

## *Sustenance Was I To The Needy*

Thank God — God? Why God? — no, thank goodness, my last patient has left. The fly-wire door is shut behind him. The smell of ether prevails. Paula, efficient beyond praise, has filed all the cards, has gathered in one bundle the day's takings which she leaves as always rubber-banded in the cash-tin, closes her handbag after lightly powdering her still-youthful cheeks, pauses (hesitates?) at my door for a moment to ask "Do you want me for anything else?" — how suggestive this always seems, even now — and, faced with my negative response, a shut-eyed shaking of the head as I replace my instruments in my case, she leaves, saying over her shoulder, "Till tomorrow, then."

She draws shut the surgery door securely behind her. Through the lace curtains I gaze, watch, even in the failing violet light of evening, to see, no — I confess — to admire, until she disappears from sight, her elegant well-trimmed body, her dignified tread and her smooth intelligent soulful face, that — in its way — beautiful face which she turns, smiling ever so fleetingly, to the window behind which I sit. A paradigm of practicality, fidelity and common sense, though she did, on one occasion, it must be admitted, lose her head. Why any man has not snatched her up. . . — A mystery even to myself who, against the routine daily stream of coughs and colds and bladder infections, is confronted with an inexhaustible succession of human mysteries. How elusive, how inscrutable those deep rending ravages of love, of love-sickness, of love turned sour, of innocent childhood become grievously errant, of sound minds grown sick, of meanness, aging and decay and, ultimately, inescapably, of death. Evelyn, far from clarifying any mystery for me has merely compounded it immeasurably.

I am, at last, alone. Outside; cars pass, trams clatter by, now and again I become aware of someone calling out or laughing or running past in pursuit of God — God? — of goodness knows what. But these sounds I can shut out. Practice has enabled me to retreat into a cocoon where the only visible and tangible reality is comprised of a desk, a book, paper and two pens — one red, one black — and, of

course of my thoughts which circumscribe all these. For above all, I am a man who thinks. Not necessarily profound thoughts, to be sure, but I categorically refuse to let my mind lie fallow. Even at fifty, I believe unshakably, despite the claims of researchers, that the grey matter may be continually developed — vide Titian, Michelangelo, Russell — and to forego any opportunity so to develop it is a crime, yes, a crime against nature and an irresponsible capitulation from duty.

But if I think, I am also a man who feels, though I do at times fall short on perception — a romantic rationalist (some who know me would even call me sublimely naive, impractical and sentimental), not the kind who bangs his thumb when hanging pictures on a wall — no, not that sort — but nonetheless not totally of this hard, furious, materialistic, rugged world. I am at my happiest away from people — though here I do exclude a few of my patients and Marianne my younger one —, secreted alone in my surgery, my private lair, my nest, after-hours my impregnable retreat, rummaging among papers and newspaper clippings, underlining passages in Russell's books and Buber's (hence my red pen), and making notes in black, on system cards which stand in rectangular cardboard boxes on my desk before me.

And what do I so assiduously make notes about?

Let me give an example.

Russell writes: "I believe that when I die, I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young, and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is none the less true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting"

I like the way he doesn't mince words. I admire his directness, his reasonableness, his utter certainty, in contrast to my own ceaseless wavering between the Scylla and Charybdis of disbelief and belief, arising out of the call to reason on the one hand and the appeal to deeper emotional yearnings on the other. For even as I jot Russell's sober words on one blue-lined filing card, I am quite capable of writing, "Lift high your eyes and see Who created these" on the very next.

And then I add my own dribs and drabs.

“How ironic, tragic, comical, melancholy, absurd everything is. And all of these at once.”

And: “No order, only chaos; no guiding hand; random evolution, blind forces, blind chance; choice that is no choice; predestination with neither origin nor end; only cross-currents of people, events, experiences, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, deeds, colliding in their millions, willy-nilly, thrusting ever forward along paths unpredictable, creating, as if by accident — indeed, solely by accident — happiness, contentment, sadness, desolation, waste.”

And for whom do I write all this?

For myself alone. It could happen, it is true, that someday — after my death — Paula will find these scribblings, or perhaps it will be Marianne or Sarah — how the idea tickles my vanity — but both in the first instance and in the last resort, they are for myself alone. For go persuade a world so stuck in the quagmire of thinking in terms of the dichotomy between will and determinism, between choice and design, that a third component exists, that of chance, a component no less potent if not indeed more so than these.

In this, Sarah’s Bernard and I are not so far apart. And yet. . .

Sarah, my elder daughter, I seldom visit. Not because there is bad blood between us. Over the telephone, she is as solicitous as a nurse. — Do you have enough to eat? Shall I bring you chocolate cake? How is your ulcer? Apart from home visits, do you go out at all? But her husband and I are forever at odds. Over trivial things, to be sure, abstract things, yet sufficient to undermine whatever common language might exist between us. Were I to come, Bernard would receive me courteously enough, even draw up a chair opposite me where, as if in readiness to engage in conversation, he would take out from his breast pocket his pipe, studiously stuff it with tobacco and through a corner of his mouth blow out spiral curlicues of white smoke as a prelude to talk. Sarah would be in the kitchen preparing biscuits and tea.

“Many patients?” Bernard begins, in the clipped economical way he uses whenever he speaks to me.

“Same as always.”

“Quite. Of course. Statistically, for a doctor one day’s activity ought to be like the next.”

He is a mathematician, a logician, ever ready to find pattern where I see randomness.

“My statistics have faces,” I say, “and fears and tensions and the capacity for experiencing, feeling, thought.”

“Quite,” he says again, neither chastened nor particularly persuaded. “But as I see it. . .”

As he sees it. Thirty-one, his face rugged, his brow a cliff rising high, he sits on a cloud, looking down. As he sees it. . .

A man, *Man*, is simply an arrangement of basic elements common to living and non-living matter alike. And men as individuals are the mere molecules and atoms of society in which only the fact of motion is absolute and the effects of that motion governed by chance alone, by randomness, in the extreme by chaos. But — and it is here that Bernard pretends originality, as looking up into his thick eyelids, he presses the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb, (and it is here too that we differ) — there is order even in chaos, there is one vast rule, one law, that has thus far eluded us, not because it does not exist but because our mathematical tools and our reason have not yet proved adequate to the task of discovering it and because we have not yet hit upon the right questions to ask. That law, or Law, when it is discovered, shall replace that concept we now call God.

That is his position, his thesis, his belief, to which he clings with the dogmatism of a convert. Though, unlike a convert, he has not suffered. He is without doubts, secure in his dogma, not aware that dogma is a dictatorship of the mind, nor aware that not faith but doubt is an acquisition won through long and hard experience.

And men without doubts I cannot abide.

And yet, privately, I cannot begrudge him his certainty, if only because I too once knew the security of certainty and its buoyancy and poise and sense of purpose.

Evelyn was then twenty-one and I two years older, just graduated from medical school, in love — how quaintly old-fashioned an expression —, engaged, the world before me, a mass of sickness, suffering and deprivation to alleviate and a multitude of confused and wandering souls to redeem. Yes, I say it without blushing. Upon me was vested the call to cure the ailing, to restore the afflicted, to sustain the needy. And most wonderful of all, I felt strong, replete with unfenced hope and equal to the task. Yes, I say it without blushing. Evelyn, if she were here, would attest to this without the faintest hesitation.

The world stretched before me . . . a mass of suffering to alleviate. . .

My box of cards, repository of splintered fragments of other man's wisdom no less than my own gibberish, contains something about that, too.

"In the dark night, glowing summer turns to autumn, all its riches are transformed into a great poverty. And the man begins to complain because of his wretchedness: for where now are the ardours of love, the intimacy, the gratitude, the joyful praise, and the inner consolation, the secret joy, the sensible sweetness? How have all these failed him? And the burning violence of his love, and all the gifts which he felt before. How has all this died in him?

A mass of suffering to alleviate. . . Indeed!

There are times when dreams turn to nightmares, or to wistful memories, memories of something gone and irretrievably lost. Is it one's childhood, one's adolescence, one's talents, one's hopes?

Marianne, bright sunshine, recently become a mother, does not understand. Sarah understands, and accepts without demur. And Paula, too, — she understands but refuses to accept, even though after that lapse of hers, she no longer hints at it.

Lost, those dreams lost.

Evelyn.

Why Evelyn?

Had I but recognised the signs earlier!

An intense, sensitive woman. The eyes, the hands of an artist. Slender, long-fingered, soft at the core. Sometimes morosely temperamental, more often vulnerable. Vulnerable and bewildered, and inviting — her eyes, her lips, her voice so plaintive — to be held and protected and loved. Evelyn. Flush-cheeked bride. Fidelity personified. Solicitous to patients who would call, consummately watchful over her growing daughters, paying for her lavish concern with the blinding ravages of pounding paralyzing migraines. And here lay the trap, the price of being too close. Another patient, seen in the formal structured setting of the surgery, would not as easily have slipped through the mesh. Migraines become more frequent, more prolonged, would have triggered a succession of tests — at least, x-rays and scans — and a consultation with a specialist. But nearness bred an ever more constricting myopia — or was it denial? — and by the time

the first clear signs of weakness in a leg presented themselves the tumour had progressed beyond any treatment other than palliation.

Sarah and Marianne, the one eighteen, the other three years younger, did not blame me. But even if they were to blame it could not sear as scorchingly as the simmering of my own conscience, or as relentlessly as the refrain reverberating madly in my own brain whenever I laid hands upon the continuing succession of patients come to spill out their symptoms and anxieties before me. I *do* feel, I do. And I question. I cannot help myself. I do that too.

Why Evelyn, then? Why her? Why Evelyn? . . .

“God gives, God takes. Who knows the ways of God?”

“Fate.”

“Biology. Birth, growth, sickness, decay and death from which not the smallest nor the purest creature is exempt.”

“Such things are beyond understanding.”

So, my comforters — Levine, Marshall, Phillips and Arnold — comforters who did not comfort, for they merely repeated the platitudinous nonsense of helplessness I had myself used so often — and dishonestly, I came to see — in consoling a breaved mother or husband or child.

Yet when, some time later, Mrs. Hoffner came weeping over her six-year old recently killed in a road accident, honesty — even though I knew the answer — still eluded me.

“These things are beyond our understanding,” I said, feeling the sickness of the child’s senseless death and of my own lie weighing lead-like in my chest. “We must *trust* that his death was not without meaning, that it had a purpose, though one which we can never know.”

Yet *I* knew.

The child’s death had nothing to do with God — goodness, no —, nor predetermined fate, and free will, certainly not.

Young Gregory had elected that moment to ride his new tricycle in the street. He had pedalled it down the driveway of his house, lost control of it, careered on to the road where a car passing at the same moment rammed helplessly into him and threw him, a rag doll spiralling through the paralysed air to thud limp and bloodied upon the black bitumen thirty feet beyond. Five seconds it took, perhaps ten, though in that horror-filled instant, witnessed by both parents who instead of grief had anticipated the child’s boundless glee, a millenium might have passed.

How to account for these horrendous seconds?

May I pose some questions?

Had the Hoffners not bought that tricycle? Had Gregory's birthday for which that gift had been bought fallen on another day? Had young Gregory, unaware of danger, not chosen that moment to ride it in the street? Had his parents forbidden him to take it outside? Had his father been near enough to stop it careering out of control? Had the gate been shut? Had the driver of the car set out a minute earlier or a minute later? Had the driver travelled by another route? Had he driven faster or more slowly? Had the sun — if it shone — not shone in his eyes? Had it rained, the rain keeping Gregory and perhaps the driver indoors? Had. . .? Had. . .? Had. . .?

God? Design? Free will?

And what of Evelyn? Had she not been so intense, so sensitive, so prone to migraines? Had her genes, her upbringing, her nature, her constitution been different? Had her body's defences been more vigilant and those malignant cells not grown so relentlessly? Had I not been so preoccupied in relieving the distresses of others to be blind to the creeping evil on my own door-step? Had nearness not fostered the balm of denial? Had she not married a doctor, but a plumber, a locksmith, a lawyer? Had she not entrusted herself so unquestioningly to my judgement?

Once more, an unending string of "had's", a profusion of variables — and these are but the iceberg's tip — interplaying to yield an outcome noxious, abominable and diabolic.

So when Mrs. Hoffner came weeping over her child, I lied with platitudes. Upon me had been vested the call to restore the afflicted and sustain the needy. And so, my own conscience burning with disgust, I sustained Mrs. Hoffner — and later, others as well — with soothing fictions and lulling mystifications. For what consolation was there in talking of chance and bad luck and the random willy-nilly collision of a myriad minute disparate trivial details into one gigantic monstrous cataclysmic consummation? I ask. Who shall give answer?

Yes. Lost, those dreams. In my surgery I sit, day in day out, eight, ten, twelve hours a day, listening, examining, prescribing, and still the misery outside is not depleted. Mrs. Johnson contemplates leaving her wife-beating husband, Mrs. Rowlands cannot sleep for fear of prowlers, Mr. Turner, losing weight by the stone, is shrivelling to nothing,

the Bennetts' asthmatic child isn't growing, young Mrs. Dent is miscarrying for the third time, old Mrs. Fogarty's pneumonia has relapsed. One rallies, another succumbs. One improves, another ails. And amongst those who visit are many — bronchitics, alcoholics, cirrhotics, psychotics, addicts — who will never improve. So it shall always be. The law of thermodynamics applied not to energy but to disease.

"You let it trouble you too much," Paula said just three months ago when I had, in a quiet moment, mentioned the fact. "You can only do your bit. . ."

Reasonable, wise, always — no, nearly always — level-headed. And thirty-two, graceful, and dignified, a touch of colour ever-present in her cheeks. And, mystery among mysteries, unattached.

That day, she had brought strawberries, large scarlet juicy ones that neither she (she said) nor I (she knew) could resist. Another time, it had been cherries, and yet another, enormous succulent peaches. But that day was different. She wore a sky-blue outfit that clung tightly to her well-trimmed body and followed avidly the smooth elegant contours of her rounded hips and breasts. My last patient hadn't arrived. I stood by the sink, plucking the green asters off the strawberries and biting into the luscious yeilding fruit. Unnoticed, she had come up beside me. She smelled of carnations. Her speckled cinnamon eyes sparkled with an uncommon shimmer; her expression, ordinarily so composed, was soft, mellow, brittle.

"You can only do your best."

"No-one's best is ever good enough," I laughed. "A man is an ant pushing a mountain. And the mountain, of course, is misery, disease."

"Is that why you drive yourself so?"

"No," I said, in a precious, because rare, moment when I could yield the truth. "I'm past that."

"Mrs. Nagel, then? Your wife? After all these years."

An inspired guess? A stigma engraved on my face? My guilt scar?

"A man has to live," I said, drifting once more into the easier tide of confabulation, "and somehow to pass the time."

She herself may not have willed it but her hand, unexpectedly strong, stilled mine as it picked another aster off a strawberry.



"No, it's not that, is it? — A man has to live for something and not just to pass the time."

She paused, searched my face, her flickering eyes groping for anchorage.

"And a woman," she said, more quietly but adding emphasis with a pressing of her hand, cool with nervous perspiration.

I drew my hand away.

"Paula. . . Yes. . . No. . . You are right. A man, a woman has to live for something, yes. . ."

Her eyes, her lips, her breasts were eager; her hair glistened in a cascading stream; her hands, suddenly redundant, sought occupation. She moved the punnet of strawberries three inches.

". . . but your life is before you. Don't pant after an old man and waste those precious years nursing a crock."

"Simon!"

This time I took her hands. Marianne came to me at the moment, sunshine, swollen and radiant in the aureole of pregnancy, loving, sensitive, her mother's child. "Why, Father, must you begrudge yourself the things that make others happy?"

Why indeed? A wife, companionship, conversation, laughter, a brandy over dinner, delight in grandchildren, an evening at cards, at a lecture, at the theatre.

"Do what others do."

Yes, Marianne, my dear one. You are right of course, of course you are right.

But the energy, my precious, my light, the *energy*. To begin hand-holding again and family dinners and small talk — the refrigerator needs repairing, the carpets ought to be changed, Margaret Kingsley's Rupert is graduating next week — and Saturday evening suppers at the Martins and more small talk or a torpid film or a concert or a play to which I must go so that marriage does not become for Paula — if it is to be Paula — a prison. No, Marianne. Let there be rather a petering out, a quiet bow before the curtain falls, a gentle largo best spent in the undistracted pursuit of the familiar, of the known routine of my daily work and the quiet rummaging, after hours, among my papers, my filing cards, my books.

I held Paula's hands, which yielded, willing subjects.

"No, Paula," I said, "I dare not rob you of your youth."

"I am not so young any more."

"You deserve more than I can give."

"Why must you deprecate yourself so, deny yourself when so close is someone who loves — yes, I have not had the courage to say so before — who loves, wants, needs you above all else?"

"Fantasy, Paula. Out there are a million more suitable, more worthy. It is you who deny yourself. Go out, look, grab. Grab before you turn around and wonder where your years have gone. Youth, youth, youth. Use it, fill it, drink from it, drain it of every drop. . ."

"And you?"

"I have my work, my papers, my books. I ask for nothing more."

"Simon. . ."

At that moment, my last patient entered. When he had left, we did not, could not resume our conversation. Paula had regained her composure, her cheeks were pinched pink and powdered, her every action directed purposefully towards closing up for the night.

Through the window, I watched her till she was out of sight.

That was three months ago. . .

It is now nine o'clock. The crickets outside the window have struck up a madrigal, an occasional car hisses by, the street lamps glow murky and yellow, my own reflection beats back at me in the glass which separates me from the night's ponderous blackness. And, here, in my cocoon, with silence my companion and darkness my shroud, I scribble page after page of flapdoodle telling the tale of an idiot, full of sound but no fury, and signifying nothing.

A young man came to me this morning. Twenty-three, a philosophy student, one would have supposed him to be articulate, yet in his turmoil he groped for words.

"I am tired all the time," he began, "and I can't shake that tiredness off. I would only sleep; each day is an effort, the senses are dulled, nothing seems to matter to me anymore."

Here lay the key. "Nothing seems to matter anymore."

"When I see how others have a goal . . . join in marches . . . engage in rallies . . . shout about freedom, security, peace, I can't . . . I would like to be among them . . . but I am

not one of those who can march, carry banners, shout. . . And, along . . . it's all so futile. . . A man is a mere ant facing an enormity of . . . of . . . of evil. . . And my books don't help . . . I have no cause . . . commitment . . . purpose."

His eyes on his fingers, on the floor, on the window behind me, he talked on this vein until he paused, sighed, said desperately "I don't know what to do" and stopped.

I sat opposite him, waited, saw that he had exhausted himself, and spoke in turn.

"You can only do your bit," I said, "and your best. You are too young to be old. I agree, yes, there is much that is wrong with the world, that needs to be rectified. But no-one demands it of you to rectify it wholly. But to desist from doing your bit, however small, through your studies, your knowledge, your gifts and later your work is to let your life, still an inexhaustible well of potential, run to such waste that one day you shall find it impossible to excuse."

And I said that causes, commitments, purpose came from the tasks one set for oneself and from the people one associated with, and that happiness — or, if not happiness, then contentment — sprang from communion, companionship and exchange, for in this world, other people were all one really had.

No, the irony is not lost upon me. That I, the doctor, should cite to my patient the words of my receptionist as my own; or that my preaching should be so at odds with my practice. But sustenance must I be to those in need, and here I must ask — are my shams, my fictions, my hypocrisies, (harsh words which I do not evade) in any wise different from those of a priest or a lawyer, a politician or a retailer of last week's goods? And another question — could I, dared I, under the circumstances, be the paragon of honesty and spill out before that young groping searching patient with his future stretching out before him my own semen of resignation, indifference, renunciation?

Evelyn, Paula, Marianne. Give me the strength to be young again, as that man is young; give me the strength to begin again, to extract from life its last, however meagre, juices, that I may enjoy the companionship it has to offer, the shared humour, the physical and emotional entanglements that, were I indeed young again, might pass for love or adoration. As that young man said — a cause, commitment, purpose.

“Father, do what others do. Why must you begrudge yourself the things that make others happy?”

“A man has to live for something, and a woman, too. Why must you deny yourself when so close, so close is someone. . .?”

You are right. I have never doubted. The very walls reverberate with your wisdom, your common sense. But the energy, Marianne, Paula, the strength. “In the dark night, glowing summer turns to autumn, all its riches are transformed into a great poverty. And the man begins to complain because of his wretchedness. The ardours of love, the intimacy, the gratitude, the joyful priase. How has all this died in him?”

Marianne, my sunshine. Paula. Must it be? Paula, if I were to telephone you, even now, even though it is nearly ten o'clock and the night is silent and the streets are dark, would you consider it madness? I am a man who thinks. Yes. But were I to cast all reason into the sea and release the emotion trapped in its depths, Paula, might I, dare I still have cause to hope? . . .

Is it madness?

How the hand clutching the receiver trembles, perspires. As it did the first time I ever rang Evelyn — was it really so long ago? And how shrill the ringing of the phone, so piercing against the taut strings of the senses. Is it madness? Am I fifty, playing at being twenty-one? Replace the receiver. Now. Before she answers it. Before the waves carry me away into entanglements for which I have no strength.

The phone rings, rings, stops ringing. A voice empties itself into it at the other end. An abrupt, hard, masculine voice, churlish at the disturbance at this hour.

“Hello!”

“Wrong number,” I say.

“Who do you want?”

“Paula . . . Paula Winter. . .”

I am not given to prayer. But I pray behind closed eyes that he will say, “You’re right, wrong number.” But instead, he thunders “Wait a moment” and then in a more distant muffled tone, says, “Kitten, there’s some fellow wanting to speak with you.”

There is still time to replace the receiver. Paula need never know. Better, indeed, that she should never know. . .

“Hello.” Her voice, curious, hospitable, self-assured.

"Paula."

"Yes?" Then, "Dr. Nagel! Has something happened?"

"I rang . . . wondered . . . wanted to know if you were free . . . if we could meet. . ."

"I shall be in tomorrow as usual."

"No, not in the surgery, but. . ."

A pause. Her breathing softly audible. Then, "I see."

". . . to talk, have coffee, supper. At Toto's, I thought."

Behind her, the man's hard voice, "Kitten, who is it?"

"One moment, Victor," she says to him, then returns to me. "Dr. Nagel, Simon. I can't. Things have changed. I . . . Victor. . . Do you remember? A woman has to live for something. Remember? Grab before you wonder where your years have gone. Remember? Youth. Fill it, drink from it, drain it of every drop . . . Victor . . . I . . ."

"I understand, Paula. I'm sorry. A lapse on my part. I thought. . ."

My cheeks burn. My hands quiver. Humming fills my ears. The walls laugh.

Who is it that is so amused, that toys so capriciously with a man? God? Fate? Is humiliation — and with humiliation, suffering, anguish, decay, death — the result of some predetermined chain following a cruel mysterious logic of its own? Is it the fruit of a man's own imbecility, the culmination of his own choices, the denouement of the illogic, chance, chaotic interplay of all these?

Had Evelyn not died? Had Paula not declared her love? Had Marianne not been so insistent? Had I never been a doctor? Had that young man not come to me today? Had I stayed my hand and not raised the phone? Had Paula not been at home? Had my parents never met? Had I never been born? Had. . .? Had. . .? Had. . .?

On my desk before me lie the cardboard box bulging with system cards, a heap of clippings, paper (both blank and with scribble), a book by Kaufmann, two pens — one red, one black, and covering them all, my future. I lean back in my chair, press with finger and thumb until they ache my burning eyeballs, give myself up to the throbbing clamour of my pulse. Outside, the crickets have sung out their madrigal, a solitary tram clatters by and a breeze rattles the window in its frame. While within, in this room, this surgery which is my whole life, I sit, solitary and detached, at the fringe of a vast

**gigantic hollow and think how tomorrow I shall have to face  
Paula and my shame. . .**

**Sustenance am I ever to the needy. Who is there that shall  
sustain the sustainer?**