

Epitaph

No, it's not pleasure I get, certainly not a perverse relish, but I cannot begin my day without first flipping open the newspaper to page eighteen or twenty-two or thirty-one or wherever the Personal Notices happen to be on that day. The front-page stories come later. International conflicts, rebellions, political strife, cabinet scandals, and economic bungles are important, yes – far be it from me who has seen and experienced so much to deny it – but, in my life, all this is secondary. So, too, are the feature articles, the book reviews, theatre critiques, editorials and letters to the editor, those brief and not so brief indignant protests which I scan in quest of amusement and of illogic, – particularly when written by members of the clergy, the Anti-Fluoridation League, the Right to Life Movement and, for good measure, the Bicycle Riders' Association, letters which the newspaper must feel duty-bound to print. And as for sport – if I had my way, I would abolish these frivolous opiate pages altogether or at best relegate the whole business in two tight columns of forbidding type to some inconspicuous place after Livestock for Sale or Garden Supplies. Indeed, I once wrote to the editor on this very issue but my letter wasn't published.

This habit – no, this compulsion – to turn to the Personal Notices columns began with the deaths, in succession, of my only daughter Batya from cancer and then my wife Hermina through suicide, nearly ten years ago. I can speak of it more

calmly now, although at the time, it took me all of two years to come to terms with facts and with the answers which weren't true answers to questions I had set myself. Since then, I have found solace of a kind in the names, ages (where these are given), and register of bereaved kin, and sometimes in the pathetic little verses telling of stairs to heaven and of eternal rest, of undying loyalty and imminent reunion and all other manner of maudlin sentiments that only a grieving heart – certainly not a rational mind – could ever compose, verses such as I wrote upon Batya's death:

'A jewel given, a jewel taken,
Our light that the darkest hours did brighten,
Our joy divine, sublime, ennobling,
Like a leaf now withered, faded, gone,
Leaving poor again mourning parents
Seeking their jewel among the stars.'

A child born soon after our arrival to Australia, she was eighteen when she died.

In these columns, I am forever looking for familiar names. And naturally, at my age, the catalogue is lengthening. Landsmen, ship's brothers, business companions, acquaintances – one by one, their names appear in black on white. Taubman, Abraham, on January 25th, suddenly, dear husband of Leah, beloved father of Sonia and Leon, darling Papa of Sharon, Justin and Fiona, loved brother of Joseph (Argentina) and Isaac (dec. USA) – May his dear soul rest in peace; Marcus, Pinchas (Pinie), on February 6th, after a long illness, husband of Pearl, father of Michael and Morry, grandfather of Gerard, Michelle, Lucille and Estelle, in his 68th year; Marila Rosenbaum, wife of Benzion (dec.), loving Mama of Sarah, mother-in-law of Paul, devoted Buba of Shoshi and Shuli – Always in our hearts. And so on. They are fortunate, doubly fortunate. Not because they have died, of course; no, not because of that. But rather because they have offspring and because, in dying, here, in Australia, a generation later, they have managed to preserve their name. A generation ago . . . A generation ago, my

parents, like theirs, died without a name. Likewise my brothers, my sisters, my uncles, my aunts, and my numerous cousins. Perhaps they had an identification number at least tattooed on a forearm. That I don't know. Certainly no newspaper column or tombstone or document, nor even a surviving tattered photograph records their existence. If they have an epitaph, it is merely one I carry about engraved in my brain, locked into the tangled nest of memory which rises in all its acuteness and severity at commemoration ceremonies when the cantor quiveringly intones the 'El Mole Rachamim' beside the candelabrum of flickering candles and against the stark black backdrop lettered in white, reminding, if reminding be needed, of the six million martyrs, victims of disease, gas and flame, buried nameless in mass graves now covered with pastures or buttercups or dispersed as ash and smoke into the infinity of space and eternity of time.

Retired, I have ample time on my hands. I see a familiar name in the columns of the morning paper and my timetable for the remainder of the day revolves around the funeral for which soon after breakfast I prepare myself to attend. There is no law – not even that of decency – which states that I must go; very often I have met the newly-deceased only once, perhaps twice, but compulsion – the same that drives me towards the Personal Notices each morning – overrides reason and I take myself out to Springvale where the wind circuits with icy fingers across the jagged terrain of tombstones and the flatter plains of waiting earth beyond, to stand in the midst of other mourners as the rabbi delivers his eulogy in sober tones, as the bare pine-wood coffin is lowered on canvas straps into the grave to the augmented sobs of a wife or son or daughter left behind, and as the moist clay is shovelled in in thick thudding clods to separate forever the dead beneath from the living above, an act in which I participate with the dedication of unspoken duty and after which I pay my respects to the grieving family even though I shall repeat my condolence at the evening minyan. Above all, I make sure that I am noticed.

Whilst in Springvale, I visit also Hermina's grave and Batya's beside her where a deep angular crevice has appeared across the mottled grey stone to separate the 'one' from the 'eight' in her age. For a fleeting moment, as always, I recall the emotional agonies surrounding her dying, the visits to the hospital, Batya's yellow sunken frightened eyes and Hermina's tormented tears and her later madness, and my gaze drifts to the empty plot on Batya's left, an overgrown rectangle of earth vouchsafed, paid for and assured, waiting through all weathers for the father's heart, already sustained by a bevy of pills, to give out entirely. Friends – those who are left – and acquaintances regard such frequent visits to Hermina's and Batya's graves, even after ten years, as expressions of profound unfading loyalty, a view reinforced by my refusal to remarry, even when a succession of eligible widows have presented themselves before me. And it is not for me to disillusion them. But true feeling – the one they speak of – has shrivelled like a fallen sun-parched grape and, if the truth be known, it is before my own still-unmarked grave that I stand the longest, envisaging with total and peaceful equanimity the tombstone I have left details with my lawyer to have erected for me within a year of my interment – a modest stone to be sure, of medium height and unpretentious design upon which are inscribed my name, the years of my birth and my death, my kinship to Hermina and Batya and, below a seven-branched candelabrum, my two-lined epitaph, the same which will appear, if my lawyer is to be trusted, in the Personal Notices columns of the newspaper. At such moments, I remember my family – not Hermina nor Batya – but the ones left nameless under the pastures and snows of Europe or in its skies, and I remember, too, my own years in Buchenwald and my miraculous liberation, a skeleton of forty kilos but one whose identity had not been wholly destroyed.

In this lies my ultimate solace which has grown, not lessened, with the years. Die I must, and against incontrovertible fact I have long ceased to argue. For there are questions to which no answers are true answers, unless what is true is that

which each man for himself designates as true. So death, dying, hold no terror for me. In surviving, it is not merely death that I have escaped but anonymity and I can with unmitigated composure envisage my own funeral, a conventional affair to be sure, but for a childless widower well attended – have I not through my own appearances among the bereaved secured for myself a harvest of goodwill? – and I can muse, as so often before, with the serenity and satisfaction of crystal waters, upon the epitaph that is to appear in black upon white and in gold upon grey:

‘A man who, when Europe burned, did not go up in smoke,
And who in the heat of hell preserved his name.’

In our day, it is almost enough to make the heart leap with delight.