposing chairs and drank. I looked again over the tiers of Rachel's dolls and the rows of journals. Solomon Alter sipped at his glass, licked his lips and swallowed.

'*In tsvei shoh . . .* in two hours, three, you will be sailing again,' he said, rolling his glass between his large palms. He seemed to gaze absently at the reflection of the overhead light in the liqueur. 'The Atlantic . . . Tenerife . . . Lisbon . . . Europe . . . Jerusalem . . . the world . . . The world with all its strife, its bitterness, turmoil, wars, ugliness, dangers, and for the Jew, for us, always a place of uncertainty, of risk, . . . Egypt . . . Jerusalem of the Temples . . . Mainz . . . Spain . . . Kishinev . . . Auschwitz . . . where next? where next, my friend? . . . While here . . .'

He looked at me, fixed me squarely with a mellow, almost sorry gaze.

'Listen. I would say to you . . . I would say to you: "Stay! Here is freedom, safety, peace. Here is history, continuity, tradition; the last secure physical haven for the Jew, as Torah is his last and abiding spiritual haven." But you must go, I know, you must leave. But, let me say this too, when you have seen all that you must, come back. Come back. Live your young, your valuable, your precious life here. Come back. Not

for my sake, my friend, but yours. Yours. And, yes, for mine, too, in a way, for he who saves one life is as he who has saved the world . . .'

'What you meant before by *pikuach- nefesh*,' I said.

He nodded. The bald head, where not covered by his skull-cap, shone. Where, earlier, on our first encounter, his cheeks had been merely slack, they now seemed to sag. He held one hand dangling limp over the side-arm of his chair.

'Yes. Yes,' he said. 'What I meant by *pikuach- nefesh*, the saving of a life. For out there, you shall always be in danger. It is the lesson of our history that safe places are few. *Und ich, ich oich* . . . I know, I, too, I know. I have seen, I have endured, and, *Got tzu danken*,<sup>9</sup> I lived through. But how many did not . . . and how many, next time, will not? . . . When you have done what you must, I ask you, for your sake, for mine, come back! Come back . . .'

Again, as before dinner, her work now done, Rachel came into the room.

'So solemn here,' she said. 'are we suddenly sitting *shiva*?'

Solomon Alter stood up, set down his glass upon a buffet.

'*Rochele meins*,<sup>10</sup> he said. 'We must get our guest back to his ship. Maybe you would take him to the taxi rank? He has listened enough to an old man. I would like him to leave with fonder memories of this place.'

On leaving, I shook hands with Solomon Alter. His grasp was firm; it conveyed urgency.

'Travel in health,' he said. 'And, *Got zol viln*,<sup>11</sup> may you one day return in health.'

Once more I was out in the Willemstad streets, darker now, less peopled, the ocean breeze risen to tangier sharpness laced with the bite of shale, seaweed and sulphur. The near-midnight moon shone with a cushioned lactescent glow, nests of surrounding stars glimmered as through a high velvet mist,

(9) God be thanked.

(10) Rachel mine.

(11) God willing.

and, passing by the houses, I tasted fish and citrus and strawberries and the more acrid camphor of mothballs. From somewhere far came a shout in a language I couldn't decipher, and then laughter, a titter and a giggle, and closer in, a lapping of water as though oars were clapping into eddies, ripples and tidal wavelets in the bay or along the river that parted Willemstad in two.

For some distance, Rachel, walking beside me, led the way in silence. She moved easily and though she had put on a cardigan she held her arms braced about her. I glanced at her once, twice, took pleasure in the soft features of her cheeks and chin and the ever-so-slight curvature of her nose and remembered a Mera and a Jackie and a Tania with whom, at the cooler end of summer nights back home, I had walked just like this, along the beach, on piers, on seaside esplanades.

A little way on, outside a souvenir shop where a fluorescent light illuminated all manner of pendants, candelabra, vases, trays, cameras and assorted bric-a-brac, I said rather formally,

'I must say I am impressed by your dolls and those journals you've brought together. Labours of love and dedication they seem to me; they must bring you pleasure . . .'

Rachel, now bracing her arms higher about the shoulders, turned her gaze towards me. A street lamp under which we passed briefly lit up her face. There was scrutiny in it, as there had been before, and the smile that came to it was either wry or modestly pleased. Illumination was too brief, however, too fleeting for me to tell.

'Pleasure?', she repeated. 'Labour of love? . . . Yes, I suppose so.'

'You only suppose?'

She gave a soft clearing cough and took deep breaths. She sucked her lips.

'There was something else there, but that you did not see . . . You could not see it . . . You did not see it . . . You could not see it . . . It was outside the kitchen, outside the door, on the porch . . . A cage . . . Empty . . . Its door open. But once I kept a bird there, a red-tailed, red-breasted parakeet that swung on its

rail or leapt from side to side and clawed at the wires with its talons . . .

'One morning I was reading in front of it, a letter from David . . . my brother . . . from New York where he lives and works and has a wife and two children. And when I finished I looked up and watched my bird, watched how it leapt and fluttered its wings and grasped at the wires. And I looked then too upon our sea, our Caribbean, and saw how vast everything was, how luminous and how . . . how magnetising, with the world everywhere around, everywhere, close by and far away, and . . . And in that moment I stood up, walked over to the cage, slipped open the catch, took out the bird and . . . and let it go. And my bird – it seemed so dizzy at first, it flew in spirals and circles and ovals – it found its wings and spread them wide and flew God knows where, how far away, how far away into that light and into that space, to America, to Europe, China, Africa – it did not matter – with a freedom which I saw that, until then, it had not had, a freedom that I . . . that I . . . that I did not have. It was then that I began to make those dolls and read those magazines . . .'

I was in the process of formulating a remark, uncertain whether to let it be statement or question, when she asked, 'Do you understand?'

'Yes, Rachel, I do.'

She shook her head.

'No. Between us, not Rachel. Let it be Ramona. I like it better. It is a name that girls in other places are called . . .'

'Ramona. Romantically Iberian. More worldly. It's nice,' I said, then asked, 'But what did your father say about the bird?'

'My father, he offered to buy another. But he did not understand. It was not the bird at all. It was me. What for him is a haven is for me a cage. What he believes is living in history, in this place where little has happened for two hundred years, three hundred years, is for me a *retreat* from history. I know. I teach it. History is there where people live, where there is change, where there is risk. To live in history is

to take risks. And not to take risks, for a Jew, for us not to live in America, South Africa, Jerusalem, Europe, or even Australia is to be taken out of history, out of the world, and to disown not just safety, but . . . but to yield to stagnation, and by stagnating, to disown life.'

I understood her. On my own speck of Melbourne dust, I had known the same sense of isolation, stagnation. But in setting sail, however, I at least had acted, I had sought and found a remedy. But Rachel . . . Ramona . . .

'Then why not leave?,' I said.

She nodded.

'Yes,' she said, 'Leave . . . leave . . . I have thought of that. And, yes, if I hated my father, yes, then I would leave. I would. But he does not deserve hate. No man with a number on his arm deserves hate. Then, as you know, my mother, she's gone; David, right or wrong, he's gone, though he does write. But if I, too, I were to leave . . . Did my father go through hell and finally find a haven where he won't be touched again only after all that to be left alone, alone, forsaken, abandoned, alone? . . .'

She smiled weakly, it might have been with resignation.

'One world passes me by. But I am learning to create another.'

'And Ramona is a part of it, is that it?'

'Yes . . . Yes . . . Ramona is a part of it.'

We had reached the taxi rank where fellow-passengers were negotiating fares back to the ship.

Beside the railing, I turned squarely towards Rachel and extended a hand in thanks. She did not take it. Instead, she placed hers on my forearm.

'Please,' she said. 'I am not one to ask favours, but . . . but do you have paper, or a pen? . . . You are going back into that world, into the real world . . . May I ask of you one thing, one thing only. Will you write to me? Tell me about Europe, Israel, Australia? Send me books? Magazines? Postcards? Photographs? I shall pay you for them. But only keep me in touch . . . with everything . . . with everything out there . . .'

I did have a pen and found a crumpled receipt in my wallet.

'I do not normally write on *Shabbes*,' Rachel said. 'But this is to me no sin, no sin.'

I offered to write for her.

'No,' she resisted. 'It is my request. Let it be on my head.'

The light under which she wrote was dim. She puckered her brow in concentration, held her tongue between her lips. Again she reminded me of Mera, Jackie, Tania back home, all lovely, dark, all with comely softness endowed.

'This is my address,' she said, returning to me the paper and my pen. 'You will write, won't you?'

'From the next port. From Tenerife,' I promised. I placed the note in my wallet and returned the wallet to my pocket.

Now she gave me her hand. It was smooth, warm, compliant. She smiled - a broad smile, a wide smile, an open smile.

'*Bon voyage*, then. If ever you return ...'

I shared a taxi with two other couples who talked spiritedly of the quaint cafes they had seen, of the Town Hall, the river, the markets, and of the bargains they had bought. 'It's a gorgeous, so-peaceful place, this,' one of them said. 'But imagine living here, so away from everything, so out of the world.'

'It's the centre of the world, its pivot,' I was tempted to say, remembering Solomon Alter, but kept counsel to myself, thinking instead of Rachel, recalling that last glimpse of her through the taxi window as she walked away, a lone figure, her arms wrapped about her against the wind, looking back once, pausing, and then turning, more resolute now, out of sight.

At the nearer end of the dock stood a negro manning a souvenir stall, seeking still to catch a departing customer or two. An oil-lantern hung from a beam. I approached him. He was a live eel as he moved back and forth along the breadth of

his stall, keeping up a steady patter in hybrid English, Spanish, Papiamento, Dutch, his fingers the while dancing, dark nimble ballerinas, over his wares – rings, music boxes, necklaces, bangles, shawls and dolls. I paused before the dolls, looked at the two rows of them and, reaching, selected one in white blouse, blue skirt, dark hair and a smile, a happy fetching smile, the red of cherries.

‘What do you think of the name Ramona for the doll?’ I asked the stall-keeper in mild jest.

He smiled brightly, his teeth strong and white between thick lips.

‘Mighty fine name, sir,’ he obliged, wrapping the doll deftly in blue tissue. ‘Mighty fine name. An’ a lovely gift for a lucky girl back home. A treasure, sir an’ a delight . . .’

I paid him as a strong wind gust rose and whirled down the length of the dock.

The parcel in my possession, I went up the gangway to the ship in the company of other passengers and headed for my cabin. There, I unwrapped the doll and took out my wallet to find Rachel’s address. I would send her the doll from Tenerife, as a token, a gesture, an offering from the world outside.

But the crumpled receipt with her address on it I could not find. I took out the money, the travellers’ cheques, all my papers. I turned out the wallet, emptied all my pockets, searched in every conceivable fold of my clothes. The note was lost. I could only guess it had dropped when that gust rising as I paid the souvenir vendor made me turn away. Hoping still to scale down the gangway to the dock I bounded out of my cabin and clattered up the metal steps. But the ship had begun to move. The dock was receding. Wavelets splashed and lapped in the waters below. The negro, too, had shut up stall; in the darkness I saw him walk away, his lantern swinging, his light flickering on the beam.

Beside me at the rail, a passenger sidled up to me, a woman whose perfume mingled with the acridity of oil and sulphur and brine.

'It's an enchanting island, Curaçao, isn't it?', she said. 'One of those charming places one would never wish to leave, don't you think, don't you think?'

As we moved out of its harbour, I looked a last time upon the island. It was decked in darkness except where a few pin-points of light still glowed, diminishing in number and intensity the further we sailed.

A mile off shore, the ship turned sharply, paused there as if to take breath, and set its prow for Europe. On that island, now behind me, a girl, a woman called Rachel and her saintly father remained, settling down for the night. In my cabin, another, called Ramona, was setting out upon the world.

*apikoros* - heretic

*Bar Mitzvah* - ceremony on a boy's attaining to the age of thirteen

*brith* - circumcision

*challah* - the Sabbath loaf

*havdalah* - service at the conclusion of the Sabbath

*kiddush* - prayer and ceremony in sanctification of the Sabbath and Holy

Days

*Shabbes; Shabbos* - Sabbath

*shiva* - to sit *shiva* = to be mourning