

The Life That I Have Led

They are waiting for me at home. Aviva, Judah, Josh. In the dark, as by torchlight I seek out the Mahlers' house, I can't recall their faces, even though Aviva and I have been married nearly twenty years and the boys are well on the way to self-sufficient maturity. I only know that they are waiting, like Ziggy Mahler, the artist Ziggy Mahler, whose house in Stygius Crescent I cannot find.

It does not help that the street, in the nature of crescents everywhere, is abysmally lit, or that fog, already needled with frost, has settled early this evening, or that it is so unseasonably cold that I have to raise my collar and draw in my head to keep my chin and ears from smarting. And less still does it help that there is no-one about, not even a vagrant whose aid I may solicit, such nights being only for doctors who receive telephone calls to tend to ailing men confined behind mute walls in turn recessed behind mute gardens in houses that, look as hard as one may, cannot be found.

It was Geulah Mahler who called.

'He is sick,' I heard her distant anxious voice. 'An infection, or worse. His face all burning up. And every part of him covered in horrible purple blotches and his eyes glowing, blazing red.'

'As soon as I finish, I shall come,' I had replied; then, hurrying through the last of the day's consultations - a child with tonsillitis, a woman with migraine, a footballer with ringworm - I set out to visit Ziggy Mahler.

But everything appears to have conspired to block out clear

vision – the darkness, the fog, my upturned collar – and even when in the mistiness I bend low, shining my torch upon the crumbling fences and rickety gates, I find no numbers to direct my way. For the district is old; the houses here have huddled one against the other through eras colonial, Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian, their paint, coat upon coat, obliterating all numbers laid on by succeeding now-evaporated generations, peeling yet again and flaking and stained, their timber, brickwork and stone now chipped and cracked and crushed, whatever smells they yield being not of lawn or flower or pine, but rather of mothballs, must and foetid blight.

This I know, simply know, for I have often visited just such houses before. But just now, cocooned within a clinging near-viscid wrapping of fog, enshrouded by layer on layer of pricking, even burning, frost, I cannot see any of the houses before me. The glow of my torch is too pale, its batteries nearly dissipated, the core of whatever light it yields, it *too* being nearly blotted out by what popular adage calls ‘pea soup’.

Meanwhile, Ziggy Mahler is waiting. Geulah Mahler is waiting. In this street. Scarcely a breath from me. And I must get to Ziggy; must penetrate the seeming mist-lock impenetrability of those terraces and cottages I know are there; to pierce the lotused muteness of their ever-curtained secret within from the inclement chill without, in which, unmoored, adrift, I find myself. And by the light of my torch, so dingy, so poor, I push open a gate, walk up a path, and rap on a door, once, a second time, a third, hoping, trusting that serendipity shall come to my aid and that the house may prove to be that of Ziggy Mahler himself, or that its owner will direct me to it with a certainty untrammable, or that, by giving me his own number, he shall lead me to deduce the whereabouts of the sick man’s, the artist’s home.

It is Willy Welcare who opens the door, balding, small-eyed, small-chinned sparrow, one-time city councillor and self-

appointed ombudsman. He wears a pullover the dullness of lime and corduroys weathered at the knees. His face, so tiny, so elfin, folds into a smile.

'Dr Balsam! Hello! What a stroke of luck!' he says.

'I have been called to see a Mr Mahler, Ziggye Mahler,' I say, preferring to defer familiarity to another time. 'He lives around here.'

Standing in the doorway, I swallow hard the foetor of sewerage, fustiness and rot that assails me here, foul legacy of decades, ages beyond counting, of stagnation. Whatever light falls is as bilious and turbid as water putrid with mould.

Does Willy Welcare fully hear? - He reaches out a hand to take mine. His minute avian eyes, patently cheery, frisk over me in an animated reel.

'You must come with me, Dr Balsam,' he says, shifting weight from foot to foot. 'You must. Back in there, in the back, there is something we're trying to settle.'

The corridor behind him is thick with smoke and dust. From beyond, there rise the sounds of voices, voices that would seem engaged in argument, however muffled, however garbled.

'But it's Mr Mahler I'm after,' I say, 'He's waiting for me . . . He's sick . . . His wife rang . . . I can't stay . . .'

Willy Welcare has already turned.

'You couldn't have come at a better time,' he says over his shoulder, tripping, bird-like, down the hallway.

Go argue! Resist! Even as in their house, the Mahlers, and in my home, Aviva, Judah, Josh are waiting for me. I try again, in this thick dusty vaporous drift, to recall their faces, but, for the life of me, I can't. Reach out to them now, all I should gather in would be handfuls of squalid void.

Caught, I follow. From the grime-encrusted ceiling hangs a light-bulb unhooded and fly-soiled; the leek-green walls are corroded with copper; and the carpets are tatty, worn to flimsy decomposition on the dully-echoing floor. The poverty of it all! The seediness! The rot!

The voices issuing from beyond the hallway become

clearer. The dispute breaks off. They turn to me, the two men sitting at the laminexed table in the kitchen there, one dumpy and flushed, the other thin-boned and severe, Charlie Workman, carpenter, joiner and union-leader, and James Lethe Gossamer-St John, failed lecturer, failed politician, failed soap-box orator, come Sundays, come Spring. Ever-loquacious patients of mine, the two of them; a peculiar pair, Sancho Panza to Don Quixote, each nudging the darker Sheol side of seventy, yet seeking still to settle the questions of long-extinguished youth.

'Why, Dr Balsam!' says Charlie Workman, brandishing a hand orphaned of forefinger and thumb, then sipping at his beer.

'Now we shall know,' says Gossamer-St John, theatrically, years of oratory behind him. 'An educated man. A man of common sense at last. *He* will know.'

'*This* is our dilemma,' says Willy Welcare, scratching at a buttock as he reaches for his stubby. 'Man dictates history; history dictates man. Which is it? You, as a doctor, who has seen so much, you will certainly know. Charlie here says . . . No, rather, Jim thinks . . .'

For *this* he has dragged me into his house, for dialectics and sophistries, for *this*, while out there, somewhere close, a man is sick, a man is burning, all blotches and blaze?! For *this*?

'I am sorry, I have never thought about it,' I say, tightening my grip upon my doctor's case in an effort to hold back irritation. 'I must go . . . Perhaps some other time . . .'

'But just a word,' Charlie Workman says.

'A man of your stature, Dr Balsam,' adds Gossamer-St John, 'Surely, surely you must have some view on it . . .'

'Not now. I've no time for it. I must go,' I say again.

'No time?' says Charlie Workman. 'No time for a matter that is the essence, man, the core, the stuff of life . . .?'

'Whether a man moulds his existence,' intrudes, elaborates Gossamer-St John, 'or lets himself be moulded, whether he is to be a leader or is to be led, whether he be participant, agent,

doer, or be dead cadaver on which the worms of history feast . . .'

What must I do to break away?

'Where is number sixteen?' I ask, turning to Willy Welcare. 'The Mahlers' house?'

Where before, on my appearance, he may have eaten relish, he winces now as if he has fed on a jar of bitters.

'Cross the road, the other side,' he says, green lemons scarcely more sour. 'Three, four houses to the left . . . next to the lane.'

Those seconds, that minute it takes me to steer along the corridor congealed in stench and foulness, are swallowed up in the words that pursue me.

'Hardly a sport, is he?' I hear.

'Could have offered some opinion at least, even a word, don't youse reckon?'

'Or is it that for all his station he's really got nothing to say?'

Is it that for all his station he's really got nothing to say?

Is it that for all his station . . .

Once more I wade through the gelid pea-soup of Stygius Crescent, precious time lost and myself only the merest measure closer to the Mahler house where Ziggie Mahler, where Geulah Mahler, are waiting, waiting for me to come, like Aviva, Judah, Josh, in my own home. I must get to the sick man. All the sooner, all the faster. The fog, the cold, the darkness all be damned, be cursed, I hurry across the street, find the lane, and almost scurry up the path of the house the nearer side of it. But earlier error is compounded before I am yet wholly aware of it. No sooner have I pressed the bell than the door opens to an onslaught of a turbulent psychedelic whirl of yellows and emeralds, and scarlets, violets and blues, to a rush of cloying vapors of pervading incense, to a reverberating polyphony of guitar, saxophone and drum and the

clarion and clamor of voices, quite apart from the long-haired loosely-caftaned girl, so beautifully stately, bangled and be-ringed who, placing a hand of pure satin on my arm, laughs through teeth themselves flickering, glittering rainbows, and says, 'Dr Balsam! Welcome to the party . . . I'm Melody Cyrene, remember? Visited your surgery a month ago . . . You must come in, I'm sure there'll be others here you'll know . . .'

Whatever protest I make drowns in the vaulting billows of noise that pound the walls, the ceiling, floor, as I draw Melody one way and she draws me the other.

'See who has joined us,' she says to one, then to another, each head-banded, beaded, ear-ringed or bearded, each in turn lit up and extinguished in the swirling gyrations of colored lights as, almost recklessly, we bundle through the incense and lurching drifts of smoke along the corridor of graffitied walls to the source and vortex of all light and color and din where, in huddles on the floor, on chairs and on settees, sprawl a mass of folk, young, not so young, long-haired, short, thin-boned, solid, all rolling, swaying, singing, chanting, all with clicking tongues and flicking fingers responding to the rhythm of a trio perched on stools at the very hub, each player himself oscillating and pulsating to the syncopations of his music.

'They're singing a song composed by Musette over there,' Melody, rising on her toes, shouts into my ear. 'You know Musette, of course. She says, she told me she's attended you . . . And the players, of course, them, too, you must recognise - Jamie Harper, Simon Fiedler and Andrew McBard. It's a pity, you've just missed a recital by Verna Lieder of her own poem and a lovely dance by Lily Jolly. Whoever comes here must perform, must do something artistic - play an instrument, sing a song, recite a poem, dance, even draw a sketch - that's one of our rules whenever we come together. What can *you* do?'

So near to me, she smells of blackberries, even above the incense, above the smoke. The image of bramble and briar comes to me, the vision of undergrowth dense and tangled by

the sides of country roads, and the spectre of yellow flowers and beet-fields seen as if from crystal-limpid heights where the breath, elsewhere so bridled, so fettered, so cramped, attains to release and freedom and flight but fitfully, scarcely, so rarely, known.

In this pounding palpitating maelstrom of color and vigor, of scentedness and voice, among faces familiar yet in a setting unknown, and confronted by a question never given thought, red wine fuels the cheeks to fire and to fantasy the brain. 'What can *you* do?' she has asked, Melody Cyrene. What *can* I do? What *dare* I do? I dare do nothing; I dare not even stay, dare not, for next door, across the fog-bound lane, there, in trouble, a man and a woman wait. And somewhere else, Aviva, too, and the boys bent over their desks, as is only right, with their father's sobriety and doggedness wrestling with geography and mathematics, history and science. And towards Melody I bend and into her ear I say, 'I must go, I really must, for there are patients whom I have to see,' but in the surroundings, the words sound feeble, they have lost their urgency, they drift into void, unanchored, almost unreal. Out there, beyond the walls, there is a world, I know. Out there, there is solidity and certainty, as surely as at this moment there is blackness and frost. But distance has intervened, and unreachability and illusion, as Melody claps her hands, bids all to quiet come, and announces the appearance of Dr Balsam who, as he must soon leave, shall also perform, the choice of act to be his alone, whether it be a song, a recitation, a narrative or a sketch.

The sea of bodies divides, lets me pass as applause and cheering transport me to the hub, Melody Cyrene, all caftan, rings and blackberries, still holding my arm, leading me to that sanctum sanctorum within that swell of faces that flare and flicker under the reeling, rolling, revolving gyrations of color and light.

But what can I do? What *can* I do?

Long ago, a child in a school play was brought upon the stage to perform a part, recite his lines and vanish into the wings. In short pants, he came; the spotlight, an orb of white,

fell upon him; out there, in the auditorium, all hushed and darkened and expectant, sat the audience, his parents in its midst, and a brother, a sister. But no sooner did his mouth open to deliver the lines than the words, so perfectly learnt, so perfectly rehearsed, so perfectly known, they fled, and before that unseen swell, he was left to founder, just as now, that boy become adult, doctor, man of the world, founders yet again, declaring, repeating, protesting, 'But there is nothing that I know to do . . . I'm sorry I must go . . . It's all a mistake . . . Perhaps some other time . . .' to which one and another at my feet cries out, 'There shall be no other time!' . . . 'The time for revelation is now!' . . . 'Bare your soul!' . . . 'Show us the real you, the hidden, submerged, suppressed, authentic you!' . . . 'Open up! Open up! Poetry, music, art - these are of the soul! Let yourself go! Let us see!' But once more, torn between flight and pillory under now-hard harsh glacial shafts of blinding white blitzing from flood-lights earlier given to a warmer ardor, sensuousness, intimacy and color, I plead 'But there is nothing I can do . . . I must run . . . A man is waiting . . .', to which yet again in succession they cry, 'But, doctor, haven't you ever written a poem?' . . . 'Composed a song?' . . . 'Perhaps drawn something?' . . . 'Learnt to play an instrument?' . . . 'Learnt some exotic dance?' . . . 'Nothing?' . . . 'Nothing at all?!' . . . 'What sort of doctor are you? Tell us. What sort of a man, what sort of *man* are you?'

I have fled once already tonight; again I flee, seeing, yet not seeing, hearing, yet not hearing, tasting, yet not tasting, as, stumbling over legs and brushing against shoulders, I evade the clawing grasp of hands that would take me hostage and have me expose my soul, I career through the anarchy of light, of voices, incense, smoke, bangles, rings and graffiti, and of leering, railing faces with Melody after me, Melody begging, pressing, urging, 'Couldn't you have just given us *something*? Is there nothing of yourself you can give?', her plaint ringing like Gossamer-St John's, like Willy Welcare's, like Charlie

Workman's, even as in the murky opacity of the night-encrusted fog, I cross the lane, rap on the Mahler's door, shuttle, scarcely bearing to hear, past a weeping hand-wringing Geulah along the corridor cluttered with watercolors, canvases, sculptures and pedestals, to reach the sick man's room where the confirmation of a dread till now suppressed explodes with the virulence of gall and wormwood, of nausea and devastation, as, damnation, blackness, dereliction and madness compounded, I fume and fulminate and curse at those who, bent after my soul, have caused a man to die, a woman to grieve, two lives, and more besides, to be so senselessly crushed.

'I couldn't come earlier,' I say to Geulah Mahler; 'I'm sorry I couldn't get away,' I try to explain. 'There were demands . . . my patients . . . long consultations . . . I . . . I couldn't get away . . .'

Braving as best I can the racked contortion of Geulah's acutely bleak, demolished, pulverised and ravaged face, I feel I might choke on the bones of my confabulation.

'If only you'd told me how urgent . . . If only . . .'

She does not listen. Words - I know, I have learnt from circumstances such as this before - have lost their power of penetration. Become blunted, emasculated, prostituted in the service of dissembling, they are the bosh and gibberish of Babel that can in no way match her own adversity, the numbed shot perplexity lacing her every syllable.

'How . . . Why . . . Just yesterday, the day before . . . he was well . . . healthy . . . sculpting . . . creating . . . And then the headache . . . fever . . . vomiting . . . and the blotches . . .'

Of what value to her the ready diagnosis - meningitis, septicaemia - saturnine bringer of ugly gargoylian premature death? I offer her a sedative, call the undertakers, inform by phone her son and daughter. I stay awhile. For decency's sake, I stay. Then, her family come, her children, a brother, a brother-in-law, all violet with cold and devastation and incarcerated breath, I leave, my condolences, I know, as vapid as dust, adding, 'About further arrangements, there will be no

trouble. The certificate . . . the certificate for the undertakers . . . that, you may trust to me.'

Outside, Stygius Crescent is silent, my very steps humbled to near-extinction as I plough my way back to my car. Whatever noise, whatever tumult, whatever turmoil there is, it all riots in furious helpless apoplexy in my own mind where, as I hurtle past Melody's house again and Willy Welcare's, as I now punish the accelerator back along the treacherously-turbid tram-lined streets towards my surgery, there to commit to officialdom the reality of a death, those accusations, reproaches, sneers, and questions surge with a violence and an urgency storm-tossed and inundating to slap and cudgel and the senses stun.

'Man dictates history, history dictates man.'

'Whether a man moulds his existence or is moulded, whether he be participant, agent, doer, or be dead cadaver on which the worms of history feast.'

'Is it that for all his station he's really got nothing to say?'

'But what can you do? Is there nothing of yourself you can give?'

'What sort of doctor are you? What sort of man are you?'

What sort of *man* are you?

What sort of *man* are you?

I know what sort of man I am. I know. Even as they asked, I knew. But go, tell them, tell *them* with souls the readier to bare that, as James Lethe Gossamer-St John has said, I am a man of common sense; a man who, though on the favored side of fifty, has found dignified contentment in his present existence; a man who has always known and adhered to the sensible, the reasonable, the safe. Go say to them: 'Friends, my friends, we are not of the same temper, I know; we circle orbits that may or may not cross; your homes, so poor, so old, so narrow, are not my home. But surely you know me now, my patients, my friends. I have never been grasping; my demands even in relation to my abilities have always been modest. If I do drive a Mercedes, it is for reasons of comfort

and safety, as is my wife Aviva's Rover; if I do have a summer house as Eden Bay, it serves as a getaway after long, sustained and wearying stretches of duty and as a healthy environment for my boys; and, as Aviva enjoys entertaining, our town-house in Olympus Court was built to serve this not-unworthy purpose.' And go, tell them that, my work-day over, it is to this home that I return and that Aviva, on my entry, will kiss me and say, 'Hello, Dudie darling, did you have a good day?'; or that Judah and Josh, emerging temporarily from their studies, will, one or the other, say, 'Hi, Dad! Did you hear - Smith scored a double century in record time', or 'Should have seen old Smiling Death in chemistry today. Lost his dentures in a bowl of acid, poor bugger'; or that I shall then sit down to dinner, my first substantial meal for the day, having till then sustained myself on coffee and chocolate wafers and, out of patients' sight, on cigarettes; or that, as I eat, Aviva will sit opposite me, and chin on hand, in her lively buoyant ever-jaunty way, will tell me about Jessie the cleaning-lady whose Anne-Marie probably has another bun in the oven, or about the dishwasher that needs mending, about her Rover in need of servicing, or about our friends, the Lees and the Prydes, the Fallows and the Sluffs with whom, come Saturday, we shall probably be attending a concert, the ballet, the opera, or a play; or that, dinner over, I shall read the paper or open a medical journal or watch the late news, and then, weary, yawning and rubbing my eyes, call Aviva to bed and settle in for another night.

I reach my surgery. Its red lamp above the stairs glows within a cold and gloomy halo. I enter, switch on the lights, sit down at my desk from which I take out the death certificate book to fill in Ziggie Mahler's name.

Yes. Go tell them this! Any of this! Go; go, tell them!

I unscrew my pen and bend over the yellow page of the certificate book.

Just as the telephone rings.

Aviva.

'Dudie, darling, thank goodness you're all right. It's so late,

I didn't know what to think. I've been trying to get you again and again. Did you forget? The Primms have come to dinner. We've been waiting for you, darling. Everything will soon be cold.'

Even across the cables I can smell the roast, taste the fresh asparagus in the salad, feel the velvet of Aviva's hand on my cheek, and see, clearly see, in all its brightness, the soft elegance of the living room, relish its very splendor, so spacious and stylish with furniture of mahogany, suede and chrome, with its lively-papered walls hung with prints and originals in what Aviva likes to call 'our little Prado, Louvre and Hermitage in one.'

'The Primms?' I say. Harry Primm is a public accountant, Julie Primm sells handbags. They have been friends of ours for all of eighteen years. We have swum in each other's pool, played tennis on each other's court, and when we talk it is invariably of our children, investments, shares, holidays in Noumea, conferences in San Fransisco, trips to Singapore.

'Aviva,' I say. 'Tell me . . . Harry . . . Harry . . . does he have a soul?'

'A soul? Harry? Dudie, darling, are you all right?'

'I mean, does he know any songs, has he ever composed a poem, written a book, created any sculpture . . .?'

'Darling?!'

'Aviva! . . . Tell me! What sort of a man is he? . . . What sort of a man am I? . . . What sort of people are we? . . .'

'Has something happened? Are you ill? Do you . . .'

'Tell me, Aviva! Please! For once let us *talk!* Are we moulding our own existence, Aviva, are we, or are we cadavers, corpses upon whom the worms of history will feast, while others out there, out there . . .'

'Shall I come to fetch you?'

' . . . while others out there, even in their dark draughty putrid tumbledown houses, in their cottages, so decrepit, so humble, so ramshackle, they *care*, Aviva, have always cared . . .'

'Darling, Harry has offered to get you . . .'

‘... have stood for politics, have been leaders of men, of workers after their rights, who even now already old concern themselves with issues, with *issues*, Aviva, like history and man, and man and history, and others who create, Aviva, who *create* – music, poetry, art – and who dare, who dare to bare their souls and show the depths to which they run, while we ... while we ...’

‘Don’t leave, Dudie, darling, Harry’s on the way ...’

‘What light glows in them who we thought lived always in bleak uncultured darkness; while what darkness has meanwhile consumed us whose lives we thought were bright with light ...?’

‘Shall I call Bernie to have a look at you, darling, shall I ...?’

‘That I should learn all this, Aviva, a man has died, a man has had to die. Are we worthy of it, are we worthy of it, Aviva, are we, are we?’

Muffled voices, anxious, fretful, bewildered, issue through the receiver. Aviva is talking to someone in the background – Julie Primm? Judah? Josh? Her hand, I know, is over the mouthpiece but sound is not wholly extinguished. ‘Something has happened,’ I hear Aviva say, ‘He was well this morning when he left, but now ... I had better call Bernie ... He’s treated him before ...’

I replace the receiver on its cradle. Let her call Bernie, let her call him, though there will be no need. She shall have no more cause for concern, Aviva. When I return home, I shall explain. This will pass. Meanwhile, Harry is on the way. He’s a good man, a good friend, even if he doesn’t read much or particularly enjoy those concerts, operas or plays. We shall, in the end, as always, spend a pleasant dinner together, talk business and travel over our supper, and put out of mind the fact that a man has died. At any moment he shall come. He will draw up before the surgery, he will clamber up the steps and press the bell, and I shall tell him everything’s all right, there was never any cause for concern – I shall even crack a joke – and we shall leave, he in his Jaguar, I in my Mercedes, and,

through the fog, however heavy, however thick, we'll both return to the warmth and brightness and velvet comfort of my home.

And within its confines, I shall be at rest, at peace. If nirvana is to be known, there shall I find it, and I shall be beyond touch, beyond care, beyond concern, I know. I know. I have clear official confirmation of it. For as I spoke to Aviva, I completed the certificate before me. I may have written 'Zig-gie Mahler', but, on looking closer, it is my name that is there.