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.