The Battered and the Redeemed

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A number of these stories have appeared in the *Melbourne Chronicle*, *Outrider* and *Storyteller*

Tribute is paid to Peter L. Berger's essay "In Praise of New York", *Commentary* February 1977.

To the battered,
that they may yet be restored to wholeness;
and to the whole,
that they may never in their own lives know
the initiations of the battered

The Storyteller

1.

At birth, I sucked milk at my mother's breast. Then at bedtimes, I heard her songs. And then, the age of understanding having come, I listened to her stories.

A rabbi called on the richest man in his town and urged him to donate generously towards the orphanage. The man turned him down. "Listen," said the rabbi, "give me the money and I will offer you my share in Paradise." The rich man now agreed. "Done!" he said. Overjoyed, the rabbi used the money to enlarge the orphanage.

When the rabbi's pupils heard of this, they stood aghast. "Rabbi," they said, "how could you possibly do such a thing?" "My sons," he replied. "Twice a day in my prayers I say, 'Love thy God with all thy soul and with all that you possess.' But, children, I am but a poor man. What is it that I possess with which I can serve God? Only my share in Paradise. So, to serve His children, His orphans, it is with this that I must ever be ready to part.

Once, someone asked Motke Chabad, "Tell me, Motke, you're a smart fellow. Why are noodles called noodles?"

Motke threw up his hands.

"Ach, what a question to ask!" he said. "They're long like noodles, no? They're soft like noodles, no? And of course

> they taste like noodles, no? So — why shouldn't they be called noodles?"

There was warmth, humour, homeliness in that parabolic ambience my mother wrought. Other-worldly rabbis spun wisdom out of the flimsiest gossamer, cantors' tremolos stirred sleeping seraphim to thrall and visionary dreamers built palaces in air, while on firmer ground, garlic-breathed matchmakers oversold their wares, indigent *shlemiels* fell backwards and landed on their face and hapless hatters fretted that with their luck people would soon come to be born without heads.

She told another story, my mother, another story that etched itself like an engraving into the deepest layers of memory's inconstant and rugged terrain.

> A king once decided to build a town and chose the site. His astrologers approved of the place on condition that a child be walled in alive, but brought voluntarily by its mother.
>
> "So it shall be," said the king, "but if within three months no mother comes forward, then I shall send forward my soldiers to bring me a child."
>
> And all mothers for miles around came to hear of the king's plan and were afraid.
>
> But one mother did go forward voluntarily with her child.
>
> Her friends, though relieved, chided her. "For a king's whim," they said, "you would sacrifice your very blood?"
>
> And her husband said, "Do you so hate me that you so wantonly give up the bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh?"
>
> While the child in its turn said, "Am I to be taken forever from my friends and never be able to grow up like them?"
>
> Nonetheless she came before the king and said, "This is the child I have brought to you that you may proceed to build your town.'
>
> The king ordered that she be showered with riches and praise. But before his order could be carried out, the mother turned full face towards him and said, "Before you take my child, your majesty, may I be permitted to ask three questions of your astrologers. If they answer correctly, may your will be done; however, if not, may your plan be fully revoked."

"Ask," said the king; and the mother, turning now to the astrologers, asked, "What is the lightest, what is the sweetest, and what is the hardest thing in the world?"

The astrologers conferred and in their turn said, "The lighest is a feather; the sweetest is honey; the hardest is stone."

Whereupon the mother shook her head and drew the child back to herself.

"No," she said. "The lightest thing in the world is an only child in its mother's arms; the sweetest, surely, is the mother's milk to her child; while the hardest, by far and forever the hardest, is for a mother to bring her child willingly to be buried in a wall alive."

And so were the astrologers confounded, and the child was saved, as were all children who lived in those parts.

If such was that child's mother, so, too, was she mine, young, lovely, clever, wise, soft and safe, who, as she told me her stories, also ruffled my hair and brushed my cheeks and cupped my chin, the while heaving sometimes or rubbing the corners of her eyes, weary from sitting day in day out behind the treadle of a sewing-machine in a dusty dingy shirt factory in the sultry heat of Flinders Lane. Her very energy depleted, nonetheless she still found the strength within herself to give. She always gave; she loved to give; she *begged* to give. "When a parent gives to a child," — so ran the proverb — "they both laugh; when the child has to give to its parent, they both weep." Mother saw to it that in her presence there was only cause for laughter, as also for comfort, and for solace, the laughter, comfort and solace being that which came from giving, even as her own father, my Zaida Natanyahu, to hear her tell of him, must have loved to give.

"Do you know what manner of man was your *zaida*, your Zaida Natanyahu?"

I knew. Yes, I knew. She had told me before. But I asked — begged — that she should tell me again.

The gates of Paradise stood open — she began — and a procession of human souls came before the Heavenly Tribunal.

First came a rabbi.

"I am learned in the Law," he said. "Night and day I studied the Word of God. Surely I deserve a place in Paradise!"

"Wait!" called out the Recording Angel. "First, we must investigate. We must first satisfy ourselves as to the motives behind your study. Did you, for instance, apply yourself to learning for learning's sake? Or was it to gain personal prestige, or honour, standing or monetary reward?"

Next came an ascetic, a saint.

"How I fasted in the world I left behind!" he said. "All of the six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* did I observe. Several times a day I bathed and studied the mysteries of the *Zohar* without cease. If anyone merits a place in Paradise, surely it is I!"

"Not so fast," cried the Recording Angel. "Of virtue there is plenty, but we are duty-bound to investigate the purity of your intentions."

Then an inn-keeper approached.

"I simply plied my trade," he said. "I opened my door to the homeless and fed the hungry and gave to the needy, and had little time left for learning, piety and prayer."

And the Recording Angel stood aside.

"Open the Gates of Paradise!" he cried.

"*Such* was your Zaida Natanyahu; not an inn-keeper, but a printer who would return home with his nails chapped and his fingers black from type, bringing now an apprentice home for dinner, now a fellow member of the *Poalei Zion*, now a visitor to Warsaw from Lemberg or Bialystok or Lodz. And until ten, eleven or twelve into the night, they would talk over Russian tea and argue and debate, your Buba Guta, too, who taught young children in the *folkshule*, sang the *Internationale* on the First of May, and waved the flag for President Pilsudski. Wise King Solomon had such as her in mind when he wrote his *eshes chayil*, when he sang the praises of the woman of worth whose price was above rubies, who opened her mouth only in wisdom and spoke with the law of loving-kindness ever on her tongue."

"And Zaida Lezer?" I asked then as I had asked so often before. "What of Zaida Lezer? And of Buba Malke Sheine?"

"Zaida Lezer?" repeated Mother, deftly smoothing out my quilt with the palms of her hands. "Listen."

> The Baal Shem Tov, accompanied by his disciples, once went on a journey from Miezibozh to Mezerich. Late at night, they came to a wayside inn. He knocked on the door and asked that he and his disciples be let in. But as it was bitterly cold, the inn-keeper refused to get out of bed.
>
> Full with wrath, the Baal Shem Tov called up to the inn-keeper, "As all these disciples are my witness, I decree that tomorrow your inn shall burn down to ash and cinders!"
>
> Frightened out of his wits, the inn-keeper got out of bed, cold as it was, and let the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples enter. He treated them with every hospitality and laid out a feast before them all.
>
> Satisfied and mollified by the inn-keeper's eagerness to please, the Baal Shem Tov raised his face unto the heavens and cried, "I now decree that this inn shall *not* burn down tomorrow!"
>
> And wonder of wonders! Do you know what happened? It happened exactly as the Baal Shem Tov had said. The good man's disciples themselves were witness to the miracle. They saw with their own eyes that the inn did not burn down the following day!

"*That* was your Zaida Lezer's favourite story. He was a small man. When he was young, he wore a long *capote*, had a full rounded beard, and had gone first to *cheder* and then to *yeshiva*. But one day, he was browsing through the shelves of a library in Praga that overlooked the Vistula, and he discovered. . .He discovered. . .What did he discover, *liebeniu*?. . ."

"Spinoza!" I said, delighting in the sound, so exotic, so exquisite, so rare. "Spinoza!"

"Spinoza, yes. And from Spinoza to your Zaida Lezer, not another *apikoros*, not another heretic like him ever lived. But your Buba, being to her dying day a true *malke sheine*, a most truly lovely queen, in loving God, also loved her husband, now

shaven, hatless and modern in his dress, protected him against the Evil Eye — who must have surely seen his waywardness and been ever preparing to descend upon him — and waited, waited, waited always, for him to repent and return to God, her God, her people's God, our God. Do you understand all this, *liebeniu*, do you? If not, you needn't worry, some day you will. As sure as oceans and mountains will never disappear, some day you will, you will understand it all."

2.

In time, other questions surfaced.

"Where are they — Zaida Natanyahu, Buba Guta, Zaida Lezer, Buba Malke Sheine?"

"They are in the heart," Mother said at first.

Then as I grew older she said, "In the memory are they."

And when I had added another notch to my years, she said, "They have been turned into *dybbuks*. Yes, into *dybbuks* have they been turned."

"*Dybbuks*?" I said, I asked, I probed.

"*Dybbuks*," Mother said again. "Souls that, released from an earlier body, ever find newborn ones to enter, that they may themselves within each live on and live through the generations, one after another, until the coming of *Mashiach* and the final *t'chias ha'messim*; yes, until that time when the messiah will come and the bones and spirits of all who have ever lived will regain human flesh and be filled again with human breath, those being so restored worshipping with never-ceasing song and praise Almighty God Who created the world and Who created man and created the notion of perfection that is given to every man to strive for and the very possibility of ecstasy on its attainment."

For some time, Mother said no more about my *zaidas* and my *bubas* but, with Father as ally, diverted me with books instead, with the fantasies and fables, allegories and folktales of their own one-time coming of age: in short, with the webs of narrative woven by Sholom Aleichem and I.L.Peretz, by Nachman

of Bratzlav and Mendele Mocher Sforim who, in homely endearing prose, told of beadles and milkmen, of matchmakers and cantors, of cabalists and simpletons, and sinners and orphans and *shlemiels* amongst a crowded multitude of others besides; to the point that while the ground I trod daily was that of Melbourne's St.Kilda, and the trees I climbed and the fences I scaled and the parks in which I ran were fixedly antipodean and indefeasably of the here and now, yet was my head ever gliding on clouds that swept over such places as Yehupetz and Kasrilevke, Tunayadevka and Cherkassy, exotic little villages and *shtetls* that were real, more real, and mine, more mine, than even neighbouring Elwood and Armadale and Elsternwick and Caulfield where I went to school or Yiddish classes or to *shul* sometimes.

3.

As I neared *Bar Mitzvah*, other names came to the fore. Interspersed with talk of *dybbuks* and *Mashiachs*, of *t'chias ha'messim* and Evil Eyes and of *eshes chayils* and *Spinozas*, Mother came to speak of furnaces and of starvation, of typhus and of gas, and of an inhuman beast called Hitler, as well as of places bearing the names of Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen and Treblinka where, in *Kiddush ha'Shem*, in Sanctification of the Name, Zaida Natanyahu, Buba Guta, and Zaida Lezer and Buba Malke Sheine, along with *Feters* Chaim, Yosef, Ksiel and Yirmiahu, and *Tantes* Hela, Fraye, Shoshke and Baile went up in smoke, their ashes strewn then into the vastness of space, forever to wander homelessly about the universe, borne by whatever breezes and windstorms happened to blow across the face of the earth and in every interstice of the galaxies. And so, they were not only within me, as *dybbuks*, those *zaidas* and *bubas* and uncles and aunts, but also beside me and around me, above me, and accompanying me, yes, at all times accompanying me, whether in my going forth, or in my lying down, or in my rising up.

In the hold of those saints and heroes and wags that peopled the novels and story anthologies that I kept adding to my bed-

head, I came to want to create too, indeed I vowed to create — if 'vowed' was not too strong a word — or, better still, to re-create, in all their fullness, sanctity and warmth my blessed forebears' truncated lives.

And in moments of transport, I tore out pages from my exercise books, sharpened my pencil and wrote:

> It happened that Natanyahu Kirschenboim had been away and on his return just before *Shabbos* on a day of blizzard and bitter cold found himself short of wood for fire. . .

Ah, the ecstasy of it!

> Buba Guta gave birth to a child with six toes and went to her rabbi to learn why she had been so punished. . .

The delight!

> Zaida Lezer who was said to be a wise man, like all the men of Chelm, was once asked, "From which end, the head or the feet, does a person grow?" For a moment he thought and then said. . .

The sheer delight!

> Malke Sheine was truly a *sheine malke.* Already at birth she was clothed in the dazzling muslin white of a bride. . ."

The magical exhilarating flight of invention!

Early, then, was my life's course as good as mapped out. That, like Chekhov, Cronin, Bulgakov and William Carlos Williams, I should in time become a doctor as well, was incidental, even given that my motives for entering into medicine were the most unexceptionable, if neophyte, ones of service and fellow-concern, but, come what may, a writer, a storyteller I would also be. And if I needed any sanction for a pursuit so esoteric among my peers I found it in a single, simple and resonant

refrain — in Mother's fervently-held and lastingly-invigorating credo: "When a child or a man is blessed and consecrated with a gift, more than he owes it to himself he owes it to others to use it." I liked the flow and rhythm of her way of speaking. Her Yiddish cadences were borne on a smoothly rising-falling lilt that closely resembled *vieg-lied* music, and though I could not know it then, they were in time to insinuate themselves, surreptitiously at first, and then more boldly, into my very work.

Believing that of all those I knew, my Yiddish teacher, Jacob Kuznitz, would most appreciate my efforts as also — how I craved it! — bless me with his praise, I brought myself in an impulsive moment to offer him a sheaf of stories.

Taking them from me, he held on to them a week, then two, and three, until towards the end of one of his lessons a solid month later, he bade me remain behind.

He was a lean man nearing seventy. His hair was thin and his sockets deep, this rendering his gaze the more intense, while what seemed like chicken flesh hung loosely from his neck. He had been an actor in Vilna and a leading light in the local Yiddish theatre. Reflecting on him now, he might already have well been ailing from the disease that was within a year to claim him.

With a minimum of preamble, save to seat himself on a chair before me and place a thin hard-tendoned hand upon my arm, he said, "I see you like stories. Then listen, let me tell you one."

> An aging king once wanted to give one of his nearby palaces to his son and daughter-in-law that they and their children — his grandchildren — might be close to him in his last days. But the palace was too small for his son who needed more room, not only for his family but also for a large number of attendants and servants who would free him for his necessary duties of state.
>
> Further, the palace which had once been a most regal place and had seen balls and banquets and the coming together of the greatest men in the realm, was in dire disrepair, having been

ravaged by fire in its upper floors, by neglect in the lower ones, and by vandals who as always made wanton destruction their sport.

The king was thus faced with a dilemma, and he summoned his son to discuss the matter with him.

"You know I want to give you another place in which to live," he said. "On the one hand, I want you to have more space; on the other I want you near. But what should I do that will be best for you: offer you one of the larger more spacious palaces that is, alas, far away from here, or demolish the one nearby and erect a wholly new one in its place?"

And his son said, "Yes, it is true that I need a larger place. And I too wish to be near you. So I do not want that more distant palace. But neither do I wish to have the near one pulled down. I would urge you rather to build on it, for though the palace is outmoded and shabby and in seedy disrepair, yet does it remain a monument and a remembrance to more glorious times and as such ought forever to be preserved.

"So, I would say," his son continued, "add to it. But add to it quarters in a modern style, with modern materials, modern bricks, timber, fittings, glass. Let the newer part be in the modern mould, for though the older part will testify to our most splendid past, the new shall bring the whole building into the present, be used again as it was before, and be meet place for living in and for folk to notice and feel at ease with, for it will in this way be attuned to their age and to their sensibilities, to their expectations and their spirit."

And the king said, "Blessed am I to have a son so compassionate and wise. I will do as you say."

And so it was. The old was preserved and, indeed, restored to its earlier nature, and the new added, suited to its time and its place and in keeping with the people's expectations and sensibilities and spirit.

Having finished the story, Jacob Kuznitz, my Yiddish teacher, paused. His gaze flitted and danced across my face as it might have done in the theatre to gauge the response of his audience. "Tell me now, my precious child," he said. "Whom are you writing for?"

In my own mind, I thought I had known, but confronted by the specific question I faltered.

"Do you understand what I am saying?" he went on.

This time he did not pause for answer.

"Listen to me, *liebeskind*. What you are doing is very nice. Your stories are fine and they show you have a Jewish heart. They are of course young stories still, a beginner's stories. But not that is what I want to say. For with time, they will improve. Important, though, is this, the question you must always ask yourself: Whom did Sholom Aleichem write for? Or Peretz? Or I.J.Singer, or even his brother Bashevis who is writing today, and Avraham Reisen and Nadir, and our own, our own Herz Bergner and Pinchas Goldhar? Am I clearer to you yet?"

The pause that ensued could scarcely have admitted two words from me.

"Yes, what you are doing," he repeated, "is both nice and fine like I said. You are preserving, or rather you are perhaps prolonging the past, and your stories are lively and clever and quaint. *But*, precious heart, you cannot write as they wrote in that past, for that past is destroyed, *farvisht un farnichtert*, gone, may God in Heaven never let its like ever happen again. A new generation has arisen that speaks with a different voice, a generation that knows little of those *shtetlech*, forests and villages of which you write. If you want to reach the people now out there and touch their hearts, then you must first *look* at their hearts, and *into* their hearts, and see and study and try to understand, try to understand the lives they lead today. Then you may the better write of them and write *for* them, even as Sholom Aleichem and the others did for their generation in their day. So if you want to be a true writer, your duty lies in telling of all that *this* generation — your generation and your parents' generation — have known, and all that *they* have lived through, and all that *they* have suffered and, being a divine and glorious people, in their time survived."

He cupped my chin within the palm of his hand and raised

my face the more squarely to meet his own. His was a bony hand but inordinately light in touch.

"So," he said, "you do understand what I am saying, no?"

I nodded. Yes, I understood, even though I was aggrieved that my pieces had not met with a keener response than being passed as merely nice and fine. I did however come to look about me with different eyes, beginning to look *into* the heart as it were, as my teacher, the Yiddish actor Jacob Kuznitz, had bade me do.

4.

As a consequence of this, however, I gained not only knowledge but also fear. For those words and names and phrases which I heard so often recurring like a set refrain in an ongoing lament — the Aryan side, Treblinka, deportations, hiding, gas-chambers, slaughter-houses, death-camps — searingly brought home to me my parents' orphanhood in the world. I recognised their bereft disorientated solitariness as strangers in a forbidding land where all they had started out with on arrival were a bed, a table, a chair, and whatever else work piecemeal brought in; I saw how important a Yiddish newspaper could become, or a Yiddish play or a Yiddish word exchanged with friends, these being their sole means to establishing tenure where tenure seemed precariously tenuous in a wilderness, as Mother called it, to which they had come out of necessity and by the most undreamable, unforeseeable and unimaginable capriciousness of chance. And when, on contemplating their past — in Warsaw, Irkutsk, Samarkand, Tashkent and a multitude of other byway stations that I traced upon the map — I turned in, turned inward, into myself, those stories that like some repetitive driven ritual filled our lounge-room and our kitchen of a mid-week evening or a Sunday afternoon, I also felt within myself first the rumblings, then the roaring, and then the eruption of alarming, goose-pimpling, breath-denying terror.

Terror! — Confronted by the night's yawning darkness after

a visit by the Grinbergs or the Waiskopfs I saw in that darkness the strutting forms of steel-helmeted soldiers, I heard their clamour, their boots against the pavement and their fists upon the door, and heard them lurking outside my window, and rehearsed a hundred times over ways of escape, of retaliation and of hiding were any of them to come to take me away. Behind each black shrub breathed menace; every crash of a gate made me hold my breath; while every rustle of branches against a fence or crackle of leaves in the wind made me stop, alert and wary, and then made me run from that peril that emerged at night and brooded brutishly about our house and its surrounds.

So did I come to detest the nights.

But the days, too, were not without their reminders. Especially those days of lowered eyes and memorial candles and of switched-off radios, low voices and melancholy talk. Those days, too, I disliked. Days when with my parents I went to the Martyrs' Monument at the Carlton Cemetery to be submerged and subsumed in the midst of three hundred, four hundred, five hundred others come to remember and mourn before the seven-branched candelabrum of stark white stone enclosed on three sides by tier upon tier of wind-touched graves. The women stood in black dresses, in head-scarves and in overcoats, their cheeks blanched from grief and April cold, while the men, in skull-caps or in hats, seemed to hug that white memorial at whose feet were engraved the names — Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, Majdanek, Buchenwald — that I had come to know as sacred, as sacrosanct, not through events that had brought glory or exaltation or cause for praise, but rather through the blood, the million-times, six-million times spilt blood of martyrs.

On one such day, I stood in the multitude, my parents beside me, masses of others all around.

The service, duty of commemoration and homage, began.

First, Simcha Hirshbein, President of the Association of Former Camp Inmates, spoke, waxing passionate as he admonished the gathered never to forget, nor ever to forgive the

bestialities wrought upon their people. Then my teacher, Jacob Kuznitz, stepped forward to recite three camp and ghetto poems in tones that throbbed and sent vibrations along the length of my spine. Cantor Neumann followed with the chilling elegiac prayer for the dead "*El Male Rachamim*" — "*O Lord, Who Art Full of Compassion*" — at which both the men and the women openly wept. And then Rabbi Aaron Siegel, Head of the *Beth Din*, took Cantor Neumann's place and began to speak, his tone at first soft and slow, so soft and slow that it fully haunted. He was nearing sixty, had a thick and coarse grey beard, and was dressed as my Zaida Netanyahu in a photograph hanging back home had been dressed — in black caftan and black hat beneath which dark coiled ear-locks had been swept.

And Rabbi Siegel told a story.

> When Moses led his people out of Egypt — he began — he carried the bones of Joseph and his brothers taken out of the Nile. He carried them himself on his shoulders for the forty years of his people's sojourn towards Canaan. He needed to build an army, he needed the strength to enter Canaan. From where would come that strength? From the bones, yes, from the bones on his back which made him cry, "*Kadimah*! Forward! Only forward!", for behind him, if ever they were to turn back, were the bones of the dead.

"So today, in our day," he went on, "we too must go only forward, and we too, my brothers, my sisters, we too are to carry the bones of the dead wherever we are, lest we forget the six million who died. And though we give our dead no rest, may we be forgiven for it. And though we permit them not to lie in peace, for this too may we be forgiven." And raising his face towards the heavens, he exclaimed in the loud plaintive tones of petition, "Forgive us, O mothers, forgive us, O fathers, for not allowing you to rest! Forgive us, dear parents, for allowing you no peace! For as we dare not forget, neither do we dare permit you, dear fathers, dear mothers, to lie in peace!"

And so, Rabbi Siegel talked on, and told of Jeremiah who said that a catastrophe was as a disaster that had befallen at sea. For a short time, the signs remained, and were seen, and remembered. But then the waters swelled, the tides rose over, and all became as if nothing had happened.

"But there *are* signs!" he said, looking upward again, his very beard quivering with emphasis.

Grey rain had begun to fall, at first scattered drops, then a fuller shower.

"The rains, my brothers, this rain, my sisters, these are the tears of those who have died; the very heavens weep! The very heavens, look up, look up, they weep!"

And a strange thing, a remarkable thing, to me a thing beyond expectation happened. Rabbi Siegel also wept; he wept until he could speak no more and the air around me was, apart from the pattering rain, consumed by silence.

Then with a strength rising through and above the choking constriction of mourning, three hundred voices, four hundred, all five hundred, sang, sang in unison, sang even in the rain, sang the song that that generation, mercifully, miraculously, incredibly survived, had come to sing into a hymn.

> Never say that there is only death for you,
> Though leaden skies may be concealing days of blue -
> Because the hour that we have hungered for is near;
> Beneath our tread the earth shall tremble: "We are here!"

Under such circumstances, what was rain? So I became wet, so my hair was flattened, so my jacket grew heavier. What of it? Such discomfiture was scarce reason for cowering, much less for flight. Surely! And when, outside the cemetery gates, Mother touched my head, my shoulders and my arms in a way that was private and close and devoid of words, I cherished that hand that had survived and had endured, and in that instant I recognised truly the generation I should write of, the generation I should write *for* — as Jacob Kuznitz had said — and enshrine them in prose as a written memorial, as the can-

delabrum at the cemetery was a memorial in stone, to the past that had been Mother's, Father's, my people's, mine.

5.

Scarcely reaching home, I sat down at my desk. As I had done before, I tore out lined virgin pages from an exercise book, took up my pencil and, responding vaguely to Mother's question as to what I should like for dinner, began to write:

> When Rivka Bultman saw her mother being herded to the gas-chambers to the left, she went mad. So everyone had said. She let out a scream, tore open her coat and blouse, and cried, "Take me, too, take me, too!" But. . .
>
> Shlomo Zeidler was the least-likely-looking hero that could ever be imagined. But when he sprang upon the guard beneath his window in the Vilna Ghetto. . .
>
> Late at night, Ber Grinberg, his brother Shimon Grinberg and and Chaskiel Bennett planned their escape from Treblinka. By the dim light of a smuggled torch. . .

They were raw, they were unpolished, they were crude those fragments, I knew. They were written in white heat, and with passion, all the more intense for being adolescent, and with venom, and with anger too, yes, with anger, seething anger against those who, scorning civilisation — and what civilisation! Goethe, Beethoven, Heine, Kant — had, as Mira Zeidler had once said, so sunk to the pits of all conceivable bestiality as to place themselves beyond the pale of humankind. They were written with fury also, as well as with spite, these partnering the rage against those who, though heirs of Chopin and Mickiewicz, had been beguiled and benighted and zealously abetted and acquiesced, according to Vigdor Bultman, in the demonic ruination wrought by those latter-day Huns; and they were written with indignation against the world, the very world

itself that — as Shula Bennett said — had stood by untouched and untouching, unmoved and unmoving, stone-deaf and stone-mute, at all times looking obtusely the other way; and, lastly, they were written with pity, with pity and with grief, and with veneration and with love, for all who, being of my flesh, and of my bone, and of my blood, had been so pointlessly, so pitilessly and so primitively destroyed in the flurry — as Ber Grinberg put it — of one crazed Austrian's manic insanity.

But even as I wrote, another force, no less compelling than the one holding me to my seat, was drawing me away. Contemplating the camps and forests and mines and ghettos I had heard spoken of, and the incarcerations and entrapments of those who had fallen there; recalling the attics, cellars, vaults and bunkers, along with the cemeteries, convents and Siberian steppes where the more fortune-favoured had survived; summoning up all these, I was beset by an assault of claustrophobia so acute that I had to break away, I had to flee my room, and did flee, heading, as I often did after an evening's study, for the spaciousness and release offered by the sea at St.Kilda Beach nearby where I could let vision, thought and imagination reach out, reach out far across the vast arcuate light-bordered bay, and thence across distance and across time, unencumbered by the earth-tethering exigencies, constraints and mundaner concerns of the day.

At the rim of the bay, I sat on the parapet there. I was alone. After the day's draining surfeit of emotion that had hotly charged the lead of my pencil at my desk in its aftermath, I welcomed the solitude. I welcomed the solitariness, even if the chill about me did sink its teeth into my flesh and the air was still damp from the afternoon's rain, making me raise my collar to my ears and bury my hands deep into my pockets.

But it was less the chill that took hold of me as I sat there than, perversely, a feeling of heat, a flush, that rose to my face and burned and prickled and stung as if I had been slapped. For, with scarcely any warning, I stiffened and held my breath under the onslaught of an acute and painful sense of betrayal. And it was all the more painful because of all people, of all people I

could ever conceive of doing so, it was Mother most of all who had done the betraying. For when she should have been telling me stories that truly mattered, she had molly-coddled me for so long with fantasies and fictions, with folk tales, tales and fables of times fifty, one hundred, two hundred, a thousand years past and oceans and continents and innumerable archipelagos away.

The need for stories remained, as also the urge to tell them. But the age was past any doling out of saccharine, treacle and floss. The stories Mother should have been telling, telling from the very first, ought to have started like this:

> When Yudel K- awoke from what he thought had been a peculiar dream, he found himself to be a cloud of smoke rising from the furnace below. . .

or like this:

> As Justus Indyte approached the pyramid that under the sun glistened white and gold and every variation of diamond luminosity, he saw that it was in fact a mound of human skulls piled high. And the skull at the summit which still had a jaw attached to its cranium spoke to him and bade him draw near for there were things till then unheard and untold of that it wished to whisper into Indyte's ear. So Justus Indyte drew near. . .

or like this:

> Between two full stops in the despatch that correspondent Blazé Tidings had written about the strife in Boschtown, another two thousand people died.

These stories not having been told before, it would fall upon me to tell them. These were the bones I should have to carry, through them would I give my *dybbuks* voice.

Was I possessed, however — *would* I ever be possessed — of the sustaining vision and the strength to see it through? If there was a God who disbursed gifts upon mere mortals, had He

given me sufficient to carry through my purpose? Or, if God there were, did He perhaps fear the bestowal upon mere man of gifts too great lest that man — in this case, I — should turn against Him, even as Job in vigorous and brazen defiance had done, or as Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, too, who had challenged God, asking,

> What do You have against Your people Israel?
> Why do You afflict Your people Israel?

and vowing,

> I shall not stir from here,
> From this spot I shall not stir,
> There must be an end to this,
> The exile must come to an end!
> Magnified and sanctified be His Name.

Given the gift for story-telling, might it not in fact prove a curse, there being none to know where that gift might lead? Fired by the fuel of abomination for the evil He had done unto His people or had permitted to be done, might I not, for instance, be tempted to utter my own blasphemies against Him, writing, say — as even now I wrote in a fifty-cent note-pad I had brought with me —

> One day, it transpired that God and the devil were one and the same, the ostensible two being but polarities of one aberrant erratic schizophrenic psychopath. And the feckless artless Adam ben Adam took it upon himself to play the psychiatrist to God. . .

Or, having no bar of Job's ultimate meek and cowed submission before the voice that issued out of the whirlwind, or of Levi Yitzchok's untouched abiding adoration, with what venom, with what wrath and opprobrium might I not myself be galvanised to challenge:

> What do You have against Your creation Man?
> Why do You so afflict Your creation Man?

But if... But if — dared I even contemplate it? — if, withal, there were no God?...

O, the seas of narrative, the oceans of possibilities that stretched before me! How deep the waters and unpredictable in their turbulence the tides on which I might yet venture out! And were I there and then to leave my perch and set sail from there upon the world — the world real and proverbial both — what shore, what harbour, what reef would I arrive at that was not in some way tainted with blood shed by human hand and where I might have reason to cry out, and to protest, and to howl, as in our time the writer who would be called "writer" had to howl — *had* to howl — "Man! Man! Have you no shame?"?

For this, too, was strength needed, and gall, and, if called for, obduracy, however perverse. Did I possess them? Would I, untested sailor, dare indeed set sail upon what were for me uncharted waters; would I, untested scrivener, dare indeed take up the prophet's, reformer's, rebel's pen, and howl? Or would I turn back, turn away my face to safer fare, even to my mother's breast again and to her soothing hand, and to her oh-so-lovely pastoral legends which I would update to, say,

> One day, a little St.Kilda tailor called Zvi complained to his neighbour that the man's pet rabbit was chewing up his materials...

or,

> It happened that the Jews of Melbourne, many of whom had come from Chelm, one day got it into their heads to trap the moon and make use of its light...

Sitting astride the parapet, perched on that solid steadfast divider between the footwalk on the one side and the sea on the

other, I huddled deeper within myself against a chill rush of wind that swept in from the bay carrying with it the rancid tang of sulphur, seaweed and brine.

Where the ground was securer underfoot, on the side that was familiar and firm, it rose in a grassy flowered incline towards the Upper Esplanade where the clock-tower stood, where cars and vans and semi-trailers hurtled past, and where the built-up shorefront gave on to a dense and crowded lit-up neighbourhood that yielded on to others and to others still which in their vast collective aggregation formed a mapped identifiable city that since my arrival had been cosy, safe and haven home.

Opposing this, on my other side, in the distance from whence that gust arose and where I knew the bay swung round to its terminal point, the horizon began, unseen in the increasingly mist-enshrouded darkness, beyond which stretched space more open, more vacant and unpeopled, and for that reason more intimidating, fearsome and scarily daunting.

Which would I choose? What choices did I have? What options?

There were two, and each a curse: the curse of treason through either silence or old-time quaintness, which in essence were one and the same, or a sustained defiant wrathful howl of protest to be for life attended by the curse of the soul's most purgatorial torments?

Braced by the wind and the cold, I looked up at the embankment on my right, upon the clock, the streets and the buildings where lights shone in ways that were bright and clear and familiar, and then turned my gaze out to the sea on my left, where all I had to guide me through the clotted darkness were a raw imagination and audacity and abandon. Flipping the pages of my notebook over and over with my thumb, I looked back and forth, right and left, back and forth again. I had it in mind to throw that flimsy spiral-backed note-book into the air and whichever side of the parapet it fell, that way I would go. But I thought of Mother then; I heard her voice behind the songs she had sung and the stories she had told; I remembered what I

knew of Zaida Natanyahu and Zaida Lezer and of Bubas Guta and Malke Sheine; I recalled with a tremor that which my teacher Jacob Kuznitz had said; I beheld an image of bones carried on the shoulders of Moses and then of myriads more, all coming alive with restored recovered flesh; and at the same time felt a closing in upon me of what clearly was the nocturnal cold, but which in that instant seemed more like a crush of souls, of *dybbuks*, piercing, entering, reaching into me, rushing in through my every pore to possess whatever part of me I might be prepared to give.

And in that moment, swivelling swiftly on the parapet and alive with the ineluctable inescapable legacy and destiny I had imbibed and was at once both blessed and cursed never to shed, I leapt. My feet sank into the sand. Before me, over and beyond the waters, stretched that vast and vacant dark expanse towards which I began to walk.

Above, the stars glinted faintly in the mist-laden darkness predicting, promising nothing. Down below — in that chill, offering up his own soul for the final peace of others — another story teller was born.

Praised be Moloch, Blessed be The Seraphim

1.

Was the time yet ripe for reckoning? Was it yet meet, now that, seated in the airline coach heading home towards the city terminal, I was again traversing familiar terrain with its wide roads, green embankments, scattered houses and storage sheds recessed at slight remove from the freeway? Could I yet make sense of all the Harveys of the world, or the Lucilles, or Josephines, Irvings, or Justines — could I? — all of them fired by such aberrations in their metabolism, as Adam called it, that the motions of tadpoles in swamps could be deemed orderly by comparison? And what of my own chemistry that had so boiled at times, so simmered at others, bubbling, bubbling, bubbling over in the reaching for. . . was it status? was it honour? the foiling of anonymity?. . . dared I say it? — fame?

And what reaching!. . . Ah, vanity!. . . What reaching; such reaching leading me, as if inevitably, to New York, both driven there and drawn, an iron-filing obedient to the stubborn laws of magnetism that shamed all notions of freedom and mocked all convictions that a man's hands and body and thoughts were the agents solely and wholly of his own untrammelled will. I may have wavered — indeed, did waver — teetering at the point where like and unlike polar forces balanced out each other, however finely, where I may still have elected to stay at home. But Adam's letter settled it all. Adam's letter was the added

charge that gave spur to action. For now I had a place to stay, and a companion, and a guide — a chaperon, as it were, who, in that Big Apple, Big A, would steer me towards that grand Eden that was home to recognition, acceptance and literary fame.

So, in accelerated, exhilarated haste, through night-hours pilfered from sleep, I completed my last assignment — an in-depth four-part analysis of poverty, unemployment and vagrancy in Melbourne's inner suburbs for *The Age* — left the headache of printable perfection to stubbled myopic "Blue Pencil" Jurgens, bought my ticket to New York; bought, too, the *Michelin* guide to that *New Colossus*, secured a list of literary agents the length of Madison Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street, packed six copies of my *In Search, the Salvation* among my shirts, and, having rung around town to farewell assorted friends, ascended on a Sunday morning into the grey cumulus clouds of Melbourne's April Autumn to descend twenty-four hours later, with the calendar date unchanged, through the smog-invested sun-tinted cirrus formations of Los Angeles' temperate Spring.

Here I lingered three days, concession to the long-jawed dismay of a native Californian, a huge, signet-ringed entrepreneur from Pasadena who had boarded the flight in Tahiti, promptly announced "The name is Brett C.Halliday, Sonny, what is yours and what is your destination?", and who, when I told him, boomed with mock-shocked incredulity, "You mean you are flyin' all o' them there thousands of miles to our mighty Americas and whiskin' across the West Coast like it weren't there, it bein' in truth a mighty repository of action and nerve and hills the envy of Grand Olympus an' bein' too a mos' glorious pantheon of movie gods and goddesses to turn your Zeus and Aphrodite of yesteryear a bilious green? O Lordie, for this, John Steinbeck, for this, King Kerouac, for this, Jimmie Dean, you spilled out your very innards? At least, see Disneyland, Sonny, or Universal! Pay homage to the golden past and the goldener future, and learn to smile, an' to breathe like your shoulders they were free, an' to reach, an' grasp, an' fulfil your every dream!"

And I did pay homage to that past and to that future, unable,

in Disneyland, to do ought *but* smile, *but* breathe freely as I visited singing bears and antediluvian creatures, as I rode on Caribbean waters and walked through haunted mansions, the while reaching — if not for dreams, then for the forgetfulness of the real — as winsome guides lavishing breezy spearminted all-American courtesy led me with a consort of polyglot, poly-chromatic, polyclad others, through quaint, multicoloured, miniature villages, squares, plazas and walkways with a bubbly confidence and prodigious optimism that ignored — or denied — under the Frontierland, Fantasyland and Tomorrowland sun, those realities of circumscribed time and place, the squalor, park-benches, the commission-flats and the tenth-storey desperation I had but recently, back in Melbourne, explored.

And if, on leaving Disneyland, it was its happy buoyancy that made its clearest impact upon me, at Universal Studios, it was the awesome thrust of technology that struck me most; technology which, still in its diapered infancy back home, could here so ingeniously dispense illusion, fantasy and thrall in a cinematic sweep that spanned millennia of history from primeval Creation through present-day apocalypses to intergalactic wars centuries beyond contemporary man's allotted time. My response may have been hyperbolic, true — but as I flew on to New York across the breadth of that craggy, canyoned, sierraed, prairied and savannahed leviathan that was America three days behind schedule, an importuning notion burgeoned to the surface and gathered form, rapping at my awareness until, with the ecstasy of climax, I sealed it with indelible ball-point in my travel-notes, and therefore permanently: "If it is unthinkable, America shall think it; if it is improbable, America shall solve it; if it is impossible, yet shall America achieve it." And in the words of that folksy hail-fellow-well-met Californian, now probably creating stage and movie stars out of hopefuls back home in Pasadena, my shoulders were free and my hands prepared to reach, to grasp, and to possess whatever there was of experience that New York — New York! — in its mooted bountifulness had to offer.

2.

I had cabled Adam from Los Angeles, detailing my change of flight, but, on alighting at New York's John F.Kennedy Airport and making my way through its long white-bright illuminated tunnels to the arrival hall, Adam was nowhere in sight. Japanese, Mexicans, Polynesians, Germans and Scandinavians there were in plenty, and Southerners, mid-Westerners, Texans and Bostonians as well, but the sole Australian upon whom I depended wholly appeared to have defaulted. No message awaited me on the letter-rack nor could the uniformed clerk at the Information Counter, for all her large-eyed broad-mouthed affability, offer particular assistance, except to suggest that there had been rolling strikes and go-slows among the country's services and "your message, sir, might be a-hibernatin' or growin' hairs someplace between one gran' sea-board an' th'other."

I telephoned Adam's apartment, then the hospital where he worked, but, not yet initiated into American improvisations of Alexander Bell's contribution to ease of communication nor into its coinage jargon of quarters, dimes, nickels and cents, I suffered the line to expire three separate times before, daunted and short of silver, I retreated, and turned, to find myself confronted by the plaintive pixie-chinned face of an underfed Puerto Rican who pointed at my case and travel-bags and urged, "Take you anywheres, sir, taxi's a-waitin' at your service — Manhattan, Brooklyn, Long Island, Bronx — and direct, sir, and cheap, and on the level. . ."

"Direct" included a concluding unsolicited tour through the crowd-congested maze of downtown Manhattan with the meter ticking, ticking, ticking over, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five dollars; "cheap" was the final outlay of forty dollars, gratuity not to be denied the now-livewire driver who carried my case into the foyer of Adam's apartment-block as if favours were free; while "on the level" was, as Adam later put it, "an easy buck ripped off the hide of an Antipodean sucker".

It was the janitor who shambled to the security door when I

pressed the buzzer to Adam's apartment. A latter-day Methuselah, perhaps handsome a happy half-century before, he was now bald, bowed and bossed where bone or edge or knuckle could be bossed, and dressed, despite the twenty-six degree warmth, in two shabby hand-knitted sweaters, a frayed lumberjacket — too massive now and too loose — and grease-stained corduroys held at the waist by cords of twisted twine.

"Huh," he said huskily when I identified myself. "The vagabond hi'self that the Doc upstairs's been waitin' for these three'em days. He said you mighta be a-comin' an' I set to thinkin' already that mebbe New York was so small a mite on the map you mighta never a-find it or you mighta blinked on your way over it."

He paused, then turned.

"Well, now that you're here, all said an' done," he said, "let's be ringin' for th'Doc in th'hospital an' tell him his buddy he's a-found his way to hell after all."

Adam arrived an hour later, lumbering up to the entrance where, returned from a circuit of the local neighbourhood streets, I waited for him, Adam, a veritable bear with a rich black Einsteinian mane, clapping my shoulder for having facilitated his deliverance from an "interminably-flatulent seminar on neuro-transmitters in the pathogenesis of schizoid disorders" or, as he put it, "what makes the banana split?", his own contribution having been a paper entitled *Behavioural changes in rats following the administration of lysergic acid diethylamide* — "LSD to the uninitiated," he added.

On entering Adam's eighth-floor apartment, Adam said, "Thought you'd never come, mate; thought you'd probably run off with some fleshy dark-haired Tahitian dream-dispensing maiden and done a Gauguin."

Once within, I yielded to his massive arm about my shoulders.

"New York, man," he said, "New York's not quite like home base, *amigo*. Melbourne, St.Kilda, Carlton, those old terrific haunts of ours. . . How I remember them still! Their aura, their taste, their smells, those odd-balls we used to know, the

girls... But, man, New York! New York! God, how I love it here! I love it! I love it! For a writer like yourself... the material! And what a massive magnificent laboratory for the scientist! Man!... Man!..."

He then released his grasp and became at once more practical.

"Now, Jules, m'boy, if you shower off the dust of travel, get yourself a nap and change, you'll spend your first Big A evening in the company of real unadulterated authenticated genu-*ine* New Yorkers!"

I showered, napped and changed, grateful for the respite from travel; then with Adam ate a light dinner in a local smoky Third Avenue restaurant and, come eight, set off uptown along Madison Avenue which Adam called "the showcase of the eastern board" with its banks and art galleries, antique-shops and boutiques, and turned into Sixty-Seventh Street to enter a sandstone town-house with iron-lace balconies on which white flowers and pot-plants were faintly illuminated by light issuing from within.

3.

Were I now — returning to the city terminal in the airline coach — to seek reasons for my quicksilver tumbling for Josephine on that, my first, evening in New York, I had to ascribe it in goodly part to a scrambling of my chemistry. There were no two ways about it. That was certainly how Adam would have put it. The Boccherini she played on her cello was tantalising enough in its tremolos and cadenzas, stirring chill and goosepimples down the length of my spine; but more basically still, if asked, I should have had to say that I simply liked the look of her — so poised, so alluring in red, with lush black hair, puckered lips and a finely-curving nose that recalled a Venus or Aphrodite or some other Grecian goddess; though, if truth were to be honoured, I should have had to give equal due to an excess of Scotch, to the surfeit of new spirited highly mobile faces, to the high-flying conversations, the poetry read,

and the art contained within that plushly-resplendent velveted town-house to which, through Adam, through his American uncle Ziggie Levick, I had been invited to one of his regular *soirees*.

And yet, were even these explanations sufficient? As a visitor from Australia, that vestigial appendage at the nether rump of the world, I could well have sat out the evening as a mere onlooker under canvasses of Miro and Kandinsky, or moved from Mexican ceramics to Nigerian masks, or studied Peruvian tapestries and Japanese woodcuts, or simply disappeared, a faceless face in Riesman's faceless crowd, in that luxurious merry nest of mahogany and velvet and silk and faultless chrome.

But Adam, first, then Ziggie Levick, gracious host, collector, photography-buff, raconteur, dilettante sculptor, amateur flautist, patron of the arts and antique-dealer, sleek and suave in immaculate beige, presented me as a brilliant budding author from "Melborrne Ohstralia come". Like flies to honey, they approached me then, those other faces in the crowd, offered me savouries, nuts and more wine, and opened all manner of conversation with me — Harvey Farber, Justine Ledoux, Madame Zara, Bertram Braun, Mick and Elaine Persip — a pick of poets, psychologists, cartoonists, astrologers, actors and clairvoyants, each in turn asking, offering, in a vigorous procession:

"How long are you honouring these venerated shores for?. . ."

"Tell you my life story an' you'll have a rip-roarin' best-seller on your hands. . ."

"Say, have yous folks in yer own home town heard of the Maharishi an' macrobiotics an' bioenergetic analysis?. . ."

"You're a Scorpio? You don't say! What a propitious, most wonderful time for you to have shown. . ."

"Me, I'm into Gestalt, into awareness. . . Theo here, he's strictly Freudian, incorrigibly, stubbornly paleolithic, man. . ."

"You'll love our show in the Village. . . French *avant-garde*. . . Even beyond Artaud. . ."

"Here's the name of my agent, m'boy. . . Phone him about

your book tomorrow. Tell him Harvey sent you. He's a good man, Laurie P. Hoffnung. Published fifteen of my books. And not afraid to lend a hand to rising stars. . ."

"Stay clear of Harvey, Jules. Beware the man who brings his wife to a party, but clings throughout the evening to his mistress. A man like that can kill if it suits him. His own mother wouldn't be safe. . ."

"Our very own Nostradamus and Cassandra rolled into one. Don't mind Irving. Once, it was the humblest scribe who rose to be prophet. Today, it's the professor of sociology."

It was Josephine who had spoken, come nearer to Irving and myself with a bacardi in her hand.

"Laugh, Josephine, dulcet nymph of the forest," Irving returned, "but pray that your laughter doesn't sour into bitters."

He turned away then, suddenly dark with temper as he looked first at Harvey and Justine talking in a group near the bar, then at Lucille, who, thin and morose and dressed in black, stood alone in a corner.

"Lucille loves Harvey, Harvey loves Justine, Justine loves Harvey, and Irving, in a dearly paternal way, cares for Lucille. But Harvey and Lucille are man and wife; Justine is divorced; and Irving, poor Irving, suffering Irving, is still in mourning for his own dear, beloved, departed wife. Do you want me to say that again?"

The red silk blouse Josephine wore set off her earlier intensity and, away from the cello, she was freer, sprightlier, certainly gayer. Fine royal-blue veins lined her hands and a mole sprouted hairs above her wrist.

"A clue to my nature," she said then, catching my gaze. "Dark, cool and prickly."

She was, as it proved, none of these, but her remark did serve as good a gambit to conversation as any.

By evening's unwinding, I felt I had her measure. I knew the population of her hometown Utica in Upstate New York, I had established that her father was a construction engineer and her mother a librarian, while she herself played cello with the New

York Philharmonic Orchestra. She owned, also, to an incorrigible craving for cherry nougat, had soft spots for Ray Charles and Dave Brubeck, baulked before the wordiness of the nineteenth-Century Russians, and confessed to a half-baked notion to enter a commune, "the modern-day alternative to a nunnery", where, surrounded by gardens and orchards, she would just play, play, play, and make music to her heart's fullest delight.

"But there's no risk of that," she aded, momentarily mock-regretful. "I'm really too ordinary, too apple-pie for such eccentricities. Besides, my full name if it must be told is Josephine Hay Fever Lewisohn. I sneeze ten miles from the nearest blade of wildgrass."

For my part, I told her what there was to tell about Melbourne, about my book, my journalistic pieces, about Los Angeles fantasy-broking, the Kennedy Airport ecumenism, and of my impressions, however raw, of Madison Avenue cornucopia. And in the telling, I was glad, I was delighted, I was impatient to tell.

"You must give me your book to read," she had also said, "you must, unless of course, it's top-heavy Tolstoyan."

That registered deeply within me, but more resonating still and accompanying me like a refrain on my return from the soiree with Adam was Josephine's invitation to the rehearsal at the Avery Fisher Hall the next morning where she would be among the cellos with Zubin Mehta conducting and Barenboim at the piano performing Beethoven's *Emperor.*

"Of course, you may have better things to do," she said with an affecting coquettish raising of an eyebrow, "Lord knows, you have only just arrived. But. . ."

I caught that "But", a solitary word suspended like an orphaned feather floating in mid-air, and eagerly, perhaps too eagerly, declared, "I'll be there", aware, even then, that not they, those two solar and lunar luminaries Mehta and Barenboim, were exerting the greater magnetism, but rather the single humbler gentler star that would be found, shining with her own radiance, among the cellos.

"A colourful lot, those folk, certainly an accomplished crowd," I felt compelled to say to Adam on walking back.

"Yes," Adam had answered. He smiled, though it was an almost ironic smile that I caught. "But what colours would you say, mate? What shades of colours?"

"Oh?"

"Jules. You don't know it. Having but today arrived, how can you know it? But each one there, man, is in search of some private redemption. Like all New Yorkers. Some through analysis, others through Gestalt, deep breathing and primal therapy, or through psychodrama, astrology, infatuation with youth, and through yoga, pop art, Zen, health food and drugs... New York is full of it... You only have to name it... What you call colourful, man, dear Jules, dear babe in the wood, what you call colourful is in reality fumbling, insecurity, groping, experiment, seeking, srraining, striving... It is also agonising, however it may seem outwardly. And if so soon after your arrival, I may take it upon myself to warn you, then remember one thing, Jules, even if you remember nothing else... Whatever your temptations, you are in this megapolis as a visitor, as a writer, as an observer. Don't become involved. With anyone, Jules. In anything. Anywhere. Right? Is the message clear? *C'est compri*?"

4.

I did not attend the Mehta-Barenboim rehearsal the next day. Not so much in deference to Adam's unsolicited counsel; less still, far less on account of my horoscope which I read with wry and leisurely amusement over breakfast and which cautioned me, as a Scorpio, "to rationalise and analyse situations rather than act on impulse", contrary to Madame Zara who, rouged, mascaraed, beringed and besotted, had urged me to seize at opportunity; but simply because at the hour of the rehearsal, directly cross-town from the Avery Fisher Hall, in East Sixty-Fifth Street, I was sitting opposite Laurence P. Hoffnung with briefcase in my lap, my *In Search, the Salvation* on the desk

between us, and Hoffnung himself, large, balding and double-chinned above a skewed broad polka-dot tie, cleaning his nails with the point of a letter-opener.

"So, Harvey Farber sent you," he said, looking up with almost bemused scrutiny from beneath thick daunting eyebrows. "Everyone's friend is Harvey, all heart. Every writer, every novice, every hack he tells, 'Go, see Laurence P. Now he'll pull something out of the hat for you.' And you, dear friend, you too have a book to sell, hm, something to offer America that America cannot produce itself, hm? Is that it?"

I edged the book closer to him.

"The stories here are. . .," I began; but Hoffnung, leaning back and crossing a massive leg over a massive thigh, did not permit me to finish.

"The stories, the book, I'm sure they're good. Else why bother at all to bring them to these shores? But friend, friend, have you yet visited our bookstores here — Scribner's, say, or Doubleday, or Dalton's, Barnes and Noble? Do! And then ask, where do you fit in? On which shelf? Which section — *Literature* or *Fiction, A to Zee*?"

The distinction had me momentarily, but only momentarily, perplexed.

"Fiction," I said. "No, literature."

Hoffnung offered me a cigar, which I declined, took one himself, and smiled; smiled, I could see, with the smile of a guardian of Hades.

"Yes," he said, pausing to light his cigar. "Yes. . . Literature with a mighty big capital 'L'."

He paused again, this time to draw still more deeply on his cigar while he looked me over.

"You're an ambitious young man, aren't you, and hankering after immortality what's more, and come to this modern Athens, Alexandria, Rome, Golgotha to find it. For, where else if not in New York in our day and in our age can a man most surely find it?. . . But, man, but friend, are you prepared to defy the maelstrom out there? That mass? Fly in the face of the fickleness out there, hm? For what the public wants, even here,

worthy friend, even here in this greatest most erudite most spectacular advanced articulate sophisticated sublimest of nations is sensationalism, the quickie, the living-by-proxy, the self-help manual, the throwaway. The most literate here has no time to think, he has no inclination to feel what others — what you, let us say — may feel. He is slave to his own sensations and needs; his is the wish for diversion and for escape from himself, which, to make it *kosher*, he calls self-discovery, through pap novels, encounter groups, mysticism, pop Hasidism, Op art, just name a few. . . And this is where Harvey comes in. He gives it all to them. He's got thirteen, fourteen, fifteen titles out there — *How to Control Depression through Zen, Sensitivity Training in the Kitchen, A Beginner's Guide to ESP, The Daughters of the Virgin, Love in Marriage,* a most lovely title, don't you think, and surely a *piece de resistance* in the light of his own. . . — how shall we say it? — of his own marital *contretemps*, perhaps? And in their way, they are all trash, *mon ami*, every goddamned word — though I trust you not to breathe a word of this to him. But if you've got suckers in the *suk*, in the market-place out there, then you must give them something to suck at, no? And Harvey, everyone's friend, everyone's sustainer, he knows what to give. He has a surefire instinct for it. So he gives. And of course — why deny facts? — on the strength of his succession of *chefs d'oeuvre*, we can both bask in the Bahamas at least three months of every year and. . ."

I must have winced, or betrayed a flitting gesture of disgust, or given him cause for pause, for he did pause, long enough to draw again on his cigar, the tip of which glowed like a cinder, and to exhale slowly a billow of smoke with renewed studied scrutiny.

"Ah, but you are an Antipodean innocent, I see, a purist, and I see too that I sorely offend your sensibilities. I ought to have known. *Mea culpa*! Because, for you — how I should have seen it! — for you, higher than anything rises the pedestal of art, of authenticity, integrity. It is these you worship! It is before these that you bend the knee. Or, even though you speak of literature in capitals, is it nonetheless something else as well? — The wish

for recognition, perhaps, the need for a name? Redemption through fame as our own good noble embattled New Yorkers seek it through God or godlessness, catharsis or marihuana, in Jews for Jesus or Hare Krishna, in baseball and astrology, in street-marches or in desperate daredevilry. Oh, man, man, man! New York, Jules, America, is too big for a book such as this and perhaps, perhaps — I dare say it even though I have not read it — not even worthy of it. Permit me, as a friend who would dearly wish you well, to tender the most well-meant advice. Listen. Stay in this city a week, two, three even, visit the Museum, the Met, the Rockefeller Center, Broadway, Liberty Island, Carnegie Hall, Central Park, even find yourself a girl to rub your back or whatever, and then go home. Be a big fish in your own home pond. For here you will be a mere snowflake; here, before you begin even to touch anyone, you will disappear."

I left Hoffnung with little warmth of charity towards the man, even though, against expectation, he, as agent, had finally taken the book, leafed through it nonchalantly, studied isolated passages, and said, "Well, let me read it at least, and if I can help. . ." Ailing to be outside, I was caught off-guard by Hoffnung's acceptance of the volume for perusal, and it was only when I stepped through the broad swivel door into the glinting morning sunlight that touched window, touched pavement, and touched car and awning in an assault of glare, that I sensed, acutely, resentfully, and not without ears burning, that the agent, the large, gross, corpulent Laurence P. Hoffnung had made easy sport of me.

But done was done, and if cursing was to cure rancour, I knew that such curses were most justly to be turned not upon Hoffnung, nor even on Harvey Farber, everyone's friend, but on myself, myself, myself alone.

5.

If my self-esteem had been rocked a little by my encounter with Hoffnung, it did regain a measure of poise as, heading, late as it

was, towards the Avery Fisher Hall, I anticipated meeting with Josephine once more. I might have had to eat humble pie for missing the rehearsal in breach of promise made, but a well-planned jest would, I held, surely offset all reproach. It was companionship I sought, another's ear and another's voice, these being a proven antidote to past disappointments and frequent enough dejections. Adam was at the hospital, Thursdays being particularly duty-laden; so I could scarcely have gone to him. But Josephine, if she was as open and reasonable as she seemed to be, would surely forgive, if indeed, such dishonour of a promise as casual as mine were anything to forgive. Besides, might she yet offer more of herself? All of herself?, as already in my nocturnal fantasies after our encounter she had wholly done, and done with what exquisiteness of submission. The resurgent image of her coquettish air, her pelvis, her thighs and crotch were tantalising enough, but the possibility of abandonment to the actuality of it all. . . Ah, the profligacy of it!. . . The consummation!. . . The ecstasy of conquest!. . . Lordie! Lordie! Dared I fly so high? And expect? Hope? As Hoffnung had said, hope to have her rub my back or whatever?. . .

Josephine did, of course, forgive, adding — with the faintest playful mockery, and, I sensed, a hint of bitterness, that she had known sinners far greater than I.

"One such misfeasant, a veritable idol while things lasted, became *bete noire*," she said. "But we really ought to leave skeletons in their cupboards, don't you agree?"

I dared to let myself believe that she was even glad to see me, first as she emerged at the tail-end of a group of musicians from the auditorium, then as we ate pastrami on rye at a deli near Columbus Circle. Again dressed in red — this time in a black-bordered dress as opposed to the ruffle-yoked blouse of the evening before — and sporting a broad crimson band around her hair, her youthfulness was all the more enhanced, although I did see the beginnings of a future angularity in her cheeks and chin.

"Just as well you didn't come to rehearsal," she said, sipping at her coffee from which hot steam was rising, then licking her

lips, "you would have heard only blunder after blunder from me. Poor Zubin, I must be the greatest bane and despair of his precious life. But what he doesn't know is that I am saving perfection for the main event, so that he'll be able to say, 'Move over, Casals, Rostropovitch, Jacqueline du Pre. Josephine Lewisohn Stradivari is here.'"

In turn, I told her of my meeting with Hoffnung, glad to unburden myself of him.

"That's Laurie P. all right," Josephine said. "People say he has a fish-tank of eels in his home. He likes to spend hours watching them wriggle and writhe. But against Harvey Farber's Mr Hyde, Laurie P. is still only a most benign Mr Jeckyll. That's what Irving calls them. Jeckyll and Hyde. You do remember Irving, don't you? Bereaved, bereft, beleaguered Irving. . ."

"And Harvey, he's so bad?"

"Harvey? Ha! I bantered Irving last night, you will also recall. Called him Nostradamus, called him Cassandra. But he really does know what's what. And as he would say, 'Beware the man who comes up too quickly in the world.' Harvey's that man. He's certainly been good news for Laurie P., has Harvey, but more than Harvey has made Laurie P., Laurie P. has made Harvey. Imagine a dish-washing street-corner SoHo poet turned into a near-millionaire simply by touching people where they are most vulnerable — in their image of themselves, their self-perceptions of inadequacy, in their drive to find 'wholeness', 'success', 'acceptance', 'self-love', 'assertiveness' — all of which are offered by our very Harv where they fail to get them from their own private analysts. So he can now trim his once-straggly mane to M.G.M. respectability; his suits, earlier bought at some Lower East Side stall for a song, he can now order custom-made from Charivari's; his shoes are the finest from Gucci's; and never mind his Jaguar and Porsche and his retreats in the Catskills and the Bahamas. While against all this. . . Over and against all this stands Lucille. . . Poor Lucille. . ."

"Oh?"

"A *magna cum laude* in English from N.Y.U., rising rungs above the very best of Harvey's other itsy-bitsy frizzle-frazzles. They have no children. Her family's in Illinois. She dresses in nothing but black, and remains stiff-neckedly unwilling, and unable, to let go of him against every effort by all of us — myself, Ziggie, the Persips, others — by all of us to have her leave. While Irving, however deep he may be in his own grieving, would take her in a blinking... would take her for the asking..."

Whatever shadows of seriousness had weighed upon her now lifted into a finer sunniness, in which she tossed her head, smiled, rose, and straightened her dress.

"Whatever must you think of me?" she said. "You've come half the world to see Paradise and all I offer is cattiness and a descent into other people's hell... But, you are a writer, so maybe I can be excused. For, surely, surely, there is a story in all this, is there not? Or are all these folks' agonisings and perplexities and tide-tossed lives to no purpose at all in fact, that not even a writer can serve as witness and interpreter and giver of meaning to what is otherwise seemingly meaningless mayhem?..."

She flicked a wrist, the better to dispel the clouds making ready to descend again.

"But now, if you will forgive me, I must run. More sonorities to punish from my hallowed *violoncello molto resonanto e exquisito*. So, tell me, will I see you after the concert tonight? Yes?... Fine!... And, oh, by the way, I do still want to read your book."

I walked her back, bought two tickets for the concert, trusting that Adam, too, would come, and left Josephine at the auditorium door, turning once to see her wave with the faintest flicker of her finger-tips as she walked away.

6.

What had been behind Josephine's apparent interest and free-speaking attention invested in me? I found myself thinking as I

made my way in the direction of Fifth Avenue. A passing flirtation? Conquest over me, such as in delectable moments I fancied having over her? Something more earnest, more substantial, all practical differences — geographic, cultural, historical — notwithstanding? And how far could I go with her? What would she permit? What would I permit myself? And ought I to flout Adam's caution against involvement? And what was I to make of her allusion to skeletons in the cupboard? — If, on the previous evening, I felt that I had her measure, after this parting at the Avery Fisher Hall, I was no longer so sure; and, recalling my earlier encounter with Hoffnung, it was not on solid asphalt pavement that I walked at all, but rather on eggshells, on sand, on jelly, or sponge.

For solidity, I turned my face instead towards the skyscraper behemoth of concrete, steel, aluminium and glass, my gaze leaping high between the summits of the Rockefeller Center, the Chrysler Building and the Empire State. I remembered their peaks projecting in sun-repelling iridescence through the clouds as I descended upon the city on the previous day, and what seemed then like plunging canyons below were now crisscrossed ravines cordoned by soaring towers that vaulted mightily into the shimmering blue of early afternoon. There was comfort to be had in the sturdiness of the facades, and not in their sturdiness alone but in their very durability, their testimony to continuity — even eternity — their pillars and porticos, their cornices and friezes, their gargoyles and spires being the legacy of centuries that had witnessed and preserved or revived the Greek, the Tudor and the Gothic along with the colonial, Renaissance and the modern. And they were invested with Promethean force, united with might and ingenuity, which, unbound, bore witness to the power of men — or rather the accumulated power of countless men — against the hard, impassive and uncompromising challenge of nature. And here lay the miracle, if miracle were not too hyperbolic a term. Of the two — of nature and men — it was cold, stolid, obdurate nature that had proved the weaker, and man, *men* — albeit at what sacrifice of health, sanity and spirit, I thought, simul-

taneously calling to mind an image of Saturn devouring his children — who ultimately proved the mightier to be able to subdue that nature.

If I sought further evidence of human power, of human energy, of verve perhaps, it was in the streets and in the stores, in the thrust I saw around me as, in streams, in torrents, people, people, *people* — white, brown, negroid; pensive, questioning, garrulous; leisurely, exploring, pursued; and infinitely more besides — cascaded along the sidewalks, dashed on and off the buses and bustled in and out of stores where displays replete with haberdashery, jewellery and electrical goods, and with pianos, antiques and pyramids of books, sucked me in with a swirling sense of *deja vu* which made me pause every dozen paces and which, were I to find a ready ear, would have surely led me with unimpeachable conviction to declare, "I belong, I belong, I belong!"

That headiness accompanied me through the afternoon, heightened to still more exquisite fragrances by the stirrings of coffee and pastrami from the delis, by the clatter, shuffle and hum of passing traffic, by the twang and strum of sidewalk buskers, and by the unwearying cries of doomsday prophets, bagel-vendors and trinket-sellers. There had been more, many more — shop-guards, flower-sellers, mimes, a pasty lip-smacking fellow in conversation with himself, a doughy woman begging quarters for a spastic daughter, and, among others, a friz-headed child who kept yelling at passing motorists, "Hey, mister, yer' back wheels's goin' forward!", and, with the fullness of it, I was impatient to open all my exhilaration and thrall before Adam who, himself a visitor, would surely understand.

I was not prepared, however, for the gravity I encountered instead upon returning to the apartment, with Lucille — Lucille, dressed in her customary black — sitting on the couch before the darkening window, and Adam, large, stooping and biting a lip, facing her, Lucille, caught off guard, swiftly turning away and wiping at a cheek from which the moisture of tears, however, was far from wholly nullified.

Tact directed me to the small kitchen where, with no little noise aimed to secure them in the knowledge of their privacy, I cut bread, set the kettle on the stove and placed a spoon of coffee into a cup. Nonetheless, I heard Adam say, "You try to get some rest at least, Luce, I'll do what I can", and, shortly after, caught a glimpse of Lucille as she flitted past the kitchen door in hurried departure.

Adam then joined me in the kitchen. He rubbed at an earlobe as he had been wont to do back home when troubled, and heaved deep breath.

"God, what *can* I do?" he said. "What can *anyone* do? Accursed chemistry! Harvey's walked out on her. . . Took her home last night, then promptly went off with Justine. Made no bones about it. And her analyst, just at this time, is at some confounded conference in Rochester. And *incommunicado*. . . So she called me. . . Not enough that she's under treatment for anorexia nervosa about which — would you believe? — Harvey's writing a book, but she also has to contend with a collapsing. . . with a collapsed marriage as well. . ."

Adam took the coffee I had poured for him in tandem with mine, went to the living-room, and called me after him.

"Look out there, Jules!" he said, pointing through the window. "Just look. Skyscrapers. Goliaths. Facade upon facade of lights, brilliance, magnificence that still make me hold my breath. We, *homo sapiens*, possess the might of Samsons, Hercules and Atlases all in one to create all these, yet mere molecules, the minutest atoms within us hold us hostage, turn our heads, fire our glands, breed fantasies and feed illusions that, even when seeking to create, nonetheless destroy, destroy, destroy. . ."

"You mean Harvey?" I said.

"I mean everybody. And Harvey, too. Yes, even Harvey. A man with a score of books to his name. But, in his own life, childless, wanting through Justine, where Lucille has not been able to deliver, to create a living posterity otherwise denied to him. Someone to whom to hand down his wealth, his being, however high the price and however much a rogue it makes

him seem. It's all so strictly, so ineluctably biological. I might deplore his morals and what he is doing to Lucille, but the impulse behind his actions... The impulse, man... It is nothing less, nothing other than that which, from the first Australopithecus, has kept humanity going on earth, not to mention all the myriad other species stalking about its crust..."

Adam paused. He then clapped me on the shoulder.

"But that's enough *angst* for a day," he said. "What have you got to say for yourself? Any generous takers for your book?"

"Mixed blessings," I said. "Hoffnung agreed to look at it, and Josephine actually asked to read it. Oh, and which, by the way, reminds me... I have tickets for tonight's concert... Dvorak, Beethoven and Brahms... *Carnival*, the *Emperor*, Brahms' Fourth..."

I caught Adam's studied scrutiny.

"Because of Josephine?" he asked.

"*And* Zubin Mehta, and Barenboim...," I said.

To which he added, "*And* Grandma Moses, I daresay, and because the moon is blue and the winds blow hot, hm?..."

He smiled with a raising of an eyebrow and shook his head.

"Tsk, tsk," he added, "you've already forgotten what I told you," then took deep breath and downed his coffee.

7.

Even now, half-way to the terminal, I could not but wonder whether the events that followed might not possibly have taken a different turn. Or, given their natures — Josephine, Harvey, Justine, Irving, Lucille; given that their needs, ambitions and responses conformed, as Adam was wont to say, to the unique configurations and motions of their molecules and, hence, their relationships, at the most reductionist, to the interactions of their separate chemistries — might not then their fates already long before have been inscribed and sealed, there being none — neither in heaven above nor on earth at their feet, nor in Hades below — to thwart the outcome?

Or — to look for other explanation: the fault was not in our stars, but in ourselves. So had said the Stratford bard. And that it was not in the stars, that had ever been easy to accept. But did it *ipso facto* follow that the fault was therefore *wholly* in ourselves, *homo sapiens* driven by the workings of the reason and the conscious will for which each man had therefore to be held accountable, or, conversely, through acts issuing from unreason and wilfulness which were the warp and weft of aberration? In the circumstances, how much was to be credited to the predetermined, how much to choice, and how much to simple ineluctable chance or mayhem in that seething biological crucible that, on this earth, took on the human form?

We went to the concert, Adam and I, and, watching Josephine through the Dvorak, Beethoven and Brahms, and sitting with her afterwards in the Cafe Pierre where a spindle-fingered guitarist spanned the gamut from Spanish classical to modern jazz, in his way matching the buoyancy and jauntiness of our talk, I felt myself yield to a score of badgering fantasies, less sensually hedonistic now than tranquilly sober and adolescently clean, but none the less desperate or intense for being impossible, or at best ephemeral, in their attaining. If, on the previous evening, flushed by Chateaubriand and novelty and heady talk, the attachment had been tentative and pre-eminently physical, I could scarce deny the altered nature of it now — I had tumbled for her, and with that tumbling, my hands acquired a cursed and tingling tremulousness, I spilled my coffee, overturned a pepper-shaker, and dropped a serviette, leading Adam to say with unmistakable badinage, "Them that fumbles must ought by Eros or by Thanatos be smitten."

We had risen to leave, a copy of my book now in Josephine's possession, myself standing aside to let her pass and Adam settling the check, when Harvey and Justine entered. Justine, undeniably beautiful and, in the jargon of the Romantics, most statuesque, stepped back as if caught out at some misdemeanour and looked away, but Harvey, unruffled by the encounter, was master complete.

"Ah, our illustrious trio," he said jovially, holding out to us

his hands. "The cellist, the author, the doctor. What talent and accomplishment between them! Such self-realised folk!"

He patted Josephine's cheek and beamed. In an unwonted leaping of resentment, I caught sight of unmistakable creases in Harvey's skin and streaks of mercury-white in the wings of hair above his ears. If he still retained his sleekness, it was, I sensed, at the price of a struggle; for Harvey was surely nearing fifty, perhaps even fifty-five, and were he to yield even a little to laxity of discipline, he might have turned dramatically to flab and paunch and jowl. And herein lay a paradox. Harvey might have sought to preserve the appearance of youth, but against stately, long-limbed, supple Justine, an observer's awareness of his age could only be not less, but more keenly sharpened.

It was Josephine who answered, returning banter for banter.

"Ah, but Harvey," she said, letting her scrutiny play the more friskily over Justine who smiled graciously if also warily. "Is not the truth quite the reverse? For has not the very embodiment of accomplishment himself just entered these honoured precincts?"

She curtsied, mock-courtier-style, before the pair. Harvey laughed, bracing an arm about Justine. The signet-ring he wore reflected a swift and tremulous glitter.

"What *can* she mean?" he said. "My books, my success, or — woman being woman, and Josephine, young, pretty, talented, but a woman just the same — perhaps she means you, Justine, my darling sapphire, my innocent seraph? Ah, beware, beware the woman spurned!"

His mouth danced in private mirth, the folds beside his eyes flickeringly mobile, while Josephine, as if touched on a raw spot, glanced swiftly at him. He, in turn, had noticed, but played at innocent dissembling.

"You are wondering, I daresay, about Lucille, are you not, my Miss Du Pre, my venerable Casals?" he went on.

Justine laid a hand on his arm as though to stay him. Adam, having paid the cashier, joined us. I sensed an unamused stiffness in him, quite unlike the more buoyant *laissez-faire* compo-

sure to which he was more accustomed. On the platform, the guitarist played a fandango, the few diners still present chatted in steady undertones.

"Should I say perhaps," Harvey continued, " that she is back at the apartment nursing a migraine, and with two tickets to see Katharine Hepburn live on stage... My, the waste if left unused? Or that an uncle of hers died in Illinois or Arkansas and she left this morning to join her folks? Or that this jewel Justine and I are at this near-midnight hour of a Thursday evening discussing a future *magnum opus* of mine — is anything more natural? — she being Laurence P. Hoffnung the Great's Number One reader, the book — here's to you, Jules, seeker after the luminous lights — being *The Literary Person's Companion: A Manual, Fact-finder and Directory*, guaranteed to make most celebrated highly-feted literati of the most humble talentless Johnny Does?... Or should I cry on my sleeve and own, hand over heart, that Greenwich Village is too small for Lucille and myself, and that as of today, all tedious technicalities aside, we are mutually free to pursue our separate predilections?"

"At whatever the cost?" Adam said, tossing his enormous head to throw back a rebellious curl.

"The cost, my future Nobel Laureate? The cost?..."

"The destruction of a life... of happiness... of health..."

Adam, in his soft but firmly-spoken hard-jawed way, had earlier in the day been angry. "I'll do what I can", he had promised Lucille that evening, asking me, in turn, then, "God, what *can* I do?" The resurgent anger whetted by the face to face confrontation with Harvey was — how clearly I saw it! — the heir of ineffectuality in the face of urgency, and of distaste for Harvey against the need for basic civility. It was in its way kin to Irving's own embittered pronouncement, "Beware the man... A man like that can kill."

"*Showdown in a Cafe Doorway*," Harvey said to Justine as an aside with a deliberate simulated Southern drawl. "What do you say, my wise and perspicacious Queen of Hearts, shall we sell the title to Paramount for their next Scotties-tissue-promoting soapie?... Man; man! Adam! Josephine! We are

grown people. Do we not have a right. . . No, are we not under obligation, do we not have a duty to forge our own destinies and to realise unhindered our God-given gifts? I must one day give you my book, a personally-inscribed copy to each of you, and to you, too, Jules, my aspiring Flaubert, *One Life: That's All You Get.* It will show you what I mean. Lucille, for her part, is brilliant. That I must admit. She could be a professor ten times over, set the university afire with revolutionary innovations and courses of study, and could court the ear of the President of the U.S. of A. himself if only she weren't so crazy and so hung-up about her figure and her mind, and mesmerised by that quack guru of an analyst tearing off her every goddamn buck, when all she needs is to think positive or try a little Maltz psychocybernetics or, with the Persips downtown, indulge in a bit of psychodrama and act herself back to sanity."

8.

We parted ways soon after, the whole episode having, by next morning, taken on the guise of something surreal. On waking, the taste in my mouth was that of acid, a residue of the cinnamoned apple strudel I had had at the Cafe Pierre, but what lingered still more acerbically, even as I brushed my teeth and rinsed my mouth, was a tight-throated sense of unreality, or rather incredulity, that anyone outside of my dreams had in swift succesion said:

"She's in danger, Harvey, Lucille's never been so brittle. . .";

"Isn't a man permitted freedom? Are nuptial vows to bind a man forever?";

"Harvey, are you really such a fish?";

"Hark, she that hath herself been perfidied hath spoken";

"Justine, think of Lucille, if of no-one else";

"Glad to see that Leo Tolstoy here, he gained the ear of Laurence P., our very own and coveted Mr Big";

"Josephine, call Lucille first thing in the morning. See that

she's okay. And maybe Irving, too. She needs an anchor, and he may be it."

The last had been Adam's directive to Josephine as, on leaving the Cafe Pierre with neither Harvey nor Justine being in the slightest moved, we delivered her to her apartment door.

I had, to my chagrin, woken well after nine, long after Adam had gone to work — "Shall be back before the poppies wilt", he had written on a note — long after the time I had promised to phone Josephine who had, also at her door, offered to show me more widely around town. I phoned nonetheless, but the burring, registered uptown some twenty-five streets away, merely recurred monotonously and unrelieved, leaving me to curse myself and darkly pound the air for having yet again, as on the previous day, fallen short of promise. Having the previous night looked forward to this day, the discomfiting exchange at Pierre's notwithstanding, I was now left with a hollowness, a vacuum of my own making to be sure, but no less chafing for that.

I was, over breakfast, leafing through my travellers' guidebooks, making ready to explore the Big A on my own, when the door-bell rang, and, in response to the voice coming through the intercom, I went to the elevator, there to meet Ziggie Levick, Adam's Uncle Ziggie, as, hands extended high in greeting, he emerged.

He was dapper in a seer-sucker suit, in gold cuff-links and pure-silk tie, the antique-dealer complete, quite unlike the casual open-shirted art-collector and patron I had met two nights before.

"Your good friends regret that they cannot be at your service," he said, bowing Japanese-style but with tongue patently in cheek, "and have assigned me, Zigmund Leo Levick, to be your chaperon for the day, a duty, sir, that could not please me more."

Then, laughing so that a gold tooth shone in his otherwise deeply-creviced distinguished and quick intelligent face, he again reached out his hands, grasped my own between two

strongly-caressing palms, and braced an arm about my shoulders. He smelled piquantly of after-shave and nurtured, I was certain, a clear vanity about his body.

"For Adam, I harbour a most particular fondness," he said. "His is the brightest mind, excepting that of his most modest uncle" — he bowed here yet again — "between East River and the Hudson. And by extension, for any friend for whom he feels my humble *soirees* are worthy fare, I have a quick and double fondness. So, if I give you pleasure in escorting you about this island-city tabernacle dedicated to the gods rollicking on high, then consider my own pleasure double, no, treble, quadruple yours. . ."

He paused, and caught the thought I had been thinking. I must have been inordinately transparent.

"As for that gentle good-natured sad-hearted young cherub who was to have been your hostess and guide. . . she, dear friend, regrets her indisposition, matters at Lucille Farber's having, alas, escalated mightily, that angel of the strings thereupon moving in with that gypped and bereft abandoned waif at the rising of the tide."

An Antipodean sense of propriety — an averseness to *seem* to be prying, however whetted my curiosity — held me back from asking more, and Ziggie Levick, for the moment, did not elaborate. He simply took a salted cracker from a plate on the breakfast-table, smeared it with margarine in a generous layering and engulfed it whole, saying between the crunch and crackle of every bite, "But Jules, *mon cher ami*, never fear; before night is fallen, from your celestial minstrel you shall surely hear. Meanwhile. . ." — he flourished an arm, describing a broad arc to indicate the immensity of his city — "Meanwhile, I will show you about the peaks of Olympus, I will acquaint you with this stupendous mammoth. There is magic in this city, and there is eccentricity, transcendence, art; and if this is the sort of fare that you are after, then I will give you entree to its splendour and its grandiosity, to its industry and accomplishment, to its colour and its multiformity, all of it scrambling your every sense to the delirium of discovery, the ecstasy of captivation,

the adoringly reverential worshipfulness of awe. So, stick by me, *amico mei*, and if you open your eyes to see, and to *truly* see, then, Lordie, in the blinking of a day I will uncover before you what for New Yorkers takes two generations of days to absorb it all. What the sun is to the universe, New York is to the world."

With that, he led me to his coupé parked in the street below and headed downtown towards Battery Park, from there to take a ferry across the harbour to pay homage, as he said, to Lady Liberty, mother of the American Dream.

The Mayor himself could not have been a more passionate guide. Ziggie Levick, Lower East Side-born-and-bred, the youngest child of migrant refugees come from revolutionary Russia, lived, breathed and seethed New York. He was, at sleek and natty fifty-eight, his city's unpaid advocate, apologist, protector, champion. He was also gospeller, preacher, pulpiteer and market-place rhetorician. And were he to have been nominated New York ambassador to the nations, he might have well accepted the mission — few, surely, would have been as suited — were it not for the requirement that he physically leave his city, leave his home which held him less through bonds of mere belonging, affection or fulfilment (though these were substantial and tenacious enough) than through his very dependence on the life-giving life-sustaining force that for him coursed mightily through the city as it coursed through an umbilical cord.

By evening, when Ziggie Levick delivered me as had been pre-arranged between them to Mortimer's in Lexington where Adam sat at a window-table, I was emotionally exhilarated if also physically drained. Sustaining a ceaseless spirited patter from Liberty Island through to Morningside Heights, Adam's Uncle Ziggie had led me along avenues, streets and concourses where the meanest crack or smudge or flake were known to him, had introduced me to any number of Eds, Louies and Sams in their bars, bookstores and boutiques, and subjected me to fortune-tellers, evangelists, Op Art, Pop Art, shishkebabs, pirozhkes, wurst and a dozen varieties of herbs. Outside the Wall

Street Exchange, a black gospel-singer sang songs of Jesus and her companion chanted "Holy! Holy! Holy!" in a monotonous refrain that mesmerised with its very regularity. In Chinatown, Ziggie Levick made a business-call from a pagoda-topped phone-booth; he dropped a quarter into the saxophone-case of a Gramercy Park busker; led me between the stone lions up the steps of the New York Library, bidding me listen to their roar that would indicate the nearby presence of a virgin; and steered me past the offices of scream therapists and fortune-tellers, past the shops of specialist dealers in Armenian art, and past innocuous-looking frontages where extortionists, forgers, promoters of erotica, revolutionaries in exile and collectors of Sioux mythology rubbed shoulders in the inner foyers, elevators, corridors and washrooms.

"Where else. . . Where else," he had asked, "will you find a biographer of Benjamin of Tudela at present at work on the second of a three-volume study of the man and his sojourns, or an anthologist of the music of the Aztecs, or authorities on Peter John Olivi, Jan Sniadecki and on the two-hundred-and-fifty-three ways to prepare brussel-sprouts, hm? Is there another place like it, is there, Jules Sonny-boy, is there? If, dear traveller, you can show me just one place in any way like it where to blink is to miss an epiphany while to sleep is to forfeit entry into the supernal itself — just one place that can boast a Met, a Madison, a Greenwich Village, Rockefeller, Guggenheim, Broadway, Trade Center, Times Square, SoHo, East Village, and more besides — all within a day's walk and a lifetime's inexhaustibility, then I will pack myself a backsack and in the steps of the Wandering Jew sojourn there, even if it takes every one of my God-given days. I place upon you the challenge to find me another place like this Big Apple, friend, that is Colossus, Hanging Gardens, Pyramids and all the other Wonders re-incarnated and reconstructed in our time."

Deciding that Melbourne's known and venerated experts on the sixty-seven ways to spin a cricket-ball or maim a fellow-footballer or shoe a racehorse were scarcely in the same league, I preferred to concede to him the conviction, the relish and the

thrill of peerlessness. There was scant mileage in a pygmy vying with a giant.

And so he had repeated, so urged — "Where else?. . . Where else?. . ." — as, with messianic (or auctioneer's) fervour, he had made the Trade Center a thing unique, and Radio City and Pan Am and the Frith Museum, and the Waldorf Astoria, St Patrick's and Central Park, in his every proverbially pregnant pause as also in his every word, intimating that if such *did* exist west of the Hudson or east of East River, then they were ersatz imitations, invented concoctions, or, likeliest of all, figments of over-ripe imaginations.

"Mighty, mighty, mighty!" he said. "Mighty the Manhattan isle of New York, the world radiating, reverberating and humming with its far-extending glory, amen!"

Whatever exhilaration had buoyed me as we entered that Lexington Avenue eating-place was promptly dissipated the moment I caught the strained greeting proferred by Adam. We didn't, Ziggie and I, get to sit down. Instead, Adam rose, strode towards us in all his hulkiness, let his gaze flit, scarcely touching, over me, and, taking hold of Ziggie Levick's arm, said, "I'm glad you've come at last. It's been a downright abomination of a day. Lucille. . . Lucille. . . She killed herself. . . She. . ."

"Hell and holy fire!" Ziggie Levick burst out, taking hold of the knot of his tie with forefinger and thumb. "Lordie! When will Moloch be sated with the blood of our children?!"

"She. . . She threw herself from a window. . .," Adam felt impelled to elaborate. "Josephine'd for the merest moment left the room. . ."

"And where is she now?. . . Josephine, I mean. . .," Ziggie Levick asked.

"She went with the police to make a statement. That was hours ago. But. . . But I haven't been able to get through to her since. . . Nor to Harvey. . . Nor to Irving. . . And there'll be the devil to pay! Because Irving, he'll kill Harvey. . . He'll. . ."

Ziggie Levick, extricating his arm from Adam's hold, in turn grasped his nephew by a shoulder. Age, experience, worldly

wisdom and probable inuring against protracted surprise, restored him to a prompter composure.

"Adam," he said. A cuff-link glinted under the light. Two diners passed us on their way out as two others entered. "Adam! Have you settled your check?... No? Then settle it. And take time out to think. You're a biologist, a scientist, a student of man. You, of all people, should know. Irving's no killer. His is the stuff of martyrdom. The Irvings of this world are the ones who suffer, while it's the Harveys that kill. Oh, no, not with weapons... Not with guns and knives and karate chops and concrete around the ankles and 'Goodbye, Charlie' out to sea into the deep... Oh, no, but none the less surely, none the less finally in their own sleezy and smiling, convivial and unmatchable most sympatico ways..."

Adam strode away then towards the counter to pay his bill. I was left again with Ziggie Levick. Where, for the greater part of the day, he had been the brighter side of jaunty buoyancy, the lines marking his brow, cheeks and eyes now deepened in the tautness of a grimmer gravity.

"I told you many things today, Jules, Sonny-boy," he said. "Someday, you may put pen to paper and incorporate them in a book. But one thing I didn't tell you. New York is great, New York is stupendous, New York is the modern wonder. True, all true, every bit of it true. But to remain any of these, it is a god that ravenously demands a succession of human sacrifices for continued sustenance. That was something I would rather not have had you know. But the ultimate truth cannot long be withheld. As near to the true God as we are, so near are we too to infernal Mephistopheles. Souls are bought here, sold here, liberated, enslaved, punished, consecrated, and consigned here to eternal purgatory or, more rarely, in merciful clemency redeemed. And all this at the mercy of a parlously haphazard turning of the wheel that may at any moment yield up a number signifying either a personal *gotterdammerung* or edifying beatitude. For her part, whatever the deity — though Adam would call it 'Chemistry'; he would also call it 'Chance' — Lucille was destined for perdition. We all saw it. She was an innocent, she

was a fallen angel, a seraph not truly suited to this earth and, with none able to resist that deity, the dictates of that innate annihilating chemistry, she ultimately fell from grace." — He bit a corner of his lower lip and nodded pensively. "Like so many in this city," he added, "like so many, so uncountably many in this vast insatiable megalopolis."

Adam returned, pocketing his change. The hum of conversation and clatter of cutlery on crockery surrounded us. An acute but fleeting sense of *deja vu* came over me as I recalled the smells, movement and talk in restaurants back home.

"I've decided," Adam said.

"Oh?" said Ziggie Levick.

"I'm going to Josephine's. Either she's been talking all afternoon — as likely as flying tortoises — or her phone is out of order or she's left it off the hook. She's not at Avery Fisher. My bet is that it's off the hook, and when she turns *incommunicado*, then something is rotten in this upmarket State of Denmark... In the meantime, Ziggie, can you find Irving? You're right... He won't kill Harvey... But if anyone needs companionship right now..."

Adam broke off before completing the obvious. Ziggie Levick acknowledged and consented to Adam's directive. He would have given his right arm to his nephew had Adam demanded it of him. He then turned back to me again.

"One thing more... One other thing I didn't tell you, Jules, which, in fairness I guess I should. Manhattan isle is residence to near two million citizens of the mighty U.S. of A. But ask each man, what hurts, what haunts above all conceivable malignities visited upon his mortal flesh, and, as sure as eggs hatch into feathered fowl, he will say it is his isolation, his primal disconnectedness, his ultimate aloneness in the world. All those Eds and Ernests and Martys I introduced to you today. As long as they're behind their counters, they're okay; or as long as they wear their white coats, aprons or other uniforms of identity and duty, then they're like the statues of martyrs and saints in their venerated niches. They have their recognised place. They know who they are, what they are, they even admit to a meas-

ure of blessedness. But take them outside; let them wear the normal mufti of the street, and they will become faceless, nameless, and ultimately alone in the congealed Riesmanian crowd that constitutes the life and pulse of this dog-tongued island. And if there is salvation to be had here, Jules, if there is such a thing as redemption at all, then it lies in this — in each man creating for himself an identifiable face, in establishing an identity, in forging for himself a meaningful name."

9.

Adam's surmise had proved right. Josephine had indeed rendered herself inaccessible and it was only his persistence in ringing at her downstairs bell when he traced the light burning in her window that finally brought a response, however reluctant, however grudging, even despairing, from her.

"You've come to see that I don't do a Lucille as well, I suppose," she asked, said, gibed all at once at the door. In contrast to her former red, she now wore a cheerless subdued blue — a dress hastily put on, an old over-stretched sweater and fading slippers — while her hair was straggled into higgledy-piggledy strands that cared nothing for grooming, appearance, opinion. Her cheeks were drained white, her eyes were lacklustre, and her mouth and jaw were harder and sharper than I would have let myself imagine them.

Adam had on the way to her apartment forewarned me.

"You may as well come with me, Jules," he had said. "There are sides and dimensions to this city you have not yet seen. There are sides and dimensions, too, to Josephine that it won't harm you to see."

But if his advance notice had also been intended as further admonition reinforcing his counsel after Ziggie Levick's *soiree* not to become involved — neither with anyone, nor in anything — it was an admonition I could not help myself but override, *feeling* for Josephine then, *despite* all he had told me about her, or perhaps *because* of all else he had told, feeling for her all the more ardently, aching if only because *she* ached as she

stood in her doorway in her state of doleful dishabile and dourness, a far cry from that most elegantly engaging cellist who had responded so vibrantly to the baton-wielding stewardship of a livewire vivifying Zubin Mehta.

"No, Josephine," Adam said, once inside. "You think that on you alone rests the onus for what Lucille did and only yours is it to do penance, and to do so in the only way you know how — through withdrawal, solipsism and retreat into some cold and punishing nunnery of the mind? Hm?"

Josephine tugged at the inverted V-line of her sweater. I had expected she might be cowed into submission of sorts, instead of which she met vehemence with vehemence — even with heat and short-fused rancour.

"Oh, I suppose it was you who turned your back on her at that moment, it was you who took your eyes off her just then when. . ."

"If you want to put it that way," Adam cut across her, prodding the air with a hard, almost menacing finger, "then yes!. . . Yes!. . . No less than you, dear Josephine, dear self-styled, self-flagellating, self-immolating martyr. For Lucille came to me yesterday; you know that already. And if anyone failed her, then I did, I did in not recognising — no, I did recognise — in not *acting* as professionalism demanded, in not calling in another therapist while her own was away, in not steering her safely into better-qualified hands than mine. . . So, if there is any guilt attached to any of this, then perhaps we ought flagellate ourselves together. And perhaps invite Irving too into our inner agonising circle for being so helpless, and Harvey of course, and naturally Justine, and even Jules here — we shall find some reason to implicate him, too, no doubt — and the whole of this anarchic city for being so god-like indifferent to private anguish, and then the world too for being so unremittingly, unregenerately and brutally screwed up, hm?"

Josephine tossed her head and came close to sneering.

"So you salve your own conscience by attacking mine, Adam? Is that your game?"

"No, kind lady!" Adam threw back. He was himself more

impassioned than I had ever known him to be. "I've learned to live with my conscience. Medicine is a great academy for acquiring the art. I ache for Lucille, too, whatever you may think. But the writing for her was, as the saying goes, well on the wall. She was made of self-annihilating mettle. There was no way around it. If she didn't kill herself today, then she would have done so tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. As Ziggie says — we live here, all of us, only by the grace of Moloch who thirsts, and hungers, and thrives on this city's harassed innocents. Lucille was brilliant but sick; that anorexia of hers was but part of a deeper pathology that, as much as it denied bodily nutrient, denied life itself. Her demise was but a matter of time in coming. The curse is upon Harvey that he should have expedited it so and upon Justine for catalysing the whole process in the first place. . ."

"Enough!" Josephine erupted, raising her hands to cover her ears. "Let me be!"

Adam prised her hands away.

"I will not let you be!" he replied in turn. "Not until I can make you see reason!"

"All right, then," Josephine challenged him now. "Rationalise all you want, Adam, all you want, you rising star of science. But Lucille was a human being. She was flesh, blood, bone. As we all are. Would you have me deny emotion, feeling, sorrow, compassion, pain because to you she was, in her illness, but a wired programmed driven homunculus? A piece of automated engineering over which neither she, nor we, had any say? Is that forever to be your tune?"

Adam stepped towards her again. Josephine drew back.

"I want only that you should keep proper perspective, that you should understand that what drove her in the end to leap out of the window was stronger than any of us, that you should not withdraw, retreat, immolate yourself yet again in some private cop-out autistic monasticism."

Josephine had become more defiant, more fighting. Colour returned to her cheeks and animation of a more vigorous kind to her limbs. I caught — or thought I caught — a flicker of a

smile ripple along the grain of Adam's strong and ample lips.

"What is it to you? If I want to seclude myself, is that not my right? If I choose not to play tonight, and to let Maestro Zubin do without me for once, or for a week, or a month, is that, too, not my right? And if I should choose to run away away with Jules here — if he will take me with him — to Australia to disappear there, unknown, unrecognised and safely left alone, away from this. . . this. . . this malignant altar, is there anyone on earth, even you Adam, who can contest that very right? I've survived before, I shall survive again. I've gone down before, I shall surface again. But I'll do it in my own time, in my own way, with my own resources, whatever they may be."

I watched her; indeed, I could not desist, myself seeking by means of whatever invisible cables to keep her from drawing back. At least once before had she so retreated — once before, at least as far as Adam knew. That had been some four years before when, having come from Utica to Manhattan with her cello and, as Adam had said, with stars in her eyes, she had fallen for an off-Broadway actor-magician-raconteur, and become pregnant by him, consenting to an unwilled abortion — her lover's price for constancy — only to return home from the clinic to a note awaiting her. "Have fixed up a contract in Iowa," it had read. "For me to stay would mean to be owned. To be owned is to give up freedom. And to be free — as you, too, may now consider yourself free — can any prize be higher?" Adam, researching into placental hormones at the time, had met her most briefly at the clinic then, by chance meeting her again, albeit long after, at the first of his uncle Ziggie Levick's *soirees*. She had, for a full six months in the intervening period brooded within the confines of her apartment, subsisting on bread, milk and dried-out canned salmon, emerging only when her father, Marcus Lewisohn, not having heard from her for some time, came on a visit from home, was appalled by the sight of his daughter who had become a proverbial sack of bones, extracted from her her story, strode to the cupboard where Josephine had boarded up everything bound up with her past, and, on extri-

cating from it her cello, had thrust it none too forcefully into her arms, barred all avenues of escape and cowed all attempts at opposition and resistance, and insisted, bullied and cajoled, "Play! Play! Play! In this is your life! In this is your being! In this, your calling! And in this, and not in some derelict drop-out reclusiveness, your truest self, your ultimate purpose and your fullest freedom!"

Recalling this — Josephine's story as Adam had recounted it to me on the way — I made sense of his quiver of a smile. Where Josephine's father had earlier pressed and exhorted and coaxed with no mean success — she had, after all, made it to the New York Philharmonic — Adam as surrogate had now taken it upon himself to do the same. And as long as he could draw response, however vehement, from Josephine, however acerbic even if directed against himself, so long could he hope to ward off her regression. He was no fisticuff pugilist, but nor was he one to tremble in the face of confrontation.

"In your own time, you say. In your own way," Adam coaxed. "Your time is now, Josephine!"

She turned her back on us.

"Your way is through us!" he persisted.

She tossed her head and huffed. Adam went on.

"There are more ways to being nothing in this world than by leaping from a window, you know!"

He had got her to bite.

"So let me be nothing."

"Your friends... *We*... Yes, your friends, *we* want your companionship.!"

"You can do without me."

"The public wants your music!"

"There are scores of other string-scrapers waiting in the wings."

"And your parents... Your parents, Josephine, if no-one else, surely they deserve your success and your contribution, your gifts, your endowments, your art..."

Through the window, I had been watching Josephine's reflection, sharp against the gathered nocturnal darkness, as

also her back and shoulders which shrugged off every thrust and sally of persuasion that Adam attempted. Clearly glutted, fed-up by it all, she raised her head in hard defiance, raised too her eyes in exasperation, and spun around with a concurrent sucking of breath and grasping of her temples between her palms.

"God Almighty! Let me be, will you? O Lord, if only I could get away from here, escape, purge it all, worm it out of my system! What do you want of me?! Is there no place where I may breathe without suffocating, no retreat which is not a chasm, a bottomless abyss walled around by cynicism such as Harvey's, do-goodery like your own, or by criminality outside, expendability all around, and carnality, predatoriness and death which are every bit a part of this earthly hell as are its concrete, glass and cold oppressive brutal crushing steel? Against all these, what *is* art? What *is* my music in the light of this if not an aberration, a sham, a dissembling lie that would pretend with what bareface mummery to deny our contemptible John Doe paltriness in the world, our Lucille-Farber-Mary-Doe fragility, and our puff-cake evanescence and dewy, foamy evaporability?!"

Adam did not relent. Where he had failed with Lucille, to draw Josephine back seemed in that moment to have become a mission. He reached out to touch. But again Josephine backed away. Swollen pads ringed her eyes; the corners of her lips quivered; her long supple cellist's fingers trembled; and she heaved, heavily, burdensomely, wearily with every breath. I, too, like Adam, wanted to reach out; I wanted to touch a cheek, a shoulder, her hair, a hand, all in the offering of succour. But, knowing the impossibility of it, I had to keep my distance, and to ache in private, to ache because *she* ached, to ache because I could do nothing to alleviate her ache, and to ache because, every will to the contrary notwithstanding, the crossing of our paths had necessarily to be but most transient, ephemeral, glancingly brief.

"Think about it, Josephine, my sweet," Adam said with the

air of a closing coda. "Art, *your* art, and all the arts in all their bounteousness and multiplicity, are the leaven that make this prodigious *behemoth* of a city at least bearable to us as humans. But more, far more, Miss Lewisohn, most guileless among the seraphim: to yourself you may seem all alone and the flesh-and-blood embodiment of all that Kierkegaardian-Sartrean-Kafkan existential stuff this place would force upon you. But out there, Josephine — and even here, Josephine, in this room with you — are such who unreservedly accept, welcome, appreciate, esteem you for what you *are* and who, in ways most human, and therefore most true, offer you the most genuine and most redeeming selfless kind of love. Perhaps our animal, biological, chemical make-up in this world — forgive my incorrigible recourse to the reductionist — does not permit us choices without number, but in *this*, in such things as ultimately matter most — man and man, man in relation to man, man in relation to the world — it is for you, dear heart, as you yourself just said, it is wholly, exclusively, finally for you to choose. So — O.K. deny yourself, Josephine, deny others, and, by denying, be damned! On the other hand, though, accept, Josephine, accept, yourself, others, the world, and you may yourself, dear loveliness, dear spirit, yet come to be saved, to be redeemed!"

We left Josephine then, Adam and I. In Fifty-Seventh Street short of the turn into Third Avenue on the final stretch home, we were confronted by a glazed-eyed wino soliciting a quarter, accosted by a black with radios, calculators and electronic watches to sell, and scrutinised by a pair of over-rouged over-powdered tight-sweatered floozies ready to sell themselves. Along the thoroughfares, successions of cars and taxis hissed and hummed and chortled by, ambulance sirens in passing waxed and waned in jangling cacophony, as did police-cars and fire-trucks hurtling past, while people hurried, ambled, stood stock-still or clung to the walls, loners among them, and odd-balls and curios, variously grinning inanely or talking to themselves or addressing fictional companions, themselves, however, ignored or scorned by those who, as Adam said, still

walked tall by the grace of the fates, of God, of mysterious powers or of personal chemistries still kept in some semblance of order.

"By the time the sun rises over East River tomorrow," he also said "the city and hospital morgues will be host to hundreds more murdered, mutilated, *felo-de-séed*, diseased, mishapped, exposed or over-inebriated stiffs who are at this moment still breathing, talking, laughing, bleeding, feasting, agonising, and grieving, or who are planning, striving, expecting, dreaming, studying, thinking, contemplating, procreating, doing any of these things, and more besides, behind any of those million million windows all around us". And he said further, "There are forces within us, Jules, mightier than our conscious, willing, reasoning selves, and forces just as mighty without. We in this city — perhaps throughout the world as well, but nowhere more evident and more wholesale than here — course between the Scylla of the one and the Charybdis of the other, between the menace that lurks within and the menace that stalks without, such coursing causing innocents like Lucille, and Irving, and Josephine, and whole generations besides to be sucked into the whirlpool to Sheol every minute of every hour of every day, or alternatively to be cast upon the rocks, against them to be tested, and tried, and, so often, too often, to be irreparably broken.

"And if you ask to what end, Jules — unless, like Ziggie, you too subscribe to Moloch — then the reasons to be had may as well be your own; for there is no-one, there is no-one, neither at St Patrick's nor at Temple Emanu-El nor among the uptown Abyssinian Baptists, nor in City College, nor in Columbia, nor in any of our other portals of learning and daunting wisdom who holds any purchase on the most ultimate knowledge of whyfor, wherefor, whatfor. We are, we are, we are, and in time to come, we will have been, and will be no more. With apologies to John Keats, that is all we know on earth and all that we can ever truly know. What we are to do in the face of that knowledge, how we live our lives, becomes then a thing solely for ourselves to determine.

10.

I slept fitfully that night. Wearied by the previous day's brisk-paced peregrinations with Ziggie Levick about the powerhouse that went by the name New York, culminating in the disclosure of Lucille's death, Josephine's torturings and Adam's punishing countervailing attempts to rescue her from self-imposed perdition, I found in sleep not the full release from exhaustion I had wished for, but a demon-ridden, dream-sodden blight compounding the mish-mash of impressions, sensations, fatigue, perplexity and, ultimately, grimness that the day had left as its legacy.

Inevitably, Lucille — the Lucille in black clinging to the corner at Ziggie Levick's *soiree*, the Lucille who had visited Adam in quest of help, the Lucille, unseen but imagined, spread-eagled or pulped on some alien bloodied pavement below her window — inevitably, Lucille, evoking a once-known Gabrielle Gross back home, haunted a large part of the nocturnal darkness upon which flashing fluorescent red and green and blue and yellow lights intruded in dysrhythmic sequences; as did Irving, too, more shadowy because I had met him only once, but nonetheless real for the tyrannous ache and dolefulness that must have been his; as did Harvey and Justine whom I could only picture, despite their suaveness, with satanic horns; and Adam, too, caught in the middle of the menage; and debonair Ziggie Levick at once both peripheral yet in another sense so central to them all; not to mention Laurence P. Hoffnung, that cigar-smoking cynic who lived as a kind of pimp off Harvey's works and the works of who knew how many other willing Harveys in what he seemed to run as a decadent, public-fleecing, public-debasing literary whorehouse. But above them all loomed Josephine, Josephine, whom I contemplated delivering, salvaging, saving, redeeming from the consuming abyss that confronted her whichever way she turned.

But, in practical ways, what could I offer her? And then, what would she accept? — Would she accept Australia, for instance, even as she had hinted; and the space it had to

offer, and the room to move, and its light in profligate abundance, and its fecundity of greenery, and the possible restoration of her spirit and her soul's tranquillity? For, these I *could* offer her. And another thing, too — a hand to ease her descent from the high-tension tightrope on which she teetered in that vaulting sky-ratching concretion of a city to a steadier antipodean terrain where she might walk with unmenaced step, free there to move about with a leisurely swing of the arm, free also to pause and reflect, and free to absorb its ambient weightless suburban calm and its easy, eupeptic and contented unconcern.

But would she accept? Would I ask? And if ask, *how* would I ask, what precisely would I ask?

I let my thoughts — my writer's imagination, perhaps — run riot through a succession of scenarios, dreams, waking fancies and neither-sleeping, neither-waking will-o'-the-wisp imaginings that traversed back and forth across each other's hazily-demarcated intermelding terrains. But at the end, when morning lightened and full day began to vibrate with the loud, brisk, animated pulse of New York living against the apartment walls, I was no nearer to formed resolve, save to let circumstances dictate action, myself the while remaining ever-vigilant for opportunity to interpose an apt remark, an intimation, a suggestion, an invitation, more.

With day's progression, I came to recognise these thoughts as over-heated, hopelessly adolescent, and, in full light of reason, even quite absurd. Besides, even given that reality conformed to the promptings of an over-ripe imagination, I discovered soon enough, and with no little sense of loss already worming itself within me, that not only would such opportunity not arise but that I might not as much as see Josephine again. For, when Adam phoned her in the morning to enquire after her well-being, he met with no response, while, shortly after, when Ziggie called him in turn to relay details of Lucille's funeral to be held two days later with himself as officiant, he disclosed also that Josephine had at first light that morning returned to her parents' home in Utica. The only message she

had left was that he, Ziggie, should inform the N.Y.Phil that she had been taken ill and been ordered rest.

"And you didn't stop her, stall her?" Adam asked.

"Stop her? Stall her?" I heard Ziggie Levick say across the cables descending from uptown. "Adam! Have you ever tried hurdling Brooklyn Bridge in one bound, or, like some latter-day Samson, sought perhaps to bring down the twin pillars of the Trade Center, or attempted to snuff out all the city's lights with a breath meant for a birthday-cake? Hm? Sure I tried to hold her back, Adamchik, sure. But I could more successfully have whistled into the wind in Central Park and be heard in Houston, San Diego and Seattle. . ."

He paused, then said, "O Adam, Adam, Adam. . . You are a doctor, a biologist, a man of science. What feats of chemical magic might yet be given to you to bring about that may in turn save our children, our innocents, our sufferers from themselves, from themselves above all? Hm?"

"I'm working on it," Adam replied with a touch of leavening to match Ziggie Levick's despairingly rhetorical tone, the while brushing his free hand through his copious Einsteinian hair. "But you'll have to give me another week or two to perfect it. With what I'm feeding them, my laboratory pets have never been happier."

The conversation with Ziggie Levick over, Adam set about clearing away the breakfast-table where, on his day off from work, it being Saturday, he had eaten at leisure, with *The New York Times* splayed out before him, the radio playing in the background, and with punctuated unhurried, unpressured musings about a suitable itinerary for the next two days.

"So hath the wing'd starling fled yet again," he said, now wiping the last crumbs from the table. "And who knows when her up-State furlough in gentler clime will this time come to an end?"

He rinsed out the squeegee in the sink, then dried his hands in a tea-towel.

"But her nest won't remain unoccupied for long," he went

on, "believe me. Others will come. Beauty queens from Denver and script-writers from Milwaukee, insurance-men from St Louis and D.J.s from Salt Lake City. And others, too, Jules, and others, too. Yahoos and yuppies, yokels and yobbos, from London and Toronto, from Bloemfontein and Tel Aviv, and even from our very own down-under ink-spot Melbourne, too, all, all come to take up the gauntlet thrown down by the gods who for their amusement play with men, toy with women, trifle with children at the foot and on the escarpments of this grand, stupendous, modern-day Olympus. And as for Josephine... our Josephine... dare I say *your* Josephine?... Who will ever know that such a one as she was ever here?... Or, if truth be extended," — he swept an arm towards the window — "if truth be extended, who will ever know that *any* of us were ever here — you, I, Lucille, or Ziggie, Irving, Harvey, Justine, Laurie P., or the millions and millions and millions out there?... Will anyone in time to come even know of us, or know our names, or even care that there were others, *we*, who lived and breathed and hankered and ached and aspired and circled here before them? Hm, Jules? And if not... If we are all to disappear down the sewer of the past, what have we of hankering and aching and fretting and flagellating ourselves ourselves the way we do? Is not the indigenous New Yorker right then in paying goodly homage and obeisance and generous tithe to the earth-bound, temporal and most practical wisdom of the likes of Eros and Bacchus and Epicurus?"

He did not elaborate at the time, but by day's end, certainly more clearly by weekend's final furling, I had seen most ravenous, most bodily application of human devotedness and fealty to that vaunted wisdom — or want of it — of Adam's Eros, Bacchus and Epicurus. In Times Square, that very Saturday evening, for instance, at the heart of what Adam called variously a jungle, an Eden, Purgatory and Sheol; in Times Square, that bustling hub of mayhem, the very axle around which Manhattan swivelled, and where buses, taxis, delivery vans and cars on the one hand, and people, people, people on the other, negotiated their separate paths, all intent, it seemed,

on flirting with, teasing, inviting and, at the same time, flouting mortality.

In that Square, as much a square as a triangle was circular, Neon fluorescence vied with Mazda fluorescence, illuminated billboard rose above billboard, and car-horn resounded to the same, while smells of hamburger, pastrami, cole slaw and rye carried like some piquant condiment through the crisp and bracing air. On the hoardings, ever spangling, ever changing pattern, Coca Cola competed with Canadian Club and Dewar's, Admiral Appliances promised more than Toshiba, John Cassavetes, Elvis Presley, Gene Hackman and George C. Scott in a huddle of near-abutting cinemas respectively pledged exciting, enthralling, not-to-be-missed and heady fare, Pussycat Follies, Whirly Girly Revues and Broadway-Style Burlesks tantalised with even better, while above the *Victoria Movie House* where the movie *Lilith* was screening, a large imposing mighty signboard presaged, in gold on gold, the coming to Forty-Second Street of the most supreme among supreme, the long-awaited, long-in-the-making, unprecedented, unforgettable, magnificent, stupendous and star-studded film, *The Bible.* Across the road, *The Notorious Life of Fanny Hill* was just then also showing.

With Adam I walked along Seventh Avenue, Broadway and the cross-streets nearby, myself wholly in awe of the multitudes and expecting at any moment someone familiar to materialise out of the teeming, streaming, careening mass — Ziggie Levick perhaps, or Harvey and Justine again, or Irving, however alone and disconsolate, to whom the facelessness to be had there might under the circumstances — his circumstances — have been particularly suited, or, all improbability notwithstanding, even Josephine tripping down with a group of fellow-musicians come to the Square for supper at concert's end. Josephine did not come, of course, nor Irving, nor any of the others, but certainly there were concert and theatre people in plenty, audience and performers both, who filled the tables in every eating-place we passed in the vicinity of the Square. And others, too. How many others! What others! Outside some seedy bil-

iously lit bar where a score of rowdies hung about, a shaven knob-skulled hulk in leather jacket, leather pants and studded wrist-band approached us, saying, "Hey, you guys, you lookin' fer a pair o' chicks, mebbe?"; out of a porn-shop an arm-waving ranting indignant madcap was being goose-stepped gutterward through a swinging door; around letter-boxes and traffic-lights, clusters of gaudy over-rouged, over-lipsticked, punk-haired short-skirted girls were chewing gum, winking come-ons to whoever passed; from the shadows of a courtyard, a runt of a man hissed, "Smoke? Smoke? Smoke?"; elderly dissipated men hung about shoeshine stands looking for fraternal bum-offering companions; high-heeled transvestites swung past in hip-and-rump-swinging rhythms of their own devising; passing a doorway of some private but dilapidated set of apartments, I nearly tripped over the outstretched legs of a stuporose wino slumped against a wall; while, veering close to makeshift stalls where watches, calculators, jewellery and pocket radios were laid out in full display, I felt Adam take firm hold of my arm, saying, "The Big Apple is lush and red and polished and full of delight, Jules, but it is strictly not for plucking. In this polyglot Eden, man, the serpent speaks with many tongues, perfidy being the one he speaks the most beguilingly of all."

"Perfidy?" I said.

By the time we left Times Square and its surrounds, the hour being well past midnight, I scarcely needed answer. I had, by then, seen any number of folk, any number of flotsam and jetsam — as Adam called them — that formed the unadvertised underbelly of that otherwise much-touted, most exquisite, glossy picture-postcard colossus: derelicts and addicts, prostitutes and pimps, hustlers and bouncers, schizophrenics and piss-pots, well-heeled businessmen and unsalvageable drop-outs. I had seen any number, too, of sleazy cafes and adult bookshops, blue-movie marquees and liquor-haunts, and massage parlours and subway pansy hangouts, where, for an earned, stolen, conned, borrowed or inherited expendable buck, one could be tickled and titillated, thrilled and amused, indulged in and pampered, all of this, all of it incredibly within a stone's

throw from a brilliant Eugene O'Neill *All God's Chillun'*, a personality-studded premiering of *Evita*, a Neil Simon playlet, a clean and wholesome *Porgy and Bess*, a polished *Annie*, not to mention *Il Trovatore* with Leontyne Price and *Don Quixote* and Josephine's N.Y.Phil, and Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard, Radio City, and what more, what more, what more magnificences of the creative soul?

"When the Almighty sought not long ago to redistribute good and bad across the world," Adam said, close to home, "each to its own more fitting ground, He caught His bag on the Chrysler spire and good and bad both in a most profligate sprinkling fell upon this duodecimo pale of earth randy and oestrous and ready to receive. And so did this luxuriant jungled Babel begin to grow, all beguilements and menaces, and temptations and snares coming here too, to teem in an abundance greater than in any other single acre to be found this side either of Eden or of Hades."

All throughout the next day, whether I found myself coursing through the glistening black-marbled shop-lined concourse of the Rockefeller Center, or walking the length of Fifth Avenue, Madison or Park, or digressing through Altman's, Bergdorf Goodman's or Saks', or even leisurely absorbing the lakes, the greenery and the Sunday afternoon amusements to be had in Central Park — a band concert, a troupe of rubber-jointed black gymnasts, boating on the water — I kept seeing everywhere the perfidy that Adam had spoken of. I saw it in everything; I saw it in everyone; saw beneath the sunlit lustrous surface gloss a deeper ingrained drabber dross; kept noticing beneath the smiles and cheers and mirth-filled squeals leaden heavinesses that made shoulders droop, that made lines on the face deepen, and caused flab to gather about the arms, chins, paunch and rump that bit sooner than might have been witnessed or accepted anywhere else. Having begun to see these, I could only be the more attuned to the rest. I could not but notice then the peeling, cracking, flaking coats of paint and plaster of places day-in-day-out lived in, yet, when photographed, photographed with immaculate sheen; nor could I *not*

see, even if it was difficult to square the sights with my better wishes, the wall around the Guggenheim both urinated and spat upon, and the dry curdled vomit on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the tin-rattling eye-patched mendicant at the foot of the Empire State; not to mention the fungus, pigeon shit and rust eating into commemorative pillar, pedestal, cenotaph and statue — all the gathered mildew and blight being dispiriting witness to the corrosion of every manifestation and representation of greatness through indifference, obtuseness and insensate blindness, where not through outright mindless, vandalism-bent, even wilful despoliation.

Perhaps as visitor and tourist, I fell to appraising too quickly, to assessing too rashly, to jumping too precipitately to conclusions. But in common with novice travellers everywhere, I did want to determine for myself and encapsulate within a single formula — even if only in a telling word or epithet or phrase — that which was the unique and singular, intrinsic, irreducible essence of the place.

The reality, however, kept thwarting me at every step, and, recalling Adam's rapture with the city which he had vented within a breath of my arrival, I turned to him and said, "Tell me, Adam, you really, truly, like it here?"

Adam chose not to answer directly. Instead, he braced his massive arm about my shoulders as he had done before and said disarmingly cannily, artlessly cagily, "Why, don't you?"

He had put me on the spot.

"It's not. . .," I began. "It's not that I don't like it here. It's just that. . . How shall I say it?. . . It's just that it's. . . it's not all so. . . so. . ."

"Ah, yes," Adam cut in to make it easier for me, spreading out his arms in an all-embracing gesture. "The bride in the flesh proves not to be the bride of the fancy. She who from a distance seemed so perfect is also endowed with acne, warts, syphilis and haemorrhoids. And also herpes, scabs, scars and boils. Is that it? And having discovered this, you're beginning to hurt, hm? Is that it, Jules?"

"It does hurt," I admitted, conceding to myself that *hurt* did perhaps come nearest the truth.

"And so it ought, Jules," he said in turn, "and so it ought. Even as it hurts me at the hospital — and, believe me, the parallel is closer than you may think — to see that what was once spotless child waste away to terminal moribundity through alcohol and dope and promiscuity and pestilence, or to see a mole turned malignant on the flesh of the most resplendent girl, or to see a man, a philosopher, a mental titan in his day, reduced in some unvisited ward to inanity and gibberish, incontinence and pressure sores. . ."

He now raised a finger in the air.

"But. . .," he said. "But. . ."

He then prodded his chest, his fingers signifying his heart.

"But for all that, ought I cease to love that child, that girl, that man, human beings all, for being blemished and flawed and less than the resplendent Dulcinean ideal I should wish for? Ought I love this city less because parts of it, like some dissipated whore, betray their age, or because so many of its human brood are morbidly and pathologically warped, or because its very greatness feeds on the muscle, blood, bone, nerve and marrow of its progeny? For how many riveters have tumbled from their dizzying scaffolds way up there down those skyscraping escarpments? How many labourers, black, Puerto Rican, white, have been crushed to pulp under falling cascading stone? How many one-time men-about-town have aged into oblivion to join the countless nevermore-remembered others in the city's scratch-houses? And how many other Lucilles have done themselves in, and Irvings been widowed, and Josephines rent apart, and Harveys and Hoffnungs thrived on cynicism? In all of this, is not New York but Melbourne, say, or London or Paris or Berlin writ large, while, viewing it from another perspective, the world itself compacted to a postage-stamp? Were I, Jules, to disown New York, would I not *ipso facto* be disowning the world? And were I to deny the world, would I not *ipso facto* then also be denying life?"

We had reached Columbus Circle where the explorer from

his high rostral column looked down upon the scene before him, and Adam, grandly drawing himself up to match the pedestaled effigy in stone and raising an imaginary telescope before an eye, swung it in a rocking oscillating arc to and fro, and exclaimed in mock-majestic tone, "O, were he, Crisofaro Colombo, Cristobal Colon, to revisit today the gift that he bequeathed unto the world, what would he say, Jules, hm, what would he say? 'Arrived am I at the gates of Gomorrah and before me in the raw is decadent Sodom!'? Or 'How mighty art thou, O Lord of Liberty, Opportunity, Accomplishment! And how great have been your triumphs!' hm?"

And, petitioning the statue that stood mute in its garden at a breath's remove, he ran the fingers of his hands through his abundant black mane, raised his arms then as if he were weighing the world, looked heavenward as neophyte nuns looked at their celestial Lord, and added with booming pulpit-pounder's voice that made a passer-by pause mid-step, "O tell us, Christopher, O noble Columbus, do tell us, if ever you had a vision on alighting here, is this island, this continent, this nation equal to it even in the meanest way? Is it, Cristofaro, is it, Cristobal Colon?"

11.

The following day saw oratory of a different order, an address more gentle, more measured, free of pyrotechnics, and soft, a low-keyed tribute beside Lucille's grave where some twenty-five mourners, thirty perhaps, had come to pay respect. They were in the main Lucille's teaching colleagues, Adam said, though I did recognise Madame Zara, and the Persips, Mick and Eloise, and Bertram Braun, along with a handful of others who had been at Ziggie Levick's *soiree* several nights before. Irving, too, was there, none more disconsolate and hang-dog than he, not even Harvey Farber who stood two steps away, dressed in immaculate white, fastidiously groomed and bearing what seemed an air less of penitence or grief than of fulfilment of a duty that had either to be done or to be seen as done.

It was Ziggie Levick who spoke, the funeral being a wholly secular affair and representing the utmost in simplicity free of the meanest ceremony or ritual appurtenance. With the coffin resting deep in the freshly hewn-out grave, Ziggie in subdued faintly-striped ash-grey suit stood slightly stooped before it. His arms hung loosely in front of him with his fingers intertwined in the formation of a cup, and, nodding ever so lightly towards the rectangular box of white unpolished pine, he began:

"Lucille. . . Lucille. . . We who are gathered here are as at a port come together to bid you *bon voyage* to shores more suited to your gentle, your sensitive, your too sensitive nature. Your transit on this earth was troubled and — none know it as well as we — not infrequently a painful, perplexed and afflicted one. And where others seek redemption from pain, perplexity and affliction in a myriad different ways, you did so through an act that many would deem at once both hard and heroic.

"I, for one, however. . . I, for one, Lucille, when I first received the news, was not inclined to regard it so. And were you able in some way to return and beg forgiveness for what you had done, I, Lucille, should not so readily have forgiven. First, because we loved you, Lucille. We loved you, both on account of your pain, and then *despite* your pain, Lucille. And, loving you, it hurt all the more to be robbed of your continuing life and being and presence amongst us. Second, Lucille, because in acting as you did, you hurt us doubly, betraying your lack of confidence in us, Lucille, who would have done anything to ease your earthly passage. For in us, *through us*, Lucille, singly, or in pairs, or as one united whole, you would, had you but tested us, have found the strength to endure. And third. . . And third, Lucille, because while your final act may well have been a hard and heroic one, harder still and far more heroic in this world — most heroic of all, of all, Lucille — is it to live with what is, and to strive with the best of one's abilities to the best one can attain, and to do so, flying in the face of every reality, however demeaning, degenerate, ugly, troubled, bestial or deadly.

"I suspect that rationally, Lucille, intellectually, you knew all this, you understood it all. Had your *spirit*, however, or your *heart*, or whatever it is that fragments us into conflicting parts and scrambles reason but accepted the fact! Had you but accepted, and built upon it, Lucille, as a man builds success on success and rises rung on rung! Might you not thereby have raised *us* a little too and others about you, and a little of the world besides, and of this nation, and of this very city, even if only a mite?. . ."

In that moment, I nearly lost the thread of Ziggie Levick's address. For, on brushing at a fly that had homed in on my neck, I tossed my head and caught sight of Josephine — Josephine — to my right some three, four steps behind me. Wearing a loose-fitting dun-brown coat over a tawny dress, she was gazing at the ground before her and holding a crumpled handkerchief to her nose and mouth, the eyes above it ringed and blinking and fixed upon a spot that was clearly not registering upon her vision. I felt the briefest constriction of breath and a quickening of the pulse. Ziggie Levick sounded suddenly more distant.

"But. . . But having thought further on the matter," he was saying, "Having taken stock, Lucille, I do forgive, as must we all, for who are we, mere mortals in this massive, sometimes overbearing, often oppressive city, nation, world, to judge another and say 'Holier than thou are we' when, perhaps, we have not been so tested, so racked, so torn and beaten, crushed and consumed? So not only with forgiveness but with every sincerest wish do we bid you safe passage. May your battered soul be made whole again, Lucille, and may you, from whatever shore you alight upon, watch over us in turn, and protect us and speak for us that we may be granted strength to accept whatever adversity awaits us, wrest happiness out of every shabbiness, and continually salvage something precious, lasting and ennobling from whatever relationships are given to us to forge. And know, Lucille, know that, wherever you go, you go there with our love, with our human blessings, and with our most human supplications. *Bon voyage*, Lucille, farewell, Lucille, forever farewell."

What followed was formality only. Ziggie Levick stepped back. At a signal, the gathered mourners threw clods of earth upon the coffin after which the gravediggers unobtrusively standing by set to work with shovel and rake to complete the work of filling the grave.

That over, the assembled dispersed, some returning to their cars, others forming pairs or clusters of three, four or five between the graves and tombstones. Adam stepped towards Ziggie who was bracing a condoling arm about Irving's shoulder, the Persips and Madame Zara ambled slowly away, and, with everyone seeming to give wide berth to Harvey Farber, he too retreated, alone, but lofty and erect, to his own car where Justine, who must also have attended the funeral, albeit at some remove, sat waiting in white hat, white scarf and dark glasses.

Standing near to Josephine who had moved neither forward nor back, I seized at opportunity and approached her. The inner corners of her eyes were patently moist and as I came close she sniffed briefly and wiped her nose.

"Hello, Jules," she said, simply, without inflection, giving nothing away.

"I thought. . .," I said, "I heard. . . Ziggie said. . ."

She managed the faintest of smiles, albeit stiff in its having to break through the more mournful cast in which it must have been set since Lucille had immolated herself in her presence.

"Ziggie said I'd flown the nest, gone, gone back to Utica, returned to bury my face under Father's, under Mother's ever-succouring wings, is that it?"

"He. . ."

Josephine nodded, bit a lip pensively, then heaved.

"Yes," she went on. "Yes. . . That was to be so. But in the end, I didn't leave."

"Oh?"

"I reached as far as La Guardia. I even bought a ticket, checked in my suitcase and cello, went to the lounge and took to waiting for my flight. But. . ."

The heavier load of grief darkening her eyes and weighing

down her shoulders gave way to a less burdened ease. Giving vent to speech seemed to bring release to a spring that had been coiled taut within her. She permitted her gaze to fall more lightly upon me, permitting it, too, freer rein.

"Let's move from here," she said. "Away from these graves, these. . ."

She did not complete the sentence, but turned towards the path that led back to the cemetery gates, myself accompanying her but a hand-span from her side. Taking short, slow, measured steps, she now held her head bent, raising it only to throw me the swiftest of glances. I wanted to reach out, to touch, to brush a cheek, fondle her hair.

"You know something, Jules?" she said. "You want me to tell you?"

She took my unuttered answer as read.

"It may sound like a confession, I know. But when first we met at Ziggie's last week, I had a most wild, most fanciful, most shamelessly capricious notion."

"And that was?" I said, sensing a flood of heat rising to my cheeks and scalp, more than could be accounted for by the ambient warmth and sunshine glinting on everything about.

"It was so schoolgirlish, and so adolescent, so absurdly sophomorish even. I fancied I might contrive to have you take me away from here or send for me after you returned home. To your own city, that is. To Australia. For I was again, as had happened before, feeling the strain of living in New York. This place is a pressure-cooker and I wanted release. I wanted space, I wanted open greenness, and innocence and a separation from everything that is too big, and too rushed, and too fanfarish which is what New York, which is what America have become. I wanted to opt out of the centre and find a niche on an untroubled periphery which was also untrammelled and, in a quiet way, secure."

She bit into the pulp of a thumb.

"And even in the airport lounge at La Guardia when I opened my travel-bag for a comb, I entertained the thought again. Escape, I kept thinking. Escape. Like Chekhov's three sisters

hankering after Moscow. I kept repeating: escape, escape, escape; faraway, faraway, faraway. And even Utica seemed suddenly not far enough away."

What was she saying? Or perhaps she was asking? Asking that I should take her with me? That she should be with me? — Nonsense, I checked myself, it could not be. The very idea was inane. Such was the stuff of television soap-operas — the facile staple of Hollywood, Burbank, and scatter-brained look-alikes back home.

"But then. . ," she went on, tossing back her head so that her hair rose and fell like a wave, pausing the while and turning to me square-on, at the same time reaching out and touching my hand.

"It's odd how the smallest thing can be catalyst to wholly new perceptions. The very title of your book, for instance, Jules, *In Search, the Salvation*, which was also in my travel-bag when I rummaged about for my comb."

"My book?" I said, savouring the soft-skinned warmth and lightness of her hand, and tingling at its very touch, so filled with heady possibilities.

"Your book, yes. For it made me ask, consciously, deliberately, what I was seeking and where I was seeking it, whatever it was."

"And you found your answers?"

She withdrew her hand. Her accompanying gesture — a tilting of her head, a shrugging of a shoulder and raising of an eyebrow — suggested a midpoint between confirmation and negation.

"Not wholly, no. But I have discovered where to look. And it's not a question of place. I could run, escape, flee, fly, go to Utica, retire to the commune I mentioned at Ziggie's, or retreat to the Himalayas to sit at the feet of a guru, or even disappear in Australia. But. . ."

She rapped at her breastbone below the neckline of her dress.

"The true search is within, in that place that, run as one might, can never be escaped. In the self, in the soul, in those

depths of what one is, what one might be, or can attain to, or can give of oneself when called upon to give. And in a last-minute flurry, Jules, with your book in my grasp, I redeemed my suitcase, recovered my cello and came back. I returned; I came back. And since then, I've been playing, Jules, playing, playing, playing; and, at the same time, weeping, weeping, weeping, too, weeping for Lucille, for myself, for Irving, for Ziggie in a way, and for Adam, and for you, and for all humanity out there, through my music and tears, Jules, ridding myself, purging myself of all the strain and grief and entrapment and oppression that this blessed cursed city has put me through."

Adam, Ziggie and Irving were but steps away.

"I felt I owed you an explanation, Jules, after my Friday night performance when you came to me with Adam, and, in a way, gratitude as well. If I am fated to be cursed, I will be cursed anywhere; if blessed, I may as well be blessed in New York as anywhere else. Come what may, I am ready again to face and. . . and. . . as Ziggie said, to accept."

She extended her hand in farewell.

"Think of me sometimes, Jules. For my part, I should like to keep your book. I do hope dear Zubin will be pleased to see me back."

We shook hands. The sleeve of her coat had slipped upward. I caught sight again of the hairy mole above her wrist. As she had done before at Ziggie Levick's *soiree*, she followed the direction of my gaze.

"I'm not really dark, cool and prickly, am I, Jules?" she said. "Though I wonder whether everything might not be better for me if I were?"

The five of us, the last remaining of the assembled mourners — Josephine, Ziggie, Irving, Adam and myself — left the cemetery grounds together.

At the gates, Ziggie offered to drive Adam and myself back to Adam's apartment. Josephine, in turn, who, in that moment, had become to me more precious and wanted for her very un-

attainability, reached out towards Irving to straighten his tie and brush scurf from his collar.

"Come, Irving," she said. "We've had a rough ride. But still we go on, we must go on. For, when you consider the alternatives... Irving, will you drive me home?"

Glancing backward to watch them retreat, Josephine and Irving walking side by side at a slow discursive contemplative pace, I felt Ziggie Levick's hand on my shoulder, his other, I saw, resting equally squarely on Adam's.

"May they yet find the blessings they deserve," he said. "The gods willing, something decent, ennobling and pure may yet be saved from this agonised, accursed, unholy mess. In this world, the two of them may be small, but buoyed up, one by the other, they may yet be great. For the ultimate salvation, Adam, Jules, the ultimate salvation can only be had through one's fellow man."

12.

The coach returning me to the terminal was now off the freeway. If ever I had given the matter any thought, I became now even more conscious of the spaciousness of Melbourne. For, stretching far before me was Flemington Road, broad and neat and tree-lined; to the left, the Royal Park Gardens extending mist-ward in a lush expansive undulating sweep of green; and to the right stood an unobtrusive row of low-roofed houses, shops and factories that permitted light and colour and unpolluted clarity the fullest access into that most generous, receptive and uncluttered space. The traffic heading inward, heading outward, was thin and orderly; pedestrians were countably few; while the sight of two youngsters riding bicycles made me suddenly aware of a singular, indeed unnatural, dearth of children on Manhattan Isle which I had left the previous day.

I was returning with two of the six copies of my book, having given one each to Adam and Ziggie as well as to Josephine and Hoffnung.

Not having heard from him, I had, on the day prior to my

departure, phoned Hoffnung. As he talked a cable's distance away, I could envisage him in all his corpulent, balding, double-chinned bulk sprawled behind his massive desk and blowing thick rising smoke-rings from a monstrous cigar cavorting between his lips.

"You are a serious writer, to be sure, young man," he had said. "And from what I have read these past days of your work, a potentially mighty fine one, yes indeed, a mighty fine one. Your concerns are deep, they are searching, existential even, and full with the *angst* of living such as I did not countenance as possible or likely on your own so-distant, scarcely-known, scarcely-heard-of Antipodean soil. And there lies the difficulty, Sonny. For truth is that we here in this cauldron that answers to the name America, we too have such a bountiful cornucopia of miseries that will keep armies of wordsmiths and readers occupied till Doomsday comes without importing more of them from other parts. One day, however, when you have a name, m'boy, and a following, and wear the honoured prophet's mantle at home, then try these shores again. But for the moment, Jules, young man, for the moment, unless you can provide me with a Harvey Farber special to beat the man at his own all-problem-solving, all-answer-giving, money-spinning game, not even Laurie P. with the best of goodness, with the best of will, can do anything for you."

Adam's janitor had introduced New York to me as "hell"; through Adam, Hoffnung, Josephine and Adam's Uncle Ziggie, it had also passed at different times as Athens and Golgotha, Eden and Purgatory, jungled Babel and Olympus, Moloch and Mephistopheles. Returned to Melbourne, I did not yet know which was most true, just as I could not yet determine, in the confrontation between man and city, which was the mightier — the man who with his blood, his mind, his muscle, bone and soul created grand colossi or those colossi which could, and often did, with a stroke demolish man. That which, on the crest of vaulting exhilaration, I had written on leaving my Californian Brett C.Halliday's justly-vaunted enchanting, pure and wondrous Anaheim and Universal Studios delights, remained

true. If it was unthinkable, America would think it; if it was improbable, America would solve it; if it was impossible, yet would America achieve it. But, as Adam had asked of Harvey in another context at the *Cafe Pierre* on abandoning Lucille, at what cost, at what cost, of life, of happiness, of health?

For my own part, in relation to my private quest — the promotion of a book, the assertion of a name — I had been foiled, I had been thwarted. First time around, New York had proved too daunting. I was but a dwarf tugging at the shoelace of a giant. But prophet or not — to use Hoffnung's term — the day would dawn when I would return. Not with any Harvey Farber-Laurie P.-type panaceas in my bag, nor with transcendentalisms, supernaturalisms, or other fads and turn-ons by which humanity might achieve redemption, but with another book, or two, or three. Perhaps, if they were still left among the city's uncrushed and undevoured, I would yet again hear Josephine give to others of her music and, thereby, of the deepest gifts that were in her to give; I might yet see in Irving, too — with Josephine as his buttress, I ventured to think — the fulfilled and blessed wholeness of a reconstituted life; Ziggie, dapper, buoyant and with his livewire spring in every step would have remained as ageless and evangelical about his city to the visitor as ever; while Adam, if not the Nobel Laureate Harvey Farber had with lampooning levity presaged for him, might have attained to eminence in teasing out in that huge laboratory the chemistry that fuelled a man's passions, desires, debaucheries, harrowings and self-destructiveness, such knowledge being harnessed to save those earth-bound sacrificial seraphim known as man from being offered up to overweaning Moloch which, God-like, scavenged the city to feed on the carrion fall-out of blighted human life.

That I would return, I knew. I would yet make sense of, come to terms with, even master New York. Meanwhile, however, there was work to be done. More stories; in due course, another collection; a novel perhaps; and, over time, more in-depth analyses for sub-editor Jurgens to blue-pencil into final shape.

Meanwhile, the coach eased into the parking-bay outside the terminal. I looked up at the familiar office-blocks with their neon billboards flashing on their rooftops and the late April sunlight glinting on their facades; I listened to the hum of traffic, to the oscillating wires and to other reverberations from God-knew-what other scattered surrounding sources; and smelled the no-less familiar, even homely odours of pasties, hamburgers, meat pies and fries. All around, people were walking, pacing, hurrying, dawdling, waiting; trams passed by, and cars and buses turning left, turning right; while voices called, horns sounded and in a construction-site fenced off nearby, a foreman's whistle blew. I was home again, back in an ambience once more my own. The Public Baths, the tram-shelter, the Institute of Technology and the corner coffee-shop a pedestrian crossing away confirmed it, as did the stores strung close along the length of Swanston Street, and the Library and Museum, the traffic policemen at their intersections, and the Shrine of Remembrance standing staid, standing sturdy, surrounded by the ornate parklands in St.Kilda Road beyond. Though brisk, though active, even boisterous, there was not about this central thoroughfare the pressured fury, the relentless crush and sheer raw force of that other city now half a world away. I could breathe, I could let go. And I did breathe, I did let go, feeling my shoulders lighten, my fingers loosen and the tightness wrought by travel, sleeplessness and sustained intensity ease, like a succession of garments shed, out of my eyelids, my temples, my jaw.

But as, on disembarking, I caught sight of *The Age*, *The Herald* and *The Australian* billboards which read "Man Shot Dead: Vendetta Feared", "Boy in Sewer" and "Terror in Sydney Mall"; as I saw a shaggy stubbled hobo leaning in a hotel doorway; as I saw the blue bloated face of a breathless airline cargo attendant just then drawing on a cigarette; as I took in all these and heard, then saw, a police-car, an ambulance and a tow-truck approach and pass, their sirens blaring, lights flashing and motors raucously turning over, and overheard, too, a fellow-passenger say to his wife, "Well, dear, seeing these

again proves we're truly home", I found myself wondering, wondering whether Adam would ever trouble to return, I recalled Ziggie Levick's parting dictum about the gods and where earthly salvation ultimately lay, and heard in my mind's innermost ear the tremulous reverberating goose-pimpling strains of Boccherini rising, falling, rising, falling and rising yet again from the strings of a cello over which a girl now far away, dressed in red, with lush black hair, most delicate nose and fetching bristly mole above her wrist, bowed in intense concentration and artistry sublime. I knew that I was being fanciful, but I did hope that, though an ocean and a continent separated us, she might sometimes, when playing for Zubin Mehta, for Irving, for New York, remember also that she was playing for me.

A taxi moved forward in its rank. The driver stepped out, a toothpick between his teeth, opened the boot with a grunt, and loaded my luggage into it. He was not American and I was no greenie. He made no promises about being on the level, being direct, being cheap.

Summers

How Chekhovian! How positively, autumnally Chekhovian!

In our student days, Oscar was, as they say, a happy-go-lucky fellow with good humour and millenarian fervour. Besotted, Cupid's smitten dupe, I was ever ready to listen to him. Even to his name, which Father said was more suited to a cat, I gave no second thought.

"There are many and stupendous things for us to do," he would say, pounding the air from a tree-stump like some young zealot on a Yarra Bank soapbox or a firebrand in a clandestine graffitied revolutionary cell. "While we, while we gorge ourselves to goose-swollen glut with the venison of Croesus, a hundred unnoticed human churchmice die from dearth somewhere every minute. Human beings, flesh and blood, possessors like us of bodies and minds and hearts and souls, are daily imprisoned because of the colour that is their inheritance, because of the deity to whom they bend the knee, or simply because others don't like the angle of their proboscis or the slant of their peepers. Meanwhile, pensioners and widows barely survive. The barons who scarcely need it reap in the wealth, while the worker suffocates and rots in the morass of his own poverty. And, travesty supreme, buddy-buddies with the barons, our would-be saviours, our leaders, elected to do us service, shit humbug by the bucketful upon the people, who in turn are too lazy or blockish or opiated by tuppeny ephemera and fripperies even to notice or particularly to care. There are

things to be done, Jenny-Jen! Change is what we need, change! A good, strong, wholesome and mighty revolution! At the very least, a revolution of minds!"

It was summer. Examinations were over. Day after day, we spent our time on the beach, with the water, the sand and the sun each a magnet drawing us unto itself. At ease, we watched the activities about us, peered into the pasts of old men walking by, threw crumbs at the seagulls, pointed at the oil-carriers and liners across the bay, and, of course, laughed a lot — all in a heady scenario as we gave clouds human faces, called the winds by name — *Eurus* and *Zephyrus*, *Aeolus* and *Favonius* — and thought how easy it might be to reach out for those clouds and grasp them in the palm and let the winds bear us away, bear us to places far better than our own where, as Oscar said, people were less concerned with wealth than with service, less with status than with decency, and less with hoity-toity airs than with simple goodness, creativity, honest living, duty and truth.

"To discover, experience, learn what is best in every place," he said, "and blend that best into a perfect whole — *that* is every individual's obligation, and if on this small large blessed cursed vibrant stagnant earth there is any purpose for us at all, this is by far the chiefest."

Ah, innocence! Ah, simplicity! Ah, nobility! How I agreed with him. As always, he made everything seem so simple, so easy to attain.

"It is up to us, isn't it?" I found myself saying, blushing even now in remembering it, but ready to forgive my Candidean naivety if only because I was eighteen then and barely out of high-school, and barely out from under the umbrella of my cosy, comfortable and sheltered parental home.

If summer had a colour that entered memory, there lastingly to endure, it was blue — turquoise, sapphire, cerulean blue. True, there was orange and scarlet and violet and vermilion, too, at the rising and setting of the sun, with dazzling incandescent white-light flashes of summer lightning and the leafy-green of gardens and the yellows of honeysuckle and the

golden ochre of soil — I know this, I know because I have often revisited those places since then. But what remains most vivid is the lightness, the blitheness, the optimism that came with the all-suffusing bluebell blue in which Oscar and I touched and nestled and stroked and in which I delighted in his pronouncements and in his unshakeable credo that, unlike so many others, in contrast even to the greater part of humanity, we were to be masters over our own fates.

Summer passed — as it had to pass, of course, eternity alone and nothing else being eternal. For Oscar, university days returned; for me, they were just beginning. Oscar was in his final Arts year, majoring in Political Science and History, the better, he said, to prepare himself for a future in journalism or politics or some other form of service to society. He was energetic. If earlier he had involved himself modestly in student affairs, he now threw himself into them with the intensity of total commitment. He addressed meetings, wrote for the journals, stood for the Students' Council. He campaigned for education, marched for Aboriginal rights, helped organise rallies against apartheid, against imprisonment of writers in Chile, against military oppression in Greece. Even if sometimes his utterances and pronouncements were radical, he always made sense, and I, happy and glowingly proud at those gatherings, was ever by his side. "Oscar and Tosca" were we to those who were close to us.

Then, one evening, the world turned over.

Oscar had been to a committee meeting of "*The Three S's*" as we had come to call the *Students for a Saner Society*, and I met him afterwards as arranged at the Lapis Lazuli for coffee. Oscar seemed tired, depressed. He spoke little, dismissed the meeting in the tersest terms — "Crap!", "Clockwork mice, all of them!", "Mindless embryos still!", and "Know nothings, caring less, and each hankering solely, solely, for laurel on his own head!" — and avoided touch, closeness, eye contact. He was remote, preoccupied, anxious to get away. I had seen him this way two or three times before, but each time the mood had quickly passed. Now, at my door, he looked away, gazed dully

at the gathered darkness, and said, "It's impossible. I've thought about it. We can't go on anymore."

"Can't go on?"

"You. . . me. . . us. . ."

In public, on podiums, in the journals, he had always and easily and unfailingly found the right words. Now they came only after long hesitations. Above us, grey gloomy clouds drifted by, the treetops quivered and the streetlamps were circled by quivering haloes as a light drizzle began to fall.

"There are things to be done, places to see. . . A whole world to explore. . ."

"Can't we both. . ."

"To go on as we are is in time to become bound by the banal and the everyday."

"It needn't be like. . ."

"But it will be. I saw it. I saw it all. Even as I sat at that meeting. In a vision. . .yes, in a vision, even as those closet reformers talked of what colour to paint the placards for next week's anti-hanging procession, even as they argued over whether to march up Gibberish or Twaddle or Tomfoolery Street. I saw it all. What's the use of striving and wanting when everything here is pettiness and smallmindedness and stagnation, when there's a world out there. . . a world with spaciousness and scope and countless possibilities for the imagination to take flight?. . ."

"It needn't be so. . .it needn't be as you say. . ."

"Ha!"

"There is no reason to stagnate. We can travel together. . . We can go anywhere, do anything. I won't bind you if you don't want to be bound. I. . ."

"If that could only be true."

"It is true."

"For a while it is. But what does a girl want, any girl? A home. And children. And clothes, and friends for Sunday barbecues, a garden, comfort, a car of her own, and, eventually aerobics classes, tennis lessons, a swimming-pool."

"Have I ever said I wanted any of these?"

"But that's what happens. It's almost a law. Look at the Jacobsons, the Hilliers, the Wallants. Babies, nappies, overdrafts, insipid dinners or suppers Saturday nights, valuable time squandered over B-grade movies, nine-o'clock starts to the daily routine, five-o'clock commutings home, and then television, feet up, the evening paper, and another night lost to sleep before facing the next day, identical to the day before. And all the while, stagnation, boredom, dullness, sweeping over everything... everything... everything..."

Pleas, entreaties, promises — these all had their place. But, naive and unseasoned though I might have been, I was no marshmallowy soap-opera heroine given to histrionics; and there was also the question of pride. I had weathered his moods before, as he in like measure had oftentimes had to weather mine, and as long as he did not admit or hint at any loss of love, I held — could still hold — to the belief that this was just another phase which like other phases would pass into the stuff of future memories mutually shared. This did not stop the haloes around the streetlamps from broadening through the mist of gathered tears or my voice from splintering in a thickened tightened throat, but even as the clouds grew black with mounting menace, even as the drizzle swelled to steady rain, even as he turned away and, with head retracted into his collar, walked downstairs and through the gate, I took heart — or told myself to take heart — from my older cousin Julie who, like all the millions and millions of others, had been through the very same thing, and was now able to laugh at what she liked to call the "*affaires tristes de couer*".".

But days, weeks, months passed, and were to time, to oblivion, to extinction irredeemably lost. And then another summer, and another, and more; the revolving cycles of seasons seeing me in time complete my teacher's course, seeing me go out with this young fellow and that, and seeing me, if not wait, then hope at least for Oscar's return — or for the coming over the threshold of another who could again excite vision and commitment, and self-giving, self-denying zeal.

A woman, however, cannot afford to wait forever. Past

twenty-four, twenty-five, the body ages, changes, but continues to desire and begins to protest if persistently denied. The lines on the face, they, too, harden; fears of solitude and waste, however silent, intensify. And people begin to talk. Humiliation and shame attach themselves like desert flies. Father, meanwhile, tells of others' grandchildren, Mother hints, hints, repeatedly hints. Meetings, ostensibly by chance, are arranged and there is excitement for a while, along with expectations, sidelong glances and unuttered hopes.

And so, one day — ostensibly by chance — Bernard was introduced to me. He was shy, quietly spoken, considerate and practical. After three months, he bought me a ring and we brought the happy news to our families. Everything had moved swiftly and people gossiped ("People being people, gossip they must," Oscar had once said, not without a sneer), but in a strange and sober way, I was content. We were married in May, the merest six months after we met. Shrivelled russet leaves fell lightly on my veil; it rained a little just as we were having photos taken; while in the distance — we took it as good omen — a rainbow gleamed against a hazy sky. Mother wept and kissed Bernard as her own. . .

* * * *

Summers do not change. The sun, the heat, the oil-carriers and liners across the bay — they are all there, all there as though they have never left. The seagulls too, as before, swoop down to gather crumbs thrown to them; old men grown older still shamble by; the soft clouds still drift along like wanderers, while lively winds blow on, in no way spent by their constant motion. But the clouds have no faces now, nor do the winds bear names. They lost these long ago, in a time as retrievable as antiquity, when we looked at them with different eyes.

When Bernard speaks, it is about his clients in the office or about the Lodge. He has to deal with difficult people, he says. At work, they are always complaining; they are always wanting

his services more cheaply, even though he does all he can to squeeze the last cent off their tax returns; they are always, always dissatisfied; while, at the Lodge, where he goes for company and relaxation, he is surrounded by apathy and laziness. He is the secretary and works hard to perform well what he calls his part. If only others worked as hard as he, he sighs whenever he returns from a meeting.

Come summer, we take Helene to a coastal resort: Apollo Bay, Lakes Entrance, Torquay. Rachel, now seventeen, prefers to spend her vacations with her friends at camp, and who can argue against that? Meanwhile, day after day, we pass our time on the sand. Bernard does not care for swimming. He stretches himself out on his towel, covers his face with an open book — Robbins or Michener or Irving Wallace, whatever is escapist and modish at the time — and remarks, "Ah, this is the life. No-one to annoy you, no meetings to attend, no-one's laziness or complaints to endure", or "Wake me when it's time to milk the cows". And for hours on end, with his head resting in the cups of his hands, he breathes easily, evenly, deeply. At such times, he is the portrait of contentment, he is truly in Arcadia.

For my part, I sit beside him, brush the sand from my legs, rub myself down with coconut oil, take off and put on my glasses, wave to Helene leaping about in the shallows, think of Rachel at the camp, of the resumption of school in another two weeks or three, of the assorted chores I must attend to, and of the friends, the butcher, the newsagent, the fruiterer I must phone when we get back. And just recently, as I sat gazing across the waters, following to the right, then to the left the yacht-dotted horizon till it lost itself, here behind a headland, there behind a cliff; as I watched the interplay in the distance of colour and light and cloud and mist; and as I thought vaguely, distractedly of the books I should soon be teaching again — *The Cherry Orchard*, *Julius Caesar*, Machiavelli's *Prince*; in short, as I sat there thus absorbed, a stray memory arose as if from nowhere and possessed me, a vivid scintillating blue-bathed recollection. . . and a thought, a question, a capricious and, at

the same time, a haunting reflection: "What might have been, what might have been if events had taken a different turn?"

Was this a premonition, the stuff of something supernal cutting across that earth-bound routine which, alongside Bernard, had evolved into a calm, untrammelled and sensibly sober means of living one day at a time through each given year?

"Fated" might be too strong a term, but I guess that sometime, somewhere we were bound to meet, Oscar and I; and meet we did — on our recent holiday near the boat-ramp in Torquay.

He had simply been walking, hands in pockets, northward along the sand as I had been walking south, sandals dangling from my fingers, watching the last slow dip of the sun into the sea; each of us alone, I for my part on my own because Bernard had taken Helene to buy the evening newspaper and bring back pizzas for dinner.

There were no sweeping pronouncements or outrageous statements this time.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said when I asked after his welfare, not knowing at first what else to say. "Fine. Just come for a bit of a holiday. Giving the brain cells a bit of a breather. With my wife, and my child."

I looked about as though I might have expected to see them.

"A daughter, Tamara. Ten. A good girl, doing well at school. She's with her mother who's back at the motel with a migraine."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry to hear that." There was little else that was appropriate to say. "And. . . I guess if you've come for a breather, you must be working rather hard?"

"I work," he said. "It's a job. What else is there to do?"

I intended neither malice nor hurt. "Once there were many things to do," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. He had put on weight and his cheeks were a dusky blue — as Father's had been before his blood pressure was found to be raised.

"Our children may do better than we have," he said.

I remembered his protest. "And all the while, stagnation, boredom, dullness, sweeping over everything... everything..."

"What of *our* lives, then?" I wanted to say. "As adults, as parents, are we to expect nothing *for ourselves*?"

I did not do so, however. I settled for neutral conversation, for painless talk, though even painless talk was not beyond taking painful turns.

He had made his trip abroad, he said, running a hand through thinning greying hair. For three years he had travelled and worked in different places — as freelance reporter, proofreader, waiter, clerk. He had brought back a Canadian girl he'd met in London but she hadn't settled in at all well in her adopted home where they lived in an Elwood flat near Point Ormond and where he worked as a sales representative with a packaging firm. He had given up — long ago given up — all notions of politics; the only writing he did now, he said, revolved around the signing of cheques for school, medical and telephone bills. He bought season tickets for symphony concerts and the theatre; on Sundays, he might drive out to the hills, and once a month attended his local philatelic club. He had also recently taken up bridge.

"Now you know it all," he said in conclusion, and laughed — meekly, weakly. I saw a gap where he had lost a tooth. "And well may you ask," he added, "Is this what we were truly destined for? When I remember our plans, our designs, our schemes to change the world...and our determination to be master over our fate..."

He had become so vulnerable, so pathetic. I almost welcomed the opportunity to bite.

"You know what Confucius says: 'As one makes one's bed'," I said, deliberately cool, even cruel, "'so must one lie in it'."

He reached towards me but did not quite touch. Behind him, a father and son in yellow life-jackets were hauling their boat up the ramp, a dog splashed about them in the shallows, a woman was shaking sprays of sand out of her towel. The light

over the waters had faded to a mellow violet and a breeze smelling oddly of rubber leapt up.

Instead of replying, he bit a lip, passed a hand down his cheeks and across his chin, and nodded. Swollen dusky folds, I noticed, weighed down his eyes. He then turned out his palms in a suggestion of helplessness, looked at his watch and said, "I really must be going... Penelope doesn't like me leaving her in a strange place too long. Tamara's probably hungry, and... and... I'm sorry... I must go".

He turned awkwardly and headed back the way he had come. He had clearly wanted to say something else, just as in his retreat, he paused and half-twisted his body towards me as if he were about to say it. But, giving himself pause to reflect, he simply heaved, raised his shoulders, waved a wrist in dismissal and continued on his way. I remained standing there for a while, nursing an image of light, but one no longer glowing in that once exhilarating enlivening burnished blue. Rather, it was matt now, more toneless, sooty and shrouded in grey. In grey. The beaten leaden grey in the tired cushions about his eyes, the dull sheenless grey of his diminishing hair, the dreary ashen grey of time-hardened mortal empty hands.

Downstairs, outside my window, children are playing. From far away, the tang of the sea drifts in like the finest feathers on unseen wings and the breeze on entering rustles the curtains.

It is cosily warm all around, and light. Ricky, the neighbour's son, eight years old and a devil, is pulling his sister Nicole's hair. Nicole, herself no angel, in turn kicks him vigorously in the shin. Adrian from across the street is chasing the bees among the nasturtiums; Fleur, the Sutcliffes' girl, a tomboy of the highest rank, sits straddled on the fence; while Harry, the Lampert's boy, is far away among the clouds in his ever-earnest studiousness, sitting crosslegged on a discarded crate and brushing away the flies that daunt his every effort to read. Along the street, Julian is bounding on his way from university. He jaunts home, his bag slung over a shoulder, tall and buoyant and

sturdy, his hair a mass of curls, his whole manner one of confidence as though he held the very future — and a splendid accomplished future at that — in his eyes. His mother Marta, to her despair, says he has wild ideas; he is forever critical of everything — of his parents, of his teachers, of the country's leaders, of national leaders everywhere — and would, if he could, she says, try to overturn the world. Rachel, meanwhile, dear Rachel, is obviously infatuated — I would even put it more strongly, she is clearly in love with him. She has never been so forgetful of things, or as sloppy at home; nor, against this, has she ever been so spiritedly radiant.

"Do you think the human race is coming to an end?" she asked yesterday at the dinner-table.

"That's rather drastic, don't you think?" Bernard replied, his expression patently feigning seriousness.

"Justin thinks it will end, the way we're going about destroying ourselves and our ecosphere. One morning, he says, the sun won't rise, it simply won't rise, and there'll be no moon. Nothing will be there. We'll have blown ourselves to bits or suffocated in our foul atmosphere or some other catastrophe will have taken place and there'll be nothing at all, nothing except darkness and void, as it all was once before."

She sounded cheerful, vivacious, somehow delightfully innocent to the gloomy prophecy inherent in her words.

"How frightful," said Helene.

"Is there no way out then?" asked Bernard, controlling a smile.

"There is a way," she said, "there is a way," so grown-up as she brandished her fork in emphasis. "We must change, change for the better. Justin wrote an article in a students' journal. He doesn't have answers to all the problems, but he does make sense. To be just and honest, not worry or strive for power or for influence or personal laurels, and to work hard. And to think of others, of *others*, not only and always of ourselves. This, he says, means revolution. But the revolution is in ourselves, in our behaviour. Mankind must change within to save itself, for

world peace will come only when each person has established his own inner peace."

Ah, innocence! Simplicity! Nobility!

And trustiness! Enchantment! Faith!

Faith!

Faith such as had once been mine, had been Oscar's, had been ours in tandem! Ah, what might have been? What might yet have been?

But go, turn back the years, erase what has more truly been. Forget that children have been born and have grown up. Ignore the fact that age has been creeping on, that the skin is no longer smooth and plastic, nor the spirit so weightless, and that the energies for big things are sapped, and return to the time when frivolity and seriousness were at once boundless and sublime, to the time when one could, without blushing, proclaim that one indeed was master over one's life. Where do we go wrong? Why do we so complicate our lives? Why do we choose one path in life and not another? Indeed, do we choose at all or is it chosen for us? Or is it neither choice nor destiny which directs our ways but something quite beyond and outside ourselves — some capricious demon perhaps, a whimsical gremlin, or a cosmic prankster ever bent on mischief? Or does even this not suffice to explain? Might it be what some call chance and others chaos, or still something else as yet unnamed that flirts for its pleasure with the happiness of men? Rachel glows with fervour. Her naivety is touching. I pray with all my heart for the fulfilment of the remedies that her Justin offers to the world, as also for her own happiness and the untrammelled realisation of her every wish.

Meanwhile, it's already late afternoon. The roast in the oven is nearly ready. In an hour Bernard will be home. We will eat our dinner, talk a little. Rachel will tell of her lectures and spout some new idea she has received from Justin, or from whatever is today's equivalent of our own one-time "*Three S's*". After that, Bernard will read the newspaper or type his minutes of last week's Lodge meeting, the girls will study, and the evening will pass, serenely as always, safely, a model of peace sublime.

Then it will grow late and we will all retire to bed. And for a while, in the darkness, we will talk, Bernard and I, he about his clients and the Lodge, I about my classes, the children, the neighbours, the bills. Then we will lose ourselves to the world, the two of us, distract ourselves from excessive thought and concern, if only for an instant, in the forgetfulness of embrace. And Bernard will then turn over to meet his dreams, while I will lie awake for a time and listen to the sounds outside, to the murmurings of the treetops and the hollow echoes of the wind, and wonder, simply wonder, about summers long ago and about blueness and sunshine and about clouds with faces and winds with names, trying, trying to imagine the possible courses of paths untrodden, the faces of children never born, and the fate of full-blooded hopes, ideals and schemes left, forever, unfulfilled.

Music

Mr Glick!

Tapering to sharpness, his head rocks, to and fro as though he were pecking at crumbs, while his body sways, that nimble frame so fragile and spare, as, by my side, he presses my fingers on the piano keys, repeating in his Litvak accent, "This is C, this is D, this is E. C-D-E, C-D-E, C-D-E.

Mr Glick! Mr *Um*glick!

Music.

I am too much of a street-boy, I assault the streets too much, even in St.Kilda, it seems, to which we have moved after the preceding two years in our Northcote exile. Mother would have me tamed — with books, a chess-set, with music.

Books I devour anyway; chess I tolerate; — but music!

The idea!

"'Music softens the character'," Mother says, quoting fat Mrs Tuchinski whose whiskers sweat mercury when she comes in Fridays with an order for her green-groceries. " 'Music broadens the personality, too, gives it depth.' Mrs Tuchinski sends her Micheline for music lessons too and see how she has changed."

Mother is right, of course. Micheline Tuchinski, cast from the same template as her mother, *has* changed. At twelve, nudging thirteen, she is becoming a model of refinement, even of coyness. No longer does she blurt out the answers to Miss Bartholomew's questions in class, but raises her hand instead. No

longer does she blink fish-eyed and impatient behind her glasses, but sets her grey-green gaze upon that thin-lipped purveyor of learning who must either look away in search of another raised hand or of flickers of enlightenment in another's face, or yield yet again to the sharper edge of that penetration with a resigned "Well, then, Micheline, you tell the class", which Micheline does, not with her former all-knowing cocky arrogance but with more softly-cushioned unabrasive certainty. And she walks differently, too, does Micheline, with a rhythmically-buoyant tilting of her shoulders and her very ample hips, while her breasts begin to bulge and, when she plays basketball, it is hair, I swear, that is seen to be darkening the moist cupolas of her armpits.

But credit all that to piano lessons?

And because Micheline Tuchinski has changed, I should learn music, too?

I shrug my shoulders, indifference the better ploy to have Mother relinquish the idea. But, standing before the sink peeling potatoes for the evening soup, she tunes her voice to air a melody of her own.

"Every Jewish child," she lilts, her countenance set in reverie while her fingers mechanically shave grimy rind off moist white starchy flesh, "every Jewish child should know how to play an instrument. A person can never know when it may come to use. Look at Heifetz, Oistrakh — and Rabin, Rubinstein."

Customers? I am about to ask, Mother knows them so well, but hold back as she says, "And Joseph Leibholz, he plays, no?"

"The violin," I say, loath to concede more.

"So the violin. For him the violin, for you the piano. Music is music. Broadens character, gives it depth."

Fat Mrs Tuchinski!

"You do like him, don't you?" Mother presses. "You do want him to be your friend, no? He's such a quiet boy, a *deep* boy. Perhaps you will play music together. . ."

Joseph Liebholz. . . go play music with an angel among

angels as Mrs Danziger calls him. Joseph Liebholz with drifting dreamy eyes the colour of distant oceans and as unfathomably deep. Joseph Liebholz, weaver of verse, manipulator of crayon, spinner of melody, whom one can worship and glorify or vilify or loathe, but whom, till the end of days, one may never emulate.

But why evoke Joseph Liebholz and not Abe Kaplan, jester, chatterer, gasser Abe Kaplan who is also in my class and plays music too, Abe Kaplan "*The Dunce*", Abe Kaplan "*The Farter*", whose effusions now return with near audible sharpness: "So boring the piano. Plink plink bang bang. Bang bang plink plink. Practice practice practice. Bang bang plink plink. Plink plink bang bang. Makes you want to shoot the geezer who ever invented the rotten thing. Plink plink bang bang. Bang bang plink plink. . ."?

"Abe Kaplan. . .," I begin, "he. . ."

It is scarcely a duet Mother and I now play, but rather separate tunes, melodies that hardly harmonise, my own painfully plaintive, Mother's more certain, forceful, increasingly suffocating mine.

"You want to be like *him*?! That *shegetz*?! That *monster*?! Rude, wild, with no respect for his parents, who throws stones at his mother, spits *schmutz* on his father. . ."

"He didn't. . ."

". . .and got caught stealing stamps from Coles. . ."

"It's not true, he told me. . ."

". . .and who will yet bring disgrace on all our people, may they, our enemies, not know it. . ."

"Piano doesn't help him. . ."

". . .and who doesn't appreciate his parents' sacrifices so that he may learn and grow up decent. . ."

"I don't want to play. It doesn't interest. . ."

"It will do you good."

"How?"

"Believe your mother."

"How?!"

"Has she ever been wrong?"

"Please!"

"But it's all arranged. Your father has agreed."

"Mother! Mother?!"

I am cowed into silence, turn away from Mother's unyielding gaze, furies rumbling deep within me as the taste of conspiracy wells to my throat. The idea! The sentence! To sit indoors, plink plink bang bang, bang bang plink plink, when I could be outside, out in the streets, *my* streets. . .

Mother, can't you see it? I can't even breathe. . .

"He is a poor man but very kind," Mother placates. "Mr Glick. We should support him. After what he's been through. He is also Micheline's teacher. You start Thursday after school. You'll like him, you'll see."

So am I offered up, an offering to music. All because of customers called Heifetz and Rubinstein, because Micheline Tuchinski has suddenly changed and sprouted breats on her chest and hairs under her arms, because Mr Glick is a poor man who. . . goodness, what has he been through?. . . because. . . because a Jewish child must break his fingers plink plink bang bang to have his character softened, broadened, and have it given depth, and because who knows when it may come to use.

Music!

Music!!

Mother is my escort. Without her, I might not get there, there, to Mr Glick's dim apartment on Marine Parade, my every protest along the way just so much more wind lost to wind coursing in from the vast, open, seemingly boundless sea across the street a truant hop, a step and a jump away.

"This is my son," Mother says meekly at the door, her tone not wholly devoid of awe as she presses me forward with the palm of a hand. "He has promised to try hard. . . He is in Micheline's class at school. . . If he has talent. . ."

I look at this new teacher of mine. Reality mocks expectation. But then what did I expect? A giant? An ogre? Flowing flamboyant mercury hair, the jowls of a Sphinx, the hands of a

Hercules? He is a little man, a bird, all leanness, undernourishment, sharp angles and dryness. His name nailed upon his door reads Abraham Glick, but with violence to none, he could as aptly be Methuselah, so old, so wizened is he — sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five? — his nose and ears honed to the acuteness of attrition, his scalp denuded to the barrenness of rural winters, wholly matted, blotched and prey to blight.

He smiles. Or, rather, his face folding, he *attempts* to smile. The lips just do not quite seem to do his fullest bidding. And he talks, too, his Litvak Yiddish more quiet, more refined, more nasal than the broader earthier Warsaw Yiddish of my inheritance.

"There is not a child alive," he says, looking at Mother and touching my hair, "not a child alive not blessed with talent of some sort. Given the will. . ."

With small eyes frisking about, he gazes at the *Beginner's* volume of *John Thompson's Piano Course* in my hands for which Mother has made a rare and special trip into the city.

Mother echoes, "Yes, the will. . ."

"And the necessity. . .," the teacher adds.

"Do you hear?" Mother adds as descant.

". . .there is nothing, nothing, a child, a man cannot achieve."

"Are you listening?" Mother says, herself listening, clinging to his lips, waiting to hear more. "Mr Glick is a wise man. You will learn, you will learn great things from him. . ."

But there is no more to listen to, no more to hear. Mr Glick does not elaborate. Instead, he moves his hand to my shoulder and licks his lips, his upper denture suddenly coming to life as it dances momentarily to a brisk evanescent tune all its own. Reflex over-riding control, I try to draw away, but his grasp is firm, however frail the cast of his hand. In me, Mr Glick has found prey of a kind. He is the hawk, I the mouse; he the vulture, I but helpless flesh.

"So you want to learn music, heh?" he asks, squeezing my shoulder still more tightly. "Music you want to learn?"

Go tell the truth!

But, then, go lie!

I lie. I look down, study the dull green floral pattern of the threadbare carpet, study too the warp of the mat on which he stands, and find in the fraying toes of his slippers safer harbour for my gaze in the face of the wordless lie to which I nod than in those black-winged prancing eyes that would the readier discover my dissembling.

"Well, then, say goodbye to your mother," he says, releasing my shoulder only to pinch my cheek, "and if you come with me I shall teach you in time the charm, the magic, the miracle of music.

And what charm! What magic! What miracle!

His hand over mine is coarse dry flesh. Beneath it, my stiff unwilling fingers press white keys with jagged thrusts as Mr Glick chants "C-D-E, C-D-E. Loosen the fingers. Relax your wrists. C-D-E, C-D-E."

For five minutes, ten, fifteen, I loosen my fingers to the same routine: C-D-E, C-D-E, with Mr Glick beside me, that lean sparrow nodding, wriggling, scratching a buttock, shuffling his feet. "That's good, that's better, more slowly, now slightly faster, gentler now, now louder. Good, good, good. . ."

To our right, the window hosts into the room yellow mote-specked light. Grime clings to the edges of the glass, the paint lifts in flakes, grey dust speckles the putty. Erratic in its flight, a bird raps its wings against the pane, holds its body, head and legs stretched out in marbled poise and flies away. There is still light outside, muted Autumn light to be sure, but wasted, squandered light as C-D-E yields to D-E-F and D-E-F to E-F-G. Beside me, Mr Glick pouts his lips, sucks them back, looks at his watch, fidgets absently and distractingly, with a button on his shirt. Up close, he smells of soap, an effluvium sweet and cloying like the treacly syrup Dr Ashkenazy regularly prescribes for my tonsillitis. His smell is oppressive. And oppressive too this cage in which I find myself with its peeling must-stained walls, the red and yellow imitation tulips in a decanter catching dust on the piano, the black-rimmed photograph of a perpetually-staring bearded Jew in caftan and skull-

cap equally black, with a pale dumpy woman in shapeless frock and shawl beside him, beneath which hang other photographs, aging stills of tumbledown houses bordering cobbled lanes which pass under cracked stone bridges where bare-footed sunken-eyed children play drearily and beaten, and still more photographs such as my parents, too, possess, though stored discreetly in the pages of an album seldom brought to view.

Cut off from the outside by criss-crossed bars of that dreary window, I am hemmed in, I am stifled. A curse on Mrs Tuchinski, on Micheline, on Joseph Liebholz! Across Marine Parade lures the beach. The sea is green, white foamy diamonds dance upon its surface, and beyond and to the left and to the right I glide in arcs and circles and figures of eight with a seagull, I streak full tilt towards the yachts, I scale the pylons of Port Melbourne, and leap from the tower on Point Ormond where more than once I have grazed a knee, sprained an ankle, or bruised a thigh. And in my imagination, I fly too to the oval scarcely five minutes away where Paul and Gerry and Max assault with body and voice the ground and the air with their playing. The last cricket balls of the season are being bowled, th footballs are being retrieved from camphor, running shoes yield to toe-capped boots, cottons to woollens, and glossy whites cede to the two-toned, three-toned colours of guernseys numbered in worship of running, scrimmaging, flying heroes who, for the next six months, will be emulated, barracked for, urged on, and wept and panted and pulsated over. While I. . . I. . . Could I, too, like them — oh, envy burning — run, rise, fly, let loose the shackles of the here, the now, and this constricting, suffocating blighting cage.

But clipped are the wings of my thoughts, and tethered the feet that would run as Mr Glick touches (no more than that, merely touches) my hand to return capricious fancy to the rectangular white teeth before me that are in fact grey and gritty and rough beneath my fingers.

"I know what you are thinking," he says, his thin rhythmic Litvak tone beguiling and his nose twitching above the restless

pouting of his lips. "I know. . . I, too, a boy was once. . . And I, too, loved light and greenness and freedom. . ."

He applies soft pressure on my fingers; his own are bossed and spindled and parchment-fleshed.

"Now go on, D-E-F, E-F-G, D-E-F, E-F-G. . . Yes, I, too, was once a boy. . . and day after day I too played upon the piano. . . and I too said a curse on it, a curse on it. . . You see, I know what you think. . . But my father, may his memory be blessed, though a poor man, on this he insisted, on this he insisted. . . 'Whatever it costs, music he will learn to play', not knowing then — how could he know? — that with his severity, that with his every last *grosz* made from hammering a nail into a last, he was to save a life, to save a life, no, to save a soul from. . ."

Is that his father over the imitation tulips looking down, so inert, so docile, his lips lost, his mouth concealed behind the vest of heavy straggly blackness? How imagine hardness, severity, insistence issuing from such deadness? How. . .

D-E-F, E-F-G, D-E-F, E-F-G. Beside me hovers Mr Glick's treacly odour; above me, his father's and mother's silent vigil; and all around walls closing in, unseen but constricting and real, enclosing mustiness, acridity and other pungent smells — of age and decay, of mothballs and wax.

What is he telling me, this Noah, this Methuselah? What is he saying?

I glance at him, look away. The glance he takes for interest.

"He was a wise man, my father. . . in the way simpleness is wise. . . Do you understand me, my child, do you understand?"

I nod. I lie. I do not understand, but play on: C-D-E-F, D-E-F-G, plink pling bang bang, bang bang plink plink.

"On a stool by his bench he would sit and hum. Mmmm, mmmm. Up and down and soft and loud, sometimes slow, sometimes brisk. Pleasant melodies, homely tunes. . . lullabies and love songs and songs of praise and songs of sadness. . . Mmmm, mmmm. . . For he had a secret. . . or so he thought. . .

But it was no secret, for, already long before, Moses knew it and Miriam knew it, and King David and King Solomon and the Prophetess Devorah, they all knew it too. . ."

What is he telling me? What is he saying? Froth gathers at the corners of his lips, his black beady eyes are alive in their flitting and frisking across mine, probing in ways that make me cower, make me recede within confines ever shrinking as he leans towards me and then swings back, now reaching and touching, now springing back.

"C-D-E-F, D-E-F-G. . . C-D-E-F, D-E-F-G. . . Let go the fingers, relax the wrist, now G-F-E-D, F-E-D-C, G-F-E-D, F-E-D-C. . . To sing was to pray and music was prayer. *This* was my father's secret, may his memory be blessed, my father believing that whatever the words, whatever the language, only through music could God be reached. . . Did you know that? That only through music could God be reached?. . ."

The goal-posts are already standing; in its greenness, the turf is eager; Coleman, Johnson and James with their brawny artistry grace the back page of every newspaper. And here, Mr Glick, Mr *Um*glick, talks of prayer and music and God.

Mrs Tuchinski!

Micheline!

Joseph Liebholz!

Who wants, who wants that *I* should want through music to have my character softened, broadened, given depth? To be a cissy when out there, five minutes away, and beyond, all worldly praise goes to cunning and swiftness and muscle? To be assailed with legends and God when all I have come for is to bang bang plink plink out the hour to satisfy Mother, satisfy Father, and then to flee at the end into the spacious, the open, the fresh, the blue?

"You are learning well now, you are learning fast. . . Now C-D-E-F-G. . . And again C-D-E-F-G. . . Yes, it is hard at first but it gets much easier. . . Now C-D-E-F-G. . . and C-D-E-F-G. . ."

A licking of lips follows, a muffled sound of clattering dentures, and potent is the smell of soap, mothballs and wax in the

suffocating dreariness, while every surface and every corner is choked by the wearisome tedium of oldness. Everything groans with age, deterioration, decay. The apartment, the furniture, even the tulips, with Mr Glick oldest of all. Yet it is he who now begins to talk of youth in that murky cavern of grey antiquity.

"You are young still, precious child. What can you understand? When I talk of God, what do you see? A throne, a hoary head, a face burning with magnificence, our Father Abraham to the left of Him, our Prophets to the right, a hand outstretched upon the world and eyes that see your every action, ears that hear your every word, a mind that reads your every thought? If you do, that is fine, for you are but a child. As I too a child was once. And to a child is given the gift of imagination, of seeing in images, in pictures, in forms. . . But to an old man, my child," — Mr Glick rocks on swelling waves — "C-D. . .E-F-G. . . C-D. . .E-F-G. . . To an old man, what is that God?. . ."

Opalescent clouds tinged with evening's crimson cross the setting sun. Yellow light yields to ashen bleakness. No more birds flutter against the window, and silent greyness settles upon the returning yachts and more heavily upon a trawler somewhere far removed and densely shrouded with mist. So does the day shrink and disappear, leaving no light in which to kick a ball or tackle Gerry or Max or head for goal.

And Mr Glick rises. Sways once, twice, a third time as though dizziness comes over him. With his legs he thrusts back his chair. Then, on the crest of a private inspiration he rides briskly towards the buffet from which he withdraws yet another photograph, this one dog-eared and creased, and brings it to me to study, once again laying a hand on mine, this time to give me pause from monotonous motion over those C-D-Es, D-E-Fs, E-F-Gs.

"You have done well for the first day," he says. "We shall do better still next time. But now, look, what do you see?"

A quiver laces his tone, a peculiar agitation. What should I see? What does he wish me to see?

Three men in a huddle.

I see them.

Striped outfits, pyjama-like, the kind that prisoners wear in films I have seen.

I see them.

One man at a piano, a second with a violin, a third behind a cello.

I see. I see.

"Tell me, my child. Have your father, your mother, ever mentioned Theresienstadt? Have they ever mentioned your cousins, uncles, aunts who might have gone in there and never came out?"

Twice already have I lied to him. For a third time now, I nod, but in that gesture there is affirmation this time, truth that rises from some primal memory of a kitchen in Carlton, a cottage in Pitt Street where, new arrivals all, my parents and the Fleischers, the Kopecniks, Elnboigens and Nussbaums pepper and salt its vapours with stories of incarceration and exile and hiding, and spice it with refrain after refrain of names, a multitude of them — Bialystok, Theresienstadt, Paris, Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin — that grow in meaning, force and resonance.

"Here am *I*," says Mr Glick over my shoulder, his soapy smell searing as he arches a bony forefinger at the pianist. "And that is" — he glances at his watch — "Hoffnung, and the fiddler is Freilich."

A gloomy group, despite their names. All of them perched on a platform. All of them lean, their heads shaven, sunken-cheeked.

"And below, down there. . . no, you don't see them, they are out of the picture and they have no names. . . are your cousins, your uncles, your aunts, kicking up yellow dust as they pass through the gates to hell, to the crowded barracks where lice and typhus and bullets and. . . and. . . But why trouble a young head with horror?. . . A curse upon our enemies that you should ever have to learn of it and. . ."

His hand poised upon my shoulder is oddly light now; it is gentle, unexpectedly solicitous, not at all the claw with which, vulture clinging to prey, he greeted me before.

"Come, let us change places," he says, less emphatic the voice that drops two notches into the quieter polished tone from Vilna.

To strangers I am ever obedient. It is an unsung virtue of mine. A conspicuous failing. I move to his former seat, he manoeuvres into mine. All preliminaries are redundant; with just an upward tugging at his sleeves above his wrists, he launches into a melodic reverberation — a torrent of sound, of rhythm, of arresting vigour, as what under my fingers had been a pallid tortured C-D-E becomes under his a Niagara of sound cascading, eddying, booming, flowing. Meanwhile, outside, the last defiant flickers of crimson founder over the horizon. Congealing greyness darkens the windows as melting within me are all hopes of reaching the oval, of running freely, and of leaping, abandon, caprice. Would he but release me...

But he holds me. With music. With words.

"Look at the photograph again. No, you don't see the guards. But imagine them. Below the platform... Grey uniforms, green... pimply men, boys in helmets, caps, rifles in their arms, their dogs, like them, nervous and jumpy, as our people... our people... Strauss they made us play, these pimply men, and Lanner and Beethoven, the *pride* of that accursed nation, Beethoven — do you recognise this? — the *Fur Elise* — da-da da-da da-da da-da-daa, da-da-daa, da-da-daaa... Beethoven! Their god while they themselves had fallen... fallen... *Gehenna* itself not deep enough..."

Hand over hand, he careers across the keys. His narrow shoulders heave, collapse; his back — the stuff of bamboo — bends and snaps to straightness in the torrent of his music.

"And so we played, so we played," Mr Glick pounds, "Hoffnung and Freilich and I, and as long as we played, there we stayed, Hoffnung at the cello, Freilich on his fiddle, and I at the piano, surviving, surviving, where others... God, God... *Them* He did not hear, but us... Wherever He was... whatever He was... Us He heard... He had given us the gift of music and in our time our music was our salvation — if you know what salvation is? Do you?..."

I do not know, but I indicate yes, the better to be spared further explanation and a longer detaining when, outside, I may still be free, I may still catch Paul or Gerry or Max. Already I begin to nod again, when, above the music, above the words, the raucous ringing of the bell startles me to jumping.

"Ah, so you are here, Freilich," my teacher says, his fingers tripping over the keys in fluid melody, scarcely looking at the visitor who enters unbidden. "Put on the light and get out your fiddle. Is it Mozart tonight or *Raisins and Almonds*?

To Freilich, I might be mere shadow. He does look at me, but no curiosity as much as lingers in that begrudging glance.

"Does it matter?" he says, his voice gritty, as though crumbs grated in his throat. "As long as we play."

Crevices cutting deep from eyes to chin slice his face into three vertical slabs. His hair, dense dirty silver, is tortured back; his brow is tormented, racked into a knot; his jaws in their hardness might have been bonded with cement. He is a bulldog, cold and tense. Were he to smile. . .

But the very notion is impossible. There is no mirth about him. Only a nervous fidgeting as he fumbles with the clasps of his violin case, removes the fiddle from its boxed captivity, moves to where I stand, the while plucking, scraping, striking at the strings with his bow, and grunts, "Let it be *Raisins and Almonds* then", the two of them, the pecking Mr Glick and the swaying Freilich, setting out upon a mellifluous duet, a piece molten in sweetness and, to judge from their tautness, in exquisite pain as well, quite other than the reverie upon which Mother would be buoyed were she still to sing, as she had once been moved to sing, that tender lullaby in distant half-forgotten Paris, in nearby unhappy unhappy Northcote, and, in moments of forgetfulness, after dinner, when washing up, or ironing, or darning my socks, in the drab dull haven of St.Kilda.

They play, they perform, make music; in the midst of mothballs and wax; under the light of the hooded bulb, under yellow light that throws more shadow than brightness, under dreary light that is more swallowed up than reflected, under light that disappears in those crevices on Freilich's cheeks and creeps into

the folds of his shuttered eyes as, above the music, he hisses, wheezes, almost spits, "For us is this, for us is this, for us, for us!" while bird-like Mr Glick peals and titters in counterpoint, "For our lives, for our lives, for our lives!"

And now, without any ringing at the door, without a knock, another man enters, a bear, a hulk, the gigantic case he carries striking against the uprights of the doorway in his lumbering passage into the room. His face is huge, his jowls like sandbags, the chin heavy and cleft, and his white regal hair is in unbridled chaos, dishevelled as if by perpetual storm. And his eyebrows. . . Eyebrows! Yes, even in the photograph, shaven as is his head, the eyebrows overpower. They are massive, stark, high-arching, coarse and lowering; and they flicker, contract and dance as he enters, they flicker, contract and dance not to the gentler melody that is now in the hearing, but to another more private passionate cascading one, one that — I know, I sense it already — they are about to take up as, with his cello now liberated, Hoffnung — unmistakably Hoffnung — plucks the deeply-reverberating strings once, twice, three times against his companions' sugary descant, thereby compelling them with a rude and vehement force to submit to his dictate.

"*Allegro appassionata*," he says with the same grim authority, glancing — oh, so unseeingly, so vaguely — in my direction, lowering then his massive head over his chipped lustreless cello as his hands flit — the left along the strings, the right with the bow across them — in tortured and torturing frenzy, the sound vibrating, ringing against the vase with its tulips, convulsing with fever, and trembling with turbulence in the dingy room become suddenly too cramped, too contracted to contain it all.

"For us is this, for us is this!" hisses the fiddler Freilich.

"For our lives, for our lives, for our lives!" Mr Glick rejoins.

"Oh listen God, now listen God, please listen God!" repeatedly booms Hoffnung.

The three huddle closer, ever closer, the bird, the bulldog and the bear united, locked in fervent synchrony of sound and

motion, with hands and arms and shoulders, head and back all leaping, plunging, pitching, glints of perspiration glistening above the cellist's frantic lips, Mr Glick's barren skull suffused with crimson, the creases in the bulldog Freilich's face deepening into ravines, all of them starkly rent with agony and spasm and barely containable strain; while there I sit beside Mr Glick, beneath the evening-blackened window, trapped, ignored, forgotten, aching to leave, yet not daring to rise, the walls closed in about me now, all exits sealed, all hopes snuffed out, black photograph in my hand in which three figures begin to move, to play, perform, while somewhere below them, at their feet, unseen, trudge men and children kicking up yellow dust, there snarl uniformed guards to the howling of dogs, the whole evoking a terror that rivets the spine and freezes the flesh to jittery tingling.

The charm, the magic, the miracle of music!

As long as we played, there we stayed. . .

As long as we played, there we stayed. . .

Surviving. . .

Surviving. . .

Where others. . .

God!

God!

But out of that incarceration I yet come to be delivered. The febrile cadences are loud and tempestuous. But louder still, even more impatient, and resolute, sustained, is the ringing at the door which, left unanswered, is opened warily to reveal Mother — Mother! — flushed and panting, her gaze hot and panicked as it scours the apartment in a sweeping swoop before it falls, clingingly, possessively, on me. What she murmurs, I do not know. There is but a merest flurry on her lips, so white, so drained, as upon each — upon Mr Glick, Freilich, Hoffnung — she turns curious bewildered eyes, while they, locked in movement, sonority and pleading, remain oblivious to her intrusion, oblivious too to my halting hesitant stirring as, gingerly, I rise, place the photograph upon my seat, and take one step, a second, a third, past my teacher, past the fiddler Freilich, past the cellist

Hoffnung, averting as well as I can my face from their pained and separate agonies.

But in my passage, I hear a change.

Having just passed him, the cellist Hoffnung draws wheezy breath, clears his throat and grunts "*Allegro vivace*", to which, without pause, in a unison untouched, the trio, as if gelled into one, strikes up another tune, a brisk lilting passionate melody, Mr Glick pounding vehemently upon the piano keys, Mr Freilich gyrating with every motion of his bow, Hoffnung pawing with enormous hands at the resonating strings, all three of them old — sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five — pinched or creviced or heavy-jowled, launching into another refrain, "Oh, God!" the one, "My God!" the other, "Hear, God!" the third, "Let us live!" "Give us continuing life!" "In music is life!" "Oh, God!" "My God!" "Hear, God!" while, just as, earlier, Mother pressed me forward with the palm of her hand, now with the same palm and with fingers to her lips, she ushers me out, but not before I catch a closing glimpse of the group, that group huddling in motion in a shadowed corner, behind them a vase with dreary dust-laden tulips and a photograph of a Jew and his wife, the Jew, who when he hammered nails into a last, hummed, hummed, hummed, and yet. . . and yet. . .

Urged on by Mother, I flee. Along the hallway, down the stairs, into the night, the music in pursuit as I hurl a stone at a lamp-post, kick with vigour at an imaginary ball, and leap high, high, as if to grasp at a star, choking with the very ecstasy of liberation, drawing away from Mother who, from a distance, says irritably, "And what have you done with your music book?" to which I shout back in pure rejoicing "Forgot it at Mr Umglick's!" Mother countering in turn with "Mr Glick! Mr Glick! Remember to bring it home next week. And if you want to stay, then telephone. You were there so long, you drove me out of my wits."

As I land on solid asphalt, I nearly twist a knee. I look at Mother, seeking out under the light of a street-lamp even a hint of irony, or of jest in her expression.

"Next week?" I say. "Again?"

There is no smile, no mirth. Only resoluteness, unbending resolve not to yield.

"He can teach you much," she says, tossing her head towards Mr Glick's apartment, now above and behind us. "Music softens the character, broadens it, gives it... gives it... You heard — gives life."

I catch the direction of her thrust. From a distance, I look back at the Mr Glick's apartment-block. Here and there along its facade, rectangles of window glow with light. Behind one of these are three men; three old men; three old men making music; three old men who for years past have been making music. I look up, root out that window. And suddenly — is it the breeze from the sea that stirs? the swishing, soft and rhythmical, of waves unfurling on shore? the autumn scent of nearby elms and palms? or some quickened awareness of the impossible or the futile? — suddenly, my breath becomes suspended and, in that instant, I feel for them, I ache in the depths of some primal core; and in the hold of that ache I reach out to them, reach out *for* them, reaching with awe that is great, grand, but hopeless, with a melancholy sweetness, too, and with a silent deeply genuine petitioning on their behalf that I come one day, long after their inevitable passing, to recognise as prayer.

The Disciple

I had two visions then, one by day and one by night, which both smote at the eyes and then at the conscience before I knew which way to take.

I found myself on the eastward road to Damascus, my donkey beneath me kicking up powder and dust, the hard, dry, much-trodden way bleached to alabaster-white by the sun which burned there the green of copses to ashen-grey, which dried the hide of cattle and asses down to knobbled and flint-edged bone, and which drove men, the very best of them no less, to convulsions, hallucinations, visions and demented frenzies. Whatever casual conversation took place in those parts, the sun, the heat and the *hamsin* dryness, all scorching and parching and shimmering golden like ever-receding waters, formed a goodly part of it. Our ancestors may have been misguided, to be sure, but not for nothing did they in times past worship that celestial orb, the sun, that mighty incandescent force that was deemed to determine every rhythm of life, every warp of nature and every turn of human destiny. — What. . .What contrast! How bright that sun and diaphanous its light, yet how pervasive had been our ancestors' unillumined darkness then!. . .

So — I found myself heading for Damascus, carrying highly-commendatory letters of introduction to companions written for me by my fathers in the faith, to seek out the followers of him they called Yehoshua the Messiah, and denounce them for heresy against God and for treason against the State.

And wherein lay the heresy and the treason that I took upon myself to root out?

It lay in this, as my teacher Yekutiel had summarised during an address he once made.

"While this Yehoshua ben Yosef, who in Latin is known as Jesus, was, in his time, like all of us, but a mere son of man, yet have his followers come to refer to him as Only-Begotten Son of God. While this Yehoshua was in himself nothing other than mere mortal man, yet do his adherents today perversely call him Our God, Our Saviour, Our Lord. Further, while this Yehoshua was in his time but another of a thousand ordained preachers, teachers, rabbis, counsellors and guides, yet have they made of him a miracle-worker, sorcerer, exorcist and healer. And while this Yehoshua was in his time but another of the Empire's million, two million, three million common citizens before the law, yet have his disciples taken to speaking of him as resurrected leader and sovereign of a rival kingdom in heaven that is soon to come upon this earth."

He had been a swarthy pock-marked firebrand, too, this Yehoshua — this much I had also learned from my masters — a recalcitrant subversive, feverish, turbulent, and quick to anger, an agitator choleric against authority, both civil and religious, and impatient in the way he dealt with it. At the same time, he unabashedly preached disruption of family, severance of bonds, and renunciation of earthly possessions, and pressed for revolution, change, and the overthrow of established order, promising in its place a new order of peace, humility, blessedness and justice in some other fancied future world. Such men as he had long dotted history's annals — from old Canaan and Goshen through Babylon, Athens and Sparta to more recent Rome — just as every generation will continually see others such as he, demagogues and seditionists all, who, to a man, foment insurgency and chaos, themselves the while drunk with the notion that they alone possess all truth, that they alone possess all wisdom, that they alone possess the right to overturn the accepted order which by their sights has grown stagnant, ritualistic, legalistic and obsolete.

As for this Yehoshua, the authorities whom he abused refused to truck with him. To them, he was a thorn in their side whom they tolerated at first or, more wisely still, ignored, if only to keep the peace with Rome. But they, the fathers whom he assailed, wise as they were, had not reckoned with the wiliness of that overheated malcontent. True, they had elected to ignore this Yehoshua, but this same canny Yehoshua was determined not to be ignored; they had, in camera, voted not to take notice, but, not to be denied, he would *make* them notice; and where they, our fathers, our teachers, turned away from him their ears, he went instead to the people, to the lowly, the uneducated, the dull-witted, the orphaned, the superstitious, the frail and the poor, beguiling them with clever parables and metaphors, and using these to promise them deliverance from their lowly state, escape from their humble station and release from their servitude, for all of which, with passion, sinewy pyrotechnics and silvery words, he over and again charged the keepers of the Law as purblind, self-serving, antiquated and sorely out of touch with their every most basic, most human, most earthly needs.

Such had been the wisdom handed down to me and my colleagues in the several academies through which latterly I had passed.

Another detail became clear, too. It might have been a small thing, to be sure, but wholly important to a full understanding of the man and the effect he had upon his followers. That man Yehoshua's undoing did not lie in his maligning of the elders; nor even of the civil leaders of the time. In the disbursements of such slanderings as his upon authority, he was neither the first, nor was he the last. He was but one of a host and, in his vituperations, wholly in fashion. Whatever its configuration, authority can never be unused to accusations, contumely, popular disenchantment and contempt, which wise government will suffer with disinterested patience.

What, in the end, led him to the cross, however, was something else wholly of his own making. It was his peculiar habit of speaking in metaphors, metaphors, it must be said, to which

the people were not equal. In seeking to goad them to revolt, he laced his oratory with such high rhetoric, hyperbole, allegory and imagery that that which had, in actuality, been wholly and purely turns of speech, assumed for the credulous, superstitious and untutored a literalness that so distorted all truer intended meaning that the words he uttered incited rumour, this in turn opening the way for opinion, and opinion to conviction that this Yehoshua, mere rabbi, mere teacher, mere son of man, child of Judea and subject of Rome, was more, far more than these. Thus, when he declared, "I am way and truth and light", meaning "My teachings are way and truth and light", or when he proclaimed, "I am resurrection and life" meaning again "My message will bring you resurrection and life", or when he declaimed, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father", meaning "As a man is, so is God, for in His image is man made", the people did not perceive the meaning behind the words, but heard and believed only the words themselves. And so, in the common manner of things, word passed from mouth to ear and from ear to mouth, receiving embellishment in its every passage, the populace that followed him becoming rabble, becoming mob, so construing his every utterance that, seizing upon his most banal allusion to Scriptural text, misinterpreting the simplest allegory he offered, and misreading the most picturesque and artless of parables he entertained them with, they raised him in their sights to King, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, and any number of other appelations tending to divinity.

That it may be still further seen how language had been the source of inordinate mischief — mischief that to this day persists, the while becoming consecrated into ossifying ritual — my teachers, my own Yekutiel among them, pointed to yet another instance, a most telling one, of that speechifier's intractable bent for metaphor, when, even at the sacred festive Passover feast on the eve of his trial, at the Passover *seder* he could not desist from morbid, mordant and sardonic jest, calling the bread he broke his body that would similarly be broken on the cross and the wine his blood that would soon be spilled;

whereupon his pupils, come in time to be called disciples, twelve young and impressionable trusting boys all, carried his words abroad so that bread and wine were no longer the humble basic consecrated fare with which to celebrate a joyous feast of liberation, but became instead to the simple and deluded actual objects of mystery, of magic and of supernaturalism. Hearing him speak — he was no mean orator — or hearing at second hand, or third, or fourth hand, what he had said, folk everywhere were so transported to flights of fancy laced with expectations of reward, blessedness and joy in the hereafter, that they, too, were moved to protest against the authorities, they too denouncing heatedly the rigidity and obsolescence of the law-enforcers, and, more bizarrely, and clearly unthinkingly, broadcasting the prophecy of a new kingdom to come, a kingdom with their own Yehoshua at its head, that would alter the interpretation of the Law, that would displace the Roman realm, and would liberate, deliver and redeem all men, that would free, release, transform all men.

Such inflammatory agitation fell nothing short of civil treason, albeit incited by religious frenzy, and the long and short of it was that that Yehoshua, for his role in inciting the people to widening all-disrupting mutinous dissent, expired, as Roman law decreed, upon the cross, his head encircled by a crown of thorns denoting most aptly what manner of thorn he himself had been.

In this, however, in the signing of the warrant that sealed his death and his immolation upon the cross, the authorities, clearly having lost their nerve, had erred. For nothing so begat followers and disciples, apostles and evangelists, fellow-travellers and leech-like lackeys as a martyr who has visibly and defiantly died in the name of a cause, however worthy, or, more commonly the truth, however infamous the cause. And so, in awesomeness and in the shadow of the cross, as in its aftermath, hosts of stories sprang up and like mustard-seed flourished enormously, each more fantastic and inventive than its predecessors, embellishments of fanciful fictions all, telling of healings of the sick by a laying-on of hands and restoration to

life of the dead, or of walking on water and calming of storms, these leading with mighty leaps of imagination to tales of that reprobate's own corpse rising from the grave and its miraculous ascent to heaven, leading to his identification too with the suffering servant told of by the Prophet Isaiah, to his being called Messiah descended as foretold from the line of David, to his birth being apprised as a miraculous act of God, and to the keen, tremulous, breath-quickening expectation of the imminent establishment of his kingdom on earth. All this his followers so unabashedly and credulously imbibed as, in infancy, they had imbibed their mothers' milk. And, having so credulously imbibed these fantastical tales, they passed them on, relayed them further, repeated them ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times over, until that which began as an irksome eccentric idiosyncratic sect — an aberration, as my teacher Yekutiel was wont to say — swelled under the disorienting dementing influence of the sun in these parts into a turbulent movement, the current of which indiscriminately and overwhelmingly sucked in all who strayed too close and caught them up in a hell and hell-fire maelstrom that menaced to the core the authority of both the rabbis and the civil masters whose patience progressively wore thin.

That current, for the sake of order — both political and religious — had perforce to be stemmed. I, for my part — if I may be so immodestly bold as to quote my teachers, a future leading light of the academies — did as necessity bade me, seeing it as my duty to use every means available to oppose and eradicate the name of that scapegrace Yehoshua, myself apprehending and delivering scores of his followers to the authorities, casting my vote against them in meting out punishment, and causing to have inflicted such onerous penalties upon their synagogues as would compel them to renounce their aberrant faith, my fury against them so severe that I pursued them even into other towns and villages east and west to which hosts of these reprobates, apostates and blasphemers had fled.

But even as I pursued them, there being time to deliberate along the burning dust-and-stone-heaped highways between

the towns through which I passed, inklings of doubt at times fell like wind-blown seeds into the crypts and crevices of my brain. Even as I waxed vehement against the transgressors as a group, such was their acceptance of their fate when apprehended, tried and sentenced, that I could not help but admire them as individual human spirits, the men, the women and the children, even the *children*, appearing almost beatific in their readiness to yield up their lives, the name of their master on their lips even as our own fathers and grandfathers in times past had perished with the name of God on theirs. If they were so prepared to die in that miscreant's name, might he, might they not in fact have possessed a truth — *the* truth — to which my own otherwise-so-learned, so-honoured fathers in the faith, and I in turn, had perhaps been blind? If, as it was said, they died for the sake also of a universal kingdom of love, and peace, and righteousness, and mercy as their own master and mentor had done, such kingdom being the very fulfilment of prophetic divination in its highest order, might we not perhaps have been too harsh on them? And, as a consequence, were we not perhaps in our obstinate stress upon the strictest ritualism and upon the letter, as against the spirit, of the Law, being both narrowly particular and arrantly parochial, thereby subjugating the individual to the herd, and in such way contravening each man's separate worth in the eyes of God and contradicting the very universality of the true prophetic vision so assiduously propounded and promoted in our own synagogues, academies and schools? If so, other questions could not help but follow. If, say, the Law had led a man to be killed for propagating on earth that very vision, as others after him had also been killed, then, were the Law and love, the Law and peace, the Law and righteousness, the Law and mercy at all compatible? And even if he were brazenly bumptious, that Yehoshua called Jesus, and unconscionably maverick in his methods, and offensive in his seemingly self-promoting claims, did all this render the message he carried necessarily false? Was the wine the poorer for coming in a crude and flawed, unpolished vessel?

These considerations I put out of mind — I *had* to put out of

mind — as, in obedience to my mission, I pursued and apprehended, accused and cast my vote, and in the halls of the academies steadily secured my place among the would-be Fathers of the coming generation. I was not yet twenty-five, but did already rank as high favourite among my elders. I received eloquent testimonials for my dedication, decorations for my zeal, and high praise even among the people for my staunch enforcement of our rendering of the Law. Clearly, other honours awaited me and a succession of illustrious promotions, too, and there were times, in vainer moments, when I fancied myself a future head of the *Sanhedrin*, or the authority supreme in the interpretation of Scripture, endowed with a secure and lasting place as a shining luminary in the annals of my people. How tantalising seemed the possibility and, more than mere possibility, the very prospect of fame! The taste of it, the thrill of it! To be another Ezra to my people, to be as Socrates is to the Greeks, or Cicero to the Romans. My time would come, I told myself. My time would come. In a world so volatile where little could ever for certain be known, this much I did know. My time would in the event most surely come.

And then the day came when I set forth on that fateful Damascus mission, with those letters of introduction and with further promotion awaiting me on my return.

The road was rough and stony and burnished ochre, the air around was hot and dry, the very taking of breath an ordeal that seared the windpipe to its innermost reaches. Though the morning had been auspiciously mild, the sun by midday was burning at its zenith, and not a soul ventured out in the villages that dotted the ringwormed slopes along whose edge we passed. Already by that time, my retinue and I had drunk more than had been wise of our stipulated rations, but even so our tongues remained dry and our throats parched and chalky. Each man's eyes smarted from the heat and the dust, some talked as if they were seeing apparitions, while for me where the blue of the sky met the distant white, and pearl and alabaster of earth, the air trembled numinous and riveting as all manner of quivering, shivering, shimmering forms took shape there — houses

and palms swimming against the horizon, stunted copses and flat-roofed caravanserais, camels and asses being driven by bedouin, these moving as if treading water, and girls who came and girls who vanished, and gardens that seemed to float or hang from the heavens, and lush wooded hills that lured and excited and beckoned and drew but themselves ever receded the nearer we came. It tantalised to determine what was real and what was mirage.

It was then, against and above all these, in the very eye of a white and dazzling shaft of light infinitely brighter than any other I had ever seen, that I had the first of my visions. I saw a swarthy, hard-skinned, sunken-cheeked man with tangled hair and bone-dry fingers who looked upon me with an indulgent pity meet for sons who have gone astray.

And he said, "Sha'ul", and he said, "Saul, you vain conniver. Why, why do you so persist in persecuting me? Do you not find it hard so to hound and harass and kick against the good?"

And I said, "Who are you?"

And he said, "I am Yehoshua, son of Joseph and son of Miriam, I am Yehoshua, the very same whom, even in travesty to your conscience and in defiance of the truth, you are so unseemly persecuting."

And I asked, "What is it that you want of me? And why do you appear before me, before *me*, of all people who are so much against you and against your followers? Why me?"

"That I may help you redeem your conscience," he replied, tapping his brow with his fingers, "and, by redeeming your conscience, to save your soul."

"Have you no other businesses," I asked then, "but that you should concern yourself with my conscience or occupy yourself with my soul?"

"Indeed," he replied, untouched by my essay at mockery. "Indeed, I have. But to achieve them, I have need of you?"

"Of me?" I said. "Of me who so strives against you?"

"Precisely because you strive against me," he retorted. "So that you, the model of scholarship and dedication, of zeal and iron will, and future heir to authority supreme, may bear wit-

ness that what is said about me is true — that I have indeed risen from the grave — and so that, as witness to this truth that makes all else true, you may become my messenger on earth and go forth unto the people and, in my name, deliver them from darkness, save them from the dominion of Satan that is upon earth, and initiate them, too, into the Kingdom of God there to receive, through me, forgiveness for all their sins, absolution for all their weaknesses, and a goodly share, through my body and through my blood, in the inheritance that is to come."

With that he disappeared and left me deliriously faint. My men, themselves scarcely better off in the heat than I, laid me down, brought upon me shade, and plied me with whatever little water still remained, importuning me the while to tell what it was that had so unsettled me. But searching through the light, scanning the terrain, and scouring in perplexity each man's burnt or ruddy face — each in that instant become so alien, distorted and remote — I did not know where, in order to mollify their puzzlement, I might with either certainty or conviction begin. For I myself could not now wholly tell whether that which I had seen had truly been, or whether it had been more an hallucinatory spectre, fruit of light's warping, distorting, capricious play upon a heat-addled, heat-numbed, heat-scorched brain.

What I did know was that I kept murmuring "Lord! Lord! Lord!" through lips that, being chapped, stung with rawness, and that my men came close and bent over me and, bending solicitously over me, repeatedly questioned, "Where is the Lord? What is the Lord?"; to which like some incantation I said "The Lord is love, and he is mercy, and he is righteousness and he is peace, yes, he is love, and he is mercy, and he is righteousness and he is peace, yes, he is love, and he is mercy, and he is righteousness and he is peace"; while, even as I looked up at them and looked beyond them, my vision reached also far beyond their troubled faces, my eyes seeing in the heavens some other realm — O Lord, a kingdom! — a wondrously luminous commonwealth where angels walked, and where all who had ever lived were again restored, sinners too, and the maimed and

the orphaned, the widowed and the poor, as also the epileptic and the leprous, the scrofulous and the pocked, all of them delivered and redeemed, all of them forgiven and cleansed, all reconstituted to virgin wholeness, all of them clad in finery most exquisite, and all aglow with love and free of blemish, cleared of stigma and shorn of shame that had been their burdensome legacy in their transit on earth.

O Lord, the throbbing, exquisite splendour of it! All that had been said of that Yehoshua by those I had so wrathfully pursued was true. He *had* risen! But more than having risen himself, he had also raised. For, as, on taking upon his shoulders the heavy burden of the cross, he had shed from himself the earth-tethering rigors of our Fathers' Law, so, too, had his disciples and adherents also risen; for, while the Law through its enforcers could both disburse punishment and requite all sins, more than this could purity of soul such as had become theirs prevent all sin from being committed from the very first. And whence came such purity? From faith it came! From faith! The faith of Abraham our original Father, the faith of Moses our venerated Teacher, the faith of David the most illustrious of kings, and the faith of Isaiah and of Jeremiah, and of Yehoshua himself in his time, like all the Prophets, so unjustly and so hatefully despised.

This faith — above all, faith — had to him and his followers been unshakably primary; faith above all could secure for them the good life, faith above all the moral life, faith above all else the blameless, edifying and edified sanctified life. And only when faith fell short and sin in faithlessness ensued, then, and only then — such instances, as a consequence, being necessarily rare — would there be need at all to invoke the strictures and retributions prescribed by the Law. Faith, then, with Law as its abettor, was the medium most true uniting man and God, bringing harmony between mind and soul, and securing renewal, redemption and all-encompassing divinity.

I saw it all so clearly then, yes, saw it all so brilliantly, as, by the wayside, with the sun by this time setting in the west somewhere over Phoenicia, I rose, draped my shawl about my

head, and joined my men in prayer. And, as always at that hour, I prayed. The words, they came by rote, they came with ease, they came with fluent facility, that facility being fruit of habit, repetition and routine. But the spirit behind them on this occasion raised them up, elevated them as seldom before, up and up, to be tendered as a thanks-offering to God for His gift of illumination, given in gratitude for His boundless goodness and His mercy, as also for His justice and His loving-kindness, and for having chosen me, of all men, to do His work of spreading His Word as revealed through His Son, His very own, the last and most sublime of His prophets, Yehoshua. I had but to open my soul to receive His grace to the fullest degree He was capable of bestowing upon any mortal man.

And I opened my soul. Even as I prayed, I prepared to take upon myself to do my new master Yehoshua's every bidding, to carry his message unto the world, to preach unto my people, as unto the pagans, too, the truth — *the* Truth — as I had seen it, and deliver to all his promise of ultimate salvation, his vision of the coming kingdom, and his augury of universal resurrection when the bones of all who had ever lived would again gain flesh, again gain breath, again gain movement, even as the prophet Ezekiel in his ecstasies so long before had prophesied.

And yet I paused. On removing my shawl at the end of prayer, I faltered, I desisted from disclosing even to my own men the revelation they ought to have been the first to know of. I was thrown, suddenly and terribly, into such a new confusion and assault of conscience that all doubts and qualms and self-reproaches that had formerly attended my earlier pursuit of that selfsame Yehoshua's faithful were as nothing against these. Oh, God, the agony of it!

For, it was at that moment, as I gazed this time not upward at the heavens but down into the valley that was darkening lightless before my feet that I beheld the second vision, a spectral apparition most bizarre that filled the very marrow of my bones with a chill more numbing, more riveting, more transfixing than the chill of evening that in those parts customarily augured the end of day.

It was a procession that I saw. It was unmistakable: a procession thrown into relief by flaring torches carried by black-hooded men who, as they walked in dense formation, sang hymns and psalms in gloomy monotones that were the stuff of dirges. Behind them followed eunuchs, themselves chanting joyless hosannas, pallid virgins praying over folded hands, and ascetics, sacristans and acolytes, behind whom, in turn, straggled, singly, or in twos, or in threes, a succession of barefoot thinly-clad unkempt wretches who lamented and moaned as they dragged themselves forward with clattering clanging chains about their ankles. Among these were men and young boys, and young girls and women, some of them carrying infants in their arms, others, the older among them wailing shrilly as, under the lash and birch and rod wielded by bull-necked guards, all were herded into an amphitheatre where stakes had been thrust into the earth and mounds of kindling heaped dense and fast about their base. There were gallows, too, within that space, and racks and pulleys, whipping-boards and branding irons, and low-roofed annexes, ostensibly disguised as bathhouses that more truly functioned as noxious, suffocating miasma-chambers.

Around the rim of that amphitheatre rose high tiers and galleries occupied by legions of law-makers, judges, princes and priests of every rank, and a multitude of other paid administrators, officials and representatives of state. To either side of them and filling to the limits every broad and narrow space that offered in the stalls were the laity as also the simpler folk, these waxing most loud and cacophonous in clamour and tumult as, from the officials' bay, successions of accusations, interrogations and sentences resounded and redounded against every surface. At the conclusion of each judgement read out by velvet-garbed, most sumptuously adorned but dour and hard-browed men who held the fearsome rank of cardinal, another whoop and cry would arise from these stalls as, below, one by one, in pairs, or in groups, those herded wretches were separated, each according to his sentence, either to be bound against the stakes, there to writhe and scream as leaping fangs of

flame engulfed them whole, or to be flogged to cries of "Confess! Confess! Confess!", or to be strung up on the pulleys by their thumbs to exhortations of "Repent! Repent! Repent!", or to be stretched upon the racks, to be led to the miasma-chamber, or be whipped, impaled, garrotted, beheaded or quartered — all this while tonsured celibates moved among them sprinkling holy water through a mounting surfeit of blood and ashes and smoke, their eyes in beatitude heaven-bent, and while, through high and gilded gates, there galloped forth grand formations of mighty, sturdy horsemen in full cry, each to a man having pledged to decimate those who, calling themselves the Chosen, were imputed to have killed the Lord, each having vowed to pursue all who denied His Word, and having vowed, too, to convert all into whose midst they came on their way to Jerusalem unto the worship of Him Who, to save mankind, had taken upon Himself its sins and sought to cleanse it through His own agonised death.

And there was another thing I saw. Hovering over all this like some incandescent beacon against the black night sky studded with stars so glacial and forbidding in their glow, there rose a cross, an enormous cross that underwent all manner of distorted transformations even as I watched but which remained nonetheless a cross, illuminated with a brilliantly blazing, fiery luminescence, before which, at given signals, all those law-makers, judges, princes and priests, and horsemen and eunuchs, and ascetics and sacristans, and virgins and acolytes, as also the masses in their tiers, fell upon their knees, their garments, particularly of the cardinals and their stern-lipped retinue, spreading out about them rich and flowing with the lush luxuriant velvety crimson and purple of sacrificial blood.

For all its utter and meticulous clarity of detail, the vision lingered there before me for the most mere moment before the valley resumed its silent, lightless, unruffled dormancy. But that moment had sufficed. I had earlier that day been called to carry the Master's staff into a world of sin and violence and iniquity that He himself had railed against, but having now caught a glimpse into what could only be the consequences of

that call, I was brought to pause. New orders, I recognised of a sudden, did not redeem the old; nor did they necessarily replace the old. Rather, in due time, they simply *became* the old, only the rituals, the credos, delusions and mythologies differing between them. And this, too, I became apprised of: rather than representing progress upon that which had gone before, the new were oft more primitive still than the old they replaced, for that which in his day were the purest visions of one man became in time the hoary rigid orthodoxies of his heirs, these latter men, through acts bordering on terror, debasement and self-aggrandisement, implementing their own reading of what had been the most divine, sublime and heavenly visions of their saints.

Was this to be the fate of my mission too? — I was prepared to go unto my kinsmen to deliver the Word of the Lord with love, and charity, and gentleness, and to go even unto the pagans, whether in India, Africa, or Iberia, and unto whatever wildernesses brooded in moral darkness both near at hand and beyond the seas. But who would carry the message after me? To whom might my new mentor Yehoshua next appear? And who knew how His Word might be distorted, embellished, manipulated, even falsified by those who in due time succeeded me? The faith of Abraham, Moses and David, too, was young once, as were those of Assyria, Babylon and Persia; likewise, the deliberations of the men of Athens had been the most sophisticated extant and the literature of Rome had been of the foremost rank before each was reduced to the most specious pastiche. To what delinquencies, then, could the disciples of disciples reduce even that which was the most sublime, most selfless and most numinous of causes! And to what abjectness, vileness and heinousness! Oh, God! Oh, God, if I took up the charge so suddenly bestowed upon me, what aberrations, what perversions, what savagery might I not set in train?!

But then were I not to bear witness, and not bring the Lord's teachings unto the peoples, nor attest to the splendrous awesome kingdom that was to come, what then of the possibilities of redemption, resurrection and eternal life that Yehoshua, the

embodiment of God's Word on earth, had promised? Was such opportunity to be passed by? Was I to hover between damnation and damnation, damned if I dared to deliver the Word, damned equally if I did not? To whom, to whom could I turn for guidance? Would that Yehoshua came before me again to tell me clearly what I must do; I should then with the utmost dedication proceed to do it. For, not fame, nor position, nor authority were the issue now, but Truth and Humanity and Life and all the sacred verities for which God, Almighty God, in seeking to save man, had sacrificed His Son. But dared I take up the charge? Or, conversely, dared I instead pass it up? More than ever did I now need God to be my shepherd, my rock, my salvation and my strength.

In my perplexity, I gazed into the valley below and contemplated the stars above, and studied my attendants as they sat warming their hands around the fire, and mused, too, over the sentries who paraded around the perimeter of our encampment. By the light of their faith, they were true, staunch, zealous men all, youths really if truth be told, and the pride of the academies assigned to me on account of their very fidelity and fervency to seek out those who had defected from their elders' ways. They were also sharp, acute and passionate, our past discussions over points of law setting light to lamps that lit up Scriptural paths till then not yet ventured upon. But herein lay their very failing. Their passion was more for that which was written and less for their fellow-man; their concern was more for scriptural precision and less for human need; their zeal too often for casuistry than given to forgiveness of human failing, their bent for the purity attendant upon the rites of Temple sacrifice above the purity of the inner soul which was what God in His heights demanded of them most of all. The Lord, through His Son, however, had indicated another way. Not through legalism or ritual or sacrifice was salvation to be had, but, in the end, through His noblest creation — mortal man.

Just then, one of the sentries came by. He was a slender, straggle-bearded, thin-boned youth of twenty, like my other attendants learned to be sure, but overly-serious, rigid and lack-

ing in humour, sad epitome of what had over the centuries evolved from that once-so-magnificent God-given man-ennobling inheritance transmitted to His Chosen through our Teacher Moses.

For a moment he paused before me, bowed his head in deference, then looked up, by the light of the fire seeming to seek assurance that I was fully restored from my earlier high-noon faint. Then, blinking once, twice, a third time, drawing with lean bony scholar's fingers at an ear-lock, and bowing his head once more, the sentry, not one given to unnecessary speech, said simply "Good-night, Rabbi", and continued on his patrol.

Having the while gazed into his face, I had wanted to wish him long life and health and a brood of descendants unto the fiftieth generation to bring solace and joy to his later years as also to his people — and till that moment, my people, too — forever and forever and forever. I wanted peace for him and holiness and mercy and grace. I did; with all compassion that was in my heart, I did. But what I saw instead as I returned his gaze was death, death and persecution and molestation and flight, over and over, in one place and another, not for himself alone but for all his kin who lived in his time and for all his heirs and their heirs who would in time come after for rejecting the One Who might have been his Saviour. And whether or not I took part in the movement that was swelling, clearly swelling in the wake of the cross, that new wave would gain vigour, gain numbers, gain force, it would spread as water spread, everywhere, over everything, into every hair-thin crevice, inundating all before it, as it had to if the truth — the Lord's Truth — both on earth and in the Kingdom to come were to prevail.

I looked then again into the valley and up once more at the heavens, and down in the valley again and up at the heavens again, and made my choice. And in that moment, having thus made my choice, as I turned to watch the dourly dutiful ear-locked sentry recede, and looked too upon my men making ready to settle for the night, I wanted to embrace them all, embrace them firmly, those kinsmen, and say to them, "Pray for me, my brothers, that I know what I am about to do, pray

that I do it for the best of reasons, and pray that those who come after me will not be too harsh".

But instead I bit my lips, nodded at the widening space between us as my sentry receded still further, said, "Yes, may the night that lies before us indeed be good", and, feeling in my cheeks the heat of the fire, turned my face away from them all.

Requiem

Were I to say that Genevieve possessed a fine clear voice and leave it at that, I might, not without justice, well be charged with understatement. Were I instead to say that she sang like the heavenly God-intoxicated seraphim, then the charge could, once again not without justice, be that of leaning towards hyperbole. Suffice it then to say that hers was the voice that led her to be given the lead soprano role in the *Terpsichore Amateur Society for Music and the Performing Arts* rendering of Mozart's *Requiem*, to which she obtained a seat for me right there in the front tier, the two of us separated solely by the footlights, a microphone and, on his podium, the conductor, the septuagenarian turning octogenarian, Francis X.G. (for Xavier Gerontius) Gray.

I had agreed to go, though not without some misgivings, however privately entertained. Masses, requiems, cantatas, even oratorios — unless they were, say, *Elijah* or *Jephthah* or *Judas Maccabeus* — were, after all, scarcely apt fare for one descended as I had been — to cite my one-time Hebrew teacher, Reverend Granek — "from the most direct, most continuous line of Abraham, may all God's children remain so blessed". Set against this, however, was the consideration that, as a lecturer in philosophy, my period of expertise and deepest empathy being for the Age of Reason spanning Descartes and Newton and Paine and Voltaire, it would have seemed nothing short of tribally insular to have yielded to some exclusive atavistic fealty

to my heritage when all outward adherence to prescribed Mosaic ritual, belief and worship had with me by then not only fallen by the way but, like other religions and other faiths, had come to represent the mere legacy of darker, anachronistic and superstitious, however pious, ages.

O, I knew that attempts had been made, and were continually being made, to bring tradition up to date and to invest it with "meaning for moderns" (to quote Rabbi Nemerov of the *Beth Din*, who was most vocally concerned by the number of defectors, through out-marriage or sheer apathy, from the faith). I was familiar, too, with the names and writings of Buber and Rosenzweig, of Soloveitchik and Fackenheim, and of that arch-sufferer of our time, Elie Wiesel, if only because Father, my father, a *Gymnasium* teacher back home, though a picture-framer in this land of his adoption, had urged me often enough "to look deeply into our own, into *your* own". But try as I might to warm to them, to our own, to *my* own, and be moved, persuaded, excited or inspired by them, they paled repeatedly against the eighteenth-century rationalists who were so much more to my taste, as also against the more recent Kierkegaard, Russell, Camus and Sartre who, along with the more secular humanists and laureated men of science, in this world made much more perfect sense.

But overriding even this was the most basic, the most simple reason of all. I went to the performance of the *Requiem* out of deference to Genevieve; no, I went — why mince words? — I went out of love for Genevieve; I went out of sheer love for her with whom — *pace*, Rabbi Nemerov, *pace* Father, Mother, *pace* Papa and Mama Allan — I was the merest step away from engagement, that last step being both enormously large and yet, if reason — if Reason — alone were guiding illuminating beacon, then at the same time dismissively small: simply — A pox on all that separated men! — different versions of God; my parents' being that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, hers the God that made up one limb of a Trinity that also encompassed the Son and the Holy Ghost.

We ourselves, Genevieve and I — children of light —

accepted neither and, where challenged beneath our roofs, could with total honesty, tell our respective parents that our loved one was different not only from others of their kind but also from whatever image they might have entertained — in the case of the Allans, of Jewish boys, and, in my parents' case, of Catholic girls. We were, in a sense, kindred spirits, whatever our bloodlines. For just as I lectured best on the optimism for mankind that generally characterised my mentors among the *philosophes* and their English, American and German kin, Genevieve's Master's thesis, albeit in literature, had touched upon just this aspect of my philosophical concerns, its very title, *Mind as tabula rasa: Enlightenment formulae towards human perfectibility*, evoking in me a responsive chord that made us of one blood, each of us independently primed but in unison inclined towards the notion that it was through reason, and understanding, and goodwill and human action, rather than through either divine grace or supernatural intervention, that any approximation to perfection would ever be attained. Fittingly enough, we had met at a getaway weekend seminar entitled "Rationalism: a return from Idealistic, Romantic, Nationalistic and Sectarian deviances and mayhem".

My parents — like Genevieve's, as I was in time to learn — had scarcely been pleased about my going.

"Not enough that you studied with them, that you work with them, that even on Friday nights you go to their parties," Mother had said with no little heat, "you now also have to eat, sleep and breathe with them under one roof". And she had added a coda, by now something of a signature tune aimed at sealing all argument: "Is this what we survived to rear you for?"

Father had been more pithy.

"If you must choose to be an *apikoros*, then remain a Jewish one at least," he said.

The irony was that of the thirty or thirty-five participants at the seminar, I could scarcely turn north, south, east or west without confronting at least one or two other faces descended from that other most illustrious now-timeless *apikoros*, Abra-

ham, that other ancestral heretic hounded some four millennia past for having denounced, demeaned, demolished and devastated the gods of *his* fathers, those effigied, totemed precursor gods of Ur. But paying only lip-service to friendship with an anti-vivisectionist *nudnik* in Reuben Aronowicz and passing over the attentions of a frizz-haired, sharp-chinned and tight-jeaned Rachel Rabechofsky, I plunged instead, like some predatory kingfisher, for Genevieve Allan who with grace — and with what grace! — had taken issue with an assertion I had made, bringing it down from the rarefied realm of flighty hypothesis to a harder reality wholly earthbound.

That, more than anything else, quickly separated her for me from the Elizabeths, Cressidas, Livias and Joannes, as from the Marcuses, Peters, call-me-Bills and Gordons who, too, had come. That exchange had raised Genevieve above the ruck, but when, later, at the evening's extempore *soiree* I heard her sing where others fiddled, trumpeted, recited or raconteured — heard her sing *Una voce poco fa, Che faro senza Euridice*? and the *Carmen* "Habanera" — if anyone else was there sitting, walking, talking, smoking, drinking, laughing, clattering saucers or scraping chairs about me, then truth was that I had become oblivious to them all and dared at concert's end approach her — none too subtly — and say, with admittedly pert if not impertinent bravado, "My, your talents seem nowhere to cease. You really are a most veritable Madame de Stael, what with your feel for sophism, for history, for dialectic and for music, bringing culture — Culture with a capital C — to this simple, Rousseauian, rustic Arcady!"

Such liberties back home would surely have earned me the coldest of cold shoulders. But the balmy clarity of the nocturnal Kalorama air, the near-total pacific ambience of repose, and the dropping of each participant's guard in the wake of close-quartered communality, had led her instead to purse her lips in mirth, bow her head in mock deference, and to return with a most affecting reciprocating perkiness, "A most gracious compliment this, coming as it does from our in-house Johnsonian post-Socratic proto-Platonic crypto-Voltairean heir."

So was the would-be catcher caught — caught by the sharp and chipper quicksilver repartee, by the bell-like tintinnabulation and clarity of her singing voice, by the evidence of a mind not too indolent to think, and by other touches that were patently more physical: the easy way she bore herself with a most savoir faire Toorak-bred elegance; the way, too, she tossed back her head to restore to obedience a wave of rebellious honey-coloured hair; the way her smoothly arching nose twitched whenever she was about to laugh; and the way a little dark mole — more beguiling than any black-pencilled artifice — danced beside her lips whenever she talked, as she usually talked, with zestful animation. I was enthralled by all of these and remained so enthralled that at a later date, and back home, I brought myself to call her "my perfect angel"; upon which she showed me the inturning of her little fingers that I had not noticed before and countered, not without some jollity and patently flattered pleasure, "Oh, no, spare me, I'm not. If I were an angel, you wouldn't have me; while if I were perfect, I'd be a freak."

Freak, then, but delectable freak was she, Genevieve, with whom I came daily to lunch at the university and whom I took to the theatre, thereby creating a buzz around the ever-vigilant loquacious witness-bearers to incipient scandal around Judaic Melbourne; with whom, too, I attended the monthly meetings of the Rationalist Society and debated the Rousseauian ideal as manifested in eighteenth- and nineteenth-Century European, English and Russian literature; and whom I went frequently to hear sing, now solo, now in a madrigal ensemble, now in the *Terpsichore* choir, taking her with me in turn to a succession of art-shows, antiquarian stores and book-fairs that had long been my own private passion.

* * * *

And the day came when, after a concentrated succession of rehearsals during which I saw less of her, Genevieve took her place on the stage and I mine in the auditorium of the Town

Hall in readiness for the "Terpsi Requiem" as we had come to call Mozart's final work on earth.

On reaching the foyer at the top of the stairs, she had turned to me, squeezed my hand and smiled with uncustomary nervousness. Her palm was faintly cool and moist.

"Wish me luck," she said. "Who knows but that God himself may be listening tonight."

I returned the pressure of her hand.

"That will mark a change," I retorted and watched her disappear through a side-door that led backstage, the while waving her fingers and saying over a shoulder, "Meet you back here after this grand Latinic roundelay, okay? We can then go back to being normal and pagan again. Suits you?"

"Sure," I called after her. "But meanwhile, Gen, good luck!"

If, earlier, she had been nervous, on stage Genevieve was all assurance again. She was in her element, and positively regal, in crisp white blouse frilled beneath her chin, and in ankle-length black skirt, her hair drawn back and tied in an unobtrusive ribbon. She had presence too, and poise, and though I was clearly prejudiced in her favour, she so stood out from the other three soloists beside her and the orchestra and choir behind, that, for me, these others might as well not have been there at all. Only the conductor, Francis X.G.Gray was as much a master unto himself — and that because he walked to the podium so magisterially and bore with such distinction the charisma of grey-haired, gaunt and venerable age.

The lights having been dimmed, all shuffling of feet and coughing having stopped, and the customary hush before a performance having fallen, the first orchestral notes sounded. They were soft, slow and ominous, rising in a steady measured crescendo to a dramatic *forte* that introduced the choir in a full-voiced declamatory and lofty *Requiem aeternam*. I had heard recorded performances of the work before, but never had the back of my neck so tingled with the very hauntingness of those opening bars which, in a peculiar and surely sacrilegious quirk of association, I could in that moment compare only to the *El*

Malé Rachamim, ("O Lord Thou Art Full of Compassion"), that Cantor Nussbaum had chanted in this very hall at a commemorative ceremony for the Jewish martyrs of the war. And I tingled even more when soon, very soon, Genevieve herself, in the clearest, most ringing and most crystalline tones, sang her solo couplet, which, as it must have penetrated every recess of the auditorium, also penetrated flesh to heat the blood that coursed beneath.

But something else too struck me then that I had never paid heed to before, no matter how often I had heard the work. True music-lovers would most assuredly have regarded me as heathen, but music to me, even the finest — especially the finest — served more often as background accompaniment to reading, to preparation of lectures and to correction of students' essays than as something to be listened to in its own right. I was always too busy with one or other activity to permit myself the luxury of quiet concentration upon the interplay of themes or elaborations of arpeggios, or the pundit comparisons of symphonies and concerti as conducted by Von Karajan, Klemperer, Solti or Bernstein. But now, in the darkened hall, there being no distractions or duties to divert my attention, my attention indeed being fixed upon one object above all, my Genevieve so elegant and poised up there before me, I let the actual words of the *Requiem* reach me, I let the words reach into me. And although the greater part of the Latin I had so grudgingly learned at high-school had turned to rust, enough had remained for me to gain some meaning from what was being sung. So I made out Genevieve's *Te decet hymnus* most clearly, translating it the while; and where I had reclined most comfortably in my seat to enjoy Mozart in the flesh, as it were, I now sat up and leaned forward, the better to concentrate upon whatever else was still to come. For even as I listened to her sing "A hymn becomes Thee in Sion, O Lord, and a vow shall be paid Thee in Jerusalem", I heard another melody as well, an alternative chant or refrain that, issuing from memory's interstices, returned me to the time when, still attending synagogue with my father, I would hear Rabbi Nemerov before the open Ark

intone in his mighty baritone, "For out of Zion shall go forth the Law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem".

Who had pilfered from whom? I found myself wondering; or, if it was not a case of pilfering, from what common source then had these seemingly parallel verses arisen, or to what common end could they in ecumenical thrust be turned? On returning home I would trace their origin.

Genevieve's solo part was for the moment brief. The choir inundated her, supervening with a fervent *Exaudi orationem* and *Kyrie eleison*, as fervent as the pleas of my own people beseeching God — O God! — to hear their prayer in the *Shema koleinu* and forgive them, forgive them, "*k'rov rachameicha El*", according to the abundance of his tender mercies. And then the *Sequentia* followed, and the *Rex tremendae*, and the *Recordare*, a cascade of melody and resonance and beauty tumbling in such profligate richness and fluid luxuriance that, were I to listen to the music alone, I might, in its thrall, have made ready to disown every truth of that sensible and sober reason I so prized, and accept, yes, even accept, the very possibility of a deity supernal and sublime.

But O the words, the words, and the concepts, the abstractions, the primitively benighted gobbledy-gook that the Mozartian musical incandescence was set to and wasted upon: Judge, King, Throne, and Book of Judgement, doom, resurrection, retribution, absolution — words and concepts and abstractions which I had long before turned my back on in my own inheritance, but which now, in the most unwonted, most incongruous of circumstances, returned to me in another guise. And in that moment, I recalled, wholly unbidden, an admonition tendered to me by my mother: "Remember who your grandparents were; remember where they are now; remember the kind who tore them from you", and recalled too a wry remark made by my father: "One bed can sleep two people, but never will it accommodate two peoples."

And yet to those very kind was I now paying obeisance! I was bending the knee in offerings of tribute that were not for me to give. What had I let myself in for? What was I doing here? If I

had little time or patience for my own liturgy, what was I doing lapping at another's? What did I want of Marys and St.Michaels and sweet Lord Jesuses, I, most probably the sole Jew in that hall? Was I not by my very presence committing, if not desecration of the Name — for, to me, there was no Name — then desecration of a people, of my people, and of their memory and their history, extending from the generation that was Abraham's through to my very own? To be free-thinking was one thing; to be accepting of others, also. But that did not mean the forsaking of the worship of one's own people's imputed God to go whoring after the gods of those others. Had I let my head be so sorely turned?

Ah, love! love! love! — that scapegrace obfuscator that would scramble all sensibleness, wisdom, sobriety and poise.

And what of Genevieve? What was she doing there? Genevieve; she who had herself till now denied the canons of her own Catholic nurturing and yet was now singing as if she were wholly rapt, wholly transported, wholly possessed, giving seemingly inspired utterance to words that transgressed everything we shared — the belief in a world liberated from the shackles of doctrinal superstition, which served as obstacle supreme to every prophetic vision of the lion lying with the lamb and the turning of weapons into ploughshares and dogmas into universal accord.

Genevieve!

Up there on the stage before me, so elegant, so gaunt, so animated and galvanised.

Genevieve!

Was she slipping away?

Genevieve!

I wanted to call out: "Come down! Come down!"

But she sang on, as did her companion soloists, and the choir, through section after section, through "*Salva me*!" and "*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*!" and "*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*", myself the while rendering the alien into the more familiar, rendering it into the synagogal forms I had left behind, into "*Hoshiah na*!" and "*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*!" and "*Baruch haba*

b'Shem Adonai"; "Save me!" and "Holy, holy, holy!" and "Blessed be he that comes in the name of the Lord!"

There was no reaching her. She was wholly a part of the orchestra and choir. Francis X.G.Gray had rehearsed them well. And as I listened, as I heard Genevieve, after a brief lyrically pastoral orchestral lead-in, launch with patent passion into the *Lux aeterna* bidding eternal light to shine upon the dead for God was merciful, God was merciful, God was merciful, I writhed in my seat; I leaned forward, I leaned back; and to the consternation of my neighbours left and right, I bent a leg under my thigh, straightened it out again, picked up the programme notes I had dropped to the floor and felt the need to clear my throat.

"Genevieve!" I wanted to cry out again. "Genevieve! Do you know what you are doing? Don't you see... Can't you see you're singing a lie? A lie! A huge and monstrous fabricated dressed-up lie!"

She sang on.

"Genevieve! Have you been so taken in by the music's guile? So seduced by it that you would even deny your truest self?"

The choir joined her, echoing her prayer.

> *Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine*
> Let eternal light shine upon them, O Lord

"Genevieve! Who is this God you're singing to? *What* is this God?"

The auditorium resonated with the music that flowed smoothly and mellifluously, leading towards tranquillity — the ultimate tranquillity which, on earth, was to be had only through the eternal repose and silence and oblivion of death. No-one moved; no-one as much as twitched; breathing itself may have been suspended, save my own that, wise to music's treachery, seethed now as though stirred in a boiling cauldron.

Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia pius es
With Thy saints forever, for Thou art merciful

"Genevieve! Haven't we talked about this, talked about it, time without number? Decided that God is but an invention of blind benighted man? A confabulation of an over-extended mind? An oriental delusion born of a sun-and-desert-addled brain! Have you forgotten?. . ."

The *Requiem* was nearing its end. My jaws were locked. My every muscle was knotted to tautness. I held my hands, my fists, clasped between my knees.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine
Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord

"And what delusion, Genevieve! And what delusion! The most lethal of all which, like nettles gone wild, comes to possess and set men at odds, the most predatory among them sanctifying in His name the spilling of blood, the most God-inebriated even now, somewhere, in some corner, with some pious prayer upon his tongue perpetrating or perpetuating some new and dastardly form of evil. . ."

The *Requiem* was steadily moving towards its final denouement. The music was exquisite, it was noble, it was — and in different circumstances, it could even for me have been — exalting. But I was not yet done. Even as all voices on stage were united in singing "*et lux perpetua luceat eis*", I was not yet done.

For I wanted still to cry out — and would have cried out, had public spectacle been in my nature:

"You sing hosannas," I would have cried, "all of you, you too now Genevieve, you too now Genevieve, to that fabricated universal object of delusion, singing so sublimely of absolution, resurrection and eternal light!"

The choir had reached its coda:

Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum
With Thy saints forever

"But who are to be the absolved? Those who killed even as they sang their hosannas or those who *were* killed with their own hosannas on their lips?"

The refrain recurred.

Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum
With Thy saints forever

"And who will be the resurrected? The murderers or the murdered?"

And again the same:

Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum
With Thy saints forever

"And who are the ones destined to eternal light and who the ones doomed to darkness eternal?"

And the refrain rose for a last reprise, attended now by its concluding seal:

Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quid pius es
With Thy saints forever, for Thou art merciful —

to which I offered up my own response, my own cadenza: "Are we not *all* doomed, *all* of us so long as we cling to dogmas and mythologies and to hoary fossilised primeval tribalisms? Even you, Genevieve, even you, kindred spirit, even you, who through your art have just perpetuated those very farragos we have so consistently debated, decried, denied?"

With the close of the *Requiem* on the sustained note of "*pius es*", the auditorium remained silent for a protracted moment, then erupted into keen applause. If, earlier, I had in that assembly felt myself apart, I was now more than ever isolated,

alone. I could not goad myself to bring my own hands together in plaudit, but made ready to move towards the foyer even though I was in full sight of Genevieve who glanced at me with the most wan and exhausted of smiles which, even that, I could not return.

I was itching for confrontation.

"Why did you let yourself be drawn into that web of fictions, deceits and taradiddle?" I burned to ask. "After all, you weren't singing "Three blind mice" or "Oranges and lemons" or "Old Mother Hubbard" who went to her cupboard. Those very same who wove such paeans and sang melodies so sublime, in their time also killed, killed, killed!"

But wherein lay the gain in such confrontation, and what might not be the loss? Was it not in fact more meet, for the sake of continuing accord, to tell myself she had indeed been singing nursery rhymes and keep the rest inside, swallow it, take her by the shoulder, kiss a cheek and even praise her performance when she came out into the foyer? Reason and sensibleness dictated that this was the better thing to do.

But Genevieve did not come out.

Nor did I find her when I returned to the auditorium in search of her, learning from one of the musicians as he packed away his tuba that she had phoned for a taxi to take her home.

I hurried out, pushed my way past the last of the stragglers departing down the stairs and sprinted to my car in a nearby parking lot. I drove through the darkness, accelerated through amber lights before they changed, weaved between seemingly crawling lanes of cars and reached her home in St George's Road just as a taxi — hers — was drawing away and Genevieve was passing through her gate.

"Genevieve!" I called, briskly getting out of my car.

She could not have heard, or had perhaps elected not to hear. Her heels continued to clatter along the path to her door.

"Genevieve!" I called again.

This time she did stop. Under the light of a streetlamp, I saw her pause, partly turn, kick the point of a shoe into the ground

in indecision, and then approach, albeit slowly, haltingly, almost grudgingly.

"Genevieve!" I said a third time. "What's happened?"

Before me was not the Genevieve I knew, self-assured, buoyant, quick. Her shoulders were normally straight and sure; now, a weight seemed to weigh them down.

"I would have phoned you tomorrow, apologised, explained," she said. "But tonight, I couldn't face you back there. I needed to be alone."

"Oh?" I said.

"I had to sort myself out."

"So suddenly?" I asked.

She hesitated; she seemed to be reaching for speech.

"Perhaps it was the music, perhaps the words. Or the sanctity of the work which even during rehearsals I had written off; or the reverential solemnity that pervaded the auditorium, or Francis Gray's total adoration of the work and utter conviction of its truth; or the way every note burrowed into the soul, or that which is given the name of 'soul'. Whatever it was, whatever it was, something in me changed."

"All this on account of a single evening with Mozart?" I said in an attempt, feeble as it was, at levity.

Genevieve tossed her head between a confirming nod and a negating shake.

"Mozart was only part of it. The other was you. For when I saw you, at the end, not so much as acknowledging the performance, let alone my part in it, I knew that something had happened to you too. And I came to see that for all we had earlier held in common, in such matters as reach beyond the realms of reason, we were, you and I, in fact light-years apart."

"We need not be," I said. "Maybe, Genevieve, we can forget this evening ever happened."

She placed a hand upon my arm, then removed it.

"Listen," she said, "Till now, we've held religion to be delusion. . ."

"Which it is! It is!"

"But isn't the notion of universal reason or the belief in it but another such delusion? Can we really with any feasible hope believe that the Swedes and Chinese, say, or the Koreans and Scots, Mexicans and Basques, Aborigines and Hottentots, not to begin even to mention our own kind, Catholics on one hand and Jews on the other, will ever agree upon a single all-uniting universal truth dictated solely by disinterested reason, goodwill and common sense?"

"Are we therefore to give up trying?" I interposed.

The opportunity to speak had patently restored her to her more customary self-mastery, directness and poise.

"Asher, Asher, believe me. If as much as the possibility of it existed, then I would be ready, yes, even willing, in the name of Reason, to burn as others through the centuries burned for their doctrinal impieties. If I still had hopes that love, our love, might indeed bring near the day of Reasonable Man, I should cling to you still and look forward to that nest of little Gershovs we planned who would continue our work after us."

She plucked a leaf from a shrub that grew beside the gate and contemplated it.

"But there are things that are stronger in this world than common sense and reason, even if they are less true. And I discovered something else tonight. Even if we stayed together and married and had those little Gershovs about us, I would never be sure of myself, you could never be sure of me, I could never be sure of you, whatever you might say now."

I wanted to prove her wrong. I wanted also to reach out, to take her hands, to hold her and keep her from breaking away. But even without physically moving, she was in another sense clearly receding.

"What you're saying, then" I ventured instead, "is that East is East and West is West; for us, Moses will ever remain Moses and Jesus Jesus. . ."

She nodded, not with the satisfaction that came with discovery, but acquiescently, resignedly, yieldingly.

"Yes," she said. "Even when people have forgotten how to spell Kant or Voltaire, Locke or Sartre, Russell or Marx. . ."

"And so you are returning to live by your lies and telling me to return to mine. . ."

"If you want to put it that way. . ."

"Even if in reality it's a return to darkness?. . ."

"At least for me it's my own, in which, like the beaver or the bear, I may most surely be at home."

Genevieve shivered momentarily as a gust of wind kicked up around us, and she rubbed her arms.

"And now, if you will let me, I'd like to go inside, I'm getting cold out here. Good night, Asher. Don't think too ill of me. I've tried to make this easy for both of us. But the truth is. . ."

She leaned over towards me, sought out my hand, squeezed it, and kissed me on a cheek. But the kiss was fleeting. It was without passion, without lust. It was a kiss such as one gave a loved one before a departure. I tried to embrace her in turn, but she slipped from my grasp and turned away, heading more resolutely towards her door.

"Genevieve," I said after her, unable wholly to let go.

"Yes?" she said, pausing.

"Why did you have to sing tonight? And why the *Requiem* of all things? And why did you ask me to come? I was so perfectly happy before, believing I was working towards bringing light into the darkness, while now. . . while now I'm suddenly lost."

"Perhaps, Asher," she said, "that's God's way of showing us where we truly belong."

With that she was gone — up the path, her tread swift, sure and firm now, crackling on gravel, then clacking on the stone of her portico, and through the door.

I walked back to my car, sat there musing while looking into the unruffled darkness around, then, resolved, struck the steering-wheel once, a second time, a third, switched on the ignition and drove away.

From memory's deeper recesses, Father's counsel returned. "If you must choose to be an *apikoros*, then remain a Jewish one at least". And with that his urgings to "look deeply into our own, *your* own" also returned.

Yes, our own, *my* own.

"Genevieve," I wished I could say then by way of having the last word. "I love you, I hope never to have cause to cease loving you. I do. But I thank you too for a denouement neither of us could have foreseen. You may well say that, in my lostness, I am opting for an easy option. But come Saturday morning, I propose to attend the synagogue. I do not know what I might discover, or what I might *re*cover there. At this very moment, it doesn't matter. But if I am to live in the midst of fictions and farragos and confabulations as we have seen fit till now to call them, then for me too they may as well be those of my own. And if I am to listen to "Holy, holy, holy!", then I may as well choose Rabbi Nemerov's "*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*!" above your own "*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*", however sublime and exquisite and resplendent it be. In this, however, I have not given up the claims of Reason. Even in the midst of those pious invented hand-me-downs of my people, I can still with ease continue to live by Reason's light. For Reason, Genevieve, is a private virtue; it is strictly an individual one. It is only in the collective, as you yourself indicated — and as an historian, I should have known it better than most — that it is an impossibility. And so I will make peace with that impossibility; and peace with the fact; and peace with the world; and peace with myself, yes, peace with myself, this peace above all having, in the end, to precede all wider, human, universal peace. And for leading me to recognise this, Genevieve, I thank you, I thank you, I do."

With that, I came to my street, turned into my driveway and stopped outside the door. Getting out of the car, I looked, as if with vision restored, at the house which had been the place of my growing up; I looked with different eyes upon those things that had for so long been familiar — the walls and windows and sunshades and shrubs and patterned door, aging all — and felt more than ever the balmy warmth of coming home.

Under The Footbridge

Towards evening, she started to waken. For the first time she heard the insistent rattling of windows in their frames and felt the cold wind rummaging about her room. She opened her eyes slowly, but the light, even in its leaden dullness, hurt them. A terrible memory, an unbidden guest, also caused her pain and she closed her eyes still tighter, pressing her head more firmly into the pillow, and would have slept on to eternity, if only to forget. She had then a sensation of rising and falling; she dreamt — if dream was the word in her fuzzied state — of the sea and then of a merry-go-round on which with the spinning of the platform the horses slid up and down on brassy plaited poles. She was a child again, laughing freely while behind the barrier her father, a blur against a whirling, swirling haze, glad to have made her laugh, laughed back at her. Then he was gone and a rustling of curtains carried her thoughts to the gardens, to the park opposite her home where, green and scented, the treetops nurtured a host of secrets and no man could be alone.

With a movement that made her whole body ache, she reached out an arm. Her fingers touched a bottle and, as if burned or stung, she withdrew her hand. She wondered vaguely whether she had swallowed everything it had contained. And she remembered again the merry-go-round, and felt herself spinning, then saw herself gliding, hovering above the treetops and beneath the clouds. And both the treetops and

the clouds moved before the wind that rattled the windows in their frames and seemed to fill the room.

She lay on her bed for another hour, then befuddled and unsteady, holding on to whatever was at hand to lend support, she rose and dressed. She combed her hair, pulling at its knotted strands without looking in the mirror and pinched her cheeks to give them tone. The weight of unwonted weariness dragged upon her eyelids and her jaw. Friends used to say she had such an expressive face, she remembered then — a goddess, a clown, even Sarah Bernhardt had none better. The footlights had been at her feet. A long white rustling gown of satin had flowed down towards them, flowing indeed, streaming, as Ophelia, lovesick, jilted, crazed, glided to her death. A student production, to be sure, but the audience applauded keenly nonetheless as the curtains came down and everyone had spoken about her, had spoken about her, months before, when there had been time for theatre, for diversion and for make-believe, and when study, seclusion and scurrying after time lost were still remote.

At the thought of study, old, familiar and unwanted oppressions returned to her again. The room, in its subdued light and with its smell of aniseed, suffocated her. Feeling the need to find release, to flee, to breathe, she fumbled for her jacket and went outside.

It had rained and the smell of compost and pine-trees hung about her. The cold, crisp, briny odour of the sea, too, reached her and she moved towards it. She raised her collar and walked slowly, her eyes upon the ground, trying, trying in vain, not to think.

She had been working hard, by day under the pale-green bilious light of the Public Library, by night in the shimmering glow of a desk-lamp whose sharp white glare fell starkly upon her books but cast shadows all about. Above all, she blamed the shadows. After three weeks within their thrall, she felt the shadows expanding, extending beyond her until they surrounded, encompassed and dominated her and she could see nothing outside herself but a vast black consuming void. She

came to despise her subjects, regarded history as a chronicle of unrelieved stupidity and wholesale blunder, philosophy as a rife and fanciful rigmarole of illusions. Even literature which she had loved devoutly became something hateful; she could not understand why people bothered to invent fiction or write verse; more than anything did it come to assume the character of an indulgence serving nought but the vanity of the writer and the gullibilities of the reader. She would have abandoned it all and gone to work — it didn't matter where — in an office, a factory, an apple orchard or a store. But she remembered her parents in Mildura awaiting good news and so she pushed on, resumed, struggled with her work; until succumbing to the shadows without and the increasingly yawning void within, she had acted in despair.

Along Acland Street, an occasional passer-by made her raise her head. In these most brief of moments, she saw neon flashing, the street-lights glowing, the stars flickering between the large, shapeless, brooding clouds. She felt sister to the clouds. She became aware, too, of activity about her. Couples approached, passed, and disappeared into the coffee-lounges. Solitary men leaned against sign-posts and giggled or retched; someone called "Double or nothin'"; and somewhere a dog began to bark. She walked on. The smell of cakes drifted out from the Hungarian and Austrian *conditereis* and from the hamburger bar emerged the sicklier fumes of grills. Above her, someone was practising on a violin; there were women laughing, and outside Luna Park, a fellow riding a bicycle rang his bell as he came closer and whistled in her ear. Past the *Palais Theatre* and the *Palais de Danse*, a band was playing loudly and couples in evening dress were going in.

She made her way towards the beach. Always, in her solitude, she had found a measure of solace there. A narrow path near the clock-tower led down to the Lower Esplanade; on both sides were small stunted bushes and quivering tufts of grass, and below, across the road, the solid and sturdy parapet on the edge of the sand. In front of her with the darkness falling more heavily and densely about her, the waves unfolding in low-

pitched shuffles sent a delicate spray over the low stone barrier. She felt it in her face and, even in its saltiness, it tasted of something fresh, of something pleasant, of something she had once loved but had since forgotten. In the distance, across the bay, she saw the port that was gateway to the world beyond, its lights glinting doubly, both on land and as reflections in the water at the further edge of darkness, and she would have given much in that moment to be as untroubled as that darkness out there and the stretch of sea that linked the far and scattered shores.

From the farther end of the parapet, she heard the strains of music. Under a footbridge, protected from wind, sat a group of young people, fellows, girls, students, too, no doubt, or clerks or shop-assistants. One of them, a lean fellow with a straggly beard, was playing a guitar. The glow of a kerosene lantern lit up his face. His eyes were closed. The others swayed to the rhythm and hummed. They were singing a current Seeger favourite.

> "Where have all the young men gone
> Long time passing,
> Where have all the young men gone
> Long time ago?"

The group seemed to her to be moved to melancholy, but no sooner did that song come to an end than another, a more spirited and vivacious one, was begun. A sense of pity took hold and welled within her. Not for herself now but for the parents of the young men in the earlier song who would never return, for her own parents waiting for good news, and for her own homecoming over summer, and for the cluster gathered there singing under the footbridge by the beach.

Someone called out to her. "Join our little party, Sis! Come, sing with us!"

She came closer and sat on the periphery, watching each in turn by the light of the lantern and listening to them sing as she felt a knot rising to her throat. She might have felt inclined to

join them, however mutedly, but with the best will in the world she found she couldn't. Then someone told a joke, an old story, and someone else a riddle. The others laughed and then they sang again. The wind had become sharper and she heard it wheezing in the bushes. The waves sprang higher and their spray fell on her lips. Apart from the light shed by the lantern, all else beyond under the footbridge was now enshrouded in total nocturnal darkness.

Now they laughed, she thought; now they laughed and sang and told tall stories and were healthy, buoyant, jovial. But life was short, it was so short that all the laughter and all the song and all the stories in the world could not extend it. One day, they, too, like the young men in the song, they, too, the fellows and the girls, and she along with them, would be gone. They would grow old, become sick and die, and hear no more laughter, sing no more songs, tell no more stories. Life, in its very motion, was sad; it was abominable; it served no purpose beyond its own perpetuation. In the face of this, how could they sing or even begin to tell stories, let alone laugh?

One girl, wearing a tawny parka, placed an arm about her shoulders. She had short black hair and smiled broadly, openly, showing her teeth. She was also singing but stumbled over words she didn't know. "Come on, kid," she said between a verse and its refrain, "no mournful faces. Sing now, kid, 'cause tomorra' ya' won' have no tongue."

The touch of the girl's arm, the nearby splashing of the waves and the taste of salt brought her comfort of a sort. She wanted to hum, but still no sound yet rose above the constriction in her throat. She remembered again the merry-go-round, the gardens and her father's laughter. Everything was transitory, everything marked for extinction — even the girl beside her clearly understood it — everything passed, every song, every pleasure, every smile, as even those couples going dancing at the *Palais De Danse*, and the solitary men in Acland Street giggling to themselves or retching, as even the boy on the bicycle who had whistled in her ear as he passed. She thought

again of her childhood, so far behind now, it seemed, and irretrievable.

Then, if she had been suffocating from what was nothing if not grief, she now felt her throat constricted by the onslaught of a new emotion. It came to her suddenly and set her head turning. Whatever pills she had taken must have dissipated in their effect and left her mind clearer, sharper, more at ease. If all things must pass, it struck her, so must all things we despise. And if this is so, then their passing is only to make way for something new, for something finer, perhaps for something more meaningful. And therefore, every age, every generation, indeed every moment and action is linked inseparably with the one before it and the one following. Above the sadness of the moment, something greater and still mysterious, for which there might yet be no name, would come to be, but towards which each in his own way had to work, work, work, and, in his own way, in her own way, bring about.

She listened to the singing but heard the haunting, higher, heaven-ascending music of eternity. And, as if of their own accord, her shoulders heaved once, twice, three times and, freely, openly, fervidly, she wept at its sheer beauty.

The Canal

They all remembered him. He remembered them. Even after fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years.

"Good afternoon, Mr Wynn."

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Mr Wynn?"

"Oh, yes, I can still remember your history classes, Mr Wynn."

"Fourth form I believe it was, wasn't it, Mr Wynn?"

Mr Wynn. Mr Wynn. Where, once, it had been Mr Unwin, Mr No-Win, Mr Can't Win or Mr Never Win.

And in response he was compelled to say, "Well, well, it's you, Charlie Fisher. . ." and "Goodness, it's you, Judy Nisbet, how nice, how nice. . ." and "Jimmy Nichols, that beard, I'd never have recognised. . ."

The classroom in which he had once taught them all needed painting, needed renovating, ventilating. Though it was not a school-day,chalk-dust stuck in his throat. By some improbable miracle, he had already forgoten its dryness, retirement having given him the wherewithal to nurture roses and gladioli and honeydewed carnations. But then in his day, there had been little dust. Every piece of chalk, every duster was in its place. No chart was by as much as a milllimetre askew. Perfection itself could not be too perfect. He had demanded much of others, but not without demanding much of himself as well.

Across the blackboard, a large multicoloured "WELCOME OLD BOYS" had been scrawled, conceding nothing to the

girls, and around it were sketches of gargoyles, tombstones, books and scattered epigrams, "Jerker Jenkins slept here", "Clem Diesendorfer swallowed a watch and thus did pass the time", "Class of '56 where a minute was a century and a century interminable" and "Form 4B, *Requiescat in Pace* and forever Amen".

"Three children now, Janice? My! And tell me, you're working?"

"Deserted wives' pension, Mr Wynn."

"But you were always so... so... Who would have believed?"

Along the back wall, on long rectangular cork-boards, he saw faces, multitudes looking out from photographs, black-and-white mementos salvaged from limbo to be returned after the reunion for yet another generation. Over here, the girls' ace basketball team, beside it the inter-school championship football eighteen, beneath them the chess club, the library club, the debating troupe of which he himself had been in charge, and photographs of prefects, form captains, house captains, school dux, school monitors, and group snaps of teachers — funny, haven't seen Dulcie Conlan here today, and poor Dick Rafferty, he's gone now, shan't see him again, nor Jessie Knight, nor Gracie Fegan, oh God, my God — so like puppets, knuckles on thighs, shoulders back, simian smiles to the dictate of the garrulous, scatter-brained photographer with his standard line, "Have camera, will travel."

"The way you debated, Malcolm, I was sure you were headed for parliament."

"Better still, Mr Wynn. Invite me over one evening and I'll sell you insurance."

"And you, Leslie, you too were a very sound speaker."

"Dad's business got me. Carpets and curtains and manchester goods."

One by one, in pairs, in threes, they approached him. He stood by the window where the light was best. But even the best was bleak, for winter respected no reunions, the clouds were turgid with grey-black menace, and rain, not heavy but

none the less audible, was striking against the panes. The green of the lawns quickly acquired a soggy look, the asphalt glistened mercuric, while beyond the fence, the waters of the canal rippled and glittered silvery under the patter.

"I can still remember, Mr Wynn. . . It could have been yesterday. . . But it's all of twenty-two years. . . how you would say, 'History is flow, a river, a tide, like the waters of the canal out there. . .'"

"And so it is, Marion, so it is. Just try to stop its flow. . ."

Stop its flow, he thought. Sixty-eight now. Retired three years. Angina tablets. Blood pressure pills. Forty-four years a teacher. Forty-four times seventy, eighty students. Three thousand, three-and-a-half thousand of them. What had become of them all?

"Children, Barry?"

"Not married, Mr Wynn. The single life for me."

Gay bachelor, eh?"

"It's a long story, sir. Was engaged once. But fell ill for a long time. . ."

"Oh yes, you had four months off school once also. Or was it six?. . ."

"Long enough, sir. On a pension now. . ."

"But you're not forty yet. . ."

"Thirty-eight, sir. Invalid pension. . . Nerves, sir. . . Never worked, sir. . . Could never work, sir. . ."

He saw that it was raining more heavily now, more steadily. Out to the east, above the rooftops, lightning pierced the greyness like a jagged yellow splinter. Thunder followed, hollow, booming. People caught in the rain came running into the school. What had before been silvery was now leaden. The level of the water in the canal had risen sharply. Its surface was restless. If character could be given to it, it was turbulent, angry.

"And you wanted to be a philosopher once, Andrew, I remember?"

"Naive the head that sits on the shoulders of a child, as they say in the classics, Mr Wynn."

"And now?"

"An accountant. Five children, the youngest seven weeks. Two mortgages. An overdraft. You know the kind of thing. Try philosophising on that."

"Hello, Roger. You *have* filled out. And this must be Mrs Bennett. . ."

"My friend, Julie, Mr Wynn. My wife and I. . ."

"Yes, yes, I understand. . ."

"I mean, my wife. . . she died. . . leukaemia. . . acute. . . the whole illness took six weeks. . ."

"Yes, yes, I understand. . ."

The water in the canal was rising.

"And Brian Corbett, glad to see you. And you became the doctor you wanted?"

"A chemist, Mr Wynn."

"And your friend. . . what was his name?. . . He sat beside you. . . in that seat. . . Raphael, I believe. . . showed a lot of promise, he did. . ."

"Raphael? Wiped himself off, Mr Wynn. Got himself drunk one night and took a long walk off a short pier, as the saying goes. . . But then he was always so. . . so intense. . ."

"And Jacquie Chamberlain, too, I heard. . . Barbiturates, I was told. . ."

The tree-tops rocked with choreic violence. He heard the wind, a squall whistle and rasp through the branches. Leaping waves splashed vigorously against the concrete reinforcements of the canal.

"Dawn Carmichael!. . .Hello!"

"Carmody, Mr Wynn. . ."

"Yes, yes, Dawn Carmody. Did you keep up the swimming? You were Olympic material. . ."

"A bun in the oven stopped that, I'm afraid. But my youngest. . . she's twelve. . . *She*'ll be a champ. . ."

"So long as she keeps buns out of the oven, eh?"

They continued to come. Some held cups of coffee, others drank cola or lemonade. He recognised Richard Henderson, Norman Clayton, Susan Fogarty. One-time debaters, sports

champions, star pupils, class comedians, would-be poets: now clerks, salesmen, mechanics, secretaries; Colin Tierney a one-horse-town solicitor, Sally Milner a divorcee, Faye Donohue mother of a child dead from tuberose sclerosis. Their faces once round or oval or square, but ever smooth, now given to sharper edges, deeper crevices, acne scars. And scalps once healthy with dark, dense, youthful hair, now balding, greying, psoriatic and coarsened like his own. The classroom was becoming crowded. They came to escape the storm. Thirty, forty, fifty of them squeezed in. Some with husbands, wives, children, *de factos*, most of them laughing, chatting, reminiscing, exclaiming in greeting, crying out in surprise. The steam of their breaths dispelled the dryness of the chalk-dust. Their wet shoulders rubbed against the blackboard, smudging the welcome, the gargoyles, the tombstones, the epigrams and the books.

Outside, lightning struck at the windows, their frames rattled with the ensuing thunder. The rain now fell in sheets. He saw the water of the canal overflow its banks.

History is flow, he remembered, a river, a tide like the canal out there. . .

"Well, Michael Simpson, did anything I taught you ever prove useful?"

"With all due respect, Mr Wynn, history scarcely helps in running a men's wear store."

Water spilled through the fence, streamed across the asphalt, flooded the lawns. Green and white tongues of foam lapped at the foundations of the classrooms.

"And I always thought that you, Martin, might some day lecture in history."

"Turned to commerce instead."

The water level had risen an inch above ground now, two inches. Quickly, it became ankle-deep. He could no longer make out the canal as a separate entity, nor the asphalt or grass.

"While you, Harold, were such a whiz with dates. . ."

"Oh yes! Still am. James II, 1685, William III, 1688, Mary

II, 1689... Cushy job now... Collecting figures for the government on the unemployed..."

The waste, he thought. The waste! How insipid they are. Had nothing of what he had taught them rubbed off? Had nothing of what he had expected of them come about? History is flow, a river, a tide... Small lives, petty lives, ruined lives.

The waters rose higher. Outside, the school seemed surrounded by sea. A seagull skimmed over the surface with outstretched legs. A terrier paddled placidly about. Nearby, the tree-trunks were black with sogginess, while, beyond them, he could see none of the houses that he knew were there. And then the grey-green breakers clamouring at the windows blotted out all view. The first hasty rivulets trickled through cracks around the windows while through the doorway a deluge spilling down the corridor spread swiftly and mightily into every cranny in the room. He felt the wetness in his shoes. His cuffs became heavy. The swell enveloped the legs of his former students who stood crammed together chatting merrily and drinking their coffee, coke and lemonade from their cups. He saw the trouser-legs of the men grow black, saw too the dresses of the women being lifted to swipe at the faces of their children who stood up to their elbows, their shoulders, their necks in the water. Jennifer Armstrong who sold umbrellas at Myer's laughed at some particular joke; Rosalie Urban, the waitress at Leo's, said "Really, you don't say!" to a snippet of gossip. "Spent a year in Pentridge, two more on probation," said Robert Stevens, while Terry Bannister said, "Made a fortune, lost a fortune on the horses."

The heads of the children had now disappeared altogether, the photographs on the walls curled to cylinders, water filled the cups that were being held and entered the mouths of those gathered there. Words emerged as gurgles. There may have been bubbles on the surface, but those were lost in the eddies, the swirls and the lifting waves. Watching all this, he stood upon a chair. Trevor Munro's was the last head to go under. Mr Wynn had hoped that he, at least, who had possessed every

talent and attained every high position — school dux, master debater, prize footballer, house captain, head prefect — would have protested at his consignment to oblivion, but before he went under, he simply looked around, said, "I guess I've disappointed you, Mr Wynn. The doctors say I'm an incorrigible drunk", and vanished quickly as the others had done.

Mr Wynn stepped on to the table; then there was no higher he could go. But the waters continued to swell. He could no longer see the blackboard, nor the corkboards, let alone the windows. The curled sodden photographs were tossed about on the tremulous surface. Also a pennant flag, a school cap, a glove, and, strangely disembodied, an old and frayed school tie.

Not struggling, but in concert with rhetoric, he thrashed his arms about.

"At least they could resist!" he cried out into the diminishing space between sea and ceiling. "They could fight, at least, struggle, try to be free..!"

Billowing surf lapped about his waist, his torso, his throat.

"I taught them history... taught them about the great, the illustrious, the mighty, hoping that they too... they too..."

A backwash lashed at his chin, sprayed his hair. He spat out the water that had swept into his mouth.

"O, the pains I went to... the preparations... the efforts on their account... And yet the waste! The waste! The waste!"

He raised himself on his toes.

"History is flow, is river, is tide... Try to stop its flow..."

He turned his head from another pitching watery rush.

"One *can't*..! Its flow cannot be stopped. But to try to rise above it at least... try to rise out of it... Even if nothing else, even if nothing else, even if nothing else..!"

High as he stood, he could not hold back the next vaulting surge. The water swirled into his mouth, filled his lungs. He tried to breathe, but breath was not to be had. Reaching upward, he discovered space beneath the ceiling, but that too filled quickly and all was water, ocean, flood, in the depths of

which still stood all who had come to the reunion, fixed now in waxen postures, and wholly mute, unseeing, deaf. He wanted one last time to call out, to cry, "What has become of you all?" but not a sound emerged now and all he could think of before blackness came upon him was that the classroom needed painting, needed renovating, ventilating, and that in *his* day. . .

Isaac Alttseit — Liberator of the Jews

There was no mistaking the fact: it *was* smoke that he saw rising high and coming from the direction of the Institute. He saw it, smelled it, tasted it and was suddenly quickened by panic, fruit of a vaulting fear that if the Institute were indeed on fire, his very life's work would go up in flames. With the railway station now well behind him, he hastened his step, almost ran. Before him, beside him, behind him, others too were hurrying. Their breaths evaporated in the morning crispness, their shoulders brushed against his, and their feet rang on the cold and steely asphalt. There were among them old men, executives, teachers, housewives, children, delivery boys, such who were eternally awed and animated by every merest hint of disaster. And so, in a mass, they were borne along. But for him, there was more at stake and the scene made his flesh crawl beneath sweat that cloyed and tingled and chilled. For there was a manuscript to be saved, his *opus magnum*, indeed his very *raison d'etre*, left there in his office for final typing. And it meant still more, incalculably more. A people's very salvation was vested in it, the redemption of a nation errant in its ways and the liberation of a stiff-necked, regressed and fossilised folk that had to be shaken out of its existing enervated torpor and shown again the path to light and to a God in the past rejected and despised.

He saw, however, to his relief, that the fire came not from the Institute, but from the Civic Square behind it. Still, he

didn't slacken his pace; he couldn't slacken his pace. The swelling human tide drew him with it, as it had done on the previous night, buffeting him on as if between high banks along a single inescapable onward-rushing course. He heard the talk of the people around him, caught their laughter and felt again the galvanising pulsation of their excitement.

"Looks like we're in for another dose of good clean fun. . ."

"Lordie, did ya' see all that glass las' night?. . ."

"An' th'way that church o'theirs she went up. . . whoosh. . . jus' like the fires o' hell with all them li'l Abrahams an' Moseses in it?. . . God!. . ."

It was the neighbourhood *Shomrei ha'Shamayim Synagogue*, the *Watchers of the Heavens Synagogue*, that had the night before gone up like the fires of hell. He had reached the scene too late to see the actual fire. He had been caught up in the midst of another crowd, locked into another crush of spirited pranksters running along Fisherman Street, more familiarly known as Jerusalem Alley, hurling bricks and firewood through the windows of Unglik's butchery, Rachamim's pharmacy and Sofer Schreiber's bookstore. Buoyed by the excitement, by the near-delirium of the streaming maelstrom, he too had thrown a stone, with sure aim shattering the six-pointed star on the *Children of Zion Opportunity Store*, thereby earning for himself a clap on the back and an accolade from "Killer" Bluey the leader who had said, "Good on yer', Sport, yer' really one of us, aren't ya?" By the time, flushed and out of breath, he had arrived at the synagogue, it was all rubble, cinders, char and smoke, from which some of the more daring and enterprising had salvaged silver candelabra and pointers, finials, breast-plates and wine-cups as souvenirs. The Scrolls of the Law, meanwhile, were just so many embers in the gnarled black skeleton of the Ark, the podium was a gutted fragile scaffold, while what had been stained-glass mosaics high up along the walls and verging on the dome were now congealed, agglutinated warps of lead-lighting and opaqueness humbled in ash.

"They brought it on themselves," he had said to a by-stander

at the time. "They bring all their misfortunes on themselves... They so hard-headedly insist on remaining unchanging, and yet always and everywhere hold themselves to be so different from everyone else..."

His words returned to him now. Once before, when he had expressed them to Gabriel Heiligman, his fellow tutor in Psychology at the Institute, Gaby had branded him a traitor and a renegade, doing so, however, with shoulder-shrugging, mocking, dismissive banter as though his opinion was of no account; and for a time he had considered that he might indeed be wrong. But "No!" — he steeled himself against both retraction and remorse — "They do insist on separateness," he said, "they really do cherish the role of suffering, and they do revel and wallow in the mantle of the eternal victim."

Thus galvanised, he moved on in haste, heading in the direction of the Institute, but bent upon seeing first what was burning just beyond it.

He was crossing the street in front of the Institute when a large ruddy-cheeked fellow, a man in overalls and corduroy cap, turned, peered at him curiously, and said, "Hey, I know you... You're Ian New, aren't you?... I recognised you from that photo there in the *Preacher's Weekly*... Printed a whole article about you, they did... The only Jew, they said, who saw an' knew an' spoke the holy gospel truth 'round 'ere..."

He winced and was about to say "I am no longer what I was born", but the man had himself already hurried on ahead and become submerged in the now-condensing scampering mass that made towards some seemingly pre-ordained destination.

He had said it often before, but wished he could have made himself heard again. He *was* no longer that which he had been born. Isaac Alttseit had become Ian New. The old had been shed. In changing name and allegiance, he had felt himself reborn. He had not left the race, for race, a quality predicated on genetic inheritance, could not be escaped; nor had he left the creed, for Judaism, Jewishness — Lord, how the words brought the spittle to his mouth — was not exclusively creed; nor was it a people he had left, for in their dispersion and Occidental-

Oriental diversity, the Jews — those out there — could not be a single, pure people.

But what he *had* escaped was the *tendency of mind*, that peculiar regressed psychological structure to which the name Judaic could be given — yes, *that* was now behind him. It was from that stifling strait-jacket that he had liberated himself, from that sclerotic superstitious legalism, as also from its darkness and righteous arrogance, from the femaleness that was its ineluctable nature. Weininger, genius misjudged, misunderstood and despised, had yet been so right. Maleness and femaleness were in everyone, though to degrees that were variable. What was wholly male was positive, productive, it was logic, creativity, brilliance, genius, Being; what was female, however, was in turn, negative, it was subservience, dependence, imitativeness and non-Being. And such was the Jew — all femaleness, all worthlessness, and all mediocrity, just as Weininger had said. But were the Jew only to enter into baptism, were he to accept the light of the Gospels as his own and merge himself with his neighbours, then lord and master would he be over those archaic tendencies of his accursed Jewish mind; embracing truth — Truth — he would overcome the cramped constraints of his mental make-up; and, daring towards grand divinity, he might yet triumph over every retarded, retarding strain of his Judaism. Then, and only then, would the Jew have a rightful place in the world.

All this was detailed, explained and elaborated upon in his manuscript, *The Liberation of the Jews: Towards Masculinity and Transcendence.* The Jews, to whom it was addressed, would yet come to see the truth. They would yet come to recognise their persisting error and clamour before the Lord's altar to be redeemed. And in furnishing them with the splendour of the Gospel light by means of that work soon to become circulating text, he, Ian New, he, Isaac Alttseit of the past, would yet come to be the Jews' redeemer. What was now Judaism, Woman, business, matter and all things negative would be transformed into Gospel, veracity, Man, culture, spirit and divinity, to which he, Messiah-like, would be the one to lead them.

The thought exhilarated him; and, exhilarated, he reached the outer rim of the Civic Square behind the Institute where a dense teeming tittering crowd had gathered and to which masses of others coming from all directions now converged. Where the way from the station had been cool, mist-laden and distinctly keen, on this wing of the neighbourhood, there was warmth, the warmth of human confluence, of condensing breath, and of nearby fires yielding smoke in the morning frostedness to reveal, through the interstices of its curlicues and coils, enlarging lakes of limpid blueness promising the calm and pleasantness of a fine and temperate day. Whatever the festivity that drew the crowd, the organisers had certainly set out on an early start. And that it *was* organised, he had no doubt. Not for nothing the concentric rings of benches and platforms rising as in a circus, or the turnstiles steadily admitting the arrivals into the inner arena, or the crowded kiosk and souvenir stands with the flapping flags, the pamphlets and the lapel badges reading "*Celebrate Today the True Day of Jewish Atonement*", "*Redeem, Redeem the Lost with Mercy and Compassion*", and "*Liberate Earth's Tortured Souls from Grievous Sin.*"

Given the motifs on the badges, what was taking place in the Civic Square was clearly something he had to attend. That it might not be pleasant — well, stiff cheddar! as the expression went.

Moving towards a turnstile, he was about to say to the attendant, "Certainly been efficiently arranged, all this", when he felt a touch upon his elbow, and, turning, saw "Killer" Bluey smiling at him, clearly unslept but electrically eager.

"Wondered whether ya' might come," he said, "whether we might be blessed with the pleasure of yer' company."

"Had you told me yesterday. . ."

"Yeh? Then?. . ."

"Then I should most certainly have made a point of coming, and of coming sooner. You know of my interest in these things. . ."

He caught Bluey's swift scrutiny.

"Yeah. . .," Bluey said. "Reckon I could'a told ya'. But. . ."

"But?. . ."

"Well, you know, Sport. . . In operations like these, the less that some folks they knows about it, the better. We 'ad t'make sure o' no hitches gettin' in the way. . . Or all the work'd be wasted. . ."

"Mercy, yes, I understand," Ian New said, and nodded, though he wasn't fully sure that he did.

He let it pass.

"Right," said Bluey, "shall we go in? You c'n be my guest."

What he saw as he entered reminded him of historical narratives he had read, and of prints and woodcuts he had seen, and of Hollywood extravaganzas issued by the score when the movie moguls passed through their lush, spectacular and sumptuously epic phase. In the centre was the arena, a throwback to the Roman Colosseum; around it were the rising tiers where the audience milled and swayed and pointed and applauded, all clearly entertained and galvanised by what was taking place below. Now and again, a full-throated clamour rose from their midst and whoops of delight counterpointing a cacophonous roar accompanied by victorious brandishings of fists aloft.

And what was taking place?

From where he stood, on a level with the arena itself, he saw forty, fifty, sixty mounds of kindling and firewood at the base of solid timber uprights. The backmost rows of them, those nearest the rear facade of the Institute, were aflame, the smoke swirling and thick before it thinned and vaporised into the sky, but what was burning he could not wholly determine.

From the smell, there was a suggestion that it might be flesh — it reminded him of a barbecue with a lamb on the spit — but he dismissed the notion as fanciful, the stuff of an over-ripe imagination nurtured on tales of Roman blood-sports, saintly martyrs, mediaeval *auto-da-fes* and the excesses of the wars in Armenia, Rusia and the Latin countries, and, reducing all of

these to mere skirmishes, the most recent apocalyptic ravages and wholesale despoliation of Europe.

"Ya' know, Sport?" said Bluey, leading the way to a more favourable observation point. "I don' unnerstan' a great deal of it, but I do admire yer writin's. One o' me buddies that helped organise this — we calls 'im 'Briansie' Blacklaw — 'e's got everythin' ya' ever wrote on th'Jews 'ose souls we're savin' today. 'E ain't one 'imself but 'e too 'as always 'ad a special interest in 'em. 'E says. . . 'e says. . . well, 'e says jus' what you're always sayin' an' 'e says that even if y'are one of 'em, ya' does make a lot o' sense, yeah, a lot o' sense, 'cause you're speakin' from the inside an' *really* knows. . ."

Ian New was about to say, "I don't consider myself one of them anymore", when, on the wing of the arena, beside a makeshift race flanked by a formation of uniformed youngsters who reminded him of schoolboy Cadets, Bluey laid a hand upon his forearm.

"Let's stop 'ere, eh?" Bluey said. "The nex' lot's comin' up. . ."

And indeed, a straggly file emerged from the race — three men, two women, two adolescents and a child, accompanied by attendants who, soldier-like and expertly drilled, bore rifles against their shoulders.

Among the emergent group, Ian New recognised Rabbi Geist who had publicly proclaimed him a turncoat and a calamity upon everything decent in the local *Weekly Jewish Tribune*; he recognised Gaby Heiligman, his mocking, bantering colleague from the Institute; he recognised Mrs Goodwach, his one-time neighbour who, whenever she saw him, turned away; then Raphaela Meyerowich, the sweet-heart of his adolescent years who had thwarted him with a stinging "You have warped ideas, you have. There's a devil in you trying to get out"; and young Sammy Landsleit who had let his dog snap and leap at him and tear his coat. Something of the earlier anger against each was now rekindled and he set his jaws to marbled firmness and tasted venom on his tongue when Bluey beside him said, "Say, Sport, do ya' wanna do somethin' for us?"

Without being told, he knew what was being asked of him. There was no mistaking it. He could tell as soon as he saw each in that ragged procession led to a separate mound, there, all protest, resistance and writhing futile, to be bound with cords to the upright stakes. The enormity of the request, its very brazenness, as also its extraordinarily underplayed delivery, made his pulse leap to throbbing and the blood rush to his temples and brow, causing there a gathered perspiration to sting and chill and prickle as before.

"You know what you are asking of me?"

Bluey flicked a wrist with a nonchalant devil-may-care dismissive gesture.

"Yeah," he said languidly. "Shouldn' be too hard, Sport. It's all a logical progression, as Brainsie'll tell ya'. Lordie, if ya' c'n write such mighty stuff about them Jews o' yours, an' then if ya' c'n throw stones through their winda's like ya' done yesserdy, then what's so hard 'bout takin' the nex' step an' lightin' a match?. . ."

"But it's their *lives* you're asking me to take. . ."

Bluey shook his head.

"What's their lives when it's their souls that we're redeemin', like you yourself're always writin' an' talkin' 'bout? I heard ya' meself, with m'own ears b'fore the *Society for the Propagation o' Spiritual Truth*, an' I read ya', with m'own eyes, in y'letters to th'papers, in *The Preacher's* an' them other pieces o' yours, *Race an' the mould of th'Jewish mind* an' *The fallacies o' peoplehood*, an'. . .an'. . .oh, yeah, th'best o' them. . . *Archaisms r'visited: th'Jews in our time.* Didn' unnerstan' it all, like I tol' ya', but Lordie, I recognise th'truth when I sees or 'ears it. . . An' believe me, none of us, not even Brainsie, could put what you've been sayin' any better. . . B'sides. . ." — Bluey turned to him square-on — "b'sides. . . are ya' t'go back to bein' Alttseit again or to remainin' New like we 'as come t'know ya?"

The logic, harsh to be sure, was not without validity. Unless one were to draw lines. But then where would one halt, where say "Thus far will I go, but beyond — even at the price of my life, no"? What were the limits of acceptability before acts

became obscenity, or of responsibility before being transmuted to culpability? — But were one to change the perspective and look at the matter in another way, even if only for a blinking. In the world, in the *real* world, that is, where obscenity exceeded decency, where terror, mass graves and nuclear blackmail had become the norm, and where casualties in wars and revolutions ran daily into thousands, and over a year into millions, how vile in fact was the lighting of a single pyre, or two, or, for that matter, eight or ten or twenty? And if such an act would rid society of a problem that through history had become cankerous and more devastatingly murderous, then if such act were indeed evil, might there not be times when evil itself could be deemed a virtue? Besides, evil was never absolute; it was always relative to greater or lesser improprieties along an expansive spectrum. And as a last point: if he were being asked to act against his own folk — truth was that they were not any longer, except in name perhaps, they were not any longer his own; the disowning had been mutual and Rabbi Geist had more than once proposed formal excommunication which in a former age would certainly have been a viable demand, but one that, in establishing experiential kinship between himself and Spinoza and Acosta, would have made him wholly proud.

Clearly, Rabbi Geist maintained his enmity towards him to the very end. Looking down from the stake as he, Ian New, set match to the kindling, and draped in his prayer-shawl, phylacteries and skull-cap, his face long and severe and deeply etched, the rabbi said, "*I* shall die with honour, but you, if you live, will smoulder with shame; *I* will die with the *Sh'ma* on my lips, but you will rot together with Satan's slime." Gaby Heiligman at the next post jeered, "It's neither more nor less than I should have expected of you and your kind"; Raphaela huffed, "So the devil in you has finally shown himself, I only wonder that he took so long"; Mrs Goodwach simply spat in his face; Sammy Landsleit stared at him with wild and hateful eyes; while the other three, strangers to him all, only urged him to move quickly to do his meanest, that their end may be more swift.

Having set all the pyres blazing, he turned away; he had to

turn away, for a lifting swirl of wind blew the smoke into his face. His eyes smarted, his breath constricted, and the rancid, fulsome smell and taste of singed and scorching flesh brought his stomach to his throat. He thought he might vomit there and then in the very middle of the Square before the whole assemblage, but the offensive wave of nausea passed, the sweat on his brow subsided, and all that swam and shimmered and swirled before him regained firm anchorage and fixity. His feet restored to *terra firma*, he walked back towards "Killer" Bluey. Behind him, he thought he heard Mrs Goodwach shriek out her last; a brief truncated wail followed from the Landsleit child; a last *Sh'ma* from the burning rabbi; a contemptuous snarl from Gaby Heiligman; and a final curse, more of a jeer, from his one-time unrequiting sweetheart Raphaela. But the thrust and penetration of these became quickly submerged, absorbed into the louder, rowdier clamour of the spectators, and overshadowed by their laughter, their cheering and their exultatory cries.

"There he goes, their holy rabbi, whoof, see that puff of smoke," called out one of their number; "They sure make good tinder fer' burnin'," added another; while a third said, "Reckon I might get meself a Jew or two o' me own for me incinerator."

Rabbi Geist's curse hung over Ian New, as did the taunts of Gaby and Raphaela, but on reaching Bluey who made everything seem so right, he shrugged them off. Perhaps there *was* shame in what he had done, perhaps he *would* rot, but done was done and the world would still go on. If by his action, he had added any evil to that world, then against the far greater realities to which it was daily witness, such evil was of the minutest proportions. Eight souls out of millions — indeed out of thousands of millions — these were a mere pittance. The most modest landslide or earth tremor would in one hit claim a hundredfold more. And besides, he had only done that which would, by default, have been given to another to perform. If there was any blood on his hands, it was no less than on the hands of those who had bidden him light the match. They were

the true instigators; in the end, theirs was the crime. Seen in this way, he was clean, he was absolved, he was immune from guilt; there was none who could point an accusing finger at him, or hold him to account, or demand from him penitence of any sort.

Drawing abreast of Bluey, he said, however, "I never thought I'd become a public executioner."

He saw Bluey eye him with more studied scrutiny.

"Ya' knows somethin', Sport," he said. "You became executioner o' them folk o' yours long ago, long b'efore *we* ever done. . ."

"Oh?"

"Like Brainsie 'e says, 'Logic. . .it's the logic o' the situation. When ya' wrote that firs' letter o' yours in the paper agains' them, 'gains' yer' people, y'became their executioner. . ."

"But they're not mine anymore, Bluey. You know that. You yourself said last night, 'You're really one of us, aren't you?' "

"Yeah, I did say that. . . But we been talkin' some more, Brainsie an' me an' th'others. An' we comes t'hold that how ya' sees yer' Jews an' how ya' sees yerself, that's yer' own affair. To you, I knows it from yer' writin's, bein' a Jew is bein' a structure or a mould or a make-up o' mind that like a skin y'has seen fit t'shed. That's all right, Sport, but to us, you is anythin' we choose ya' t'be. . . that is, race *an'* creed *an'* nation *an'*, the thanks to you, structure or mould o' mind. . . So, man, whatever y're t'yerself, t'us ya' always remains th'same. . . What y're born, ya' stays an' yer' destiny remains that that ya' been born inta'. . . Believe me, Sport, we thought 'bout th'matter long an' hard an' that's th'verdic' we come ta' we that organised this gran' public showin' o' salvation. . . An' I knows what y're thinkin' — an' I'm truly sorry t'say it — but the gates's closed now an' y'ain't leavin', I'm sorry, Sport, but y'ain't leavin', save as a soul goin' t'wherever yer' Maker he be waitin' t'receive ya', as with yer' rabbi an' yer' sweetie an' all o' them others that're today goin' the way o' the saved. . . An', yeah, b'lieve me, I am

sorry, I did like ya', but y'know 'ow it is, if we let one o' yer's go, then. . ."

There was no escape. The gates, though still admitting spectators, were indeed closed against egress. Armed uniformed attendants stood before them, as did other gurads at intervals around the perimeter of the arena. Ian New was caught; he was trapped; he was snared; he was also caught, trapped and snared, as Bluey had said, by a logic taken to its full conclusion.

Above him and all around, the crowd in its movement seemed congealed to a dense gelatinous and faceless polychromatic mass; in the arena stood the humped and malignant wood-piled mounds, the rearmost ones still smouldering with Lord alone knew whose ashes, those he had himself ignited still blazing in the centre, while, nearer still, another formation of shuffling, sullen mortality, a mother with her baby and a club-footed Institute student among them, was being hustled forward towards the next grim tier of waiting stakes.

With the heat of it all touching his face, Ian New looked at Bluey, and at the guards, the stands, and, beyond them, at the sky now more shimmeringly, more gloriously blue, save where the smoke, as if in quest of Jerusalem, was being driven eastward by an impetuous wind. Not he, he saw now, not he, Ian New, with his urgings, importunings and tirades directed at the Jews, was to be deliverer. Death, rather, had stronger claim to the messianic mantle. Nor — this, too, he saw now — had he, for all his labours, been in possession of that hallowed light and gospel truth. The reality was all too clear, and he would have had to be wilful, blind or obtuse to deny it. What he had perceived as brilliance when pitted against the worn sclerosis of Judaism was, at base, nothing other than murky primevalism; what had seemed maleness and creativity proved, at root, nothing less than dour destructiveness; and what had seemed genius and positiveness crumbled into a ravenous penchant and proclivity for diabolical evil.

It seemed to him so right then, so natural, so reasonable to be led by Bluey and Brainsie to a waiting stake plumb in the heart of the arena.

Meanwhile, at the Institute, on his desk, lay his manuscript, his life's work, his *opus magnum*. It only awaited his secretary to type it. And type it she would. Whether or not he was there, she would do it. For there were numbers in plenty — "Killer" Bluey and "Brainsie" Blacklaw not the least among them — who would wish to see it done and brought into the light and disseminated among the nations to give sanction and spur to more rampages, devastation and Jew-burnings everywhere. And though that work was scarcely a score of breaths away, it was yet eons, light-years beyond his reach. It simply lay there waiting to be typed, waiting for those who had till then been his companions to bring it into the open, the consummation of which nothing could be more certain — nothing except the inescapable truth that, in a denouement hateful, despised and in his wildest dreams unforeseen, he too would soon, too soon, join his kin and perish, crumble to ashes and rise up in smoke, no longer the Ian New he had sought forever to be, but the Isaac Alttseit which, through a logic inexorable, violent and perverse, and which he himself had set in train, he was yet again, as upon his birth, to become.

The Parapet at Bracken Bay

For many years, the parapet by the beach at Bracken Bay was for me a near-daily place of pilgrimage. I first went there as a schoolboy of fourteen soon after moving into neighbouring Springwater, often alone at first, but later with classmates, with companions from the "Y", with confidants dependably mum, with strutting hot-shots and *braggadocios* making passes at the girls, and then much later — and yet, on looking back, not really so much later — with Rochelle before she became my fiancee, before she became my wife. Marriage, allied to domestic routine, allied in turn to work, visiting rounds and social duties, not to mention the births of Chantelle, Genevieve and Jeremy, as if one, two, three, led to Bracken Bay becoming in time some incidental backdrop to a fragment of the past, not exactly forgotten — for one does not forget the solid, daily-trodden, daily-crossed terrain of one's maturing — but nonetheless a backdrop seldom recalled, rarely invoked, like the rounds of tennis, say, that in former times one won and lost, or like one's art-works pinned to display-boards for parent-teacher nights, their purpose served, being promptly removed, or like Saturday parties one went to, all subsequently melded into one, or even the girls one dated, once, twice, perhaps a third time, thereafter put out of conscious mind to be relegated to some no-longer tangible, retrievable arena of space, or time, or even recess of nostalgia.

Probably I should never have returned to the beach at

Bracken Bay save through some chance passage through the area; for, neither my work, nor my social obligations, nor even the hottest sun would have had cause to lead me back there, for, come summer, and certainly winter, escape from the elements whether sweltering or inclement was afforded by my personal study which could be cooled or warmed with the most *degage* flick of a switch, and in which, shunning crowds, I could sit, feet up, behind a newspaper, a book, a stamp album or my collection of coins, with Rembrandt in his advancing dotage peering down from the wall and the strains of Vivaldi or Brahms wholly surrounding me, all these rendering everything outside disagreeably boorish, superfluous, or sheer encumbrance. Where, in adolescence and even early manhood, I had been ever impatient at day's end or on Saturdays or Sundays to be outside, the years had transformed me truly into a recalcitrant, near-incorrigible indoor type.

When, on vacation, I did venture out *en famille* and conceded to tennis and golf, to fresh water and salt, and to nature walks their due, it was to spend a week or a fortnight inland among the springs around Ironvale, say, or in the alpine setting of Mount Muscat, or far up the coast at Barbary or Cliffshead or Narraboi. Truth was that a man was not an automaton, and after eleven, twelve months spent consulting from behind a desk or at a bedside, one needed activity of a different sort, and a clearing — a spring-cleaning no less — of the mind, and, most important of all, the time and leisure to retreat and reappraise what one was doing, where one was heading, what one's priorities were: whether more of the same one had engaged in till then or some form of departure, something more challenging, more involving, new. And nothing was so conducive to either a re-affirmed resolve that one's trodden way was right after all or to an opening up to fresh ideas, possibilities and new directions as a wholesale change of scene, a change of air, a change of pace and a laid-back, suitably distanced, long-sighted wide-vistaed withdrawal.

The long and short of the matter was that Bracken Bay had long before ceased coming into calculations even for a day's

outing, the Botanical Gardens, the museum, the zoo, Governor Callender's Cottage or a suitable matinee finding greater favour with us when we did come to hanker after some diversion.

But it happened that both Rochelle and Genevieve fell ill, Rochelle with a protracted bronchitis and Genevieve with glandular fever which left them both fatigued, enervated and at low physical, mental and emotional ebb. One of my partners having taken his long service leave just then, I could not myself get away, but it was decided that Rochelle and Genevieve, with Chantelle and Jeremy into the bargain, should take their holidays then, up north in Narraboi which never failed to quicken the body and restore to full flight the overstretched and flagging, jaded mind. I saw them off at the airport and returned to my surgery to continue with my work, work which afforded me not only occupation but also continuing communion, a word in exchange, and genial bonhomie, so much a characteristic of my clientele, all these furnishing an agreeably welcome buffer against isolation, or an excess of solitude, or solitariness perhaps, and reminding me yet again — if I might at times have been given to forget — that if my patients needed me, there were occasions in plenty when I, for my part, albeit in different ways, needed them no less. I harboured a special fondness for the likes of, say, breezy newsy octagenarian Mrs Standish who, being early for her hairdresser's appointment, thought she would drop in on me, and for the book-dealer Ray Dewey whom I could always rely upon for an intelligent down-to-earth appraisal of Virginia Woolf or Solzhenytsin, and for Professor Daintree Parker who, with the most temperate, measured, Welshly mellifluous word, could demolish all humbug, hokum and puffed-up airs. These and others were an abiding boon; they were the leaven to days otherwise given to the steady sounding out of complaints, resolving of difficulties, assuaging of distress.

Different were the evenings and weekends, and without Rochelle, Chantelle, Genevieve and Jeremy to fill the house with its customary riot and ruction of living, industry and play, these periods yawned with a vacated and vacuous emptiness

that, rather than being more easy to deal with in successive absences, in fact became more cheerless, irksome and sombre.

It was during just one such moment, on a Sunday afternoon, when the sense of dispossession, even disorientation, became inordinately and peskily acute, and the hands, mind and heart would not fall to anything gainful, that I left the house, indeed fled from it — *had* to flee — in search of openness, air, communion, space. Perhaps explanation was that in spirit at least I was with Rochelle and the children on the coast in Narraboi, for, though I was some five miles removed from the nearest beach, I was certain I could actually smell the sea, could taste its seaweed, and hear the swilling surf and feel the sting of salt and spray carried inland by maritime breezes that, with the imagination given rein, might well have been lapping Rochelle, lapping the children with all their fullness up north. Be that as it may, the net effect of this vaulting heightened acusis of the senses was to make me flee the house and draw me back, back, as in times now so long past, to the beach at Bracken Bay where, once again — O where had all those intervening years gone? — I came to press my body against the parapet, and straddle my legs over it, and sit upon its cool granular surface facing the bay, reclaiming there its once-familiar and swiftly-restored dependability, security and earthly anchorage.

There was much at Bracken Bay that had remained as if caught in a photograph taken, say, twenty, twenty-five years before when the bay with the parapet along its lip were to me that near-daily place of pilgrimage. Even the kiosks, the two of them, carried the same hoary weathered hoardings for Peters Ice Cream; even the clock in front of the Mont Blanc ice-skating rink on the esplanade to my rear was fixed at eight-seventeen as it had been a quarter-century before; while to the left was the Life Saving Club, to the right the hot water baths and gymnasium, and, beyond each, the jetties reaching two hundred, three hundred metres out to sea. And in the sand before me stood the same concrete waste-disposal bins, perennially chipped, perennially graffitied, the drinking-tap where

more than once I had recoiled from an electric current shooting through its handle, and the sign-post on which some wit had written, "Do not throw stones at this sign". I had not reckoned, however — for never had I had cause to — upon, say, the widening of the esplanade above, or upon the erection of a fish restaurant but a twenty-second sprint away, or the construction of a playground still nearer at hand with brightly-coloured blue, green, yellow and orange swings, slides and roundabouts where, before, there had been only shrubs and grass where Greek and Italian families from great-grandmother down to neo-nate had laid out their picnic spreads so lavish in their fare. Nor had I anticipated. . . But why belabour this? I had been too much conditioned by Ecclesiastes. But truth was that there *were* new things under the sun. Not necessarily always momentous things, but, to those who lived in their midst, new no less. And it was only logical — indeed, if one had thought about it, in fact inevitable — that sun-shelters should have been added, and a car-park provided, and that an open-air market trading in bric-a-brac and knick-knacks should have been established and thrived, all this in tandem with lesser, mundaner, changes such as the provision of public barbecue plates, extra traffic-signals, evenly-placed crossings and high-rising lamp-posts fitted with more powerful lights for nocturnal oceanic illumination.

Thus returned to my old position on the parapet, I let myself be swathed by the lofty lambently aureoled mid-afternon sun whose warmth, to one no longer used to it, prickled at the eyelids and lips with the finest needles that nature could devise; I let the sea-skimming breeze sweep my cheeks as well with its countervailing coolness; and opened myself with deep mind-clearing breaths to the surrounding motley liberating offerings of the moment. Others, too, a multitude of others, had also come to savour those same gifts of openness, air, communion and space that I had sought, albeit for reasons necessarily their own. Before me lay, as there had always lain, bodies of men, of women, of boys, of girls, alternatively olive and white, freckled and spotless, each seeking to soak up the quicker, the better, whatever colour the sun in its bounteousness was ready to be-

stow; around them, young, bronzed and muscular fellows were pitching and catching, hitting and diving at balls and frisbees steered through the air; slobbering rubbery-tongued dogs meantime scurried and scuttled between their feet; while children bit into hot-dogs and pies or licked at ice-creams that were stickily melting, dripping and running in their hands. There were these, and more besides, young and old and in-betweens, whether alone, in pairs or in groups, variously preoccupied with chess, or backgammon or coquetry, or simply doing, I guess, what I was doing — escaping walls become too narrow, convergent, confining.

At that moment, *deja vu*, if it had arisen, would certainly not have been misplaced. It was with the most consummate ease that I summoned up Maxie Beckerstrauss who wrestled and tumbled with whoever else was willing — or might not necessarily have been willing — to wrestle and tumble upon the grass, and Annie Zylber for whom I had nursed the most brief and intensely fervent whirlwind fascination, and Charlie Eckert, Tania Markov, Lizzie Pearl and Alex Rivkind who were forever planning car-rallies, rock-dances, barbecues and come-as-you-are-parties, and lived for the day, which, were I wholly of their free, unfettered and breezy easy-going mettle too, I would have agreed was most assuredly the pleasantest, if not always the wisest, way to live.

But to me, Bracken Bay and the parapet on which I sat had even then augured other things. Perhaps, to quote Joey Diskin, I was indeed at times a wet blanket of a sort, and stand-offish, aloof, even Olympian. And in a given measure, there was truth in that. For, even when surrounded by the most raucous, flamboyant and high-spirited mayhem, if I chose the solitude of my parapet, it was to gain private respite from wrestling with the monarchs of England or from a Shelley ode or from a problem in differential calculus or nuclear physics; it was, like the fishermen on the nearby jetties, to cast my line out to sea, in my case seeking not fish, but scenes of other cities, villages and towns on continents and islands out there in the vast expanses; it was to devise ways whereby I might in due time discover for myself

what truly lay out there; it was to contemplate the causes that needed championing, wrongs that needed righting, and duties needing to be met; but above all, it was to raise from the proverbial depths extending far before me both in the brightness of day and the darkness of night answers to such nagging, exquisite, pressing adolescent conundra as: What am I? What can I believe? What can I know? What must I do?

I could not say even then on that Sunday afternoon with my family away and I again by the beach at Bracken Bay whether I ever did find answers to those questions — and an infinity besides — that I had cast into the deep. Being neither theologian nor philosopher of the paid and dourly professional kind, it was not given to me to systematically pursue either actively or overlong the solutions to mysteries, riddles and contingencies by which our lives were hounded at every turn or surrounded on this most capricious, contrary, inconsistent, if not frankly malicious of galaxial planets. Evidence for any of these was never in short supply. The newspapers, radio and television were full of it, even if one was blind to it at close quarters among neighbours, acquaintances, family and friends whose misadventures spoke volumes of a world that was not quite the stuff of the design, order, meaning and purpose that men of the cloth and beachside evangelists pounded home with devil-behanged conviction. This was all matter for another story — and had, of course, since Adam, given rise to a never-ending plenitude of stories. Truth was , however, that not *I* had discovered the answers I lived by, but that, like those Pirandellan characters in search of an author, the answers had, of their own accord, found me. So much so, that at every crossroad, the daily confluence of medical obligations, family needs, financial constraints, and social duties directed my every forward step. And so much so, too, that if, as I sat on that Bracken Bay parapet that Sunday afternoon, I were asked, "What are you?", I should have said most surely and honestly, if not particularly profoundly, "I am a doctor, a husband, a father, a man"; if asked, "What do you believe?", I would have answered, "I can only believe in procuring the well-being of those who come to me";

if asked, "What do you know?", I should have replied, "I can only truly know that which I can touch, feel, intuit, taste, smell, see and hear"; while to the question "What must you do?", I should have said most simply, "That is implied in my answer to what I believe", and added, "Anything else is superimposed invention, overlaid embellishment."

I was riding the crest of these reflections and savouring, as Rochelle and the children must just them have been doing, the calm, the colour, the light and the warmth of the sea and the sun, when my attention was caught by a flurry of activity to my left, on the nearer side of the fish restaurant. As if at some signal which I alone seemed not to have seen, people turned their heads in that direction or pointed avidly, or, with what seemed unseemly haste, actually weaved their way there. At first, in the glinting glimmering thwarting shimmer that leapt from water, sand, wind-screens and kiosk wall, all that I could make out with any certainty at first were three bathers stepping from the shallows, but it became quickly clear that they were lifesavers bringing ashore another bather they had hauled out from the sea. I, too, left my station then, thinking I might in some way be of help. But in the event, I proved redundant. Indeed, as a doctor breathing down their necks I might in fact have been an encumbrance, for they were most competently versed in the resuscitation routine, as were the ambulance-drivers who arrived fully-equipped but minutes later. I proved redundant, however, for another more basic, more telling reason. For — work as they might, grimly, obdurately, frenetically, first the lifesavers whose wet, tanned, powerfully muscular bodies glistened and rippled with every effort as they pumped and breathed, pumped and breathed, pumped and breathed breath into his lungs, and then the drivers after them desperately trying with a succession of intravenous drugs to elicit as much as a heart flicker on their monitor — I saw with full clarity that the man they had salvaged from his watery berth was beyond any other kind of salvage.

"Drowned, poor bugger," someone said beside me, standing with thickly hirsute arms folded authoritatively akimbo.

"Probably got a cramp and went under," said another.

"Probably a coronary more likely," offered a third.

To which a fourth, more philosophical, and affectedly so, remarked, "Life's brittle shit, ain't it? Ya' goes in healthy an' comes out stiff."

The dead man was not yet stiff. He was limp, he was blue, livid, inert. This, however — the countenance of death — had already long before ceased to overwhelm me with its impact or to mesmerise me with its one-time abhorrent novelty. I was past staring at corpses with the same morbid cloying raptness that possessed the others now crowding around. But what did strike me forcibly and sorrily was the dead man's relative youth. He was forty, forty-five at most, about my age, and, to judge from his hair, torso, thighs and calves, a well-preserved, self-pampered forty-five at that. Around his neck hung a copper pendant, albeit slung askew over a shoulder, while on a finger a large initialled sand-specked signet-ring glinted in the sun.

"Reckon if a man's got to go, Doc," said my philosophic neighbour as the cadaver was being transferred to a stretcher, "there's somethin' to be said for goin' while he's on top."

On departing that site of blemish upon the day in tandem with the dispersing others, I chose not to return to my perch on the parapet but rather to make for home. I was passing the Bracken Bay Life Saving Club when I caught my reflection in a full-length mirror beside the door. Given that I was myself on the nether side of forty, I had worn rather well, I thought; I had retained my former leanness; apart from touches of grey about the temples, my hair was still dark and youthfully abundant; and, even for an indoor type, I could not have wished for a better colour or texture in my cheeks. I expected to see the same in the companion mirror just past the doorway, but that mirror was multiply cracked, as if someone had hurled a stone at it with the fullest force of either anger or malice, and instead of composite wholeness, I saw myself splintered into a myriad slivered fragments. The interval spanning my full-length wholeness and the ensuing fragmentation could not have lasted more than a mayfly's blinking, but, on looking through the

glass doors into the dark, drab, wet-floored, uninviting hallway of the Life Saving Club, I caught a glimpse, the briefest, most ephemeral mind's-eye glimpse less directly of my reflected self than of the innumerable cities, villages and towns on continents and islands across the vast trans-oceanic expanses that, while Rochelle and I had once avidly talked about them, we had, somehow, in the end, never ventured to seek out, nor visit, nor touch, nor explore. And it seemed to me that while I *had* at earlier times asked the right questions, I had also, for what seemed good reasons at the time — family, security, service, prudence, duty, and more besides — let the wrong answers seek me out and direct my staid, strait, unadventurous path, every splinter in that shattered mirror coming to represent a distinct and separate possibility untested, unrealised, uncharted, unmapped.

The stuff of fiction and poetic licence might have led me at that moment to expect the sky to cloud over, or the waters of the bay to turn malevolently grey, or the flimsy waves along the foreshore suddenly to gather force and swell mightily and crash ashore in some ascendant fury joined in concert with the whole darkening firmament. But none of this happened. To the contrary, the sun actually emerged from behind a wisp of cloud where it had momentarily hidden its face, the sky retained its turquoise blue, the sea-waters remained ever so calm, and the air itself shone so limpid that, given the imagination, one might have looked into the distance and seen the very shores of China. Certainly, there was no sign that a man had died or that anything else in the least momentous had but a handshake earlier occurred.

"Ya' goes in healthy an' comes out stiff," my fellow bystander had remarked. Needing not the slightest alteration either in inflection or tone, he could, with equal soundness, well have said, "Ya' gets born rosy an' ends up blue."

But in between? What was to be done in the in-between? Between the rosiness and blueness, the healthiness and stiffness, the wholeness and the fragmentation?

I wished Rochelle was beside me then, and, with her, Chan-

telle, Genevieve and Jeremy that I might have braced my arms about them all and in our huddle have said to them, "Rochie, we have led a charmed life. But is a charmed life all? Have we seen, experienced or learnt all there is to experience and learn, or championed causes, righted wrongs, or so mastered the challenges, duties and obligations incumbent upon us, that we have earned — genuinely and justly — the dispensation to sit back, fold our arms and shield our eyes as if in some satisfied Panglossian way to say 'Never mind the headlines, all is right, all is right with the world'? Have we, tell me, Rochie, have we ever ventured anything of ourselves, or risked anything, or dared? And children, Chantelle, Genevieve, Jeremy, think about it, when the merest flutter of a wing separates newborn malleability from all-expunging *rigor mortis*, separates blessed rosiness from terminal cyanosis, ought we not every day, yes every day, like some sustained incantation, renew the questions 'What am I?', 'What are we?', 'What am I to believe?', 'What can I know?', 'What must I do?'? Above all, 'What must I do?' when to live and to live truly means each day, each day to choose anew, to be never satisfied, to be never content, to be never secure and, above all, never to settle for the answers of the previous day?"

On their return from Narraboi, this was what I would do, precisely this: gather them into a huddle even as they descended from the plane, or confront them as I drove them home, or summon them into the lounge-room even before the cases were unloaded, and say all this to them, and more besides. It was not too late. I dared not accept it was too late. They might still listen, accept, absorb, act, before their ways, too, were set.

Meanwhile, however, a duty too long neglected had to be attended to. I could defer it no longer. The proof lay in a signet-ring, in a pendant, in a straight line on a heart monitor, in a splintered mirror, in a beach that was no more what it had been, and in a companion bystander's dictum that life was shit, that life was shit, that life was plain, dispensible and brittle shit.

And, reaching home, I settled at my desk, took out paper, and, just as the first premonitory chill of evening rustled the

curtains before my window, to make the final task easier for my lawyer, I prepared with care the details of my will.

Catherine

1.

Catherine — Kate, Cathy, Kitty, Kitten — how inauspicious a time for her to cross my path!

What would Cybele, picture-postcard Cybele have said to our eventual break-up?, she, though freckled, eczematous and carious, the flimsy stuff of floss converted through photographic gloss to the softness of Palmolive, the toothy radiance of Colgate, and the appeal of Chanel, though, nature be praised, smelling of genuine ocean odours in her eager pubic vault.

"Yes, obviously a Scorpio-Sagittarius incompatibility," she would have said, pouting her lips as was her way, just as the progressive cooling of our own ardour towards mutual iciness had stemmed from a Scorpio-Taurus disjunction, the remarkable thing being that it was totally unforeseen even by herself, by Cybele, that otherwise incontestible, so-emphatic oracle.

And what of Priscilla? — What would *she* have said, Priscilla, catching me on the rebound from Cybele when the fleshy configurations of Psychology majors were no less welcome than those of photographers' models with astral predilections? Now, had she been asked to interpret the break between Catherine and myself, she would surely have thrown Freud and Eysenck, and Adler and Jung at me, and droned bookishly in her way about inevitably different temperaments and interests, attitudes and perceptions, the truth of which could not but be right, if only because common sense, that lowliest and oft-most jilted

branch of sapiens psychology, could not, without insult to the most basic intellect, be wrong.

Catherine, Cathy — no, at such times, Kitty — she warranted no such explanations. She was, pure and simple, the advertisement for life lived for the moment, lived in the hungry pursuit of ever-tantalising here-and-now tactile, olfactory, gustatory and auditory pleasures — dancing, say, at the *Moldavia* till others' nuptial exhaustions before immersion into our own ecstatic orgiastic play; or delighting in three-course dinners with Cabernet or Spumante leavened by the smutty corn at the *Laughing Hen Revue*; or letting herself become almost childishly entranced by the lavish itinerant circuses that came our way where she would gape and gasp, and grasp my arm at the gyrations and teeterings of the acrobats on the trapeze and of the cyclists on the tightrope far above the gawking multitude; or mingling with the festival-hatted folk waving flags and balloons to the cacophony of *Festa* merriment, the crowded riverboats cruising under an incandescent flare of fireworks, with Kitty the while poised on one foot on a low-slung parapet clacking there a wooden rattle won at the laughing clowns. . .

All this, and more besides, much more, life-embracingly more, while I. . . while I. . .

O, how cramped against all this my soul, my soul, my Jewish soul!

That she, Catherine, Kitty, Kate, should even have bothered with me! She, so free, so untrammelled, uninhibited, while I. . .

Again, while I. . .

But, listen. Give the imagination rein. . . Picture a Jew. Conjure up a fist with its knuckles blanched and the fingers clutching — no, not the silver and gold and crisp green notes for which my race, my people, my tribe is so sorely maligned — but clutching within it rather his very soul, that seething, simmering cauldron of urges and hesitations, of hurts and reservations, of Aphrodisian eroticism and Scripture-honoured purity that few, too few, allow in him; and then compare him

with, say, *Vati* and *Mutti* Wagner, Luther or Treitschke giving birth to their own Eros-seeded spawn, or with Father and Mother Chamberlain bleeding forth their own execrable Houston, or *Pere* and *Mere* Drumont or Henry or Gobineau, each couple in its own place, endowing the world with its own modern-day no-less intemperate malignant Jew-hating, Jew-baiting roe.

But they — may no alas-alack for them be said — are now dead and yet the Jew lives on, just as (if parallels of a different order be permitted) poor syphilitically demented Nietzsche, too, is now well-settled pulverised dust, while the God he deemed dead, He, too, endures; neither reality, however — neither the survival of God or of the Jew — affording any particular sense of victory or of superiority, but merely a stirring ever and again of heightened rancour, suspicion and collective touchiness over the legacy left by others' aborted humanity, moral dwarfism and intellectual cretinism. — *Pace*, heirs of Goebbels, Rosenberg and Streicher; whatever your perversions and perversities, I do still find in myself the charity to rank you one rung above the maggots. But what, in the meantime, have you done, what have you done, what have you done to the Jewish soul?

"You certainly do have your share of hang-ups, don't you?" Catherine had said in a moment of banter when I put all this to her. She had even seen fit to laugh.

"No more no less than your own crazed Easter-touched forebears," I had answered, sprinkling pepper to her salt. If my wounds were to smart, those of others would smart with me; were I, in the manner of Shylock, to bleed, others too would bleed with me. I had promised this to myself long before. The day of the lamb being led meekly to the slaughter was past.

Permit me, however, to focus my light more clearly and more sharply upon her — upon Catherine, Kitty, Kate.

She crossed my path, I said. — A concession to poetic licence, that! Rather, that I crossed hers does truth the lesser violence. For fact was that we were brought into contact by the simplest, most inevitable and most mundane of circumstances. Liberated

from my stint as Intern in Professor Armstrong's Surgical Unit, I passed on to Catherine's domain, Harry Kleinberg's Medical Ward, of which she was the ever-energetic, enterprising, incomparably efficient and much-appreciated Sister-in-Charge. Had she been Roberta Williams or Mandy Graham or Teresa Kennedy who serviced the other wards, the final outcome would have been quite different, of course — a nod at Cybele's astrology and a nod, too, at Priscilla's oh-so-earnest but insufferably obtuse pronouncements — but less different would have been the deliberately planned preliminary assault on their sexuality that my fantasies were fancying, these, in turn, and in the event, making of Catherine their actual object. For, all Jewish sensibilities and notions of purity be damned, all apology and self-containment be cursed, after successive breaks with Cybele, Priscilla, Sarah Bender — she, at least, one of my own and parentally sanctioned — and Jenny Coulson, I was bent yet again on conquest, conquest of the crotch, utterly and unreservedly erotic, wholly perverse and totally conscienceless, and unwaveringly ready to launch into the fray with the same devil-may-care bravura of my gentile colleagues, Ricky Durham, Bruce Forster and Kelvin Starling, for instance, to whom girls, and nurses especially as the most immediately accessible of the species, were acorns to be plucked and tossed aside at whim.

"Playing the triangle" was Kelvin's name of the game, while Bruce, raising his eyes heavenward with Raphaelite beatitude, called it "The Horny Quest for the Holy Grail."

They were recent graduates, too, like myself, they were doctors, they were supposed men of the world; yet they continued to purvey a schoolboy humour not yet to any responsible degree diminished.

2.

But were they the instigators of my resolve? — Hardly. In their carefree, careless, care-be-gone phallic wieldings, they were not colleagues particularly worthy of emulation, but, as fly-by-

night consummators of my own vicarious androgynous fantasies, they served as models, as abettors, and as disinhibitors, permitting me to wield weapons far more dear to me: power, domination, a quickened vengeance and the thrill of excelling at their own hedonistic game, indeed at *all* their games, this being but a sequel to the thrust that, in earlier years, had netted me a bag of highly remunerative academic honours, and homage, and high repute — all this a boon, too, to my hard-pressed immigrant shop-keeper parents, where they, my peers, indigenous and anchored in long-confirmed untroubled security, were amply content, where not actually proud and even cocky sometimes, at their adequate, if unspectacular, subject passes. — In short, in a paraphase of that happy bit of confident Americana: anything they could do, I could do better; and, in the doing, I was not about to let the curly darkness of my hair dissuade me, nor the acuteness of my eye, nor the curve of my nose which, in any cartoonist's caricature, would have verged on the hooked — none of these which, in their sum, created a hard relief at once unmistakably, unashamedly and unapologetically Semitic. As the words of another song ran, the onus was on others to take me or leave me.

For that Shylockian pride which I carried over into my internship, I could in large part thank Professor Armstrong; Professor Armstrong, awesome, towering manipulator of the scalpel, papally Catholic, father of seven, silver-haired despite his enviable youth and endowed with an incorrigible propensity to touch — the shoulder of a student, the forearm of a nurse, the hand of a patient, all invariably female and preferably young; the same Professor Armstrong who, with a wink, a half-faced smile and an adjustment of the bow-tie he wore like some public insignia, farewelled me on my last day with his Unit, saying ever so inoffensively at the conclusion of my final ward round with him, "There are castes in this world whose brains by nature outmaster their hands. Surgery is not a skill given to every tribe, but the exercise of the intellect. . . I daresay, young Bensky, Medicine will prove your apter *metier*."

Back-handed compliments were scarcely welcome departing

fare, nor the licence, however jesting, to melt down the Benjamin, the Benjamin Pruzanski, legacy of three, four, five already sufficiently humbled generations, to a pillorying, lampooning, demeaning and derogatory Bensky. If, then, he had thrown bait, I confess that I bit. Pushed, with every pore tingling and hot and prickling with sweat, I snapped, the attendant audience of Registrar, Sister, nurses, students and passing technicians, cleaners and orderlies be damned. I snapped, almost snarled, "Give me a choice and I should choose the merest most humble tribe endowed with intellect above the choicest regal clan of mechanical scalpel-manipulators and needle-wielders!"

Professor Armstrong laughed. He laughed loudly, amusedly, like the King of Hearts, and with deep creases of mirth puckering the outer corners of his eyes. But in tandem with his open bonhomie, those very eyes acquired the hard blue sheen of cold pellucid ice, they were accompanied, too, by a nose narrowing to menacing angularity, his Adam's apple above his bow-tie bobbed in a vertical flutter like some harbour buoy, and he closed the episode with a nasal remark as he turned his back upon any considered reprisal, saying, "Yet there are some, it would seem, even among those castes who would allow their intellects to let them down."

My name, not unexpectedly, reached Catherine before I did. The hospital corridors in their structural straightness and acoustic linearities enhanced the swift unarrested flight of chinwag and chatter; the walls themselves had ears; and tittle-tattle was not an indulgence reserved for hen-parties, hotel counters and charity-balls alone. Hospital dining-rooms, operating-theatres, residents' and nurses' quarters could be buzzing hives of small-talk and gossip no less.

Scarcely had I, the following Monday, begun my first morning round in Harry Kleinberg's Medical Ward than she, Sister Richardson — Catherine — formerly just another ward sister in blue among many whom I had passed in the foyer or on the stairs without particular acknowledgement, thrust a drug-

requisition book under my nose, saying, "Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?"

A hero? — Yes, perhaps, but a flawed one, of whom my colleagues said with palpable commiseration and a clicking of tongues that, after that petulant display of audacity, I would do well to look outside the hospital for future appointment. For, his cheery paternalism, his solicitous touch and his ready ear for those he favoured notwithstanding, around the table of the Hospital Management Board, Professor Armstrong wielded power as malignant as his outward mien was benevolent. If I had nurtured hopes of post-graduate posts, of higher degrees, or of eminent status in the medical hierarchy — and truth was, I had — there were some in that closed fraternity whose particularly influential recommendations I should now have to do without.

The future, then, over the remainder of that Friday and the Saturday and Sunday that followed were suddenly contracted to a circular zilch. But, by the Monday, I had come through the ritual of fretting and anticipatory grief more fortified than cowed, and prepared from the red corner to come out fighting, take on the system, and confront it on its own terms, hitting at it if I was touched, springing up if I was put down, baring my teeth if shown as much as a palm. What might have been a game to some would become bloody sport for me, the aim of that sport being not merely to play, but to lead, to conquer, to exceed, excel. I should yet be Professor Armstrong's equal; I would yet rise above my peers; I would yet render them my underlings, and dominate, become the font of decisions, and exercise most sweet, most delectable, most exquisite power.

Ah, the thought of it! The very thought!

So, when Catherine Richardson confronted me with her "Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?", it was less with corresponding jest than with masked aggression that I countered with "And what will that lady offer in return?"

"Her loyalty, of course," she answered, and added, "Though only on duty."

"That is small return indeed," I said, signing the drug order book with a flourish. "Surely the lady can offer better — off duty?"

"Oh, yes," she said sunnily, taking back the book and flipping its pages to dry the ink, "complete sets of Scott, Eliot and Dickens and whoever else peddled such abominably corny hand-me-down gambits such as this."

I saw the amused play of dimples at the angles of her broad mirthful lips and heard her release a huff of disdain for just those literati in tandem with a dismissive toss of her head.

"My, a nurse who reads," I said, unable to resist, "you don't go in for psychology as well, by any chance, do you — Freud, Adler, Jung, *et al* — or better still, for astrology?"

We were standing beside the trolley that contained the patients' records. Catherine took hold of the bar.

"Only tea-leaves and tarot cards," she retorted, moving towards the first ward along the corridor, "and flirtations with Zen, deep breathing, the Maharishi, ESP, and. . . and a little of the Mosaic. You know — God, the Law, the Prophets, quaint colourful expressive rituals, all those things. . . So, now, dear brazen, valiant doctor, shall we begin the round?"

I was not yet wholly ready.

"The Mosaic?" I echoed after her. "Are you kidding? Judaism, of all things? Lord, and in all that company — Zen, ESP, spoon-bending, the Maharishi, abracadabra mysticism. . . All this with a name like Richardson, seventh-generation descendant no doubt of a convict original, C.of E., the Lord's Prayer come Sundays, the Sermon on the Mount? . ."

She had long fingers, agile ones with which she tucked a rebellious coil of ebony black hair under her cap. Her face, in so far as any face could be open, was open to receive, and — if I had been wholly alert to it, I should have added — open to give as well, her large eyes, raised eyebrows, broad lips and bold glinting teeth all contributing to an air of playfulness and sustained un-selfconsious mirth.

"There are fascinations. . .," she said.

"What would you know about it?" I said, cutting across her.

I had a long-standing innate aversion to gentiles talking about Judaism and Jews.

"Even a. . . what shall we say, even a *shikse*?. . . even a *shikse* can learn about such things, I should think, no?'

"Sure! Sure!" I countered. "But why not study Seventh Day Adventism instead? Or Jehovah's Witness-bearing? Or, best of all, Smiling-death Armstrong's brand of Rock Choppery?"

Catherine took up an exercise book that lay on the trolley and unclipped her pen from her uniform. She brandished the pen lightly before me.

"I had a good friend recently," she said. "You may know him. . . David Appel. And before him, another, Simon Silberberg, also a former intern here and now in Anaesthetics. They taught me various things."

We had reached the entrance to the first ward. A trio of white-jacketed students passed us, and a ward-assistant carrying flowers.

"Aha! I see!" I said, steering the trolley in readiness to enter. "Some people collect butterflies, others stamps, others bottle-tops, and still others match-boxes. Sister Richardson, she has a nose for Jews. Silberbergs and Appels, Dr. Harry Kleinberg and now a hook-nosed caricature answering to the name of Benjamin Reuben Pruzanski, another acquisition among the circumcised, to be placed like some trophy on a mantelpiece or in a glass-topped showcase. Pray tell where you shall be setting me. . ."

A nurse limping on an elevated shoe approached.

"Mr Frimmer's in pain again, Sister. Can he have two more Digesic?"

Catherine nodded, replied with an assured "Yes", added "And see to it, Nurse Davies, that he watches his fluid intake", then turned back to me.

"Frimmer," I said, "another specimen of the Chosen for you, I suppose."

"How did you guess?" she tossed back, then said, "You know, there's nothing as dull as a tongue-tied always-obedient always yes-saying intern like some who have passed through

here. But you, you're interesting, you're spunky, you're aggressive. I can already see that we will have plenty of meat around here to carve with our respective knives. And as for a nose for Jews — I like that. Some people are so marvellously cute when they're brusque. Professor Armstrong must really have got to you. Looks like we're set for a most invigorating three months. But —"

She paused and tossed her head towards the ward.

"But for the moment, I'm sorry to say, Dr. Benjamin R. Pruzanski, in those beds within are thirty lives to be saved and you. . . we. . . had better get down to it."

"Let's," I said, stepping aside to let her lead.

Just inside the doorway, she paused again, waved her hand in greeting, and tossed a crisp "Good morning" to the patients waiting in their beds. Then, as if tickled by some private joke she had just remembered, she turned her fine fetching profile towards me, let out a soft, ironic and melodious laugh, and said, "May I say one more thing?"

"Do," I said.

"Then, for your information, Dr. Benjamin P., my paternal grandfather emigrated from Glasgow a mere eighty years ago, while my maternal one was a Dane. And as for convicts in our family — alas! there are none. My father is a highly-regarded municipal mayor and ne'er a stauncher Presbyterian did ye ever see. His daughter, again alas, his only lass among four laddies, is not the joy he would ha' wished for in his older age, bein' as she is a rebel 'gainst all things virtuous."

"*Touche*!" I said, loser of round one, and bowing in defeat even while arrogating to myself the final word.

3.

Dr. Harry Kleinberg, M.D., B.S., F.R.C.P. (U.K.), F.R.A.C.P., M.Sc., Ph.D. — to whom I was assigned in apprenticeship for the next three months — was a man upon whom one would never deliberately inflict one's mother-in-law. He was a saint — Catherine's, Kitty's word — quietly-spoken, ever a listener,

his hands (as more than one patient was wont to say) divinely blessed, a man who, if ever there were another as wholly intoxicated by his calling, would find in him most harmonious kin. The very portrait of humility, ever unhurried, tranquil and pensively-earnest, it was difficult to conceive of him having passed through childhood, let alone adolescence, just as it was to consider that he might in time age and go the way of all mortal flesh. He was born into his role, pure and simple; and where there were other, non-medical worlds in which he circled, these lay comfortably within the orbit of his quietly-intimate family life and of his synagogue where, come Saturdays, guiding his two young sons in the weekly readings of the *Chumash* while his wife and daughter sat in the gallery upstairs, he would pray with a calm untrammelled air of devotion and unquestioned faith.

Freethinker that I was, heir to ben Abuyah, Uriel Acosta and Spinoza fed to me by my survivor forearm-branded father, there were occasions when I, too, was compelled to present myself as a would-be-worshipper before the Ark, as on the approaching marriages, say, of Manfred Shuster to Sonia Minkies or of Solly Halpern to Susie Weiss, worthy sons and daughters all marrying into the fold, or on a *Bar Mitzvah*, or at the turn of the New Year on Rosh Hashanah, or, nudged by some atavistic chord, on that most sombre, tedious and self-negating of days, that God-intoxicated day of contriteness and humility, the Holy Day of Atonement. It was on just such occasions that I had seen Dr. Kleinberg and had watched him — even before I came into his Unit — watched him perversely, perhaps, nurturing the wish to uncover a flaw, the merest crack in the facade of his seeming sincerity. The shame for such devious intentions as mine rebounded, of course, on me, for doubts about one's fellow always told more about the doubter than about the object doubted. That notwithstanding, however, I could not bury the conviction that Dr. Kleinberg rode the wrong tram. It seemed to me impossible, indeed it was an affront to reason and wholly absurd for any Jew at the time with even the most meagre knowledge of recent history with

God's silence in the face of it, and for a doctor to boot, imperatively alert to the pervasiveness of gargantuan bodily, mental, emotional and moral sufferings, to cling to the fictions and appurtenances of faith against all odds.

But that was Dr. Kleinberg — humble, tranquil, and in himself and *to* himself in every way a master. And more. Presented by a thankful patient with, say, a generous box of Red Tulip chocolates, he distributed the delicacies among the staff; offered flowers, he handed them to a nurse to find a vase; a painting he nailed in a prominent place on a wall; a socks-and-handkerchief set he passed on, tactfully outside the ward, to his Registrar, his Intern, a student — in all this being a far cry from Professor Armstrong who, already the flamboyant possessor of a Porsche, a summer villa and a yacht, eagerly accepted and pocketed everything that came his way. A physician's physician in this modern sophisticated age, had Dr. Kleinberg lived two centuries earlier and roamed the forested foothils of the Carpathian Mountains, he might have been a Baal Shem Tov, a Master of the Good Name, and a folk-healer or a wonder-worker. Had he lived a century later, he might have been the model for a Bontsche Schweig or a rabbi, a scholar or a scribe, whose sure, God-given, God-trusting way of living, feeling and thinking that I, in my own troubled adolescent quest for meaningful roots, had sought to emulate. — Truth to tell, I had failed; I had been tossed and buffeted instead on the oceans of self-exploration like a ship robbed of anchor and pitched between the docks of stringent piety, joyful praise and icy reason offered by the *Chassidim*, *Mitnagdim* and *Maskilim* that had made up a part of my ancestral legacy; it being the last, the *Maskilim*, the "enlightened" who gained final sway, these attaining dominance under the combined effect of my father's death-camp-engendered cynicism, the romance of our own Jewish medieval and Renaissance heretics, the contemporary this-worldly level-headedness of a Russell or Camus, or a Kaufmann or Sartre, and, most odious of all, the loathesome God-denying dignity-destroying cadavers lying cold and marbled

along tiers of porcelain tables in the dissecting-room of the university's Anatomy School.

In Dr. Kleinberg — son of Polish parents come to Australia on the eve of September 1939, his father having been a cantor and slaughterer in Kutno near Lodz — I came to see continuity with warmer, cosier, homelier tradition, but did so, astonishingly only after Catherine — Catherine, of all people, a *shikse* be damned — had said, "Running this ward is the closest thing to working with a saint." Whether she was being genuinely descriptive in so far as anyone talking about saints could be or inclining towards the figurative, I could only guess at; though, tending to associate such expressions with shallow gee-whiz-type hyperbole, I elected to attribute it to the exaggeratedly metaphorical.

But Cathy in time made clear what she meant.

"Oh, I know he's religious and all that," she said, "and in this, I'm sorry to say, Ben, you're not a patch on him. But even if he believed in nothing or held that the Father Creator Redeemer Healer Judge on high was a mere hobgoblin or hobbit or some devilish imp, then just to *watch* him, Ben, the way he *speaks* to people, how he *deals* with them, the things he *does* for them. . ."

There it was: the old-fashioned stuff of sainthood. Performance, attitude, deed — the hoary do-unto-others bit or, conversely, the don't-do-unto-others ethic, the homologous messages of Christ and Rabbi Hillel finding rapprochement transcending all other antagonisms in this gentle descendant of Poland walking the wards of a hospital light years away from his origins.

Ah, virtue, virtue, virtue — could I but follow in Dr. Kleinberg's shadow, ever an ideal, a perfection to strive for and to emulate, and thereby, to bask sweetly serene, knowing both the calm and the fervour of sanctity, such basking accompanied by a heaven-blessed soft-breathed assurance of deathlessness, the light-winged flight to boundless freedoms, an ecstasy in the

discovery of one's worth, one's potentialities and gifts, and the capacity, honed to tingling sensitivity, to see within, to truly love, to feel deeply, and to give.

Ah, splendid idyll — of purity, divinity, redemptiveness.

4.

How removed, however, were such dreamy soft-cored adolescent aspirations from the more tactile, more urgent and far harder stuff of the actual: the almost incessant daily careering through *this* world, the clattering reverberating scuttling up and down the hospital's concrete stairs, the darting along sheerly angled linoed corridors, the day-by-day coursing through pathology departments and antiseptic-reeking wards, all these from eight to six, day in day out, every second night on rostered duty and every third weekend, and forever scurrying over admissions and discharges, setting brisk pace in ritualised questionings about headaches, breathlessness, cough, constipation and diarrhoea, repeated examinations of chests, abdomens, armpits and legs, and repeated instructions, repeated and repeated — "take deep breath in, let it out", "tighten fingers, now relax", "please turn over, now stand up", "your blood pressure's raised the heart's a little strained the liver's been touched the kidneys are failing", and "yes it's diabetes I'm afraid but no not cancer but you could well reduce your drinking cut out your smoking avoid overeating shed some weight some physiotherapy could help and regular exercises at home", and "take these capsules three times a day this tonic should give you pep I will see you in the clinic three weeks from now you should be fully recovered by then fighting fit as the saying goes but let me know if anything goes amiss. . ." and so on, day after day, week after week, with Catherine — Cathy — through all this nearly always there, alert, alive, buoyant, ceaselessly on the move, about her the scent of perfume, of lavender talc and fine perspiration, and Ricky Durham there, too, and Bruce Forster and Kelvin Starling, the three of them as ever brimming with ribaldry, its effect — desire, craving, lust — honed to most

exquisite keenness by the swift inadvertent touch of a nurse's dress in passing, the tantalising masturbatory fantasies of easy lays, everywhere also the pervading ambience of cocksure cock-a-hoop Professor Armstrong, and in their beds, the sick, the soiled, the garrulous and regressed, unknowing catalysts in the chemistry, intensified by proximity, of two beings, one brashly male, the other zestfully female, the pair, Catherine and I, wholly professional by the bedside — "Sister, I'll set up Mr Steele's transfusion after the round", "Yes, doctor, I have already told Nurse Strang" — but behind partitions continually ragging, scrimmaging, sparring in deft exchanges of banter and repartee — "My brother's given me two tickets he can't use for 'Die Fledermaus'", "I didn't know you had a brother", "I don't, but the tickets are for real" — each subsequent outing edging me nearer to the consummation of my most immediate purposes, the conquest, the mastery and the having for having's sake, of crotch and buttock, breast and throat, undisturbed in the folds of her lone apartment, fervid the lust, clammy the flesh, a solitary car or van purring by outside, the window rattling in its frame, with the festivities of *Festa* now behind us, Catherine — Cathy, Kitty, Kitten, Kate — a clear lingering image poised on the parapet skirting the river bank, magically weaving through the crowd, all woman, delicious woman, desired woman, liberated from the desexing dress of sober vocation and wearing brilliant red now, and flame, vermilion, her shoulders, torso, hips all enraging, myself the while watching, thirsting, hungering, swearing: if not tonight, then never, if not tonight, then. . .

With the ascent of dawn, too precipitate, too swift, and the yielding and the having, now, like the *Festa*, also past, the barbs returned, together with the salt, the pepper, the deflation.

"Another Jew to your collection."

"Another *goy* to yours."

"Such is the thrust behind all human history, Kitten — use and abuse, exploitation and despoliation, only always called by other more noble-sounding names. . ."

"And love?"

"Which? The puppy kind or the eternal?"

"The honest, Ben, the genuine and the uncomplicated."

Face over face, hers over mine as she leaned on her elbow, she had blown coquettishly into my face.

"Poor innocent," I could not but snort, saying, "Uncomplicated? Are you kidding? What planet are you on? This is *terra firma* and *terra realita*, Kate, Cathy, Kitten dear, not *terra molta dorme*, or whatever the Latins used to call Dreamland. Your kind and mine, for instance, my loving Presbyterian, lapsed though we both may be. . ."

She nodded briskly in patent comprehension and sniffed down her nose. In the grey light of dawn, I saw the outline of her face; I mapped out its contour, traced over its smoothness, but had to visualise its expression through the imagination.

"Ah, yes," she laughed, mocked, chaffed. "Ah, yes." She grasped my chin. "Us you pump, yours you marry, learning to shave on another's face, as Simon would say."

"A malicious libel, of course, Cathy, worthy, my little vixen, only of an ill-bred mouse-brained Cossack. But even if true, it is a lesson learned from your own fine-assed breed of phallus-waggers, forgive my indelicacy; even though, of us, of course, of us, our maligned, oppressed and painfully-begotten tribe, greater decency is expected, and a higher virtue — shall we call it propriety? — or Kleinbergian saintliness, holiness, modesty and mildness. . ."?

This was when she said, "You certainly do have your share of hang-ups, don't you?" and I had answered, "No more no less than your own Easter-crazed forebears."

"Oh!" she thereupon continued. "Yet if we. . . If *I*, say. . . were to seek and gain entry into your tribe, as you call it. . . if I were to wish to become a part of it. . ."

"Well?"

"Then all would be. . . What's the word?. . . All would be *kosher*, I guess. Love, marriage, the production of little Jewish geniuses growing into adult Jewish geniuses — the 'my son the doctor' syndrome, a mother's and a grandmother's pride and joy. . ."

I clapped a palm over her mouth and turned her flat on her back, myself now leaning over her.

"Madam," I said, foraging for her eyes in the dimness, "you are suffering from an overdose of Silberbergs and an excess of raw Appels even to think of such a thing."

Catherine shook off my hand and rummaged her own through my hair.

"No, it's just a fascination, let us say a predilection I have for... for your kind."

Again I snorted.

"I know just what you mean, Kitty dear. I feel the same towards pygmies."

She shook her head vigorously.

"That's unjust, Ben. I might tease, I might trifle, have my little joke, but I don't lie, Ben, and I don't flatter for flattery's sake."

"Hark ye to the confessions of a latter-day Judeophile," I said. "What are you saying, then?"

"You'll think me patronising, gratuitous, you will, I know. But those patients of ours, Flamer, for instance, and Weiss, or Mr. Frimmer... They're characters — eccentric, some of them, opinionated, quarrelsome even, demanding, and not a few of them never satisfied. Give them the earth, they want heaven as well; bring them a glass of water — why so little?; bring them a jug — why so much, water is cheap here? And yet..."

"And yet they're lovable dears. Is that what you, my sweet, my own, my very own Jew-loving *shikse* are about to say?"

Again she shook her head. With the rising light, her cheeks, her chin, her eyebrows were becoming more distinct. Her stark black hair was in disarray. I had rolled back and lay now supporting myself on an elbow.

"No, not dears, Ben... But heroes. To you there's nothing new in it, but for me... It was David Appel who first made me see it... Every so often a scar from the war, the story of a family killed, the number on Frimmer's arm who, breathless as he is,

still gets up early each morning to put on those leather cases and straps, those. . . those. . ."

"Phylacteries. . ."

". . . those phylacteries and prayer-shawl and starts to pray. . ."

"So?"

"There's strength in that. . ."

"Ah, yes, you should ask my father what he thinks of the matter. And he has a number on his arm, too. He'd say it's all blindness, blindness and delusion, a blinkered clinging to superstition, to fairy-tales, and to a downright primitivism we should have shed long ago. . ."

"The fact remains, though, whatever you say, my hell-bent iconoclast supreme, you cannot deny that certainty of theirs, that conviction. . . Dr. Kleinberg, Mr Frimmer, Flamer. . . despite everything, despite it all. . ."

I sat up, and in mock theatricality struck my forehead with a fist.

"Kitty! My God!" I said. "Hath not a Jew eyes?! Have I been blind? Have I been deaf? Are you telling me that this fascination, this. . . this is a predilection for the Mosaic is in fact a flirtation with the notion, indeed a contemplation to enter as an attested member into our so-marvellous, so-noble, eternally-abiding tribe? Is that it? First, Simon Silberberg then David Appel, now me. . . each of us being primed in turn to be your entree ticket into the Judaic paradise? Is that it? Is that your game?. . ."

"I. . ."

"Do you want wise counsel, Kitty, Kate? Stick to the God, hold to the fiction you already know. Your father's Presbyterian fiction is as good as any that this earth has to offer. To be a Jew, my dear well-meaning Don Quixotic somnambulist, let this Sancho tell you, is to be burdened with history and bowed down by memory. It's to inherit a future, call it a destiny if you will, but not a destiny of grandeur, believe me, nor of splendour, or of glorious salvation or of messianic peace. Oh, no, my innocent one. Don't for a moment believe what you read or

what the likes of Frimmer and Kleinberg would have you believe. Our past has been a legacy of malignancy, our destiny is to be at the receiving end of more of the same. Not a shred of joy lies before us for all our messianic aspirations, not the least assurance of deliverance, nor the meanest hint of redemption or national salvation or whatever else we've been exhorted, cajoled and deluded into believing. . . But. . ."

Fully drawing back the covers, I swung out of bed, rubbed the stubble on my chin, and stretched.

"But if they are heroes, those Jewish brethren of mine, if they are indeed the saints you make of them, and if, as you say, their faith contains certainty, conviction and even perhaps a modicum of truth, then don't tell *me*, Kathy dear, it isn't *me* you have to tell. Instead, tell the world out there. Take upon yourself the evangelist's mantle and let the world outside know. Tell them that we've been a people most unjustly and far too long maligned. Tell them that we truly are God's Chosen; tell them that if they would but look upon us, they would truly see us as a light unto the nations; tell them. . . Tell them whatever you would have them know. Us, they won't even begin to believe. But if *you* tell them and *you* recruit others to the cause, then maybe, just maybe, we might have a few less enemies and perhaps in this Panglossian world of ours a few more friends."

Catherine, too, had by now stepped out of bed. Moving lightly, almost on the balls of her feet, she made her way to the bathroom, on her way brushing a frisky hand against my cheek.

"We're not all against you, Ben," she said. "If it's any consolation, there are some of us you can trust," and added with all the perky cheerfulness of the Ward Sister in her again, "like your own doting hero-worshipping cloud-cuckoo-land dreamy maiden."

"Thanks," I said after her. "I must remember to tell my father next time he mentions the showers, the furnaces and the chimneys of Auschwitz."

5.

And how often did my father talk of Auschwitz?

Or my mother? . . .

Cybele — as I had ribbed her often enough before the heat between us congealed to ice — was either a descendant or a beneficiary of Alexander Graham Bell or owned shares in the nation's telephone network. When she was neither modelling nor consulting the heavenly constellations, she so made the telephone an extension of herself that one might as easily have pictured her without that appendage as without ears. Indeed, one glossy print she sent me from interstate where she had been offered temporary work showed her posing in an ermine fur — and, it appeared, only in that fur — the while holding a tusk-white telephone receiver to her shoulder, winking, licking a lip and beckoning suggestively with a brazen come-on. The astronomical reaches towards which her phone bills must have soared were far beyond my caring. What had irked me was her persistence in calling me at home, and had she never known my number, I would have been the last to grieve. For, more than once, upon returning from the hospital or from some other place when I still lived with my parents, I was greeted by my crusty purse-lipped father with a dry chaffing hard-edged pronouncement: "That *goyishe* onion of yours has been after you again." It took me time to recognise his wry private play upon her name, the unusual, colourful, if almost ostentatious *Cybele* giving on to my father's harder patently contemptuous *tsibel* and *tsibele*, in Yiddish the name given to the homely, less colourful, most commonplace onion.

"Bring her home one day, this *tsibele* of yours," he also said. "I want to see with my own eyes if she is *kosher*."

With Priscilla, mine was the fortune to run headlong into my parents in the foyer of the Rivoli Cinema to which, counter to their more customary stay-at-home, chair-warming habits, they had been inveigled to go by their friends. They had heard that the movie dealt with Jews in wartime Europe (more particularly Warsaw, their native home) and pictured them in a

sympathetic light. Given these inducements, my parents — more so, my mother — felt it disloyal not to go. They were, however, less than edified by film's end when Priscilla and I met them near the door, all of us, except Priscilla perhaps, startled by the encounter on leaving the cinema. The film *did* in fact deal with wartime Warsaw; the Jews in it *were* sympathetically portrayed; but to my parents' consternation, the whole proved a travesty of justice and a whitewash of the Poles. For more than anything, it was a paean to the Polish Underground which, to my parents, had in reality been as anti-Semitic and murderous as both the very nation it defended and the nation it resisted, the role of the Jews in the movie being nothing if not merely ornamental — one scene depicting two Jews buying arms from Poles for use in the Ghetto, another showing a Jewish girl hurling a Molotov cocktail at a German convoy in an ill-fated personal act of heroism.

In the wake, however, of our ill-timed encounter in the cinema foyer, the feeling that they had been duped by the film's pretensions took second place in their concern. What rankled, what must have torn at them like witches' nails, was another, deeper, more grievous betrayal. And they stayed up until my homecoming, which I had deliberately, if unsuccessfully, delayed until the shoulders of dawn, to make their sorrow very plainly manifest.

"You saw for yourself, didn't you?" my mother began, about to set sail upon a turbulent sea of remonstration. "You saw. . . You saw. . . with your own eyes, you saw. . ."

She wore her old, now-shapeless crimson dressing-gown, a one-time Mother's Day gift I had bought her, her eyes were bleary and suffused with weariness, and her greying hair splayed out in convoluted tangles over her shoulders. A memory sprang up of my mother having at one time played small bit-parts on the local Yiddish stage.

"The war the Germans the Poles I mean," she now let go, scarcely drawing breath. "Is this what we Jews died for suffered for your father we and your grandparents uncles aunts and cousins. . .Is this what we raised you for all these years giving you

the best of everything so that you might run around with *shikses* and right before everyone's eyes so that the whole town can tittle-tattle. . . Nachum and Bella Pruzanski's son did you hear he runs around with *shikses* he is bringing them shame O if only the floor had opened up right there when I saw you and swallowed me alive. . . Is this to be the whole gain of our lives is it is it is it can we expect nothing better from you can we. . . we who have given our best years our energies everything only to see you behaving as if you want to send your father to an early grave like that apostate Finkel or drive your mother to an asylum like that Myer Citrynowski is that what you really want is it is it is it. . .?"

My father, having also sat vigil through the night hours, having spent them bent over the pages of the week's *Jewish News* and, in all likelihood, to the ceaseless tune of my mother's repetitious dirges, was less demonstrative. His ways were less dramatic; his teacher had not been the theatre. It had been the harder, crueller, more crushing realities of experience — thin soup, for instance, and typhus, dysentery, festering abscesses, back-breaking labour, whippings delivered simply for being, public hangings for no better reason, bodies impaled on electric fences and the endless stench of charring flesh — all these in him transmuting dramaturgy to disdainful wryness or to words so measured and so quiet that they trapped his hearer into intense, close and concerted attention.

"You're grown-up," he said softly and directly this time, the hour militating against the deployment of his more usual cutting barbs of scorn, his tattoed number, that indelible tool of blackmail, deliberately bared and conspicuous on his forearm. "Perhaps you know, or believe you know, what you are doing. Some things can't be helped. We have to live with the *goyim*, and work with them, buy and sell with them, while you, as a doctor, will have to treat them, heal them, at all times do your best for them and then better still. . . But when it comes to making them your friends, before you sit down to eat with them, make sure they don't hold a knife in their hand or have a fork in their tongue. That way, at least, you might not get hurt

and the rest of us along with you. . ." — he rapped a finger against his breast — "For I have seen; I have felt; I have experienced. And if you want proof, Ben, if you want evidence. . ."

After all the waiting through night's darkness into the early hours, that was all he said. As a final gesture, he simply, turned out his arm. He must have deemed his number, 50726, branded there in blue, more eloquent by far than all the words, whether in Yiddish, Polish, English or French, he had acquired in his more than sixty years of traversing the terrestrial terrain.

In the event, their loss of sleep over Priscilla — "your pretzel", as my father referred to her in a return to his more traditional irreverence — was less than warranted. Priscilla, the most diametrically opposite number to Cybele, was a fill-in come upon the scene at a most fortuitous time, just when I sorely needed a buffer against the surfeit of wound-licking solitude after the final glacial schism between Cybele and myself — puerile jealousy the cause — Priscilla latched upon as one of those proverbial acorns of Kelvin's to be plucked and then be tossed aside. Or perhaps — topsy to turvy — I was an acorn to *her*. Dour, ponderous as she was, overtly the picture perfect of spinsterish bookishness, she was yet, in the moon-lit hours, ready, if unexciting, substrate for the workings of her glandular juices. Her vault was no less accepting that that of Palmolive-Colgate-Chaneled Cybele had been; but the time came, as it had to come, when, preparing me for that which by then I too hoped was inevitable, she said, "Sometimes, I can't find anything to say to you." After that, in the words of the oracle, the end was nigh; but not before she had also managed from certain Olympian heights to add, "People have different interests and temperaments, attitudes and perceptions and so on. I guess there really is little between us, we're oceans apart, and. . . and. . ." — and here, the shoulder shrug, the puckering of her lips and the ascent of her eyebrows said it all — "your being Jewish and all that doesn't help."

I couldn't help but sneer then and deliberately set my profile to its most salient, challenging, belligerently Semitic form.

"Tell me, my prissie Priss," I launched into her, "was it at the

university or in some benighted shadowy Jew-as-devil nunnery that you gained your priceless wisdom, your most divinely-endowed and ineffably immaculate tact, quite apart from your Christian love and tolerance and charity and compassion?!"

Amicability was scarcely the note on which we parted, and it took me by no surprise to learn that she subsequently drifted into a relationship with a law student, the flathead son of a White Australia politician, given for his sport to wearing a T-shirt with skull-and-crossbones on front and back accompanied by the legend "Australia for Australians", "Kikeland for Kikes". To his credit, at least, he did not strut about the campus delivering raised-arm salutes, but that swiftly ensuing Priscilla-Flathead liaison did illustrate to me most vividly, even if only for a while, the essential verity inherent in my father's cautionary injunction.

6.

Safer harbour was Sarah Bender. After Cybele, whom my parents had never met, and Priscilla, whom they had, even if Sarah had come with down on her upper lip, a port-wine stain suffusing a cheek, a horn on her brow and a mass of livid pimples as her dowry, yet would she have been no less welcomed into the family fold than the most flawless Jewish daughter. That she had none of these, but was instead dark, petite, a ready and quickly responsive listener and the picture of courtesy with "Yes, pleases" and "No, thank yous" in appropriate places; that she possessed a B.A., Dip.Ed. and taught at a private school; that her father was a landsman of mine, Warsavians both; and that she wore most sensible clothes and colours and carried no airs — all this certainly endeared her to them from their first encounter, but their readiness, indeed their sheer anxiousness, to accept her followed the mere mention of her name even well before I brought her home. Her degrees notwithstanding, they very quickly recognised in her the domestic streak, and her potential as a worthy wife, a loving mother and a dedicated daughter taking the place of the one they had themselves

wished for but had never had. I daresay she would have been any of these, indeed, all of these. I was certain of it. For, any girl who could boil an egg while holding a degree, as Sarah could, must have had grand potential for domesticity. But she was not for me. By the third or fourth date — this, at her cousin Debbie Bender's engagement party where she introduced me to every tenth-removed member of her family — it was clear that she did love me, but it was a love just as clearly predicated on the M.B.B.S. I bore, on the status this would give her, and on the kind of life it promised. I was less taken by the pedigree of chattering, nattering, vacuous Auntie Hannahs, Uncle Morries and Cousin Barbaras, Beverleys and Brendas, just five random samples of a hundred I would acquire in turn. So, when Jenny Coulson came along, she a slender-buttocked, large-eyed nurse I met at a hospital party, at which Sarah was a flower decorating the wall so well that I left her there, I felt buoyed again, I tingled again, I could once again look forward to adventure, titillation and colour, and to nestling in the finer plumage of a lyre-bird as opposed to the clipped dry and dreary pinions of an ostrich.

With Jenny, however, the promise proved more than the offering — chloroform itself could not have been as soporific — quite apart from which I had no particular penchant for yesterday's breath, unwashed body sweat and vinegary perfumes, all of which, while permissible in patients, were scarcely fragrances endearing to soul or body mates. As a consequence, within the space of a mere six hours, I had gained and given up Jenny, lost Sarah who, to her credit, did possess some pride, and found myself again in the field unattached and unrestrained at just that time when Professor Armstrong saw fit to nettle, challenge, humiliate, and offend.

That I was less than temperate over that weekend that bridged my surgical and medical terms could scarcely escape notice. My room was my haven. I spent the greater part of that Saturday and Sunday spread-eagled across my bed, attempting at times to read, at other times simply staring at the ceiling or scanning my bookshelves, but mostly fretting sweat over my

future, at the same time cursing and swearing, and praying that each and every one of Professor Armstrong's fingers should that day rot with fungus, and planning sweet, bitter and malignant revenge, not only against him, for he was but a cog, but against the whole establishment — the whole Establishment — he represented: the hierarchical, cliquish and ostentatious, and the brash, contumelious and dyed-in-the-wool, self-righteous infallibly papal.

To my parents, the explanation for my sudden uncustomary seclusion was simple; nothing conceivably more so.

Over Saturday evening dinner, my mother was moved to ask, "Aren't you seing Sarah this weekend? Have you had a quarrel?"

The face I showed must have been appropriately morose and, in Romantic terminology, woe-begone, for my father, adhering to the track my mother had cleared, added his bit, and said drily, "That shows, at least, that he cares. I was beginning to think our son, our heir, had no finer feelings."

Their tune, however — a melody best played upon the harp — changed as the truth became increasingly evident over subsequent weeks that Sarah had, as it were, become a closed chapter, with Catherine, by then, well integrated into the next, with my mother, all hopefulness yet, asking, "Do you see Sarah still?" and with my father, his insight as sound as his greying hairs were many, contributing his own single-breathed coda: "I trust you shan't return to your old ways with those *tsibeles* and pretzels, with those *blondinnies* of yours and those red-heads, and that. . . and that whatever you do you will remember you will remember who what where why you are and when you remember remember too remember again remember always your parents remember your people remember Auschwitz remember your history, your tradition, your fate. . ."

As the son of my parents, my duty was ever to remember, as in Hebrew school I was also taught to remember and in Yiddish school as well, until I learnt that the Jewish genius lay not in literature, nor art, nor wisdom, nor even in its much-vaunted highly refined and polished morality, but in its tribal memory,

that memory both cementing the generations and bonding the dispersed, at once linking me with Abraham our Father, rendering me heir to Moses our Teacher, and making me kin to the martyrs of Jerusalem, Masada, York and Kishinev, and, in my parents' own time, of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek.

There was no way, then, that I could have been induced to disclose to him — to disclose to either of my parents — my dalliance with Cathy. And the one time I did venture, with tongue in cheek rather than out of conviction, to say to my father as Cathy had done, "They don't all hate us, they're not all against us", he huffed with a veritable explosion of sound, and raised his eyes till they swam in the cupolas of his eyelids, saying, "Of course not! Did I say different? We are butterflies, we Jews, beautiful magnificent splendid butterflies. Everyone loves us, the whole world, from president down to the smallest child — that is why they like to chase after us, and pull out our wings and our hearts and our tongues. Out of love for us, and admiration and respect. When have they ever shown that they're against us?"

7.

The fact soon enough became apparent to others that between Cathy and myself there existed more than a mere work relationship, a formal Dr. Pruzanski-Sister Richardson interdependence. For a time, our public faces did remain correctly and professionally different from our private ones, but they could not for long be so clearly separated. There were too many give-away signs in the way we greeted each other, or spoke, or turned an ear or positioned ourselves during the twice-weekly rounds with Dr. Kleinberg, keeping side by side and to the rear as he instructed the students around the bedside. Cathy, ever the more alive, the more giving, and the more expressive with that sparkling bright-eyed readiness of hers to jest or encourage or pat a shoulder, an arm, a hand, became still more happily all of these; while I — the coin reversed — in public the more

reserved and the less inclined to jest or infringe with unnecessary touch, became in the ward still more subdued and more pre-occupied, my gaze, at once doting and not a little lascivious, never far from her. My perennial mentors, Ricky Durham, Bruce Forster and Kelvin Starling, themselves having found willing mates with whom to nestle, thought our liaison "bonzer", "super" and "A1", though there were times I sensed questioningly disapproving looks from Dr. Kleinberg. These, however, I dismissed — or preferred to dismiss — as the autonomous workings of an imagination, *mine*, nudged by guilt, that guilt enhanced by my countenancing of his own virtue, heightened by the constancy of the man, and turned almost to shame by the very purity and steadfastness of his allegiance to self, to family and to faith.

What I had not counted on was this: that, where my own heated chemistry had urged upon me the role of seducer, it was I who, my every will and intention confounded, had within a matter of weeks been the one who was caught. In a sense, I was captive; and captivity offended my commitment to freedom; and with my freedom thus curtailed, limits were set upon my ambition, ambition which I was not so easily about to yield, particularly not when those other volatile fantasies of excelling or attaining primacy over the likes of regal Armstrongs drove me on, myself taking anticipatory delight in that moment when I might yet turn my back upon that smirking bow-tied long-fingered lecher and, with a dog-like raising of a leg, fart full-blast in his face.

Cathy was not unaware of my discomfiture, even if she could only hazard educated guesses at the reasons for it. I could scarcely hide it; she could scarcely miss it. For, even as we sat, — whether in the *Art Gallery Restaurant* or in the *Sunset Bistro* bantering about Matron Reynold's unfortunate prickly mole on her cheek, or about Mr. Frimmer's by-then ritual assertion "You're like a true Jewish daughter to me", or about our respective fathers' hob-nobbing with the illustrious lay-politicians of the municipal chambers and of St.Kilda's Acland Street — I remained continually on the prowl, forever fol-

lowing the flow of legs, skirts, buttocks and breasts and the more delicate faces that passed between the tables.

Catherine was certainly not given to blindness.

"Does your *shikse* cramp your style, Benjamin P.?" she laughed on what was to prove our last outing together — supper at *Genevieve's* after Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* at the Carlton Moviehouse. She had just drawn back my attention to herself with a brush of a forefinger against my chin as she scanned me over the rim of a cup of cappuccino she was drinking at the time. "In the ward, we're such a great pair and in bed — don't blush — greater still; but in public places like this, you look increasingly like a fly in a spider's parlour. I sometimes wonder, Ben, why I bother with you. I do."

"And?" I said.

"I guess, if really pushed, I might say there is a little bit of love in it."

I bade her set down her cup and took her hands. They were, as always, pliably willing.

"You're so sweet, Kitty dear," I said, "so sweet.The very unadulterated stuff of sugar, honeycomb, honeydew and fairy floss. But you're sweeter still when you're less serious. Why rock the boat we're in with such terribly, abominably complicated words — like 'love' for instance?"

Her fingers in mine tightened a jot, as did her lips and the corners of her eyes.

"To put it simply, Cathy. Talk of love and you must talk about tomorrow. And to talk about tomorrow is, for me, to evoke the yesterday — or rather, several millennia of yesterdays. I like you, Cathy, I'm fond of you. I've been fond of you from your very first 'Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?' But history, Kate, my dear, history, nothing less, stands against us."

Catherine withdrew her hand and studiously ran an index finger around the rim of her glass.

"History," I repeated. "That will always remain against us, and — forgive the coarseness — a meagre little hood of flesh, that smidgin of Semitic foreskin dividing the nations and sur-

rendered in exchange for a birthright that I first imbibed with my mother's milk and separating the nations beyong reconciliation."

The opportunity for repartee from Catherine Richardson was laid wide open — I recognised this even before I had finished speaking — and, never slow to seize at opportunity, Catherine seized.

"Yes," she said, toying now with the points of her scarf. Her face seemed consumed by shadow, her chin had become firmer, her cheeks tighter, her nostrils flared. "Yes, I forgot. I forgot how, in my very own most dear, most precious Jewish doctor, that little smidgin given up has afforded him the licence to wallow in neurosis, suspicion and defiance and served as a spur to exploitation and revenge for all the things that every half-witted Ferdinand, Fritz and Ivan ever did to his ancestors — the choicest part of the cut being that, while himself denying the most central credos of his faith, yet does he rail against the merest slur seemingly cast against it, yet does he see blood on the hands of all the uncircumcised and uncovenanted among the nations, and crying, crying, incessantly crying, not least even in the bed of a *shikse*, 'Expiate! Expiate! Expiate!' "

"Cathy. . .," I said, looking around to see whether anyone was listening.

She did not allow me to continue. She thwarted me with a brisk shaking of her head and an upraised palm.

"But you're wrong, Benny Casanova. I told you before, Benny boy, we're not all against you. We're not. But if you persist in thinking otherwise, then that's your problem, yours, not ours, certainly not mine, even if you would lump me also with that amorphous mass of alleged Jew-hating Teutons, Jesuits, Benedictines, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Moslems, Trinitarians, Jacobians, Russian Orthodox, Armenians, fifty-headed Gorgons or whatever you will, out there. That's your headache."

Catherine, holding me now with firm unyielding eye-contact, rapped the tips of her fingers on the table. She was warming for a kill.

"But you're wrong on another count, your Highness, your Excellency, your Majesty, Mr. Don Juan. To you, tomorrow evokes yesterday, and yesterday is history, all of it, so you would have it seen, being a vale of tears in which you thrash about and kick, and from which you never let yourself swim free. You *want* to hurt, Benny, *you* want to ache, and grieve, and hate. For your own reasons, you seem to need it. And that, too, if it satisfies your masochistic streak, then that, too, dear sir, is your absolute prerogative. So flagellate yourself to your heart's content; you'll never find a shortage of birches. But when, on sitting in the Sisters' Station, I see and watch men like Harry Kleinberg or Noah Frimmer or Reuben Flamer or Israel Weiss, then that tomorrow of yours, Ben, looms not as a black, bitter and hateful rehash of yesterday, but frankly splendid, optimistic and indomitable. Through their strength, Ben, and their conviction, their humility and their trust — and all this despite their past, golden boy, *despite* their past — they've opened to me a window to the Jewish soul, if that's not too shamelessly rhetorical a thing to say, and through that window, Benny, dear, my blind embittered one, I see light and celebration and the certainty of a continuity such as I, and I daresay you, Ben, with your teeth ever on edge as though you'd been sucking lemons, have never known. You'll think me presumptuous — I'll take the chance — but the irony is that it takes a *goy*, the *shikse* daughter of a civic-minded Presbyterian to point it out to the blinkered Jew."

Had we been elsewhere — in a private place, say — or alone, I might have risen upon my seat and applauded her performance. But, surrounded by a house full of patrons, with the waiter just then approaching with the bill, I settled for a mere rejoinder.

"My, you are evangelical, Miss Richardson. A veritable Paul reverted to Saul. Are you perhaps about to set forth, this time out of Bethlehem, to preach your vision to the pagans?"

As I paid the waiter, Cathy stood up. She took her coat from the back of her chair and doubled it over an arm.

"Take me home, Ben," she said. "You will still do that for

me, won't you?, adding at the door with composed unruffled serenity, "You mightn't know it, Ben, but in your own warped way, you've actualy helped me discover where I stand."

8.

For all the exhilaration offered by Catherine in that most hectic, medical term of my internship year, I felt satisfaction, I felt relief on breaking out of her snare, even if that liberation had been achieved in a less than tactful way, as with Cybele, Priscilla, Sarah Bender and halitotic, acidic Jenny Coulson.

But where did I go from there; or, as Ricky Durham put it, "What now, O Romeo?"

What now, indeed? — Nothing. For the moment, I was content; my medical term was about to end; my next Internship stint — two months this time — was to be spent at the Base Hospital in Warragul in the wilderness of Gippsland, and there was neither time nor virtue in complicating the last fortnight with yet another fly-by-night attachment, however propelling towards such another fling was the very sight of swaggering Professor Armstrong in the hospital dining-room or the crotch-tickling badinage of my peers in the quarters.

With Cathy — with Sister Richardson as she again became — contact during that interregnum could not, of course, be wholly severed. After all, she was still the Ward Sister and I the intern, and medical imperatives compelled us to continue working side by side. Though there were times when in her presence I now felt inhibited and awkward — product of a chemistry manifesting as conscience — she, for her part, smart in her constant blue of authority, remained as buoyant, assiduous and enterprising as ever, was perhaps even more so than before. I could have been mistaken but, towards me, she appeared to assume an amusedly ironic air, a bright-eyed subverting coquetry ever at play when she spoke to me — quite different from the earlier, impish coquetry she had shown — as when she said, for instance, "Do you think, Dr Pru, that Mr. Williams might do with a respirator for his chest, he really

is very rattly?" or "Have you seen Mr. Nugent's pressure sore, Doctor? I think debridement might help". As to conversation beyond the necessarily medical, this had evaporated to near-extinction, words having become rare bullion to be extracted only with guile or by extortion.

"So be it," I said to Ricky Durham, trading notes with him one day. "So be it. There's nothing worse than being plagued by sorry ill-done-by maidens *a la* Byron, Shelley and Keats, or by such *belle dames sans merci* gushed over by fountain-eyed, fairy-floss, melting heart Romantics."

What struck me, however, was the fact that Cathy was spending more time with Noah Frimmer. He was a sick man, to be sure — one coronary occlusion followed in short order by a second had left him with heart failure of such degree that it confined him, diuretics notwithstanding, within a mere ten-foot radius of movement. But it was not that, I was sure, that made her in moments of leisure as much as an inner drive retrace her steps to his bed. And there, they made an unusual pair, Catherine a gay fun-loving twentieth-century gentile sophisticate, he a balding big-eared small-chinned pixie of a man, a character out of Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, a *mittel-mentsch* as my father would say — no great sage, no small fool — one of those to whom I warmed spontaneously in the black-and-white of folksy fiction, but whom, in the roundness of the flesh, I actually pitied, lamented over for their smallness in the world, as also for their unmarked transit through it — not for me that anonymity! — their lack of forcefulness, dering-do and vision of earthy possibilities, and, ultimately, for their intractable innocence and ineffectuality. In three decades, Frimmer's ship's-brothers — men by the name of Kliger, Levinson and Stark — had built splendid high-rise apartments, had assembled ever-expanding chains of retail stores and been honoured through a room here, a plaque there, a hospital wing elsewhere or a portrait hanging prominently of the walls of a wide range of board-rooms. Meanwhile, Noah Frimmer's legacy, by contrast, was simply a married son, two school-age grandchildren, a less than roadworthy car, a bookcase or two of Yiddish books,

and a small two-roomed flat a short step from the Elwood Synagogue, the sum of it being sole fruit of years passed within the damp, flaking and mildewed walls of Kramer's factory in North Fitzroy where, humming private tunes to the clatter of rackety machines, he had until pension-age stitched sleeves beyond counting to ever-depleting, ever-replenished mountains of shirts — all this after having, like my own father, been liberated from a death-camp, but unlike him, having been bereaved of one wife lost in Buchenwald and of another in the Australian Antipodes, she having died of more natural causes, insofar as ovarian cancer attended by widespread dissemination, jaundice and morphine-dependent pain were natural.

And yet, if I sought a shadow of disenchantment in him, or a furrow of envy, a crease of discontent, it was in vain. The remarkable thing was that that little pixie, Noah Frimmer, could still smile, laugh, cajole and be earnest, his face, however grey it might have been because of illness, folding concertina-like in public mirth, quiet pensiveness or private vision. Where, to my father, the brand on his forearm was a condemnation of man and a negation of God, to Noah Frimmer, his number was an affirmation of both.

"The *Maalach Hamavet*, the *Angel of Death*, and the heirs of Amalek have always sought to destroy us, yet the *Ribbono Shel Olam* has seen fit to preserve us to this day. . ."

With patients, as with customers, one did not argue. However, reared in my adolescence on Russell and Huxley, Kaufmann and Spinoza, I did say, "That's one way of looking at it; though another might well point to the one-third of our people that perished."

"We were being tested," he had answered.

"Oh?"

The veins on his bald crusty scalp stood out as dark and sluggish rivulets, his chin sharpened to a finer point, his eyes brightened.

"Just as our father Abraham, bidden to kill Isaac, was tested, and our teacher Moses summoned up Mount Sinai, and Job, and

the Jews upon the destruction of the Temples were being tested. . ."

"And we passed the test?" I said.

"With flying colours, as the saying goes" he said. "For we have remained pure, decent. We have neither imitated nor been reduced to emulating the barbarities of Satan and Amalek. And for that, the *Shechinah*, the radiance of God, continues to glow upon us and the time will come when His word will reach out through us to the world and the gentiles will hear it too and become true Jews again. They will yet return," — at this, he opened out his hands — "and, as much as they have wronged us, it will be for us, both for the sake of their souls and for the sake of ours, to take them back."

I was preparing to take issue with him, when Catherine — when Sister Richardson — entered the ward, outwardly formal and direct, and yet nursing, I was sure, a private damnable mirth very near to her harder surface.

"Doctor," she said, looking me directly into the eye, "there's a new patient just been brought into the third ward. Asthma and hypertension, And he doesn't look at all the proverbial rose."

I managed to redeem that asthmatic hypertensive patient, and saved too an alcoholic exsanguinating from ruptured oesophageal veins and, among others still, a diabetic in a coma.

At the end of it all, I would have liked to say to Catherine, to Cathy, Kitty, Kate, if she were still in the slightest even wont to hear, "Ah, glory! Your hero is certainly soaring in his prime"; but she, for her part, gave not the least acknowledgement to those miracles of salvage, she did not drop a word, nor allowed herself as much as a nod of recognition or an impressed pursing of her lips, neither then nor at the end of my medical term, when, turning heady, sycophantic and flunkey for a day, I also clung to Harry Kleinberg, fawning for the faintest praise for my three months' work, the most subtle suggestion, or a comment, something akin to "first rate", "very good", "well done", "you have certainly earned your keep."

Instead, with the last ward round over, and the two of us,

Harry Kleinberg and I, waiting in the foyer for the lift to take us down to the ground floor, my mentor, that paragon of duty and solicitude turned to me, scratched absently at an ear, and said with a scrutiny that seem inordinately intense, "So, Ben, where do you go from here?"

Catherine passed us just then. She was on her way to dinner.

"Goodnight, Dr. Kleinberg," she said, less in formality than out of clearly respectful courtesy, while me she touched with a wordless swifltly-pirouetting mocking glance before skipping kittenish out of sight down the stairs. I clung to her for as long as I could, tracing her shoulders, her waist, her hips, her legs.

"Warragul," I said, turning back to Dr.Kleinberg. "For two months. I start on Monday."

He shook his head, studying me more closely still with a shuttling brow-knitted contemplative gaze.

"No, Ben, that's not what I mean. I am not talking about you as an intern. That, I know. But you, Ben, call it the... the spiritual you, the private, inner... should I say, the troubled you?"

I was about to offer up some concocted reply, something side-stepping, something thwarting, but he did not wait for a response.

"While we have a minute, listen," he said, clearly indicating that he did not expect a reply. "I heard this in *Shul* last *Shabbat*. A simple story, very simple. A wanderer came to a rabbi of some unfamiliar village and said, 'I am lost. Help me find my way home.' The rabbi spoke with him awhile, then took his elbow and said, 'Come'. He led the man to the edge of the village where he stopped at a crossroads. There he turned to the wanderer. 'This is as far as I can take you,' he said. 'From here, it is up to you. Go. Choose whichever path you wish. One will be longer, another shorter; which is which, I myself do not know. I can only say that wherever you shall find *yourself*, and *truly* find yourself, there shall be your home.'"

That little tale of a little rabbi in a little village did not fail to

find its mark. Where others had in their childhood feasted on spreads of bread and jam given them by doting mothers, I had done so on the most delicate Chassidic spice. With the mildest of words, Harry Kleinberg had rapped me on the knuckles even as Professor Armstrong had done with rattle-snake venom. But where, three months earlier, I had bared my teeth to that surgical cur, on this occasion, I chose first a poker face, then a faint smile, and finally a fleeting laugh, saying simply, "That's cute" by way of response, to which Dr. Kleinberg replied with a patent pall of sadness on my account, "Yes, I suppose it is cute, if one wants to see it that way."

Catherine, Cathy, on parting, proved less reserved. As I shut my last patient file for the term and screwed on the top of my pen, Cathy, who had been filing reports, checking rosters and completing charts, looked up briefly, seized the opportunity as on our first encounter to thrust the drug requisition book under my nose for signing, and said, "So do they come, so do they go. Goodbye and good luck, as they say in the classics. When you get to Warragul may you, like a latter-day Caesar, come and see and conquer. No doubt there is some other panting lonely maiden there ready to dote upon any *Prince Charmant* that may come her way, and, as sure as fairies hide under toadstools by day and emerge at night, you will not be slow in uncovering her."

I reached out for her hand, but Cathy, with a swift receding movement, drew it deftly away.

"Is that all you see in me?" I ventured. "A bed-hopper, a lecher, a mere runner after skirts?"

Cathy took back the book I had signed.

"More to the point, my worthy liege," she said, "is what you see in yourself. Besides. . ." — she shrugged her shoulders and dismissively brandished a hand — "Besides, what does it matter to you what I see in you? Who. . . Or, rather, *what* am I, after all? Am I not just another of your throwaway *shikses*, and, if so, since when does a *shikse's* word really count?"

The laughter may have been defensive; nonetheless, I was stirred to laugh.

"Ah, the Catherine I used to know! Suddenly, I recognise her again."

"Ye.e..s," she said with sudden cryptic pensiveness. "The Catherine you used to know. But not. . ."

She paused, bent over an observations chart before her and entered figures there.

"But not. . .," I prompted.

She did not look up. Absorbed — or feigning absorption — in her work, she licked her lower lip and said, "Not one you would ever bother about."

"And that is?. . ."

She now turned aside to jot a note on the desk calendar.

"And that is?" I repeated.

Her immediate work completed, Catherine stood up. She smoothed down her uniform which had developed wrinkles, put her pen into her pocket, smoothed back her hair, a coil of which had escaped from beneath her sister's cap, and, having no option if she wanted to leave the Station which I was at that moment obstructing, looked squarely at me. She shook her head; she had nothing to say.

Nothing, that is, except, "Forget it, Benjamin P. May you return from Warragul and be spared the clap."

9.

In Warragul, I worked as necessity demanded, but with little fervour, less of dash, virtually nothing of involvement. After a lifetime surrounded by cityscapes, the rural streets were to me discomfitingly barren, human movement was sluggish, while the faces were vacant and inaccessible. I could not respond to the repetitious talk of coal-mines, sheep, cattle, wheat and rainfall. I was a stranger there and I sought to be nothing more, a waif on the fringe of that plain, a solitary itinerant leaf, an anchorite, an exile, save for one bouncy country girl willing enough to warm my feet.

For her part, Senior Nurse Jean Cummings dutifully took notes, passed on orders, helped with infusions, and dispensed

the medication. That her blood pressure readings were not always accurate, that the infusion rates were not adjusted to precision, that sometimes she dispensed one diuretic, analgesic or sedative in place of another, these *petit riens* seemed not to trouble her. Near enough was good enough, and no amount of instruction or elucidation could persuade her that she was dealing with *homo sapiens* and not some equine species, though if a guess were to be hazarded, I would have said that her father's horses undoubtedly received more expert and more stringent care.

It was while serving my stint in that Gippsland backwater that I read in the *Personal Notices* column of *The Age* that Noah Frimmer had died. Not that it had been unexpected. The flimsiest thread had separated him from that silent, vast and timeless hinterland beyond the realm of breath. When, in a moment of lowered guard, I said to Jean, "And so has another mystic gone", she, the portrait of sublime profundity, scion of sensibility, possessor of Einsteinian intelligence, sucked her lips, rolled her tongue around the gum she was chewing, and said, "Was 'e one o' them geezers that wears long gowns an' sandals an' flowers 'round their 'ead?"

I forgave her. How could I not forgive?

"Yes," I said, "They're the ones. And he played the sitar at midnight and plaited his beard and, what's more, sniffed cold water through his nose and insisted even in hospital on sleeping on a bed of nails."

"Jeez," she said. "Really? Yer not 'avin' me on, are ya? Ya sure gets some queer ones."

Yes, indeed, I sure had some queer ones: like the numerologist, one of a small but worldwide disseminated tribe who, tracing his lineage back to King David, calculated the End of Days in our time; like the dowser who insisted that the core of the earth was molten gold; like the spiritualist who derived the word "soul" from the Hebrew for hell, Sheol. But not Noah Frimmer; he was not queer — not he, my evangelist latter-day heir to the Prophets who, to that blue-uniformed sister at that moment some two hundred kilometres away, was a hero, a man

with the tattoo of suffering, a man with scars, yet who, breathless as he was, nonetheless rose early each morning to put on his phylacteries and prayer-shawl and sailed with perfect faith into his devotions.

"There's strength in that," she had said, my succulent transported Catherine.

And now that he was gone?

Now that Noah Frimmer was no more?

I spent the evening alone in my room. To my newly-acquired bed-warming Astarte, I pleaded weariness, left her in the ward, and did not call her as I had intimated though without actually firming intimation into promise. Far-receding flatness, darkness and silence extended outside my window, nothing in it particularly remarkable, nor, for that matter, anything objectionable, simply a mono-tonal inkiness in which dreary houses stood silhouetted against the night, in which, with effort, sheds could be made out, and the church, and the town hall, and telegraph poles, roadposts and the occasional approaching-receding transport truck or car. The Caucasian Steppes could not have been as desolate, nor the Himalayas as apathetic, nor Death Valley as claustrally enervating and stifling.

In that moment, I needed breath. And latitude. And touch. I opened a window, opened the door, wanted the wind to sweep into my face, wanted to be assailed by the scent of mown grass, the sound of a voice, the taste of something — anything — familiar, homely, reassuring. But all was stagnation. I might have been surrounded by ocean, by quagmire, bog, with everything around lying heavily torpid, paralysed, as good as dead. Its very remoteness from the familiar made me doubt the reality of that other world which I had but recently left. How real, for instance, were Professor Armstrong, Harry Kleinberg, Noah Frimmer, and even Cathy, or those evenings drinking Cabernet or Spumante at the *Laughing Hen* and the circuses which had made Cathy gasp, and the riverboats, the parapet, the wooden rattle, the flags, balloons and fireworks we had known?

Catherine!

"Shall the hero of the day honour a doting lady with his autograph?"

Cathy!

"Deep breathing, Zen, the Maharishi, ESP and. . .and a little of the Mosaic."

Kitty!

"Another Jew to your collection."

"Another *goy* to yours."

Kate!

"History, Kate, my dear, history, nothing less, stands against us. . . and a meagre little hood of flesh, that smidgin of Semitic foreskin dividing the nations. . ."

And Noah Frimmer!

"His word will reach through us to the world and the gentiles will hear it too and become true Jews again. . . and it will be for us to take them back. . ."

Was it madness, that which followed then, certifiable, moonstruck, lunatic madness?

I escaped. Whether driven by thought alone or yielding to mindless action was to remain forever beyond recall. Whatever the spur, all I knew was that I seized my jacket, scaled down the stairs in twos, in threes, and ran, ran, my breath steaming in the cold air before me, towards my car. In haste, I backed out of the parking bay. The wheels shearing on asphalt squealed and, with a stridor no less violent, I lunged forward into the yawning darkness.

At the hospital's exit gates, I saw Jean. It was half-past-nine. She was leaving at the end of her shift. She saw me too.

"Ben!" she called out.

I had no patience to give detailed explanations.

"I've just had a phone call," I said. "The dog's got rabies. I must get back to Melbourne."

10.

I drove. To the left, to the right, there stretched black expansive seas of tar; before me, frosty circles of illumination thrown by

my headlights guided the way; behind, howled all the furies and horsemen of the apocalypse driving me, driving me, driving me on.

I drove. Against the windscreen and duco, the wind whistled and lashed; I struck a bird; an oncoming truck kicked up a stone.

I drove. Beneath the wheels, the road protested at my haste and recklessness. It sizzled and hissed, while, counterpointing the sibilance, my head pounded, "Catherine! Cathy! Kitty! Kate!. . . Catherine! Kathy! Kitty! Kate!. . ."

I reached Melbourne's outskirts, penetrated its suburbia, headed for South Yarra, came upon her street, halted with a jolt before the apartment where she lived. Looking up at her darkened window, I contemplated for a moment the possibility of heading back, but I leapt out of the car instead, hastened through the gateway, strode along the path, vaulted up the stairs. It was minutes short of midnight: the end of one day and the confrontation with another; the possible end of one life and the opening out upon another.

I had my speech prepared. Catherine, Cathy, if it is in you to forgive. . . Cathy, if you can accept the humility with which I offer. . . with which I offer what can only be called. . . yes, I can say it, I can say it. . . what can only be called pure love. . . Catherine! Cathy! Kate!

I reached for the doorbell, hesitated a hair's breadth from it, placed my finger on the button, heaved, heaved again, set my teeth firm and pressed.

A minute passed; it could have been an hour. A door opened within, followed by a jangling of keys, and a voice, *her* voice, wary, inquisitive, firm, "Who is it?"

"Cathy. . . It's Ben. . . It's me. . . Can I talk to you?. . ."

The briefest pause followed.

"Ben?" she then said. "Ben? Ben? Ohhh, Ben! You mean Lord Ben, His Majesty Ben, His Holiness Ben, Benjamin Pruzansky Ben."

The security chain rattled on the other side. Catherine opened the door. She stood before me in a crinoline dressing-

gown, her dark hair spread across her shoulders, her eyes, quickened from sleep to wakefulness, darting now like swallows about my every pore, her lips playing between mirth, mockery, contemplation and disdain.

"My, it really is Ben!"

She let me in.

"Well well! What tantalising gift of nature do you bring me? Treponema or gonococcus?"

"Cathy. . ."

"Or is Warragul a little cold or dull in August? Or is the female of our species unknown there?"

My speech fell apart.

"Cathy. . ."

"What an elephantine memory you have! I was certain you would by now have forgotten my name."

"Frimmer. . . he died. . . I saw. . ."

"You came a hundred miles or whatever to tell me what I already know?"

"No, I know you know. . . I mean. . . He. . . Something he said. . . I. . ."

"If you want a surgeon for tongue-tie, I can suggest a very good one. He's a professor. His name is Armstrong. He'll set your tongue loose again."

"Cathy, I want you. I mean. . . not in that way, not like before. . . but. . . but as a wife, my wife. . . Whatever's in the way we'll overcome. . . Differences. . . my parents. . . all those things. . ."

"And that little smidgin of flesh? Are you planning to stitch something back on?"

"Cathy. . . I mean it. . . I do. . . I mean it in every way. . . I do. . ."

Cathy stood an arm's length away from me. Softness, or at least a hint of it, crept into her countenance, her lips, her cheeks, her chin. She drew together the lapels of her gown and paused for a prolonged moment in that position with one hand over the other as her gaze danced over me.

Then she spoke. Deep dimples appeared alongside the angles of her mouth and beside her eyes.

"Oh, Ben, Ben, Ben. Dr Benjamin Pruzanski, in the ward always on the ball, a master of observation, quick, astute, sharp."

She reached out, touched my cheek. I, in turn, was about to take her hand. With a movement swift and deft, she withdrew it and laid it across her throat.

"Go, Ben," she then said. "Don't humble yourself so. Stay where you've been all along — on Olympus, on Everest, on Sinai. Don't lay yourself before my feet like some penitent, some petitioner, a suitor? Or I shall be forced. . . I don't want to be forced. . ."

"I am not forcing. . . I am asking. . . asking. . . asking you to be my wife. . ."

Cathy looked away. She circled the walls, the ceiling, floor, smoothed out a fold in the rug with a foot, and said, shaking her head.

"You still don't see it, do you? You're forcing me to tell you, you're forcing me to show you. . ."

She held up her hand, the same which she had laid across the other upon drawing close her lapels, the same with which she had touched my cheek, the same she had put to her throat. The diamond on the ring finger glinted, glistened, mocked.

She followed the transit of my gaze first across that hand, then her face, over her shoulders, down the length of her body and back to her hand again.

"You see, Ben. There is no way I can become Catherine, Mrs Benjamin Pruzanski, when two weeks ago, I consented to become Catherine, Mrs David Appel. Benjamin P., did you truly not notice?"

Were humble pie a thing to be eaten, I would have surely made a feast of it.

"And so to purgatory I go," I said, wishing in that moment that I could disappear instead through the meanest crack in the floor.

"That's up to you, Ben," Cathy replied. "It's up to you

whether you continue to live with your hang-ups, your venom, your spite and your obsessed and obsessive defensiveness, or accept the positive, the stuff of faith, humanity, humility and strength that is in so many of *our*. . . of your kind who have endured more, far more, infinitely more than you. . ."

"Of *our* kind, you were about to say," I said. "Of *our* kind?

"Yes, Ben. The signs were there, right up to your last day in the ward. But you were blind or perhaps you did not give them their due. Perhaps my clinging to Noah Frimmer was a service rendered in the line of duty, you might have thought, or an indulgence or eccentricity like yoga, ESP, deep breathing and so on. But I'm converting, Benny, I've been taking lessons, and learning, reading, studying. . . I'm not there yet, but whatever the formalities still to be met, inwardly I am one of you. . ."

I shook my own head vigorously this time, as if to shake myself free from an absurdly impossible dream.

"Converting?" I said. "Despite everything that in our history would drive any sane man the other way?. . ."

"Just as there are things beyond the pleasures of the flesh, so are there mysteries and purposes that transcend its endurances. Noah Frimmer taught me that. And I recognised something of the kind in Harry Kleinberg, while even David who is scarcely a year older than you is showing signs of it. It is a sense of mission, of. . . direction, of destiny. And mad as it may seem to to you, to you who are so bitter, so cramped, so. . . so decadent, if I am prepared to take upon myself the mantle of Ruth, it is to seek out and discover for myself those mysteries and purposes, and absorb, and share them. And perhaps, perhaps, from me, from my kind, Benjy dear, shall arise another proverbial David, another king, another ancestor of the true messiah."

I had little left to add.

Nonetheless, I did say, "You are crazy", and then, "I guess that at this point, there is no further purpose left in my staying here. What with David and you and your new-found God and the soul of Noah Frimmer and the saintliness of Harry Klein-

berg in your home, my crude intrusion can only create excessive and discordant crowding. I had better go."

Cathy neither actively acceded nor held me back.

"As you wish," she said. "Though you're welcome to a coffee before heading back."

She stood before me like some being I was seeing for the first time. The large eyes were familiar, as also the broad lips, the bold glinting teeth, the long slender fingers and the ebony black hair. And yet this was a different Cathy from the one I had known, a Cathy just as erect, happy, self-assured as before, but possessed of depths till then unplumbed, unacknowledged, perhaps deliberately ignored. And I wanted then to take her by the shoulders, and sink my whole face into her neck, and murmur intimacies into her ear again — genuine, loving, deeply-felt endearments this time instead of those earlier false and flattering, perfidious ones, but brute reality had left me but one single viable option.

"No, Cathy," I said. "There's no point in prolonging all this. If I must nurse my loss, let it be from a distance. And have no fears for me. I'll survive. Survival was a lesson I imbibed with the first milk I ever sucked. It is also the Jew's ultimate and most powerful weapon against the world. Only one thing would I ask of you, one thing only. . ."

Kathy became Catherine, distantly impassive.

"And that is?" she asked.

"And that is. . .," I said, "If ever it occurs to you to think of me, don't be too harsh."

I left then.

If there was desolation in the Gippsland plains, the desolation I now felt in my depths was infinitely greater. Slowly now, I descended the steps, passed through the downstairs entrance and then the gate into the bracing chill outside, stepped into my car, and, looking one last time at Cathy's now-darkened window — was she watching? was she watching? — I switched on the ignition, pounded at the accelerator, once, a second time, and then a third, and drew away.

Driving back to Warragul, to nothingness, *through* nothing-

ness, Dr Kleinberg returned to me. I recalled the fable he had told me, and longed, like his wanderer, for some rabbi, for some fellow mortal, for some other guide to show me the way. But the darkness around yielded no such shepherd nor even a guiding star, and the car-wheels pelting swiftly, precipitately past the milestones back to Warragul, reverberated to a single, continuous, unrelenting tune:

"Oh, you ancestors and heirs of Goebbels, Rosenberg and Streicher, I am lost, I am lost, I am lost, what have you done, what have you done, what have you done to my soul?"

Giuseppe Giuliani

"Oh, forgive me, sir. A thousand pardons for talking to you. I didn't know that to say 'Good morning' was such an offence on high."

Giuseppe — Giuseppe Giuliani — turned his back on the girl who had come down the path and swept the asphalt with thrusts more violent, more fierce still than before.

"Oh, well," he heard her say behind him, "if you got a flea in your ear, then . . . "

In the shadow cast by the towering commission flats under a sky struggling towards blueness, the wind coursing in whorls about the grass-mud-and-concrete quadrangle chilled the sweat that made his shirt and overalls cling to him clam-like to his back.

"Just the same," — he found himself gritting his teeth — "Thought I'd tell you . . . I'm Angela . . . I've come to stay for a while . . . Apartment one-one-four . . . To look after Grandad . . . my grandfather Vic St.John who's gone and had himself a stroke. And I know you're Joe, the neighbours they told me already and . . . and well, I thought you should know who I am . . . "

He tossed a shoulder at her — the devil could scarcely have cared less — and with thrusts hard and testy, he struck at the pavement with a vehemence still more virulent, with anger and loathing locked into his marbled jaw, with his nose bristling, his lips compressed near to quivering, and his stark-tendoned,

hard-veined hands taut, like a vice, about the broom. He then opened a plastic bag, the glaucous green of a drunkard's spew, swept a pile of garbage on to a scoop and, dourly, testily, shovelled it in.

"I thought I might have met you before this, but they told me, the neighbours that is, they told me you'd gone away."

He wished she'd stop talking; he wished that she would go away; he wanted nothing other than to be left alone and left to dissolve, unseen, unencumbered and untrammelled into the obliviousness of private thought and unbreachable contemplation. Would the very ground but open and swallow him up! . . . But the girl — blonde, trim, and poised, with convivial dimples beside lively eyes and nimble lips (this much he had noticed on his first glimpse of her as she had come through the door) — the girl who called herself Angela, simply went on.

"Some said you'd gone on holiday . . . Others, that you'd gone back to Italy . . . Others still, that you'd moved to another job . . . You know how people they like to talk . . . And why not? Those poor old sick folk up there, there's so little else for them to do . . . "

To Giuseppe, she seemed now to be receding and, thus heartened, he permitted himself another glance over his shoulder to confirm that she was indeed truly on her way. And Mother Mary be thanked, she was. String-bag in hand, she had skirted around him and was now at the foot of the incline that led up to the noisier, busier, morning-trafficked street above. She paused there for the merest moment as if she might yet have second thoughts, said, "They told me you weren't a talker. But still I tried . . . I did . . . " and, Mother Mary more truly be thanked, tripped lithe and easily up the ramp.

Left to himself, he continued, now unmolested, with his work. From somewhere close, there rose the scent of lavender, as also a trace of cinnamon, and chives, and of a roast, but more pervasively it was the stench of fungused cheese, and of orange peel, lettuce leaf and wilting carrot that sprang from every corner, as also of rotting snot-and-phlegm-encrusted tissues,

stale beer and an uncovered sewerage drain. Around him, there were scraps of paper by the score, depleted grimy bottles of cordial and sauce, and broken egg-shells, fish-skeletons and rancid rind, and, beneath a window, a heap of beer-cans, a soggy glove, a legless doll, and more, and more — the foetid putrefying debris of kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and nursery left to the birds, left to the pigeons, scavengers all, to pull apart, demolish, pulverise and disperse, trash, all of it trash, trash, like everything, like everyone, everywhere, in every age, trash!

It was all so clear, so plain, so patent —

All the chattels with which humanity littered its life — trash!

All the refuse and the leavings, and the shards and detritus and parings it left at every turn — trash!

And, in this world, the seedy flesh itself, and the abandoned, the cast-off, the disowned in the apartments above, and the derelicts at large, along with the wasted, the cadaverous and insane — trash again!

And still more trash the doltish in the streets, the mindless in the city, the unfulfilled across the nation, and the gutter-waifs throughout the world, and the criminal, the sluttish, the lewd and the obscene!

Where did it all end? Trash! Trash! Trash! Sandrina, too, now, and Santo and Benedetto and Baby Salvatore, they also become the stuff of trash, even as he, Giuseppe Giuliani, still living, still breathing, was himself nothing more, a mere scrap of flotsam cast up on the junk-heap that went by the name of life, he from Montefalco to Melbourne arrived, from the surrounds of famed Assissi come, abandoning family there, and church and vineyard and olive grove, surrendering language, homeliness, filial duty and friends, and crossing continents, crossing oceans for an existence more alluring, more promising, more fulfilling — at the end of it all, to be reduced to this, to this, a beaten chunk of driftwood, a sludge of carrion, alone now, alone, another offering before due time to the all-levelling, all-annihilating, all-silencing primacy of expendable,

useless, throwaway trashiness that overtook all in a trashy world.

The fact, the reality of it screamed at him, hemmed him in on all sides: the Saundersons, the Habibs, Polidoris, Barkers, Prideaux and Theophanous, and their numberless ilk behind every window and on every floor, proof, if proof were needed, of the physical, mental and moral decrepitude, decay, even debauch to which possessors of human flesh — God-given flesh — could be reduced. He knew their stories. Because ears did not close of their own accord, he had heard them, even as, not wanting to listen, much less bringing himself to care, he had continued to sweep, to mop, to wipe, and to polish away the debris and grime of their fouled-up, unaccomplished and seedily-cankered existence.

He had deliberately turned his back on them — "Let me be," he had wanted to say.

He had moved from them still further away — "I will clean your pollution but leave me free of your pollutedness."

He had intensified his activity with brisk and thwarting vigour — "I am not one of you, I am not of your kind, even if that is how you see me."

But, leeches that they were, they had chosen to cling to him, a janitor being patently safe repository for all the abasement, foulness and mayhem that vulgarised their lives.

Ellen Saunderson, for instance, in Apartment one-three-six, a flabby floppy sixty-eight, in times past mother to a string of many-fathered bastards, one of her own daughters now pregnant with her third, her son-in-law in prison awaiting trial for breaking and entry and attempted rape; and the Habibs, Mohammed and Samira, on the eighth floor in eighty-nine, with four children under five, he, Mohammed, unemployed on mental grounds, whiling away his time in a Russell Street gaming parlour and beating his wife on returning for delaying with his meals; and the Polidoris, Giovanni Polidori paraplegic from a fractured spine, his wife and daughters slave to his every need, his every wish and every whim; and the woman in one-two-four whom he knew only as Lorraine, a chain-smoking tat-

tooed stripper with two undernourished children, her face never free of eye-shadow and grease, lipstick and rouge, her alcoholic *de facto* ever threatening to hurl her and the kids from their twelfth-floor window even as he hurled out his beer bottles from that height having them smash to slivers and splinters on the asphalt below, and giving the children matches, daring them to set fire to the curtains, to the apartment, "to the whole fuckin' caboodle of the fuckin' government's fuckin' charity commission flats in a mighty fuckin' bonfire such as none from fuckin' Adam to fuckin' Armageddon such as they's never in their fuckin' lives they's never fuckin' seen!"

And there were others, there were more, more. Trash! Scum! And he felt the pain and the weight of questions he would have preferred not to face but which, at the same time, would not desist from assailing him. For this, for *this* had he left a town of thousands for a city of millions? For *this* forsaken a promising apprenticeship to the carpenter Gianfranco Ricardo, the best of all the Umbrian *artigiani*, enticed by a partnership in Cousin Carlo's quick-money-making catering firm that proved no longer to be, to exist, by the time he came? For *this* to have broken with Rocco Santoro's Montefalco fun-loving bordello-crawling madcap gang, expecting something better, something finer, there stretching before him every prospect of "*lavoro, soldi e il mondo grandioso*", yes, yes, the very world, as he had said to the older folks in persuading them to let him go? For *this*? —

How he despised them, despised them all here, couldn't bear to listen to them.

"You'd think they'd forgotten they ever had a mother." So, Mrs. MacClure about her daughters who seldom visited, seldom rang.

"An' jus' three days b'fore we're ready after long las' t'move into our own unit, me Albie 'e goes 'n' gets hi'self run down by a bloomin' train of all things." So, Mrs. Cuthbertson every Monday and Friday when she passed him on her way to the doctor's for her multi-vitamin injection.

And "what with me leg ulcers an' piles an' me sugar eatin' up

me toes an' eyes an' me art'ries, the Lord above 'e's really makin' a downright mess o' me, ain't 'e, an' only 'e knows why, goddammit!" So, Charlie Mauldron stopping to rest every few steps on his walking frame.

So did they talk, talk, talk, had to talk, had to tell — tell about sickness, and paralysis, desertion, alcoholism, decay, suicide, murder, death — had to talk, had to tell, as if he had nothing better to do but to listen to them and had no troubles of his own to gnaw at him and bite and eat away, bit by bit, with deeply-sinking teeth at his own betrayed, frustrated, increasingly hope-denying hope-relinquishing life.

How doggedly they kept bringing him down to their level; how perversely they must have held that because a man dealt in trash, he himself must assuredly be trash; or did his very foreignness identify him with the wretched, the abased and the demeaned, all these by nature and by circumstances made to fall, he in their eyes having perhaps fallen still lower than themselves?

He remembered his father then, and his mother.

Were they but to see him now, and with them his sister Peppina as well! Did they but know — his mother Constanza who had stoically packed his cases for him and lost herself in the throes of incessant preparatory activity, only at the bus terminal dropping her grim demeanour to coddle and throw her arms about him with a passionate clinging tearful "Giuseppe, Giuseppe, my little baby grown up so quickly, my infant so quickly also grown away!"; his father Tomaso admonishing him as at arms'-length he gripped his shoulders, "Wherever you are, whatever you do, remember always the name Giuliani, and for your father's peace and love of your mother and honour towards your sister, never upon the name of your family bring down shame", before drawing him closer to kiss both cheeks; and Peppina, dark, homely, ripening Peppina, who, in saying only "*Ciao,* Giuseppe; *fratelli, arrivederci*", said all, vesting in him the possibility for herself of another future, too, another existence over there, over there across the continents and the waters, where life, as he himself had kept insisting, must be

livelier, must be finer, freer, grander, more exciting and more exhilarating than anything back home in tiny Montefalco.

Could they indeed but have seen him!

What subterfuges he had had to resort to that they should not suspect, what contrivances, what frank deceptions!

The letters! —

> "Dear Mama, Dear Papa, and Peppina,
>
> Carlo's business — it fell apart. That, you probably know. But I work with just my kind now — with carpenters as I did back home, with cabiner-makers, and, God being good, I make good money. At night, I study English. In a year, two, I will be able to bring you all here."

That letter written when Cousin Carlo's promise not honoured, he had become storeman and general labourer in a timber-yard.

> "Dearest Mama, Papa, Peppina,
>
> I have gone into building, a very lucrative occupation here. And started a cleaning business on the side. I have met a lovely girl. Her name is Sandrina, Sandrina Gibaldi. You see, she is one of us. Her father he has a good fruit-selling business and he is the finest of men. His family is from Fiesole.
>
> Meanwhile, I am putting aside everything I can. Please God and Mother Mary, it will not be long before I can kiss your hands on these shores."

That, when, retrenched during a re-structuring of the timber firm, he had turned to brick-laying by day and earned a bit more besides as cleaner in insurance offices, banks and restaurants by night; while Orazio Gibaldi, Sandrina's father, in truth ran the most meagre stall at Victoria Market, his asthma and a chronic rheumatic heart ailment keeping him from doing more than just enough to support his wife and daughter.

> "Dearest, dearest Mama, Papa, whom at this most blessed time I miss more, more than ever before.

No, do not send Peppina for the wedding.

First, it will be only a small celebration — something very private, very intimate, a dinner, a few friends, a little music, music from the mother country, and some dancing. All as my Sandrina and I we want it to be.

And second, we will be living in a small apartment. We want to save all we can, and as quickly as possible to bring you out. So, for the moment, there really won't be any room with us for Peppina, much as I would dearly love to have my beloved sister with me.

But it won't be long now. My work is going well. Sandrina, too, she works. When she is not helping her father, she is a waitress at one of our biggest, best-known, most-respected restaurants owned by a countryman from Firenze. Nicolo Cacciatollo he is called.

And, oh, the wedding; the wedding, beloved Mama, revered Papa, the wedding itself will be exactly as you would wish for a son of your blood and of your flesh — it will be in a proper Catholic church with all the proper rites just like a wedding back home.

So think of me then as I too shall think of you."

What had they thought, his father, his mother, and betrayed Peppina? Or had they perhaps guessed, even if in their own letters to him, they hinted at no suspicion, complimenting him instead when the time came on his choice of bride — clearly beautiful and comely in so far as they could judge from the photographs he sent them — and asking when, asking only when they might yet set eyes upon their son again.

"Forgive me, Papa; forgive me, Mama; and you, dearest Peppina," he murmured with a fullness of pain, remembering the succession of lies he had fed them as he rubbed and scraped and polished away the grit and grime encrusted during his previous week's absence in thick accretions along the window joints.

That he had married Sandrina, so much, of course, had been true; that was beyond any possibility of faking. Of the marriage, Cousin Carlo, even if no one else, would have surely written home. But, Holy Father, how tell them that after all the prom-

ise, the enthusiasm and the expectations invested in him, he was, in this great and free and blessed land, but a mere janitor; tell them that he had become less than he might have been under the wing of the carpenter Ricardo back home; tell them that in everything he had turned his hands to he had somehow, through no fault of his own, been short-changed; or explain even — if his parents did perhaps expect explanation at all — that while Sandrina's father ought to have helped secure for the couple at least a more spacious apartment as any well-to-do father would surely have done, Orazio Gibaldi, fine as he was, was in fact both sick and poor and in no position to help? As fond as he had been of Peppina, the last thing he had wanted was that she should come and see for herself and report, to his parents' hurt and his own chagrin and shame, on the true state of affairs.

It all seemed so distant now, even unreal. He preferred — he said desperately — not to think of it, but how resist thoughts that from purgatorial blackness the blackest shade of black rose like wildcat demons to think themselves? A man needed to be cut from the coldest granite to put his past, and his present, and his seeming destiny out of mind. How then was he, *he*, born a mere child of flesh, to forget his marriage to gentle, yielding, unspoiled Sandrina, forget the births in short order of Santo, Benedetto and Salvatore, forget the vow shared with Sandrina that whatever they had to miss out upon in their own lives, the children at least should not be denied, or forget their shared happiness and delights, even through fatigue and the enervations of daily routine, taken in domestic constancy, pliability and loving reciprocity, all of it to end between a lorry and a delivery-van in a sudden all-obliterating opening up of quicksand and whirlpools, the earth swallowing up Sandrina, Santo, Benedetto and Baby Salvatore, even as the trash he consigned to the sewers was swallowed up, forever and forever and forever — and, as Father Modesto at Mass was to add — amen?!

He had had to tell Williams, Harvey Williams, his supervisor.

"Yes, Joe, I understand," the beet-red man behind the desk

laden with papers, rosters, charts and the morning's *Sun* had said. "May it never happen to me, but I do understand. Yes, you can have a week off if that's what you want. You are a poor devil, aren't you?"

After a week — with time, existence and sensation all reduced to the stuff of vacuum — he returned.

"Glad to see you, Giovanni, m'boy," Harvey Williams greeted him when he reported back. "Would have hated to lose a man like you . . . Well, all the tools of trade are in the cupboard where they've always been. I believe you still have the key"; and, without further ceremony, he returned to his rosters and charts, the day's newspaper open on the racing pages beside his elbow.

"Giuseppe", Giuseppe had wanted to correct. But he stopped himself short. He saw no sense in it. Giuseppe; Giovanni; whatever the name, the possessor of it was of no account in the world any more. He was insignificant, a mere creature, a gob of offal, forgettable, dispensable, disposable — as, in the end, were all men, all mankind, mere offal and trash and effluent, ever-accumulating ordure itself shedding more ordure on the surface of the earth, all to be wiped off repeatedly, generation after generation, to make room in their turn, for more, and more, and more expendable crap. He wondered whether anyone truly knew his name. They called him Joe, but did any know him by his christened name before the Lord Jesus Christ, the Giuseppe Giuliani that his father at their parting, so long before now, so long before, had bade him always remember, for the sake of his father's peace, for love of his mother, and in honour towards his sister?

But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Not in a world that for him was sinking. If the terrain beneath his feet had ever been in the least bit secure, whether in Montefalco or since arriving in Australia, it was no longer so. Even as he swept and rubbed and polished and gathered up the husks of the slovenly decadent decaying living of the tenants, his legs teetered as if he walked on mounds of jelly. Every so often, the rumble of a tram passing by led him to lean upon his mop or broom or hold to a

nearby rail and look around. Everything had become so alien, unreal, distorted, everything as if he were looking through misshapen lenses, the buildings formerly solid, sharp and square now buckled and warped — they might have been standing in mire — the curtains behind the windows gracelessly awry and the balconies frangibly detachable supernumeraries along the walls, protruding extensions threatening at any moment to detach themselves from their supports and topple in a wholesale cascade of mortar and steel to crush, to maim, eviscerate any inadvertent misdirected wretch or composite of blood and bone and shit and flesh who, at that moment, happened unhappily and unsuspectingly to be passing there.

But if all around him seemed unreal, detached, distorted and remote, the stridulously sibilant squeal of the siren of an ambulance scuttling by promptly returned him to an immediacy hard, sharp-edged, unyielding and intractable. And reality assumed another guise as well. For, on looking up in reflex action, he saw the girl who had called herself Angela coming back down the ramp. She, at least, walked with sure step, walked with poise, with buoyancy, with lightness — with a ductile ease that in its fluidity would deny even the least possibility of adversity, were it not for her string bag laden with groceries swinging and bobbing against her leg and telling of sickness, paralysis, incapacity and dependence of a man incarcerated in a room, in an apartment high, high, high on the eleventh floor above. And, watching her as, more dilatorily, he pressed another bag of garbage into a bin, he was beset by an ache, and an urgency, and a need — a need — a need such as he had for long both to himself and to others denied, to talk, to bare himself, to splay open a soul on which every disappointment, dejection, indignity, abomination and defeat was, as if with a mallet and a chisel, and with trowel and harrow, inexpungibly writ.

She, at least, would listen, *she* would hear; she had already, after all, shown a readiness, an openness to receive. And though a man was mere garbage, though he was, in space, in time, and before God and the gods and in the wake of every capricious

whim mere trash; and though the man might in his every action be fundamentally alone, be born alone, die alone, and eat, breathe, shit, sleep, dream and suffer for himself alone; and though every shared exchange of love and every promise, and every intimacy, undertaking and ecstasy in rejoicing was in every passing minute subject to precipitate disintegration, annihilation, frustration and collapse; what else did he — what else *could* he — have on this wretched earth if not another such as he, *any* other, who, by listening — no more, no more than by mere listening — would give the man to understand, "I am with you; we are one; whatever may be above, or beyond, or beneath, as long as it is given to us together to be here, you are not, you are not, you are not alone."

In that moment, he saw the fact clearly; it had every sharpness, wholeness and potency of a vision; it gave new lightness to his every movement; and it led him to take one deep breath, and a second, and a third, each assuring him of the possibility of liberation, extrication, release. He would talk to her, yes, he would, to Angela, and she would talk to him; he would reach another, and would yet be reached in turn.

And finding cause through clearing away accumulated debris from the foot of the ramp, he moved closer to her, permitting himself to look straight at her in the hope that, as before, she might open the gambit in speech, that he might in turn be given reason to respond, and thereby be able to talk, and thus to open himself out, out, out, with all the pent-up pressure, and with all the pressing need, to her who would surely, surely, surely listen.

And speak she did in fact.

A metre, two, from him, she looked at her watch in a hurried motion and said, "Lordie, I didn't know it'd take so long to get the merest handful of things. Even as early as this, there was a fair bit of waiting in the shops, while old Frank Diabolo in the milk-bar, once *he* gets to talk, it takes all one's cunning to break away. Meanwhile, Grandad must be starving for his breakfast and I still have to get to uni for classes, and . . . and . . . Well,

you know . . . As long as there's life, there are duties . . . There's always something that's got to be done . . . "

And before he could as much as formulate any reply that would keep her near, she was as good as gone, limbering ever so smoothly along the path towards the door and through the foyer to the lift, there in the merest blinking disappearing and being whisked away, her being, even her shadow, in that swift, even, unbroken transit past him, scarcely touching, impinging upon, or acknowledging his own.

The opportunity was lost. Even now she was rising up the lift-well unseen somewhere between the ground and the eleventh floor. But she would have to come down again. And therefore, he would yet get to see her. If not later that day, then the next perhaps, or the day after, as long as her grandfather old Victor St. John held out. The all-pervading greyness would stay, of course, and the hardness and the lifeless obtuseness of that constricting filth-strewn enclosure of asphalt, sky and wall. But these did not matter now. They were all in the nature of things. Garbage was garbage, waste was waste, scum was scum, and garbage, waste and scum would for all his efforts ever remain and ever be renewed. But he would yet rise above it all, he would like a phoenix yet rise out of it. For Angela would return. And they would share a word; he would yield to her questionings; he would open himself out, he would, and, by so opening himself out, be brought back, returned, into that human circle of oneness and exchange from which for too long, too long, by shutting himself off, he had shut himself out.

So buoyed, he moved towards the door, there to wash its glass, to wipe its frames, to polish its handle. And when Mrs. MacClure on her way to the doctor's passed him and said, "Me daughters, you'd think they never had no mother", and Mrs. Saunderson said, "Me son-in-law, 'e's out on bail", and Giovanni Polidori, wheeling himself out, said, "*Mia* Francesca, *mia figlia*, she leave her sick papa and leave her mama and run away with a married man", Giuseppe paused in his work, reached out as if to touch, support and hold, and, hesitantly,

tentatively, keeping pace with each, nodded and murmured, nodded and murmured,

"Yes."

"Go on."

"I am listening."

"I hear."

Glossary

Apikoros — an unbeliever, a sceptic, a heretic; one who negates the rabbinic tradition; derived from Epicurus, the Greek philosopher

Artigiani — artisans

Baal Shem Tov — Master of the Good Name; originally applied to Israel ben Eliezer, (c. 1700–1760), the founder of *Chassidism* in Eastern Europe.

Bar Mitzvah — Son of the commandment; a boy's initiation into responsible religious adulthood at the age of 13, marked by the assumption upon himself of Jewish precepts, observances and duties. Cf *Bat Mitzvah* — the female analogue, but observed at the age of 12.

Beth Din — House of Judgement; a Jewish court of law with a minimum of three men as members

Blondinies — blond ones; here used derogatively.

Bontsche Schweig — Bontsche the Silent; a character in a story by I. L. Peretz, and, ever since, seen as the fictional epitome of humility

Buba — grandmother

Capote — a kaftan or gaberdine-like coat traditionally worn by religious Jews

Chassidism — also *Hasidism* — a popular pietist religious and social movement, founded in Eastern Europe in the 18th century, with emphasis on miracle-working, joy, ecstatic prayer and charismatic leadership. See Baal Shem Tov.
Hence *Chassidim* — adherents of the movement

Cheder — room; an elementary school for Jewish learning; see, *Yeshiva*

Chumash — the *Pentateuch*; the first five books of the Bible. From *chamesh*, meaning five

Dybbuk — also *dibbuk* — adhesion; in kabbalistic folklore, the notion of a soul of one who is dead transmigrating into another's living body

Eshes chayil — A woman of valour; the first words of *Proverbs* 31:10–31, describing the virtuous housewife

Farvisht un farnichtert — wiped out and annihilated

Feter — uncle

Folkshule — folk school; public school

Gehenna — hell

Glick — luck, fortune; hence *Umglick* — misfortune

Goy — a Hebrew term employed in the Bible to refer variously to peoples, nations and gentiles. Today, applied more commonly to non-Jews, in both a simple descriptive and, depending on the context, derogatory form. *Goyish/e* — adjective

Grosz — a Polish monetary unit; one hundred grosz totalled one *zloty*

Gymnasium — European secondary school

Internationale — revolutionaly socialist hymn, first sung in 1871 in France

Kadimah — Forward!

Kiddush Ha'Shem — Sanctification of the Divine Name; acceptance of martyrdom in preference to apostasy or performance of actions likely to bring disgrace on Judaism. Its opposite is *Chillul Ha'Shem* — Profanation of the Divine Name.

Kosher — fit to eat; ritually clean according to Jewish dietary laws. Also used, depending upon context, to denote acceptable, approved, authentic, legitimate, legal, ethical, okay

Liebeniu — dearly loved one — an endearment, usually addressed to a child

Liebeskind — dear child; essentially interchangeable with liebeniu

Maalach Hamavet — Angel of Death

Mashiach — messiah

Maskilim — literally, the enlightened; adherents of *Haskalah*, the post-C18th Jewish enlightenment

Mitnagdim — literally, the opponents; applied, historically, to Jews opposed to the more populist *Chassidic* movement, and stressing devotion to talmudic learning and formal, as distinct from ecstatic, prayer

Mittelmentsch — literally, a middle man; figuratively, a mediocrity

Mitzvah — commandment, precept, good deed; plural: *mitzvot*

Poalei Zion — literally, Workers of Zion; a socialist Zionist movement in Europe founded in 1907

Ribbono Shel Olam — Master of the World; can be used in exclamatory form as "Oh, God in heaven!"

Sanhedrin — the supreme political, religious and judicial body, constituted of 71 Elders, in the Land of Israel during the Roman period through until c. 425 C.E.

Schmutz — dirt, filth, smut

Seder — the Passover feast celebrating the exodus of the ancient Hebrews from Egypt

Shabbos — Sabbath
Shechinah — the Divine Presence, the numinous immanence of God in the world
Sheine malke — a lovely or beautiful queen
Shikse — a non-Jewish woman, more especially a young one; the female counterpart of *shegetz*, in certain contexts used in the derogative
Shlemiel — simpleton, a loser, a sad sack
Sh'ma, the — from *Sh'ma Israel*, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (found in *Deuteronomy & Numbers*), a twice-daily recited prayer affirming God's unity; also recited on one's death-bed and the final prayer of martyrs being led to their deaths
Shtetl — town, village. *Shtetlech* — plural form
Shul — synagogue
Suk — marketplace (Arabic)

Tante — aunt
T'chias ha'messim — resurrection of the dead
Tsibel — onion; *tsibele* — little onion

Umglick — misfortune; see, *Glick*

Vieg lied — cradle song, lullaby

Yeshiva — a higher institution of Jewish learning; see, *Cheder*

Zaida — grandfather
Zohar, the — *The Book of Splendour* — a major work of Jewish mysticism, written in the form of commentary on the *Pentateuch*, and containing vividly imaginative symbolic description of the inner life of God and His relationship to man.