

## *Before the Law*

My father never played golf. In fact, there were many things he didn't do – watch football, drink beer, go sailing, bet on horses.

'That's for them,' he would say, sucking his lips as he arranged his oranges in neat little rows.

'But it won't hurt me to join the team,' I persisted.

'And it won't hurt you if you don't,' he said. 'Your studies are more important. Your father and mother do their part. If you love them, you do yours.'

A quiet life his, spent unadventurously among the smells of cabbage and tomatoes of his fruitshop, spent in the over-riding dedication to one cause – to make of me a man.

'Fill your head with football and you'll become a plumber. Stick to your books and you will be a lawyer, an architect or a dentist, something respectable, a man to look up to, a somebody. Now if you love your father . . .'

I loved my father and didn't join the team.

When I was eleven, he took me to the museum; at twelve, to a concert. A year later, I turned Bar Mitzvah and he bought me the Britannica. But having eaten raw apples the day before, I spent the museum journey in the lavatory; at the concert I fell asleep; and the best use I could put the encyclopaedia to was to colour in the black and white diagrams in Volume one. He gave me a hiding when he found out, but the deed having been done, I didn't see the point of the punishment. He called me

ungrateful, demanded to know what he and my mother slaved for, predicted that nothing worthwhile would become of me.

'You'll be a shegetz, an ignoramus, a . . . a nothing. Is that what you want? Is that right for a Jewish boy? For someone who will be a man someday?'

I tried to become more sensible, grew more serious, and pledged myself to read from Volume 1 through to 24 the entire Britannica. I reached 'Abbey' before abandoning my resolve, but not before I could distinguish between Abbas the first, Shah of Persia, and Abbas the first, pasha of Egypt, as well as between Abbas Hilmi Pasha, Abbas Mirza and Abbas-Tuman, not to mention between Abbeville in Carolina and Abbeville in France. In school, I looked for ways to display my newly-garnered knowledge but neither algebra nor trigonometry lent themselves to such pearls, nor even history which dealt with the kings of England and Captain Cook and the Plains of Abraham where a soldier James Wolfe met his tragic end after defeating the French.

To my friends and classmates who preferred volleyball and cricket, I became a bore. They called me 'brains', 'swot', 'snob'. On occasions, I did join in their games but more often, having lost my earlier interest in sport, I spent the recesses with a book in my hands, munching an apple in the shelter shed and reading, not the insipid texts prescribed by the teachers but the juicier stuff – of Steinbeck and Hemingway and Caldwell – the loftier prose of Conrad, the flowing tales of Tolstoy and Dostoievski and the melancholy but so human stories of Chekhov. I became intoxicated, obsessed. After eating and sleeping, reading became my deepest need.

But my father wasn't particularly pleased.

'And what about your schoolwork?', he asked, picking up a Dostoievski with a hand grimy with potato dust and smelling of leeks. 'For such books you have time when you're older. First, you have to be something, to become somebody, then you can read all you want. Next year, with God's help, you will finish Matriculation and then there is the university. Your father and mother won't be able to work for you for ever. And

if you don't do your part, what will become of you?'

He wasn't ready for my reply. His eyes narrowed, almost menacingly; even before I had finished my announcement, his cheekbones became steel, he stiffened.

'I don't want to go to university. I want to be a writer.'

'A writer I'll give you.'

My mother was in the kitchen. My father called out to her.

'Tamara, did you hear? Your son wants to be a writer, a scribbler. After all we have done for him.'

Mother entered, wiping wet hands in a dirty already-wet chequered apron.

'Is it any wonder? All the books he's been reading when he should have been outside, getting sun, fresh air like other normal boys. Books, books, books all the time.'

My father preferred not to argue. Facing me squarely, his face at fifty grown flabby, his hair become a leaden grey, he said, 'let's make a deal. First you study, become a somebody – a lawyer, a dentist, an accountant, whatever you choose, we'll support you – then when you have finished and are earning money and, God willing, you can support a wife and family, you can do what you wish, even become a writer. Without a secure profession, you'll wander from job to job, become a fruiterer like your father, a plumber, a . . . a God knows what.'

'But I don't want all that – to be a lawyer, have a wife, family.'

'Listen to your father,' Mother said. 'It's for your good, not ours. We know. Our life has been lived already, and we can't change it. But you . . . you have the world before you.'

'I don't care about . . .'

'Do you want to get up at four each morning like your father,' my father said, 'and load sacks of potatoes and orange crates on to a truck and stand in a shop for twelve hours a day, seven days a week?'

'But a writer . . .'

'A writer starves,' Mother said with her customary gentleness, 'lives from hand to mouth, struggles, slaves, begs for

years before he becomes known. Is that what you want after all we have done for you? Is it?

My father, too, mellowed his tone. 'If you love your parents who want only the best for you, do as we say.'

The following year I matriculated with honours and enrolled in Law with half a heart. The pressures of study had curtailed my reading and where before I devoured the books, now I merely pecked at them, flitting from one to another, from Gide to Camus and Brecht, from Turgenev to Zola and Flaubert, reading only disjointed snippets which transformed one-time pleasure into pounding frustration and honed into resolve the deep-seated ache that was the need to write. And I did write. Sketches, feuilletons, even stories that evoked the melancholy tone of a Chekhov if not the art, and rhyming verses, none of which, in my four years at the university, to my sorrow ever saw the light of day. I needed time, I felt – indeed, I knew – but how surmount the exigencies imposed by the need to master company law and torts, conveyancing and equity through a series of dry massive colourless tomes hedged in with legal jargon and gobbledegook. But time was a commodity elusive. I detested the course and had to work all the harder to permit perseverance to see me through where enthusiasm fell short.

And my perseverance did see me through.

On the night of my graduation, my parents held a party in celebration. I had protested, wanted no fuss to be made of the occasion; a dinner for the three of us would be sufficient after which I could withdraw to my room and immerse myself once more in my books so long neglected and in the mound of papers, of fragments – of 'dwarfs' as I called them – which I had crammed into the drawers of my desk. They insisted on some sort of celebration. Twenty people came – among others, the Edelsteins with their ugly daughters, Betty and Rose, all the Wertkins, the Kahans, the Rosenbergs and the Wieners and Haskiel Norich who clapped me on the back with his massive palm and laughed raucously through the spaces between his teeth. Mother had excelled herself. The tablecloth

was new, glistened still in its whiteness. One course followed on the heels of the previous one: herring and tomato, gefilte fish, kreplach, kishke and cholent, chickent, duck, top-rib, and, when all these were over, there were still compote of apple and strawberry and finally coffee and cake.

My father, not accustomed to wine, had drunk too much. He was buoyant, laughed a lot. His cheeks, usually grey, were flushed and the leaden dullness of his hair changed to a shinier mercuric hue. After dinner, he rose to speak.

I wanted to escape, to retreat to my room, to write and write and write, to make up for time lost in four years and more of study to become a something, a somebody in the eyes of the world.

Father spoke, spoke of things that everyone knew: of the black years in Europe and of survival; of this distant land Australia, of its freedom and pleasantness and of the opportunities it offered to the children of migrants. He had the proof of it under his own roof, he said, in his own son who showed how, in one generation, a person can rise and become, with a little effort and ambition, whatever in the world he chooses to be.

When he sat down, beaming at the flow of his own eloquence, the guests applauded. Mr. Wertkin called out, 'Good on you' and Haskiel Norich rose from his chair to clap me once more on the back with his massive palm. I kept my eyes lowered, focussed on my fingers that fidgeted with my knife.

'Don't be so modest,' I heard Mr. Rosenberg say, and Mr. Kahan opposite me added, 'It's not everyday a young fellow becomes a lawyer.'

'No, indeed', my father echoed, 'it's not every day a young fellow becomes a lawyer'.

I raised my head, looked into the laughing happy faces of the guests, of my father, and smiled. A bitter smile, an angry smile, a smile aching with regret.

I had become a lawyer, yes, but I no longer loved my father.