Plaques

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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 Melbourner 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 swellled 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?'