

A Marriage

Papa, that evening, emerged from his shell. Laying one hand gently upon my veil, he wiped at a corner of his eye with the other, then leaned over, rather stiffly, to kiss me.

'My daughter,' he whispered, 'mein herliches kind.'

A little later, after the dessert, he held a speech. He was visibly nervous, read from his notes which quivered between his white puffy hands and twice lost his place. And then he swayed to and fro before the microphone so that his voice tumbling from the speakers ebbed and flowed in volume quite apart from the tremulousness that underlay each word. Poor Papa! How glad he was when his ordeal came to an end. But there was no denying that pure sincerity with which he expressed his love for his only daughter and wished her all that a father's heart – and a mother's – could wish in her future life with her new husband, his acquired third son, a young man of unquestioned ability, unique gifts and an ambition, too rarely seen these days, to strive for all that was truly worthy in life. During the ensuing applause, Papa, relieved, passed a dumpy hand over his moist balding head and beamed almost boyishly; Mama dropped her eyes; and my brothers, David and Benjy, both older than myself, said 'Amen'.

At midnight, Max and I changed into our travelling clothes, said a hectic goodbye to the guests, kissed our parents and were whisked away. I threw the bouquet towards my bridesmaid who, leaping forward, caught it with both hands.

In the taxi, on the way to our hotel, I said, 'We're on our own now.'

Winking as he tossed his head, Max said, 'Happy?'

I nodded, passed the tip of my finger over his bristly moustache and nestled under his arm.

I *was* happy. Unreservedly. Ecstatically. I felt strong; the future lay open, unknown yet undaunting; Max would create, write the plays that were burgeoning in his imagination and I would help and bolster where I could and shine, in time, in the light of his success.

Max had strong views, ambition and enormous talent.

'What the local theatre needs,' he would say, probing the air with his forefinger for emphasis, 'no, what theatre everywhere needs is a shake-up, new ideas with epic heroes once more and tragic heroes, not the sordid petty melodramas of the kitchen, the bedroom and the hotel bar. Hamlets, Macbeths who stalk the stage, not little Beckett tramps who cling fretfully to the shadows of existence.'

I loved to hear him talk and to read whatever he wrote. He showed me fragments of his projected plays. The language was still raw, the scenes admittedly somewhat forced and heavy-handed, but there was immense energy in them, passion, tension and what to my mind was an artistic manipulation of great themes – of love and loyalty, tragedy and hate, creation and destruction. When he spoke, Papa, too, a shy man who had a deep reverence for culture first nurtured in Europe in the years before the War, listened to him with respect.

'A man who loves books must have a sensitive heart,' he said, expressing an insight into himself no less than into Max and into book-lovers in general.

Mama, however, a practical woman who complemented Papa's more ethereal nature, held reservations. Her intuitions worried her. An idiosyncrasy of hers, she never liked pure white hands in a man, particularly hands with carefully-trimmed nails and faint blue veins that disappeared into the soft haze of surrounding flesh. Like Max's. To her, such hands spoke of vanity and a bent for idleness, but she did not press

her suspicions too hard. She was a sick woman who suffered from diabetes and kidney disease and who, in every aspect of family life, preferred peace to remonstrations.

'I pray only that you will be happy,' she said when Max and I approached her and Papa with our decision to marry.

'I will be,' I said, 'I know I will.'

David and Benjy, smiling strangely – I had hoped they could be more open – wished me luck, kissed me on the cheeks and shook Max's hand without another word. I sensed their disapproval – he was too forthright and self-assured for their liking – but I knew secretly, whenever I heard Max talk, that someday, their reservations would prove unfounded. Ours would be a better marriage than that of my parents and, God willing, more fulfilling than theirs had been.

'Poor Papa,' I said, suddenly filled with pity, to Max who held his arm draped lightly about my shoulders. 'We shall have more luck.'

Max said 'Yes' with his customary emphatic firmness, but I wondered whether he knew exactly what I had meant.

Poor Papa. How he had failed!

A reserved and peaceful man, once a lawyer in Czechoslovakia, his everyday breath was Melbourne, his food, his work as a taxation clerk, the firmness beneath his feet, the cold winds that made him turn up his collar – those things of which he was aware through his immediate senses – all these were of Melbourne and of the present. But in those reaches of the mind which emerged when physical awareness became stilled, he lived and breathed in different realms. He remembered always – could never, would never forget – Prague, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz where his youthful ambitions to become a judge foundered in ashes. Arriving in Australia five years after the liberation with Mama and their two infant sons, he could not regain his poise. The demands of the moment directed him away from any consideration of renewed study into the tedious string of menial jobs – as janitor, shoe maker, waiter – for a solid interminable decade during which he breathed the Melbourne air with bitterness and ate its bread with patent

distaste. Only later, much later, when he mastered the language of his newer home did he secure a position, albeit a clerical one, in which he could put his hungry intellect to use. But dissatisfaction, that sober melancholy sense of life slipping him by, led him into flight – not physical, for he was too responsible a husband and loving a father for that – but from the everyday stultifying chores of reality into private realms where books and papers became his all as he prepared to write someday a book of memoirs to tell the world, as he said, of the wartime struggle of decency and the human spirit against bestiality and evil, and of the ultimate however costly triumph of good. That he suffered was plain. His fluctuating moods, his nightmares, his long silences and increasing references to the past made his pain almost palpable. Yet he persevered, amassing voluminous reams of notes, of information garnered from memories and books, driven – there was no other word for it – by an inner need to harness for posterity his experiences together with those of family, friends, landsmen and acquaintances and of the millions who had perished and whom he had never known. Out of his labours was to emerge an ultimate and abiding credo.

Mama, herself already sick with diabetes and the beginnings of her kidney disease, feared for his health. Knitting in the lounge-chair as Papa at his desk continued with his consuming work, she would say with growing concern, 'Spare yourself, Karol, who is it all for?', and Papa, running his fingers over his balding head and adjusting his glasses as he looked at her, would answer, 'If not for the world, then for our David and Benjamin and Esther; if for no-one else, then at least for them'.

Mama would not argue. She knew – we all knew – that his book would remain unwritten. A man can endure just so much pain, just so much recall; there are limits beyond which even the strongest will not go, and Papa was not particularly strong. That was why, I realised one day, he spent so much time gathering together his information and amassing notes. Were the preparatory work to come to an end, he would be confronted face-to-face with the very task he had set himself,

of baring his soul, a task in the end too excruciating for so sensitive a man. So he delayed continually the confrontation and procrastinated, even pushing it onward into some distant receding future which, on the one hand, he believed, and on the other feared, might still come. Thus taking flight, he receded progressively into those pained labyrinths of his innermost self, leaving, over the years, less room for Mama in those private realms in which his existence circuted. Harsh words never passed between them, yet there was distance, and if Papa was not mindful of it, Mama, I knew from the way she sighed in her neglected solitude or rooted about for things to do, felt keenly the sharper edge of isolation. Her two sons, my brothers David and Benjy, both married, lived of course away from home while I, too, teaching during the day and spending my evenings and weekends in the company of Max, was seldom there. She fell back, therefore, contrary to her one-time outgoing, even voluble nature, to solitary occupations – knitting, crocheting, watching television or reading – using up time as well as she could if not with soul-providing satisfaction.

Nestling under Max's arm, I could not help but sense how hollow their lives had become and, in that hollow without fathom, how unfulfilled.

At the hotel where we were booked into the nuptial suite – the porter had left with a knowing smirk on his merry youthful lips – we drank champagne, the best. Max glowed, laughed, lifted me by the waist and swung me around.

'My little bird,' he said, his moustache a little moist. 'How does it feel to be Mrs. Lehman at last?'

'Wonderful, Professor Lehman,' I said, feeling free and feathery as I glided in his arms. 'Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.'

Though still a tutor in English literature, Max was in line for a lectureship and liked to be called Professor. It flattered him and fed his ambition to rise high.

It excited me to know that I would be by his side as he rose. 'Professor,' he repeated with obvious delight as, his hair

dishevelled now and his eyes the sparkle of champagne, he laid me down upon the bed, stretched himself fully over me and covered my neck with kisses. After the dancing, he smelled and tasted of sweat.

‘One day, Mrs. Lehman, you will be proud,’ he said.

On our return from our honeymoon, a letter awaited Max notifying him of his appointment as Lecturer in the university’s English Department. We celebrated the news with dinner at the Pickwick, then drove to my parents’ home to share it with them. After our wedding, Max’s own parents had left for a holiday in Hawaii.

Shaking Max’s hand with genuine warmth – he was never anything but genuine – Papa said, ‘I never doubted it.’

Mama offered us some of her apple cake and said, ‘That’s very nice.’

Max saw his appointment to the lectureship as being, by his own choice, merely temporary, a means of establishing contacts in the local literary and theatre world and of earning sufficient money in order, some day, to write full-time. In three years, four, five – certainly no more – he would have enough set aside to meet his purpose. For a time, I would continue to teach, he would write and, with the coming of success, so certain that neither of us could even for a moment entertain any doubt, we would turn our mind to family, to having a child while we were still young and able to boast good health. Max was then twenty-six, I was twenty-two.

For the first year of our marriage, we rented a small third-floor flat in Parkville. There was peace, solemn serenity in our lives. Throwing open the windows on waking, I looked out across the radiant parklands and inhaled their calming stillness. Sometimes, when I rose early, I watched with inner tranquility the athletes on their morning run and the tiny toy-like figurines marching comically across the dew on their way to work. Max, barely ten minutes from the university, slept in. Having prepared breakfast for him and planted a kiss on his brow as he slept, I left for school. I taught with vigour, enjoyed my work, took care over details, gave myself to the

children completely. Returning home – Max was usually there already, reading the morning paper or revising a lecture or writing at an improvised desk in the lounge-room – I prepared dinner, and over the meal we spoke, he of the university and of his projected plays and I of school. We went often to the theatre, indeed saw every new play, good and bad, as it appeared. Max went less out of love than out of duty. ‘A budding playwright, to be successful, can never stop learning,’ he said, stroking the bristly ginger beard he had, soon after our marriage, permitted himself to grow. Sometimes, we visited my parents, or his, occasionally friends. But most often we merely stayed at home, Max continuing his private work and I preparing my lessons for the following day. The ease with which we became creatures of routine flooded me with wonder but I was happy, content, lacking nothing.

Lacking nothing. No, that is not quite correct . . .

It was Mama who in her motherly way first planted the seed of longing within me.

‘You are happy?’, she said to me on one occasion when, visiting her alone, I mentioned to her Max’s writing and the plays Max and I had recently seen. ‘And there is nothing missing?’

Her face, once so youthful, so mobile, had become progressively more bloated, her skin sallow, pasty, sickly.

There was no escaping her meaning. She already had two grandchildren – David’s five-year-old boisterous Daniel and Benjy’s baby Mirela – but it was in her nature, in her blood, one could say, to believe that family, children, after the decimating devastation in Europe, came before all else, before ambition, before personal comfort, even before security. And she herself – if evidence were needed – was living proof of that belief.

‘When David was born – may such conditions never be known again – your Papa and I shared a room with two other families. There was one doctor nearby, an old-asthmatic with a crippled . . .’

Her stories of the transit camp at St. Ottilien were familiar

to me, for years the butter I ate with my bread: the post-War uprootedness, the deprivations, the appalling discovery of entire families destroyed. There were times, on commemoration days and anniversaries, when I swallowed them with my bread and was made to sense, particularly through Papa's intense silences and changing moods, the abyss of anguish they must have known.

'In children is our future,' Mama would say, 'in them our hope.'

Max would not hear of it. When I broached the matter of a child, he scratched his whiskers and laughed.

'Getting all clucky, are we?', he said.

And once, when, after Benjy had left with his wife Elizabeth and their little Mirela, I mentioned it again, he approached me, held me close and passed his fingers down my spine.

'No, my sweet, we're not ready for *that* yet,' he said, and added as he bit my ear, 'Remember our agreement?'

That Max was not particularly sentimental, he himself attributed to his parents' difficult life. They had arrived in Australia before the war, Polish Jews from Lodz who – so Anusz Lehman was fond of saying – after the Kristallnacht in Germany, had read the signs of the future. Recently married and possessing little to keep them rooted to one place, they cast about for another more distant haven that could become their home. South Africa, America, Canada and Palestine had entered into earnest consideration but it had been an unexpected impulsively-written letter from a remote cousin in Australia that had decided the direction of their flight. That cousin had in his letter promised Anusz and Doba Lehman work in his stocking factory but died, still a young man, of a brain haemorrhage, soon after their arrival. Now alone and not skilled in any occupation, Max's father found work of sorts dealing in spare metal parts and his mother stitching collars to shirts in a dingy, dusty, crowded workshop. Dissatisfied, they bought a milk-bar where they spent – 'mis-spent', Max said – twenty-seven years. Confined for long tedious hours seven days each week within the four constricting walls of their dark over-

stocked shop, smelling of chocolates, bread and cheese, selling yet a little more of their strength for every penny, Max had watched their lives deteriorate into disconsolate drudgery, his father becoming prematurely cynical and grey, his mother growing stout, irritable and complaining, both of them unhappy and bitter, at a pinch provoked into argument and mutual blame for the irremediable void of their lives. Later, much later, after selling the shop, they learnt after a fashion to live again – visiting friends, evenings over cards, the occasional vacation away – but in Max who had grown up under their wings during their most embittered years, the sense of their blighted, wasted lives, their smallness – ‘my parents are the mediocre insignificant people of the world’ – forged the resolve to rise above them, to rise high, above anonymity, above mediocrity, and to achieve success and, with success, a name.

‘A name,’ Max said. ‘When I have a name, then we can think of a child.’ He placed a forefinger on my lips. ‘Trust in me,’ he added, ‘will you do that?’

Our lives continued as before. Max lectured, wrote; I taught.

I trusted in him, but a change, at first barely perceptible but then more evident, took place in Max.

‘I have ideas, splendid, grand, vivid, burning ideas. They nag at me, haunt me, don’t let me sleep. But on paper, the black upon the white, they lose their lustre. My plots are wooden, my characters flat. Their hates, so menacing and malicious in my brain, are mere petty ranklings, their jealousies are trivial, their desires so shallow and immaterial that an infant could not be moved.’

I read whatever he wrote. As self-critic, he was harsh; though, at times, it must be admitted, there was justice in his self-flagellations.

‘Give it time,’ I said in the way of consoling. ‘Keep trying. Something will come of it.’

‘Yes, time,’ he said with uncustomary vehemence. ‘That is what I need. Six months, a year. To stop lecturing and give

myself over solely to writing. I want six months, uninterrupted, dedicated to one thing only. Six months.'

His frustration rankled, a festering sore, nurtured by his portentous dread of anonymity.

'That would be a good idea – if it would help,' I said.

He stared at me. There was anger in his expression. Buried – I imagined them thinly stretched – between his moustache and beard I could not see his lips.

'And for bread I suppose you would eat the words from the manuscript and for milk you would drink the ink.'

'Max!'

'This life! Gas bills, telephone, electricity, rent! What a narrow, stifling, mediocre existence! How it dulls every cell in the brain. If only . . . if only I could be free again!'

My cheeks flushed with the slap of his words.

'I don't stand in your way.'

He blew down his nose.

'I don't,' I insisted. 'Why do you blame me? Have I ever said anything?'

'Say?! You don't need to say anything. I read it in your eyes. Your hurt, accusing eyes. Blaming me at every turn for denying you a child. Making me bear the load of guilt. How can I hope to create with that on my mind?'

'That's unfair,' I said, approaching him.

He held me by the shoulders, at arm's length, his eyes probing, hard, studying mine.

'Everything I have ever wanted. Vanishing, receding, slipping away.' He clasped me to him with such force I could feel the quiver in his body. 'Going up in smoke.'

He kissed me. I felt his beard scrape my shoulder. He kissed me, not on the lips, but on my neck, his body tense and now somehow remote, his eyes hidden from mine where I could not read, even though I sensed, the distaste with which he performed the ritual of appeasement.

How I wished he would lift me by the waist and swing me around!

How it happened, I do not know. We had, I thought, been particularly careful.

Mama, insofar as she could be stirred to enthusiasm – her diabetes now required insulin for control and she was developing trouble with her circulation – was pleased at the news. Papa touched my cheek fondly and said, 'Mein herliches kind,' and David welcomed me to the Parents' Club. Benjy was away in Warburton at the time.

Over dinner, I told Max. He had begun to come home late, staying back, he said, in his university office to write after the day's lecturing had come to an end. In a flurry of extravagance, I treated him to artichoke hearts and roast chicken with dumplings and placed before him a bottle of wine.

'That's great', he said, but the sharper edge in his tone belied his smile.

The smile then passed off quickly and yielded to a pursing of lips which disappeared, as was happening more frequently of late, between his whiskers and his beard, and to a puckering of the brow and steel-like narrowing of his eyes. This time he kissed me neither on the lips nor on the shoulders, but proceeded to eat, slowly, gloomily, with difficulty, as if with every mouthful he might choke on the food. The wine he didn't touch.

I came up behind him, braced my arms about his bristled chin and placed my cheek upon his head.

'We'll manage, Max,' I said. 'I feel strong enough for all of us.'

'I don't want it,' Max said without emotion, 'not now.'

'What are you saying?'

'You're a woman. You know more about these things.'

'No, Max. Anything but that. I am not getting rid of it. It is *you, me*, both of us. It means something to me.'

'Oh, yes. And to me, too. A ruined life. A humdrum existence revolving on a merry-go-round of feedings and nappie changes. A future trapped in drudgery – like my father's wretched wasted life, like your own father's hollow one filled with plans, intentions, dreams which will go down

with him, with me, unfulfilled, splintered, shattered, into the grave.'

'Be realistic, Max. It need not be like that.'

'Can it be anything else?'

'My God,' I said, 'how can any man be so selfish? How?'

Stung, Max pushed his plate aside roughly, stood up, scraping his chair over the floor-tiles, and strode toward the window where he faced, unseeing I am sure, the darkness outside.

'Max! I love you. I love your work. You have gifts, talents. But those works, they are only words. But a child, Max . . . that is what life, *living*, is all about. Max, please, for once at least, think of me!'

He turned. Max was not given to anger, but there was no denying now the incandescent searing vehemence of his fury.

'Think of you. I can't help but think of you. Your breath is in every breath I take, your shadow stalks my every step, your accusing eyes follow wherever I turn. If not for you . . . if not for you . . .' Max sought the ungiving air for words. He pressed his temples with the balls of his palms.

'My God, I can't escape!'

But he did escape. He strode toward the door sweeping his jacket from the chair where it hung, the chair tottering, reeling and clattering to the floor, went out and slammed the door behind him.

He returned after two and, though he saw that I was still awake, he did not say a word. In silence he changed into his pyjamas, clambered into bed, pulled the blanket over his ears, and turned the other way.

That silence, sustained when, suffering from the persistent discomforts of advancing pregnancy, I needed him most, hurt more than any physical pain. I tried with words, with a smile, with touch, to reach him, but each time he recoiled as though he had been stung. In silence we ate, sat in the same room, crossed each other's path, shared the same bed. Or if we did speak, it was not face to face – Max could barely bring himself to look at me – but indirectly, through friends who happened to visit or through our parents or my brothers before whom

we were compelled out of convention to act out a charade of harmony and marital bliss. Max came home later still, sometimes not until after eleven when, wordlessly and without eating, he would retire to bed. No more did he show me his notebooks where his plays were evolving – they remained in his satchel which he tossed onto his desk on his arrival home. No more did we attend the theatre together and I had to content myself with reading the occasional review he now wrote for the newspapers. Sometimes, in despair, I screamed at him but my screaming was into the void. He shut himself off from me. I slept badly and became nervous, but when Mama, herself becoming visibly sicker by the day, pointed to the darkening circles around my eyes, I joked that I was not exactly an old hand at pregnancy and reassured her that, according to Doctor Winston, there was no cause for concern. And when Papa, visiting me more often as my pregnancy progressed, commented on Max's absence, I dissembled, protected Max and spoke of staff meetings, evening lectures and reports he was obliged to attend to. Papa, obviously unconvinced, bit his lips but accepted what I said. He had endured enough in his life; I could not add to his hurt with the truth. I felt alone, abysmally alone, and even my work, which, for sanity's sake, I was determined to continue as long as I was able brought me no solace.

It was David who first discovered the truth.

He visited me one evening when I was alone. I was in my fifth month of pregnancy and the fact was beginning to show.

David sat on the couch, accepted the coffee I poured for him, ate a cracker, and spoke of his work, of Daniel, of Benjy's Mirela who was growing rapidly. When I sat down opposite him, his expression normally so placid, became more serious. He had strong bushy eyebrows which now came closetogether. The cheekbones of his otherwise soft rounded face – Papa's face – hardened. He drank the coffee quickly but set the cup and saucer down on the side-table with deliberation.

'Esther,' he said, 'we have always been able to talk, haven't we? After Papa, you always came to me when you had a

problem. Mama senses something and the worry is killing her. Papa, hidden behind his papers, doesn't say much but you are always on his mind. Esther, what is going on between you and Max?'

'What do you mean, "What is going on?"?'

'You look forever tired, you are not as bright, as alive as you were. You're well advanced into the pregnancy, yet Max is seldom home.'

'Max? I already explained to Papa. Max works hard. Lectures, meetings, reports, corrections. And . . . and, on top of that, he is still writing his play.'

David waited; probed my eyes with his own unrelenting blue eyes – Papa's eyes – and waited.

I looked away.

'I don't know what you're referring to,' I said.

'Esther,' he said, rising towards me and placing a firm hand on my arm. 'When a man runs around with other women while his wife is carrying his child, then there is something drastically wrong at home.'

'Max?', I said, withdrawing my arm. 'Max with other women? No, not Max. He is too weak, no, too . . . too sensitive. He is an artist. He is ambitious. Nothing, nobody comes before his writing.'

'Papa doesn't know it yet. Nor Mama. But people are beginning to talk.'

'People always talk. Gossip, rumours, lies – there are always people, stupid people with nothing else to think about, ready to wag their tongues and meddle in other people's concerns.'

'Esther,' David said, raising my chin towards him forcing me to look at him. 'I saw him. Last night, at the Atheneum, with some tall brunette he was fawning over.'

'It couldn't have been Max, then. You made a mistake.'

'Susan saw him too.'

'Then you are both mistaken, that's all.'

'Esther, for God's sake, you know that I don't indulge in empty prattle. If I didn't know, if I didn't see for myself, I

would have said nothing. But I do know and I did see and somehow we have to resolve the situation before it becomes irreversible. I'm afraid, Esther. Afraid – for Mama, for Papa, for you.'

David was a rock. Dependable. Steady. Ready to bolster. I knew that him I could tell all there was to tell and he would listen, as he had always done, with selfless patience, concern, solicitude. But I looked at my fingers, studied my nails, and said,

'David, I am no longer a child, no more the confused bewildered adolescent who ran to Papa or to you at every turn. I don't wear plaits anymore and my pimples are gone. I have grown up, David. Come what may, I am soon to be a mother, and whatever problems I may have, they are for me to solve.'

David held my shoulders at arm's length as Max had done. I thought fleetingly how fortunate Susan had been.

'As you wish, Esther,' he said. 'Only remember, should you ever need me, I shall always be there.'

What had been mere insupportable suspicion or runaway fancy during solitary evenings in the flat preparing lessons or ironing the linen or washing odds and ends, had now become established as fact. Well-intentioned, a loving brother, David had disclosed a truth I preferred not to know, and knowledge of that truth hurt more keenly than the honed edge of any razor.

Alone, once more, I feared the loss of self-control. David had been afraid for me; I became afraid for myself as anger, rejection, hurt, spite and frustration slapped at me with open palms so violent that I felt I might be consumed by their heat. In the grip of hurt, I devised menacing gambits with which to confront Max with my knowledge, I rehearsed to brutal completion repeated threats to leave, I envisaged myself standing firm, with a finger of steel pointing towards the door and insisting that he, not I, should be the one to go.

But when Max, after eleven, returned home, placed his satchel upon his desk and, unspeaking, prepared himself for bed, I held my peace, in the last moment for my parents' sake

resolving not to permit a scandal that might further shatter the beleaguered lives, and seethed instead in the sullen desolate solitude of silence.

Three weeks later, Mama stubbed a toe. She bathed it, painted the broken skin with mercurochrome, and dressed it.

On the same evening, I learned from the Levines who came to visit, that Max's first play was to be staged by the Emerald Players in three months. I could not have sufficiently concealed my astonishment nor Max his discomfort, for Deanne, gazing at Max and at me in turn, said, 'Why Estie, didn't you know?'

Max, desperately embarrassed, coughed into his palm, sipped his coffee and, laughing, laughing in truncated jagged tone, said, 'It was to have been a surprise. I didn't tell her.'

Deanne and Martin Levine exchanged a swift all-understanding glance and laughed with him, politely, more out of refinement, I knew, than conviction.

'Oh, I *am* sorry for revealing your secret,' Deanne said.

Soon after, the Levines left.

I tried to bridge the chasm.

'That's wonderful,' I said, summoning strength to conceal the hurt and smoothe all scars. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

Max raised a shoulder, glanced coldly over it towards me, then looked away. There were rebellious strands of grey in his beard that I had not noticed before.

'Since when have you been interested in what I do?'

'I am your wife, Max. For months you haven't given me a chance.'

He reached for a book on the shelves, impervious to words found the place he sought, and, shutting me out, immersed himself in it.

His studied lack of response provoked, spurred me to speak, the accumulated bitterness swelling into sweeping dashing waves.

'Max, I am *speaking* to you. I am your *wife*. I am carrying your *child*. I *care*. In every *way*. What you are, what you do, what you become. More than you know, more, infinitely

more, I promise you, than your brunette or anyone else that you may be running to for your pleasures. If you want to leave, if you want to separate, say so. But this kind of life is not living; it is a hell, a miserable, despicable, soul-destroying hell. If you don't care about me, then think of the child, your child. In three months, you'll be a father. We must come to some decision. If we are to stay together, then make peace with the idea. If you can't do that, then for my sake, for your sake, for everyone's sake, go, go, and stop tormenting me!

To attempt to deny would be to incriminate himself more deeply. He made no protestations of innocence about his brunette. The depths of the Pacific could not have been more remote and unreachable. Max was an unrecognisable shell of the spirited ambitious self-assured man I had married.

'If you're depressed, then see a doctor; say so!', I screamed. 'If something is still gnawing at you, then tell me! But answer me, for God's sake. I am a human being, not a dog!'

Bowing further over his book, he shrugged his shoulders. 'I have nothing to say,' he said.

I left him then, hurried, almost ran to the hallway cupboard, grabbed my jacket and left, slamming the door behind me as he had done several months before.

But unlike Max, I did not return. I wandered through the dreary streets of Parkville and across the silent shadowy parklands, a figure alone in the stark hollow darkness and walked wherever my feet and mind chose to lead me. A wind stirred in the trees and wrapped itself around me with clawing fingers. Outside the cemetery in Lygon Street, a young fellow asked me the time. He reached out towards me and touched my hair. I started to run, escaping from his coarse pursuing laughter, hailed the first taxi that came into view and, my head and chest throbbing with violent palpitations, told the driver where to go.

'Not to the Women's Hospital?', he joked, looking at my figure.

'No, you bastard,' I thought in the jungle of my thoughts, nearly aloud.

They were not surprised to see me. Mama, limping badly and murmuring 'It had to come to this' made me lie down on the sofa; Papa sat beside me, his pain evident even behind his glasses.

'We didn't want to interfere,' he said, apologetically, as if he held himself to blame.

For the first time in several months, I wept. Papa's shoulder, offering support, absorbed my sorrow.

'The scandal, people will talk. I'm sorry. I couldn't take any more.'

Papa's puffy hand was soft, inordinately gentle, as he passed it through my hair in appeasement.

'Mein herliches kind.'

Where, confronted by David, I was stone, resolutely tight-lipped, before Papa, I become sand and crumbled and told him everything as he, as always, cushioned my pain.

'My strength is in my experiences,' he had once said, 'after Auschwitz, nothing can hurt me again.'

His very expression now belied these words, a boast uttered in an unguarded moment.

'Time,' he said when I had finished. 'To every situation, there is a solution. Tomorrow, yes tomorrow – it's too late now – I will speak with Max's father. Something may come of that.'

Mama, in obvious physical discomfort on account of her bruised toe, returned from the kitchen bringing with her a glass of warm milk and honey. She looked appallingly grey and bloated, sick.

'Drink this, then go to sleep. Your bed is made. Whatever happened, you have to be strong. You *and* the baby, may I live to see it. As for *him* – it's no secret I never trusted him. Those white hands, his . . .'

'Not now,' Papa said, 'Esther has had enough.'

The next morning, Papa telephoned Mr. Lehman from his office. An embittered, cynical, unhappy man – one of the 'mediocre insignificant people of this world,' as Max described him – Max's father nonetheless knew where decency lay. He

swore that he had not been even remotely aware of the situation and promised to speak with Max.

His return call came during dinner. I couldn't eat.

'Anusz Lehman couldn't extract much from Max,' Father said gloomily, returning to the table. 'Only that Max says you left him, that the marriage isn't working . . .'

'Has he tried to make it work?', Mama said testily.

' . . . and that their separation is the best thing.'

'Of course,' Mama said, 'For him.'

'Anusz is ashamed. So is Doba. They had no idea and find the whole matter hard to believe. They will try as hard as they can to reason with him.'

Mama had been to the doctor earlier in the day about her bruised toe which had begun to fester. The pain which she couldn't conceal made her more irritable than ever.

'Hmmp,' she snorted, 'what else can he say?'

For a while, we ate in silence, the only noise being the clatter of cutlery against the plates and the rustle of serviettes. Then, pouring himself a glass of soda, Papa sighed, turned up a hand and said, with a nod of the head, 'Time, Esther mine. To every problem, there is a remedy. But for now, we must continue to live and work as before.'

We continued to live and work as before.

In the weeks that followed, I stayed with my parents. Sometimes, David came with Susan and their precocious Daniel; sometimes Benjy brought Elizabeth and Mirela to dispel the gloom. They tried their utmost, with bright illustrious talk and jokes and laughter, but after their departure, Mama, her infected leg raised on a stool before her, returned to her knitting or crocheting, Papa to his futile labours behind his notes and books, and I to the lessons I had to prepare. Mama, herself in pain, doted upon me at every turn. Doctor Summers had prescribed a succession of tablets and insisted that she rest, but he could as well have whistled into the wind. Mama continued, even against my protestations and offers to do it instead, to wash my clothes while I was at school and brought me a glass of milk or an apple as I sat with my notes at the table.

'You must think of the baby,' she said at every opportunity.

I was entering into my eighth month and about to give up working.

There were bruits in the press about Max's forthcoming play. Entitled 'Guests for the Night', it told of the attempted impossible reconciliation between two middle-aged brothers, one grown wealthy beyond counting through shadowy and unscrupulous dealings, the other his moral opposite, his alter ego, honest but poor. The reporter in 'The Age' (which carried a bad picture of Max smiling with facetious smugness) called it a modern fable; the 'Sun' described it as a 'hard-hitting commentary on the distortion of contemporary values.'

I resolved emphatically not to attend the performance when staged – but knew with equally tenacious certainty that, unless I was already confined I should be unable to stay away.

In the end, I did not see Max's play, but not my confinement was the reason.

Mama's bruised toe, accidentally stubbed against the leg of a chair, had become infected. An ulcer developed. Frank gangrene set in. The smell of putrifying flesh under the soggy dressings was appalling. All of Dr. Summers' efforts to salvage the toe failed and Mama was in constant pain.

'It's the diabetes,' Dr. Summers said gravely, gazing over the rim of his bifocals as he spoke. 'It affects the circulation and makes healing difficult. There is only one course of action left open.'

The idea of an operation frightened, unnerved Mama. Victim of her diabetes, her kidney trouble and her mounting fatigue, she became beset by sombre premonitions. Whereas in her, in contrast to Papa, her past had been bolted against the present with chains of an iron resolve, more and more her memories now seeped through the cracks developing in those restraining gates as she dropped allusions to her parents, her brothers, her sisters destroyed three decades before in Europe. Youth and death came to possess her conversation and in those few days at home before she entered into hospital, she insisted upon her daughters-in-law Susan and Elizabeth bringing to

her her grandchildren whom she then fondled and kissed and touched with a fretful intensity born of black and anxious panic. To Papa, already sorting out his papers for want of occupation, she said with a forced truncated laugh on the eve of entering St. Andrew's Hospital, 'Pray hard, there may be a God up there,' and to me added, 'If it's a girl, remember my name.'

I had cause, in the end, to remember her name.

The first, partial, amputation failed; another became inevitable. Following the second operation, she suffered a stroke, the diabetes leapt out of control, her kidneys, to cite Dr. Summers, 'collapsed' and Mama sank into a coma as ugly and final as the extinction of the sun.

In those interminable weeks of her dying, Papa became a shadow. He refused the invitations of Susan and Elizabeth to come to dinner and ate instead at home, ate without appetite or, rather, picked fitfully at the soups, meats and desserts they brought him. Carelessly shaven, unslept and dark-eyed, he haunted the hospital ward where Mama lay and, returning home, clung to the huddling corners of the lounge-room, sometimes gazing for long empty periods at the place on the sofa where Mama used to knit or crochet or read, and repeating in a frequent muffled monotone, 'What kind of life did I give her, what kind of life, what kind?'

Always the one to be consoled by Papa, I now sought the strength, above my own distress, to console him in turn. But words, in the face of the cold overwhelming fact of Mama's oblivion, against the ugly tangle of bottles and tubes and apparatus that were beyond all reason now sustaining her physical existence – against all these, words came hard. Words were hollow, vacuous, feeble. David, too, the strongest of us all, tried, and Benjy. But words could not touch. The closest I could come to him was, without speech, to bring him a cup of coffee or a sandwich or a piece of fruit and sit close at hand offering my presence alone where I could offer nothing more.

It was during this period – Mama had been in hospital for

five weeks and I was no longer teaching – that Max's play 'Guests for the Night' – opened.

I stayed away; Papa's solitude became mine.

And then, two days later, a fortnight before time, I went into labour. It was in the early morning hours. I woke from a nightmare in which a succession of grotesque screaming gesticulating natives were pouncing upon me for some undetermined crime. Intense pain riveted my belly; for a while I could barely catch my breath. I lay still, suddenly alert, and peered, my eyes sharpening, into the half-light half-darkness that cast mute immobile shadows about the room. And then the pain returned, a cramp unmistakable and stubborn, that penetrated vice-like through to my back. In that instant, I thought of Max. A brief vision, fleeting but vivid, an engraving in relief, Max. Not the Max I had loved and married and tried to sustain but the Max in 'The Age,' facetious and smug, who did not, could not, care about what, in that moment, I was enduring on his account. And once more the pain eased and in the ensuing pause, all my senses were honed to razors. I heard Papa shuffling about in the lounge-room. I rose, went in to him. The overhead light stung my eyes. Dressed in his crimson cotton dressing-gown – a birthday gift from Mama – and in his loose leather slippers, he was busying himself, despite the hour, at his desk.

On its surface lay a pile of folders, books and papers which he was tying with a string. Seeing me, he turned. His eyes, though tired, were unusually clear, their clarity enhanced almost triumphantly by some private resolve. His balding head glistened, his puffy hands trembled. Jaws firm, he shook his head. His voice was hard, tense, bitter.

'They're not worth the price,' he said vehemently. 'Scribble, foolishness, useless. Because of this I denied her a proper life. And now . . . now it is too late . . .'

They were his notes, I realised with a jolt, that he had bundled together. And not merely his notes, but his life's purpose, his experiences, his past unforgotten and unforgiven that he had wanted to declare before the world. And now,

from his manner, it was evident that he was ready to destroy them all and let the ghost of his past settle, however convulsively, in the unmarked unrecorded grave of mere private memory which, when his own time came, would perish too into eternal silence.

And I wanted to tell him not to destroy his work and to console him that upon him lay no blame and that his labours still possessed meaning – if only, as he had said, for his children, for us – and that contrary to his resolve he now owed it to Mama to complete the work – but just then another contraction burgeoned forth with a force that fixed me to one spot and made me gasp.

Starkly awake, prodded to lucid alertness by the cool silence of rising morning, I wanted to say many things, but the pain cut across all speech.

Papa caught my gasp which threw him into indecision. Not knowing what to do with his hands – they seemed to become superfluous as he teetered between me and that knotted bundle of notes, — he scanned me up and down in bewilderment, looking for a sign upon which to act. How I wished that Mama, so decisive, so practical and efficient were there at that moment! Even Max.

‘Mein kind, what is it?’, he asked, his eyes briskly mobile.

‘This is it . . . the baby, I think . . . the hospital.’

‘The very word ‘hospital’ filled me with distaste and unsettled Papa; but called to positive action – perhaps thankful for it – he now tried to be strong on the threshold of the front-door, locking it behind me. I felt as Mama must have done when she had left, looking upon the pictures on the wall, the telephone table, the potted rubber plant and the hallway mirror as if for the last time. There was none of that hoped-for, dreamt-for gladness in the coming event. And the recurring griping riveting pain made it all the more detestable.

At the hospital, as I was wheeled into the ward, Papa leant over me, kissed me on the brow. I felt the sharp bristles of his unshaven chin. He smiled, distantly, weakly, only with the lips but not the eyes.

'Mein herliches kind, think only of the baby,' he said. 'Nothing else matters . . . anymore.'

Five hours later, the baby was born, a pink flat-nosed black-haired wrinkled squinting girl that the sister brought to me swaddled in blankets. I looked at her, tried to persuade myself that she was mine, thought then of Max, of Papa, Mama, my brothers and of the vast troubled horror-stricken world outside, suppressed waves of nausea and pity and mourning that welled up stubbornly within me and, feeling utterly, abysmally depleted, screamed and screamed and screamed, begging whoever was there if they had compassion to take the baby away.

Two sisters hurried toward me. One took the baby; the other grasped my hand and stroked my brow. Then the first sister returned and gave me an injection. I fell asleep.

I woke from a muddled dream to find David sitting beside my bed. He had brought an elaborate bouquet of flowers which a ward assistant was placing into a long-necked vase.

'Welcome finally to the Parents' Club,' David said, squeezing my fingers and smiling, showing his teeth. 'She's a beauty, the little one. A true Kornfeld.'

The mid-afternoon light entering between the slats of the aluminium sun-shade outside my window hurt my eyes.

'Tell Papa,' I said, turning my face from the light, yet not looking at David, 'tell him, when you see him, not to destroy his papers. They are all he has, his purpose, his mission.'

'What are you talking about?'

'About life, David. And happiness, fulfilment, waste. And ugliness and pain and meaningless suffering.'

'Esther, this isn't the time for such thoughts.'

'A toe. One silly toe stubbed senselessly against a chair. Life is so brittle, David, if a person can die because of a toe.'

'Mama is still alive . . .'

'And all their pain. Why, David? To survive hell, Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, years and years of heartache and uprootedness and, at last when all seems to be going well, to be struck with a scandal and an unhappy deserted daughter and have it

all end because of a toe. Where is the sense of it all? There is none, none.'

'Esther . . .'

'You once promised me, David, should I ever need you, you would always be there. I need you now. To hold me, to give me of your strength, of that simple goodness that is within you. I am so desperately cut off. Even the baby, the baby . . . I feel nothing for it, except sadness. I wish it had never been born. The world doesn't deserve its innocence.'

David held me; through his chest, I heard the regular comforting pulsating of his heart. He arms were strong, yet tender. He smelled, I didn't know why, of blackberries. I clung to him as to a lifeline.

He tried to soothe, his soft puffy hand – Papa's hand – stroking my hair, with words telling me that to be happy one did not need to look for explanations, telling me that to look for explanations was to make oneself unnecessarily unhappy. What mattered most was the air one breathed, the light that shone before one's eyes, the odours and tastes one could sense in the present upon one's tongue. What had been could never be changed. What was to be, the big things – Mama's illness, the miseries outside, the ugliness, senselessness, evil, waste – these were not in my hands except insofar as I guarded against them in my own life, in my own small way. In the nursery lay my baby, *my* baby. What *was* in my hands was to bring *it* happiness, to offer *it* love and security and tenderness. For the rest, even an oracle could not foretell.

When he left, a sister brought the baby in to me.

'The poor little sausage has been wailing,' she said with a gay good-natured laugh. 'Is Mum ready to offer her a feed?'

Tensely, uncertainly, I unbuttoned my nightgown and slipped an arm out of its sleeve. The baby was so tiny, its face florid and mobile and almost squashed as it gnawed frantically upon its knuckles, its eyelids folded over one another in long irregular creases, its thinly-delicate black hair standing on end. My hands fumbling, I reached out for it. Its head jerked forward and back, revealing its gooselike neck. With the help

of the sister, a big woman in uniform, who kept up a ceaseless ritual patter on how to hold and position and feed little juniors like mine, I laid the baby to my breast, felt against me the vigorous searching quiver of its head and yielded, out of duty, without love, without interest, simply because the sister was there and I could do nothing else, to the hard frenetic gnawing of its firmly-gripping gums. She was my baby, David had said, *my* baby, a true Kornfeld. Yet even as I gave it suck, I wanted to tear it away like a stranger or intruder that had no claim upon the remotest part of me. But the sister, ever-chattering, touching, patting, hovering over me, her powdered face locked into a professional smile, and the baby a stubborn vulture on my breast, gave me no opportunity to cut short the odious ordeal. I could not bring myself to give the little wretch a name.

When, towards evening, Papa and Benjy came to visit and plied me with questions about the baby, all the venom that had welled up during the ritual of feeding burst its bounds, and violently, almost savagely, I flailed about the air and hissed at them to go, to leave me be, to leave me to myself, alone, and undisturbed. Papa, laying his hand upon my shoulder, tried to kiss me. Snappishly I turned my face away. Then Benjy, his breath smelling of the mints he devoured by the packet, leaned over and said, softly, evenly, in muted confidential tone, 'David told me of your state. Remember, Esther, Papa too is suffering. Hurt is not any one man's prerogative. Think of Papa. Mama doesn't have long to go.'

The next morning, I fed the baby with resignation. I took her mechanically from the sister, delivered its mouth to my breast, and then let her lie, without taking interest, in the crook of my arm until she was taken away again. Then to forget, to pass the time, the wearisome hours between feedings, I bought the morning papers.

On the arts and entertainments pages, I found reviews of

Max's play and recognised at once that, despite all the preliminary publicity, it had been a failure. The critic in 'The Age' wrote of the 'inflated sense of the play's importance,' of 'its high-falutin' bombastic unrelieved oratorical tone', and of 'the playwright's lack of balance, perspective and theatrical grasp'. The 'Sun' mildly applauded the theme and sympathised with the author's ultimate intent but found that the play suffered from 'a want of artistry, sensitivity and psychological insight.'

My jaws set in gratified concrete hardness, I read into the critics' words sharply-honed nails which I hammered into Max's egotism with a vigour as virulent as poison, deriving from his public rebuke a sense of vengeance, a retribution that was private and deserving. I remembered Max basking in smugness in that earlier photograph in 'The Age', couldn't help but think of the brunette that had usurped my place. More than anything else, that had cut the sharpest, had drawn the most blood, and was of all his felonies the least forgivable. It pleased me with a perverse delighted pleasure to read and read again the critics' verdicts and to rejoice no less perversely in his failure.

But rejoicing, however churlish, proved too truncated a luxury in which to wallow. Shortly after midday, David, serious, his otherwise full mobile cheeks drawn to pale gauntness, appeared and, fumbling for words to temper the blow, broke the news. Mama had died during the night.

'It's for the best,' he said solemnly. 'She didn't suffer.'

It was not until after he had left, and then Benjy, that I wept. Then Papa came and, wordlessly – for what was there to say? – we wept together.

The duty sister asked in the afternoon and again towards evening whether I was able to feed the baby. Numbly, mechanically, staring at the nurse's badge the lapel of her immaculate white uniform, I said 'No.'

'Don't let yourself go to pieces,' she said solicitously when I had refused a second time. 'Baby needs a strong mum.'

Left alone, I stood by my window, gazing out into the descending darkness. Far below, the gardens, by day full of

sunlight and variegated green, became beset, beleaguered, by dark menacing clumps of clotted shadow, while beyond, towards the city, criss-crossed by tiers and spirals and pylons of light, the buildings stood stark and sharp-edged and monstrous against the tumbling night, mute witness to the arbitrary malevolence and brittleness inherent in life in which a thing as senseless as an injured toe could kill and in which millions upon millions could die, expendable, their one-time existence concealed by the rush of time and the all-encompassing oppression of space. No wonder then that Papa had come to consider his life's task futile; no wonder, too, that Max, driven by the dread of oblivion, wanted to carve for himself a name; no wonder that David, ever so good-natured, accepted so calmly the air he breathed, the light he saw, and the odours and tastes upon his tongue. The responses were of one source, each equally appropriate, there being none to judge except the self which response was of all the most true, none to choose except the self which course of many was the most felicitous to one's enduring authentic inner core.

Against the darkness, in the glass of the broad high window, I saw my tense immobile face rimmed by the ragged graceless cascade of my dishevelled hair, saw the limpness of my shoulders sagging under the combined weight of my blue cotton dressing-gown and my gloom, looked at my flattened belly which not long before had been swollen wonderfully with an object of pride. In the nursery she now lay – asleep, awake, crying, I didn't know – my baby, as David had said, my own, while I her mother denied her from the outset any chance of happiness, of love, security and tenderness in a world already impoverished of sense and gladness. And remorse – frenzied, surging, inundating remorse – welled up from depths uncharted and overwhelming pity for her unprotected innocence made me gasp. I turned, I hurried, I ran, brushing visitors and staff on my way to the nursery.

But I did not get there. Gasping again, I came to a frozen standstill and stared, seeing, unable not to see, not wanting to believe.

At the farther end of the corridor, Max, Max without the pretentious beard, without the affectation or smugness was approaching, searching among the ward signs for my room. And then he saw me. Neither of us smiled as he came close. He pursed his lips, fidgeted with his fingers for occupation, looked at me, looked away, turned questioning, searching eyes upon me again.

'I've just seen her,' he said, nervously, one eyelid twitching. 'She looks like you.'

People walked by. Behind my back, I felt a cool glancing draught as a door somewhere was opened. I wanted to leave him standing there, to move on to the nursery.

'What are you calling her?'

'What do you want from me?'

'She is ours, Esther, ours. No, don't blow down your nose.'

'I suppose I should kiss you or crawl to you instead.'

He shook his head.

'Curse me, swear at me. Whatever you say, Esther, it won't hurt me one iota as much as all that I have already said to myself; it can't hurt one jot as much as the shattering of illusions. That's why I am taking the chance, hoping, however fragile the hope, that we, we, Esther, the three of us can start afresh.'

It was bitterness that spoke. 'For how long, Max? Three months, six months, a year? Until you're ready for another change? Until you find another brunette or blonde or red-head?'

'I'm past illusions. I've been bitten once and the teeth sank deep.'

I said nothing now, took mute satisfaction in his discomfort. His upper lip under the moustache quivered. His whole face bore an intensity of almost palpable tangible sorry despair.

'I heard about your mother and I am sorry. Perhaps *we*, at least, can still be happy?', he said.

I moved past him. 'I have to go to the baby. She's hungry.'

'Is it possible?'

'You tell *me*, Max, is it?'

Max strode behind me. He was breathing heavily. We reached the nursery. At the display window, I paused, stiffly seeking out the trolley with my baby.

She lay on her side, covered by a white flannel blanket with a blue rim. As before, the round moon-like face, full with creases, seemed flattened, the nose squashed, the delicate black fan of hair standing on end. One closed fist was pressed against the crimson cheek, her small mouth pouted, the full red lips sucked at a knuckle of her other hand.

'Perhaps we can still be happy?', Max had said, asking for the impossible. Two years before when I had glided free and feathery in his arms, happiness had been certain, absolute, pure. But time, ambition, desolation, sickness and death had eroded that purity to reveal a rotting core in which happiness was merely conditional, a brittle illusion teetering drunkenly on a filament stretched taut and ready to crumble into fragments beyond restoration. Or, at best, it was a dappled tapestry of patches, crudely seamed together along ragged margins which the most minute of discordant breezes might forever rend apart.

Accepting that, poise, calm, even hope might in time be regained.

Standing now beside me and looking too upon the child, Max reached out and touched my arm, uncertainly, with caution.

'I still don't know her name,' he said.

His white veinless hand was moist. I remembered Mama who disliked such hands; remembered too her forced truncated sombre laugh, black with premonition, the night before she entered hospital, and remembered finally her anxious remark.

'If it's a girl . . .'

I did not draw away. Max's touch, a little bolder, gained strength. Beside us, another couple come to see their child, were laughing. The mother, her gay face a mass of freckles, was pointing excitedly at their baby, who at that moment

yawned comically and wide. Her husband nibbled at her ear and she giggled, happily it seemed. And standing beside her, I felt the weight of gloom subside and became aware of an easier movement of breath. The light around me seemed suddenly brighter, the darkness outside less menacing, more serene.

I turned, looked squarely upon Max, probed in turn the tension of his searching face.

'Her name's Rebecca,' I said, remembering Mama, and, turning back again towards our child, dared myself once more to hope.