The First Lesson

"Do I have to?"

I don't want to go in. I hate Grandmother's deepening yellowness, the symmetrical bosses of her brow, her harrowed knuckles, and her eyes, when awake her staring eyes, shrivelled black kernels in walnut shells hollowed out. And the smell! The ether that Dr. Rosenthal always leaves behind, the all-fingering vapours of a pan left too long, and the settled rankness of unaired rooms, all of it stale and throat-congealing despite the lemon-tinged deodorant that Mother discreetly and practised lavishes about the room.

"A glass of orange juice," Mother say. "That's all Nana asked for. Now that's not too difficult, is it?"

Those are her words.

But words ride on formations of lips, on play of eyes, on waverings of tone. She looks at me, glances at her visitor, — in truth, Grandmother's visitor — and focuses upon me again. Words say one thing but "Don't embarrass your mother in front of the rabbi," lying outside the audible range of hearing is nonetheless the truer message. While in Rabbi Segal's softly-smiling silence and unsolicited scarcely-perceptible nod rests the eloquence of command to do Mother's bidding as if to do anything less is shameless and unseemly.

Go, a boy not yet twelve, resist the combined pursuasion of such eloquence.

So, already before I have yet poured the drink, I set my jaws to steely endurance, grit my teeth against distaste and take deep breaths of whatever freshness is to be had to ride the tide of anticipated suffocation.

"He must be a great help to you," Rabbi Segal says, all solicitude, as he watches me clink jug against glass in the pouring of the juice, himself rolling his emptied glass between white palms leaving steamy prints against its sides.

"He has only one grandmother," Mother says, "and she, poor soul, has lived and suffered to see only one grandchild. And now how long that will last. . ."

The wind in her sails rises towards a sigh then suddenly falls.

"Yes, yes, the lot of her generation," Rabbi Segal says, buoyed momentarily on the same waves as Mother.

"If you only knew what she went through . . .," she begins, "the running . . . the hiding . . . the forests. . ."

"But I know, I know," Rabbi Segal breaks in, rolling his lips so that his goatee points forward like a fallen exclamation mark.

"But you're so young still," Mother ventures, "how can you. . .?"

None can be more gracious. Rabbi Segal places a fine spindled forefinger on the tip of his bulb-tipped nose. "But I have read," he says, "and I have heard. And. . ."

His "and" remains unattached. It trembles on the motes of dust tumbling through the window. He adjusts his skull-cap, looks around as if in search of something and, to my dismay, finds me.

"I am glad to see," he says, "that you are teaching your boy the observance of the fifth commandment."

His gladness brims over his rimless glasses.

"He's not a bad boy," Mother says. "He's. . ."

"Hmm," Rabbi Segal hmms. "Tell me, my young man, do you know the fifth commandment?"

Standing before him, full glass in hand, I feel then the price of Father's rediscovered religion. Seldom one to pay heed to ritual, he has since opening his own factory begun to attend synagogue services every Saturday. For one thing, having become his own boss, he is now free to observe the Sabbath. But more. As he now often says, putting sentiment to words, "God has been good to me in Australia and the least I can do is to give Him thanks." Whenever he says that, I look at Mother. And Mother never fails me. "And if He had not been so good. . .?" she says, her head tilted to one side and one eye squinting in amusement. "You always were a cynic, an apikoros, weren't you?" Father then says, to which Mother answers, "Well, after Europe. . ." "And yet," Father counters, "Your mother who has suffered more still believes", at which Mother sets the lid upon all further discussion with the declaration firm and final "She, more than any of us, has earned every right." Father is not to be dissuaded and when ingenuity fails me and I find nothing better to do — a rare event, for is not the kicking of a football even with snot-nosed Lennie infinitely better? — I tread on my shadow beside his own in procession to receive my share

of awe and to deliver with him my own small modicum of thanks to Him who presides over the Ark and pulpit and bimah.

It is Father, then, who has petitioned Rabbi Segal to visit Grandmother and Rabbi Segal, young and newly-arrived, out to impress, a fledgeling, to use Father's word, still keen to serve his congregation as well as apprenticeship demands, eagerly — for me, too eagerly — obliges. And that on the very afternoon when school closes early for a teachers' meeting.

Confronted now by his question, I wait for the floor to open up and swallow me out of his sight.

"Well," he says, smiling, if the mere stretching of lips can be called a smile, "the fifth commandment."

It is not bashfulness that binds my tongue. Now had he asked me the fifth rule in football. . .

"Of course, he knows, he's just shy," Mother saves me — or saves herself. "He's a good boy. He honours his father and his mother and he loves his grandmother. . ."

"Very good, very good," says Rabbi Segal. His eyes are black mice darting all over my face. "But do you know, my young friend, what it *means* to honour your parents?"

"It means . . .," I falter, glancing at Mother, acutely aware of the many times I have fallen short of truly honouring them, "it means you do what they say . . . listen to them . . . go messages . . . all those things. . ."

"Aha!" says Rabbi Segal. He leans forward abruptly. I have fallen into some web he has woven. "Yes. Yes. All true, all true. But there is more, my dear boy, more." He prods at air. He is behind his pulpit again. "Something higher. Something deeper."

The floor won't swallow me up.

I gaze at the surface of the orange juice in the glass I am holding. In that moment, even flight to Grandmother's in her musty room is the height of attraction.

"I . . . I . . . I . . .," I say.

Rabbi Segal reaches out. His fingers in my shoulder are pincers. His voice rises to a raspier pitch. A sermon clamours for release.

"When you honour your parents, when you honour your parents, my boy, you honour God. And is not God, my boy, above all the first and the eternal parent of all?! Ha?! . . . So. . ."

Mother leans towards him.

"Excuse me, Rabbi," she says.

The flicker of a flame is not as swift as that of Rabbi Segal's eyes towards her. Having set sail, he must complete his journey.

"So," he repeats, "when you take that juice in to your grandmother, you are indeed taking in the juice but, more, you can ask your mother, you are also in your way making an offering to God. And for that offering, you earn a thousand rewards."

Mother's expression is the very mask of seriousness. She tilts her head and squints, in what Father calls her cynical way.

"Excuse me, Rabbi," she says again, glancing at him. Then she turns back to me. Her tone — it is, I can't mistake it — her tone is the one with which she mocks Father when she asks "And if He had not been so good?" "Go," she says to me, "better make your offering now. A boy shouldn't let his grandmother remain thirsty, should he? Rabbi would be the first to agree, I'm sure."

The folds beside her lips relax. Since the onset of Grandmother's illness, it's the closest she comes to a smile. I nestle in the embrace of a secret that has in that moment been forged between us.

Rabbi Segal clears his throat.

"I should be the last . . . the last to hold him back," he says.

Grandmother, when I enter, is a pillar. Upright against the pillows, gaunt, yellow, distant and, always, staring. Not like the grandmother smelling vaguely of aniseed and peppermint, the grandmother ever bustling, doting, cuddling, the grandmother left now to the memory and to the photographs on the dresser in the corner by the window. Grandmother. How her smell — of rancid meat, last month's fish — scorches the nostrils. If only I did not have to come so close!

"I've brought you your orange juice, Nana."

"Has he gone yet?"

Her mouth without her dentures is a cave, her voice a rasp.

"Gone, Nana?"

"Your father's new friend."

"Rabbi Segal?"

"God's bearer of wisdom."

I approach her. Holding my breath against her nearness, I shake my head. Grandmother takes the glass from me. Her hands are warped knotted cords.

"Talks too much," she says. "Knows everything. Knows nothing."

"What did he want, Nana?"

Her lips, dry and puckered like a crumpled leaf, stretch, thin out. What she intends as a smile grotesques into a scallop-checked grimace.

"*I* should know?! . . . He came to see. . ."

She sips her drink. Thick orange drops spill on to her nightgown. She is all but oblivious to them.

"He came to see whom he was going to bury when I'm dead."

"Nana!"

"You child, you."

"Nana!" I say again, though I don't know why. — Or I do, but the notion of impending loss seeks to stifle awareness.

Mother stands before me then. She has just brought Grandmother back from the doctor. Grandmother is in her room. Father returns from work. He has washed his hands, rubs them expectantly. He is ready for dinner.

"Well, what did the doctor say?" he asks.

Mother is straining the noodles, the water streaming through the sieve with a ringing into the sink.

"A black day," she says. "A black day. . . She's got. . . May it be granted only to our worst enemies."

Father purses his lips, says "Mm." He needs to be told no more.

But mysteries are beyond my enduring.

"She got what, Mummy?" I ask.

"A sickness not fit for a dog," she says, then turning to Father adds, "Dr. Rosenthal says it's in the liver already."

Once more, Father is the model of articulateness.

"Mmm," he repeats.

Won't anyone say a straight word? My curiosity burns. Perhaps it is not my place to ask. But try to restrain me.

"Does that mean she'll die?"

Mother switches off the flame under the pot of soup. Her back is turned to me. I see a shoulder rise and fall, a gesture I have long learned to liken to a question mark.

"We mustn't talk about dying," Father says. "Maybe the doctors can . . . maybe with God's help. . ."

"From your mouth to God's ear," Mother says with sharpness as Grandmother whom I see suddenly with different, with clinging, eyes comes out from her room.

"Nana," I say now. "You shouldn't talk about dying. Daddy says. . ."

"Your father says if we don't talk about it, it won't happen. Is that so?"

Can I do anything but shake my head?

"No? Then what *does* he say?"

She has finished her drink. I take the glass from her. Her fingers touch mine with their gruesome boniness.

"He says that the doctors can help you. . . And . . . and God, too."

"My child, my child. How earnest you are."

The black shrivelled kernels of her eyes hold me.

"Listen. . . Your mother will surely be angry with me. She thinks I might catch cold. . . But just the same, go, open the window."

"The window. . . Should I, Nana?" I ask, though nothing in that moment is more welcome.

"Go on. . . Why should an old woman die . . . I'm sorry, my precious, why should I live out my life in a stuffy room? Go on now."

I scarcely need further bidding. I am not one given particularly to the appreciation of flowers — the study of nature is to me as exciting as a clod of clay — but the sudden rising smell of geraniums outside Grandmother's window and of moist grass and the flowering rose-bushes in Mrs. Fremont's garden next door carries with it a myriad savoury blessings. I swallow whole draughts of air and delight in the cleansing breeze that fans my face.

"That's better," Grandmother says behind me in her raspy voice. "Now . . . what did your father say about God?"

I turn towards Grandmother, look into her tight-skinned collapsed yellow face which has become unusually alert as she peers pack at me. And a sudden recognition occurs to me then. This is the first time I have ever heard Grandmother speak of God. From Father's glancing comments, I have taken it for granted that where Mother is sceptical, Grandmother believes. Yet never has she mentioned God by name nor do I for the briefest moment recall her ever going to synagogue, not on the Sabbath nor on those days — the New Year and the Day of Atonement — when the synagogue is

otherwise crowded. Rather, while Father insists that I accompany him, Mother and Grandmother remain at home, their sole concession to ritual being the lighting of a candle on the holiest of days.

"Well, my young one," Grandmother says, "what *did* your father say?"

"Daddy said . . . he said that God may help you get better. . ."

"Aha!" she says, pointing a knobbed tapering finger past me. "You have opened the window for me, my precious, my blood. Now look outside. I want you to point out to me where you see God. My own eyes have grown too weak."

Caught by her ploy, I gaze outside but turn back immediately.

"But Nana," I say. "God can't be seen. He's . . . he's invisible."

"Oh?" Then you can't see him either, my child?" Grandmother says, lifting her face so that her chin looks unduly sharp. "But the rabbi — Rabbi Segal, is it? — the one who knows everything, he says that God is out there and He shall look after me. That's what he said. Or something like it. . ."

"But he should know. Don't you believe him, Nana?"

"Psha!" Grandmother says. "The greenhorn."

Where Mother snorts down her nose and Father says "What do you *say?!*" Grandmother's disclaimer is a volatile "Psha!"

"Now tell me, my precious. Where are your uncles, your aunts, the children who would have been your cousins, your Grandfather Tuvi, and your other grandfather and grandmother, mm?"

I could scarcely not know. A candle burns in our home twice a year. On the Day of Atonement and on the Day of Commemoration to remember our family killed in the war. The meaning of this second candle far more than the first I have imbibed with the first drops of Mother's milk.

"They were killed, Nana."

"And — may your father forgive me for asking a child who should be out playing in the street such terrible questions — where was the rabbi's God then to look after His people? Or your father's God?"

The best I can offer is a shrug of the shoulders.

Grandmother, who on previous days has spent most of her time in bed or in her chair, her thin body propped against

pillows and her face for the greater part of the day skewed to one side, is unusually animated. Dr. Rosenthal has not yet been to give her her daily injection. Rabbi Segal's visit, I sense, has uncovered some private nest and into that nest I am being drawn to be entrusted with a precious secret.

For the briefest of moments, Grandmother winces with pain but her pain she has from the outset made a point of not sharing with me.

"He wasn't there," she says, shaking her head. She looks suddenly like a rag doll. "He wasn't there. . . Just as He isn't here . . . in this room . . . outside the window . . . above the clouds . . . in the trees. . ."

I remember the rabbi's words.

"When you take that juice in to your grandmother, you are indeed taking in the juice but, more, you are also in your way making an offering to God."

I don't care about the thousand rewards he has promised. But if Grandmother is right and there is no God there, to Whom then have I made my offering in bringing the juice?

"Nana . . .," I say.

"But your mother, may she live to a hundred and twenty, is also wrong," Grandmother says, untouched by my attempt to reach. "I shouldn't speak against her to her son, I know. But child, my child, I speak no evil. . . She doesn't believe, your mother, I understand her. She lost nearly everything, nearly everyone, and you too must understand her. But she is wrong not to believe."

What has promised to be a secret has evolved into mystery. Rabbi Segal believes, Father believes. They are wrong. Mother doesn't believe. She, too, is wrong.

"Nana . . . what . . . how . . . why. . .?"

I set out to ask questions but, elusive birds, they defy formulation.

Just then, Mother appears with Rabbi Segal along the driveway outside. The rabbi is leaving, together with his fifth commandment. Mother sees me by the window, freezes, calls out.

"Shut that window this minute. Nana will catch cold. She will . . . she will. . . Do you want. . .?"

Rabbi Segal waves, smiles, nods. With his free hand, he tugs at his goatee. He is the model of self-assurance, of ease with his knowledge or, if I am now to believe Grandmother, with his error.

"What did I say to you, my pet?" Grandmother says behind me. "Mummy is angry. She won't accept that I won't live forever. But no matter. Shut the window. You saw what I wanted you to see."

I shut the window just as Dr. Rosenthal in his car draws up before the house. I would rather keep the window open. I hate the closeness in Grandmother's room. I prefer a hundredfold the geraniums, the wet grass, the roses. But though not always the most obedient of sons, I comply, rebellion being saved for later days.

Duty done, I turn back to Grandmother. The grimace straddled across her lips is that of pain not of a smile distorted to the grotesque. Erect, a brittle reed, she draws up her knees, contracts her shoulders, holds her breath, then, the tension suddenly falling away with the regression of the spasm, she collapses back on to her pillows with a sigh the depth of chasms.

"Do you remember, my flesh, the story of how your mother and I survived?" she says then.

I nod. She need not tell me. The lines on my hands are not as familiar to me as the tale of the Polish farmer and his wife who hid Grandmother and Mother, then fifteen, in a cellar of their home, and of the nuns who later adopted them, the nuns whose crosses they wore, whose Ave Marias they learnt, whose bread they shared.

"There He was," Grandmother says. "In people's hearts, wherever there was goodness, because God is the goodness that is in men and there are those who by their love preserve Him and those who by their evil kill Him in their hearts . . . so. . ."

From the hallway, I hear the approach of steps and voices — Dr. Rosenthal's, Mother's.

Stay out! Stay out! A moment more! This at last is Grandmother's secret. . .

". . . so He is in you . . . in your mother . . . your father . . . in every person who is good and cares for others and . . . and. . ."

They are at the door.

". . . if you ever want Him, then look only into yourself. He is all the goodness that is in you."

They enter. Mother. Dr. Rosenthal, the doctor a tower, greying, imposing.

"Ah, a tete-a-tete between the generations," he says, all smiles as he lays his case upon the bed and flicks open the clasps. "It warms the heart, it warms the heart. He's a good boy, your young one."

Mother is less giving.

"Go now," she says to me, ice in her tone. "The window he opens . . . his grandmother so ill. . . Pneumonia he wants her to get on top of everything. . ."

I glance at Grandmother, at Dr. Rosenthal, at Grandmother again.

"He's done no harm, I'm sure," Dr. Rosenthal says, laying a massive hand upon my head, while from her bed Grandmother lickes her lips, tightens her eyes, opens them again and says with the rasp that is ever in her voice, "Remember, my precious. Remember always. Remember."

Grandmother mercifully doesn't suffer. She dies peacefully enough. With a little huff at the end of a gasp with her sunken eyes already closed, just as I enter to bring her back her pan.

Mother, her nose twitching, calls Dr. Rosenthal and Dr. Rosenthal, marble-cheeked, rings the Burial Society.

On receiving the news, Father leaves the factory and hurries home, meeting at the door two men in polished black carrying a stretcher to take Grandmother away.

"Keep out of the way," Mother, her blue dress rumpled and wet, bites at me. "This isn't for children. Go, eat something!"

But go and eat!

I stand on one foot, hovering, a cuckoo between the rooms, stretching my neck, peeking, listening to the hushed murmurs of practised efficiency as the men in black roll Grandmother up in stiffly starched sheets — the murky yellow of her attenuated skin dirty against their laundered white — and transfer her, one at her head and one at her feet, while the middle sags, on to the stretcher where she disappears under the folds of green canvas shackled with straps. And then they carry her out, taking little steps, though she has become so light, as Father in his creased grey jacket holds open the door and follows them, the merest breath behind, down to the gate.

It is then that Mother weeps.

"What did I tell you to do?" she lashes at me with words stiffened with ice, herself melting as she enters the room that for long months, become suddenly so short, has been Grandmother's, shielding her agonised face with hands tendinous and blanched, her shoulders heaving, convulsing in the swelling frothing tide of her grief. But when Father, loosening his tie and brushing back ruffled prematurely whitening hair returns and says in that wry way of his "Only God lives forever," she steels herself against his further efforts to console, strips the bed of its soggy sheets and opens the window to disperse the smell, the smell of ether, effluent and must, so acrid and stifling that Grandmother, in dying, has left behind.

When we bury Grandmother the next day, the wind bites with canines. The grass between the graves smells of dung, and shrivelled leaves tumble over the tombstones, driven by the moaning wind. The tails of Mother's black scarf flap and slap like a cracking whip. Father's new felt hat nearly blows away and I almost laugh, keeping control only by looking at old Tuczinski with the crazy rheumy eyes whom Father calls more Marxist than Marx and at Grandmother's one-time neighbour Levenberg who, shivering reed-like, blows into his palms and stamps his feet. Other mourners stand around. Past neighbours, old friends, cronies. Even Joseph Milstein who, over eighty, has left his sickbed to pay respect. Beyond them the oaks sway like old men, and, above, arches a rainbow, a hazy timid band of colour struggling weakly through the swollen clouds.

Rabbi Segal offers consolation. With the movement of his lips, his goatee wags.

"A Jewish soul has departed, returned to its Maker. The soul of a woman who, like the brothers and sisters of her unhappy generation, knew what it meant to suffer, to lose family, to be uprooted — miraculously to survive the ardours of Poland, for years to struggle in Paris, Australia — and yet to endure all without harshness on her lips or hatred in her heart or loss of faith. Only because of such folk does the world endure. A Lamed Vavnik, a saint of the highest order, may her memory forever shine in the hearts of her dear ones."

The first fat drops of rain fall, yielding a hollow patter against the pine of Grandmother's white untarnished coffin. Someone opens an umbrella and a handful of mourners

huddle under it. Rabbi Segal glances upward. His black eyes — the eyes of a greenhorn as Grandmother called him — disappear under eyelids that flutter. Standing opposite him, I taste the sap of the nearby oaks and imagine Grandmother breathing inside the box, her skin still that tawny dirty yellow,and clamouring, though unheard, to be let out. My face, my hair, my skull-cap are getting wet.

"She was ever a woman of God," says Rabbi Segal raising his arms so that his shirt-cuffs show beneath the sleeves of his rain-coat. "And now that she is gone, He too weeps for her. He shall watch, ever watch over and preserve her soul."

He has more to say, would say more, but instead steps back, gives a signal and watches — we all watch — as Grandmother's coffin is lowered, respectfully slowly despite the rain, on broad canvas harnesses into the waiting pit. Tuczinski wipes his watering eyes. Levenberg wipes his dripping nose with a buttoned sleeve. The wind's pincers tear at the flesh.

Father is the first to shovel earth upon the coffin. Climbing the mound of loam beside the grave, his feet sink in, his black shoes polished for the occasion becoming smeared with thick clay that smudges also his trouser-cuffs. Out of respect, he wears his newest suit. Bending low so that his hat tilts forward on his head, he grips the shovel and with a husky grunt heaves the first load of heavy damp fragmenting clods into the pit. His brow puckers with the effort. His jaws lock. In quick succession, one thud of falling earth follows another. Each thud releases its echo. With the first, Mother gasps; with the second, she sobs; and with the third, weeps openly until I cannot tell, looking at her pained white face encircled by her scarf, what is rain and what are tears.

And so Grandmother disappears. The mourners come to grieve make her disappear. Father, Tuczinski, Levenberg, even the invalid Milstein who shaking stiffly, can barely move, even I who can't resist shuffling a grassy clump of earth into the grave — we, all of us, one by one, make her disappear, disappear under layers of loam, in the rain, in whistling wind, enshrouded by the smell of wet leaves, crumbling earth and dung. Make her vanish, — forever, it suddenly strikes me — in five minutes of shovelling dirt, in a plot of land in the Springvale cemetery where — as Father said earlier on the way — destiny, Jewish destiny, has brought her, twelve thousand miles away from the leaking

draught-bitten cottage in Lodz where, sixty-eight years earlier, she had been born.

And I look at the rabbi, his fingers entwined around his prayer-book screening it from the rain; I peer again into the grave, I see, see in the depth Grandmother's crumpled yellow face with the bosses on the brow and the black shrivelled eyes; and I shiver for reasons other than mere cold. I feel also the rain in my face and the shiver swells into a tremor, turmoil brews, and then heat, fervid and prickling, burns in every pore as the slap of eternity prises out protest with an irrepressible cry "Nana!" cast into the grave into which the clods of loam are still being shovelled, their impact muted now as the mound rises. Father's hand finds my shoulder. It would urge me to silence but I wrest myself free of it, move away from him, retreat, and pin to an astonished fixity the rabbi opposite me, his gaze immobile behind his rimless glasses.

"He's not watching!" I cry out. "He's not guarding her! There is no God up there! Nana said! He was never there in the sky, in the clouds, in the trees! He is with her, with Nana, in there! He is her goodness. . . He is all the good. . . He is . . . He. . .!"

Through the haze of clouding eyes and rain, I see Tuczinski and Levenberg and Milstein and Mother and the others, puzzled, staring, mouthing words.

"What's got into the boy. . .?"

"He's taking it badly. . ."

"Poor boy . . . he'll miss her. . ."

"They must have been close. . ."

"They shouldn't have brought him. . ."

"He's only a child. . ."

Father reaches for me again. His grasp, a vice about my arm, strait-jackets any attempt of mine to find release. With the other hand, he holds my chin. His face is a mask of embarrassment, hurt, perplexity. Beads of moisture sit on the brim of his hat. Someone holds an umbrella over us.

"You're too young to know such things," he says. "You're. . ."

I struggle against him. To be mollified by words is to forsake Grandmother, to forsake her truth. With my free hand, I point at the rabbi.

"But he doesn't know either. And he's supposed to know. He's . . . Nana said. . . She. . .!"

"Now listen," Father says, "the rabbi is an educated man. . ."

"But he doesn't know, he doesn't know!"

Mother, cowering under the rain, the ends of her scarf flapping, joins us while Rabbi Segal is weaving through the huddle of mourners towards us.

"Hush," Mother says severely, all razors, "this is not the place."

Father says "Have respect."

While from behind us I hear someone else say "The old one must be turning in her grave at this."

Rabbi Segal reaches us. His shoes are layered with dark brown clay. He raises a placating hand. Father lets go of me. Mother, biting her white lips, steps aside. Around me, the tombstones, the oaks, the gate call me to flee but heavy immobility roots me to the soil. I dread the imminent voice of the pulpit, the self-assured harshness of his tone, the unyielding skewer of his gaze.

There is no flight.

And the rabbi does an unusual thing then. He squats before me. The hem of his raincoat scrapes the mud but he pays no heed to it. I fix upon his goatee, avoiding his eyes.

"You're a clever boy," he says, placing a hand upon my waist. "I saw it rightaway."

I shake my head vigorously. Trees, people, tombstones, clouds are a blur. I don't want his words, his falseness. I would stop my ears were I able.

"Nana said. . ."

"I know what your grandmother said," he says calmly, unruffled. "I talked with her too. I know what she believed. . ."

Lies! Lies!

"You couldn't. . . You don't. . ."

"And I know what your father believes . . . and your mother. . ."

I would rather that he were holding forth a sermon. For calmness I am not prepared. He is beguiling me with softness. And, beguiled, resistance flags.

Still I fan the dying flame with bellows.

"Nana said there is no God out there. . . And you say . . . you said . . . Nana said God is the goodness in people's hearts, in people, in them. . ."

"But she believed. She believed, you see. She never went to synagogue but she was in her way a very religious woman."

"She was good. . ."

"And that's the same thing, my friend. Being religious does not depend only on what you believe. It is what you *are,* what you *do*. . . That is the first lesson of all. Everything else comes later, do you understand? Do you?"

I stub the toe of my shoe into the loam. The wind vaults into my down-turned face. The rain is easing. The rebellious flame within wilts, fades.

Do I understand? Do I understand?

I nod. To save face, I nod, though some embers of discontent still glow. I look at Father, Mother, Rabbi Segal, Grandmother's grave. Anger is spent; only bewilderment remains. Of those around me, who is right, whom am I to trust, whose God, if God there be, is God, the true unchangeable irreducible God?

The return journey home passes at snail's pace. The roads in late afternoon are congested with traffic. The wheels of the cars hiss on wet asphalt, rooftops and shop windows gleam, the trees are heavy with moisture and the clouds are grey, wolves not yet shorn of menance.

Father sits erect behind the steering wheel, his hat and shoulders wet from the rain. Mother is contracted within her coat. Every now and again, she sighs as though some demon within her were seeking release.

And near to home, it finds it as, heated, she erupts, "The scene . . . the scene. . . And at his grandmother's grave. If she could only have heard . . . her only grandchild . . . she would have turned over a hundred times."

Father, not accusing, not defending, waves a nonchalant wrist.

"He's only a boy," he says. "What do you expect? What can he know?"

The pique runs momentarily deep but, nearer the surface, the question exposed, it swirls in eddies, broadening eddies, questions yielding questions, thoughts yielding thoughts: What can I know? Could I but know? Shall I ever know? Shall it ever be given to me to know?

And as we turn into our street and approach our home which shall now forever be depleted, I feel nonetheless Grandmother's presence by the gate, hovering benignly — not the grandmother shrivelling to oblivion amidst the odours

of decay, but that other earlier caring doting bustling grandmother, the grandmother of photographs and memory, benevolence enshrined, that grandmother from garnered wisdom and endurance saying to me now "God is all the goodness that is in men — if you ever want Him, then look only into yourself," and, in the eye of that image, whatever heaviness weighs upon me suddenly lifts, there is freedom in my limbs, lightness, buoyancy in the breath, and a resolve that forms, mellow and sublime, a resolve as earnest as a vow to strive towards goodness, obedience, service and to open myself to the flood that — later, much later — I come to name as holiness that I may be a vessel worthy to be filled with that splendid Presence that others, in their way — Father, Rabbi Segal, the mourners by the grave — endow with the name of God.

So, when Father, musing aloud, says on reaching home, "That young one of ours still has a lot to learn," it is no longer pique I feel coursing in the nether depths of my awareness but rather wellsprings of excitement rising up and the impulse to cry out, exultant and alive, "But I know, Daddy, I know, Mummy, I know now, I know now, I know, I know!"