

Survivors

I escaped, fled, sought the severance from dissension and rancour that only walls and distance could offer, a hope misguidedly vain as their shouting – Father's, Mother's, his voice raucous and untamed, hers full-throated and shrill – in every crevice of the brain reverberated and jangled, stirring in me the cauldron that in others flowed as mere blood to fury, frenzy, desperation and murder-lust.

'Bind these hands!', a dramatist might have written. 'Bind these hands lest they do harm!', the hands where left unbound destined in time to execute the deed of Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello.

But reality was not invention, nor theatre, nor public spectacle, but anger that made the fists close and open, perspire and tremble, and, on reaching the succouring parapet on the skirting of the bay, crash, first one fist, then the other, into the mortar of the uprights, pain sublime in sublimation of fury uncontained and in the mad purgation of hate, the expurgation of burning gall against those who in some supposedly tender rapprochement eighteen years before had created life, created breath, along with a brain with which to despair and blood with which to rage.

It did not matter that there were people about, scores of them, and scores more, winter-albino, tanned and roasted, and others scraggy, run to seed, or manfully athletic, and others still, pubescently self-absorbed, or childishly wilful or toddler raw. It did not matter that an owlshly-startled dumpy man in bermudas and elastic hose stared for a moment at me and

might have touched his temple, or that a woman in last century's frock and hat from mothballs redeemed clicked her tongue and lowered sourly, or that a young fellow and his spider-legged inamorata paused momentarily in their conversation, the two then giggling as they passed, the fellow, tossing his head so that this nose, chin, hair rose high, saying, 'Reckon it takes all types . . .', his soft-bloused consort closing the subject with a verdict, 'Probably had a row with his girl or sumpthin' . . .'

It did not matter. With them I did not have to live. A pox upon those holier-than-thous, upon their judgements, their opinions. A cholera, a plague, a contagion on them all, as my flammable pater-paterfamilias would say . . . But with him, with them, my parents whose very shadows I had to share – how ignore, shut out, transcend the polemics incendiary and splenetic? –

'New carpets?! Now?! Last week, it was new curtains you wanted, the week before new covers for the chairs, the week before that new wallpaper . . . More spending, more this, more that, more money thrown down the sewer . . .'

'You want to live in a trash-can all your life?! . . .'

'We had worse . . .'

'We can have better . . .'

'And what don't you have? A roof, a car, television, a shop, a belly that – oy, God forbid – never goes hungry . . .'

'A monkey with even a little bit of brain can have the same. Don't you see . . . Can't you see what you are, what we are? . . . A week, a month, a year can go by and no-one will come . . . I don't even invite . . . This hole, who would want to as much as enter? . . .'

'So you're ashamed?! Ashamed!'

'Look at the Fleischbergs, the Richlers, the Kopolovskis . . .'

'So?!'

'They are somebody! . . .'

'And in my home, I am somebody!'

'Ha!'

'Ha! You want houses, flats in Toorak, blocks of land, and mortgages, overdrafts, interest payments higher than the roof, not sleep at night worrying if you can pay . . .?'

'And *they* worry?!'

'I am not them. I don't want their ulcers. You want me to have ulcers? Take Fleischberg's pills, Richler's injections, go wherever Kopolovski goes for cures? . . . Maybe you want my skin, my blood, my marrow, every hair you can pull out from my arse?! . . .'

'Pig!'

'Blood-sucker!'

'Miser!'

'Squanderer!'

'Satan!'

'Witch!'

So thin the walls. Even a metre thick, all doors closed, all chinks and breaches and crevices filled, yet would they still have been too thin as vitriol in the kitchen mingled with physics in my study, as calumny ignited all chemistry and contempt riddled every formula in maths. Themes and variations they were, these feuds, the refrains, too, inventive and diverse, but no music, no harmony were they, only discord, marrowbones and cleavers, twelve-tone dissonances doubled, trebled, quadrupled.

When did I become aware of these vituperations? When was I *not* aware of them? My mother's milk, expectedly so innocuous, so bland, might already at my birth have been laced with gall. For the Russian hearth, the Uzbek ambience, so exotic, so oriental, upon which I had opened my eyes, were not the hearth and ambience of her own origin and becoming, but a derailment in her life – in both their lives, Father's, Mother's – the first of many to which troops Teutonic, moronic and vulpine, the devil at his most bestial beside them a saint, had driven them, the modern spawn of Attila the while reducing to ashes, smoke, dust, soap and decay, and to memory what in my parents' Warsaw had been bustle, breath, and industry, what had been humanity, folksiness, God-intoxi-

cation and faith, and an innocence that in the blackest nightmare could not have conceived the perditions that a single Austrian dement, a runted swarthy dark-haired dark-hearted dark-souled Schicklgruber was in time to wreak in pursuit of the blue and blond of some fancied warped and impossible Aryan fiction.

Had I been sucking lemons while the battle raged, my teeth would scarcely have been less on edge. Had I drunk vinegar or even wormwood in draughts, the goosepimples crowding my skin could not have crept more bristlingly. I could not study; not even with examinations, matriculation three weeks away. The words and numerals and symbols of the texts before me clung to the page, they were impervious to penetration, refractory to absorption. I stood up, sat down, stood up again; I paced the floor, glared out the window, snorted and heaved and sighed, in acute claustrophobia pounding the air of my room where vituperation and clamour piercing through wall and door streamed into every corner. And, myself pounded too often, pounded too far, tossed to the limits of frustration and futility, I left that room, left the flat, and, slamming shut the door on the polemics of my begetters, took to the streets, there to find the breadth, the space, the sanity which might contain my unfettered fury.

Summer was two months away, but the heat might have been that of the southern high noon solstice. The October sun glared, shimmered, trembled; glinted on the asphalt of Barkly Street, on the tramlines, wires and windows along the Village Belle, leapt off the billboards outside Luna Park and on the shellacked shining surface of the sea at St. Kilda to which my steps, so maddened this time, so wild, but through long-established habit trained, now drew me. To that low familiar parapet I came, there I crashed my fists into its stone, and there then sat upon it, untouchably cocooned, the plaints and jar-rings of home still jangling in my ears as I watched – as I saw without truly watching – the flow of flesh and bronze and liveliness across the esplanade, on the plantations, the sand, around the bay. To my left, yachts and skiffs lay moored or

sailed beyond the far side of the Marina jetty; to my right, the baths of the South Pacific sealed off the farther reach of vision; while, hemmed within that cloistering corralling cordon frisked children, young fellows and girls, or more soberly lazed and suckled of the sun the older folk, bent here and there over chess or cards or draughts, or tattling, jabbering, chattering about children, grand-children, thoroughbreds, cricketers and prize geraniums. There was a haze across the bay, seemingly frosted pearl that weighed and nestled upon the derricks, pylons and refineries of Port Melbourne, while beyond . . . beyond . . . beyond stretched freedom, space, adventure, solace, and other countries, other peoples, customs, climates, lores, all waiting to offer colours brighter, melodies more melodious, scents more fragrant than the dreary second-, third-, fourth-rate fare of the Antipodean backwater washed by Indian and Pacific Oceans and chosen by my parents – chosen *for* my parents – as if called to do penance for the sin of survival where annihilation was more acceptably, if more insanely, the order of the day. I sat there on the parapet swaddled in solitude, still burning, still seething, and seething all the more as some larrikins wantonly rattled a gewgaw in my ear, as a beach-ball carelessly hurled struck my head, as a pair of bronzed sinewy wrestling Narcissists jostled me in their foolery off my perch.

‘Sorry, mate!’, they said, first one, then the other, ‘No harm meant! It’s all in the fun!’, but fun was all one-sided as — enough being enough — I left my place and moved off, side-stepping children who frisked about with ice-creams melting in their palms, avoiding groups of thick-lipped loud-mouthed girls come down from St. Moritz sporting ice-skating boots about their necks, turning away from gaggles of fellows in bathing briefs, copper pendants and silver-plated bracelets who whistled at this girl and that, the girl, safe in the open, in the light, in the crush, daring to tilt her breasts, waggle her rear and jiggle her wrists in erogenic mock-allurement with a laugh that, not wholly laughter, was nearer to snigger.

It was towards Fitzroy Street I headed, mile-long converg-

ing hub of polyglot, polyphonic, polymorph mortality crowding shop and thorough-fare, weaving serpentine paths to safer harbour between sweeping cars, braving the approach of clang-happy trams, shrugging shoulders and snubbing noses at police patrols cruising, cruising in expectation, in intended deterrence of some incident by the law of statistics ordained. On the stairway to the Upper Esplanade, a boy, a girl the tenderer side of teen were lighting cigarettes, bravura and furtiveness in their posture combined, a drunk in trench-coat and September's stubble his companion sat on a step, while a streak of graffiti above him read 'Shut your mouth and open your cunt for the thrill of your life!' At the summit, the sun, ricocheting off the duco and mirrors of passing cars, hurled stark silver in my eyes. I paused, let sight be restored, and turned left, turned junction-ward, there to confront a bounding bouncing trio of homuncular Lolitas, in their bleach, their gaudy flesh-configured bulging blouses and tights and cloves-scented necks the goading stuff of coquetry, objects sublime of ruttishness and prurience to any number of acned adenoidal gangling paralaliacs.

'Yeah,' said one, tossing chewing-gum between her teeth and swinging a handbag of yellow-orange mesh, 'the bouncer 'e got the bugga by the neck, in a flash kicked open the bloody flamin' door an' turfed the mongrel out . . .'

'Serve 'im right, the drag . . .'

'Pervs! . . .'

Like fabled sesames, they parted to let me pass, oblivious to my actual existence, I would swear, just as a Holden-load of layabouts drew up close, one of them, beefy, gargoylian and square-toothed, leaning out to call after them, 'Hey, sheilas, wanna come to a party?!' 'Up yours, Mort!' called back one of the mannikins and upped a thumb, 'Pull your own till it drops!', to which her companions, first one, then the other, twitted, tittered and peeled 'Yeah!', 'Go fuck yourselves!', 'Suck yer' mothers' tits!', 'Lick our arse!' Under the low wall of the Esplanade, a spindly elf-chinned man with lips of rubber sat on a bench, quickened by the scene. As I passed, he

raised his stick and winked. 'They got spunk, them kids,' he said, smiling, his face becoming a warp of wrinkles. 'No doubt about it, son, they certainly got spunk.'

'Spunk' was scarcely the word I would have chosen. Sauciness perhaps, bumptiousness also, coarseness certainly, vernacular and argot such as theirs even at the height of domestic squall within our walls unheard. At times, loose scabrous tainted words may have been dropped, even a colourful string of them, a Polish 'damn', perhaps a Yiddish 'cholera', a Russian 'hag' or 'devil' or 'beast', but not – my ears be protected – the verbal spawn of the gutter, the sewer, to be plain, of the whorehouse. But neither, the coin turned over, did 'love', 'dear', 'kitten', 'my hero' receive ready currency under our roof as they did in, say, Ricky Wrobel's house, or Harry Freilich's, or Martin Glicksman's, in their large-windowed spacious fresh-aired homes where there was warmth to be had, and composure and calm, not merely in strictly atmospheric ambience but in a word, a smile, a touch.

Could I, could I but be touched, touched in that same warm, calm, composed and generous way!

Crossing the street, I tasted again the acerbity of their venom, Father's, Mother's, mingled with the salty sharpness of the sea and overcame a tide of nausea that welled in a maelstrom in my throat. A touch, that was all, a touch! But there was no touch to be had, neither at home, nor in Fitzroy Street, whose Acland Street corner I had reached where, outside the Prince of Wales, closed though it was, a rowdy, joking, back-slapping gaggle of flush-cheeked sweating drinkers had gathered with stubbies, cans and froth-slimed glasses. They were near-facsimiles of one another and templates for numberless clones of beer-gutted mulberry-nosed smoking-drinking hoi-polloi – brick-layers, boiler-makers and wharfies, and mechanics, labourers and workers in mines – the stuff of which, and for whose sake, revolutions in other places were made, but who in the terrain provincial of *Melbournia parochiale* found religion splendid in trinity divine of footballer, cricketer and horse, who were moved to ecstasy by a

ball coursing through the goals, who were transported to bliss in a well-hit well-cut homeside run, and were brought unto salvation in a bet redeemed at two hundred to one.

A caricature, this, to be sure; but no travesty of reality was it, no fabrication such as might be rendered by one who would perceive things in over-simple bi-chromatic blacks and whites, or thought in absolutes oblivious to relativities and conditionals. Fruit, rather, was it of a cynicism nurtured in one who, in earlier years of pristine unworldliness, had, at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, dared imagine that the society he would in time be ripe to enter would boast more parts of wisdom than of ignorance, more of intellect than of indolence, more of achievement than of waste – of waste, and of abuse of energy and gifts, and of curtailment of the grander vision, all these the final lot of his parents trapped, day in, day out, in a dusty haberdashery where constant unrelieved proximity caused their nerves to jar and grate and fray, their smallness in the world, their pettiness, their being no more than mere puffs of breath, all these the culmination and apotheosis of all that might have been, of all that might yet have come of my father's one-time industrious venturesome spirit, or of my mother's artistic eye and hand to nothing lasting turned, as also of those other gifts in society more extant, gifts of literacy, of creativity and of imagination, all once aflame perhaps, all so numinous and expansive once, but now so deeply drowned in beer, or narcosed so thoroughly by sport, and to mediocrity lost, forever lost, the reality that thwarted possibility so cuttingly refracted in that very huddle of roisterers to history and to value so bacchically oblivious as in their trance they swore and celebrated and soused, and swaggered and caroused outside the bars and lounge of the Prince of Wales.

Caricatures, perhaps; but no caricature the man in dreary grey, the loner who, approaching from behind outside Sarti's, synchronised his step with mine and said, 'Nice weather we're having, don't you think?'

The angles of his mouth rose to a smile, soft, reserved, unimposing.

'Just right to go walking,' he went on, 'and with company all the better, wouldn't you say?'

He sucked a cheek and passed a hand through hair grown sparse and wispy sweeping his gaze in swift contemplative gyrations of spirals, helixes, and whorls over me.

'Yes,' I said, letting a smile of sorts, more a flitting grimace break through the raw causticity of bile that still smarted in me like a burn. 'Yes.'

My companion, unbidden but suddenly true, pursed his lips and nodded. He rubbed his nose, looked around him to all sides, repeated 'Yes . . . yes' in a quiet tone, and fell silent as if to let opinion harden to the solidity of confirmation.

Our shadows short and broadly splayed, moving on the footpath side by side, we passed the newsagent's, the bank, the chemist, Levi's, the fruit palace. Above the tang of ocean now behind me rose the syrupy nectar of pancakes, the heavier rankness of chips, the more inviting balm of coffee, vanilla slice and floss. Here, before us, a father a mother paused in wait for a straggling toddler, there a crew-cut fellow whistled through his fingers to a distant mate, a dog paused to raise a leg beside a pole, a tattooed girl stopped in her tracks to light a cigarette and a man gone to seed begged for a shilling, a penny, a zac. The folks-word *lustmensch* came to me then and I heard mother in her shrillness use it again and again, hurling it at Father because he was not a Fleischberg, a Richler, a Kopolovski, or a Wrobel, a Freilich or a Glicksman.

To my acquired companion I was becoming oblivious, that stranger among strangers but another ephemeral, drab and nameless moth flitting at a tangent to my private orbit; but short of Leo's he turned to me square-on, reached out a hand as if to touch, and said, 'Say, you seem like a decent fellow. Look, we're close to my place . . . in Loch Street just over there you're welcome to come over we can talk if you like I've got loads of matchboxes I can show you got them from

everywhere from everywhere and I'll show you them I'll be glad to have you over and as God is my saviour you can trust me my friend you can trust me every bit of the way . . .'

Though touch I might have sought, his touch I shrank from. The seedy flabbiness of the cheeks which earlier I might have overlooked but now acknowledged and registered more clearly, I had seen before, and seen their blotchiness too, and the same thinning hair, as also the despondent eyes above a smile watery and slack, and the puffy hands as well – had seen them in Mr. Fowler, in soft-voiced and ineffectual Gabriel Fowler, in *Queenie Gabriela* Fowler who had taught English literature and liked to touch and was the butt of rumours and jokes and sniggering whisperings that, in adolescent prudery and naivete, I had preferred to greet with a deaf ear, let alone believe.

'I can't,' I said, moving away, 'not just now I said I'd be home in half an hour we're expecting visitors guests I have a friend coming . . .'

'It needn't be for long,' he persisted.

I shook my head, side-stepping a boy who running away from another was clearly heading, unseeing, into me.

'I promise, I swear,' that tenderer of hospitality pressed on, 'you can trust me I'm not what you think really I'm not I'm not what you . . .'

Charlie Chilvers in the fourth form had once thrown a paper plane at Mr. Fowler in class. It had struck him, the teacher, on the neck. Reaching for the offended part, he had turned around. There was hurt, pain in his every facial fold, and puzzlement, and brittleness, and vulnerability. About to speak, he had moved his lips, sniffed, then pursed them tight. He had glanced out the window, at the ceiling, the floor, at the display-boards at the back of the class, and then, heaving, pressing with finger and thumb the inner corners of his eyes, and, swaying ever so slightly, had turned away. He did not appear at school for three days after. Sorry for the beaten Mr. Fowler though I may have been then, it was revulsion that drove me now to recoil from this to-me degenerate milk-sop,

from this effete and blighted pansy, even though the hurt and the puzzlement, the vulnerability and fragility were wholly the same as they had been in my enervated teacher. And I hurried away, past the Dairy Queen across the lane, past the cluster of T-shirted young folk crowding the doorway of the Casablanca, past the window-shoppers outside Peter's Shoes, past the portrait gallery, the bookstore and Cyrano's, and on across Jackson Street from where, glancing back, I caught a glimpse of that invert standing in mid-footpath, looking left, looking right, a hand on his head, as though decision, decision of any kind, were at that moment beyond him.

When I turned back junctionward, to be struck yet again by another momentarily-blinding arrow of silver leaping off duco and glass, just as from Theo's to my right the cloying astringency of hamburger and frying onion was drifting out, there emerged from the knot of people in the two-way flow a scraggy unshaven trough-cheeked fellow who, scuttling from one stroller to another and then to me, asked, solicited, almost pleaded 'Hey, mate, have ya' got a fag?' Emaciation was scarcely too strong a word for him. His arms were weedy spindles, their veins protuberant blue cords with bruises and scabs running along their length, up to the elbow where, swollen and angry, festered a hideous noxious suppurating sore. Dressed in a sleeveless jacket itself undersized and frayed, his meagre flesh showed every knob and boss of bone on his cadaverous chest while the navel above his legless denim shorts was ringwormed, ballooned and grimy.

When I shook my head, he grasped my arm and said, 'Then d'ya know mate where I c'n get the stuff?'

I caught his glance, a swift and furtive dart of yellowing eyes towards the street where a police car had appeared on its patrol.

'Giv ya' good money if ya' do,' he pressed. His fingers were pincers, talons, claws.

But in the winking of time that passed before I could deny again, he was off, scampering away, the patrol car continuing at its easy but vigilant pace, the words 'Shit bastards pricks!'

escaping through his chipped and blackened teeth hanging like some withering cloud of smoke behind me.

I felt the sting of those words as if they were directed at me, and the flush of a slap delivered rose to my cheeks. My jaws set to the marble of protest, the gritting of teeth all the more vigorous, all the more vicious for my protest being unuttered, being impotent, being helplessly inward turned. But the stirrings of a vision burgeoned then; more, something of a revelation, vague still, to be sure, and tentative, elusive and confused, but bound up somehow with time and with history, and with emptiness and dreaming. I saw then, as I had not seen before, the street, the shops, the people as if from a distance, as if from some pedestal or platform or perimeter of a roof. There was garbage in the gutters; like links in spiral chains, the cars trundled past; hoardings were peeling, notices on doors were fading, wrinkled, and out of date; here, a neon-light flickered in near-extinction, there, a rift in the pavement caused a pedestrian to catch a toe. I walked on, continued to notice things I had not clearly, consciously, noticed before – a bicycle tethered to a pole; apartments across Fitzroy Street showing every sign of decay; a young fellow hugging the walls as, with head rolling, lolling, he gangled along, talking to himself. In a doorway near the post-office stood a baggy-eyed woman the further side of blight; a man, himself not free of mould, paused before her, looked her over, walked on.

There was something ephemeral about the scene, and yet, the coin turned over, something unchanging and unchangeable. In that bustling multitude, even while most were ordinary, unremarkable and commonplace as they strolled past, talking, laughing, gesturing or hauling their children in tow, I saw more clearly a stream of alcoholics, derelicts, prostitutes and vagrants; there were boys without homes, girls without refuge, and behind the doors of the Ritz a rallying of transvestites, voyeurs, pimps and pederasts. And there was something else I saw, saw in the interstices of imagination – a cemetery, scores of cemeteries, even in the sunlight, in the brightness, in the colour, the glow; and within their bounds

and boundaries were terraces of graves, vales of them, whole expanses of them, the deep cold caverns dark and silent, swallowed up in them this whole pathetic mass of flotsam and jetsam whose passing from light would be unnoticed, unremarked, unmourned. Time would then conceal them, eternity concrete them in oblivion.

But what struck with potency still more compelling was the awareness of the unrelenting continuance of it all; no sooner was the one sucked through the cesspool of his existence to extinction than another waif of nature, of life, staked claim upon the vacancy, the defector become the merest drop of ocean lost in its infinite immensity, the surface left untouched, incurious, taciturn to the extreme of frigidity and indifference. Other bronzed Narcissists would there be to jostle unobtrusive spectators, from their parapet perch; other secret smokers would conceal juvenile sin on the steps ascending to the Esplanade; and other Lolitas, if not in trios, then in singles, pairs, quartets and more would up their thumbs at crotch-tickled gutter-crawlers; while inside and outside the Prince of Wales, other gaggles of toss-pots and sots would soak gut, liver and brain to dilapidation and torpor. They would always be there, though different their names, as also their faces and their dissipations, their precursor kindred-spirit long since committed to the grave; they would always be there, along with the Fowlers, the deranged, the addicts and the strays, Fitzroy Street, the Fitzroy Street of my earlier calmer contemplative St. Kilda walks but one short conduit, but one dark tunnel in a huge multi-continental trans-universal network of tunnels along which entire constellations of humanity and mortality, through ignorance, mindlessness, brutishness and insentience – in murder, harlotry, addiction and suicide manifest – pitched and scuttled and reeled towards unconsidered perdition.

Against this . . . Against this . . .

The vision sharpened.

As did hearing. As did all the senses as, even at such remove, Mother's plaints, Father's reproaches returned with their ear-

lier execrating shrillness. Turning into Grey Street, heading home, I felt distaste, to be sure, well full-force to my throat, but the need to smash a fist, to escape, to flee across the oceans from the stagnation of a home rent by rancour and dissension – these did not importune with the same desperation. There were shadows across Grey Street, and shadows sobered, tempered fury and cooled the exasperation that heat and incandescence had brought to the boil. But there was something else that restored sobriety. Something quite different. To be sure, the Fleischbergs, the Richlers and the Kopolovskis were blessed with the fortunes of Croesus in their acquisition of properties, city motels and cinema chains. Ship's-brothers, they, unlike Father who stagnated in his haberdashery long, long after arrival, they had reached out, and when opportunity had presented to seize, they, indeed, *had* seized – notwithstanding that Fleischberg had been bereaved of a wife and son in Belsen, that Richler, once a free-thinker, had turned fanatically pious, or that Kopolovski had alienated wife, brother, cousins and, ultimately, his children.

None of these, my father; a modest, humble shell was his home; gone beyond had he, or fallen short perhaps, of grasping, of covetousness and of voraciousness for the mortar and glass of sky-piercing constructions that made those other Sammys run, or for a name engraved on the plaques of hospitals, synagogues and schools, or for padded chairs around committee-tables, or for a place on a public platform, in the limelight, or, as the saying went, in the sun. A roof, a shirt, a piece of bread; these were all he wanted in this world. And more than mere motto, fervid credo had this become, implicit in it an offering of thanksgiving, a hosanna, and a *selah!* For his flat, however sombre, was at least paid for; he had a business which, however inglorious, offered returns of a sort; he could sleep comfortably at nights while letting the days take care of themselves; and he could take pride, *naches* of a kind, however seldom or grudgingly given voice, in a son who, serious-minded and resilient, was heading somewhere, towards something, towards a name – all this when, in Hitler-shadowed

years long, not-so-long before, in Warsaw, Russia or in Paris, the very least of these may have seemed beyond the possible.

And if there were more to contemplate: for all her misgivings, and for all her demands, and for all her fancies, Mother, too, was not of the world of the society that was the object model for her rhetoric. Home and business were her domain also, all else but peripheral trifling bagatelles, such fidelity as hers the garnered legacy of an ethic sown and nurtured by her pious saintly father, my smoke-and-ashes grandfather, under whose roof with Uncles Chaim, David, Shmuel, and Aunts Dora, Esther and Baila none of whom I ever knew, the schooling of chastity, charity, decency and responsibility had been delivered. Perhaps it had been done with a birch, in the manner of the onion-and-garlic-breathed *rebbe* of folklore, perhaps with patient good temper had it been done, but the instruction was to last, it was to endure and to accompany Mother, accompany Father, to whatever far-flung pin-point of terrestrial soil they were in time ordained in the world to occupy.

And as, along Grey Street, I crossed Eildon Road where a car speeding madly skidded to a halt, a folk-tale after the likes of Peretz and Sholom Aleichem came to me. 'When, on your passing, you confront the Creator' – so it went –, 'not "Why were you not Moses?" shall He ask you, but "Why, why were you not yourself?"'

And my parents, they *were* themselves. Not Fleischbergs, nor Richlers, nor Kopolovskis; not Wrobels, nor Freilichs nor Glicksmans. And for that, for what they were and for what they were not – go deny! – I, my raw sometimes-volatile adolescence being sole excuse, I had pitied and despised and resented them, I had loathed their very smallness and, by association, mine, as an execrable offence. But God! – if God there were – go justify that pity, sanction that hatred, condone that resentment when, all around, along the beach, in Fitzroy Street, and in the countless ineffaceable irredeemable Fitzroy Streets of the world, from Melbourne to Los Angeles, from

Capetown to Tokyo and from Dublin to Manila, there coursed the mouldering offal of society and time, there drifted the debased, unanchored, brutalised and mindlessly self-destroying, men, women, human beings born with the silver spoon of local idiom, roots and passport in their keeping, but throwing themselves – their lives, their gifts – into the trash-can of time that, after Europe, might more fittingly have been my parents' lot.

And yet, against all this, against all that in their own time had contrived, viciously, horribly, malignantly to drag them down, they had survived, they, Mother, Father, who from nothing – and, worse, from a legacy of orphanhood, vagabondage and loss – had risen and, all migraines, neuroses and distemper notwithstanding, had clung to decency, responsibility and duty, and, however modest the degree, had thrived.

If, in this, there was a tale, it was a tale, however low-key, of the humanly heroic.

And where, before, I had smashed my fist and cursed and fumed and given rein to fantasy of my eventual escape, if, as, on the last leg home, I turned into Barkly Street, where a freshly-lifting breeze signalled the coming of a change, anyone asked what it was that at that moment quickened my step, I should have taken him in tow, given still further impetus to my haste, and said, 'I am heading home. I am heading home. I am heading home', and 'I forgive! I forgive! I forgive!'

luftmensch – lit. one who lives on air; one without occupation, or an impractical fellow, or a dreamy wastrel.

naches – pleasure, pride.

rebbe – a rabbi, a teacher.