The Life That I Have Led

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On Firmer Shores (stories)

A Universe of Clowns (stories)

A Bibliography of Australasian Judaica.

To my parents,
to Eva, Dvora, Jonathan and Noemi always,
to all who venture ever to reach deeper, look further and aim higher,
having at the end no reason to regret the life that they have led
or the life they have not led,
as also, with no less feeling, to those who do regret.

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Seeds

Nearly empty, the house. Mere odds and ends remain, earlier necessities become ephemera which we – Mother, Father, I – toss higgledy-piggledy into boxes, into cartons soon to be taken away. The other wares already lie outside, deposited on the nature strip, on the pavement, in Father's station-wagon, themselves to be delivered to charity or to be thrown away at the local tip as junk, all the accumulated now-redundant bric-a-brac of years cluttering Zaida Zerach's home – the usual chipped dust-encrusted peeling picture-frames, old suits with the fustiness of mothballs choked, mottled mirrors, a rickety table, precarious chairs, an outworn sofa with pouting springs, his violin.

His violin. Solace to his solitude, succour to his soul.

Not overly pious, far less observant, yet does Zaida Zerach ever like to talk of souls.

'Do you know,' he says as his fingers sift melodies, wring tremolos from that varnished frame of pinewood and wire, 'there is a *dybbuk* in these strings and a *dybbuk* is a soul and that soul dances like a *shikker* across space across time as tum-ta-tum-tum it leaves one human body to enter another?'

He continues to play.

'*Raisins and Almonds*,' he plays.

'*Margaritkes*,' he plays.

'*The Little Town Belz*,' he plays.

'Not music is this,' he says as strings oscillate and tremble beneath the bow, 'not music, don't be fooled, but the soul of a people through the centuries passing down from Jubal and

King David through me on to you. So open up your soul Raphael mine, open your soul, and let the souls of others of your people continue and live and abide through you on to generations and to generations yet to come that their greatness *our* greatness brilliance light may yet be given unto the nations as was the charge given to our father of fathers Abraham our Father whose seed was to be as the stars of heaven and the sand upon the shore.'

'Three levels of creation define a man,' he says, plucking at strings that resonate on pine. 'What he does what he thinks what he feels. In this a man is deed a man is mind a man is soul.'

Zaida Zerach, if mother I am to believe, is intoxicated with soul.

But his own soul, Zaida Zerach's, where, where is it now to be found?

The rooms, under our tread, reverberate. Our voices, however solemn, however subdued, echo in the expanding camphored emptiness of the house, metal rings against metal, wood clatters on wood. Neither Mother nor Father seems to hear, but Zaida is playing. He stands before the window, as I do now, looks out upon the porch, the street, the terraces and the cottages as their shadows lengthen this side of the sinking sun, and makes the strings hum, the soul that customarily rides on the music not dancing now as on occasions past, but rather easing to rest, tamely, wearily, resigned. Twelve months have witnessed his metamorphosis into a reed; his pancreas has cannibalised his flesh; that which was once colour, fullness, health, is now sallowness, transparency, decay.

'When I die,' he says, 'may my body be cremated and may my ashes be thrown into the wind.'

His eyebrows, as he peers at me, pucker into folds. His are the unslept eyes of one desperate for sleep.

'For one thing, that is what happened to your Zaida Ephraim, your father's father, when Europe was a furnace, a charnel-house, a gas-chamber. And for another, no man with a

navel born belongs to himself alone. Neither during this life, nor after.'

There comes an occasion when Zaida Zerach sees fit to buy me an atlas. I have just completed first form creditably well. He, a man who has journeyed through Poland, Russia, Germany, Italy, France, Egypt and Ceylon entertains the notion to tell me of his travels, to teach me history, geography, current affairs, *life*. Over city, village, wheat-field and steppe, I follow his finger as he traces out his route, moving from one page to another on which he creates, re-creates Siberian frosts, Uzbekistan mosques, the DP camp at Ziegenhain, the Champs-Elysées, the red Suez sands with Bedouin sheltering under palms, pineapple-sellers scaling his ship at Colombo, the spectre of the new land he is approaching becoming form, become reality housed and paved and railed as he nears slowly, slowly, and enters the Port Melbourne docks at the nether tip of far-flung Australia.

Listening to him as he plays out his life at the stage just short of the call to *kaddish*, it is a map of rivers I remember most clearly. They are all there, more in number than in the very world itself, all traversing the beaten terrain of his scalp – rivers, rivulets, tributaries –, their blue not truly blue but violet, purple, inky in a topographic expanse run to austere denuded dessicating tawny waste.

'Before his death and after it,' he says, watching his own fingers at play upon the strings, 'not a wet ugly wretched hole in the ground is his home, but the world itself, the space out there, all of it, in the clouds, in the sunlight, in the mist, the fog, and with the very dust from which the man has been formed; while his soul born into the universe remains forever its citizen, wandering forever and for all time on earth, to touch, to move, to enter into others.'

But Zaida Zerach, asking for that which the law of the Rabbis, the Law, enshrined in *Torah*, *Shulchan Aruch* and *Talmud*, cannot sanction, is brought to his final recumbency and repose in just such a hole, in the wind-lapped surface crust of Springvale, among the tombstones that sprout, monthly,

weekly, daily, like ... like ... like the tomatoes on his porch.

Through the grimy glass of the window I see them, his tomatoes, their stems struggling through the dense grey soil in deep aluminium cylinders, the fruit still green or ripening, or ripened to lush edibility. What gall must have been his from them to be taken, and what chagrin at being so hastily interred, the finality of it so all-annihilating, no rein in the slightest given to his soul that would wish to roam, roam free, whatever the balm flowing from Rabbi Faigen's solacing words delivered before the open grave.

'A Jewish soul has departed,' he says, Rabbi Faigen, the man of God short and young and bearded and visited with a lisp. 'Returned to its Maker that soul, the soul of a man who, like the brothers and sisters of his unhappy generation knew what it was to suffer, to lose family, to be uprooted, for years to wander about the Siberian wastes while Europe burned, for years to struggle, in Russia, Paris, Australia, and yet to endure all with neither harshness on his lips nor hatred in his heart. A *lamed vavnik* was he, a saint among the highest, his memory forever to shine in the hearts of his dear ones.'

The first fat drops of rain fall, yielding a hollow patter against the pine of Zaida's white unvarnished coffin. The gathered mourners draw into themselves. Rabbi Faigen glances upward.

'May his memory shine,' he says. 'His memory. For after all his travails on earth, what else, what else if not memory is left of a man? ...'

He would say more, I swear, but, with the rain swelling, he steps back a pace instead, gives a signal with his brow and with his chin, and with apt solemnity watches as, first, Father, then the socialist printer Levenberg, the fruiterer Norich, his partner Solinski, and Eckstein the tailor-poet shovel wet brown loam into the pit. Mother gasps, sobs, heaves, weeps, as Zaida, in the rain, body-mind-soul Zaida disappears, his friends making him vanish in a mere five minutes of dogged shovelling into a plot of earth twelve thousand miles from the

leaking draught-bitten cottage in Lodz where, a lifetime before, he has been born.

Yet, though neither Mother, nor Father sees him – though, in taking out the chattels of his former home, they pass him by, if once, then a dozen times –, he is kneeling on the porch, with a battered kettle evenly watering the roots of his tomatoes, binding the stalks to uprights with ribbons and twine, touching the leaves, fondling the soil. He wears again his tattered green sweater, wipes his hands in his baggy pants, and strains the buckles of the sandals he wears without socks.

'In the *sovkhoz*, there, too, I grew tomatoes when the frosts thawed and let the seed ripen to fruit. Because cold it was. To clean ourselves we rubbed our bodies with snow. Water we pumped up and carried from wells a kilometre, two, three away. And as for *hot* water. Hot water! Who, even in Ziegenhain knew what that was, or up there on the fifth floor in the eighteenth *arondissement* in Paris, or even here, in this house, Raphael mine, in Carlton, in this paradise that in your atlas is called Australia . . . Even here, my blood, my heir, earthly bearer of my soul, have you ever seen your Zaida use hot water for the pampering of his flesh?'

I shake my head. No; I have never seen Zaida Zerach use hot water for the pampering of his flesh.

'After Europe,' he says, scraping with a knife the clay impacted to solidity beneath his nails, 'a man can in Australia take the very worst. And after that, still worse. Hot water turns the skin to jelly. Dissolves the oils and makes it soft and weak and wrinkled before its time. Just as softness, clover, feather-beds – may no evil eye fall upon the nest-egg your father-mother have here built up – make the soul soft and weak and wrinkled, while for the seed of Abraham with an arduous eternal mission unto the nations charged, no softness can be permitted, nor clover, Raphael mine, nor feather-bed. These only dazzle, where they are the sons of Abraham that must forever be the brightest light; these become the end of all striving, when perfection is the truer end as is also purity of the soul; and the coming of redemption do they thwart, and

the descent of peace most sanctified, and of the glorious and triumphant consummation of our task for which your *zaidas* and *zaidas' zaidas* found the strength yet to cherish breath and to hold to faith, even when their necks were bared beneath the sword, their bodies tied like lambs to the stake, their flesh turned to violet from the poisonous vapours let into the zyklon chambers by men whose names might in the service of all best be eternally expunged.'

Carried on crests of resolve billowed by Zaida Zerach's proud capacity to endure, I step under a cold shower in my home, my own home, my tiled and carpeted, wall-papered upholstered immaculate home locked in a cul-de-sac the statelier, leafier, balmier edge of Kew. Under that lashing glacial cataract, my teeth bite lemons; goosepimples clamp my every pore. I gasp, breathe fast, inhale, exhale, hold my breath, and lock my knees and stamp my feet and dig blue nails into my palms. But in the end, I escape, must escape, as, draping towels about my shoulders one, two, three of them, I stand there hunched, contracted, as near to rigor mortis as living will allow, shivering and shuddering like a storm-tossed dog. And if that is a lapse, yet do I lapse again, and yet again – first, when in emulation of Zaida Zerach's mastery over hunger in times to wintry history now relinquished, I pledge myself to starvation rations and to fasting, compelled finally to yield to the griping sleep-depriving cramps of a stomach to emptiness unaccustomed; and further, when, in the glorification of labour such as Zaida Zerach once sweated over, grappled with, and overcame, I dig up a far corner of our garden in preparation for a vegetable patch, only to succumb to the clawing throb and stiffness of biceps, calves and back that make me abandon that plot to weeds, Father saying then, 'Well, so much for our home-grown provider of pumpkin, carrots and beans' and calling in the gardener to lay down lawn once more, my ecstasy, resolve and exertions to extinction thus annihilated, no testimony remaining, no face, no name, no redemption to be salvaged.

Void, then, is testimony to *my* efforts; Zaida Zerach's house to emptiness now stripped, what remains of *him*?'

'Have we left anything behind?' Father says from the doorway.

'Nothing else we can give away?' Mother says.

'Nothing,' Father says. 'We can go now. Give the place to the wind till the next people move in.'

I look about. Eerieness consumes the vacuum that has now usurped the room, the house. No more hang there the curtains, or stand the chairs, the second-, third-hand, fourth-hand buffet, the table at which Zaida Zerach over Russian tea and almond bread long ago argued with Becker, Levenberg, Winkler and their wives about socialism, Marx, Pilsudski, Stalin, Israel, the messiah, God. Only smells remain – of mice, naphthalene and mould, and of dankness corroded with grime and walls bronzed and blotched with rust. I wish I could hear again his violin that might at least once more restore a touch, a memory, of warmth, however fleeting, before departing, but coldness, too, and unfamiliarity, have already stolen into every corner. Called by Father, I turn to leave, but catch sight of a slender pile of photographs on the mantel above the fireplace in which, in Zaida's time, no fire ever burned. It is Mother who has found them in the buffet, but diverted by another task, has left them behind, forgotten. I take them now and, looking back no more – all that there has been left to see, I have seen; all that there has been left to hear, I have heard –, I go outside, I go outside into the openness, into spaciousness, into the light, go out there, where there is life both living and lived, where there is also freshness and movement and where there is direction, purpose and marvel, too, and thought, debate and industry.

Out there in the street, I take deep breaths again, rid myself of the mustiness and acerbity that, for decades past, have swathed Zaida Zerach like a shroud, and, given the audacity, might like a rooster crow out my liberation from that house become a tomb.

To my left, on the porch against the wall, are Zaida Zerach's tomatoes. Each time I have visited him, he has plucked one for me, rendering it as an offering with the formula. 'At least you do not forget your Zaida like so many other boys so here take this enjoy it is ripe and rich and juicy suck from its heart its very soul.'

There is another ripe and rich and juicy tomato even at this moment weighing down its stalk. It, too, I now pluck. Zaida Zerach would not mind, I know; even if he were there, not in the least would he mind, I know. But it is not to eat it, to suck from it its soul as Zaida calls it that I sunder it from its source, but rather to toy with it, manipulate it, toss it, polish it, dandle it as I would a ball, this opportunity the last as I say goodbye forever to the home that was for so long my Zaida's. And all this I do; I toy with it, manipulate, polish, dandle it, and toss it, toss it high, toss it once, toss it twice, and a third time, and a fourth, on the fourth seeing it rap the spouting skirting the roof, from there to return more swiftly than my hand beneath is poised to catch it, in that instant, not only the tomato slipping through to strike the ground, there in turn to split and splatter, but all the photographs as well that, in my bungle, I also drop, these dulled greying fraying relics scattering, face up, face down upon the path, Zaida somewhere in Poland with his mother – his father, Zaida in the Urals with Buba Sarah, Zaida outside barracks with his brothers – his sisters, Zaida with his daughters, Mother among them, and Zaida in streets, in stores, in kitchens, and in fields, all different Zaidas and yet the same, not the yellow hallowed Zaida now lying in the clay of Springvale, but other younger, sturdier, darker Zaidas who hewed up soil and grew tomatoes, who dealt in draperies and, on his violin, stirred up music, stirred up souls. My Zaidas all are they, of whom Mother, as if by duty driven she too bends to salvage the photographs so sacrilegiously dispersed, chiding the while, 'Is that how you treat the memory of your Zaida?', and adding more gravely then, 'That after all a man's been through, that this is all that should remain'; and of whom Father, ever the wry one, says, 'Well, there *are* his

tomatoes, that are still over there.' My Zaida, Zaida Zerach all are they who over his violin once said, 'There is a *dybbuk* in these strings and the *dybbuk* is a soul', who said, 'A man is deed a man is mind a man is soul', who said, 'Not music is this but the soul of a people through the centuries passing down from Jubal to King David, from King David on to me and through me then on to you.'

But not in the photographs does he remain, Zaida Zerach, as Mother infers, nor in his tomatoes even if one allows for any seriousness in Father's wry remark, nor even, as Rabbi Faigen at the funeral said, in memory alone is he. How can a man supposedly as learned, reputedly as wise as a rabbi not truly see? – As I gather up the photographs, some of them smeared and stained with the juice so rich, so red of that shattered tomato, I am pulled up to a dizzying halt. As if struck, I stand up. Around me are trees, flowers, cottages, shrubs, plantations, fences, lamp-posts, wires, grass and concrete, common things all, things I have climbed and touched and walked upon and plucked times innumerable, and yet now so acutely, peculiarly, dazzlingly different. It may be the wind skirting about the eaves that animates the vaulting revelation or the mellowing lilac light, or the flush of warmth now come up the spine with pricking prickling nipping teeth, or the suddenly-leaping smells of lavender or lemon rising piquantly and headily from Zaida Zerach's neighbours' gardens. All these – everything about me – are of one unit, all united in a vastness of space that, as I look about, strikes me for the first time as so wholly and awesomely limitless and of which, however solitary I am as I stand on that minuscule infinitesimal spot of soil, I am yet an integral part.

But not even this is what has startled me to near-immobility. Those seeds, those seeds! The seeds of that tomato now pulped and demolished on the path where Zaida Zerach is playing his violin. They may not hear him, Father, Mother, but he is giving life to souls, giving breath to souls, and on those strings that oscillate and tremble beneath the bow, those souls, they dance, those souls they dance, and they dance like

shikkers across space across time, dancing from Jubal and King David down the generations even down to Zaida Zerach and through Zaida Zerach on to me. 'Open your soul Raphael mine,' he is saying, 'open up your soul', and, following his bidding, I open up my soul and through that opening does his own soul enter into me and with his soul, he brings still more, whole hosts of souls, generations of souls, the ever-surviving souls of my people, that through me they may continue that through me they may continue and live and abide and that their greatness, *our* greatness brilliance light may yet be given unto the nations as was the charge given to our father of fathers Abraham our Father whose own seed was to be as the stars of heaven and the sand upon the sea.

Buba Grandmother
dybbuk, a soul transmigrated from the body of one who is dead to that of a living person
Kaddish, recitation of the prayer for the dead.
lamed vavnik, one of the thirty-six righteous men of the world on whose account the world is preserved
shikker drunkard
Shulchan Aruch, literally, a prepared table; a code of Jewish Law
sovkhoz, a Russian mechanised farm owned by the state
Talmud, the main authoritative compilation of ancient Jewish law and tradition
Torah, The Pentateuch
Zaida, Grandfather

The Life That I Have Led

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

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

It was Geulah Mahler who called.

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

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

But everything appears to have conspired to block out clear

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Willy Welcare has already turned.

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

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

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

The voices issuing from beyond the hallway become

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

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

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

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

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

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

'But just a word,' Charlie Workman says.

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

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

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

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

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

What must I do to break away?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Is it that for all his station . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Man dictates history, history dictates man.'

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

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

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

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

What sort of *man* are you?

What sort of *man* are you?

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

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

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

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

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

Just as the telephone rings.

Aviva.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Darling?!'

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

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

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

'Shall I come to fetch you?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discovery in Venice

The Prado in Madrid took the breath away, the London National Gallery deprived the nights of sleep, and the Louvre and Jeu de Paume in Paris kindled the blood to ecstatic seething as Marguerite and I, married scarcely a month, tramped around the streets of Europe in pursuit of Rembrandts and Vermeers, El Grecos and Goyas, Manets and Van Goghs. Not to mention those other creations of magnificence, Versailles, the Vatican and, if only time had sufficed, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Dahlem in Berlin. But go try to include the best of the centuries in a fleeting fugitive five-week schedule.

We had promised ourselves, Marguerite and I, the trip long before. The plan was simple. To get married, spend a week in an Albert Park motel while finalising preparations and then set off abroad before the shackles of possessions – solid brick, household appliances, furniture, babies – and the concomitant commitments to mortgages and overdrafts bound us obdurately to tethering middle-class captivity.

The plan was simple indeed. But at what cost! Marguerite in marrying me had effectively said goodbye to her family, the intense staunchly Catholic Arthur and Mary Corcoran and her brother Peter, while my parents Aryeh and Leah Goodvach, while not wholly disowning me, their only son, had made it plain that if I wished in the future to visit them, it was to be either without Marguerite or at a time when they were not otherwise entertaining their friends. Their shame, after having given me what they considered to have been a proper

Jewish upbringing – Sunday school, Jewish youth clubs, Yiddish spoken in the home, the best of Sholom Aleichem and Peretz and any number of Jewish books – was stingingly acute, and if they did attend our registry wedding, it was because they found themselves unable – it was simply not in their nature – to permit themselves to remain childless after expending so much effort upon me, a child born in wartime Europe during what were for them the most harrowing years of their overall hard and unhappy lives. I understood their grief. I was not so obtuse as to minimise it. I wished, I wished, yes, to please them, to give them that *naches* that any parent craved for from children and grandchildren. And several times I had separated from Marguerite to stand back, as it were, and study our relationship and all its implications with whatever objectivity I could muster. And Marguerite, in deference to her parents, had done the same. But we kept drifting back together, each separation followed by a reunion more violently intense than the preceding one till nothing short of overseas escape by one of us – or death, to use the hyperbole of the Romantics – could part us. For whatever she saw in me, in her there was gaiety and gentility, pleasure and sound sense and an absorbing accepting openness that banished every tiniest mote of self-consciousness that with other girls I had never been able to shed. Or perhaps rather than self-consciousness, it was the doubt that I could ever meet their later expectations as I then perceived them. Marguerite was not ambitious. Not in the material sense at least. Her conversation when we spoke was of finer artistic things, of the potential inherent in each person to realise himself creatively – through his work, his family, through one of the arts – and of service, utility and value to others, and less of houses, suburban gardens, girlfriends' children, lucrative jobs.

But perhaps I magnify the differences or distort them unfairly or seek impossibly to give rational reasons for what the overheated blood and the nerve fibres tingling in every excited quivering pore dictated – Why elaborate? Enough to say that I loved Marguerite. Those who have themselves loved

will understand; those who have not, may they yet discover for themselves the grandeur and the helplessness, the ecstasy and the brutality, the exaltation and the devastation of love.

So we married, flew overseas, left family behind, Marguerite bearing with her her father's grudging cold embrance and I with my mother's tears as at the airport – how she clung! – she said, 'Write at least. Give us back something of what you are taking away.'

We landed at the Barajas airport in Madrid on a dry sunny day in April – a day such as are depicted on picture postcards and travel brochures. Marguerite, descending the gangway ahead of me, travel-bag slung over a shoulder, wore a bright red poplin coat and a broad scarlet band around her lavish blonde hair. Among the darker Spanish girls who flitted friskily about the terminal, she stood out splendidly exceptional and I was glad when a photographer approached and said in broken English 'Pliz, Senora, una photografa per your 'usband.' Caught off guard and exhilarated by her descent to new, possibly exotic, adventures, Marguerite was captured on the crest of an enchanting spontaneity. She laughed, her teeth shone, her keen eyes squinted just that jot in the lustre of the sun and what I carried in my wallet from then on was a portrait of delight, naturalness and buoyancy that betrayed not in the slightest the tedium of what had been a long unbroken flight.

Having deposited our luggage and refreshed ourselves in a two-star hotel in the Calle de Lope de Vega, Marguerite even more than I was impatient to take to the sunwashed streets and alleyways of Madrid. A graduate in literature and fine arts with a tutorship awaiting her on our return home, she had made up her mind to visit the monument to Cervantes in the Plaza de Espana, the Palacio Real and, inevitably, and above all, the Prado Museum. While she dressed, I bought a map and guidebook from the desk clerk, returned upstairs and studied

them briefly. Marguerite, smelling appetisingly of ripe strawberries, braced her smooth downy arms around my neck. I kissed her on the nose, on each eyelid. She nibbled at my ear, blew into it, and said 'You shall be my Don Quixote and I, loyal Sancho, shall forever follow.'

Don Quixote then, and Sancho Panza, we chased after windmills in the streets of Madrid. We walked holding hands, bracing waists. We sauntered along huddled shadowed stall-lined lanes and wide stylish modern avenidas; we circled the lavish spouting fountains of Cybele, Apollo and Neptune; passed banks and offices and ancient churches; and strolled between the balmy immaculate lawns and flower beds of the Botanical Gardens, pausing repeatedly before gates and statues and facades to marvel at structures that under the European sun seemed infinitely more exquisite than anything else we had ever known or seen back home.

Then, seeing the columns at the entrance to the Prado Museum, Marguerite with a cry broke away and ran ahead.

'Last one there is a Philistine!' she called.

I paused momentarily to watch her. I couldn't help but smile. Her hair, shimmering mercury from a distance, rose and fell rhythmically. Her shoulders swayed. Her heels clicked on the pavement – like castanets, I thought. Once she looked back and beckoned me with a hand. Then she ran on, stopped before the statue in the Prado forecourt, taking deep breaths, and, as I approached, bent forward, placed a hand upon a tilted hip, Carmen-like, and mocked ever so mildly, ever so lovingly, 'You poor old man you, my hero, my knight.'

I grasped her by the waist and swung her around. We laughed. A Spaniard passing by looked at us with inquisitive eyes. He walked on with a studiously measured gait and from some way off turned around and smiled.

That night, we didn't – couldn't – sleep. Through dark hours, to the fitful flickerings of neon lights, to the humming reverberations of the odd passing car, to the disconnected

salvos of nocturnal voices exploding in the Spanish calles below, we touched, clung, mauled, loved, loved again and writhed, our bedsheets in anarchic disarray, as we were borne, Marguerite and I, on vaulting crests of exaltation, our skins moist and burning, pores tingling, muscles at electric pitch. For we had that day for the first time truly touched splendour and genius and had in turn by them been touched. Over and over, Majas and jesters crowded the darkness of our hotel-room and, with them, infantes and apostles, monarchs and rebels, angels and peasants, assaulting our inflamed senses with their breath-depriving perfection, of form, of colour, movement and expression. Over and over, Velasquez' spinning-wheel turned – we could imagine its very whirring –, El Greco's Christ agonised on the Cross, Goya's hay-makers revelled on the threshing-floor. And martyrs protested, philosophers laughed, madonnas meditated and virgins wept. By morning, we had levitated to a new enhanced ecstatic pitch that, even unslept, we could not wash, dress and breakfast quickly enough to take to the streets, to the alluring, scenic, peopled, sun-drenched streets once more.

We stayed in Madrid three days. We took a guided tour of the city which included a visit to Marguerite's Cervantes monument and the grandly sumptuous Palacio Real; as to a magnet, we also returned to the Prado three times more; we bought a filigree jewel-case and hand-carved wooden effigies of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the Puerto del Sol, sent detailed glowing letters to our families back home and, on the last morning, coached back to the Barajas airport to board the plane, destination: London.

In a postscript to her letter, the last of three – Marguerite could never write any letter without a string of afterthoughts – she had written, 'Whatever you may say, Father, marrying Reuben was the best thing I could have done'; while in referring to Marguerite, I wrote merely, 'We are happy and the weather has been uniformly fine.'

London, to Marguerite, was Milton and Ben Jonson, Dickens and Swift; it was also the National Gallery and the British

Museum, St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. To me, a fledgeling lawyer, it was constitutional monarchy and nineteenth-Century liberalism, the Houses of Parliament, Hyde Park and the Tower of London. And it was, for totally different reasons, Petticoat Lane and Portobello Road and *A Kid for Two Farthings* and Israel Zangwill and any number of generations of Solomons and Jacobs and Levis and Beckys and Sarahs and Malkas. And for both of us, it was Covent Garden and the Royal Festival Hall, the Shaftesbury Avenue theatres and Madame Tussaud's. With Russell Square our launching-pad, we assaulted London anew each day, leaving our tiny flaking gas-heated room before nine in the morning, returning only late at night, tired to be sure, but nonetheless a-quiver, after reaping *Fidelio* or Pinter or Shakespeare or Arthur Miller. If, upon landing at Heathrow, ten days in London seemed sufficient, by the time of our departure, they had proved, however frenzied and crowded, yet too brief, mere flickers, fleeting. We left with images of Rembrandt's world-weary eyes pursuing us whichever way we turned, with the echoes of whispers magnified in their reverberations under the perfectly hemispherical dome of St. Paul's, with the resonant eloquence of dispute in the plushness and formality of the House of Commons, with the contrasting cacophony and garrulousness of toothy thick-lipped Jewish traders at the teeming Sunday market in Petticoat Lane of which, Marguerite, pausing amused over a valueless trinket, a mock-leather coat, a silken scarf, over and over remarked, 'How colourful, how novel, how quaint.' Once more we wrote home – we could not write enough – Marguerite impressing her parents Arthur and Mary Corcoran with the stateliness of that mausoleum of the greatest of England's sons that was Westminster Abbey, I elaborating jauntily on the scraggy loose-jacketed East End haberdashers, jewellers, grocers and blood-aproned fishmongers that may have reminded Mother of Warsaw and Father of Lodz.

Long before leaving for overseas, when planning our itiner-

ary, Marguerite had said, 'They say there's a wall of Da Vincis at the Louvre. And then the Impressionists – Van Goghs, Manets, Renoirs – at the Jeu de Paume. And we must climb the Eiffel Tower and visit the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Elysées, the Notre Dame. We won't dine at Maxim's, of course, but we can on our budget at least stand in its doorway if it rains.'

It didn't rain. Descending at Orly airport, Marguerite reminded me of the title of a film *April in Paris*. And April meant Spring, wisp-clouded skies, crispness, romance, invigoration. The city was bright, its stone facades refurbished to whiteness, the Seine by whose bank we rode to our hotel shimmered delicately under its sturdy ornamented bridges. Marguerite, like a child in her seat by the window, pointed to this structure and that and said, 'That must be the Tuilleries and there, I'm sure of it, is the Place de la Concorde and way over there is the Left Bank, the Latin Quarter – Sartre, the Existentialists, the intellectuals and all that – and the Sorbonne can't be far away and Montparnasse and . . .' Her face was mobile, immensely elastic, her excitement contagious. I leaned as close as I could towards her and smelled the luscious strawberries in her hair. I held her hand and felt its tremor, its softness, its moisture.

'A girl can lose her heart to Paris,' she said with a sunny laugh and I answered, 'Well, please, do leave some of it for me.' She puckered her lips, winked, blew a kiss and said, 'Don't worry, my Reuben, my darling, even here I shall remain all yours.'

We checked in at a hotel in a street off the Place de la Republique and quickly yielded ourselves to the Parisian metros and streets. With map, guide-book and camera, we trod, over the days that followed, hand in hand, the well-worn paths of innumerable tourists. With them, we paid homage to versatile Napoleonic grandeur, ogled at the Mona Lisa, the Delacroixes, Davids and Veroneses at the Louvre, pressed through crowded rooms to sate ourselves at the feast of Gauguins, Van Goghs, Manets, Cezannes and Degas' offered up at the Jeu de Paume. We photographed each other before the

Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe and the rising column in the Place de la Bastille, and studied with awe – Marguerite with an intensity immeasurable – the immaculately-sculpted portals and the soaring Gothic vault of the Notre Dame. In Montmartre, an artist sketched a portrait of Marguerite in lilac pastel. We drank coffee among students and academics in Place St. Germain des Pres. And for a joke, we stood in the doorway of Maxim's even though it wasn't raining, and a waiter, rubbing hands, came out and asked us whether he could be of service.

Once again, we had merely blinked and ten days were gone. Every few days, we had written home, now a postcard, now a letter, cramming the last blank space with minutiae. Shortly before departing, we collected mail forwarded to the airline office. Marguerite's mother had sent a card. Its contents were brief: 'Glad to hear you're enjoying yourself. Here, all is as expected.' My mother had written a longer letter. She referred to Father's health – his varicose veins were giving trouble; commented on a friend's son's engagement – to a fine Jewish girl, a pharmacist; alluded also to another's marriage and, further, to a ship's brother's stroke. For April, she wrote, the weather was exceptionally warm and she hoped that I was not letting myself go hungry. She didn't mention Marguerite.

Marguerite, in turn, putting her mother's card into her handbag, was obviously disappointed. Biting a lip and dropping her eyes, she shrugged a shoulder, turned up a hand and said, 'Well, it's something at least.'

That dejection, manifested in pensiveness, stayed with her even as, hours later, a motor-launch transported us from the airport in Venice through Mestre to the Piazzale Roma at the northern end of the Grand Canal. As in Paris, Marguerite gazed at the passing scenery – at oil refineries, engineering workshops and islands and still more islands – but she did not point, nor jump, nor quiver nor laugh. I held an arm about her and she nestled her head against my shoulder. She breathed

evenly. A strand of blonde hair skirted an eye and traversed her lips. She was sucking at a cheek.

'A penny for your thoughts,' I said as we approached the berthing-point.

She turned towards me square-on, smiled and said, 'You'll have to make it a dollar.'

'A dollar then,' I said.

'You generous soul, you,' she said, dimples now appearing beside her mouth and wrinkles of mirth alongside her eyes.

'I'll even make it two dollars to get at your thoughts,' I said.

'Let's leave it at a penny,' Marguerite said. 'I was only thinking you do love me, Reuben, don't you, you do, don't you?'

'You'll always be mine,' I said, squeezing her hand.

'Yes,' she said, blowing me a kiss in her more lively coquettish way. 'I need someone to belong to.'

By vaporetto we traversed the length of the Grand Canal to its southern end where we disembarked at the quay outside the Doge's Palace. From there, a brisk-footed porter led us to the Hotel San Lio on the Salizzada San Lio. With the breeze in her face flapping the tails of the scarf she had wound about her head, and the smell, taste and crispness of the turquoise waters all about, Marguerite came back to life. In the iridescent slightly misty grey-blue light, she pointed out the high-coloured Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque marble palaces densely huddled on either bank. She waved good-naturedly at a gondolier who volleyed forth a lilting tremolo as we passed. Under the Rialto Bridge, she remarked upon the rust, moss and lichen that had eaten into the stone over the water tide. There were semblances of that excitement that had touched her – had touched us both – in Madrid, then in London and in Paris, so that by the time we passed through the Piazzetta and San Marco's Square bounded by the Doge's Palace, the Basilica, the Clock Tower and the Courts of Law in pursuit of our porter, I was relieved to feel the total dissipation of Marguerite's gloom as she said, 'Can you imagine? This is where

Tintoretto walked and Giorgione and Veronese and Titian and Vivaldi.' The narrow streets excited her too, as did the flagstones and humped bridges, the lines of washing strung across the green canals between opposing windows, as did further the nests of restaurants, fish-shops, bakeries and gift shops, a plenitude of them, that displayed intricate lace, jewellery and delicately-blown Venetian glass.

Of those streets and canals, Marguerite could not have enough – it was as if, she said, the very breath of history and greatness surrounded her and it made her feel small, humble, acutely ephemeral. That feeling was enhanced that afternoon as she marvelled at the golden Byzantine mosaics above the portals and on every wall, vault and cupola of San Marco's Basilica and at its brilliant gold altarpiece studded richly with silver, enamel and jewels. It was intensified, too, the next morning, by the Tiepolos and Veroneses and Tintorettos from floor to ceiling in every chamber of the ducal palace and later by the further assault of Bellinis, Giorgiones and Titians at the Accademia. Here, lagging behind me, Marguerite paused before the concentration of madonnas, saints, pietas and virgins, tracing lines and configurations, studying and commenting on attitudes of grace, agony and beatitude as, with mere summary casualness, even levity, she had done before the El Grecos and Murillos at the Prado. 'To look at you,' I had said then, ecstatic after that first wild and sleepless night in Madrid, 'one would think the artist used you as his model in portraying all this beatitude and beauty.' She had laughed then, sunnily as always, with a captivating peal. She had rummaged elastic fingers through my hair, blown deliciously into my face and said, 'Go on, you, you smooth-tongued flatterer, you.' I remembered her scent again as, walking through the luxurious high-ceilinged rooms of the Accademia, the seemingly endless suffusion of figures, landscapes and prodigal colour battered the senses to madness.

When we left, Marguerite locked her fingers into mine and said, 'Some precious material in there. It could drive any art student insane.'

A little later, as we ate on the terrace of a cafe looking out upon San Marco's Square crowded with Venetians and tourists, with a small orchestra playing jovial Italian melodies nearby, Marguerite, gazing up at the twin columns at the entrance to the Piazzetta, said, 'This place does strange things to you. Its history . . . its . . . its religiosity . . .'

If something of the historic air of Venice impinged upon Marguerite, it came to strike me too in a way additional and unforeseen. We had one day remaining to us in Venice. We were then to fly on to Florence, then Rome, then Athens. Though much in Venice was inevitably to be left unseen – we did, however, to our satisfaction capture the city's unique flavour – our itinerary did include as a final venture a visit to the Scuola di San Rocco, the repository of a goldmine of Tintorettos. Whatever time then remained to us was to be spent in unhurried browsing, in buying souvenirs, in writing home. Settling into bed at the end of our crowded second day, as I waited for Marguerite to loosen her hair, I was studying more closely our map of Venice when, along its upper border, in unimpressive print, two names caught my eye. Had I been prepared, had I known my history more proficiently, the presence of a Ghetto Vecchio and a Ghetto Nuovo in Venice would have scarcely caused surprise. Nor would I have delayed so long before embarking on what was in a sense a pilgrimage to an historic shrine.

The pigeons were scarcely awake the next morning, our last, before, downing a hurried breakfast, Marguerite and I headed northward, clattering through narrow streets and over bridges through parts where houses became starker, more closely-set, more drab, darksome and grimy. We passed pale tradesmen, shopkeepers and porters on their way to work, children skipping or dawdling in their setting out for school, dark plaited-haired women with straw baskets chattering rapidly at the tops of their voices.

'I'd never considered the idea of a ghetto in a place like this,' Marguerite said.

'Nor did I,' I answered, 'to my shame, nor did I.'

The ghetto was a cobbled square, silent and austere, enclosed by tall narrow unkempt edifices with their rectangular and arched white-rimmed windows looking like so many cavities in the tarnished facades. In the courtyard stood two wells and a water-pump between them. A solitary cat licked its paws in a doorway. Near the wells, the air was heavy with the rankness of stale fish and I could taste a saltiness which I guessed came through the arm's-breadth alleys entering the square at irregular places. Marguerite, bending over, played inquisitively with the handle of the pump. Her bright red coat and blue scarf gave to the courtyard its only animation of colour. With the sun not yet risen or, in any case, still barred from entry by the high slanted rooftops, greyness and torpor consumed the space. I walked around the perimeter of the ghetto, looking at doors, studying doorposts, seeking a hint, through a familiar name, a *mezuzah*, a Hebrew character, of the continued presence of a Jew who might still be living there. And signs I found and, suddenly quickened, I beckoned Marguerite over to see as well. Overriding a double door of oak was a stone arch lettered with Hebrew script, its gilded surface eroded to reveal coarse greyness. Within was a synagogue and museum. I looked for a bell, a knocker. Having come this far, not to visit such a shrine was an offence against reason, against taste, against sensibility. I banged on the door, received no response, banged again.

Marguerite laid a hand on my arm.

'I'm afraid you'll only rouse the ghosts,' she said.

She drew my attention to a notice in Italian which we deciphered as best we could as indicating that the synagogue was closed pending renovations following recent internal damage.

'A thousand Venetian churches open and its only synagogue has to be closed,' I said, piqued.

Marguerite, having moved some distance away, looked at me with a wry ironic expression. 'I hate to tell you this, Reuben,' she said. Beckoning me with a finger, she pointed towards another doorway. 'But I think that's two of them.'

And indeed there was another synagogue but, to my chagrin, it too was closed as was a little corner glass-blower's shop in which, to my astonishment, delight and, ultimately, fury, stood row upon row of glass figurines in the display window, figurines I couldn't lay my hands on, figurines of spectacled rabbis with long coats and long beards, of Jewish husbands and wives, and entire scenes depicting marriages under canopies, circumcisions, Sabbath benedictions, the festivals Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles and finally scenes of communal prayer before an Ark.

'How quaint!' Marguerite said. 'How picturesque and old-worldly!'

They *were* quaint, they *were* old-worldly, but with cutting acuteness, they burred into my awareness the resurgent recognition, repressed till now, that they were a part of me or of my past or, if not of my own experienced past, then that of my parents, my grandparents and of their ancestors who had carried forward a tradition, already so ageless, that with me had become diluted and withered and as good as lapsed. I wanted then to linger on in the ghetto to recapture, restore, the breaths of the generations that had slowly stifled here incarcerated in rankness and prohibition but, looking around once more from the corner at the impoverishment of the square in this city of otherwise extravagant excess, I gritted my teeth at the flooding sensation that the ghetto and I were somehow as one in waste and dispossession until, turning to Marguerite, I grasped her hand, drew her forward, wholly to her uncomprehending bewilderment, and led her from the place over stone and bridge and canal, saying as she herself had said the day before, 'This place . . . this place does strange things to you.'

I had escaped the ghetto but its aura of starkness clung even as with Marguerite I wandered, scarcely heeding now, through the interior of the Scuola di San Rocco. The columns, the friezes, the marble and the profusion of Tintorettos on wall and ceiling crushed with their colour and massiveness and representations. Among the tourists, scores of them shuffling along the hall and between the rooms, I could scarcely

breathe. I was out of place, oppressed by the force and tyranny of a dark religion ridden through with superstition, fable, mysticism and fancy while Marguerite, her complexion pale against the high-toned redness of her coat, progressed slowly from canvas to canvas, pausing before each as if she could not have her fill of annunciations, nativities, baptisms, last suppers and crucifixions.

On our way out, Marguerite walked slowly, pensively. She looked about. She seemed bewildered, remote, somehow, for the first time since I had known her, unreachable. Her cheeks were set harder; her lips, normally moist and healthy, were dry; her eyebrows were puckered. She hesitated, then pointed at the Church of the Frari opposite the Scuola. It was a large domineering Gothic structure and the guide-book referred to two magnificent altarpieces and to the works of Titian to be found there.

'Before we go back to the hotel, Reuben,' Marguerite said. 'One last fling, I just want to flit in and out to satisfy my curiosity.'

Biting my tongue, I followed her, stood with her before the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, stood with her too before the Virgin of the Pesaro family and before Bellini's calm Madonna in the sacristy.

'The beauty of it all, Reuben,' she murmured, her gaze elevated, high, steady, 'the sanctity. Those faces, those angels, those people . . .'

Barely outside again, as we walked across the square in front of the church, Marguerite came to a stop.

'My scarf, Reuben,' she said, tapping her shoulders, her neck, searching also through the pockets of her coat. 'Did you see it?'

I looked about.

Marguerite laid a hand on my arm.

'Wait for me here,' she said. 'I'm going back inside. I must have dropped it there.'

She hurried back towards the church, almost ran, stepped

this way and that as two elderly Italian women in black, entering, blocked the doorway.

In the square I waited, gazed at the murky green water of the stagnant canal, took deep liberating breaths even of its acridity and welcomed the softness of the mellow April morning sun. People, both worshippers and tourists, entered and left the church. Two men with arms straddling each other's shoulders sang a ditty, then laughed. A mother called after her straggling toddler. A gondolier in sailor's blouse and straw hat hurried by.

I waited, then stopped waiting. Marguerite was taking an unduly long time. I walked towards the church entrance, became aware as I had not been before of polish and of some vaguer mustiness of aging cedarwood and camphor. The steps of those who had gathered there echoed in the vaults, whispers reverberated in a hum. And above the altarpieces with their opulent Titians burned numerous candles in golden candelabra and all about there beat once more that turbulence of colour, heaviness and excess – of excess, excess, excess – that constricted my breath with rank distaste.

And then I saw her and nearly cried out, nearly let voice shatter the quiet of that hallowed sanctum. The lost scarf had been a ploy, I saw, and felt in my suddenly-tingling quivering flesh the bite of resentment at the deception she had wrought. But I could not sustain it. She was too beautiful, too pure, too magnificent as I saw her kneeling, praying before the Virgin Mary, her fingers clasped, her chin raised, her eyes, normally so alive and mobile, now uplifted, still, reverential. The light from the candelabra fell on her face, her lips flickered, her shoulders were drawn forward. It may have been a trick of the light but her cheeks, her hands, her hair, all these, all bore the colour, contour and texture of the countless Madonnas before which we had stood. And I wanted to reach out to her then, and to touch, and to hold, but, seeing myself an intruder upon that which could only have been called her soul, I backed out to wait again in the square before the church, aware, acutely,

desperately, achingly aware, as I had been on fleeing the ghetto, of my own inner grey, hollow and dismal poverty.

When, finally, she emerged, tripping down from the shadow of the portals into the light, Marguerite was all mobility and familiarity again. Seeing me, she hurried forward, waved her scarf and called out, 'I found it.'

Then she paused.

'But Reuben,' she said, 'you look so serious. I can count, I swear, at least two wrinkles on your brow.'

I reached out, took her willing hands, then touched her own immaculate smoothness.

'I hope,' I said, 'I hope that we are still one when we are nothing else but wrinkles.'

She laughed. Openly. Deliciously.

'My, you *are* cryptic,' she said.

She tossed her head. Her hair rose and fell, catching the light. I saw her running sprightly towards the Prado, saw her pose against the Eiffel Tower, saw her, self-assured and happy, accept my ring while beside us Arthur and Mary Corcoran stood mute and grim and Mother wept and blew her nose. Above us, flimsy wisps of cloud moved slowly, a flock of pigeons fluttered by, the air in the streets and over the canals was salty and misty and cool. And as we crossed the Rialto Bridge on the way back to our hotel, I held Marguerite's hand, I clasped it, clung to it, clung to it with all the firmness and tenaciousness of desperate need, feeling beneath my feet the texture of feathers, of crystal, and of straw, all that earlier was stone and solidity and bond between us become at once so quickly uncertain, precarious and brittle.

mezuzah – parchment in a case inscribed with scriptural passages and affixed to the door-post of a Jewish house.
naches – pleasure, pride.

Daniel – A Fragment from a Letter

Perhaps you too, Ephraim, remember those days of our childhood when, like larks in spring, we played cheerfully and with our own brand of passion in the streets and courtyards of our homes, not for a moment believing that there could exist anything in the world that was not beautiful or fresh or radiant.

We grew up together, a dozen or so of us, in the same courtyard, tall toneless edifices looming all around us, while our fathers, dressed in their outmoded black caftans, leaned against the walls, argued and bargained, debated and gesticulated, and thought to solve, with words alone, the misfortunes that afflicted the world. In the mornings, we were hurried to the *cheder*; and in the afternoons we ourselves hurried home, back to our games and our laughter, to pulling Daniel's sister's neatly-twisted plaits, and to Moshe the Butcher's angry curses and his son David's blasphemies and vulgar jokes. And on the Sabbaths – do you remember? – the sun would creep into the courtyard like a reluctant guest, and while our parents pored over the Talmud or strolled leisurely through the gardens nearby, we occupied ourselves once more with those games of which we never tired and blew our whistles and rolled our hoops and tussled on the ground in childish battle.

Perhaps it is an illusion of the mind that is left of childhood, perhaps a shadow, a vision or a pleasant, peaceful dream. Yet it is no dream. I still see our courtyard as though I had walked through it just last week, with its heavy wooden cheese barrels rolled into the farthest corners and the linen

hung up to dry on twisted rusty wires stretched between opposing windows. And I can still smell the rancid odour of the fishmarket and the butchery; and if I hear voices every now and again, they are not the hallucinations of a deranged mind, but rather our own voices still ringing out and echoing in those streets, shrill and childlike, as if we had never grown up at all but had really stayed there, forever youthful, joyful and content, despite all that has passed since then.

Of course we did not stay there and time did not stand still – how often have you heard this expression? – and we had, of necessity, to grow up and mature and to see, through adolescent and, later, adult eyes, the black events that were drifting our way. So David, for instance, grew up and followed his father into the meat trade; and Simon – the one with the wild eyes and the sharp tongue who was a plague to the *rebbe* in *cheder* – set himself up as a seller of books; while Mordechai, the sexton's son, prepared himself for the life of a wastrel, existing from hand to mouth, and thriving on air. Yehezkiel escaped to study in the big cities and only the Almighty One knows whether he is alive today. And Dora, the rabbi's only daughter, as plain and homely as the weekday bread, slipped quietly into marriage, while Esther, Daniel's sister, whose plaits we had pulled as children, grew more and more beautiful by the day and became the common object of our affections and desires.

And there was Daniel himself, as reticent as a mouse and perpetually hiding behind a pair of thin-rimmed glasses and one learned book or another. Did you ever see him with empty hands? While we, the dozen or so, wreaked havoc in the courtyard and had the neighbours leaning out of their windows pleading from us a measure of silence, Daniel would sit through our play, perched on a cheese-barrel, a book in his lap, oblivious alike to our shrill cries and to our neighbours' pleas. Sitting alone, he read everything that came his way – the prayer-book, the Talmud, its commentaries, secular novels proscribed by the rabbi, travel books, all the newspapers, and an assortment of pamphlets, some of which called for our

destruction as a people and others which called upon our people to enlist in the army to defend the country which protected us. How he absorbed it all, I don't know. At twelve, he had read at least as much as his father, who far from being an illiterate man, was a cantor well-versed in rabbinical teachings and Jewish lore.

Just as we teased his sister, so did we taunt Daniel when, reading in a corner of the courtyard, he showed he had no patience for our games. His aloofness hurt us, for, secretly – we would never have dared to demonstrate it openly –, we admired and envied him, while our parents forever set him up as a model of an earnest, industrious, intelligent boy who would one day rise high among men. Nevertheless, children that we were, we mocked him, wore twisted spectacle-frames over our noses, in imitation hunched our backs as was his habit, and shuffled to and fro before him, our knees bent so that our trouser-cuffs scraped the bitumen, and our shoulders drooping until our arms disappeared into the sleeves of our jackets.

He was not one to be offended so easily. Every now and again, he raised his head, regarded us solemnly, flipped over a page and sank back into the special pleasures that his books seemed to give him.

In this way, we all grew older and, yielding up the pleasures of our childhood, we turned our minds to more serious matters. Of David and Simon and Mordechai and Yehezkiel I have already told you. Jacob, the widow Rivka's only son, took up work in a saw-mill and lost an arm there – perhaps a fortunate event, for that exempted him from the first call-up in 'thirty-nine. He later fled eastward, always a step ahead of the invading armies and, if he survived, he probably settled at last in Samarkand or in Tashkent. Leah followed Dora's example and married, but then her husband fell victim to some mental illness and she left him for a Polish student with whom she lived until the war separated them and make them bitter enemies. Benjamin, the baker's boy, who had a special talent for the violin, went the other way and moved in with a

fiery Polish actress for whom he composed maudlin love poems which he then set to music. Elijah volunteered for the army, but deserted when the war finally broke out to join the partisans instead. And Esther, Daniel's sister, the same whom we had teased and taunted for our amusement, the same who had grown more beautiful by the day and became the object of our affections and desires . . . Esther and I became aware of one another as individuals with common interests and similar enthusiasms, and, in the last spring before the war, when the sparrows reappeared and the blossoms opened, we were married. By that time you had already left the country.

Meanwhile, Daniel, too, had grown up, although apart from his outward appearance he had changed little. He had become tall and lean. His chin was pointed and above his prominent forceful nose sat those inevitable thin-rimmed glasses. He had graduated from high school – with high honours, as everyone had expected – but, owing to lack of money and the *numerus clausus* besides, he gave up all ambitions for the university and found work as a proof-reader with a publisher, while in the evenings, he edited a newspaper for a young group that had been formed in the wake of the threats which filtered in from Germany. Even while entrusted with this responsibility, he maintained his reticence. He shrank from his comrades and moved about awkwardly, a fish out of water. His arms seemed too long for him, his back arched forward, his shoulders drooped. He hid within himself. Yet from behind those spectacles, he saw everything; and his mind worked hard, exploring all manner of things in order to sift from them as much as a thread of reason or of justification for the terrible things – the slanders, the beatings and the deportations – that were reported from Germany.

He spoke little of these matters, even when Esther and I happened to interrupt him in the course of drafting an editorial or consulting a reference work. He let his writings be his mouthpiece. – Did you ever read anything he wrote, Ephraim? Fire, I tell you, fire. Every word seethed with emotion, every phrase raged with some innate passion. He sensed

that a war was coming and he appealed, with all the vehemence that a soul can contain, to the leaders to seek peace before the wrathful conflagration engulfed Europe entirely – these were his own words – and to cease indulging in self-interest, and to think of the people whose lives and welfare were entrusted to them. He quoted from Jeremiah and Job, invoked the writings of our rabbis, selected passages even from Christian writers whom he had read while still at school – Shakespeare, Mickiewicz, Tolstoy. He wrote of the destiny of mankind which could be a glorious one. And he wrote of every man's responsibility not to be moved by empty slogans promising victory and prosperity or, as he put it, promising the sun when the sun itself had been banished by the storms and clouds of our own making.

The news that came grew daily more terrible and more fantastic and we were seized by genuine fear and anxiety lest the threats that spoke of our annihilation would prove indeed to be true and not merely the vacuous words of a demented man. And the more fantastic the news items were, the more feverish became Daniel's activity and the more passionate his editorials and articles. Abroad, he noted, the leaders of governments were talking of peace and appeasement, yet on every side, nations were preparing for war. And he cited figures, quoted ministerial speeches and exposed what he saw as hypocritical or brazenly false.

Those of us who knew him and a few members of the young group for whom he wrote held Daniel up as our authority whenever we sought to make or drive home a point in discussion. But beyond this narrow circle, his newspaper enjoyed only a minute circulation and even that among people with no authority, no influence, no voice of their own. So in the end, Daniel spent his passion in a vacuum, and his anger and frustration passed unrewarded and unremarked and were merely fanned by the endless current of news that came into his keeping.

The war broke out in early autumn and we went into hiding, in a room on the outskirts of the city. There were six of us

- Esther and myself, Daniel, Simon, who, at the time, was already selling books, and two others, a Moshe Weisengrad and a Bruno Musikant, who earned their place by virtue of the fact that they worked with Daniel in the production of his newspaper. A seventh visited us frequently and stayed the night when he came. His name was Bransky. He was an assimilated type whom conscience as much as external events made him remember that he was a Jew, but who nonetheless managed to keep the company of gentiles, particularly of academics and of government officials. It was he who furnished much of the information which Daniel used in his newspaper.

Perhaps if Bransky had not come so frequently, Daniel would not have lost his self-control quite so readily. Perhaps it would have happened anyhow. But as the weeks passed by, a visible change was coming over Daniel. He was no more than twenty-one at the time, a weakling physically and always bowed as though by a heavy conscience. His brow perpetually knitted, his expression betrayed to us that our situation was far more threatening and perilous than we had even imagined. Gradually, he began to lose control over his thoughts and let slip isolated words and ideas that left us uncomfortable and anxious.

'There is much goodness in the world,' he said on one occasion, 'yet people insist on clouding its luminous face with evil. One man alone is needed to sweep the cloud away from the world.' And another time, when Bransky brought us the news that a massive plan was being devised to gather all the Jews of the city into a central ghetto, he burst forth with a fire quite out of keeping with his usual composed demeanour. 'We must prevent this. We must speak to those who will bring an end to this scheme.'

At first, he spoke in general terms, saying that someone must intercede in order to bring sanity to the world. And when he spoke in this way, we were on his side, though confined in hiding in a single room, we knew of no-one heroic or foolhardy enough to intercede in events which were out-

striding the comprehension and influence of the average man. But later, as it became more obvious that he himself was assuming the role of spokesman and saviour, every word struck like a stone and filled us with a fear both for him and for ourselves. For no man anywhere had the strength to alter the course of events. And further, if there were such a man, it seemed impossible that he would come from our midst.

Finally, when things kept moving relentlessly from bad to worse, he could take no more of the news in silence. His reticence collapsed and, in one long impassioned speech he declared that – let the winds howl and the sun scorch his back! – *he* was setting out for the front. There he would try to talk sense into those engaged in the fighting. The heads of government were beyond his range of influence. The common man might understand, might listen where others were deaf.

During the night, flaunting the curfew which had been imposed in that period, he crept out of hiding and sought out the house where he had earlier lived. He returned with two suitcases into which he had thrown together some clothing, a loaf of bread, a prayer-shawl, phylacteries and a prayer-book.

Daniel closed his mind to all reason. There was one thing only he now wished for. That was to leave. And none of us, neither I nor his sister, nor Simon, nor the two men Weisengrad and Musikant, could dissuade him.

'Is it martyrdom you are wanting?' we asked him.

'We have martyrs enough,' he replied, speaking in such a way that we saw before us the trainloads of victims being shuttled across the countryside to labour camps and crematoria.

'For whom are you doing this? Whom do you hope to save?'

'For myself alone. I can save no one else. To know that I have done my part is all I want. The peace I want is my own peace.'

'You are throwing away your life, deliberately, without reason!

'So be it then.' The light played around the rims of his spectacles and cast wide shadows around his eyes. He did not smile. He bore only an expression of resignation which, like a shrug of the shoulders, dispelled all self-doubts and hesitations and denied all attachments and debts. He locked his suitcases and tied a leather belt around each. Esther flung herself about his neck, and his body, already bowed, seemed to yield still further under her weight.

'Daniel! My brother! Think at least of us whom you're deserting for some personal madness.'

He did not answer, for such pleas were of no consequence and, besides, could not be answered.

So he went away before dawn, a solitary silhouette against the early light, and we never saw him again. Only his baggage returned several months later – two small suitcases containing a muddied prayer-shawl and phylacteries which had been neglected at some byway station where – so Weisengrad, who had met him again, informed us – he had set himself up on a straw-wagon and, waving a prayer-book and a Bible above his head, had called upon the people to abandon their fighting and to resist those in high places who sought to make of them their tools, their servants, their slaves. He followed the war-front wherever it moved, addressed the troops at every stopping-station, threw himself in the line of fire in every town. A few there were who listened to him, but, according to Weisengrad, he was met more often with mockery, derision and anger. They called him traitor, anarchist, renegade, Judas. They spat at him, beat him, rubbed his face in the mud. Finally, the authorities came and took him away.

What ultimately happened to him one can't even guess. One acquaintance wrote, stating that he had been exiled deep into Russian territory. Another, a Polish refugee, swore that Daniel had been executed by a firing-squad alongside a trench with fifty others, while another still is just as certain that he was delivered into enemy hands and ended his life in a labour camp.

A generation has passed since then, even more. I can only

surmise that Daniel has perished and his bones have decayed in some nameless grave covered over in spring with foliage and pasture and in winter with snow. And with him lie his desires, his ambitions, his frustrations. While for us, for Esther and myself, all that remains of him are grey and tattered photographs of a boy and, later, of a young man, standing awkward and withdrawn, a bent water-reed with arms too long for him and an expression impassive, almost remote. And there remain, too, flitting glimpses, memories, echoes which, in turn, focus clearly and recede, bringing with them painful wisps of nostalgia, of sadness, bitterness and regret.

Ephraim, do you remember too? . . .

cheder – literally, a room; a school for Jewish studies
rebbe – rabbi, teacher

Fame: or The Rise and Fall of Benny Liner

Benny Liner called me over to his table the moment I entered the Scheherazade. At first, I didn't recognize him. He wore dark glasses and a scraggy beard that appeared to have been stuck on by a third-rate Vaudevillian make-up artist. But the balding head, the tapering face and large pointed nose were his alone. A Cyrano was he who was thirty-five but looked forty and suffered visibly from hay fever.

We had first met in the third form. Together, after school, we had studied algebra and trigonometry, had quizzed each other about the lakes of America and the Kings of England, exchanged copies of Steinbeck and the juicier Erskine Caldwell, and later became infatuated with Mary Unger, a wide-eyed narrow-hipped lip-licking coquette of the first form. For four years, we were friends. Then the university separated us. I set sights on medicine; he went into architecture. He failed, turned to history and politics, defaulting in these through soporific boredom and loss of interest, and drifted, a rudderless vessel, into a pen-pushing position with the Department of Taxation. Then I lost track of him until his name appeared in the papers in connection with some scandal of which I had garnered a few disjointed facts. I had been engaged in post-graduate study in Cincinatti at the height of the affair and did not know the details.

After the initial formalities, during which he ordered an iced-coffee and vanilla slice for me, he took a pipe from his checkered waist-coat pocket, stuffed it with cheap tobacco, lit the matted pulp with considerable sibilant sucking and blew

white billows of smoke into the air. His hands were white and plump. They were also without hair.

'Well, I suppose you've heard,' he said, draping an arm about a chair and crossing one leg over the other in an attitude of indolence.

'Heard what?,' I asked

'You *are* a diplomat, aren't you?,' he said.

The smoke of his cheap tobacco did not blend too well with the coffee before me. I waved it away. Seeing my gesture, he smothered his pipe with the palm of his hand.

'Forgive me. I'd forgotten. You never were a smoker, were you?,' he said.

He paused, probed at some probable molar cavity with his tongue, then resumed.

'Well, I'm a celebrity, did you know? I've earned myself a small niche in history. I wanted the sun; and, man, I got it. I sowed, and as I sowed, so did I reap. I was rubbed lusciously with the sweetest honey, but taste instead of the most caustic tar.'

When I furrowed my brow at this flow of cryptic aphorisms, Benny Liner stopped speaking. He scratched at a patch of eczema at the root of his nose and sniffed. He bit his upper lip and seemed disappointed.

'So you really don't know? You really don't? – Do you have time then or are your patients hustling you?'

'It's my afternoon off. I have time,' I said.

'Good. Drink your coffee slowly then.'

I bit into my vanilla slice. Benny took a spray from his pocket, squeezed it into his nostrils and sneezed. His relief, as he wiped his beard, was immediate.

'It all started for one reason alone,' he began. 'It all started because I wanted too much. I wanted – in one word – to be famous.'

'Oh?', I said.

'Listen. – Two years ago, I was a nobody, a Mr No-name, a Mr Zero, a Mr Zilch. And it hurt. It hurt to realize that for all my thirty-three years, I had achieved nothing important.

Keats, you will remember, was already dead at twenty-six; Einstein was the same age when he changed man's concept of the universe. And then there were Newton, and Goethe, Mozart and Shelley, all men of genius, famous before even their first grey hairs appeared. While I, with half my life as good as over, all *I* had done was to ensure that the people's tax returns were in order and that no-one was getting the better of the Department. Surely – surely! – I had been destined for better things. My parents had, after all, survived Europe. I myself had recovered from meningitis, and once, when I was five, six perhaps, I was knocked down by a truck and had crawled out with barely a scratch. There must have been some greater purpose, some special mission for which I had been spared. Surely that was a fair assumption, No?

'Well, I had early on set my mind upon becoming a writer. And not merely of books, of those potboilers and throwaways that fill to nausea the shelves of every store like tins of tuna, but of sagas, *chansons de geste*, epics. Epics! In the lower forms, you will remember, I was a good student and already then I felt myself specially ear-marked for fame. My parents were not without pride on my account, their friends praised me, my teachers commended my talents, and everyone – everyone! – predicted success in whatever field I chose. And like silver to greed, their praise naturally honed my conceit all the more keenly. I filled my days with fancies. I sucked, as it were, upon the lollipop of fame. Of fame! Fame! Fame! Wherever I walked, the thought was always with me. Fame! Fame that made a man rise above his fellows, fame that made other men raise their eyes in worship, fame that tantalised and promised eternal life. Believe me, I could conceive of nothing grander.

'From where I lived, I often walked to Ormond Hill. There, the sheer ecstasy of creative thought soared its highest, for only from the heights can the eye grasp the vastness of space, the expanse of time, only from the heights can one comprehend the unity that underlies the innumerable tiny separate and scattered splinters of human existence. There, on my Everest, I was a giant among dwarfs. Ship's lights, port lights

and the stars winked at each other. Waves rose and crashed against the parapet below. Brisk winds sprang up from the sea and brought all manner of redolences to the nostrils and all manner of tastes to the tongue as from far away came also the sounds of motors and horns, sibilances and muffed echoes.

'Sitting there alone on the crest of my Olympus, I heard voices, saw faces – saw builders and destroyers, prostitutes and virgins; saw schoolboys and shopgirls, titans of business and toothless larrikins; and white-coated doctors and dog-collared priests, pimple-faced addicts and six-fingered freaks, and, in a hubbub as if from Babel come, they were whistling and shouting, taunting and swearing; and they were hissing and bellowing, and shrilling and shrieking. And as I watched and listened and contemplated that which, as it were, came before mind's eye, as in that wake I took it all in, I had a vision. They were bound in time, all those folk, they were bound *by* time – that was clear – yet were they simultaneously timeless. The present was a mere blinking, yet did even this mirror the eternal. For that which men were now, that had they always been, and that would they forever be; as they acted now, so had they always acted, and so would they always act; what they lived for now, for that had they always lived, and for that would they forever live. We had become modern, yes, we were masters – or servants perhaps – of cars and electricity, television, computers and all mod cons; our music, literature, architecture, engineering, art, one could argue, had advanced in diversity, versatility, technique and maybe in sophistication; but at the nitty-gritty level of human affairs, nothing – nothing – ever truly changed. Now, as always, a bronchitic child spent sleepless nights while its mother fretted, old men raged against the night and women everywhere sobbed and bit their lips over illness, disaster and death, all these recurring, all these recurring, as did carnivals and terror, rites of passage and rituals of grief, as did beauty and saintliness and malice and waste and splendour and decrepitude. All these, from Eden to the Black Death even to the present day; and from Cornwall to Melbourne to Japan. The eternal, the infinite and

the universal, each in the merest moment caught, each in the weest trifle identified.

'This, then, *this* was the world as I saw it. And none, our age being short on great minds, had in our own time yet fully captured the vision. Nor – so did I believe – had anyone yet effectively caught the gaping contrast between the heedless flow of time and the flitting evanescence of existence which both made meaningless and pathetic all our fretting, our ambitions, our very lives, yet against this, *despite* all this, charged every man and woman alive ever to create meaning, even to invent it if need be, for no other world but this could they ever know, and, if they were to fulfil the best of all that lay within them, only here, only now, in this life only could they hope to do so.'

Benny paused. He had been probing at air and now inverted his finger towards the table which, in turn, he took to prodding for emphasis.

'Both to present the world as I saw it and to fire others to give of their best – in other words, to inspire and excite and to elevate – these became my dual ambitions as I sat on Ormond Hill. And on such nights, I hurried home, intoxicated. My imagination burned. Not bothering to take off my jacket, I would sit down at my desk, take reams of paper from a drawer and begin to write. Words streamed from my pen; the ink was a waterfall. I breathed life into people, all manner of folk – professors, inebriates and seedy crows, and children, wastrels, braggarts and cretins. In those hours, believe me, which lasted well into the night, I was exhilarated, alight, alive, and it was in a state of ecstasy that finally I would fall asleep.

'But o, were such sleep, such sleep to last forever!

'In the mornings I read again the sheets I had filled with ink during the night. Gremlins, I discovered, mischievous sprites inhabited my drawers. For, in the more sober light of day, all I found of all my ecstasy were stilted prose, hollow phrases, a cornucopia of platitudes and, worst of all, not characters alive who moved and thought and felt but caricatures who didn't in the least bit breathe. How it hurt! Believe me! How it pained! I

wanted to give up, give it all up a hundred times. But to give up hurt even more than to continue, for the prospect of mediocrity and with it the dread of oblivion were alike past bearing; and I knew that, whatever the pain, whatever the agonising, the coming evening I should try again.'

Benny Liner rapped his pipe against his hand. A sprinkling of charred tobacco powdered the table. His nose twitched. He sniffed. Then he sneezed.

Wiping his beard again, he asked, 'Can I buy you another coffee?'

'My turn,' I said, calling over the waiter.

'I am telling the story,' he replied. 'I'll also pay for your patience.'

He pushed the sugarbowl towards me even before the coffee had arrived. 'I'll have another cup later,' he said and coughed into his plump white palm.

'One day,' he resumed, 'in the hold of a new idea, I left the office in a hurry. The day was cold and bleak, the kind in which icicles hang from walls. The wind blew viciously and the sky was menacing. People everywhere turned up their collars. The air tasted salty. And then, and then, the storm broke. Caught in the downpour, I ran for shelter in the doorway of a bookstore. Other people pushed past me. They were wet. Their breaths came out as steam.

'Seeing no early end to the deluge, I too went inside. The store was old and musty. On every wall, scores of shelves built to the ceiling held countless used books, their bindings dulled by handling, their titles faded, their jackets frayed along the edges. In its way, it reminded me of a graveyard. Just as there were dead people, so were there dead books; just as one-time remarkable and honoured men, once interred, became progressively forgotten, so too were the much-dog-eared books of the one-time renowned and esteemed buried, unremarked, under masses of other people's books or squeezed between others' tomes, or sequestered, out of sight, behind volumes penned by later, if also ageing and receding, authors. The contemplation of oblivion was a sobering one but that was one

fate I would not accept. There was too much in me, the crucible of ideas, of characters, of plots was too heated and overflowing to permit such annihilation.

'As I had nothing better to do while awaiting the return of calm, I browsed about the store. And it was then that something happened which took my breath away. I took down a book, a slim unprepossessing volume that had slipped behind some others, shook off its dust and began to read. Its phrases, passages and cadences made my cheeks burn and my temples throb. A flush rose to the very roots of my hair and I broke out in a sweat such as can only follow a rampant fever. For out of those pages emerged a modern Solomon, a Solon and a Nestor all in one who captured with the most utter conviction and art the truths I had hit upon on Ormond Hill. And suddenly, as I read, fame, fame, became a thing ridiculously easy to attain. Like a caprice, an idea came to me. One needed not skill but cunning, not a vision but daring. Its very simplicity made the idea seem ludicrous. And yet it could work; nothing was more certain.

'Where earlier I had waxed hot, my palms now became coldly moist, my fingers as though preserved in ice. I replaced the book upon the shelf but a magnet drew me back to it, drew me back to it once, twice, three times. For in it lay my whole fate and I could not let it go, I simply couldn't, although perhaps, perhaps it was fate that would now not let me go.

'And then the rain eased. The store emptied itself of its refugees from the storm. Icy gusts of wind blew through the store as the door repeatedly opened and repeatedly closed. The proprietor, who earlier had been content merely to sit behind his counter, now approached me.

'"May I help you, Sir?," he asked.

'"Yes", I said. "Who is this Miklosz who wrote this book?"

'He turned the book every this way and that as though he were looking for a light to illuminate the darker recesses of his memory.

'"Miklosz?," he murmured. "Miklosz? A Hungarian, I

would guess by the name. Strange. I haven't heard of him. Lord knows how long the book must have been sitting there. If you want it, you can have it for two dollars."

'Two dollars! Imagine it! How cheaply was fame to be bought! – I paid him the money. I could barely swallow. I hurried home, the book under my coat. I felt like a thief; no, worse, like a looter, a would-be murderer.

'For four weeks, after returning from the office and sitting at my desk well into the night, I worked upon the little volume. I sought things to change. But the story told itself. No amount of shuffling of characters, chapters, passages or events could improve upon Miklosz' work. What I did alter – names, locations, times – was more to placate my own conscience than to truly modify the text.

'Then, the manuscript completed – I still can't say transcribed – and typed and bound and parcelled, I hurried with it to the post-office. To dawdle would have been to risk a victory for conscience. The clerk, a red-headed pimply fellow with long freckled fingers, weighed my package, stamped it and, with a gesture that was at once decisive and irrevocable, tossed it roughly on top of a heap of other parcels. In that moment, I swear, I wanted to reach out and retrieve the package, ready to confess – *Mea culpa! Mea culpa!, Mea culpa!* – that the whole business was a mistake or a caprice. But the clerk was already counting out the change, and the matter, I decided, was now out of my hands. If I was destined to drown I would do so even in a spoonful of water.

'I didn't sleep, all the same. Nor did I eat. I lost weight. I couldn't write a single creative word. I became green whenever I thought of a distant editor detecting the forgery. I drafted letters to the publishers but threw them away. I thought of leaving the country. I contemplated suicide.

'Then one day, the postman, complaining of the flies and of his load, brought me the publisher's reply. My legs were jelly. I expected the worst. The letter was brief. In short, the publishers were pleased to inform me that the editorial board viewed my manuscript with particular favour. With my con-

sent, after finalising contracts, the book would be published during the following autumn and an advance cheque would be forwarded upon receipt of my affirmative reply.

'I was amazed, astounded, and, as you would expect, overjoyed.

'The book did indeed see the light in late autumn.

'The first reviews were a little cautious. The novel possessed a quaint old-fashioned and, at times, anachronistic quality, the critics wrote. It had to be admitted, however, – they added – that its themes were enduring and engaging and the author's handling of them so persuasive that to deliberately find fault in this work of a new and able writer would be to quibble over trivia. Later reviews proved more enthusiastic still. I received congratulatory and laudatory letters. My mother prepared a party for family friends. Past schoolmates suddenly rediscovered me. The fellows in the office patted me on the back. I attended meetings, went to theatre parties, was admitted into writers' societies, read from the work to discussion groups. For six months, I floated. My life had been rubbed with that proverbial honey.

'But where there's honey, so, too, are there flies . . .

'Last November, I received a letter. – You may want to read it. I have it here.'

Benny handed me a folded double sheet of paper which he had taken from an inside pocket of his jacket. He picked at his nose with his free hand.

'Read,' he said, placing the stem of his unlit pipe into his mouth and sucking on it with moist lips, 'I won't disturb you.'

The letter was written on pages torn from an exercise-book. The writing was thin and spidery and the script climbed upwards without regard to the lines.

> 'May I commend you on your extraordinarily fine work,' – I read. – 'How sensitive an artist you are and how splendidly you convey the sweep of history, the flirtation of the

universe with each man's destiny and the muteness of man in the face of his fate.

'Permit me here to append a personal story. When I was twenty-five or twenty-six – my memory has regrettably weakened considerably in the past fifty years – I possessed a vision, as vivid as sunlight, identical to that portrayed in your book. Out of this vision, an idea sprouted and flowered, shapeless bodies assumed form, faces peopled my imagination. All of these forced themselves upon me, begging me – so I believed – to record them for eternity upon paper. I hesitated. I had little talent. I didn't seek the limelight. I valued more the quiet life of a watchmaker, demanding little, content with mere plums. The prophet Isaiah, too, wanted no more than this. But God touched his lips and gave him speech. I wrote a novel. The work fell together easily. It took a mere five weeks. It was as if I had conceived it in a dream and, waking, it lay before me ready to be written. I was – or deemed myself – merely the agent of some mightier force compelling the work into being. It was published. But few people read it. The War had just begun; folk were distracted and where they sought diversion it was in the form of more humorous light-hearted fare than philosophic stuff. I wrote no more after that. I married instead, set up my own shop, collected stamps, raised children. And I seldom thought of that work of my youth – that peculiar somnambulistic aberration of my life – which, for all I knew, apart from a single copy in my keeping, had vanished from existence. It is true; I seldom thought of it until a newspaper review stirred my memory. And now, having purchased your book, I see my own work again, identical in all respects save for the names and places and lesser immaterial details.

'I have discussed this matter with my family. They have persuaded me that a double injustice has been committed. In the first instance, the work of my youth deserved a fate better than the past half-century has given it. In the second, credit for it is being taken by one who has usurped – that is their word, I myself abhor it – who has usurped it from its rightful owner.

'I regret to inform you therefore of my intention to institute legal proceedings.

I am,
Yours sincerely,
Gustav Michaels
(formerly Miklosz).'

When Benny Liner saw that I had finished reading the letter, he replaced his pipe upon the ashtray and sniffed and then blew his nose aloud. He would have done the first trumpet in any symphony orchestra proud. People looked around.

'Can you imagine it?,' Benny said. 'I swear I was a breath from hanging myself.

'Over the next week, I wrote letters to the Michaels, this Miklosz. Dozens of them. Scores. I pleaded with him to desist from legal action. I begged for pity, for clemency, appealed to his sense of decency. I offered him all the royalties, promised him a weekly income for life from my own pocket, he had only to nominate the sum. He didn't answer my letters. I telephoned him. A girl, her voice cold and impenetrable, answered but wouldn't let me speak with him. I went to his home but that same girl, his grand-daughter, wouldn't let me in.

'The old Asmodeus dragged me to court in the end. And, of course, I had no case. My lawyer tried hard to justify my action but even I failed to be convinced. Meanwhile, Miklosz sat in his seat, to all appearances oblivious to the proceedings. His face was flabby and expressionless. His eyelids drooped. He had a tremor in his hands and his movements were slow and jerky. Beside him sat his grand-daughter, a dark pretty girl with full lips and a dimpled chin. She had large black eyes that seemed to be laughing at some private joke. From time to time, she wiped the old man's mouth, adjusted his tie or gave him a sweet.

'I lost the case, of course. My lawyer shook my hand and said "Bad luck." Miklosz didn't even look at me. Upon hearing the verdict and the ensuing order for remuneration, he

leaned over stiffly towards his grand-daughter and whispered something in her ear. I despised him as I despised snakes. I cursed God for giving him life long enough to punish me with humiliation too mortifying to countenance.

'Outside the courthouse, newsmen and spectators gathered around Miklosz. He was leaning on a stick. He was being photographed. Reporters plied him with questions. He spoke with difficulty, in explosive jagged syllables. "I am not a writer," I heard him say. "I am but a mere watchmaker."

'I turned away. I had come alone; I left alone, disgrace a visitation that none was keen to share. But on my retreat, quick clattering steps pursued me. It was Miklosz' grand-daughter.

' "Mr Liner," she called.

'She reached me, her shoulder-bag bouncing on her hips. She panted. Small and compact, she could have been the old devil's pet rather than a relative.

' "Mr Liner, I am Teresa Michaels. We met when you called at our home. I am sorry I could not let you in. But Granddad, Granddad, he wants you to know, and he really means it, that he bears you no ill will."

'Behind her, still leaning on his stick on the steps of the courthouse, that bent unsmiling Mephistopheles nodded.

' "He wants you to know also," Teresa went on, "that he will not press for payment."

'I nodded back at Miklosz, silently wished a pox upon his head and turned my back upon on Teresa.

' "We can settle scores another time," I said and walked away to nurse my hurt alone.

'The scandal tumbled out of the courtroom into the streets and just as avidly into the newspapers. I was roundly denounced. Those with whom I had drunk champagne forgot my existence. The journals ignored me. Nobody now cared what I thought. My parents no longer dared invite their friends. My mother wept whenever she looked into my face. I changed jobs. And Miklosz was now acclaimed the genius. He had been so far ahead of his time, the critics wrote and pro-

ceeded to ask, what might he yet still have achieved had his gifts been earlier recognised?'

Between finger and thumb, Benny pulled at his beard, then smiled – a peculiar smile, an enigmatic smile, an ironic smile.

'Yes,' he said. 'I wanted fame; instead, it was infamy I won. Miklosz, content with oblivion, at his late hour became famous. A funny sort of world, don't you think?'

I had finished my coffee and set down the cup.

'And what do you do now?,' I asked Benny.

He scratched at the patch of eczema above his nose and fleetingly sucked a lip.

'Oh, I don't write any more, if that's what you're asking.' He shook his head. 'I've taken up stamp-collecting and work for a watchmaker.'

'That's quite a change, isn't it?'

'Things haven't turned out altogether badly,' he said, 'though I must admit it's scarcely what I had envisaged from the heights of my Olympus up there on Ormond Hill.'

He looked at his watch and then towards the doorway.

'Ah, punctual as ever,' he said, standing up.

A young woman was approaching. She was short, dark and compact, with big black shining eyes. She carried a shoulder-bag that reached her hips. She brightened when she saw Benny and blew him a kiss. They embraced.

'Meet Teresa Michaels,' he said, and winked. The balding patch on his head gleamed. He took off his glasses and his eyes glowed.

'Like I said. A funny sort of world, don't you think?'

Survivors

I escaped, fled, sought the severance from dissension and rancour that only walls and distance could offer, a hope misguidedly vain as their shouting – Father's, Mother's, his voice raucous and untamed, hers full-throated and shrill – in every crevice of the brain reverberated and jangled, stirring in me the cauldron that in others flowed as mere blood to fury, frenzy, desperation and murder-lust.

'Bind these hands!', a dramatist might have written. 'Bind these hands lest they do harm!', the hands where left unbound destined in time to execute the deed of Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello.

But reality was not invention, nor theatre, nor public spectacle, but anger that made the fists close and open, perspire and tremble, and, on reaching the succouring parapet on the skirting of the bay, crash, first one fist, then the other, into the mortar of the uprights, pain sublime in sublimation of fury uncontained and in the mad purgation of hate, the expurgation of burning gall against those who in some supposedly tender rapprochement eighteen years before had created life, created breath, along with a brain with which to despair and blood with which to rage.

It did not matter that there were people about, scores of them, and scores more, winter-albino, tanned and roasted, and others scraggy, run to seed, or manfully athletic, and others still, pubescently self-absorbed, or childishly wilful or toddler raw. It did not matter that an owlishly-startled dumpy man in bermudas and elastic hose stared for a moment at me and

might have touched his temple, or that a woman in last century's frock and hat from mothballs redeemed clicked her tongue and lowered sourly, or that a young fellow and his spider-legged inamorata paused momentarily in their conversation, the two then giggling as they passed, the fellow, tossing his head so that this nose, chin, hair rose high, saying, 'Reckon it takes all types . . .', his soft-bloused consort closing the subject with a verdict, 'Probably had a row with his girl or sumpthin' . . .'

It did not matter. With them I did not have to live. A pox upon those holier-than-thous, upon their judgements, their opinions. A cholera, a plague, a contagion on them all, as my flammable pater-paterfamilias would say . . . But with him, with them, my parents whose very shadows I had to share – how ignore, shut out, transcend the polemics incendiary and splenetic? –

'New carpets?! Now?! Last week, it was new curtains you wanted, the week before new covers for the chairs, the week before that new wallpaper . . . More spending, more this, more that, more money thrown down the sewer . . .'

'You want to live in a trash-can all your life?! . . .'

'We had worse . . .'

'We can have better . . .'

'And what don't you have? A roof, a car, television, a shop, a belly that – oy, God forbid – never goes hungry . . .'

'A monkey with even a little bit of brain can have the same. Don't you see . . . Can't you see what you are, what we are? . . . A week, a month, a year can go by and no-one will come . . . I don't even invite . . . This hole, who would want to as much as enter? . . .'

'So you're ashamed?! Ashamed!'

'Look at the Fleischbergs, the Richlers, the Kopolovskis . . .'

'So?!'

'They are somebody! . . .'

'And in my home, I am somebody!'

'Ha!'

'Ha! You want houses, flats in Toorak, blocks of land, and mortgages, overdrafts, interest payments higher than the roof, not sleep at night worrying if you can pay . . .?'

'And *they* worry?!'

'I am not them. I don't want their ulcers. You want me to have ulcers? Take Fleischberg's pills, Richler's injections, go wherever Kopolovski goes for cures? . . . Maybe you want my skin, my blood, my marrow, every hair you can pull out from my arse?! . . .'

'Pig!'

'Blood-sucker!'

'Miser!'

'Squanderer!'

'Satan!'

'Witch!'

So thin the walls. Even a metre thick, all doors closed, all chinks and breaches and crevices filled, yet would they still have been too thin as vitriol in the kitchen mingled with physics in my study, as calumny ignited all chemistry and contempt riddled every formula in maths. Themes and variations they were, these feuds, the refrains, too, inventive and diverse, but no music, no harmony were they, only discord, marrowbones and cleavers, twelve-tone dissonances doubled, trebled, quadrupled.

When did I become aware of these vituperations? When was I *not* aware of them? My mother's milk, expectedly so innocuous, so bland, might already at my birth have been laced with gall. For the Russian hearth, the Uzbek ambience, so exotic, so oriental, upon which I had opened my eyes, were not the hearth and ambience of her own origin and becoming, but a derailment in her life – in both their lives, Father's, Mother's – the first of many to which troops Teutonic, moronic and vulpine, the devil at his most bestial beside them a saint, had driven them, the modern spawn of Attila the while reducing to ashes, smoke, dust, soap and decay, and to memory what in my parents' Warsaw had been bustle, breath, and industry, what had been humanity, folksiness, God-intoxi-

cation and faith, and an innocence that in the blackest nightmare could not have conceived the perditions that a single Austrian dement, a runted swarthy dark-haired dark-hearted dark-souled Schiklgruber was in time to wreak in pursuit of the blue and blond of some fancied warped and impossible Aryan fiction.

Had I been sucking lemons while the battle raged, my teeth would scarcely have been less on edge. Had I drunk vinegar or even wormwood in draughts, the goosepimples crowding my skin could not have crept more bristlingly. I could not study; not even with examinations, matriculation three weeks away. The words and numerals and symbols of the texts before me clung to the page, they were impervious to penetration, refractory to absorption. I stood up, sat down, stood up again; I paced the floor, glared out the window, snorted and heaved and sighed, in acute claustrophobia pounding the air of my room where vituperation and clamour piercing through wall and door streamed into every corner. And, myself pounded too often, pounded too far, tossed to the limits of frustration and futility, I left that room, left the flat, and, slamming shut the door on the polemics of my begetters, took to the streets, there to find the breadth, the space, the sanity which might contain my unfettered fury.

Summer was two months away, but the heat might have been that of the southern high noon solstice. The October sun glared, shimmered, trembled; glinted on the asphalt of Barkly Street, on the tramlines, wires and windows along the Village Belle, leapt off the billboards outside Luna Park and on the shellacked shining surface of the sea at St. Kilda to which my steps, so maddened this time, so wild, but through long-established habit trained, now drew me. To that low familiar parapet I came, there I crashed my fists into its stone, and there then sat upon it, untouchably cocooned, the plaints and jarrings of home still jangling in my ears as I watched – as I saw without truly watching – the flow of flesh and bronze and liveliness across the esplanade, on the plantations, the sand, around the bay. To my left, yachts and skiffs lay moored or

sailed beyond the far side of the Marina jetty; to my right, the baths of the South Pacific sealed off the farther reach of vision; while, hemmed within that cloistering corralling cordon frisked children, young fellows and girls, or more soberly lazed and suckled of the sun the older folk, bent here and there over chess or cards or draughts, or tattling, jabbering, chattering about children, grand-chidren, thoroughbreds, cricketers and prize geraniums. There was a haze across the bay, seemingly frosted pearl that weighed and nestled upon the derricks, pylons and refineries of Port Melbourne, while beyond ... beyond ... beyond stretched freedom, space, adventure, solace, and other countries, other peoples, customs, climates, lores, all waiting to offer colours brighter, melodies more melodious, scents more fragrant than the dreary second-, third-, fourth-rate fare of the Antipodean backwater washed by Indian and Pacific Oceans and chosen by my parents – chosen *for* my parents – as if called to do penance for the sin of survival where annihilation was more acceptably, if more insanely, the order of the day. I sat there on the parapet swaddled in solitude, still burning, still seething, and seething all the more as some larrikins wantonly rattled a gewgaw in my ear, as a beach-ball carelessly hurled struck my head, as a pair of bronzed sinewy wrestling Narcissists jostled me in their foolery off my perch.

'Sorry, mate!', they said, first one, then the other, 'No harm meant! It's all in the fun!', but fun was all one-sided as — enough being enough — I left my place and moved off, side-stepping children who frisked about with ice-creams melting in their palms, avoiding groups of thick-lipped loud-mouthed girls come down from St. Moritz sporting ice-skating boots about their necks, turning away from gaggles of fellows in bathing briefs, copper pendants and silver-plated bracelets who whistled at this girl and that, the girl, safe in the open, in the light, in the crush, daring to tilt her breasts, waggle her rear and jiggle her wrists in erogenic mock-allurement with a laugh that, not wholly laughter, was nearer to snigger.

It was towards Fitzroy Street I headed, mile-long converg-

ing hub of polyglot, polyphonic, polymorph mortality crowding shop and thorough-fare, weaving serpentine paths to safer harbour between sweeping cars, braving the approach of clang-happy trams, shrugging shoulders and snubbing noses at police patrols cruising, cruising in expectation, in intended deterrence of some incident by the law of statistics ordained. On the stairway to the Upper Esplanade, a boy, a girl the tenderer side of teen were lighting cigarettes, bravura and furtiveness in their posture combined, a drunk in trench-coat and September's stubble his companion sat on a step, while a streak of graffiti above him read 'Shut your mouth and open your cunt for the thrill of your life!' At the summit, the sun, ricocheting off the duco and mirrors of passing cars, hurled stark silver in my eyes. I paused, let sight be restored, and turned left, turned junction-ward, there to confront a bounding bouncing trio of homuncular Lolitas, in their bleach, their gaudy flesh-configurated bulging blouses and tights and cloves-scented necks the goading stuff of coquetry, objects sublime of ruttishness and prurience to any number of acned adenoidal gangling paralaliacs.

'Yeah,' said one, tossing chewing-gum between her teeth and swinging a handbag of yellow-orange mesh, 'the bouncer 'e got the bugger by the neck, in a flash kicked open the bloody flamin' door an' turfed the mongrel out . . .'

'Serve 'im right, the drag . . .'

'Pervs! . . .'

Like fabled sesames, they parted to let me pass, oblivious to my actual existence, I would swear, just as a Holden-load of lay-abouts drew up close, one of them, beefy, gargoylian and square-toothed, leaning out to call after them, 'Hey, sheilas, wanna come to a party?!' 'Up yours, Mort!' called back one of the mannikins and upped a thumb, 'Pull your own till it drops!', to which her companions, first one, then the other, twitted, tittered and peeled 'Yeah!', 'Go fuck yourselves!', 'Suck yer' mothers' tits!', 'Lick our arse!' Under the low wall of the Esplanade, a spindly elf-chinned man with lips of rubber sat on a bench, quickened by the scene. As I passed, he

raised his stick and winked. 'They got spunk, them kids,' he said, smiling, his face becoming a warp of wrinkles. 'No doubt about it, son, they certainly got spunk.'

'Spunk' was scarcely the word I would have chosen. Sauciness perhaps, bumptiousness also, coarseness certainly, vernacular and argot such as theirs even at the height of domestic squall within our walls unheard. At times, loose scabrous tainted words may have been dropped, even a colourful string of them, a Polish 'damn', perhaps a Yiddish 'cholera', a Russian 'hag' or 'devil' or 'beast', but not – my ears be protected – the verbal spawn of the gutter, the sewer, to be plain, of the whorehouse. But neither, the coin turned over, did 'love', 'dear', 'kitten', 'my hero' receive ready currency under our roof as they did in, say, Ricky Wrobel's house, or Harry Freilich's, or Martin Glicksman's, in their large-windowed spacious fresh-aired homes where there was warmth to be had, and composure and calm, not merely in strictly atmospheric ambience but in a word, a smile, a touch.

Could I, could *I* but be touched, touched in that same warm, calm, composed and generous way!

Crossing the street, I tasted again the acerbity of their venom, Father's, Mother's, mingled with the salty sharpness of the sea and overcame a tide of nausea that welled in a maelstrom in my throat. A touch, that was all, a touch! But there was no touch to be had, neither at home, nor in Fitzroy Street, whose Acland Street corner I had reached where, outside the Prince of Wales, closed though it was, a rowdy, joking, back-slapping gaggle of flush-cheeked sweating drinkers had gathered with stubbies, cans and froth-slimed glasses. They were near-facsimiles of one another and templates for numberless clones of beer-gutted mulberry-nosed smoking-drinking hoi-polloi – brick-layers, boiler-makers and wharfies, and mechanics, labourers and workers in mines – the stuff of which, and for whose sake, revolutions in other places were made, but who in the terrain provincial *of Melbourna parochiale* found religion splendid in trinity divine of footballer, cricketer and horse, who were moved to ecstasy by a

ball coursing through the goals, who were transported to bliss in a well-hit well-cut homeside run, and were brought unto salvation in a bet redeemed at two hundred to one.

A caricature, this, to be sure; but no travesty of reality was it, no fabrication such as might be rendered by one who would perceive things in over-simple bi-chromatic blacks and whites, or thought in absolutes oblivious to relativities and conditionals. Fruit, rather, was it of a cynicism nurtured in one who, in earlier years of pristine unworldliness, had, at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, dared imagine that the society he would in time be ripe to enter would boast more parts of wisdom than of ignorance, more of intellect than of indolence, more of achievement than of waste – of waste, and of abuse of energy and gifts, and of curtailment of the grander vision, all these the final lot of his parents trapped, day in, day out, in a dusty haberdashery where constant unrelieved proximity caused their nerves to jar and grate and fray, their smallness in the world, their pettiness, their being no more than mere puffs of breath, all these the culmination and apotheosis of all that might have been, of all that might yet have come of my father's one-time industrious venturesome spirit, or of my mother's artistic eye and hand to nothing lasting turned, as also of those other gifts in society more extant, gifts of literacy, of creativity and of imagination, all once aflame perhaps, all so numinous and expansive once, but now so deeply drowned in beer, or narcosed so throughly by sport, and to mediocrity lost, forever lost, the reality that thwarted possibility so cuttingly refracted in that very huddle of roisterers to history and to value so bacchically oblivious as in their trance they swore and celebrated and soused, and swaggered and caroused outside the bars and lounge of the Prince of Wales.

Caricatures, perhaps; but no caricature the man in dreary grey, the loner who, approaching from behind outside Sarti's, synchronised his step with mine and said, 'Nice weather we're having, don't you think?'

The angles of his mouth rose to a smile, soft, reserved, unimposing.

'Just right to go walking,' he went on, 'and with company all the better, wouldn't you say?'

He sucked a cheek and passed a hand through hair grown sparse and wispy sweeping his gaze in swift contemplative gyrations of spirals, helixes, and whorls over me.

'Yes,' I said, letting a smile of sorts, more a flitting grimace break through the raw causticity of bile that still smarted in me like a burn. 'Yes.'

My companion, unbidden but suddenly true, pursed his lips and nodded. He rubbed his nose, looked around him to all sides, repeated 'Yes . . . yes' in a quiet tone, and fell silent as if to let opinion harden to the solidity of confirmation.

Our shadows short and broadly splayed, moving on the footpath side by side, we passed the newsagent's, the bank, the chemist, Levi's, the fruit palace. Above the tang of ocean now behind me rose the syrupy nectar of pancakes, the heavier rankness of chips, the more inviting balm of coffee, vanilla slice and floss. Here, before us, a father a mother paused in wait for a straggling toddler, there a crew-cut fellow whistled through his fingers to a distant mate, a dog paused to raise a leg beside a pole, a tattooed girl stopped in her tracks to light a cigarette and a man gone to seed begged for a shilling, a penny, a zac. The folks-word *luftmensch* came to me then and I heard mother in her shrillness use it again and again, hurling it at Father because he was not a Fleischberg, a Richler, a Kopolovski, or a Wrobel, a Freilich or a Glicksman.

To my acquired companion I was becoming oblivious, that stranger among strangers but another ephemeral, drab and nameless moth flitting at a tangent to my private orbit; but short of Leo's he turned to me square-on, reached out a hand as if to touch, and said, 'Say, you seem like a decent fellow. Look, we're close to my place . . . in Loch Street just over there you're welcome to come over we can talk if you like I've got loads of matchboxes I can show you got them from

everywhere from everywhere and I'll show you them I'll be glad to have you over and as God is my saviour you can trust me my friend you can trust me every bit of the way . . .'

Though touch I might have sought, his touch I shrank from. The seedy flabbiness of the cheeks which earlier I might have overlooked but now acknowledged and registered more clearly, I had seen before, and seen their blotchiness too, and the same thinning hair, as also the despondent eyes above a smile watery and slack, and the puffy hands as well – had seen them in Mr. Fowler, in soft-voiced and ineffectual Gabriel Fowler, in *Queenie Gabriela* Fowler who had taught English literature and liked to touch and was the butt of rumours and jokes and sniggering whisperings that, in adolescent prudery and naivete, I had preferred to greet with a deaf ear, let alone believe.

'I can't,' I said, moving away, 'not just now I said I'd be home in half an hour we're expecting visitors guests I have a friend coming . . .'

'It needn't be for long,' he persisted.

I shook my head, side-stepping a boy who running away from another was clearly heading, unseeing, into me.

'I promise, I swear,' that tenderer of hospitality pressed on, 'you can trust me I'm not what you think really I'm not I'm not what you . . .'

Charlie Chilvers in the fourth form had once thrown a paper plane at Mr. Fowler in class. It had struck him, the teacher, on the neck. Reaching for the offended part, he had turned around. There was hurt, pain in his every facial fold, and puzzlement, and brittleness, and vulnerability. About to speak, he had moved his lips, sniffed, then pursed them tight. He had glanced out the window, at the ceiling, the floor, at the display-boards at the back of the class, and then, heaving, pressing with finger and thumb the inner corners of his eyes, and, swaying ever so slightly, had turned away. He did not appear at school for three days after. Sorry for the beaten Mr. Fowler though I may have been then, it was revulsion that drove me now to recoil from this to-me degenerate milk-sop,

from this effete and blighted pansy, even though the hurt and the puzzlement, the vulnerability and fragility were wholly the same as they had been in my enervated teacher. And I hurried away, past the Dairy Queen across the lane, past the cluster of T-shirted young folk crowding the doorway of the Casablanca, past the window-shoppers outside Peter's Shoes, past the portrait gallery, the bookstore and Cyrano's, and on across Jackson Street from where, glancing back, I caught a glimpse of that invert standing in mid-footpath, looking left, looking right, a hand on his head, as though decision, decision of any kind, were at that moment beyond him.

When I turned back junctionward, to be struck yet again by another momentarily-blinding arrow of silver leaping off duco and glass, just as from Theo's to my right the cloying astringency of hamburger and frying onion was drifting out, there emerged from the knot of people in the two-way flow a scraggy unshaven trough-cheeked fellow who, scuttling from one stroller to another and then to me, asked, solicited, almost pleaded 'Hey, mate, have ya' got a fag?' Emaciation was scarcely too strong a word for him. His arms were weedy spindles, their veins protuberant blue cords with bruises and scabs running along their length, up to the elbow where, swollen and angry, festered a hideous noxious suppurating sore. Dressed in a sleeveless jacket itself undersized and frayed, his meagre flesh showed every knob and boss of bone on his cadaverous chest while the navel above his legless denim shorts was ringwormed, ballooned and grimy.

When I shook my head, he grasped my arm and said, 'Then d'ya know mate where I c'n get the stuff?'

I caught his glance, a swift and furtive dart of yellowing eyes towards the street where a police car had appeared on its patrol.

'Giv ya' good money if ya' do,' he pressed. His fingers were pincers, talons, claws.

But in the winking of time that passed before I could deny again, he was off, scampering away, the patrol car continuing at its easy but vigilant pace, the words 'Shit bastards pricks!'

escaping through his chipped and blackened teeth hanging like some withering cloud of smoke behind me.

I felt the sting of those words as if they were directed at me, and the flush of a slap delivered rose to my cheeks. My jaws set to the marble of protest, the gritting of teeth all the more vigorous, all the more vicious for my protest being unuttered, being impotent, being helplessly inward turned. But the stirrings of a vision burgeoned then; more, something of a revelation, vague still, to be sure, and tentative, elusive and confused, but bound up somehow with time and with history, and with emptiness and dreaming. I saw then, as I had not seen before, the street, the shops, the people as if from a distance, as if from some pedestal or platform or perimeter of a roof. There was garbage in the gutters; like links in spiral chains, the cars trundled past; hoardings were peeling, notices on doors were fading, wrinkled, and out of date; here, a neon-light flickered in near-extinction, there, a rift in the pavement caused a pedestrian to catch a toe. I walked on, continued to notice things I had not clearly, consciously, noticed before – a bicycle tethered to a pole; apartments across Fitzroy Street showing every sign of decay; a young fellow hugging the walls as, with head rolling, lolling, he gangled along, talking to himself. In a doorway near the post-office stood a baggy-eyed woman the further side of blight; a man, himself not free of mould, paused before her, looked her over, walked on.

There was something ephemeral about the scene, and yet, the coin turned over, something unchanging and unchangeable. In that bustling multitude, even while most were ordinary, unremarkable and commonplace as they strolled past, talking, laughing, gesturing or hauling their children in tow, I saw more clearly a stream of alcoholics, derelicts, prostitutes and vagrants; there were boys without homes, girls without refuge, and behind the doors of the Ritz a rallying of transvestites, voyeurs, pimps and pederasts. And there was something else I saw, saw in the interstices of imagination – a cemetery, scores of cemeteries, even in the sunlight, in the brightness, in the colour, the glow; and within their bounds

and boundaries were terraces of graves, vales of them, whole expanses of them, the deep cold caverns dark and silent, swallowed up in them this whole pathetic mass of flotsam and jetsam whose passing from light would be unnoticed, unremarked, unmourned. Time would then conceal them, eternity concrete them in oblivion.

But what struck with potency still more compelling was the awareness of the unrelenting continuance of it all; no sooner was the one sucked through the cesspool of his existence to extinction than another waif of nature, of life, staked claim upon the vacancy, the defector become the merest drop of ocean lost in its infinite immensity, the surface left untouched, incurious, taciturn to the extreme of frigidity and indifference. Other bronzed Narcissists would there be to jostle unobtrusive spectators, from their parapet perch; other secret smokers would conceal juvenile sin on the steps ascending to the Esplanade; and other Lolitas, if not in trios, then in singles, pairs, quartets and more would up their thumbs at crotch-tickled gutter-crawlers; while inside and outside the Prince of Wales, other gaggles of toss-pots and sots would soak gut, liver and brain to dilapidation and torpor. They would always be there, though different their names, as also their faces and their dissipations, their precursor kindred-spirit long since committed to the grave; they would always be there, along with the Fowlers, the deranged, the addicts and the strays, Fitzroy Street, the Fitzroy Street of my earlier calmer contemplative St. Kilda walks but one short conduit, but one dark tunnel in a huge multi-continental trans-universal network of tunnels along which entire constellations of humanity and mortality, through ignorance, mindlessness, brutishness and insentience – in murder, harlotry, addiction and suicide manifest – pitched and scuttled and reeled towards unconsidered perdition.

Against this . . . Against this . . .

The vision sharpened.

As did hearing. As did all the senses as, even at such remove, Mother's plaints, Father's reproaches returned with their ear-

lier execrating shrillness. Turning into Grey Street, heading home, I felt distaste, to be sure, well full-force to my throat, but the need to smash a fist, to escape, to flee across the oceans from the stagnation of a home rent by rancour and dissension – these did not importune with the same desperation. There were shadows across Grey Street, and shadows sobered, tempered fury and cooled the exasperation that heat and incandescence had brought to the boil. But there was something else that restored sobriety. Something quite different. To be sure, the Fleischbergs, the Richlers and the Kopolovskis were blessed with the fortunes of Croesus in their acquisition of properties, city motels and cinema chains. Ship's-brothers, they, unlike Father who stagnated in his haberdashery long, long after arrival, they had reached out, and when opportunity had presented to seize, they, indeed, *had* seized – notwithstanding that Fleischberg had been bereaved of a wife and son in Belsen, that Richler, once a free-thinker, had turned fanatically pious, or that Kopolovski had alienated wife, brother, cousins and, utimately, his children.

None of these, my father; a modest, humble shell was his home; gone beyond had he, or fallen short perhaps, of grasping, of covetousness and of voraciousness for the mortar and glass of sky-piercing constructions that made those other Sammys run, or for a name engraved on the plaques of hospitals, synagogues and schools, or for padded chairs around committee-tables, or for a place on a public platform, in the limelight, or, as the saying went, in the sun. A roof, a shirt, a piece of bread; these were all he wanted in this world. And more than mere motto, fervid credo had this become, implicit in it an offering of thanksgiving, a hosanna, and a *selah!* For his flat, however sombre, was at least paid for; he had a business which, however inglorious, offered returns of a sort; he could sleep comfortably at nights while letting the days take care of themselves; and he could take pride, *naches* of a kind, however seldom or grudgingly given voice, in a son who, serious-minded and resilient, was heading somewhere, towards something, towards a name – all this when, in Hitler-shadowed

years long, not-so-long before, in Warsaw, Russia or in Paris, the very least of these may have seemed beyond the possible.

And if there were more to contemplate: for all her misgivings, and for all her demands, and for all her fancies, Mother, too, was not of the world of the society that was the object model for her rhetoric. Home and business were her domain also, all else but peripheral trifling bagatelles, such fidelity as hers the garnered legacy of an ethic sown and nurtured by her pious saintly father, my smoke-and-ashes grandfather, under whose roof with Uncles Chaim, David, Shmuel, and Aunts Dora, Esther and Baila none of whom I ever knew, the schooling of chastity, charity, decency and responsibility had been delivered. Perhaps it had been done with a birch, in the manner of the onion-and-garlic-breathed *rebbe* of folklore, perhaps with patient good temper had it been done, but the instruction was to last, it was to endure and to accompany Mother, accompany Father, to whatever far-flung pin-point of terrestrial soil they were in time ordained in the world to occupy.

And as, along Grey Street, I crossed Eildon Road where a car speeding madly skidded to a halt, a folk-tale after the likes of Peretz and Sholom Aleichem came to me. 'When, on your passing, you confront the Creator' – so it went –, 'not "Why were you not Moses?" shall He ask you, but "Why, why were you not yourself!?" '

And my parents, they *were* themselves. Not Fleischbergs, nor Richlers, nor Kopolovskis; not Wrobels, nor Freilichs nor Glicksmans. And for that, for what they were and for what they were not – go deny! – I, my raw sometimes-volatile adolescence being sole excuse, I had pitied and despised and resented them, I had loathed their very smallness and, by association, mine, as an execrable offence. But God! – if God there were – go justify that pity, sanction that hatred, condone that resentment when, all around, along the beach, in Fitzroy Street, and in the countless ineffaceable irredeemable Fitzroy Streets of the world, from Melbourne to Los Angeles, from

Capetown to Tokyo and from Dublin to Manila, there coursed the mouldering offal of society and time, there drifted the debased, unanchored, brutalised and mindlessly self-destroying, men, women, human beings born with the silver spoon of local idiom, roots and passport in their keeping, but throwing themselves – their lives, their gifts – into the trash-can of time that, after Europe, might more fittingly have been my parents' lot.

And yet, against all this, against all that in their own time had contrived, viciously, horribly, malignantly to drag them down, they had survived, they, Mother, Father, who from nothing – and, worse, from a legacy of orphanhood, vagabondage and loss – had risen and, all migraines, neuroses and distemper notwithstanding, had clung to decency, responsibility and duty, and, however modest the degree, had thrived.

If, in this, there was a tale, it was a tale, however low-key, of the humanly heroic.

And where, before, I had smashed my fist and cursed and fumed and given rein to fantasy of my eventual escape, if, as, on the last leg home, I turned into Barkly Street, where a freshly-lifting breeze signalled the coming of a change, anyone asked what it was that at that moment quickened my step, I should have taken him in tow, given still further impetus to my haste, and said, 'I am heading home. I am heading home. I am heading home', and 'I forgive! I forgive! I forgive!'

luftmensch – lit. one who lives on air; one without occupation, or an impractical fellow, or a dreamy wastrel.
naches – pleasure, pride.
rebbe – a rabbi, a teacher.

The Redeemer of Little Jerusalem

The setting was immaculate – Sunday, summer, a still shimmering sea, comely bodies bronzing, tanning lotion glistening, rippled young men, long-limbed girls, albino men in striped bermudas, triple-chinned women in last century's hats, and children squealing, clambering, leaping, and dogs chasing, chasing beach-balls, chasing shadows, chasing sticks.

This was Little Jerusalem, shrine of our pilgrimage, that stretch of magnetic green between the kiosks, the St. Kilda marina to the left, the South Pacific baths to the right, and across the bay, milky mist crowning the immobile cranes and pylons and refineries of Port Melbourne, scene of arrival of so many of us to these securer firmer Antipodean shores. Day after day, we gathered at our place of worship, boys and girls of the higher forms, fifteen, twenty of us, showing off, admiring – ourselves and one another –, and talking (oh, God, no, not of philosophy or physics or medieval history, subjects of nine-to-four captivity in chalk-choked classrooms), but of last night's barbecue, tonight's poolside party and tomorrow's rock concert at the Myer Music Bowl. Here, Abe Belfer wrestled with Maxie Greenberg, Micky Schleifer flirted with Hannah Podemski. Here, too, we outleapt one another in pursuit of high-flying rubber balls, and when Arthur Kirschenboim sought a partner for a game of chess, boldly laughing we kicked the wooden pieces off the board, gaily tickled Arthur's resisting, writhing, contracting ribs, and spiritedly sprinkled grass in his face and filled his ears with sand.

Poets – the Romantics among them – might have called the

air golden, radiant, and luminous, and prattled about twittering birds, gay hearts, blitheness of spirit and juvenile innocence. Ours, however, is a less mawkish age. Our pens flow not with honey but with Royal Blue or Indian ink. Our words are more temperate, suited to the harder, more sober temper of the times. And yet, truth compels us to adhere to the very descriptions of those we chide; for the air *was* luminous, birds – sparrows and seagulls – *did* twitter and sometimes caw around us; and we *would*, if pressed, have admitted to gaiety and blitheness, and, as for innocence, yes, that we still possessed, though, Lord knew, with summer and vacations scarcely begun, that was a state not destined for long to be preserved by all.

Others, barely a short call away, were well on the other side of innocence. Gurewicz, Shuster, Postnick and Lilienblum – a quartet of bare-backed men sitting around a square collapsible felt-topped table, biting their lips or whistling monotonously behind their fans of playing-cards, while their wives ate cream-puffs and chocolate cake and poured coffee from thermos flasks as they sat spread out on mohair rugs and shrilly traded the news of the week as though that week had been a year and the next two hours were to be a mere minute. Sometimes, Mrs. Postnick, capacious in the seat and endowed with arms of plucked chicken-flesh, stood up. Hands on hips, she arched her back out of its stiffness, winced sharply on straightening, and said 'Mine enemies should so suffer from old bones,' to which Mrs. Gurewicz, Mrs. Shuster and Mrs. Lilienblum in unison murmured a solemn 'Amen,' their faces transforming, however fleetingly, to a nobility and passion born of nothing less than suffering. But allowance must be made for other possibilities: that such manifest nobility and passion were, for instance, merely a trick of sunlight and flitting shadow – say, of a seagull flying across the sun; that they were perhaps but fanciful interpretations of mine, endowed as I was with intimate knowledge of those people; or that – a man is capable of any deception – I am deliberately misleading the

reader in pretending to depth where, in truth, none exists but only surface and shallows. Little Jerusalem, after all, was ever a place for games and good humour and light-hearted teasing, and my taste for these even as I remember those adolescent days, all the intervening years of work, debt, thinning hair and domestic wranglings notwithstanding, has not wholly waned. So may the reader forgive me my private, however unsubtle, amusement, pleasure and tilt at a little humbug.

But I digress.

That Sunday, then, was immaculate, the single minor aberration apart – the clock on the Upper Esplanade above us. Were we to trust it wholly, beguiled might we have been into believing that time stood still. Five-to-eight did it register to all who cared to look. But so had it the year before and the year before that. Besides, go, stop time, real time, and stop movement that can only take place within time! But there was no stopping of movement. The sun itself stirred it, its warm magnetic emanations drawing towards it the unresisting pleasure-tickled masses. Cars humming in the shimmer of entangled traffic inched somnolently over glowing asphalt. Sweating, laden with blankets, bags and beach umbrellas, the people wove serpentine paths through the narrow spaces between the cars while would-be comedians – or would-be corpses – clambered harum-scarum over their burning bonnets. At this, drivers hooted, shook fists, and sprinkled lush words into the surrounding glaze, while drowning these were whoops of delirium straddling the iridescent blueness over the Stardust and the Palais that came from the coasters that clattered and scuttled around the neck-jarring bends of the Scenic Railway a stone's thow-and-a-half away in Luna Park.

Our group were past such whoop-inspiring pleasures; those coasters had been the delight of an earlier day. But neither had we, mercy be, yet settled into the composed twilight of card-playing or of cream-puffs and chocolate cake and the matching of story against story of grand-children, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, nephews, nieces, and neighbours, or of

grocers, doctors, plumbers and landlords, or of Surfers Paradise and Hayman Island, and indigestion and constipation and piles and Lord knows what other sunset talk.

Ah, blessed, blessed generation that we were!

Who saw or heard him first, our nemesis, I no longer know. Perhaps all of us looked towards him in unison, as at a sudden thunderclap or towards a startled shout of 'Fire!' He betrayed, that lean spare haunted haunting trespasser, no hint of sun ever having touched his face. Of flesh, only the hard curved buttress of his nose, the milk-white brow, and his waxen spindle-fingered hands ventured to meet the light. For the rest, he wore, pulled down firm, a porter's cap, wore too a black roll-neck sweater and, over this, the heat notwithstanding, a tatty black suit, too tight, too short, on which blobs of grease had melted darkly into confluent lagoons. And as for his face – yes, I must return to his face – his lips, his cheeks, his chin, even his ears, all so shrivelled and so sere, were lost in a straggly black beard that might have been a hand-me-down from some ancient pious ancestor laid to rest in the distant Carpathians, while as for his eyes . . . one could well wonder whether they were truly his own, so stark, so black and so dartingly avian were they in their cavernous sockets.

By the time I looked up, he stood perched just midway along the parapet that separated sand behind from plantation in front. From there, raising a finger that was spare and scrawny as though he were setting to cleave the very air, he cried out in a voice that was at once shrill and riveting and intense: 'Who among you shall listen to what I have to say! Who will listen here to what I have to say?!'

How could we *not* listen? Or, if not consciously listen, then not *hear* that wizened graceless scarecrow so suddenly landed in our midst.

Conversations instantly gelled and hung suspended on overhead wires; the card-players, having skewed themselves

towards him, were transfixed in sculptor's stone; while their wives, on looking around, each became Lot's wife, all except Mrs. Shuster who, more severe than the rest, said, 'Ach, another one such, *shoin*.'

The other-one-such-shoin, bird-eyed and beaked, leaned forward precariously and asked again:

'Who among you shall listen to what I have to say? When I have come here to direct you, to show you purpose, to redeem your lives?!'

Lisa Firestone, copper-toned and lush, every visible bit of her a calendar model, giggled. Ivan Moss, in his hirsute darkness an advertisement for masculinity all-vanquishing, nibbled at her ear and said, 'Beware, evil sinner, thy Maker prepare to meet!' Lisa laughed, a tantalising shoulder quivering in the hold of her mirth.

'Five minutes give me, ten even, no more,' the newly-alighted visitor appealed. 'I come out of love for you, out of pity for you, and out of hope for your salvation!'

Abe Belfer who wore leopard-spotted trunks snorted and thrust a firm cleft chin towards him. His thighs, his arms, his chest were corded warps. He was of the species that no Nadia, Debbie, Ruth or Tanya could resist.

'And who are you, mate?' he leered, assuming as if by ordained right the role of spokesman on our behalf.

'My name, my name is Yehoshua Rachamim,' our visitor from Sheol said vehemently. 'I am, I am a poet and a watchmaker come to speak to you, my brothers, to you, my sisters, to you, God's Almighty's holy chosen people!'

'*Vos is*?[1] said Mrs. Lilienblum, liberated from her salty pillar. 'No *parnosseh*[2] in poetry? Or in fixing vatches? A missionary you become?'

The poet-cum-watchmaker impaled Mrs. Lilienblum on the shaft of his glare. He turned up a cupped knobbly hand. He could have been thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty; there was nothing to give his age away.

(1) 'What is?!' (2) Business

'A missionary, no. But a mission I have, yes!' he said, prodding at air.

A reedy little man with mottled scaphoid belly and cracked leathery cheeks spat on the ground and rubbed the spittle into the asphalt with a foot.

'An' I thought 'e was another o' them Bible-bashers,' he said, 'an' turns out 'e's a bloomin' Jew.'

'You're no brother o' mine, mister,' said a red-haired fellow covered in tattoos before moving on.

These, he ignored. They were not, it seemed, the fish he sought to fry. It was us, pilgrims gathered at the Little Jerusalem shrine, that he looked at most concertedly. To the yachts behind him, the liner, the people swimming, floating, throwing balls – to these he was totally oblivious.

'It is no sent message, however, that I come to deliver,' he said, vigorously shaking his head. 'I haven't the tongue, nor the eminence of Moses or of Isaiah or Jeremiah. I am but lowly even among the low. But one question, my people, one question do I wish to ask. But of whom . . . of whom here . . . of whom shall I ask it?'

He scoured the faces of those gathered there – the card-players, their wives, and the Weiners, Wisemans, Gordons, Gotts spread on blankets across the lawn. It was upon Jacob Gurewicz on whose back one could fry an egg that his gaze came to rest.

'You!' he said then, pointing at his quarry. 'Friend! Hold out your arm! Your left one!'

Jacob Gurewicz, scarcely impressed, merely shrugged a shoulder.

'A crazy!' he said, looking at his playing hand and throwing down a card.

Shuster tapped his temple. 'A *meshugene*,'[3] he said. 'A *shkizophrenic*.'

Our would-be-redeemer must surely have heard, but betrayed no sign of having done so. Instead, he tugged at his

(3) A crazy one

cap, drew himself up still higher so that his very shadow across the plantation lengthened in proportion, breathed in, held his breath, and then released it, the release attended by a hard sharp crisp explosion.

'*This* is my question!' he burst forth raspily. 'This! That number on your arm, mister. You, mister, who shrugged your shoulder. What does it mean to you? What does it mean to *any* of you here?'

Bella Gurewicz rose to her knees. She looked as if she had swallowed a can of nails.

'Anti-Semit!' she yelped. 'Vot do you vant from mine husband? He's had enough trouble from vun life. Vy do you persecute him again?!'

Other voices rose in a babel – those of Solly Weiner, Moshe Gordon, Hannah Gott.

'Vot he vont from us in our old age?'

'Vot madness is dis?'

'It is de devil or de *maalach-ha-mavet*[4] dat sent him here?'

Jacob Gurewicz, on the other hand, object of our visitor's focus, shrugged a dismissive shoulder.

'Let de donkey bray,' he said drily. 'He's *fardreit*.'[5] He threw down another card with an emphatic thrust and drew towards himself the centre pile.

'Persecute? Me?!' cried out the grim-visaged emissary Rachamin poised above us. 'I have no wish to persecute. You have suffered enough. 'That I know. As God is my witness, that I know. But you survived. *Survived!* While many there were who didn't, who didn't, who died!

'Now vot is he saying?' asked Mina Shuster, laying a hand on Bella Gurewicz's arm.

'He's unreal,' said Sharon Weinrib beside me, turning up her eyes, then crossing them.

Our unheralded guest again leaned forward. A squawking sea-gull winged low, just over his head.

(4) Angel of death (5) 'He's screwed up.'

'Watch the bird shit on him,' Maxie Greenberg said. I couldn't help but smile.

'But why?! *Why?*' he called out more forcefully still, pounding a fist into the opposite palm. 'Why did you survive when others died? Why?'

'*Nu*?' cried Abe Belfer, hand on hips. 'Why?! Tell us! Why?!' He winked at me, at Maxie, at Sharon, at Sarah.

'Was it that you may spend the rest of your lives playing cards?' our inquisitor kept on, lowering at the men. 'Or that you may bow to idolatry in worshipping the sun?' he said, glowering at us. 'Or that you may stuff yourselves with cream puffs, eclairs and chocolate cake, ha?' he added, frowning at the women. 'Was *that* what for?'

Jacob Gurewicz, bare-backed and burnt, the hair on his chest grey and curly, now lay down his cards and turned to the man who had come to be our interrogator, deliverer, saviour. He narrowed his eyes, their whites disappearing in the dusky periorbital folds around them.

'Vot do *you* know about vy?' he said, his tone soft but resolute. 'You can crow, mister, sure. But vere you there? In Auschwitz? In Treblinka? In hell?'

'My parents were, may their memories be blessed,' Yehoshua Rachamim the man on the parapet returned. 'And my grandparents, who became soap, smoke, ashes.'

'And dat makes you an expert, ha, and a *Got-geshikt mashiach*?'[6] said Jacob Gurewicz, again quietly.

'I did not say that!' the man in black, that devil's advocate of ours protested. 'Not for a moment, no! But, think, think, all of you, *did* they die so that you could play cards? Did *you* survive that you might stuff your faces? I ask again, was *that* what for?'

He paused, briefly, purposely, the better to let his question filter into our awareness; but it gave time to Mickey Schleifer to call out, 'If not that, then what for, mate, eh? Tell us, mister!' drawing a giggling Hannah Podemsky towards him.

(6) God-sent Messiah.

The poet-watchmaker-prophet-advocate-redeemer pounced at opportunity. He had clearly tossed the bait and Mickey Schleifer had bitten.

'To create!' he thundered at Mickey, at Gurewicz, at Abe Belfer. '*That's* what for. To create! Poetry, music, art. To write histories, memoirs, books. To tell what was and tell what is, and tell of the greatness, of *our* greatness, that may yet come to be, and through our works to honour our martyrs and give meaning to their deaths and worship God, and through culture, too, and through knowledge, and through art, to ensure our survival, ensure our survival, as individuals, as a people, as a nation, and show that we are not destroyed and that by any outside force can never be destroyed, and prove that we may yet be that glorious light that we were bidden to be unto the nations? That, *that*, is what for!'

'Ra! shouted Abe Belfer, clapping. 'Encore!' he cried.

Lilienblum snorted and Postnick tapped his temple. Shuster was brushing away a fly. I felt Maxie prod me in the ribs. 'Screwball, isn't he?' he said. I smiled at him too as I had at Maxie Greenberg and pushed him away, he in turn jostling Lisa and Ivan who were as close to petting as propriety could allow.

Gurewicz, sitting back in his chair studying his cards, huffed.

'Leave us, mister,' he said in the same soft tone as before. 'Ve are tired. After vot has happened, after vot ve have been t'rough, ve have earned some peace. Ve don't need to keep living and re-living our pain.'

And he did seem tired, the way his cheeks sagged, his lips turned, and his hands lay, lying like shapeless white heavy clay in his lap. I felt sorry for the man.

But Rachamim for his parapet-pulpit-dais-soapbox did not let up. His eyes, hard and black, darted from face to face. For a brief, tremblingly brief moment, I felt their sharpness in mine. A tremor passed through my limbs and a flush rose to my cheeks as if my blood had been ignited.

'Not for us the luxury of being tired,' he continued with

heightened fervour, or of peace, of this kind of peace as you call it.' 'If we do not take the challenge of creativity upon our own shoulders and through such creativity the highest worship, of what value then the struggles, the heartaches and the sufferings of all our prophets and of all our heroes, zealots, martyrs, saints? Are we by retreat into the frivolous to give victory to our oppressors and offer satisfaction to every two-cent madman who would revel in our defeat? For is not such retreat, such inertia, and such emptiness, this preoccupation with things of no significance – cards, sunshine, rich food, idleness, vanity over bodies, suntans, muscle, physical strength – are not all these, in fact, for a Jew, the very substance of defeat? Are we to be – is this what you want? – to be like other people, when you are, when you are, in truth, a chosen nation? Are we, are we, *are* we?!'

He had raised a shaking finger high. Another hubbub arose. Mrs. Shuster, Mrs. Postnick, Solly Weiner, Hannah Gott all had to have their say.

'Vy must ve Jews alvays be striving, driving ourselves?'

'Let us be like de other peoples. Den ve vill not be so killed.'

'Art, it never saved nobody. It has not stopped de peoples from murderers becoming.'

'And de prophets dey vas dreamers, and de saints dey vas misguided fanatics, and de martyrs dey vas victims like any oder.'

The poet-watchmaker, our redeemer come, fairly shook. He sought words; his countenance blazed; and he held out his arms and withdrew them, seeming then to find them fumblingly superfluous. His tone became suddenly less shrill, more pleading, and more petitioning.

'And you mister?' he said, confronting Jacob Gurewicz squarely again. 'You have a number. You have truly experienced. Is that what you, too, have to say? Mm? Is it? Is it? For if *you* have learnt nothing, how can anyone here, anyone anywhere begin to learn, to see, to understand, to accept the

message and the lessons in our trials? Mm? Have you said all you have to say?'

Gurewicz tossed a hand and once again shrugged a shoulder. He turned back to his companions around the felt-topped table, handed the cards to Lilienblum and said, 'Here, Hersh, forget de *meshugene*; deal.'

Maxie Greenberg, meanwhile, had scaled the parapet to the other side and was now on the sand inching towards our deliverer Rachamim from behind. Abe Belfer on our side stepped forward, and Mickey, too, and Hannah and Ivan and Nadia and Sarah, along with others who had got up. They were laughing, they nudged one another, they tittered and they winked, and they beckoned to me to advance with them.

'All right,' said the poet, prickly before, but mellow now, in whose shadow we now stood. 'If it's too much for the older generation, all right, I understand. I do. But you, then, you . . .' – he turned his long disconsolate importuning face upon us – '*you*, at least, are young still. In you lies the strength, in you are invested the gifts, would you but use them, of blessed creativity, and in you, too, the seeds of greatness and eminence and achievement of all that is good and is splendid and worthy of praise both human and divine.'

We had formed a half-circle about him, the fifteen, the twenty of us. Maxie, too, now behind, was close. I, for my part, held up my head, took deep breaths of a breeze that just then had risen across the bay and relished the cool play of the wind on my face.

'If one thing there is that I can impart to you,' I heard our would-be redeemer Yehoshua Rachamim say, 'it is this. It is this. To avoid frivolity, to shun stagnation, and not to succumb to the easy, the empty, the wasted life. And if today a single soul have I redeemed, a single soul by what I have said, then . . . then, as is written in the Talmud, the very world shall I have redeemed.'

Searching our faces , his gaze sweeping, feverish and

imploring fell now directly upon me. As before, a wave of heat swept through me, surging, flaring, beginning to seethe. The sweat down my spine prickled, my brow burned, and my eyes stung as, riveting me with what seemed a desperate fervent glare, he cried out, 'Is there anyone here who has heard what I've had to say?! Is there anyone here who has heard what I . . .'

He was not permitted more. To the animated ecstatic whoops of those about me, Maxie, shouting 'I got him! I got him!' grasped his ankles, held them firm, and tugged; he must have tugged, for, the flaps of his black coat flying, his cap sent gliding, his spindly arms flailing, the poet Rachamim teetered above us, he rocked upon the stone and tottered there and swayed, and tumbled then heavily in a graceless ungainly curled-up heap upon the sand. The rest of us, fired, surged forward. Leaning over the parapet, and straddling it, and scaling it, we took to chanting, we beat out a clamour, screeching, shrieking, mocking, jeering, 'Who will listen to what I have to say?! Is there anyone here who hears what I say?!' when Abe Belfer, flushed and chortling, darted to a side, bent towards the pavement, and picked up a solid, flint-white, jagged stone.

Moving in, it was I who threw the second.

On the Isle of Curaçao

Ah, yes the enchantment. The enchantment to be had in that Caribbean Eden where, on the Fairsky's entry into St. Anne's Bay, the twilight played gold and crimson on the darkening silver-sheened untrammelled waters; where the oil refineries stood sturdy and silent and already softened by mellowing light to the left; where the headland rose to a smooth low shoulder to the right; and where, beyond the prow, past other ships bunkering in the port, stretched the pilot station and pier with their warehouses, derricks and forklifts while the dockworkers and customs-men awaited our arrival, standing with hands-on-hips patience born of practice, habit and matter-of-fact routine.

'*Amici mei*, you will be enchanted,' Captain Silvestro, massive, immaculate in white with gold braid, and gregarious, had promised us earlier that afternoon. His hair was lush, white and swept back in magnificent waves, his voice deep and resonant, his hands large as he opened them out in a florid generous so-Italian flourish. 'A fly on the globe of the world, this Curaçao,' he said, 'a little spot like dust . . . *Ma, la magica, amici, la magica*! . . .'

With that, he proceeded to itemise and elaborate with all the nuances of voice, expression and movement at his command upon the topography, the climate, the fragrances, the quaint and multi-coloured colonial houses as in Amsterdam of old, the floating market and the cafes, the polyglot of Spanish, English, Dutch and Papiamento tongues, the syna-

gogues and the churches, and the souvenir shops of the capital Willemstad.

'To our Jewish passengers,' he said in passing, 'tonight, *amici*, you will be able at the Synagogua da Mikve Israel, the synagogue the oldest in the Western Hemisphere . . . you will be able to welcome the lovely bride del Sabato . . . While to everyone I will say . . . many, many souvenirs and cheap free-port things you can buy – cameras, jewellery, china, tape recorders, crystal, linen, silver, Curaçao liqueur, mmm! the best of all liqueurs, from the peel of the lovely oranges of Curaçao . . . And this too I will say . . . if you are not rich or . . . or if you are not like iron . . . more safe is it then to keep your money on the ship . . .'

If, upon hearing of the synagogue, I had been prey to anxiety about reaching it in time, I need not have let myself succumb. I had not counted on the late setting of the equatorial Antillean sun – the sun, when I looked at it, a phosphorescent gilded orb setting staidly and leisurely through a lush-striated wash of cadmium, carmine, indigo and lavender, the fingers of its light extending over ocean, harbour and emerging silhouette in a broad, far-reaching, generous encompassing. By six, we berthed; by seven-thirty, had placed foot on the hearth of that exotic trans-Atlantic outreach of Netherlands dominion; and at eight-thirty, saw myself passing through the just-opened central portal of the Mikve Israel beneath the lintel which, in gold engraved on rich mahogany, bade me be blessed in my coming.

The taxi-driver, strong-featured and dark, hybrid issue of Lord knew what turbulent cross-coursing currents of history, without prompting had assumed the role of guide, from behind his wheel and in an English intonated with Dutch and Spanish colouring, recounted a narrative of Spanish discovery, Dutch conquest, land settlement, governors and gentry, in the flow dropping names as illustrious as Alonzo de Ojedo, Christopher Columbus, Peter Stuyvesant and Prince William Charles Henry Friso of Orange-Nassau, names that rang with resonance and evoked images of greatness, pageantry, bril-

liance and esoterica so far a cry from the bumptious self-satisfied insularity and plebeian backwardness of antipodean Melbourne that had for so long till then been my adopted home.

That same sense of splendidness, abetted by the perspective of history, struck me also in the Sala Consistorial, the communal-hall opposite the synagogue proper across the inner courtyard. There, on tables, in display-cases, on corner stands, all set apart from a central table set for the after-Sabbath-service *kiddush*, were candelabra, spice-boxes, Torah crowns, breast-plates and pointers, all of finely-wrought solid silver or of filigree, on their rims inscribed in calligraphy ornate and fine the names of still other folk, folk from Amsterdam, Portugal and Brazil come in times of Inquisition and of expanding West Indies trade, four three, two centuries before. In the midst of the locals come for the Sabbath Eve service and surrounded by a vigorous motion of loud, boisterous, easily-tickled tourists, Americans all, except for an elderly couple, co-passengers on my ship, I wandered about that museum, that repository of a man's permanence and immortality, studying names and dates that opened up vistas of time and of space far outside, but immeasurably enriching, my own narrow till-then cocooned primordial existence.

'You are now witness and part of noble history,' I heard someone say close to my ear.

I had been stooping over an engraved *Havdalah* plate studying its inscription and elaborate design. I straightened, and found my companion to be a sturdy balding slack-cheeked man in brown suit and skull-cap, standing with one large hand on the window-frame and smiling with an amicable benevolence that sent deep creases darting in clear mirth from the corners of his eyes.

'That plate belonged to Hakham Ishac Carigal, successor to Hakham Samuels, Hakham Mendes da Sola, and fore-runner of the beloved and wise Hakham Yahacob Lopes de Fonseca who was followed a generation later by Hakham Aron Mendes Chumaceiro from Amsterdam. You stand now where

great men have lived, breathed, loved God and watched with fatherly care over their children.'

I nodded.

'Yes,' I said. What else was there for me to say?

'You read Spanish, maybe?' he asked then, turning towards a Torah-case on which he pointed at a line of script.

'Only English,' I said, 'and . . . and Yiddish.'

He drew himself up more erect than ever. He adjusted his skull-cap, patently beaming.

'*Emes*?,' he said, '*Men redt noch biz heint Yiddish oif der velt? Zer angenem dan mit aich tzu bakenen. A mentsh fun Got alein geshikt.*'[1]

His own Yiddish was that of my parents, not Galician, not Lithuanian, but Polish, more specifically a Warsaw, Bialystok or Lodzer Yiddish. That he should have doubted its continuing currency in the wider world struck me for a moment as strange – rather was it for me to doubt its currency on this remote far-flung Sephardi island spot of dust – until I saw that his question was delivered with tongue well in cheek. That I should, however, have been God-sent – that seemed more the stuff of hyperbole, the kind of remark often accompanied back home by a pinching of a cheek, a hand ruffled fondly through one's hair, a strong affectionate clap on the neck.

At that moment, one of the Americans, the most vocal of a very vocal group, announced the imminent beginning of the service.

'*Kummt, mein yungerman*,' my self-appointed mentor said, '*m'vet gein davenen*[2] . . . Let us go in . . . My name, by the way, is Solomon Alter . . . I live here . . . work here . . . import-export . . . And you seem to me a fine young man, a *feiner yungerman* . . . From Australia, no? . . . That is where your ship comes from, no? . . .'

He was clearly well-informed. As we crossed the courtyard,

(1) 'True? Yiddish is still spoken in the world? My pleasure is it to meet with you. A man sent by God himself.'

(2) 'Come, my young man. We will go to pray.'

his every step firm and purposeful on the Spanish-patterned tile, he said, 'You are surprised, my friend? . . . Do not be. In my business, I must know these things . . .'

He secured for me a skull-cap and prayer-book from the visitors' box and led the way into the synagogue, bowing as he entered. He was a picture of elegance and confidence in his every movement. His suit sat on him without a fault; his shoes were polished to a sheen; his skull-cap sat on his scalp as though it were grafted there. Over the doorway through which we passed, I read, '*May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem.*'

'Come sit with me,' he said as we moved into hs tier. 'The *Siddur* is in Portuguese and Hebrew . . . We have our own order of service and I will be honoured if you will let me guide you in our prayers.'

In his shadow, I followed him towards his seat. Looking about me, I was struck by the spaciousness of the synagogue interior, by its basic simplicity of design, its high white walls and arched windows at each end, by the long tiers of richly-ornamented benches, all aligned around a central platform – the *theba*, as Solomon Alter called it – on whose balustrade stood four brass candle-sticks and separate holders for the Torah bells, and over which hung a splendid massive chandelier, one of four, with numerous sconced candlesticks that threw a brilliant white light everywhere befitting the arrival of the Sabbath bride. Sand covered the floor; the Ark was open to reveal scrolls in embroidered mantles, a dozen or more, and above it were the two Tablets of the Law over-ridden by the legend '*Remember the Torah of Moses, my servant,*' while illuminating them was the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Light in a separate glowing ornamented chandelier.

As we sat down, Solomon Alter, opening his prayer-book and mine, said,

'We do not have many young Jewish families on this island. You may count them on your hands. Young people altogether we have not many. I have myself a daughter and there are a few boys here, but again you can count them. But

what I want to say is something different. Last week, a Jewish boy on this island had his *brith*. In thirteen years when, God willing, he shall stand on that *theba* to celebrate Bar Mitzvah, this building, this synagogue shall have stood two hundred and fifty years. A quarter of a millennium. Think of it. Two hundred and fifty years of Jews – Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, with visitors from Europe, America, and Australia now – all come to worship in a place where for a long long time there has been peace and safety and freedom.'

Leaning towards me, he peered into my face, his expression grown more earnest. He pursed his lips.

'Do you understand what I am saying?,' he said.

The words, accented with whatever other languages laced his speech – of which Spanish, Dutch and Yiddish at a minimum were three – were clear enough. But his question along with the accompanying change in his expression implied more than the words on the mere surface conveyed.

I nodded comprehension, but he, Solomon Alter, now placing a large firm hand on my arm, drew his brows together, shook his head and said,

'Perhaps later, if you will honour me as my guest at the *Shabbes* table, I will explain.'

'A mystery?,' I ventured.

'A thing of *pikuach-nefesh*,' he said, 'the saving of lives.'

With a word, he had laid before me a conundrum where the clues did not quite cohere.

'*Pikuach-nefesh*?,' I said after him, 'the saving of lives?'

He nodded, once and briskly, but raised a hand intimating silence, for the rabbi, a young smooth-chinned man, clearly of mainland North American origin, now stood on the *theba* before us about to begin. I was left, throughout the service, to make sense of Solomon Alter's remark that seemed at once so portentous and mysterious, a mystery indeed as I had ventured albeit merely in the semblance of jest.

Wordlessly, but with pointing, nodding and timely turning of pages, Solomon Alter, regularly bowing low, guided me through the service. While the Portuguese of the prayer-book

was unfamiliar, except in so far as I could decipher words of clearly Romance origin, I was more at home with the Hebrew. Where Yiddish proved a secular Esperanto in the world, the Hebrew of the liturgical and Biblical texts was a religious one. But what both struck and delighted me still more piquantly was the sheer musicality of the service, the melodies in their lilt and harmonies and rhythms possessed of a distinctly classical Iberian resonance, the greater wonder of it all being their preservation and enduring potency to stir even after two centuries and a half, and more, of usage. And they did stir! While outside, in the Sala Consistorial and in the courtyard, the Americans may have been loud and boisterous, even shrill to the point of abrasiveness, to a man, to a woman, they sang now with a moved, moving choral unison that within those high, white, now-age-hallowed walls evoked and bound their voices with those of the generations past who had, through the vestibules and corridors of history, worshipped with the Carigals, de Solas, da Fonsecas and Chumaceiros. To their voices, Solomon Alter added his own, a deep basso rich and clear, delivered I thought at first with over-theatrical airs, but I became persuaded – I ought not to have doubted – with a genuine reverential love of the divine.

Myself far from devout – by any standards an *apikoros*, an armchair heretic, all knowledge I possessed of ritual and prayer acquired at Sunday school rather than under the domes of synagogues back home –, I could not help but wonder from whence came that veneration shown by my host, a man so outside the current of world affairs, somehow misplaced or derailed – dared I say, lost? – on an island that, were one to blink while flying over it, would be totally missed. Misplaced or derailed, nothing more certain, even if that certainty stemmed from intuition rather than from volunteered, disclosed and uttered fact. He was not native to that place. With his Yiddish, his physical resemblance to any number of my parents' friends, with the unquestionably eastern-European Ashkenazi features, he was a late arrival to this tiny postage-stamp island on the surface of the terrestial sphere. But if there were

truth in this, why, of all places, when Jews had, over the preceding three decades, sought out the Americas, Canada, South Africa, or, like my parents, far-flung, but at least substantial, Australia, had he disembarked on this blister, this pimple, this innocuous mole that punctuated, almost like a single full stop, the vast physiognomy of the physical and the human world?

The rabbi in his address, directed at the American visitors above all, captive audience for the occasion, might have appeared to offer an answer. Standing on the *theba* and swaying on the balls of his feet as if to add stress to his words, he said,

'We are not of the mainstream of Jewish life as you, my friends, know it. We are not a wealthy people, we are not a politically or socially or, regrettably, culturally-endowed folk. We are, here, but a tributary. But this tributary, ever since Samuel Coheno first set foot on our shores for the Dutch West India Company three hundred years ago and more, this tributary has never dried up, while in other places – need I remind you who must surely know of Jerusalem of old, of the cities of Babylon, Toledo, the Ukraine and Europe but recently? – in other places, our parent-brother-sister communities large and small have disappeared, been decimated, ravaged to ruins, and deported. Yet, like a saving remnant, we are proof of the resilience and endurance of our people; in us is invested the mantle of continuity; small as we are, while others of our people have undergone attrition or vanished, we remain forever witness to ongoing, splendid, colourful history sanctified.'

Such inverted, almost solipsistic reading of history was scarcely to my mind beyond dispute – even commonplace Melbourne was not above such self-conceit – but Solomon Alter, for one, as he set the pace with long strides on our way to his home, did not dispute it. Rather did he say:

'May our worthy Rabbi Aryeh Silas Jacobi forgive me, but in front of visitors, before his mainland countrymen, he is inclined to the rhetorical. *Er hot lib a bisl tzu redn*, he likes to

talk. Weightier matters he reserves for *Shabbos* mornings when our good American *leit*, our kinsmen, see fit to drink in the sun along the beaches or buy out our markets and souvenir stores, leaving him to sustain his local faithful with finer wisdom of Torah and Talmud without the theatre. But, all the same, truth there is in his words'. He paused, then said, 'The Fairsky, I understand, is sailing in the early hours for Europe, no?, and then you shall be flying, flying on in time, to Lod, to Israel, to Jerusalem, not so?'

To a question he had asked as we ate salted herring and drank red wine at the *kiddush*, I had broadly outlined my itinerary.

I nodded.

'Yes,' he now said. 'Yes, very fine. In the places you intend to visit, you show yourself to be a true child of our people, *ein emeser getreier zun*. It is a fine pilgrimage you are undertaking, in some ways even a holy one. But this, *this*, remember. That pilgrimage is to dead or ailing places. Amsterdam, for us, is now kaput; the ghetto of Venice is dead; the ghetto in Rome pure ruin; Dachau has been a nail in the coffin of our people, and Israel, Jerusalem – God above!, who knows what awaits the children of Zion gathered there? You read the newspapers, no?; you listen to radio, no? Is the land again to be a place of war, destruction, exile? Is it? Is it? For is there not turmoil out there, everywhere, wherever there are Jews, and also danger and risk, the Jews nowhere to be secure, nowhere secure, while . . . here, here, at least . . . even in the flow of history, here there is safety, there is safety, freedom, peace . . .'

He had used the same formula as before – safety, freedom, peace.

He did not elaborate. He pointed out instead the Ashkenazi Synagogue we passed, the now-darkened shops, the houses with gables red in the daylight and with walls of rose, olive, blue and yellow stone. To all sides, the streets were broad; they were clean and fresh; dark-skinned well-built negroes moved along them swift and sleek; while all around I smelt the ocean air, tasted its heady brine and felt in my face the capricious

stirring of a tantalising Caribbean breeze. Solomon Alter talked of oil, talked of trade, talked of the rugged forbidding limestone terrain, and of Curaçao liqueur, the drink of princes and paupers, from the skins of the finest local oranges made.

'To you,' he then said, slowing his pace outside a wide spacious many-windowed house that proved to be his home, 'we are far away, beyond the reach of nowhere. Before your journey, you knew nothing, I swear, about us. *Ober ir zent nisht alein in dem*, you are not alone in that. But before we enter . . . Look around you . . . Look there, beyond the harbour, beyond the lights – there, under those stars, less than an hour away, lies Venezuela, and just a little further the whole of South America; Now turn around . . . There, to the north, the United States. By plane twelve hours from here, Africa, London and Lisbon, while to the west, just a little further, China, Russia, Japan and your own rich sand-and-mineral-filled continent with its token concession to habitation. We are, you see . . . *ihr zeht, mein freind* . . . we are at the lever, the hub, the pivot of the world, and could you but see it, could you but know it, *Yiddishe kinder*, all my Jewish brothers, sisters, children out there, would you but think of us, this could be your last and quietest and safest haven in the world.'

As Solomon Alter opened the door, a girl, a young woman of twenty-one, twenty-two, came down the corridor.

'*Gut Shabbes*,[3] *Tate*,' she said.

'*Gut Shabbes, mein kind*.'[4]

Dark and tanned, she bore herself with easy elegance; she wore a frilled white blouse and blue skirt and around her neck a delicate gold necklace from which hung a filigreed Star of David.

'*Mein tochter*, Rachel,' Solomon Alter said to me, introducing his daughter. '*A gast oif Shabbes nachtmal*,' he said to her, '*fun Australie gekummen*.'[5]

(3) 'Good Sabbath, Father.' (4) 'Good Sabbath, my child.'

(5) 'My daughter, Rachel. We have a guest for Sabbath dinner. From Australia come.'

'Australia,' Rachel repeated, raising the eyebrows and smiling, light and curiosity in her expression. 'Melbourne? Sydney?'

'Melbourne.'

'Mmm- It is a nice city I have heard . . . With a river . . . many gardens . . . a new gallery . . . a concert hall, a . . . a music bowl you call it . . . outside . . . in the open air . . .'

If Curaçao was a spot of dust on the map of the world, I had never imagined Melbourne to be anything more. And yet, she was far better-informed of my home-city than I had ever been of hers.

'Ask anything,' Solomon Alter said, not without pride, 'and my Rachel will know.'

'Father!,' Rachel said, placing a hand on his arm. 'Some things,' she then said to me, aiming at modesty. 'Not all.'

'*Nu, mein sheins*,'[6] Solomon Alter intervened. 'Will you set another place at table for our guest?'

'*Mit fargenigen*,'[7] Rachel said, and turned back towards what I assumed was the dining-room, though not before looking me over with a swift, lively, seemingly-all-encompassing scrutiny.

'Not every father is so blessed,' Solomon Alter said, hanging his suit-coat on a stand in the hallway, leading me then to the lounge-room to one side. 'My wife, *zichrona l'vracha*[8] died nearly ten years ago; David . . . that is, my son . . . left home for New York . . . he's a journalist with NBC . . . two years earlr; and Rachel and I . . . we are on our own. With friends, of course, good friends. But if she were to leave . . .'

He wore short shirt sleeves and, in that moment, as he turned up his hands in a gesture of forsakenness, I caught sight of a number branded on a forearm.

'If you only knew it,' he said, 'You find yourself at this very moment in Eden. But there is no serpent here, no tree of

(6) 'Well, my beauty.' (7) 'With pleasure.'

(8) 'May her memory to eternity be blessed.'

knowledge that may lead you to sin. From here, you won't be driven out. No Hamans, no Torquemadas, no Hitlers will ever follow us to this place. And after Europe, a man, a Jew, is surely entitled to a place of unmolested rest . . .'

'Yes,' I said. 'That is what made my own parents choose Australia . . . Melbourne . . .'

'Mmm,' he then mused. 'Australia. Tell me . . . Tell me. Do the people there have a national costume . . . Like the Czechs, the Mexicans, the Swiss? . . . What I mean is . . . Come this way . . .'

I followed the direction of his beckoning. In a corner of the lounge-room, which was large and, in its harmony of upholstery, light-fittings and curtains, tastefully furnished, stood a tall broad mahogany wall unit, on its every shelf a tier of eight-inch, ten-inch dolls crowded close and dressed in national costumes, modern clothes and the trendiest high fashion gear. Every detail was immaculately correct, whether hem or sash or trill; whether colour, padding or pleat. Here and there, a miniature flag identified a figure or a national pair. It was a display with special love, almost with fetishism endowed.

'Rachel's work,' Solomon Alter said, 'Not one bought but each stitched with the finest care. I am her father, she is my daughter, I know, but I must say it . . . She is a gifted girl . . . She has her mother's eye, her mother's hand . . . And . . .' – he pointed behind me – 'turn around . . . she's such a reader. Look at this bookcase. Books. Books . . . All right, books, that you would expect, but here, *Time*, *National Geographic*, *Vogue* – five years, six years of issues, not one missed, she has read them all. Ask her about anything, she will know . . . people, places, customs . . .'

I thought in that moment of the matchmaker of Chassidic folklore softening a prospective suitor for a prize most exquisite and beyond resisting. I preferred, however, not to attribute motives as unsubtle as this to his uncourted hospitality, to his intrusion upon my own unobtrusive privacy as I had studied the memorabilia in the Synagogue hall. Of such

things were only fairy-tales and B-, C-, D- grade Hollywood-inspired schmaltzy movies made.

Just then, Rachel, herself, appeared at the door, her hair just that more smoothly brushed, I sensed, and announced,

'No ship is this, we have no bell, but dinner, *Shabbes* dinner, *messieurs*, is ready.'

'Come, my friend,' Solomon Alter said. 'Do you wish first to wash your hands?'

We washed and took our places around the Sabbath table. Everything was there. The lighted candles, the *challah* under the embroidered cloth, the wine in a silver cup, crockery and cutlery of the best, crystal glasses, immaculately-presssed napkins; the smell was the familiar smell of my trans-Pacific home – chopped liver, herring, chicken, potatoes, chives – while the whole room, with portraits, prints and photographs on every wall, glowed under a splendid chandelier with the lambent whiteness of high festivity. Solomon Alter at the table's head recited the *kiddush*, passed around the wine, broke bread, salted it and handed one piece to Rachel and another to me. We then sat down to eat.

In no way had I – could I have – aboard ship imagined that in this manner would I spend that Sabbath Eve. The respite from standard bulk-cooked maritime fare was one thing, but the company – the paternal-filial harmony, the light, the warmth, the homeliness – all these, if ever I saw fit to balk at the cost of passage and talk my travel agent down, in these moments, so short, overall too short – to resort most tritely to the tritest of triteness – they were worth every last bent cent. For three weeks, nearly four, had I been orphaned, as every lone traveller adrift in sea or sky is orphaned; in that Curaçaon interregnum, however, I was part of family again, adopted to be sure, with that family itself depleted, but nonetheless a part of it, the easy conversation, the goodwill, the generous acceptance all there, all there, all there. And whether it was of Melbourne that we spoke, with its suburbs, gardens, people and my doctoring there, or of Curaçao with its wild goats and parakeets, its orchards, ship-building docks, annual carnivals

and Rachel's teaching, or of Italy, Paris or Jerusalem, future stops along my travels, every moment was laced in a web of enchantment, enchantment that by far exceeded anything that Captain Silvestro, immaculate, distinguished and talking of the floating markets, cafes, fragrances and languages could ever have foreseen.

The meal over, grace recited, time urged return to the ship that was setting soon to sail.

As Rachel, moving swiftly, deftly and with comely poise, cleared the table, Solomon Alter, bowed over me paternally, laid with a hand upon my shoulder and led me back to the lounge-room. He offered a liqueur which he pressed upon me.

'*Zugts nor* . . . Tell me, can you leave Curaçao without tasting that which royalty itself would give its eye-teeth for?'

We sat on opposing chairs and drank. I looked again over the tiers of Rachel's dolls and the rows of journals. Solomon Alter sipped at his glass, licked his lips and swallowed.

'*In tsvei shoh* . . . in two hours, three, you will be sailing again,' he said, rolling his glass between his large palms. He seemed to gaze absently at the reflection of the overhead light in the liqueur. 'The Atlantic . . . Tenerife . . . Lisbon . . . Europe . . . Jerusalem . . . the world . . . The world with all its strife, its bitterness, turmoil, wars, ugliness, dangers, and for the Jew, for us, always a place of uncertainty, of risk, . . . Egypt . . . Jerusalem of the Temples . . . Mainz . . . Spain . . . Kishinev . . . Auschwitz . . . where next? where next, my friend? . . . While here . . .'

He looked at me, fixed me squarely with a mellow, almost sorry gaze.

'Listen. I would say to you . . . I would say to you: "Stay! Here is freedom, safety, peace. Here is history, continuity, tradition; the last secure physical haven for the Jew, as Torah is his last and abiding spiritual haven." But you must go, I know, you must leave. But, let me say this too, when you have seen all that you must, come back. Come back. Live your young, your valuable, your precious life here. Come back. Not

for my sake, my friend, but yours. Yours. And, yes, for mine, too, in a way, for he who saves one life is as he who has saved the world . . .'

'What you meant before by *pikuach-nefesh*,' I said.

He nodded. The bald head, where not covered by his skull-cap, shone. Where, earlier, on our first encounter, his cheeks had been merely slack, they now seemed to sag. He held one hand dangling limp over the side-arm of his chair.

'Yes. Yes,' he said. 'What I meant by *pikuach-nefesh*, the saving of a life. For out there, you shall always be in danger. It is the lesson of our history that safe places are few. *Und ich, ich oich* . . . I know, I, too, I know. I have seen, I have endured, and, *Got tzu danken*,[9] I lived through. But how many did not . . . and how many, next time, will not? . . . When you have done what you must, I ask you, for your sake, for mine, come back! Come back . . .'

Again, as before dinner, her work now done, Rachel came into the room.

'So solemn here,' she said. 'are we suddenly sitting *shiva*?'

Solomon Alter stood up, set down his glass upon a buffet.

'*Rochele meins*,'[10] he said. 'We must get our guest back to his ship. Maybe you would take him to the taxi rank? He has listened enough to an old man. I would like him to leave with fonder memories of this place.'

On leaving, I shook hands with Solomon Alter. His grasp was firm; it conveyed urgency.

'Travel in health,' he said. 'And, *Got zol viln*,[11] may you one day return in health.'

Once more I was out in the Willemstad streets, darker now, less peopled, the ocean breeze risen to tangier sharpness laced with the bite of shale, seaweed and sulphur. The near-midnight moon shone with a cushioned lactescent glow, nests of surrounding stars glimmered as through a high velvet mist,

(9) God be thanked. (10) Rachel mine. (11) God willing.

and, passing by the houses, I tasted fish and citrus and strawberries and the more acrid camphor of mothballs. From somewhere far came a shout in a language I couldn't decipher, and then laughter, a titter and a giggle, and closer in, a lapping of water as though oars were clapping into eddies, ripples and tidal wavelets in the bay or along the river that parted Willemstad in two.

For some distance, Rachel, walking beside me, led the way in silence. She moved easily and though she had put on a cardigan she held her arms braced about her. I glanced at her once, twice, took pleasure in the soft features of her cheeks and chin and the ever-so-slight curvature of her nose and remembered a Mera and a Jackie and a Tania with whom, at the cooler end of summer nights back home, I had walked just like this, along the beach, on piers, on seaside esplanades.

A little way on, outside a souvenir shop where a fluorescent light illuminated all manner of pendants, candelabra, vases, trays, cameras and assorted bric-a-brac, I said rather formally,

'I must say I am impressed by your dolls and those journals you've brought together. Labours of love and dedication they seem to me; they must bring you pleasure . . .'

Rachel, now bracing her arms higher about the shoulders, turned her gaze towards me. A street lamp under which we passed briefly lit up her face. There was scrutiny in it, as there had been before, and the smile that came to it was either wry or modestly pleased. Illumination was too brief, however, too fleeting for me to tell.

'Pleasure?,' she repeated. 'Labour of love? . . . Yes, I suppose so.'

'You only suppose?'

She gave a soft clearing cough and took deep breaths. She sucked her lips.

'There was something else there, but that you did not see . . . You could not see it . . . You did not see it . . . You could not see it . . . It was outside the kitchen, outside the door, on the porch . . . A cage . . . Empty . . . Its door open. But once I kept a bird there, a red-tailed, red-breasted parakeet that swung on its

rail or leapt from side to side and clawed at the wires with its talons . . .

'One morning I was reading in front of it, a letter from David . . . my brother . . . from New York where he lives and works and has a wife and two children. And when I finished I looked up and watched my bird, watched how it leapt and fluttered its wings and grasped at the wires. And I looked then too upon our sea, our Caribbean, and saw how vast everything was, how luminous and how . . . how magnetising, with the world everywhere around, everywhere, close by and far away, and . . . And in that moment I stood up, walked over to the cage, slipped open the catch, took out the bird and . . . and let it go. And my bird – it seemed so dizzy at first, it flew in spirals and circles and ovals – it found its wings and spread them wide and flew God knows where, how far away, how far away into that light and into that space, to America, to Europe, China, Africa – it did not matter – with a freedom which I saw that, until then, it had not had, a freedom that I . . . that I . . . that I did not have. It was then that I began to make those dolls and read those magazines . . .'

I was in the process of formulating a remark, uncertain whether to let it be statement or question, when she asked,

'Do you understand?'

'Yes, Rachel, I do.'

She shook her head.

'No. Between us, not Rachel. Let it be Ramona. I like it better. It is a name that girls in other places are called . . .'

'Ramona. Romantically Iberian. More worldly. It's nice,' I said, then asked, 'But what did your father say about the bird?'

'My father, he offered to buy another. But he did not understand. It was not the bird at all. It was me. What for him is a haven is for me a cage. What he believes is living in history, in this place where little has happened for two hundred years, three hundred years, is for me a *retreat* from history. I know. I teach it. History is there where people live, where there is change, where there is risk. To live in history is

to take risks. And not to take risks, for a Jew, for us not to live in America, South Africa, Jerusalem, Europe, or even Australia is to be taken out of history, out of the world, and to disown not just safety, but . . . but to yield to stagnation, and by stagnating, to disown life.'

I understood her. On my own speck of Melbourne dust, I had known the same sense of isolation, stagnation. But in setting sail, however, I at least had acted, I had sought and found a remedy. But Rachel . . . Ramona . . .

'Then why not leave?,' I said.

She nodded.

'Yes,' she said, 'Leave . . . leave . . . I have thought of that. And, yes, if I hated my father, yes, then I would leave. I would. But he does not deserve hate. No man with a number on his arm deserves hate. Then, as you know, my mother, she's gone; David, right or wrong, he's gone, though he does write. But if I, too, I were to leave . . . Did my father go through hell and finally find a haven where he won't be touched again only after all that to be left alone, alone, forsaken, abandoned, alone? . . .'

She smiled weakly, it might have been with resignation.

'One world passes me by. But I am learning to create another.'

'And Ramona is a part of it, is that it?'

'Yes . . . Yes . . . Ramona is a part of it.'

We had reached the taxi rank where fellow-passengers were negotiating fares back to the ship.

Beside the railing, I turned squarely towards Rachel and extended a hand in thanks. She did not take it. Instead, she placed hers on my forearm.

'Please,' she said. 'I am not one to ask favours, but . . . but do you have paper, or a pen? . . . You are going back into that world, into the real world . . . May I ask of you one thing, one thing only. Will you write to me? Tell me about Europe, Israel, Australia? Send me books? Magazines? Postcards? Photographs? I shall pay you for them. But only keep me in touch . . . with everything . . . with everything out there . . .'

I did have a pen and found a crumpled receipt in my wallet.

'I do not normally write on *Shabbes*,' Rachel said. 'But this is to me no sin, no sin.'

I offered to write for her.

'No,' she resisted. 'It is my request. Let it be on my head.'

The light under which she wrote was dim. She puckered her brow in concentration, held her tongue between her lips. Again she reminded me of Mera, Jackie, Tania back home, all lovely, dark, all with comely softness endowed.

'This is my address,' she said, returning to me the paper and my pen. 'You will write, won't you?'

'From the next port. From Tenerife,' I promised. I placed the note in my wallet and returned the wallet to my pocket.

Now she gave me her hand. It was smooth, warm, compliant. She smiled – a broad smile, a wide smile, an open smile.

'*Bon voyage*, then. If ever you return . . .'

I shared a taxi with two other couples who talked spiritedly of the quaint cafes they had seen, of the Town Hall, the river, the markets, and of the bargains they had bought. 'It's a gorgeous, so-peaceful place, this,' one of them said. 'But imagine living here, so away from everything, so out of the world.'

'It's the centre of the world, its pivot,' I was tempted to say, remembering Solomon Alter, but kept counsel to myself, thinking instead of Rachel, recalling that last glimpse of her through the taxi window as she walked away, a lone figure, her arms wrapped about her against the wind, looking back once, pausing, and then turning, more resolute now, out of sight.

At the nearer end of the dock stood a negro manning a souvenir stall, seeking still to catch a departing customer or two. An oil-lantern hung from a beam. I approached him. He was a live eel as he moved back and forth along the breadth of

his stall, keeping up a steady patter in hybrid English, Spanish, Papiamento, Dutch, his fingers the while dancing, dark nimble ballerinas, over his wares – rings, music boxes, necklaces, bangles, shawls and dolls. I paused before the dolls, looked at the two rows of them and, reaching, selected one in white blouse, blue skirt, dark hair and a smile, a happy fetching smile, the red of cherries.

'What do you think of the name Ramona for the doll?' I asked the stall-keeper in mild jest.

He smiled brightly, his teeth strong and white between thick lips.

'Mighty fine name, sir,' he obliged, wrapping the doll deftly in blue tissue. 'Mighty fine name. An' a lovely gift for a lucky girl back home. A treasure, sir an' a delight . . .'

I paid him as a strong wind gust rose and whirled down the length of the dock.

The parcel in my possession, I went up the gangway to the ship in the company of other passengers and headed for my cabin. There, I unwrapped the doll and took out my wallet to find Rachel's address. I would send her the doll from Tenerife, as a token, a gesture, an offering from the world outside.

But the crumpled receipt with her address on it I could not find. I took out the money, the travellers' cheques, all my papers. I turned out the wallet, emptied all my pockets, searched in every conceivable fold of my clothes. The note was lost. I could only guess it had dropped when that gust rising as I paid the souvenir vendor made me turn away. Hoping still to scale down the gangway to the dock I bounded out of my cabin and clattered up the metal steps. But the ship had begun to move. The dock was receding. Wavelets splashed and lapped in the waters below. The negro, too, had shut up stall; in the darkness I saw him walk away, his lantern swinging, his light flickering on the beam.

Beside me at the rail, a passenger sidled up to me, a woman whose perfume mingled with the acridity of oil and sulphur and brine.

'It's an enchanting island, Curaçao, isn't it?,' she said. 'One of those charming places one would never wish to leave, don't you think, don't you think?'

As we moved out of its harbour, I looked a last time upon the island. It was decked in darkness except where a few pinpoints of light still glowed, diminishing in number and intensity the further we sailed.

A mile off shore, the ship turned sharply, paused there as if to take breath, and set its prow for Europe. On that island, now behind me, a girl, a woman called Rachel and her saintly father remained, settling down for the night. In my cabin, another, called Ramona, was setting out upon the world.

apikoros – heretic
Bar Mitzvah – ceremony on a boy's attaining to the age of thirteen
brith – circumcision
challah – the Sabbath loaf
havdalah – service at the conclusion of the Sabbath
kiddush – prayer and ceremony in sanctification of the Sabbath and Holy Days
Shabbes; Shabbos – Sabbath
shiva – to sit *shiva* = to be mourning

From Olympus the Laughter

'Hey, mister, them's books you jus' thrown in that trash-can,' I heard a rich resonant voice behind me call.

I turned.

A bearded black in fur-lined jacket and woollen beanie was leafing through the two volumes I had thrown away.

'Yes,' I said, too much a stranger in the city to say more.

'Them's a man's life, man, his'n blood, man, his'n sweat . . .'

'Yes,' I said again.

'An' them's his'n mind an' his'n soul you jus' consign'd so easy-like to nothin'ness . . .'

And a third time, I said 'Yes', and, looking at him, he looking back at me with curiosity and disdain, I wanted to approach him then, I wanted to lay a hand upon his arm, I wanted to reach the very core of his human and spiritual being, and to say in an inflexion to match his own:

'An' I beg of you, man, to let that man's soul be, to let it rest, an' let it rest where I did consign it, 'cos it's an old soul and a new one is in the makin' an' in it an' through it shall that man come to realise his sublimest will an' attain to eternity an' sanctification an' mos' consummate peace.'

But instead I turned the corner into Fifth Avenue heading back the way an hour earlier I had come, hearing the black behind me say, 'Lord, some folks! . . . How out o' the dark an' broodin' woodwork they's come.'

* * *

And this morning, along with the customary journals, medical reports, bills and advertising pap, Angelika's letter with the photograph in its fold landed on my desk.

* * *

Seventy-second Street, Jefferson Kincaid's Street, was, like uptown and downtown New York all snow and sleet and solidified ice, the buildings to each side tall and sheer, scar-grey murky-brown barred keepers of secrets between which cars and cabs snail-paced crosstown with short-tempered blasts of horns and raucous cries, and other pedestrians, like myself swaddled in two-ton wraps, hurried by, their shoulders frisking against mine, their gaze sometimes engaging, sometimes clinging, but more often retreating and fugitively private. Already clear to me before, yet did the paradox return in sharpened relief: the bigger the city, the tighter the milling of people, and the more solid the mass of humanity, the more privacy if to privacy he were inclined could a man enjoy. Anomie, they called it, the sociologists, the philosophers of this stamp and that, even writers who should have known better; facelessness in the crowd they called it, and alienation, endowing such privacy with demeaning detracting labels as if it were a fault; but theirs was the sin of blinkered vision, of ignoring the fact that this very facelessness could bring real and enduring solace to those who would shun the complexities of attachment, the ambivalences and contradictions of commitment, and the insistent, binding, unyielding claims of duty.

After a brief and disastrous relationship, I too had known something of that desire for self-effacement. To retreat into a cocoon, oblivious to the rack and pillory of daily living, and be left alone in the darkness and silence of slow gestation would have been as near to bliss as I could imagine. But, to borrow a colleague's word, I had 'cured' myself of that desire, emerging into the light, if only for the blinking of an eye, with a book, a collection of stories which I had brought with

me to show to a literary agent in America. The book, however, was not the only reason, not even the prime reason, for my visit. Rather, coming from antipodean Australia, physically large to be sure but at base still provincial, I sought a new vastness, and enormity, and breadth, and range, flight from the constricting topographical and emotional strait-jackets of over-familiar and increasingly-oppressive faces, buildings, streets and conversations, and exposure to fresh experiences, idioms, tempers and terrains.

All of this I had summed up in a sentence in my notebook:

> 'Freedom to be, to breathe, to feel, to see, to hear; unmolested by inner urgings and outer contingencies, liberated from the fetters of the here and now, untethered from the myopic vision that clings so timorously to nearer anchors far from the bounteous expansive seas beyond. Freedom, freedom above all, freedom from myself, from others, from outer compulsions.'

That might have been hyperbolic, to be sure, but for two weeks I had given myself up to New York, to the robust, vibrant, heady, if wintry Manhattan heart of the Big A. I had bought out all the bookstores from downtown to uptown Fifth Avenue and Broadway, had ransacked every shop and stall in the Lower East Side and Chinatown of its bric-a-brac, and had, with a chill teething into my bones, paid homage to that grand and eternal pedestalled torch-bearer to freedom standing in the midst of ice-encrusted waters surrounding Liberty Island. Nor could I resist, without being criminal, the magnetic pull of a final rehearsal by Barenboim and Mehta with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra or Leontyne Price in *Il Trovatore* at the Met, not to mention – how conceivably neglect? – the artistic ecstasies of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and of the spiralling ascending white-stoned Guggenheim. If gluttony for word, line and musical note were a sin, then I sinned grievously, but remained not in the slightest penitent. And if

my trip to New York was, in any sense, a pilgrimage, towards visit's end, I felt I had worshipped well.

One objective, however, remained to be realised. I could not bring myself to leave New York without at least once visiting Jefferson Kincaid: Kincaid, Professor of Biological Sciences and Social Behaviour and author of two volumes of essays, slender, to be sure, but to me distinguished without equal and entitled *The Delusions of Fixed Belief* and *Quest for Ultimate Truths.*

A hero-worshipper from the cradle, I had filled scores of folders with notes, photographs, biographical sketches and newspaper cuttings of a plethora of writers, artists, musicians, scientists and philosophers, carefully indexed alphabetically, giving to Kincaid the niche between Kepler and Kokoshka in my pantheon of illuminati. It had been with Kincaid's volumes ever by my left hand, both copiously annotated and heavily underlined, that I had written my stories which had been published as *Requiem for a Mortal God.* I was rather pleased with the title which recalled shades of Faulkner but was in reality a misnomer. For were I to follow Jefferson Kincaid to the letter, God was not truly mortal; God was simply not there or, at best, irrelevant. What indeed I was referring to was the death of a *need* for God, the title of the book being but a necessary piece of shorthand. Several readers alluded to its deceptiveness and, of course, seen in context, they were quite correct. However, done was done, and the best I could do was, in a chastened way, to set the matter right verbally whenever the issue arose. The book sold passably well to equally passable reviews, but it failed to generate the serious debate of the social, biological, cultural and theological dilemmas and contradictions that I had in my more buoyant moments of composition seen into as if with crystal clarity. I was no Bellow or Beckett or Sartre, true, but I had hoped for better.

Oddly enough, Jefferson Kincaid's response to my telephone call left me ill at ease. Replacing the receiver on its cradle and reflecting upon our exchange, I deemed it wise to

conclude that any unease was of my own making – the infernal tendency, not yet mastered, to be cowed and to cringe before authority and an atavistic retreat into a state of inferiority – rather than by any direct effect that Kincaid might have had upon me. Indeed, Jefferson Kincaid had come across the cables with the expected American affability, openness and acceptance; and even across the distance I could see, *see* him as a big man, burly, erect, expansive, still the nearer side of sixty with hair copious and chaotic and greying sage-like at the temples; I could see, too, the heavy green polo-neck sweater fraying at the elbows and the brown corduroys fading at the knees; and I could smell, I swear, the smoke of his pipe which, between philosophic Socratic dissertations, he was constantly re-lighting. A conventional picture, to be sure, though perhaps suited more to a Cambridge or Oxford don than to a peer in American academia; but nearing the professor's apartment on Seventy-second Street short of Central Park, pushing against a canine-toothed wind that careened, sometimes whistling, between the sharp escarpments to either side, I felt my earlier disquiet spume to enhanced intensity and loom enormous and stiflingly burdensome, my kindled apprehensions further bellowed to clammy anxiety by a resurgent uncertainty whether Kincaid over the telephone had been genuinely surprised or flattered or amused, and, if amused, whether I had not been, however faintly, mocked.

'So they read me in Melbourne, Australia?' he had asked, his voice rolling, burring with a vibratory resonance. 'And you are taken by my works, by the produce of my brain cells, and have flown over the great Pacific and across this honourable and honoured continent to learn wisdom at the feet of the master? To worship a guru never by your two eyes seen? Or perhaps to see the beast himself in his private lair? Or perhaps, perhaps even, to teach wisdom to the teacher in turn?'

'There are questions that arise from your writings . . .,' I had answered, battling the bent towards meek-voiced regression, 'Matters to which . . .'

'. . . to which you seek momentous durable all-resolving

answers? Or perhaps, perhaps, my wanderer, those ultimate truths I have written about? Ah, yes, ah yes. For that do they all come. But has any creature possessed of a navel sole mortgage upon any answers? And I, my traveller from Melbourne, Australia, was I, too, not with a navel born?'. . . He had given a little laugh and said then, 'But if you be at my door at three tomorrow, we shall engage in a congenial encounter of grey matter, we shall shed light upon your dilemmas, we shall give air to truths that may enter into your fiction, and I shall be delighted to make your acquaintance, I'm sure, I'm sure . . .'

How in keeping with the man, the biologist and sociologist who strode across every page of his books! 'The produce of brain cells.' 'A creature possessed of a a navel.' 'Congenial encounter of grey matter' – Jefferson Kincaid, who synthesised by reducing, who created new perspectives by dismantling metaphysical abstractions into biological fundamentals, who explained and interpreted all phenomena in the most reductionist terms.

As he had written in *The Delusions of Fixed Belief*:

> 'Recognising, then, that behaviour, thought, emotion and belief are predicated upon the interactions of atoms and molecules in living cells, themselves subject to genetic inheritance and to the vagaries of environment acting through the receptive senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing and smell (and intuition, if this be deemed a sense), the conclusion follows naturally that one pattern of behaviour, thought, emotion or belief, is, objectively, as valid as any other. Accordingly, given the manifold variety of influences and experiences (or, to render such more scientifically, the variety of sensory input) to which one is subject, neither behaviour, nor thought, nor emotion, nor belief can ever be universally uniform, nor constant, nor necessarily permanently fixed, even within the same individual, nor incontrovertibly true;'

while in a passage that had given spur to the title of my own

book, this in the afterword of his *Quest for Ultimate Truths*, he had written:

> 'Hence the notion of a God is as fictional as that of the devil and the angels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, as misled, as that of eternal bliss in Heaven and eternal purgatory in Hell, as unsupportable as that of corporeal rebirth and resurrection, and as fanciful as that of witches and souls and copulating Hellenic gods. If any lessons there be in our quest, they are that such quest must begin and end with the basic irreducible inescapable biological nature of man, and that truth – Truth –, until ultimate truths be known, may be such as each man for himself, in the light of his own acquired insights, deems it to be, albeit necessarily bounded within the confines of strict biological and, by extension, scientific verities.'

Heading towards his home, I was carrying both of his books in a satchel together with my own, his for inscribing, mine as a gift-offering. Reaching the entrance to his apartment-block, a tall eleven-storied building of brimstone and wrought-iron grilles across bay windows covered with mounds of clinging snow, I dispelled all anxieties with a resigned devil-may-care heaving of breath and, in the foyer, floored and walled with turquoise tiles, pressed the buzzer to his apartment.

The voice that greeted me through the security phone was a buoyant lively gift of youth. It rang, alive and plastic, even friskily melodious, and it was all in keeping with its breeziness to be met outside the elevator by a bright smooth-cheeked ebon-haired young woman with fine dimples at the ends of her smile and well-ballooned in a gay vermilion dress in the latter, more euphoric, if impatient stages of pregnancy. She was perhaps twenty-three, twenty-four – twenty-five at most –, Kincaid's daughter, my first impression, Kincaid's daughter visiting her father.

'Hi!' she said sunnily, extending her hand. 'I'm Angelika. It is gracious of you to have sought us out, while for Jefferson . . . for him, your coming is a month of Sundays arrived in

one. He has few visitors now. And he has always loved to be among the young.'

In that moment, Melbourne and New York met. The voice, the inflection, its cadence, was inevitably different, to be sure, but from her homely bright-eyed countenance sprang a score of faces familiar, any number of Marys and Ericas, Sophies and Joannes back home whose emergence from memory's cinders kindled a lively and nostalgic flight of *déjà vu*. Even the waxy smell of the passageway, the succession of doors with their peep-holes and the white cupolaed lights along the walls recalled the high-rise blocks at home where, each week, punctually at eight, I scaled the stairs to visit my regular crew of waiting patients.

'The professor for me is a wise man,' I said, 'I can easily see in him a mentor to the young.'

'You *are* gracious,' she said, and laughed.

That Angelika proved to be Kincaid's wife rather than his daughter was an adjustment I made quickly enough. Her jesting 'Our friend from Terra Australia Mysteriosus is here, darling' promptly settled any doubt while the rings on her finger belied the fleeting notion that she might be his mistress. But adjustment was harder when I saw Jefferson Kincaid himself sitting deep within the apartment before the window. No university don, this, certainly not my conception of one with heavy pullover, corduroys, abundant intemperate hair and smoke curlicuing from a pipe held in the cup of a hand. Jefferson Kincaid, I saw at once, sat in a wheel-chair. He wore a red silk dressing-gown, a worsted scarf, chequered woollen socks and fur-lined slippers, notwithstanding that, in contrast to the crystalline chill of the New York streets, the apartment seemed to crush with an enervating heat. And as for the aura of presence one associated with academia and erudition . . . Yes, that had once been there; shades of it remained, evident in the high brow, the large head and the swiftly-exploring eyes; but only shades, for past eminence was being overtaken by those very processes Jefferson Kincaid in writing about biology had written about only too well. His was the face, stead-

ily atrophying and pastily sallow, of any number of Johnsons and Harrisons and Akeroyds back home, patients caught by that biology, and by time, behind drawn curtains to fade there, unwatched, unseen and unremarked into blue and silent immobility and the eternal blackness of oblivion. I knew him to be fifty-eight. In appearance, he could have been sixty, sixty-two, sixty-five; but what of that? – he was in a phase of life, that phase, the last, where age could no longer matter.

Yet, as I entered, he smiled and waved a hand to indicate a chair.

'Pardon me if I do not rise, welcome bird of passage,' he said in the generous rounded tones of the previous day, 'but the lower portion of my humbled anatomy has seen fit to rebel against the higher will . . . But sit you down, sit you down. Angelika my red-winged butterfly shall deliver you of your coat and excess lumber and provide refreshment for the corporeal flesh while we shall partake of the nourishment of the mind.'

Caught off-balance by the unexpected, by the wilted reality that masked my grander conception, I gave scarf, jacket and hat to Angelika with two left hands, and with two left feet approached a lounge-chair, feeling acutely dwarfed in the spaciousness of the room which, despite the outer inclemency, glowed nevertheless with a mellow brightness. Tiered ceiling-high against one wall was a profusion of well-thumbed books, journals and files; prints of modern art hung tastefully-arranged along the others, together with two enlarged framed *Time-Life* photographs of gestating embryos; two elegant chandeliers hung from the ceiling, chrome-plated light-stands stood over puffed-up bean-chairs, and on the table beside his elbow, functionally a desk, stood a telephone, a typewriter, a microscope, piles of papers, journals and books, and a welter of writing appurtenances – pens, rubbers, rulers, liquid paper, paper-weights, scissors, a letter-knife, a letter-rack – beyond which a half-dozen assorted carnations rose out of a ceramic vase, while both he and Angelika – he not yet ill, she not yet

pregnant – beamed artlessly out of a lush-coloured summer photograph.

'Such is the spider's parlour,' Jefferson Kincaid said with a raising of his hands that indicated the compass of his room. 'A universe within a universe. Frail conglomerations of gelatinous body cells bounded wholly by fragile flesh, itself respiring in this humble domicile within a city that throbs to the refrain 'New York' set like a diamond within a wider magnificent grotesque colossal petty beautiful hideous entity we call by so poor a name as 'world.' And beyond that, dear pilgrim from Melbourne, Australia, come, beyond all that? . . . And within, within, my wanderer, within that innermost universe, within the core, within the pit of every gelatinous cell that is the very stuff of our morphology, hm? What other universes, manifestations, revelations dare one conceive of?'

He paused and drew breath, his eyes, black and recessed, burrowing into mine, private quiet merriment kindling in their brightness.

He scratched at a scale above an ear where there lingered the thinnest finest wing of hair.

'Concentric circles these universes, one about the other, fleeing expanding ripples around a stone fallen in a pond, haloes like those that ring the street-lights, aureoles in an autumn mist. These are *my* images for it, and it is for *you* to choose your own, my traveller-friend. *You* must choose your own. And as a writer, as an artist with the gift of creativity in your genes and in your sharpened senses, yours is the privilege of image and metaphor and play with language . . .'

'While I, I am a man of science, of the visible, the tangible, the audible and the deducible,' Angelika chimed in, solicitously drawing together the lapels of his dressing gown from behind, her chin at rest upon his head.

Kincaid reached upward and affectionately took her hands.

'While I, yes, I am a man of science, of the visible, the tangible, the audible and the deducible,' he said with emphasis

and with the strength of pride, 'and must accordingly turn to the resolutely physical to choose my imagery.'

'My perennial philosopher,' Angelika said fondly.

'My little parakeet,' Kincaid retorted in turn, 'my most favoured immaculate dimpled disciple of the test-tube and the microscope slide.'

'Master!'

'Fidelity incarnate!'

Placing my satchel beside my chair, I could not help but smile at the repartee.

'Our regular little game,' Angelika said.

Kincaid pressed her hands.

'Is there anything, anywhere, more worthy of seriousness than games?' he said. 'Is not play the greatest creation, the most excellent invention of all? Would we all, would the whole world but know it and not only the child who is on its account the most multiply, the most bounteously blessed? . . .'

A whistling stemmed then from the kitchen. Angelika left her place behind Kincaid and padded out of the room, tapping my shoulder in passing.

'Thus do I Daniel leave in the lion's den,' she said with a laugh that stirred a momentary homesickness with its balm.

Jefferson Kincaid followed her with his gaze, a doting, clinging gaze that absorbed her form, her movement, her very essence. He bit his lip pensively. Then returning to me, he winced, briefly arched his back, and, with his hands cupped beneath the thigh, moved a leg to a position of comfort. His foot, flaccid and inward-turned, flapped on the foot-rest of his chair.

'No mortal of woman born is deserving of such divinity as one that goes by the name "Angelika",' he said, 'and yet the gods have seen fit to smile so generously upon me.'

He paused, then arched his eyebrows, a quiz-master about to pose a question.

'But am I to presume that in gods, or in God, you do not

believe? Else why should you have sought out your deity-denying guru? Hm?'

He did not wait for a answer. Instead he constructed a pyramid of his cachectic bony fingers, on the apex of which he rested his lips, themselves blanched and dull.

'So, if I may now venture to ask – what message do you bring or with what request do you come?'

The moment had arrived at last for explanation, the repeatedly-rehearsed repeatedly-dreaded moment to justify my visit. Not without nervousness, I took up my satchel and opened it. I hesitated, fearing to speak now, fearing the onset of tongue-tie before that venerated name; but I knew that, whether I spoke or kept silent, I was already either equally blessed or damned, and having come thus far, it was the better thing to speak.

'Your . . . your work, I admire it greatly,' I said, taking out the books I had brought, his two and mine. 'It . . . it may be an imposition, but . . . but I wished to meet with you, to . . . to tell you myself of my regard for your work and of its influence upon my own, and . . . and if it is not too presumptuous, to give you my own book, my own stories, as a token, a gift . . .'

Kincaid nodded graciously and reached forward to accept that collection of mine which I extended to him.

'About . . . about your works,' I said, seeking to draw back his attention to his own two titles that lay in my lap. 'I think them splendid . . . The prose, the force, the evidence, the logic . . . And the ideas . . . As a doctor seeing people at their most elemental, I cannot agree with them more. Indeed . . . indeed, so much so that in my own stories, my own book, that *Requiem for a Mortal God*, I return over and over to the issues you raise – about the chemical basis for behaviour and emotion, and for thought and belief, and about the fictions of after-life, resurrection, and damnation and the soul, and about truths, ultimate truths – the realities behind existence, behind creation, that which people call God and destiny and purpose and choice – all these being truths discoverable only through bio-

logy, only through biochemistry and physiology, through the advancement of science, of science above all.'

Jefferson Kincaid was leafing through my book. Purse-lipped, he nodded, indulgently, it seemed, the illustrious professor listening to the stammering sophomore.

Just then, Angelika returned, carrying a tray of refreshments. The cups rattled in their saucers and steam from the coffee-urn spiralled thickly and aromatically before her luminous face. Beneath the tray, her belly was well on the way to fruition.

'Our Daniel, I see, is not consumed,' she said, deftly manoeuvring the tray into a space on the over-laden table. 'Such hardy stuff in Antipodean climes does thrive!'

She laughed; artlessly, almost waggishly, in keeping with her tongue-in-cheek turn of phrase. Jefferson Kincaid reached for her arm and passed over to her my book.

'He learns his lessons well, our guest, sweet angel Angelika,' he said, visibly more buoyant in her presence. 'Indeed so well that he has made my position in my *Quest* book his very own. For which' – he returned to me – 'for which I must own that I am honoured, I am flattered, touched. Indeed I am.'

Again he turned to Angelika who, having laid my book aside, was pouring the coffee.

'And if my surmise is correct,' he said, 'our footloose wanderer has come before his master eager to learn what the master has since discovered, has since learnt, to tear out, as it were, from his life's work the final page.'

I knew the scrutiny that followed very well – the privately, quietly-amused gaze of my medical professors, lecturers and tutors befuddling already befuddled students for their sport. But Jefferson Kincaid was merciful. He did not maintain his scrutiny overlong. As Angelika set my coffee on the low table beside me, the brew still too hot and steaming for my taste, Kincaid tossed his head, beckoned with a wasted hand, and said,

'Come. Step towards this window.'

I did as I was bidden.

'Look out there, over this gargantuan colossus we mortals call New York, and tell me what you see.'

That there was method in his directive, that I did not question. The games and ploys of masters of their calling were scarcely novel to me, having spent six intensive years in the academic-clinical-laboratory mill back home. But if it was bewilderment I betrayed before Jefferson Kincaid poised in his wheel-chair before me or to Angelika who had just settled down with coffee in one hand and my book in the other, it was less on account of Kincaid's unheralded unexpected bidding than of a flustered uncertainty about what it was he particularly wanted me to see and then knowing where, in describing that canyon-, crater-, Tower of Babel-ridden scape of concrete and steel, black slate and glass, vapour and ice, I should even begin to begin.

I made apt noises, muttered unassailable words: apartment-blocks, row upon row; hotels, their awnings heavy with snow; streets glaced with ice along which wary pedestrians negotiated their way; traffic-lights; taxis; trucks; a deli opposite; a newspaper kiosk, its black attendant blowing at his hands for warmth; workers at a demolition site drinking coffee around a fire; a telephone booth; parking meters; a profusion of signs; Central Park with all its vegetation trapped in snow; and, over-riding these, the spire of the Chrysler Building, Pan Am, the multiple faces of the Rockefeller Center, the Empire State, and, above these still, cloud thick, cloud hulking, cloud engorged, the feeblest stunted glimmers of pearl-white light against all odds struggling through.

'Raw grist for the mill by the imagination to be processed and by the hand to be moulded and cajoled into the refinement of noble art,' Kincaid said behind me in that inflexion of his, so broad, so giving. 'And so magnificent, splendid, massive, wonderful, no? But, even so, not yet have you seen the grandest thing, the very grandest there is to see. So come . . . Over here now . . . To this jungle of paraphernalia on this table where a mortal clings to dogged industry and look you down the shaft of that humble contraption of mere metal and glass

and perhaps you still discover what your guru has discovered there.'

With a sure hand on my forearm, he steered me towards the microscope that stood in the midst of the chaos of journals and books.

I looked through the eyepiece, but what was it – what was it?! – that Jefferson Kincaid so patently intended me to see? For there was little on that mounted slide that was so extraordinary, so rare, so grand that even in my undergraduate days I had not seen – only a spread of tissue cells with dark nuclei in their substance and rose-pink cytoplasm around the nuclei. One feature alone stood out at all: a single larger cell in the centre of the field caught and fixed in the phase of replication, its configuration nearly bi-partite as the symmetrical black spindles of stringy chromosomes receded towards opposing poles.

I described all these as best I could. Behind me, out of sight, Jefferson Kincaid assented. 'M-m,' he said, 'Yes,' 'Indeed, that is so,' but punctuated assent with a near-melodic refrain, 'But what else do you see?,' 'What else is there?,' 'What *else* . . . underlying . . . pervading . . . transcending all these?'

All prickles and perspiration, I was the student again as I sought desperately to please the master, yet did not know by which formula he might best be pleased. The discovery he had referred to was either so obvious or so obscure that for my obtuseness I craved forbearance in the one instance and leniency in the other.

It was Angelika who, with merriment and blessed fulfilment playing in her soft, lapping, clearly-knowing scrutiny, delivered me from perdition.

'If my Socrates you would wish to render a happy man,' she said, 'then let him hear from you the single solitary most marvellous word "God".'

'God?' I said, turning towards Kincaid.

He arched his back, winced with obvious pain, but promptly regained composure even smiling as his gaze upon me flickered as if with private mirth.

'Have my writings so numbed your soul, my friend, so inured you against the apprehending of wonder, of the miracle that Spinoza was wont to call Nature and that to men in black as also of the Cross, the Star and the Crescent is the Deity Supreme?'

Was he jesting? Had he returned to a faith he had earlier so uncompromisingly renounced? Had he abandoned that which, so rational, so honest and so well thought-out had been the very thrust and mainspring and inspiration behind my own creative work? And if reason he had abandoned, together with his earlier honesty and conviction, did he now grant ultimate victory to convention, yielding at this stage of his life to moral cowardice, and turning with cold feet to the championing of thatwhich for so long had been to him a lie? And, if so, was my own deity in Jefferson Kincaid to prove to have clay feet, to be weak-willed and to be unregenerably flawed? – I was beginning to see my pilgrimage to him as a mistake, a fanciful adventure, a plainly silly act destined to end in nothing but cold and doldrumed disillusion.

'I know what you are thinking,' he then said. 'So listen. Between them and myself, we, those men in black and I are one. Where altercation there may be between the frocked and the never-frocked, it lies in differences of perspective, but not of object. Their god, theirs, is the hoary Michelangelan figure of fresco and canvas or the formless disembodied spirit hovering over the waters of the deep – a being of grandeur, of might and of magnifience, the first of all things and the last, all-causing, all-knowing, all-pervading, unto infinity extending, unto eternity enduring, and yet beyond human knowing, invisible, mute, of imagination's gossamer crudely wrought . . .'

'But mine is . . .,' Angelika, so radiant in vermilion, so youthful, so fulfilled, interposed, winking and showing teeth so white, so strong, that it pained me to look back towards the man who had become of health so grievously dispossessed.

Jefferson Kincaid caught the strain. 'But mine is more scrutable, more manifest, and works in ways discernible and

with canniness sublime. And you, fine friend, seen it have you and yet you have not truly *seen* it.'

I remained puzzled, tossed.

'God! . . . God! . . . Yes, you saw the Deity itself – as a doctor you have seen it a thousand, no, ten thousand times – and yet you have not recognised it. In the most flimsy strip of tissue mounted on a slide is it. You will look down and say, "Ah, yes, cells do I see, and nuclei, and within those nuclei laces of frail threaded genes like pearls beaded on a chain, flimsy black tendrils of no great moment and scarcely exceptional which, in moments opportune, one may count and measure and manipulate." And at the most basic level of beholding, my fellow striver after truth, you will most certainly be right. *But*, dear doctor, fine word-smith, fellow man of science, is there anything in this universe as boundless in its distribution as this, as infinite in its variety as this, or as eternal in its self-renewal, or at once force both unceasing and unceasable, mightiest of mighty generator propelling all life, implacable mediator of aging, sickness, decline and death, template for the senses, and springboard for all actions, feelings, beliefs and thoughts? Hm?'

His eloquent rounded tone, even as it issued from a form so withering beguiled. But *was* he jesting?, toying with a novitiate come for illumination but destined to depart more impossibly perplexed?

'The cell?' I said. 'The chromosome? The gene? *That* is your God?'

If, before, I doubted it, there was no mistaking now his earnestness as he held me with a gaze became steady, clear and probing.

'That which giveth and taketh away, that which blesseth with fortune and curseth with misfortune, that which accompanieth the man in his walking, in his standing, and in his lying down and that which granteth life and, in the fullness of days, bringeth death. Perhaps the matter is but one of name. But yes, worthy seeker, yes, whatever name you give it, *that* is my god – in everything found from the smallest to the largest

that in the meanest way respires, in all that vastness as common to Capetown as it is to Copenhagen, as real in Vladivostok as it is in your own home town of Melbourne, Australia, and extending from the very innermost core of this, the crumbling shell of my decrepiting mortal anatomy out to the universe beyond the eyes' furthest reaching and down the generations that shall in turn extend beyond counting. And in that, dear pilgrim, in that, if soul there be, when the body dies and to oblivion fades, in that dark filament, so brittle, so fine, resides forever the soul's immortality.'

I must have frowned at this shift to the language of theology, for Angelika said, her dimples again playing mirthfully beside her lips, 'The professor, it seems, has not pleased his visitor with his teaching.'

As guest, I preferred not to confirm. Nor, however, could I wholly deny. I preferred to prevaricate.

'I am . . . I . . . I am merely marvelling at how . . . at how you reconcile metaphysics with biology . . .'

Kincaid smiled, however askew that smile seemed against his emaciation. Had we been playing chess, his would have surely been the private mirth of one who had snared his opponent in a well-woven mesh.

'Metaphysics?' he said. 'Metaphysics?!' He bit a lip and crooked a finger over his shoulder. 'Must I bid you look through the window yet again?,' he asked. 'Are those vaulting snow-encrusted soaring leviathans wrought of concrete and glass the stuff of metaphysics? Touch them. Breathe on them. Or look too upon the straddling thrust of Brooklyn Bridge across East River – is that metaphysics? Or the Gothic intricacies of St. Patrick's, the library at Forty-Second Street, and the human labours invested in the meanest volume on its shelves, or the wild daring spirit of the Guggenheim, the ecstasy of a Price or Domingo filling the Met, the brilliant scintillating art of a play on Broadway? Lordie, if this be the final wisdom and the judgement, for what have all the generations past breathed and laboured and endured that a man should be blind to the wonders and the grandeur they have

wrought? If it is greater persuasion that you seek, look then about you upon the demonic and the gargantuan, and upon the hedonistic, the kitsch and the chaotic, upon this hungry giant called New York. A Moloch will you see, ever-voracious and never-sated. Feeding on visionaries, madmen, derelicts and geniuses, glutting on revolutionaries, kabbalists, evangelists and fools, all the races, all the nations living here coursing madly, even frenziedly in this metropolis, in this megapolis; yet even this is but a mere pin's-head microcosm of humankind, humankind in turn but one wee rarified expression of nature, nature itself in its myriad forms ever transfigured and transfiguring, created and creating, from the sorriest to the grandest, through a loose mosaic of flimsy stringy strands of threads, these scraggy cobwebs bathed in the jelly of a pale and brittle shimmying cell . . . And all this – the majesty of it, the divinity, the magic and the wonder – all this you would dishonour by diminishing and demeaning it with the appellation "metaphysics"?!'

Angelika had set down my book upon a side-table and now hoisted herself from the chair into which she had sat sunken. In an uncannily-fluid dovetailing choreography of movement, Kincaid reached out to her, she moved towards him, she ran her fingers affectionately over his balding head, tightened his scarf, drew together again the parted lapels of his dressing-gown and stood beside him, resting a hand on his shoulders.

'Yes, wandering sparrow of the south,' Jefferson Kincaid then said, more softly as he tightened his grip about Angelika's hand. 'You have come to tear from my life's work the final page. Well, that page, my friend, is renunciation and just as much is it affirmation . . . renunciation of the coldly rational that would deny wonder, deny unity, and would reduce all thought, action and belief to the random interplay of atoms in the heart, the brain, the blood; but, against this, affirmation . . . affirmation of an infinite, eternal, unopposable force, a creative force streaming through every conduit of nature, this, in turn, an affirmation, too, of redemption, and of resurrec-

tion and of the ultimate immortality of all that lives, and affirmation, finally, of all values that recognise the sanctity, uniqueness and primacy of every life . . .'

He pointed at the volumes *The Delusions of Fixed Belief* and *Quest for Ultimate Truths* that I had left lying on my chair.

'Those books . . .,' he said, 'when you leave here, promise this to their author: that you will dispose of them, throw them away. Yes, consign them to oblivion. You shall find any number of trash-cans in the streets below. And thereby, liberate yourself from them, they are the stuff of mischief and have done too much to mislead. And when the time comes, go home, go back to your native Melbourne, set about your work for the welfare of your fellow-flesh, find yourself an Angelika of your own, make of her your wife, and have about you a brood of children . . . Contemplate your navel, too, if that is your bent, write also if you must, more *Requiems*, more stories, novels, poetry if that is your stronger inclination. But know that not in these lies immortality . . . Fame, perhaps yes, but not immortality nor the hope of redemption, nor of resurrection, nor of truly enduring through time . . . That can only be through offspring, through children, through the fruit of your flesh.'

He heaved, drew his shoulders together as though a chill passed through his body. Yet again did he wince but this time reached out for a pill-box from which he took two tablets.

'And now, gentle, kind disciple and comrade, I must ask you to leave. The flesh is weak, the will is feeble. To dependence on anodynes is mortality reduced . . .'

Angelika indicated with the slightest gesture of eyes that I comply. She left Kincaid's side to fetch my coat and scarf.

'Go,' Kincaid said, himself now drawing together still tighter the lapels of his dressing-gown against a chill that possessed him, 'go out among the living, there where God is in every snow-bound leaf, in every embryo, in every cocoon, tadpole and winter-bird, in the black attendant by his stall, in the workers warming themselves by the fire, in the keeper of the deli, the hotel footman, the clerks in their offices, the

sales-girls in the stores, and the children skating on the ice, and know, know that as this God is a part no less of you, you are a part of the greater all-pervading all-encompassing ambience of this self-same God, and as that God has been in all who have come before you and to whom you are heir, so shall that God be in the issue that shall to you in their turn in time be heir. In them, through them, dear friend, shall you, shall you thus forever endure...'

He then waved a hand as if to say, 'And now – go!'

Fortified against the external cold, I left. Angelika accompanied me to the elevator. She moved buoyantly, held her hands in the pockets of her dress and glowed, healthily, sunnily, as she smiled.

'So, noble Caesar, have you come and seen and conquered,' she said with gamesome pertness. '*That* was Jefferson Kincaid. Did he brush away old cobwebs, offer you the tantalising fruit and the juicy lemons you came to suck?'

'He is a big man, a great man, a strong man,' I said.

She tossed her head and held high her chin.

'Yes, he is big, *and* great, *and* strong. And of mighty will. Holding on, holding out ... holding out for the day he becomes patriarch to generations and sees himself in his coming child reborn.'

'And you?' I asked.

The elevator reached the floor, its arrival signalled by the tinkling of a bell.

'I? ... I am proud,' she said.

I looked Angelika over a last time – looked at her ebony hair, the bright smooth-complexioned cheeks, the dimples and at the belly ballooned in vermilion – and held out a hand. Her own was soft, sure, already tenderly maternal.

'He was married before, I guess you knew, no children, the former Mrs. Kincaid, Stella Kincaid, killed in a plane crash over Colorado. This ... This ...'

She did not elaborate. Placing her hands upon the dome of her abdomen, she had made herself clear. This was to be the child Jefferson Kincaid never had.

'It feels nice,' she said with a perky, open, marvellously open laugh, 'to see myself as a future matriarch.'

The elevator doors were about to close. In that warm scented hallway, under the cupolaed lights, I saw in her again the Marys and the Ericas, the Sophies and Joannes I had known back home.

'May the gods – his God, your God – see fit to smile upon you,' I said.

* * *

And outside, in the street, that rich resonant voice called out behind me.

'Yes', I said to the bearded black in fur-lined jacket and woollen beanie who was leafing through the two volumes I had, in keeping a promise, thrown away.

'Them's a man's life, man, his'n blood, man, his'n sweat . . .'

'Yes,' I said again.

'An' them's his'n mind an' his'n soul you jus' consign'd so easy-like to nothin'ness.'

And a third time, I said 'Yes', wanting to approach him then, wanting to lay a hand upon his arm, wanting to reach the very core of his being, to touch, embrace, lay open before him all that was God within him. But, instead, into Fifth Avenue I turned, hearing the black behind me say, 'Lord, some folks! . . . How out o' the dark an' broodin' woodwork they's come.'

* * *

Within days, I had returned to Melbourne, resumed my surgeries, took up my pen again; and following Jefferson Kincaid's judicious counsel, in calling a succession of Robyns, Ritas and Yvonnes, sought the prospect of immortality through my own in time to-be-acquired Angelika.

And this morning, six more months gone by, frosty winter

now come south, together with the customary journals, medical reports, bills and advertising pap, there came Angelika's letter with the photograph neatly sequestered in its fold.

> 'It was gracious of you on your American journey winter last to extend to us the bountiful honour of your visit. Your book, which Jefferson and I read together, extended the pleasure of your presence exceedingly.
>
> 'Three months ago, our child, a boy, was born. Jefferson passed away just six days before. As events turned out, never shall be given him that immortality, redemption, resurrection he sought, but in sparing him from seeing the child, at least in this, if I recall your phrase aright, did the gods see fit to smile.'

I saw why. But, no, the gods had not smiled. They had laughed and, if they had teeth, they had bared them with a delight malicious and perfidious and malignant. For in the photograph accompanying the note were the unmistakable features of a mongol child.

The Poet Walks Along High Street

Just after two, Gabriel Singer stepped out of doors. The early afternoon sun, he was glad to see, was pleasantly warm. It shimmered watery on the oil-slicked asphalt; it vaulted from the shop-windows and duco of passing cars; and shot white-gold shafts into the crystal space around. The air, so thin, hummed with the rumble of tramlines; it buzzed with the trembling of wires; and, close by, it was filled, as ever, with the strong earthy smells of flake and roast coffee, of cloves and tanned leather, and with a myriad other smells to which he had become accustomed, smells as familiar as his own sweat or the breaths of low-bowing obsequious waiters or the staler fusty pungency of mothballs in his tiny but adequate garret above Harry Bosch's picture-framing store midway along High Street.

Apart from the presence of a handful of ravens cruising overhead, black visitors dotting the sky, as he took deep bracing breaths to fill his lungs, Gabriel Singer thought the day perfectly splendid.

For High Street, he had a special feeling. He liked it. He savoured it. He had a keen affinity with it, a distinct rapport. It was, as he had written in his notebook:

> 'a profusion of colours, sounds, tastes and smells, the hub of local bustle, the hub of magnetised convergence, a milling thoroughfare of shop-keepers and shoppers, businessmen and tradesmen, along which:

> Humanity cascades in crashing torrents,
> Streaming in clamour to the hammer of time.'

The feeling, however, was not unmixed. He had written further:

> 'Yet none is there in that flow with as much as a line of poetry on his lips, none aware of lyric beauty, none – how sad!, what waste! – blessed with the gift of discovery, the gift of delight in the sanctified creations of the artistic mind.'

And he had closed the passage with the lines:

> 'To the poet is given that gift; to him the summons – the hard god called Anonymity be defied – to rise above the ordinary and the earth-bound, the call to transform the humdrum and routine, and the dictate to imbue all these with beauty and celebration, these being – no, not merely the function – but the very duty of the highest art.'

Emerging into the street then, he remembered those lines, remembered them as he watched two beetles scurrying swiftly along a crack in the pavement, and remembered them yet again as he squinted northward and gazed south, deciding this time upon the northern route, at the end of which, where Utopia Bridge straddled Erehwon Creek, there were broader finer infinitely more lavish vistas to enjoy.

In that direction, the buildings were huddled closer together and greater diversity was to be had – the Town Hall, for instance, with its solid neo-Renaissance facade, the equally-stately Croesus Bank, and just the nearer side of them, at the corner of Quandary Street, the age-and-weather-beaten Hotel Bacchus. Beyond the bank was Munch's ultra-modern Funeral Parlours – Munch, himself, it was said, recently retired –, also the Spectral Buy-All Supermarket, the Left-and-Right-Hand Hardware Store, and, further still, a more intimate string of food-shops, shoe-stores, haberdasheries and florists, into which, from which, the locals darted – Mrs.

Rushall, Ellen Herd, Charlie Scuttle – in a ravelling, unravelling tangle of colour, chaos and briskness.

Towards this maelstrom, he made his way. From Smetana's ice-cream parlour, he saw Chrissie Chrysalis emerge, wheeling her Sammy who was happily smearing a vanilla ice-cream over his face. She was his landlord Harry Bosch's daughter and Gabriel Singer could never meet her without having his pulse miss a beat.

'Likes it, the little one, doesn't he?,' he said, awkwardly.

All in white – shoes, skirt, blouse –, a perfect angel, she smiled. Her smile, too, he liked. It was so open, so happy, so pert.

'Likes anything messy,' she said with a gladdening laugh. 'Just like any dear precious lovable child.'

Gabriel felt a pressure in his throat. He was twenty-four; she was twenty-two. If only she weren't married! . . .

Again, as upon its completion, he considered giving her his latest poem and dedicating it to her, the one entitled '*An Innocent – and a Scene from Botticelli.*' But he knew he wouldn't. In practical matters – his nature be damned! – he knew he was a coward.

He was wondering what else to say when Barney Brown, the electrician Lightfoot's apprentice, drew abreast, along with young Freddie Freeling whistling as he swung his schoolbag. At his heels followed Freddie's dog, Black Roger, mangy and malnourished and blind in one eye.

They had just crossed Enigma Lane when Gabriel saw Ol' Chris 'the Prophet' being strong-armed through the Bacchus door. Off-balanced, he reeled and toppled to the pavement where, levering himself to a knee, he wiped at a graze with a grimy sleeve and appealed to a doughy woman Gabriel recognised as Mrs. Goodworks of the Holy Duty Opportunity Shop to take pity on a fellow man.

Mrs. Goodworks, evidently in a hurry, dismissed him with a rubied hand. Felicity Worth of the Citizen's Welfare Group, passing just then, gave him wide berth; arthritic Clem Goldheart prodded him with a stick; Judas Barabas of Barabas and

Sons spat 'Get out of the way;' while Benedict Gentille shoved a bird-cage in his face, the parrot within it squawking with every thrust.

All insult notwithstanding, the drunkard rose to both knees now, raised a defiant fist and began to shout:

'I am fallen! Yes I know! You see before you a fallen man! But so are you all! And there'll be hell to pay! 'Cos when they call, you'll be payin'! You'll all be payin' when they call! Lord ha' pity on yous all!'

Archie Hugo, the hunchback came close, nudged Gabriel in the ribs.

' 'e's at it again, that bag o' wind!', he said.

'It'll be a cleansin' we'll be headin' for when they call,' said Father Templeton of All Souls Church of Mary Magdalene, 'a purification and a salvation, yeah, not to any old dark and burnin' devil-ridden hell like that tosspot he has it.'

'Yeah!' echoed young Luke the choirboy, nestling under his arm.

Gabriel felt Chrissie Chrysalis' hand on his arm. He leapt with the electricity of her touch and felt goose-pimples creeping to his neck.

'Poor Chris, he's right, dear soul,' she said nodding, and not without sadness. 'And when they do call, Lord truly have mercy and see fit to spare us all.'

'When they call?' he was about to ask, when something about Ol' Chris made him catch his breath.

'God, how beautiful!' he couldn't help but exclaim. For, drunk though he may have been, Ol' Chris was encircled by a magnificently-gilded halo. His face, usually violaceous, glowed; his white dishevelled hair shone. Though Gabriel knew the aureole to be a trick of light, yet did it possess a palpability as real as the very pavement on which 'the Prophet' knelt. And at that moment, in one of those flashes he was ever aching for, a line, two, came to him, and outside Springer's the jeweller's, as Chrissie Chrysalis and the others went on ahead, he took from his pocket his pen and dog-eared pad, and wrote:

'Around each man a circular field,
Distancing, repelling - an impenetrable shield.'

He might have written more - the words, the phrases, the rhymes were beginning to form -, but just then a siren, something of a scream, made him look up. He saw the ravens startle in flight and dart madly in each and every direction. The siren was shrill and piercing. It rose above the jagged high-pitched squeals of the ravens, above the rumble and clatter of passing traffic, above the tittle-tattle, chit-chat, hellos, goodbyes, and above the chinwag, palaver and repartee of people meeting, chattering, parting in the street. It made him think of a dog such as he had once seen kicked in the flank by an angry exasperated postman. He couldn't determine its precise source but it did seem to arise from somewhere past Poe's Corner a couple of blocks away.

That he was not alone in having heard it was clear. Josiah Springer himself appeared suddenly in the doorway, sniffed at the air, said with unmistakable ardour 'So it's true. At last. You can tell by the burning!', and vanished hastily inside.

Perhaps there *was* a faint smell of burning. Gabriel let himself believe it, but he scarcely thought it strange. There were, after all, any number of factories nearby, some as close as in Coke and Coal and Cauldron Streets. And that sound - it was a mere siren after all, scarcely, one would have thought, a thing exceptional.

And yet what an odd effect it had on the people! All about him, everyone stopped abruptly, looked searchingly at one another, and almost joyfully, apparently finding confirmation of something expected, became again galvanised and animated, and whatever had been the direction of their separate missions but moments before, they now, in near-unison, turned northward. Some, like Mrs. Goodworks, Barabas the lawyer, and Gentille who carried his bird-cage with him were decidedly delighted and, clearly forgetting about Ol' Chris, made haste. Clem Goldheart, on the other hand, became visibly distressed. Waving his stick after them, he called out

'Wait for me, wait for me!', but, ignored, he hobbled as well as he could on his arthritic feet. Even Wally Pipes, the plumber, normally not one to hurry, pushed past the cripple and laughed, 'You'd better get a move on, old Quasimodo, or you'll be too late for your cleansin' an' deliverance from your sins!'

Witness to this peculiar transformation, Gabriel Singer was struck by a notion and took out his pen again.

> 'Sounds mysterious in broad daylight' – he wrote,
> 'When even the deaf will startle, even cats
> and ravens leap in fright.'

He mused over the couplet, recognised that the lines, particularly the second, were not wholly suited to what was taking place – perhaps 'delight' might have been more apt –, but did find merit in them. They had rhyme, rhythm. As for the rest, he would work on the verse more concertedly later. Meanwhile, he preferred to continue on his stroll, while the air was pleasant, the sun warm, the day so splendidly congenial, even if, as Springer had said, the smell of burning was becoming more definite and another half-dozen ravens had gathered overhead.

He moved on, watching Mrs. Rushall, Mrs. Goodworks, Father Templeton and his choirboy Luke almost sprint ahead of him. Outside the Gluttony Den Carvery, Josiah Springer himself, hurriedly putting on his coat and hat, brushed past him.

'We've been called, Gaby!' he said, looking back at him. 'You'd better be getting on. You heard the signal! They've promised us eternal life, deliverance. It's like the coming of the messiah. But if you don't get there on time ... Lord! ...'

The watchmaker, round-shouldered and squat, pattered ahead on dwarfish legs. He was joined by his lottery partners, Schechter the butcher and the grocer Salzberger, all three, having greeted each other with obvious glee, making their way through the converging mass ahead which enclosed them

like some consuming ocean. In that mass, which was beginning to mill and bustle and kick up dust, he recognised Kleist the book-seller, Hands the physician and Scholes, Professor of Occultism and Esoterica from the nearby University of Arcadia. He also saw Beckett, Schulz and Neugroschel of the local repertory theatre. Individualists all were they – so had he always looked upon them –, yet did they, too, press through the crowd of people streaming out from every doorway, they, too, at times running, at times veering left, veering right, jostling tardier folk aside.

Eternal life, Josiah Springer had said. Deliverance. The coming of the messiah. While Father Templeton had talked of a cleansing, a purification, salvation. And yet, he himself had heard nothing, had read nothing. – But then, how could he have heard about it all, when his radio remained ever silent, when he possessed no television, when he subscribed to no newspaper? So banal were these, so mundane, with nothing in them to touch a poet's soul. And so insipid! Arid! Flat! No wonder, then, that he knew nothing of what was going on.

But what *was* going on? He wondered at the movement that had become more boisterous, but above the wonder, he was moved to smile. Watching the people scurry and scud northward in increasingly-fervent, eager, headlong flow, he was reminded of the chicken his mother had long ago slaughtered when he had lived in the country, the wretched headless fowl scuttling blind and bleeding under the house. He had always remembered that, for, being the smallest in his family, it was he who had crept under the boards to redeem the exsanguinated corpse. And as he continued to watch, the people now four, five, six abreast, he himself holding back from the crush, he remembered yet another thing, a line he had jotted in his notepad just a week before:

'We march to the future with bold sturdy tread,'

but recognised with amusement that their onward scrambling and shoving and haste would scarcely pass for marching.

Again he smiled, just as another sounding of the siren – strange, it *did* seem more of a scream – came through the air. The tempo of the movement escalated more noticeably still. Pedestrians, trams, cars, cyclists – all. Old skinflint Cashmore stumbled over the tardy Newbold child. Tessie Aintree dropped a bag of oranges and left them to roll into the gutter. Archie Hugo got his feet entangled in someone's abandoned shawl. Studs Gidley lost a shoe. He himself, Gabriel, almost collided with his landlord, Harry Bosch, who was just then emerging, sniffing at the air, from the Nether World Bookshop. Somewhere, glass was being shattered. He heard what his imagination interpreted as gunfire but what could really, surely, only have been the backfiring of a car. Tram-drivers caught in the swelling traffic sounded their horns impatiently; cyclists rang their bells. Even the ravens, now doubled in number, headed north. To his left, to his right, he heard a succession of questions:

'Will we make it on time?'

'Do you think it will take long?'

'How many of us can they purify at a time?'

'Do you really believe they can keep their promise of offering us happiness, peace and justice like they say for evermore?'

Gabriel Singer walked on. A rat darted across the pavement; a cat lumbered after it in fevered pursuit, first the one, then the other nearly causing old Flora Scarlett of Finewreath's Florists to topple in her haste. Here, he side-stepped an infant's rattle, there a dropped newspaper, here a crumpled hat, there a dust-smothered jacket. He also saw a button on the asphalt and a cigarette-lighter, someone's wallet and a pair of glasses.

He was about to ask Marcia Faithfull of the local massage parlour where everyone was heading when he was distracted by an outburst of angry shouting. It came from an open window above the fruiterer Peppercorn's store where Justus Peppercorn was beating his wife Angela who cowered before him with upraised arms. He should have guessed. Punch and Judy were yet again enacting their customary pantomime.

'Are ya' comin' with me or do I 'ave ta drag ya like a bitch?!' Peppercorn shouted.

'But I'm clean already,' Angela countered. 'Me body, me soul. I'm clean 'n' I'm pure 'n' the Lord Hi'self He knows I don' need no cleansin'!'

'Ya heard what they said! Everyone need a cleansin'. It only takes one bein' that is uncleansed 'n' all aroun' 'im becomes impure. Like an apple gone rotten in the case. So you'd better be comin' b'fore I truly gives ya somethin' to be cleansed about!'

Justus Peppercorn struck his wife again and pulled her by an arm.

Sandy Beechall, the soil merchant, hurrying past, said, 'He'll kill her yet, he will, he will, and then she'll really be eternal . . . If they don't get to her first . . .!'

'They?' Gabriel was about to say, but Sandy Beechall had already moved ahead. Besides, the soil merchant was exaggerating. Peppercorn wouldn't kill his wife. Another minute, two, three perhaps, and like Punch and Judy every time, they would patch up their quarrel, make peace, and seal their love with an embrace and a kiss.

The scene, theatrical as it was, did, however, yield another inspiration. The wonder was that it had not occurred to him before. Outside Becker's Hot Bread Shop, closed now, like so many others, with a sign on the handle reading '*Closed until tomorrow*,' Gabriel Singer paused again.

> 'They cannot love that do not also hate,' – he wrote
> 'Nor peace can make who war do never wage.'

He saw Peppercorn again beat Angela about her head.

'You'd better be comin', you witch! For your sake, for mine! 'Cos if they come instead . . .'

Gabriel frowned. Something about the couplet troubled him. The idea was simple, but as poetry . . . There was something archaic about the lines, they needed shaping into modern cadence, moulding into art. They needed more refining, polish.

He smelled burning more distinctly now, and, looking up, actually saw the smoke. There were thick wads of it, in fact, grey coils spiralling into the turquoise blue which over mere minutes appeared to have lost its earlier luminosity. And it was not from Coke or Coal or Cauldron Sweets that the smoke arose, but from the Salus et Vitas Hospital past Poe's Corner towards which everyone, in ever-mounting, ever-excited, ever-more-crowded fervour and expectancy was heading.

At Quandary Street, however, there was a hold-up in the current. A huddle of people had gathered about, now and again one of their number – Kochan, for instance, or Priestley, or Theophanus – looking uneasily over a shoulder.

'What could they expect?', he heard someone say from within the circle.

'Turned back instead of going forward.'

'They should have known . . . Everyone was called, everyone had to go . . .'

'And it was for their sakes, too. There is no sense in missing out or trying to escape, poor fools . . .'

There must be a line or two in this, Gabriel thought.

He edged forward through the gathering. He saw glass glinting on the road. He saw an overturned stroller and a squashed ice-cream splattered across the asphalt, and, a little way into Quandary Street, where a line of graffiti '*Folly is it to doubt*' had been painted upon a wall, the distorted dismembered bloodied bodies of Chrissie Chrysalis, little Sammy, Barney Brown and young Freddie Freeling, and nearby, too, Freddie's mangy dog, Black Roger, shoved into a gutter, its blind glaucous eye open and protruding, looking like a dirty grey button about to loosen.

Already the flies had begun to buzz around them.

'Better move on, sonny,' he heard someone say in his ear. 'If they catch you dawdling . . .'

It was Alf Keymoney, the real estate agent, running as though some demon were in close pursuit.

Gabriel looked once, twice more, at Chrissie Chrysalis, but had to look away; look away from Sammy, too. He preferred

not to see in this exposed shattered form his object of divinity. It was rather to that earlier image of beauty, of perfection, he wished to hold, the saintly mother in immaculate white, all smiles and pertness and electric touch, the child, it too so saintly, playing havoc with its ice-cream.

As Alf had said – it was better to move on, wherever it was that he had to move on.

He did move on; but scarcely was he across the road than he was struck by a thought that sent a hot prickly burning flush to his cheeks.

The luck of it!, he could not help but think. The strange mysterious peculiar workings of luck! Lord! – Had he, had he, in his infatuation, kept pace with Chrissie; had he not paused to describe Ol' Chris 'the Prophet' in verse; had he, with Chrissie, Barney, Freddie at Quandary Street also sought to turn back! . . . Lord, might he, too, not now have been a mangled tangle of flesh, of bone, of hair, and victual for the flies? Lord!

He turned a page of his notebook.

> 'Not by the grace of God go we,' – he wrote,
> 'Nor by human design, however appealing,
> But like dust in cyclones, tornado-tossed leaves,
> On skittles of chance our very lives keeling.'

He pondered over the verse and bit a lip. He was saddened by another reflection. For, to whom, to whom might he now dedicate that latest poem, that '*An Innocent – and a Scene from Botticelli*' with his own lovely angelic galvanising Innocent gone? To whom?

A sharp thrust against his shoulder made him look up. It was Ernie Windglass, the glazier, who had struck him in his northbound haste. But it was not Ernie who captured his attention. For a moment, a tram crowded with excited impatient passengers obscured his view. While others to right and left of him rushed past, he waited for the tram, too, to pass, ready to believe, as with the aureole around Ol' Chris that what he saw was another trick of light. But he knew that this

time it wasn't so. The sun was more subdued, the sky had mellowed to a more sombre grey. No, what he had seen was real. Lazarus Godson, the manager of the Croesus Bank, *was* hanging behind the plate-glass window, his normally cheery, cherubic, chubby face so bloated and violet as to be almost beyond recognition, almost like an over-ripe plum.

'The silly fool!' Ernie Windglass, looking back, hissed with near-contempt. 'Wanted to be a hero. Tried to resist them, I swear. An' that's what he got. If only he'd taken to heart what's written there b'neath the window. Poor fool!'

Gabriel read. '*Trust – and unto you shall eternity be given.*'

'Maybe it was suicide,' he was about to say, but held back as on the uppermost step of the Town Hall he now saw the Mayor, Peter Holyoake, also hanging, he, not by the neck but by the feet from a flag-pole.

'Another hare-brained hero!', Ernie Windglass now receding further away spat back. 'He, of all people, shoulda known . . .'

The siren sounded yet again, a third time, closer now, more clearly than ever like some unnatural scream. It came, Gabriel was sure now, quite sure from the Salus et Vitus Hospital, upon which the people were all feverishly converging, while it was also from *its* chimneys, so clear was it now, that the smoke was billowing thickly, giving to the air a dully-opaque bilious light and a heat become drier, heavier and more scorching. It smelled peculiarly and vaguely as his own flesh had done when long before he had singed it over an incinerator. In the meantime, what was left of the sun could no more be seen. His eyes began to smart, his saliva thickened. At moments, he had to turn aside for breath. And yet the people themselves, those around him, seemed not to notice. Arrived there by foot, by car, by cycle, by tram, some of them joked, others laughed, still others talked of the new directions they would take when their lives would be renewed and made eternal, they talked of new business ventures, of journeys, of new occupations, as also of hobbies, enterprises and creative pursuits till then denied them by the ever-present demands of the moment in their

arduous, busy day-to-day lives. That he was more aware of the accumulated heaviness and acerbity that had come to the air, Gabriel Silver attributed to his more sensitive perceptions, to the inner sight, as it were, bequeathed to him as a poet.

The ravens overhead had doubled yet again.

Reaching the outer rim of that human swarm, Gabriel rose to his toes. No lights, he noticed, shone from the hospital windows, the clock had stopped, while a broad prominent banner flapped against the wall.

'*Cleansing Makes Free*,' he read, the blood-red lettering bold on the sooty white.

People pointed at the sign, breathed deeply, took in the air in draughts as if already breathing in freedom's freshness, and smiled – beatifically, Gabriel thought.

He reached for his pen.

'*Cleansing makes Free*,' he wrote. He bit a lip, sucked his pen, and crossed out what he had written.

> 'In cleaning lies salvation' – he wrote instead, and added
> 'And in fire is purgation.'

He was more pleased this time by the musicality and the symmetry of the lines.

He was about to write a matching couplet when he looked up as though he might find the lines ready-formed in the air. He was momentarily taken aback by what he saw, while beside him, he heard someone else exclaim, 'Wow! Gee!' For, high up, towards the topmost end of a lamp-post near the hospital's doors, hung Angela Peppercorn. Her arms were bound to the horizontal, while her body, delicate and light though it was, sagged limply. At her feet hung the tardy Newbold child who seemed at that moment to be restfully sleeping; below that tranquil cherub was Ol' Chris 'the Prophet,' his tongue dangling loose and the blood congealed in his mouth; while at *his* feet lay Benedict Gentille's parrot, its throat slit wide and its eyes protruding as if on mushroom stalks.

'They thought they were pure and already immortal, so they refused to come,' Gabriel heard Canon Priestley say ahead of him. 'Yet is there any among us who is, who can be, truly, truly, wholly clean?'

'Yeah,' said Willet Everend who worked as clerk at the Coroner's Court, pointing at Angela. 'She thought she was too good and wouldn't listen. The young 'un, below her, he was too slow, and that one, that swiller o' spirits, he, the ol' rebel, he jus' babbled too much. So his tongue, it's been prised jus' a little loose, jus' a little loose, poor devil . . .'

Explained that way, Gabriel Singer could believe all that. But what, he wondered, could anyone have had against a parrot?

'Parrots, too, can sin,' said Canon Priestley gravely. 'I guess it's b'cause they also know to talk.'

And that was all. After the explanations offered by Willet Everend and Canon Priestley, no-one else seemed to as much as look at the corpses along the mast. They might as well have been part of the landscape a decade past. Rather did the mass of folk gathered there face the hospital doors, clinging to them, all of them pressing forward, their breaths stale as they mingled with one another.

He moved on, skirting around the perimeter of the massed chattering, laughing, bantering, gesturing, expectant, impatient assemblage.

'We're going to be scrubbed lily-white,' someone said.

'Like loveable albinos,' someone else laughed.

'Say, if we go in through here for the cleansin', where do we come out, do you think?' a third one asked.

'With the bath-water, down the drain,' a wit saw fit to reply.

There was much of that. Gabriel Singer registered their talk, but held continually to the outer, the better, as poet, to observe them. He reached a position opposite the doors at just that moment when the siren sounded again. Climbing on to the step of an evacuated tram – it had the peculiar appearance of a cattle-car –, he caught sight of the hospital interior. And

he saw the source of the siren. He had been right. The siren was, in fact, a scream, a human – and yet, in other ways, a patently inhuman – scream. It issued from a scraggy figure standing on a platform just inside the entrance. The figure was bald and nearly fleshless, its cheeks were troughed, its eyes empty mussels, and its belly and thighs as if scooped out by huge serrated trowels. It held bony hands to the hollow that was its mouth and screamed with a force so shrill, so strident, that, to Gabriel, the penetration of that cry could scarce be reconciled with its shrivelled form. Yet, its skeletal form notwithstanding, Gabriel suddenly recognised him. It was Munch – Think of it; Munch, Munch himself, Munch, of Munch's Funeral Parlours who was said to be retired – calling the people to their salvation.

Again, Gabriel reached for his pen and pad and wrote:

> 'There is no end to mysteries, no dearth of surprises,
> People familiar assume motley guises.'

He looked up to observe the scene. Some hundred to two hundred folk entered, in homage bowing to Munch who, despite his stark appearance – indeed, in contrast to it –, eyed them smilingly and clearly benevolent. With an arc described by his arm, he motioned the people inside. And the people moved in, the people, Gabriel Singer's neighbours and acquaintances, and the waiters he had known, and the shopkeepers, the printers, seamstresses, tailors and Lord knew who else. As many as could enter, as many crowded in. Any anxiety at being delayed had clearly been needless; all had reached the hospital well in time and everyone, everyone would in his-her turn be readily accommodated.

In the foyer, during the few moments the doors remained open, Gabriel saw the arrivals begin to undress, men, women, children, who with neither shame nor bashfulness shed their clothes which a score of men in gold braid, all remarkably handsome, dignified and polite, piled neatly against a wall, alongside boxes that contained mounds and mountains of

spectacles, necklaces, dentures, watches and rings. Pregnant Gwenda Canister, he saw, had trouble undoing her bra, with which one of the men then graciously assisted her; arthritic Clem Goldheart was asked courteously to give up his stick; Mrs. Goodworks freely offered up her rubies; while Felicity Worth, clearly finding old habits hard to surmount, offered up herself.

The heat issuing from the hospital struck Gabriel more keenly. He saw the naked bodies glisten white, yellow, gold and red with a gleaming of sweat. But it was scarce to be wondered at, for, in the background, a series of open fires were brilliantly blazing. Before them stood rows of chairs on which the new arrivals were seated while a team of men, working briskly, shaved their heads and tossed their hair into the flames along with some of the clothes clearly too ragged and worn for further use. Tessie Aintree, skinflint Cashmore and Justus Peppercorn, he saw, though in their shaven state he nearly did not recognise, were given soap and towels and led away, while at the foot of the pedestal where Munch stood beaming knelt Father Templeton with his choir-boy Luke both naked and white, in rapt delight offering up a string of peeling trilling hosannas to him above them who was about to give them new and eternal life.

Then, with Munch holding up a palm to the public left waiting outside the entrance, and bidding them be patient, the doors closed.

Gabriel Singer stepped down from the tram and resumed his walk. He was within sight of Utopia Bridge. He liked its name. It corresponded with his idea of culture – erudition, curiosity, sophistication, art – towards all of which he, too, in his way, was working.

If, for a moment, he deemed it strange that the people proved so ready to disrobe to nakedness, on reflection, the fact was scarcely strange at all. They had come for cleansing, for salvation, for the promised granting of eternal life. What were all these if not, in a sense, rebirth into the world? It was, therefore, wholly logical, indeed wholly natural, that it

should be in a state naked, purified and innocent, in a condition shorn of all vestiges of the old life and healed of all ailments and delivered of all past encumbrances that they should be reborn. And to be reborn, to be made whole again, to pursue the promise of eternal life – think of it! – were not these the dreams and hankerings and aspirations of every age, the ultimate consummation of every human instinct, drive and impulse, notwithstanding the fact that there were departures from the general rule, aberrations perhaps such a Angela Peppercorn, say, or Lazarus Godson, Peter Holyoake or Ol' Chris, the Prophet?

There must be a poem in all this, he thought. He must, he would on his return give careful consideration to the theme.

He reached the centre of the bridge. He had a special fondness for the bridge, that arch of solid dependable stone spanning Erehwon Creek, in winter ever a rich swiftly-flowing river bordered by vegetation lush and verdant with a lavish fecundity of poplar and willow, eucalyptus and pine. That was how he savoured it best. But now something different rose from the creek – a smell –, a smell not altogether pleasant, a smell sulphurous and aquatic, a smell strangely faeculent, as though emanating from a leaking sewer the Council had not repaired, while he heard also sharp rapid muffled retorts and brief squeals and shrieks such as could not come from those hovering ravens alone.

He placed his arms upon the stone and looked down.

All grey, – the smoke having shut out the brighter light of the sun apart from some thin greenish-yellow shafts struggling through –, the creek and its embankments stretched a short way into the distance where it veered suddenly out of visibility. If asked, he would have had to concede that the view this time was unusual – at least, for him, unusual. For, just beneath him, in so far as he could recognise them, he saw Tessie Aintree, Cashmore and Peppercorn, along with a score, two-score of others, being ushered into a low building, on the roof of which, after the doors had been shut and secured, an

attendant, clearly earnest about his work – dedicated, one could say –, emptied a canister of crystals down a narrow chute. Barely a dozen paces away, on a makeshift dais, Barabas the solicitor and Willy Pipes were being flogged, Harry Bosch, his landlord, at whom Gabriel waved without response, was drinking turps, while the high-brow threesome, the bookseller Kleist, the physician Hands and Professor Scholes were being strung up on a gallows by other attendants who worked with an efficiency beyond the slightest reproach. Beckett, Schulz and Neugroschel were already dangling floppily, their necks at sharp angles to their trunks. At some remove, where Marcia Faithfull was copulating with another attendant while an Alsatian looked calmly on, Archie Hugo, the hunchback, and crippled Clem Goldheart were led to leaden furnaces and through narrow openings were thrown inside; pregnant Gwenda Canister, nearly too big to fit through, was next; then Studs Gidley, Benedict Gentille and Flora Scarlett, followed by the clerical trio Kochan, Priestley and Theophanos; while on a row of tables, rinsed by a hose constantly flowing, Father Templeton, his choirboy Luke, and – Gabriel saw – another trio of choristers were losing their balls. Others were having their nails torn from their thumbs; near the gallows, a number of souls were being stretched on racks; some, tied to stakes, were being macerated by clubs and hooks and whips; while others still – Springer, he recognised, and the jeweller's lottery-partners, Schechter and Salzberger – were being impaled like lambs on spits. And one thing more caught – could not help but catch – Gabriel's eye. Though smoke-permeated mist lay heavily upon them, he saw several tracks cut into the slopes of the banks that led from the hospital above to the lower reaches of the Erehwon Creek below. Along these tracks he saw, too, separate trails of people descend, all of them naked, all shaven, all, even the children, wholly mute, there along the embankment to spread out in a single file at the behest of a further clan of attendants. Behind them, the creek had a mottled-marble appearance with, here and there, thick splotches of red. The creek had obviously

dried out. Gabriel missed the shimmering reflections of its more usual flow, as also the customary darts of silver under the sun, the dancing shafts of mercury, and the glinting javelins of gold. He did not see their actual source, but again there arose from below a volley of short and rapid retorts. What he did see, however, were puffs of cotton-wool smoke among the trees, followed by the sudden flurry of ravens and accompanied by another succession of squeals, from the birds themselves, to be sure, but also he now clearly recognised, from those very souls below as, along the embankment, and in a quaintly-uniform way, the linear formation of men, women and children tumbled back, rolled and cartwheeled surprisingly nimbly down the slope and came to rest in quiet immobility, although a few did stand their ground a fraction longer before executing a final reeling pirouette. The one formation despatched, another promptly followed. Gabriel Singer no longer knew any of them. They were clearly the ones who had come from further out by car or tram or cycle. They made him think of extras on a film set and he wondered, fleetingly, whether somewhere in the mist among the trees sat a film-maker with a cameraman nearby.

What briefly struck him, too, were the expressions of what seemed surprise, pain, even agony and anguish on the faces of the many led to the gallows, the furnaces, the gas-chambers – for what else could those low-roofed buildings be? –, and to the embankments below, and with that thought became linked another: that all those who had so keenly, so expectantly run and bustled and rushed to their promised salvation had, in fact, been cleverly, expertly and excellently duped and beguiled. But, no – on further reflection, there was a more compelling argument still. If one were to be reborn, it was only natural – it was nothing if not natural – that one must first die, while if one were to be reborn purified and prepared for eternal life, then one had first to be cleansed, wholly cleansed – of sins and of sickness, as of smallness and infirmity –, even if such cleansing necessitated the infliction of what was all too glibly and superficially described as suffering by such who would

hold the means of cleansing as things evil or vile or reprehensible. Clearly, the logic was nothing if not inescapable and irrefutable.

He did not remain long on the bridge. He was disappointed that the usually clear invigorating, indeed inspiring, vistas of Erehwon Creek had been blemished. He had always been one to prefer light; he did not like the murkiness that had gathered, nor the way the smell of the creek impinged on his breath. Next time, he thought, he would take a different route.

By the time he reached the hospital on his return, its doors were shut and no-one any longer waited outside. The whole process had been remarkably efficient, a credit to Munch and his clearly superbly-organised team. The funeral director was a master of his calling, *par excellence*. For the chimneys themselves had as good as stopped billowing, and afternoon light, the more usual golden light, again began to tremble, however tentatively, in the sky. The banner reading '*Cleansing Makes Free*' had meanwhile been removed and the pavement before the doors swept perfectly clean. No-one hung now on the lamp-post outside the hospital, and as he looked south, down the length of High Street from whence he had come, even the cars, the trams and the bicycles were gone. High Street was deserted, silent and mellow under the lifting returning spreading light. Remarkable, remarkable – he thought – what could be achieved if only a man set his mind to do it. A whole city of folk – tradesmen, shopkeepers, intellectuals, clergy – a whole city in a blinking had been cleansed; and now only silence and calm remained, as if people, there, had never been.

Alone, with no-one near to nudge his shoulder or urge him on, he paused. Once again, he licked his pen.

> 'A man, a car, a street, a city,' – he wrote,
> 'Into oblivion plunged, to anonymity purged,
> All engulfed, devoured, in oceans submerged.'

He walked on, passed the shops and looked for the signs he had read before: '*Back soon*', '*Out for an hour*', '*Open again tomorrow*'.

They were no longer there, nor did he see Peter Holyoake outside the Town Hall or Lazarus Godson hanging inside the Croesus Bank. Even the graffiti had been rubbed away, while, at the corner of Quandary Street, no sign was there of Chrissie Chrysalis, of Sammy or his splattered ice-cream, of Barney Brown, Freddie Freeling or his mangy dog, Black Roger.

He was crossing the narrow street when he entertained a sudden vision of the heroic.

'If only . . . if only . . . if only . . .'

If only he had had been near Quandary Street with that foursome; if only he had been with Lazarus Godson at the bank; or with Peter Holyoake, the Mayor; or with the Peppercorns in their room; or with Ol' Chris 'the Prophet' to whom the wisdom of silence he might yet have taught or whom, in some other forceful defiant way, he might, he might yet have saved.

But just as quickly, he recognised the folly of his notions. He was a poet, an artist, not a man of action. His brief was to create order from disorder, beauty from discord, truth from confusion. Not for him was it to compound violence with violence or confound common sense with derring-do. Nor was it in his power – let others do it! – through ill-judged action to alter events. What had been – if, indeed, it had truly been – had had to be. What now would be, would have to be. For this was the way of the world. And if others had been cleansed, purified, purged and, in that way, redeemed, it was because they had shown reason for it – Josiah Springer who over-charged, for instance, Salzberger who gave short weight, Barabas who tendered poor advice, and, of course, those physical liabilities, the cripples Clem Goldheart and Archie Hugo. He, Gabriel Singer was not of their kind. His was a quiet, fruitful, creative life, neither sinning, nor offending, his hands in this world perpetually clean. Those others – even Chrissie Chrysalis, even Angela Peppercorn if the truth had to be admitted – were little folk, while he, Gabriel, was the servant of art. And as its servant, he was ear-marked for finer attainments. Not for nothing had he been spared.

Buoyed by the thought, he hastened his step, almost ran. He seemed to be gliding. He passed the shops, crossed the side-streets and felt sweat gathering down the length of his spine, while his mind, suddenly so lucid, so alive, so clear, buzzed with a refrain:

> 'We march to the future with bold sturdy tread,
> I create for the future with bold steady pen.'

Now he did run.

'We march to the future with bold sturdy tread; I create for the future with bold steady pen.'

At the door of Bosch's store, he fumbled with his key.

'We march to the future . . .'

He opened the door, entered.

'I create for the future . . .'

He made his way between the paintings, between the portraits, between the frames on the floor. He half-expected Harry Bosch to say, as always, 'Well, how's our Singer, our poet today?' He reached the stairs, scaled them in twos, in threes; he took out his notepad, he switched on the light and, wondering vaguely, fleetingly, where, with Salzberger gone, he might get tomorrow's rolls, he hastened to his desk, pulled out his chair and sat down, there to work upon his snatches of verse, there to create order out of disorder, there to forge pure art, cocooned in his still, secluded, untroubled garret above Harry Bosch's picture-framing store.

The Caterpillar

Parties, even the best of them, oppressed him and New Year's Eve festivities still more, particularly when, along with the small talk, the tedious sameness of the company and the forced camaraderie, he was compelled to pretend to a cheer he did not feel – had not felt since being acutely cudgelled by the revelation that at thirty-seven he had achieved little, was achieving little and would never achieve more than little.

His first response to the invitation to the Silvers' fancy dress party had been to fume, 'No way am I going to sink to their goddamned infantile level!' but Jennifer, touching him here, fondling there, had always prevailed, and he did dress up, all in shriekingly garish green – shoes, socks, slacks, pullover, hat – over which he petulantly pulled a coarse tawny potato sack, snapping, 'Well, if I have to be ridiculous, then let me damned well be original!'

'Original, Henry, that it certainly is, I must say,' Jennifer had said. 'A caterpillar in a cocoon. If they were to give prizes . . .'

She had been putting the finishing touches to herself – heavy mascara, smouldering rouge, and fiery scarlet to sweeping eyelashes, to smoothly marbled cheeks, to lips. Her gown a plush violent red, herself lavishly beringed, bangled and brooched in glinting gold, her hair fringed and black and boyish, the Carmen in her was hungrily emerging. Looking at her, Henry acknowledged that she could still make herself sensuously beautiful, but he clenched his teeth, bridling at the pleasure she seemed to take in such frivolity.

'A pox on their prizes!' he had huffed. 'A pox on the whole insipid lot of them, the Silvers, the Cullens, Landmans, Ellisons! . . .'

'Henry, it's New Year's Eve,' Jennifer had tried to placate. 'The evening's scarcely under way and already you're sucking lemons.'

'New Year's Eve!' Henry snorted. 'And from tomorrow on things will be better, I suppose?'

'We haven't done badly so far. A home, two children, secure jobs, friends . . .'

'And mortgages, overdrafts, school bills, the kids becoming impossible, clients who can't wait to see the back of me, who make me despise myself for peddling life insurance, and no way out of it, to do something else . . . something . . . to achieve something, make something of myself that will stay on . . .'

'One's children stay on, Henry,' Jennifer had said, draping herself in a white satin shawl. 'They're anyone's most lasting achievement.'

Henry had opened the door with rank scorn.

'Give a mule the right pestle,' he said, 'and it too will be able to do the same.'

That rancour only mounted as their hosts – Martin Silver in the leather breeches and feathered cap of an Austrian yokel, Hilda in the artless white red-bordered cotton outfit of a peasant girl complete with plaits – gaily opened the door upon the party within.

'Wow!' Martin Silver whooped as his gaze tumbled helter-skelter down Jennifer's full length. 'Ma bella senorina, how ravishing!'

'And look, Martin, at Henry,' Hilda laughed, her blonde plait dancing as she tossed her head. 'How cute! Jiminy Cricket, Henry? A pea-pod? I know, a vine!'

'No,' said Martin, plucking at the leather straps of his breeches. 'Something more exotic. A zucchini with a jacket on, right out of old Pietro Pietruzelli's garden!'

'Wrong each time,' Henry heard Jennifer squeal with a

triumph that might have been of her own making. 'My darling husband is a caterpillar in a cocoon.'

Hilda clapped her hands. 'How ingenious!' she sizzled. 'I was sure you'd come as an insurance salesman.'

'Just as well you didn't crawl in,' Martin bubbled. 'Someone might have stepped on you.'

Henry wished he could have torn down every streamer and burst every balloon hanging from the ceiling and Martin into the bargain.

'Well, come in, come in!' Martin gushed. 'There's drinks to put you under the table, savouries till next year and a sumptuous feast to follow. But no leaves, Henry, no grass. And what about a fandango later, Jenny, or a bolero?'

Deeper inside the house with its richly-carpeted, richly-patterned walls, Henry became detached from Jennifer.

'Hello, Henry!' he heard himself being called. 'Henry, good'ay.' 'That's a flashy outfit!' 'You really let yourself go, good on you.'

He smiled weakly, waved back languidly at the Hausers, the Havins, the Grays who beamed at him theatrically through the guises of a Chaplinesque tramp, a Hawaiian girl, an astronaut, a buccaneer. They were drinking, rolling their misted glasses of white wine and red between eager palms, and tattled merrily as between their repartee they nibbled nuts and savouries and potato crisps. Henry moved on, weaved his way between Indian chiefs and can-can girls, between bull-fighters and impresarios, taking in at every turn the heady pungency of perfume, greasepaint and talcum, touching in his passage the cool warp of ruffled cotton, silk, velvet and lace. Above the clatter, shrill raucous music boomed and reverberated from two large mahogany-encased loudspeakers attached to an elaborate tape recorder that flashed with a succession of green dancing chassis lights.

'My latest baby,' said Martin Silver, passing by.

The host had money and flitted from one expensive pastime to another. Twelve months before, it had been yachting; six months later, he had taken lessons in flying. Henry was

about to say 'Nice' but Martin in his loud green and brown Austrian outfit was already gone, preparing now to laugh with his customary abandoned laughter at a lurid joke told piquantly by a towering black-robed Mephistopheles.

'The devil himself,' Henry murmured, approaching close, then retreating far, almost drunkenly, as though he were catapulted mightily by the group's shock wave of prurient laughter, his fists and chin locked in the throes of seething tension.

How he hated them! Little people all, small-minded, dwarfs – professionally-accomplished to be sure, with solicitors among them, and surgeons, teachers, accountants, and an engineer, a psychologist, a social worker – but, outside their domain, so shallow, so narrow, so blinkered into a tunnel vision that saw as most deserving of exertion the immediate gratification of capricious wants, that *failed to see* those heights of art and brilliance and eminence – even fame – to which they could attain. And the worst of it was that they dragged him down, made *him* second-rate, made him, too, expendable and threatened with an oblivion he despised and spurned. What he could have been if not for them!

But, then, what *could* he have been? What could he still be?

Smiling, nodding, answering banalities, he strayed glumly about the rooms. All in green with a patato sack over his shoulders, he felt more ridiculous than ever. He listened wearily to snatches of conversation.

'And the judge, as full as a boot, barely raised his eye-lids and drawled to the plaintiff . . .'

'And when the nurses came to count the swabs . . .'

'Reckon half my class will end up in jail, the other half in reform school . . .'

'The money's in land at the moment, with property values rising ten, fifteen, in places twenty percent per annum . . .'

In their multi-coloured motley, they were dressed for flight, yet, spurning liberation, they remained trapped, anchored to the pedestrian mindlessness of their everyday

selves. Around him they moved, gorgeously prodigal in their pageant of crimson and scarlet, yet even against their luxuriance of turquoise and jade, of silver and gold, they could not help but betray the dreary tedium of every shade of grey.

Asked questions, he answered; offered drinks, he drank; called to the smorgasbord, he ate. Awkwardly he stood, plate in one hand, with the other scooping salad, fishballs, cold cuts and chicken, for occupation alone hovering about the tables returning for seconds, for thirds, for any leftovers that wooed his palate. And then, sated but oppressed, he sat down in a lounge-chair and drew his legs beneath him.

From there, he watched. Jennifer in her hungry burning scarlet swept up to him and said, 'Henry, it's not really as bad as all that,' and drifted away again, bubbling like the bubbles in her champagne glass. Then a false-moustachioed colonel sat upon him inadvertently, a tipsy jockey showered him with crisps while a dunce-capped jester sounded a fog horn in his ear. He longed for midnight, for the passing of Auld Lang Syne when, duty done, he could fetch his Carmen and flee, flee, flee . . .

And midnight came, the second-hand ticked into another year, and Martin Silver sounded a gong, striking a wooden ladle against a saucepan. From his position, Henry did not move. He watched the circle as it formed, watched the eager cross-linking of hands, of sailor to ostrich, ballerina to wizard, and tried to shut out the passage that ushered in the new year that promised only more waste, more emptiness, more destitution.

The song over, he made moves to rise, but Martin Silver, flushed from wine and merrymaking, with Hilda in her peasant-dress smiling artlessly by his side, was booming,

'Right, the time has come, the walrus said, for everyone to perform!'

There followed laughter, squealing, applause.

'Jennifer, a bolero, Richard a piece of wizardry, Isobel, the can-can, and make sure you kick those legs high!'

He watched with distaste as Jennifer in flaring fiery red

stamped her feet and clicked her fingers to the animated clapping of the gueasts around her. He gritted his teeth at the giggling tutued ballerina who gracelessly rose to an exaggerated arabesque; and felt deepening nausea at the rolling jerking eye and hand play of the Chaplinesque tramp, at the suggestive gyrations of the Hawaiian girl, and at the poker-faced, flat-palmed salute of the Indian chief. One after another, each guest took the centre, the buccaneer and the devil, the peasant girl and the impresario, in singles, in pairs, running on, running off, with silliness tittering to claps on the back, to jocular laughter and to the raucous riot of scatter-brained inanities.

Then he had enough. He had enough! The noise, the vacuousness, the levity, the ache of his insignificance, the prospect of a future without future – these tore at him, seared his awareness, pricked as if with a thousand needles every silently screaming pore in his protesting flesh. Enough now! Enough! He drew up his legs still higher, tighter, sank more heavily into the upholstery beneath him, curled chin to knee with the torment of it all, and shrinking further from the milling circle, hoisted the potato sack over his head, if not to shut out hearing, then to blot out vision, gaudiness and foolery.

'A pox on them all, a pox on them, a pox!' he swore into the darkness of his hollow warren. How he hated them! Detested them! Loathed them!

Still he heard their laughter, their whoops and their squealing. But these did not touch him now. They were outside of him, unthreatening, innocuous, even when suddenly, physically close, he recognised Hilda's voice as she shouted 'Hey everybody, look!' and Martin's as he boomed 'It's Henry! It's good old Henry!' and Gerry Hauser's as, near his ear, he bellowed 'The devil!' While we're performing, he's gone off on an act of his own!', the whole company bursting into a riot of abandon, approval and delight.

'Henry?!' he heard. 'Who would have thought it of him?'

'He's a fine sport, after all.'

'How ingenious, the caterpillar inside his cocoon.'

And he felt hands over him now, soft solicitous hands, probing, seeking out his shoulder, his own hands, his face, and heard Jennifer's voice happily caressing, 'That was cunning of you, Henry, that was very clever. You can come out now, they've all seen you now, you really do deserve a prize.'

But he stayed. Tossing his shoulder, he shook off her touch. He jerked a hip and kicked a foot. More actively now, more firmly, he felt Jennifer tug at the sack, but with tightened fingers, tightened feet, he clung to its ends. And then other hands fell upon him and other voices rose as laughter swelled to a delirious crescendo, then abruptly faded, fizzled into puzzlement as question tumbled over question in baffled confusion.

'What's the matter, Henry?'

'Are you all right?'

'Jennifer, is he sick?'

'It's over now, darling, why don't you come out? . . . Henry? . . . Darling? . . . Henry? . . .'

Henry did not come out. He held on to his dark enclosure. He felt safe there. There, there was nothing to dread; there, there was no burlesque, no impossible children, no debts. Oblivion did not matter there, nor immutable sameness, nor unrelieved stagnation. In that very incarceration, there was freedom; in that very darkness, there was light; and even as he felt the probing and the pummelling and the tugging of hands and more hands at his every part and heard about him the clamour of voices cross-firing in confusion, he clung to his freedom and clung to his light, hoping, praying, entreating never – oh Lord, oh God – never to be born again.

The Sniper

What I've achieved so far is, as the expression goes, chicken-feed, or, to cite the title of a recent Malouf novella – terrorism its theme – child's play.[1] * A dozen aims, a dozen shots, a dozen successes. In the parlance of ten-pin bowling, a dozen strikes. The actual score might in fact be thirteen or fifteen or eighteen by now, but I have lost count. No notches have I scratched on my rifle, I am not so vain. Nor are they, the underlings of the world, truly the prize I am after. Prime ministers are worthier fare. Besides, numbers, mere numbers have lost their spell. To put the matter into a certain perspective, though at the risk of intrusion – after the first few times, do you keep count how often you've made it with your wife/husband/de facto/lover/Pandar's Cressidas?[2] You see? – the original interest, the original stirrings, these remain, along with the exhilaration experienced in repeating or even improving upon the performance, in your case in the gratification of your libido, in mine in the collection of a bull's-eye. But tallies, overall scores, become quite irrelevant, in my sport no less than in yours, especially in an age when, think of it, think of say, South East Asia, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, the Central Americas, life is so disposably cheap.[3] We, homo sapiens, through rituals and codes consecrate our existences to worth, and through ordinances and injunctions, conventions and commandments[4] exalt ourselves to the rank of highest and most sacrosanct in the living realm. And yet, reduce the

* See endnotes.

human body to the basic structures of blood, collagen, fats, calcium, starches, whatever, and only the untutored will insist that it is, *in essence*, different from that of the dog, or the weasel, or a mole.[5] I acknowledge, let there by no inference to the contrary, that we are also possessed of minds and, to defer to our men of the cloth, of souls. But then, hath not a dog a mind, doth not a weasel think, doth not the mole reason and respond, albeit – this, too, I shall grant – at a different level? And as for soul, who is so wholly ready to assert, on the life of his mother, that such endowment is denied the bee, say, or the butterfly, or the snake that slinks furtively and, picture it, so gracefully in the grass?

So, it's not worth particularly much, the body. Boil it down to its components, extract its minerals, its oils, reconstitute it in different forms, and sell them. The soap that can be made from it, or the lampshades,[6] would scarcely dent even a poor man's budget. While as fertilizer, here, too, large numbers of dried, denatured and dessicated carcases are needed to cover the smallest viable lettuce patch, and fertilizer is, as is known, generally – pardon the pun – dirt-cheap. When you consider against this the price of mink, or a pound of veal, or a jar of caviar . . . When you consider that one gold tooth was not so long ago worth destroying breath, mind and soul for . . . When you consider that taxi-drivers, grocers and service-station attendants have been done away with for less . . .[7] Why, for one tribe to be circumcised – or, conversely, for another, to remain uncircumcised – sufficed; for others still, to be born now with a cleft, now with a little frankfurt between the legs, was reason sufficient for a watery obliteration. And as for a hare-lip, a club-foot, or a strawberry mark – ha! these scarcely warrant mention.

None of this – let me say outright – is called forth to justify my actions. I feel no compelling need, let alone obligation, to justify. I am here merely stating the obvious and I have, I believe, made my point. It has to do with equality, equality before the law, the ultimate law – let me be explicit, the biological law, albeit an equality predicated on a common worth-

lessness, or, better still, expendability. A kilo of Skid Row soot is worth little. But, in material terms, a kilo of prime minister is not worth more. His breath, sweat, urine, shit – pardon the language – is the same as that of the sozzled boozer though his flesh warms that of the Mrs between the clean white sheets of Big Wig Grotto while his opposite number graces/disgraces (take your pick) the benches of Slubberdagullian Station, the Albatross Highway underpass or the Gardens of Sheol.[8] But go shoot a prime minister and shoot a derelict. In which is the greater notoriety to be had, and with notoriety, fame? Yes, fame of a sort, fame – one's face in every newspaper, on every radio, every television screen through the world; a line, permanence in Professor Ivor E. Towers' revised *'History of New Macadamia: the Later Years'*; a chapter in some journalist's *'The Hundred and Eighty-Eight Days of John T. T. Creighton-Smith, PM'*[9] and an in-depth study in some Ph.D. student's *'Tall Poppies and Bared Necks: the Price of Leadership, and Assassination of Public Figures as Temptation and Sport – From Lincoln to Creighton-Smith.'*

This is whom I have within my sights then. Metaphorically speaking that is, though for the moment only. Metaphor shall yet assume the garb of literalness when I am fully prepared to execute my purpose. (Forgive me, once again, my play with words. I do enjoy the occasional pun.) The time shall come, I swear, as surely as Adam is now dust fused with crud in some sodden subterranean shaly stratum, it shall come – when he emerges from the Grotto precincts in his limousine, say, or opens some new gas-works or civic centre, or walks out on public parade, something for which he, my quarry, John Thomas Titterton Creighton-Smith who professes to be a man of the people and for whom the people have a decided weakness, this actually being balm to his stupendous vanity by uncommon popularity fed. To that whole adventure of mine, that very popularity adds tantalizingly heady spice. When I contemplate the effects of its consummation upon the public . . . No chef by his concoction could be more transported. But

first I shall need to penetrate the tiers of bodyguards around him, of course, breach an opening, however slight, in their defences, and do a Booth or a Guiteau, a Czolgocz or an Oswald[10] – a perfect hit, a strike that earns in full that dark and silent purgatory to which I shall – need I doubt it? – be eternally consigned. Near-misses, like near-hits, are the preserve of the inept, and the stigma of ineptitude is more ignominious than death itself. For just as the unexamined life is not worth living,[11] nor is the unachieved life worth the candle, and if I am to leave this earth – as biology dictates I must – then, not having scaled the heights in business or industry, in scholarship or the arts, at least it shall not be without this one accomplishment, this singular, grand, momentous, history-changing, riveting, all-mesmerising act. Ah, bliss, bliss, the very contemplation of it – a Prime Minister, a J. T. T. Creighton-Smith under my belt even as I hang, or fry, or in some other way bleed for my audacity.

There is, however, work to be done. Practice. That is above all the name of the present game. Practice. And this is where I return to my hobo. One of these was my first. From two hundred metres away, from a patio in the centre of the Deliverance Gardens[12] at five in the morning when the dew was rising as was the pearly light. But the sensation was, I must confess, that of shooting at a sack of potatoes. (This is not at all metaphorical; I *have* shot at a sack of potatoes.) I heard the thud; it reached me through the still, cool, glassy ambience. But my tramp did not move. He might indeed already have been dead, frozen and locked in rigor mortis. The preliminary exhilaration over, the matter proved a joyless anti-climax.

Less so the escapade that followed. A static target is scarcely a challenge. I could, of course, have spent an afternoon at the Jolly Nimrod firing blanks at mobile mechanized plastic ducks; or, out in the lanes plucking off cats, dogs, and pigeons, or sparrows in flight. But the one are too regular, too predictable in their revolving circuit and, after a while, quite boring; while the other, really, the other they're small fry against the bigger more newsworthy game to be had. So, radio

listeners and television viewers will have heard of or seen filmed shots of a station-wagon overturned along the Bonebreak Highway just north of the township Tartarus, the vehicle having skidded off the road, rolled, and struck a tree, killing instantly its occupants – a man of sixty (so it was announced), his wife, and the sister of one of them. The mishap happened on a weekend when a further twelve people met their *Gotterdämmerung* on the State's roads; the listener/viewer will therefore be excused if he does not recall the specific episode. Not known, however, and not suspected was the fact that, before that wagon veered into its terminal skid, a single pellet had rammed into the left front tyre, causing instant puncture and deflation, the laws of physics, so highly consistent and reliable, seeing to the rest.[13] There was cunning in that – even I, normally quite fastidious and unimpressible – had to admit. I had successfully bull's-eyed a moving target; I had collected, numerically speaking, a fine prize; and had done so without arousing the least suspicion. After my deliverance of that park bench layabout from his mortal coil, a brief eight-line newspaper item appeared which referred to police investigations into suspicious circumstances. I guessed, however, that the law would not become overly excited over an instance which represented the removal of one more imposition upon the State's welfare resources. But here, with regard to the simulated accident along the highway, only a chance observation by an exceptionally astute observer, only a fluke, would render anyone aware of play that might have touched at all on the foul. I must say that the whisky I downed that evening as I watched the scene on the news had an exceptionally exquisite and piquant taste. Pity was that, on the Monday, I could not tell my colleagues in the office about it other than to say, deliberately off-handedly, 'Old Mephistopheles certainly had a picnic this weekend collecting souls, didn't he?' They, however, preferred to talk about Mick Forward's eight goals for the Bloodred Arsenals and the spectacular high-flying marks of backman 'Hawkeye' Eagle. Yes, 'spectacular' was their word, but not for me was it to redefine

for them its usage as I would apply it to my own forthcoming deed. How tediously, then, did the day pass as, abstractedly, I continued to scan the ever-incoming taxation returns.

No virtue is there in elaborating separately on all my meagre operations. Quite early on, I had the police wonderfully mystified. Why should anyone wish to do in a gas-man on his rounds, for instance, they asked, or a bag-swinging school-boy running with a class-mate home from school? Reasonable questions, to be sure: after all, a discern the motive, and you uncover the villain. Or why should one pick off an electrician fixing wires at the summit of a light-pole, or a cooing clucking young woman wheeling a pram? Or a paper-boy, an upholsterer, or a Salvation Army brother? The papers began to tell of a madman terrorizing the streets, of a psychopath on the loose; the television news-readers conveyed the law's regret that no composite picture of the culprit had yet been assembled, and appealed to the public to report anything untoward; while the public itself was becoming somewhat restive. Psychopath, they called me! I rather liked that. I still do. Not so much the label itself – I am, in my faculties, as sane as the next man; it is only that I dare perform what others merely strait-jacket in dream – but rather, what I prize is the fact that by being endowed with a label, I would even call it a title, I have acquired a distinct identity, I am already singled out from the rest of mortality, though I swear the last place our officers of the law would consider looking would be in a government taxation-office where that 'psychopath' is in a sense faceless among forty to fifty others. They find it hard to accept, this too I swear, that even in a mass, a man can be truly unique.

One strike that gave me especial delight – the delight I would guess of that little tailor who got seven with one blow[14] – was that tally of four I bagged with a single bullet cutting clean through a scaffold support outside the twelfth-floor window of an office-block in the process of construction. One moment they were scraping, plastering, painting, whatever,

one of them had to all appearances probably told a joke for they were also laughing, the next they were spinning and careering like squawking hens down the face of the building. An added bonus to the expected thud, bounce and spread-eagling of those bodies abruptly become corpses on the bitumen below was the impaling of one of them on a steel upright, where he flailed about for a full ten seconds I'm sure as the blood coursed from his innards down the length of the pole. What I relished still more, though, was the irony of an ambulance, of all things, sirening in haste towards Azrael Hospital with a victim of a genuine accident careering crash-bang into a tram which, in halting abruptly, precipitated a magnificent concertina-ing of three vehicles into its rear, the whole – mangled steel, shattered glass, excoriated flesh, bone exposed, teeth dispersed – caused by one live coil penetrating the ear of the ambulance-driver just as he was beginning to turn into Leveller Avenue that runs direct towards the entrance to the hospital. The television news that night was certainly worth watching. All the more so as, in one of the panning shots, I caught a glimpse of myself, spectator beside a tree, none suspecting what it was I truly carried in my clarinet-case.

With a gin in my hand, I indulged in a nice little giggle then as I watched the television news and felt close, nearly ready to tackle the big game, for me the biggest game of all. At the moment, he is probably sleeping, my John T. T. Creighton-Smith, PM, who knows but that he may be making it with his wife – or, having heard of the peccadillo ways of politicians, I suspect, possibly with one of his panting glazed-eyed secretaries by his charisma and eminence charmed. Ah, the animal nature of man! And of woman, for that matter! Such pleasures, however, *any* pleasures he shan't know for much longer. Sheol is waiting for him, for as I said before I have him within my sights. I am a mere hair's-breadth short of perfection in my aim. A little more practice, a more total sense of being wholly at one with my rifle, the need to steel myself utterly against the possible quivering of hands at the crucial moment, the need above all to be secure in the knowledge that

my quarry, however fast he may be moving, and in whatever direction he may turn his head, is, from the moment my aim is trained upon him, irrevocably doomed. The power, the power! Whether from a rooftop, behind a garbage can, behind bushes, from my car, the rim of a headland, beside a highway, perched between the branches of a tree – there is no place from which I cannot now home in on my prey. For all that you, dear reader, good reader, Mr/Mrs Everyman, may know, as you next head for the golf-course, the tennis-club, supermarket, concert-hall, will you have any certainty that you shall to your haven hearth and home return? Look well at it whenever you leave, fondly, ruefully, nostalgically, however you will, for who knows but that as you pass by, say, Huntsman's Hill or Marksman's Pass or even Tony Delilah's Il Paradiso Pizza Bar, I might be somewhere close, a head rising a jot above a hedge or balustrade, releasing from there a shell that may deliver you faster to your El Dorado than your vehicle at its swiftest ever could. As you sit now and rummage through your mail or play with your children or instruct your broker to purchase more bonds, give time to the thought that, tomorrow, for instance, that moment you step across the threshold of your castle/temple/home-sweet-home may well turned out to be your last. You do, after all, read the newspapers, don't you? And surely, you must by now be impressed by the randomness, that utter unpredictability with which that supposed madman-psychopath's innocent lambs have fallen.

This is one of those delightful bonuses that make the whole exercise so intriguing – the basic unpredictability of it all. Neither I, nor my prospective booty, know one another, and yet, tomorrow, we shall, in a sense, cross each other's life trajectory. The thought that it could be anyone, someone at the moment scratching at a mole, or flushing a toilet, or picking his/her teeth, is a notion exquisitely piquant indeed. My daily quarry's happy obliviousness to his/her fate moves me to headiness, while no less affecting is the fact that my catch I do not have to choose but is, in truth, already chosen. Yes; chosen.

His fate is, to use philosophical jargon, determined.[15] There is something of the Sophoclean/Aeschylean Greek about it. The Delphic oracle has spoken. My Orestes/Oedipus/Electra is caught irretrievably in the spider's mesh. Were he to know, he might kick and tug and thrash about in the silken warp of that filamentous web, but fulminate as he may, by this time tomorrow, my butterfly shall lie congealing behind steel doors in the city morgue. A haunting thought, perhaps, if by notions of death and inevitability the reader is haunted. But more haunting still is another thought – the meditation that to such an end should the man, as child, be born; the reflection that man in his growth should study, work, love, laugh, play, agonize in his time over cosmic mysteries and private woes, marry perhaps, and perhaps divorce, do good, do evil, requited, unrequited, attain to notoriety, attain to fame, and engage in all that tellurian earthlings are given to do, only to be cut short in a milli-second of time by the dead-on flight of a mini-cylinder of metal. Epic writers endow their heroes with the strength of steel. But, truly, ah how fragile the flesh, how flimsy! Powdered talc is scarcely as brittle.

So he is already chosen, my prize, already caught, as I have said, in the spider's web. He cannot escape, simply cannot. The choices he shall make, the decisions he shall act upon will, simply because he shall have made no other, lead him to his Calvary. Acting as he will, his fate is even now rubber-stamped and sealed because tomorrow – I have already selected the site – I shall be crouching in the vicinity of Consignment Bay where he, in the enactment of his decisions, shall be passing. Of course, were he to take other decisions, were I to select another site, not he then but another should be the fruit I bag. But the truth of what I have here written shall remain no less true; it shall merely be transferred to that 'other' whose fate would then accordingly be indelibly writ. I could also choose to abandon altogether my poacher's game, in which case my ferret's rendezvous with the Reaper should be to some later time and circumstance not of my making be deferred. But were I to do so, I should render wholly void of meaning

the extinction thus far of my many and separate Jonahs who through their unwitting unanticipated martyrdoms[16] have at least paved my way to John T. T. Creighton-Smith, PM, and that would be – my conscience could not bear it – damnably unconscionable.

The perceptive reader will note a shift in gear towards those favorite playthings – casuistry, argument, what they like to term philosophy – of our sophists, in this instance the set question being how much of my quarry's actions and his forthcoming denouement is determined, how much of these is freely willed? In other words, to what extent, if his end is beyond repeal, is he locked into a system which had directed and continues to direct towards this consummation his every step; to what extent is he truly free, given the myriad variables that act upon him and are acted upon by him in turn, to choose and to follow the logic of his every choice?[17] What formerly fell into the province of pure philosophers has now claimed mathematicians, logicians, statisticians and a newly-cloned breed of calculating animal called probability theorists. These last I harbor strong affinity for, for they add to the whole operation, already fascinating in its Heisenbergian elusiveness, the recognition – which I have long maintained – of a third dimension, the more untamed, by-guess-and-by-God, haphazard workings of chance. In this cosmic, multiplex, multifarious scheme of things, by Aristotle, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and Einstein explained – though some Nostradamuses would attribute all to the stars – may I beg leave to intrude my humble two cents' worth? When my prey shall expire under the impact of my aim, why will it have to be he and not another? Of the thousands, the millions all around, why is it that it is we, he and I, who shall be brought by our separate paths to that common crossroads for that one swift, demolishing, obliterating milli-second of time? To extend my sights: when my baby brother Uriel died of sepsis, why was it he and not another who had died, as Mother kept asking? Or when young Cousin Stella slipped under a bus, again, why she and not another? Had she in that moment not been there; had

the bus come early, come late; had the sky poured sunshine rather than rain; and had not my nervous Aunt Mary called her back at the moment of leaving to fetch her raincoat . . . All these little 'hads' and 'had nots'. Go, deny the machinations of that rollicking jester Chance[18] that leads couples to meet and to marry, fortunes to be made, fortunes to be lost, miners in shafts to be crushed, airliners to collide, or buffoons to hoop the hoop on the peel of bananas. The whole thing is so tantalizingly intermeshed. I can't help but reel at the thought, in anticipation of tomorrow, and more intoxicatingly of the day Prime Minister John T. T. Creighton-Smith shall fall, that what for me shall be an action willed, for them, my prizes, shall be determined, ordained by all that has preceded in a fateful – call it fatal, if you wish – ineluctable confluence arrived at through chance.[19]

I have him within my sights then, Prime Minister John Thomas Titterton Creighton-Smith. But no hurry is there. The day will come. The day will come when through an act of choice, an act of unfettered will discharged at the time of my choosing, I shall alter the course of history of the nation, change it categorically – so is it ordained, if not by anyone foreseen – and, in so far as waves and ripples reach out from shore to shore across Neptune's seven seas and other waters, so shall I, in some definite way, touch upon the course of other nations, upon the course of all the nations, as well. Ah, the effects! The effects ! – on foreign policy, defence, stock markets and currency exchange, migration, trade, hot war, cold war, United Nations numbers games, power play, none of them escaping, not one, if only because with the liquidation of one helmsman another is there to offer his neck in filling the void, that 'other' of necessity possessed of views, perceptions and doctrines, and temperaments, endowments and styles different from the *primus inter pares* and master of the deck I will have plucked off.

It's nice, it's nice in a world willy-nilly tossed and rocked on 'the ever-whirling wheel of Change'[20] to exert an

influence, to press upon this universe a thumb-print, to know that one will not have lived wholly in vain and passed through this all-deracinating cosmos unnoted and unremarked, a thingummy Monsieur un Tel, a Richard Roe and What-Have-You, when immortality is so easy, so absurdly, swimmingly, exquisitely easy to attain. But, as I have said, there is no hurry, there is no rush; the headman's terrestrial dusk and millennial dawn will come, until which time, from rooftop, window, embankment, ridge and underpass I shall wing and snuff my earthly pigeons, now one, now another, at play with singleton and nation in the way that up there, somewhere, somwhere, in the heavens, or in the spheres, another sits and plucks off, another angles and snares his spoil, another scythes and reaps and harvests, that other – or Other – a revered worshipped Moloch gathering unto himself each man/woman/infant on the Clapham omnibus in exulting, self-exalting, exuberant, lively, clandestine, merrily-private sport.

1 David Malouf: *Child's Play* (Chatto and Windus, 1982, Penguin Books, 1983).

2 A play on the name Pandarus who, according to mediaeval legend, procured Cressida for Troilus.

3 The examples cited could as readily have been substituted with South America, Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan. Any issue of the weekly Time Magazine, the Year Books of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or of the *World Book Encyclopaedia* or the annual reports of Amnesty International will attest to the validity of the assertions made.

4 The reader may prefer 'Commandments' to 'commandments'.

5 The reader is referred to any standard text on comparative biology.

6 Students of recent history will recognize that none of this is either hypothetical or fanciful.

7 The merest intelligent perusal of the daily newspaper will vouchsafe the truth of all that is stated here.

8 As the reader will have guessed, the narrator has, in this instance, elected to substitute fictitious names for more identifiable stigmatizing landmarks.

9 Here, the name is real, however inflated.

10 The list is confined to despatchers of American Presidents – Lincoln, of course, Garfield, McKinley and Kennedy, the date of the latter's dispatch falling, by odd circumstance, on the day when, turning twenty-one, I celebrated my accession to responsible manhood. Numerous other instances may be cited, though none so notable and consequential in our time as that of Gavrilo Prin-

cip's wiping out of 'fat churchy' Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, an event which unfailingly evokes that hilarious opening of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik.*

11 Attributed to Socrates in Plato's *'Apology.'*

12 See Note 8.

13 I refer here to Galileo's dictum – some attribute it to Newton – that an unimpeded body, moving on a smooth horizontal plane, moves with uniform velocity in a straight line. The corollary is, of course, that with impedence, that body shall depart from its course. Precise calculation of displacement – which must consider forward motion, sideways deflection, vertical roll, the force of impact with the ground with each turning and other variables – then enters the realm of higher sophisticated mathematics, a not-impossible task for those with nothing better to amuse them in this computer age.

14 Fairy tales are well behind me, but I believe the story is told by the Brothers Grimm, Jakob and Wilhelm. Actually, I prefer their Rumpelstiltskin, especially when he goes through the floor.

15 The ensuing reference to Electra notwithstanding, I shall in deference to convention revert to the masculine gender, this in no way, however, excluding from my remarks the purportedly fairer, weaker, more delicate daughters of Eve.

16 I employ the word 'martyr' only in echo of the mounting press hysteria which is now referring to my spoil as 'martyrs of some unhinged dement.' It's nice to have an identity. Others talk of a modern incarnation of Jack the Ripper, Dracula, and, inevitably, Frankenstein. In the wake of the rising panic, several mistaken arrests have taken place. The police are beleaguered by a flurry of hoax calls along with calls from such who genuinely believe that they are being hounded and swear to being next on the hit-list.

17 A complete list of variables would be beyond the scope of this *oeuvre*, but I shall offer a number of them at random: the city of one's birth, the neighbourhood in which one's been reared, one's parentage, genetic endowment, influence of teachers/peers/spouse/inamorata/sibs, and then one's reading, work, education, skills, one's health, skin color, language, faith or lack thereof, standards or lack thereof, and so on. Name but one contingency and that, too, cannot be ignored.

18 Readers may be reminded of Chance the Gardener (or Chauncey Gardiner) in Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There.*

19 Having looked into mathematics texts to help my vernally-flowering niece Angela, whom I must admit I love, albeit in a platonic paternal way – if, as the public says, I am a maniac, I am nonetheless capable of love; I would kill to protect her every hair –, I have alighted on the Venn diagram which might best pictorially describe that quickening bewitching triumvirate – determinism, free will and chance – the influence of each to every circumstance conceivable related to the degree of separateness of space between or overlap.

20 Edmund Spenser: *'The Faerie Queen,'* book VII, ch. VI, i.

Stella, to Elysium Fly

Stella.

Stella.

So, are you happy? Are you famous? Rich? Dear child. Is your name up there on the hoardings in brightly-flashing flickering lights, Stella, mute when it comes to words, yet so eloquent in movement and elastic in motion, as, sequined, gilded and sculptedly austere, you stand *arabesque en point* on the loftiest wire, rise on tiptoe there on a bicycle bar a breath from the dome, and execute a pirouette that causes children to gape and grown-ups to gasp, high, high, high up there, – while I, far, far, far below pray for you, my Stella, pray for you, my Alceste, pray that you should fall – yes, that you should fall – that I may, in turn, from the folds of the tent run forward to catch you in your flight and hold you and console you, and, in that moment, in that instant of saved, delivered, salvaged life, gift more precious than any other I have thus far given you – ear-ring, bracelet, necklace, pendant or friendship ring –, yes, in that moment have you know, have you recognise, flesh against flesh, palpitation against palpitation, that there is something boundless and profound and beyond quelling in its intensity, that seeks, that yearns to possess you; not as Asmodeus has since possessed you, but as Columbine's Pierrot might possess, or Pyramus, or Tristan, or Daphnis his Chloe, no words needing passage between us, you, in any case, innocent of speech, and I, in my harlequin way, confessing truths more pure in felicity with the merest quiver of an eyebrow than with the silver-tongued disgorgement of a million words that

are the generous endowment of circus-owners, ring-masters, managers, entrepreneurs, talent-scouts and impressarios, all of them men of the world, men of the world to be sure, but outside our own, more precious, world of art and feeling and soul.

Stella.

I ask again.

Are you happy? Are you famous? Rich? Are you up there on the hoardings, your name in brightly-flashing flickering white and brilliant lights?

To me did he come first, that agent Asmodeus.

'Carlo, I like your style,' he said. 'The way you hold your audience in thrall, with just a flicker of a lip, a twitch of the nose, a shudder of a chin. The people, they love you, every woman, man and child out there. But why do you waste yourself on this narrow circuit, with this meagre troupe tramping the districts when . . . when if you trusted to me, I could have you take Paris in one night, and Madrid and Prague, and Rio and New York. You are rare. Take a million and you would still be only one. Trust to me, Carlo, and into your palm I shall put the very stars.'

There was but one star I wanted in my palm.

Stella, my radiance, my light.

Unmoving, I hardened my gaze upon him.

'No,' I said. 'I will not leave. This is my place. I love the work here. I love this troupe. Take me away from it and you would kill me, you would tear my very heart away.'

'I have watched you,' he persisted. 'At rehearsals. In performances. There is magic in you. Its source is beyond knowing, but it is there, in every gesture, every nuance, even in immobility itself. Give it to the world. It needs it, craves for it.'

I twitched a cheek, raised a finger to my lips in mock contemplation. Still in motley was I, just returned from performance.

'Outside,' he went on, describing a flamboyant arc with an

arm, 'outside, there is evil. Masses of it; mountains of it; and rivers, seas, oceans of evil. It is nothing for people to slander one another, and to hurt and maim and to kill. But at a circus, Carlo, all that becomes forgotten, it becomes remote, it becomes unreal. The public is then so pure, so cleansed, uplifted, and so virginal in innocence, as if to beatitude baptised, of every touch of calumny and vileness purged; while there is laughter instead and exaltation and Elysium blessed, and it is in you, in your gift, your magic, your genius to bring it all to them. In you is it; yes, in you. Can you so deny the world? Can you deny the world at large, the world out there such laughter, such rapture, thrall, even redemption that through exhilaration, galvanisation and transport to ecstasy sublime you alone can bring?'

Could I deny the world?

Stella.

Could I deny? Thwart that tongue of silver and deny? . . .

I denied.

Because I clowned with you as you clowned with me, familiarity permitting all, did you therefore take my awkward, my adolescently-uttered truth, too, for jest? In the language of your fingers, you called me not Carlo, but Punch, you called me Punchinello, and Pantaloon, and Pantaleone; you tweaked my nose, hid my grease-paint and chalk before a show; and how you laughed when, having mustered courage over a week of days, I dared finally with the frail and fragile language of my own unlettered tongue to say I loved you, as though mimes, jesters, clowns were not meant to love, nor be granted to know such love requited, but who, electing to give joy to others, had ever to appear joyful themselves, and who, elected to bring laughter to others had always to be ready to laugh themselves, even when laughter, once a gift beautiful, precious and inviolable, became a thing by experience dashed. – Yet I stayed; I thwarted the temptation of Asmodeus, denied the world out there my magic, and stayed: and continued to worship, Stella, to worship, O Star of Eve, and to cleave, and to

pant, and to dote, and thirst and burn, I who before the galleries was so eloquent in my every wordless gesture, intimation and sign, and yet with you was so insufferably bungling, inarticulate, Arcadian.

I stayed.

He approached Truffaldino, too, our Asmodeus. Do you remember the juggler Truffaldino? And the Brothers Triton, Hercule and Atlas, and our midget Thumbkin, and Hero Leotard, the stuntman, as he sprinkled talcum on his palms, and Virginia Virago ever occupied with trimming her beard? But they, too, they stayed, none, not one leaving, not one going the way you went, up there on the high-wire one evening, bowing when returned to ground to applause exquisitely generous and deserved, and throwing kisses, one hand first, then the other, then both, without words making it clear you wanted the audience back again, not for the merest blinking letting on that by the time Leo Leondas rose at dawn to feed his cubs Cheshire and Calico, you would be gone, and Asmodeus, too, Lord knew heading for which airport, which dock, which railway-station, in your possession those trinkets I gave you, that jewellery, those gifts all of tinsel, which no matter how beautiful, was all of it bauble, which however exhorbitant, was all of it junk, junk, Stella, yes Stella, all junk, all junk, all junk against the grandeur and the richness and the amplitude and the prodigality of the ready, willing offering of self and spirit and soul that, in your leaving, you left so bruised, so lacerated, so crushingly, achingly, cruelly pulped.

You did see Paris, I grant you, even as Asmodeus promised me I should see it. You even performed there. And if in my information I can trust, you also stopped awhile in Madrid and Lisbon, and in Frankfurt and Rome. There was fun in that, wasn't there, and adventure, exhilaration, and expectation? No more of the provinces for you, no more of the makeshift, or the improvised, the ephemerality that was our legacy here; but heir-apparent were you now to the Fratellinis no less, and to the Schumanns and Renz and Colleans, and Cordona and Lilian Laitzel, not to mention the Hagenbachs,

the Althoffs and the Wirths. O laughter and magic were you to take out into the world – such was the promise made to you too by Asmodeus –, and purity, and beatitude to all who would of vileness be purged – sing Gloria in Exelcis Deo! –; but Stella, Stella, Stella, as silence is to an artist above a million words, and muteness a safeguard against duplicity and deceiving, does not the actual, does not the real, however humble in the hand it may seem, transcend that which is only among the constellations, that which is the unattainable stuff of addled vision, and the melting floss of diabolically-kindled fantasy? Hm?

But tell me now, Stella – I don't know about such things. Tell me about the fun, the adventure, the exhilaration, the expectation. Was it fun, for instance, to fall pregnant in Florence?; or adventure to be aborted in Vienna?; or exhilaration in Copenhagen to be abandoned?; or expéctation in a gas-filled room to be resuscitated in The Hague? – Oh Stella!, were it but in me to kil, most assuredly would I have killed that Asmodeus! But though one of the Pagliacci am I, yet Pagliaccio himself am I not. Not for me the mantle of Calvero. Even a mime must live, even though it be that the very thing for which he most truly lives – has lived! – roams adrift in nebulae, galaxies, vaults beyond all reaching.

And so I chose to live, and in the course of things began to look at Diana, or, more truthfully, she at me – you remember Diana who in her acrobatics ever remained earthbound –; and where there was hurt, she brought balm and where there still lingered futile hankering, she did bring to me a here-and-now sensibleness of a kind. Mime was for the public, so did I learn, while pretence, fantasy, make believe, those were for enactment under lights. For the house, however, and for the street, and for the hours before a show and for the hours after, normal speech was there to be, a-b-c-d-language, verbal, oral, articulated, parlance easy and as ordinary as air; as also in the church, as also before the altar, where no theatricals were there to be, nor any charades, but solemnity alone and only solemnity in the exchange of rings, in the response to 'I do'

with another 'I do,' the subsequent nuptials to be followed by a week on the coast, and then a return to work – yes, Stella, to work, not to art, but to work –, with money to be counted and money to be saved and money to be put aside to be expended in time on a cot, a pram, on schooling, the mastery of a trade.

If that was to be vision, that vision too I, in time, adopted. It was safe. It was securely berthed. I had learned the wisdom about the dependability of the actual, the reliability of the real, the benefits of that which lay in the hand, against the perfidy unscrupulous, treacherous, and crushing, of delusion.

And yet.

And yet.

Stella.

When you appeared again tonight, a Eurydice out of Hades . . .

I was ready the very sharpness and faultlessness of my eyesight to deny, as also my every sense, my every sensibility.

Not you was it – was it? – up there, up high, descending from the gods? No, surely, Stella, Alceste, Celeste, no, not you. What I saw could surely have been nothing more than the mere play of an over-wrought, over-ripe emotion to a fever brought at the end of a performance; surely, the capricious flight of memory suddenly gone wild must it have been; the most simple of things was it – was it not?, an identity mistaken, a look-alike, another Stella, though not my Stella; rather a Jane, perhaps, an Amelia, a Mary or a Josephine with the hundreds come, like those hundreds come every day to see a show and laugh and applaud and titillate and marvel at Hercule and Atlas, and giggle at Virginia Virago, and rise with a thrill in their crotch at every vault and leap and mid-air somersault of Hero Leotard, up there, high up there, high, high, a whisker from the dome where, once, you, Stella, you, so full with glory, so naturally belonged. Surely . . .

But no.

No!

Though I deal in illusions, an illusion, Stella, that it was not. Thinner were you – are you! – and more drawn, a jot more severe perhaps, experience the sculpting chisel, and so out of place there, up there, that when I glimpsed you during the troupe's final bows, you were the only one, I swear, who, while I remember you in no other garb but that of laughter, you were the only one up there who did not for the merest blinking as much as smile. – So, if not to laugh, Stella, and if not at least to smile, Stella, what was it then that brought you? The call to relive the days of your triumph, perhaps, however modest the company that afforded them to you? To revisit, if only from a distance, your past but now-long-abandoned friends? Or, dare I believe, Stella, dare I, if only for the duration of a breath, that it was to me you thought to return, even to me, once that bumbling tongue-tied Punch, Punchinello, Pantaloon, Pantaleone who dredged up from his soul the dare-or-be-damned audacity to confide, confess his love, only to have his nose tweaked again, his cap pulled over his eyes, his grease-paint and chalk smudged by finger-tips seeking play and even as those lips, yours, Stella, yours, across which no word ever passed, made ready to laugh?

Stella? Dare I believe? Dare I?

Hm?

If, through Diana, so totally tellurian, so wholly earth-bound, house-and-home-and-child-aspiring Diana, I had finally learnt the untrammelled use of daily speech, in that instant of obeisance to the gods, I became there the knock-kneed adolescent again, became an adenoidal stammerer rooted in indecision once more, ready nonetheless to scale all barriers towards you, but held in place by propriety's bonds; impelled, too, was I to obliterate every past thought, past recrimination, and past reproach attendant upon your flight, even while reason dictated that you, instead, should I from all memory have obliterated; But tossed – my very soul from devil to devil tossed, a plaything for each of Satan's spawn become, Sheol itself opening before me and Lucifer laughing whether or not

across the barriers of propriety I took the leap –, tossed, I paused, I turned away, I turned back, turned away again, yet turned back once more.

A blur were all the others now, the women, the children, the men who had come to be titillated and to laugh. Colour merged into colour as down the steps they descended, shadow melted into shadow, form into form, while breath was there consumed by breath, and scent by scent, and voice by voice. Only you did I truly see; and could you but speak, only you would I have heard; while, at that moment, your own breath, your own scent, your own form, and, more than these, the black you wore transcended all. But why black? At a circus: why black? Were you in mourning? For yourself? For the child that might have been and now was not? For the life you here orphaned through your leaving?

Stella?

If, in that moment, it was consolation that you sought, I was ready to console; if acceptance, I was ready to accept; while if to return was your intent, to welcome your return would have been both Jupiter's and this simple humble Harlequin's chiefest joy. Stella. Columbine Columbine so sad. Spent Columbine. Instead of leaving, why didn't you put your Pierrot to the test? Hm?

And, Stella, why didn't you pause when, following your steps, I ran after you? Didn't you see me? Didn't you hear me? I did call, I did call out.

'Stella!', I called.

And 'Stella!', again, and yet again.

But through the gates you flew, across the lawns, aboard a bus, within a crush, within a tide enclosed. And through that crush I weaved my way, and faster than the tide itself did I press on. Sweat gathered on my grease-paint; paste clung to my brow, curdling the chalk that had been there; my blouse in growing dampness in turn clung to my back; while close behind, the breaths of Diana and of the Brothers Triton and of the midget Thumbkin lapped hot, lapped worriedly, lapped mystified down my neck.

'Carlo!' I heard Diana cry. 'What the devil has possessed you?!'

'Carlo!' Hercule and Atlas shouted after her, 'He's gone mad, he has! Stark mad!'

And 'Carlo!' echoed Thumbkin, trying to keep pace on his miniature legs. 'What's the matter? Lost a fortune or somethin'?'

Still after you did I hurtle, Stella, tripping over feet, over groundposts, over ropes.

'Stella!' I called yet again, trying to reach you once more. 'Pull the cord, my star! Stop the bus, my radiance! For me, let it pause, my light! For me, for what might yet be us, let it wait!'

Night's wind carried my voice. The trees shook with it, the scarves of children fluttered and flapped; the great tent itself, as if in a cyclone, ballooned and palpitated and pitched. But you might as well not have heard. Your bus drew away, receded, dissolved into blackness, your face an after-image in the night after which I ran and for which I reached out and lunged and plunged, that, as in times past, I might catch and grasp and be permitted yet once again to hold; but only upon the blackness itself did my fingers close as also upon the mist, upon illusion, upon unvanquishable void.

And then they caught up with me and led me away. Diana held my arm, the Tritons my shoulders, Thumbkin the hem of my blouse. And back at the tent, they all gathered about, Virginia Virago, too, who laid a hand upon my brow, and Hero Leotard who poured me a brandy, and Leo Leondas who forced some other rank and foul concoction between my lips, saying, 'If this doesn't restore him to normal, nothing will.'

But, normal again, Stella, I cannot be. For, knowing that you are back, I am damned, and for wanting you again, I am doubly damned. For I shall wait for you, Stella. I shall wait; I shall at each performance play to the gods and scour the rows; I shall flit from entrance to entrance, and, even in the arena, mime as only a mime can mime for your eventual return. And though in bondage am I now, yet shall I seek from it to be

liberated to enter yet another, far more willing, far more splendid, far more beautiful; the bondage of duty shall I exchange with the highest exultation for the bondage of love; the bondage of words for the bondage transcending words; and the bondage of the earth-bound for that which would rise, would spiral, would soar, mightily, headily, exquisitely unto the heights.

I shall wait, then, Stella, I shall wait. But you, Stella, the last laugh on Asmodeus, will you return and dare once more to fly? Will you dare, dare yet again to scale the loftiest wire, there where in sequin and in gold your happiness and your fulfilment, your riches and your fame most surely ride, and on that tightrope dare yet again to execute your pirouettes and arabesques, as before causing children to gape and grown-ups to gasp, rendering them pure, rendering them cleansed, rendering them uplifted and of every calumny purged, myself not down below this time praying for you to fall – oh no, not any more –, but up there, up there with you, a whisper from the dome, from Elysium a breath, up there, up high, close to the stars and the galaxies and the constellations, there where the treachery of words is a transgression unknown, where muteness is a blessing and the silence of a mime a treasure sanctified, and where all is attainment and all is exaltation, and all is perfection and beatitude and light.

Stella.

Will you return?

Return and, through me, be redeemed?

And dare once more to climb?

And dare to rise?

And dare towards the arms that would offer redemption, offer love, would offer ecstasy and sanctity, to fly?

Dare you? Stella?

Dare you?

Stella?

Stella?

Hm?

The Man who Hated Football

'Peasants!'

He loved Man, but not men – Mr Cleanslate, the recluse sequestered in the dust-laden greyness of his house with his *Newsweek*, *Bulletin* and *Time*, in which he read with contempt of prime ministers and presidents and scorned those ambassadors, businessmen and movie stars who luxuriated arrogantly in the crystal of elegance and basked unabashed in the shimmer of fame.

'Sheep!'

He loved Man, but not men – the retired schoolmaster sitting on a Saturday afternoon under the cobwebs of his verandah, scowling with char-black odium at the current of legs that streamed towards Princes Park a block away to waste precious hours in the delirium and frenzy of a football match.

'Animals!'

He loved Man, but not men – the widower peering out through curtainless windows, before which he gritted his teeth with stifling distemper as young fellows and girls idled on the nature strip or splayed themselves out under the elms or clung or petted or giggled in distracted amusement.

He loved Man, but not men – and yet, and yet, Mr Cleanslate, he loved me.

Gnarled tubers were those fingers that probed through my hair, wrinkled hide the hand against my cheek, and bursting blasts the breath that pelted my face.

'Listen, just listen,' he said, touching my arm. 'Shut your eyes, let yourself go, and listen.'

Mother, pitying, concerned, had sent me in with soup, stewed fruit and cake for our neighbour. My trouble he rewarded with music.

Ever obedient, I listened; listened to the sound that cascaded along the murky shafts of mote-laden light; listened to the resonance that dispelled the muteness of the shadowed corners; listened to the reverberations that danced about the grubby globe that hung orphaned from the ceiling.

Himself leaning back, chin on chest, he sat, his thin lips flaccid, his eyes lidded caskets recessed in the scalloped hollows above his cheeks.

'Shh, don't breathe,' he said. 'Open your ears, and hear, hear with your soul the splendour created by Man.'

I listened though I could not help but breathe, and heard with what I understood to be my soul the splendour that had been created by Man. First Mozart, then Schubert, then Bach, and Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms. Each day another name, each day another feast offered in exchange for Mother's meagre morsels.

'Learn music,' he said, turning over the record, his emery eyes the while probing mine. 'Learn. And keep on learning. The mind of a child is a fertile plain. Feed it. Nourish it. Don't let it fall fallow like the minds of those unthinking creatures outside.'

He reached out. My cheeks felt both the warmth and the quiver of his hand.

'Men are a rabble, a mob, ignorant as beasts. But Man, *Man* has the capacity to be a god.'

Long after I left him, the words reverberated.

To be a god . . .

To be a god . . .

Together with Beethoven, Mozart, Bach. With Schubert, Mendelssohn, Brahms . . .

Fired, influenced, I prevailed upon my parents to have me taught music.

I continued to deliver meals. Mr Cleanslate seemed to await my visits.

The morning had been dew-laden, the afternoon splendid, the evening cool once more. Scarcely had I set down the tray upon his table before he thrust a weathered book into my hand.

'Here, read this,' he said, with the tip of his index finger rapping at the chosen page. 'The universe is contained in every word, in every line eternity, infinity, perfection.'

He straightened and raised his face in impenetrable reverie. His lips, thin and ridged and drily liverish twitched in readiness for oration. His fingers manipulated air.

> 'To be or not to be - that is the question:-
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them?'

I marvelled. Not a mistake, nor hesitation, nor fumbling. Mr Cleanslate, the teacher turned actor, held me. More than the words whose meaning eluded my comprehension, the rhythm of the phrases and the flowing-ebbing tide of the old man's tremulous voice burrowed a shivering core down my spine and stirred nests of goose-pimples to bristling. I scarcely breathed.

> 'Who would fardels bear,' -

he continued, his voice pitched to graver intimacy,

> 'To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
> No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
> Than fly to others that we know not of?'

The recitation ended, his body contracted back to meagreness and the glow of ecstasy purpled into spleen. I sensed the advent of a storm.

His fingers curled about my neck.

'Ha! . . . Look out there, into the street, at that . . . that rabble that thinks itself literate when all it reads are the sports pages of the papers and thinks it can write when it scribbles filth on lavatory walls. Who reads Shakespeare today, tell me. Or Dante, Dostoievski or Tolstoy, ha? And who today can even write like them?'

The breath lapping my face smelled of cinnamon, the cinnamon with which Mother had spiced his fruit.

'Forty years!' he exclaimed, his hand become a claw gripping my shoulder. 'Forty years was I a teacher, and what did I have of it? Class after class, year after year of blockheads, chaff; children of their parents turning their backs on knowledge, beauty, truth in pursuit of pettiness and prattle, blind – my God, how blind – to the power that stirs in Man.'

His eyes, anchored to the depths of chiselled sockets, pierced. His vibrating voice burred more harshly.

'Sometimes, there is a star, a boy, a girl with a gift – a gift for speech, poetry, art. But where are they now? Tell me. You, *you* tell me.

I would have shrugged my shoulders but the clasp of his hand strangled movement.

'Out there!' he cried out though his bambooed body could scarcely contain his thunder. 'There! Burnt out, nobodies, shells of what they might have been. Doctors, yes, and architects, plumbers, nurses, mechanics, lawyers. *My* children! All of them at one time my children. But how humdrum have their lives become, how commonplace, hollowed out, genius a foreign word. If this . . . if this be the fruit of my work, then may the world be extinguished before it crumbles from insipidity.'

He turned more squarely to me. With a crook'd finger, he propped up my chin.

'And you, my young friend. You. Will you be more than they?'

My gaze fell as once more the words stirred inner depths and resounded as echo.

Will you be more than they? . . .
Will you be more then they? . . .
Yes. Yes. I *will* be more than they.

At school, after school, my friends called to me.

'Wanna' kick of the ball?' Ricky Boxall tempted.

'A game of cricket?,' Stuey Rivett coaxed.

'Hey, let's play marbles,' Robbie Ferguson pressed.

'No thanks'; 'Some other time'; 'Can't now,' I answered them all.

I stood outside their paths for I had begun to circle other orbits.

First Shakespeare, Dostoievski, and Tolstoy. Then Chekhov, Maupassant, Flaubert, all thrust into my hands by Mr Cleanslate who kindled, then pumped the bellows upon the flickering flames that glowed with the ardour to be some day more than 'they'. Into the nights I read, during recesses, lunch breaks, even in class while Bertie Quayle, hissing 'Cissy', prodded me in the back and shortsighted Mrs Myrtleford taught the principles of quadratic equations, square roots, and sines, cosines and tangents. Mother fretted that I was growing pale, plied me with vitamins and tonics, and advised air, sunlight, exercise and friends. I heard the words but for the actual counsel my ears were filled with wax. I clung to the indoors, with books, books, books before me, and when I foundered beneath the weight of literary genius, I turned to the piano or immersed myself in a sea of rondos, largos and andantes kept at high tide by Mr Cleanslate who showered upon me his Beethovens, Mozarts and Bachs with the fervour of missionary zeal.

* * *

I continued to bring him his portions.

As always, he led me into his dingy lounge-room where journals, books and records lay in chaotic heaps on the frayed settee, the coffee table and floor.

Paganini dispelled the gloom.

'You are a precious lad,' Mr Cleanslate said, grazing my cheek with the crumpled hide of his hand. His face was pixie-like at that moment, the chin honed to pointing, the ears high, thin and protruding, the faintest hint of hairy fluff at the temples. 'If only Anthony . . . Hah!'

That little explosion clung to him as with swift jerky movements he mince-stepped to the book-case from which he removed a large white-jacketed volume, its cover illustrated with paintings, sketches and tapestries.

'Take it, this is for you,' he said. 'A gift. A store of genius. Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Rubens, Rembrandt, Goya.'

The pages crackled with virgin crispness. On the fly-leaf was an inscription: 'To Anthony. To your growth. May you reach the blessed heights. From your father.'

'Hah!' he huffed again. 'A son. A nobody. A drop in the multitude. A speck of dust. A grain of sand. But you, will you dare to be different?'

He rapped at the volume.

'Look! Study!'

Before me, colour followed colour, as, his hands pitching and descending in paroxysms of motion, Mr Cleanslate frisked through the pages.

'The Mona Lisa! The Sistine Chapel! The Prodigal Son! The David! The Maja! – *That* is art! Not the trash in our galleries. Those willy-nilly shapes, splashes of colour, distorted faces and landscapes without depth – all flatness, emptiness, the effluent of wishy-washy minds and wretched talent.'

He moved towards the window and pointed outside.

'What do *they* know of art, those rag-pickers out there, those philistines who, would they but know it, would they but care, could be free, could be great?' He beckoned to me. 'To be great is to create, to dive deep for the pearls within one's soul, to cultivate them and bring to the surface the treasures present in every man and transform what is raw into the colour, harmony and grandeur of music, of literature, of art. Had I but known this at your age . . . or had I been able to persuade

Anthony . . .' His hand upon my shoulder slackened. 'How easily a man fails himself; how easily a son fails his father. For myself, forty years a teacher, where's the gain? And a son a bank clerk, where's the future?'

He searched my face.

'But you . . . You, so young still with the pearls waiting to be salvaged from the depths. Scorn the tastes of the masses! For that is the way to ignorance and enslavement. The way to greatness is through freedom. Will you dare be free? Will you, will you dare be great?'

Will you dare be great? . . .

Will you dare be great? . . .

The words rang, and my fantasy, fired, promised to dare.

* * *

The seas of genius in which I swam swelled into oceans. Names luminous in their greatness tumbled through my brain. Gorky, Turgenev, Balzac; Dvorak, Vivaldi, Brahms; Vermeer, Titian, Hals. And in their midst was I as my piano yielded to the zealous assault of my fingers and the library at school failed to sate my appetite.

In those oceans I swam alone, drifting from companions I had swum with before. The distances from them which I attained exceeded their vision, the depths I reached were to them unknown. And there was pride in that and satisfaction and superiority and, in the full glare of that adolescent sun, I glowed to myself as I harnessed gorgeous treasures to the surface from the very deepest of those fabulous depths.

* * *

But how quell the swelling loneliness and the taunts?

'Wanna throw a ball?' Ricky called.

'I'm reading.'

'How's about noughts and crosses?' asked Stuey.
'No.'
'Comin' to the footy Saturdy?' said Robbie.
'Don't care for footy.'
'What about Bertie's party?' asked Mickey.
'I'm not invited.'
And the taunts:
'Snob.'
'Highbrow.'
'Mr Stuck-up.'
'Peacock.'
'Fop.'

The names adhered to me, names that barbed and pricked and pinioned me to whatever barrier I set between my classmates and myself in the resolve some day to be more than they, to rise above their mediocre commonality and exult, lustrous magnet to their awe; while, away from school, ensconced behind a book in the haven of my home, I fell to Mother's plaints and admonitions as, fretting, she dragged me to Dr Barnett complaining that I was becoming unnaturally thin, pale and moody and that I was weakening my eyes.

Could she but have known the pride she would one day reap from her son!

'It's his age,' Dr Barnett said, the portrait of benevolence, delivering his diagnosis with bold authority. 'He has nothing that a little sun and fresh air cannot remedy.'

How I hated him for that! But for Mother his words became a commandment to be consummately observed.

My homework completed, she drove me into the street.

'You can read all you like when you go to bed,' she said. 'The light is God's gift to growing bones.'

'I've got nothing to do out there, no-one to play with.'

'What about your friends – Robert and Michael, and Richard and Tommy and Stuart?'

'They're dull.'

'And you, hiding your face behind those books, are a brilliant star, I suppose.'

'Mother!' – I wanted to shout – 'I am! I shall be! One day you shall see!'

But her sarcasm cut deep and the sting in the wound silenced any attempt at such a declaration or promise. My future, to me so luminous, stifled into secrecy.

'Now go outside,' she pressed. 'Enjoy yourself. Be like the other boys.'

'And what about Mr Cleanslate?,' I asked, clutching at another reason for remaining indoors, clinging to another hope.

'I'll see that he doesn't starve,' she answered, her palm pressing against my back, advancing me through the front door. 'From now on, leave that to me.'

'And indeed, it was Mother who now carried the portions to Mr Cleanslate, remaining there just long enough to transfer the food to his plates and rinse her own and ask, in her bustling practised way, after his well-being and his needs.

* * *

Once more, then, the streets and parks claimed me as I yielded to Dr. Bennett's and Mother's prescription of sun and exercise and fresh air. I did not forget the miracles and magic woven by the 'Greats' but treasure and eternity now mingled with the earthbound and the temporal as, falling in with the sport of regained friends, I chased again those oval balls of bouncing leather and puffed once more in races after school and joined as before in their chatter of football, parties, rock 'n' roll and girls.

In our games, they led, I followed. Into the streets, the parks and nature strips. On playing fields and footpaths. Outside their houses, outside mine, and in the lanes where we ran and kicked and leapt and in stealth pursued our footballs over fences and gingerly retrieved them from rooftops or recklessly salvaged them from trees. No garden, yard or flowerbed was sacred. Wherever our feet could stand, there was our domain. And neither the reprimands of the Thompsons nor

the curses of the Macdonalds nor the warnings of the Kenneallys bothered us one bit. If to fly were within our power, we would have claimed even the stars.

The quiet of the suburb being ours to violate, we penetrated into its every interstice which led us one day, too, to the nature strip before my house.

There, Tommy kicked the ball. Ricky and Stuey soared. I scouted at their feet and snatched the ball. Weaving, I ran, bounced the ball, kicked. Now Mickey marked it and, with a resounding whoop, sent it back. It fell into Ricky's hands. Kicking high, he brought down rain, and Robbie, dashing in, scooped it up, twisted, turned and dummied and skewed the ball over a rolling shoulder. Back and forth, the ball oscillated while we in turn chased after it until with a leg-breaking kick, Mickey sent the ball careering on to Mr Cleanslate's verandah where it bounced, leapt, thudded at the window and came to rest beneath its sill.

The nearest to his house, I scaled the gate and scampered up the path. Robbie laughed, Tommy squatted, Stuey executed a cartwheel, Mickey did chin-ups, Ricky leaned against a tree. The sweat warm on my face, I picked up the ball, turned and began to run back when, in my haste, unseeing, I collided with Mr Cleanslate standing before the door.

Warmth became cold. Words of explanation formed frenziedly in my brain but, released into the open, dissipated into incoherent mumbling. I tried to pass him, but thin and wizened as he was, he seemed to occupy the entire breadth of the verandah. He stood immobile before me, a book in his hand, his pointed face contracted, his brow furrowed, his eyebrows drawn together, his pixie ears more prominent than ever. He frowned, his teeth clearly set on edge, but in the depths of his expression, there lingered something less tangible, elusive, yet something close to pain.

Face groping at face, he riveted me with his gaze, glanced with hatred swift and undisputable at the football in my hands, then once more fixed his eyes upon me. The whole episode may have lasted a mere instant, the briefest flicker of

an eyelid, but in that instant, there passed before me the image of the teacher transported by the magic of Mozart and Michelangelo, of the teacher turned actor reciting Hamlet in a voice that sent goosepimples through my flesh, of the recluse pointing a lean tubered finger at a world outside replete with host upon host of humdrum lives, the dross-laden lives of men who, would they but know it, could be free, could be great and rise to be as gods.

And in that instant, he reached out, cupped the chin of my shame-bowed face, nodded slowly and sadly as if at something lost, and said in a voice muted with regret,

'*Et tu, Brute, et tu?*'

For Love O' Me Brother

Me brother Jamie he done some funny things in his day. It was voices speakin' to him that made him, kneelin' b'fore the mirror, stick needles in his arm an' walk barefoot on cigarettes their tips still burnin' an' crack his knuckles 'gainst the stone o' statues an' rile ol' Mulligan's dog into sinkin' its teeth into his skin.

"Blood there is to see do you see it Barney?", madcap he would say each time, "but never will you see me wince with the pain of it."

An' another time he shaved his head an' somewheres laid a hand upon a cassock an', all in black, he clambered to the roof settin' there to rise, ascend all glorious in a chariot o' fire, an' that he might ha' done if me mother she ha' not seen him an' shooed im down with a broom, cryin' "What will you be thinkin' of next m'blood m'soul m'son?"

Jamie he was me brother an' I want to speak no evil 'bout him even if he did string me 'gainst the gum in the yard an' put a crown o' thorns 'bout me head an' gave me frights in plenty by placin' seaweed in me bed an' snails an' moths an', one time I shall never in me life forget, a rubber snake he'd been coolin' in the freezer.

"Slunk here all the way from the Garden o' Eden Barney," he tittered, an' I should ha' tittered with him like I usually done an' o' course I should ha' said "Well now you had your joke send the creature back there again", but me wits they was so addled I screamed instead 'cause the snake its colour shape an' fangs an' all it looked so livin' real that I set to such howlin'

that me father who he was the slaughterer in the meat works where they called him Big Mort he pounded in, an' 'cause he had been sleepin' he was madder'n hell, an', sizin' the matter up he gave Jamie the wallopin' of his years shoutin' the while "Do I have ta' throw ya' out to become a man an' think mannish thoughts an' do mannish things?!"

An' Jamie – would any livin' eye believe it? – he was not sheddin' the slightest tear but Lord he was gigglin' like a mutton-head, he was gigglin' an' he was rantin', too, rantin' all transported-like 'bout the blood o' Sain' Peter an' the blood o' Sain' Sebastian till me mother too she came runnin' in, scarcely there the blinkin' of an eye b'fore she set to such a shrillin' "Oh Lord on your children ha' mercy!" that me father, caught all aback, he stopped the beatin' while me brother he went on gigglin' an' me mother she went on shrillin', shrillin' "He's sick the boy he's flyin' he's unscrewed it's the doctor he's needin' not the sting o' hands!"

But me father he found his wits again an', shoutin', shoutin', beetroot-red fillin' his every pore, "It's a kick in the pants he needs not a doctor me foot!", he stepped a step closer to Jamie again, but me mother she took me brother's hand though he was all o' fifteen, him gigglin' still like some pixie was ticklin' his ribs, an' they went out the room the two o' them, me mother leadin' Jamie to the bathroom there to put salve on the welts, while me father he stomped through the rooms like a bull seein' red and down the passage to the verandah he pounded there to light up a cigarette an' snort out spirals o' smoke an' kick at the flower pots me mother she had planted with ferns an' things an' spit at the stars an' curse with a curse that must ha' woke half the neighbours up, cursin' hard and might-like whoever it was out there that had made those flamin' lights o' heaven an' had so blessed his days with such a bad egg as Jamie, with such a feeble-minded simp who would as sure as fire was fire blacken his ev'ry minute o' breathin' with shame an' odium an' contumely.

Me mother she was a haloed woman but with a will of her own, an', 'spite me father's roarin' an' rantin' 'bout what Jamie

needed more'n a quack was a beatin' a day, she took me brother to Dr Graham who listened like he was all made o' ears an' sent him on to Dr Daniels that me father he called a money-guzzlin' shrink, but the truth o' the matter it was that Jamie poor Jamie he was seein' things no other eye could see an' he was hearin' things no other ear could hear an' Lord knows I should ha' guessed it 'cause sometimes when I was not even speakin' he would say "What?" or he would say all earnest-like "Last' night our brother Lazarus after his risin' he walked right in through that door", or he would say, too, marvellin' in gladness, "I touched the hair o' the Virgin an' Lord was it soft an' fine an' smooth like it was the purest silk."

An' it happened that in the hospital where Dr Daniels he sent him, Jamie he said to me all private-like, "Don' tell no-one Barney but me blood me blood is the blood o' Peter an' o' Sain' Sebastian an' the blood too of all that has suffered on earth, an' only you an' me an' God above we knows it."

An' perhaps I should ha' told, but I didn' 'cause I liked the sharin' o' secrets with him an' 'cause that made me feel big an' importan' an' I guess 'cause, 'spite o' all the awful things he done to me with them snails an' seaweed an' snakes, when he said "Barney you deserve to be sittin' by the right hand o' God", I had to love him an' he was more than me brother then, he was me friend me idol me hero me guide.

So I kept private as private as me breath all o' the later things he done like pilferin' a book from the library all magnificen' an' gorgeous an' with pictures o' madonnas an' saints an' prophets an' demons which I saw in them of a sudden as sure as me eyes were true was the source o' all his crazy flyin' utterin's and of the other things he done like whippin' his back with sprays o' bramble or collectin' ol' bones that he said were the bones o' the holiest men that ever lived.

But when he took to settin' the shed on fire to drive out the sinners that were revellin' there, or drownin' Elmer our tabby in baptism intendin', or callin' Mr Judd the headmaster the scurf o' Satan, or standin' one day in the blowy shade o' the

Public Library scarecrow-like crumbin' crumbs for the pigeons hi'self raw an' unstitched to the last black hair o' his naked crotch, all me silence 'bout his doin's it couldn' help him from reelin' an' careenin' from the fist o' me father to the claws o' the law an' from the pink junket-like hands o' Father Glamorgan to the reachin' graspin' tentacles o' the hospital wards.

An' over an' over it went, the same again an' again in a ring-a-round o' devilry for another year, another two, the hands o' none o' them helpin' any, Jamie the while swallowin' this pill an' that, rainbowed beads o' purple an' green an' blue' an' red, an' me mother rufflin' his hair sayin' "What is to become o' you m'child so possessed?", an' me father ev'ry day growin' more ropable an' mad, barkin' at the quacks an' at the law an' at the starch-collared Father, an' flushin' in the cistern Jamie's gatherin' o' pills, clamourin' "He don' need these his brain is addled more th'n enough", hi'self shamed to vexation b'fore his friends, 'fraid to look fellow mortal in the eye, an' swearin' oaths in plenty like they was the height o' fashion, "The day's gonna come Jim so help me God the day's gonna come!"

An' the day he meant –I *guess* it was the day he meant – it did come, comin' with the comin' to school o' Barbie Baker, she lovin' nothin' more than to tease the boys their zips stretched to breakin' an' their buttons to burstin'.

An' one day she took Jamie behin' the toilet, lurin' him with Lord knows what flashin'-eyed charms, an' there the two o' them not gone five minutes but Mr Judd he found 'em out an' she, Barbie, her hair in the sun gold an' all glitterin', like a halo in the book that Jamie he pilfered from the library, her nose twitchin', an' the tears o' crocodiles rollin' from her eyes, she kicked up a ruckus drownin' all other ruckus, an' cried for even the heavens to waken, "He tried to rape me 'e did 'e did sayin' keep yer' trap shut or I'll smash ya' to a pulp finer'n any machine it can do to ya' "; while Jamie me brother me brother Jamie he jus' stood there like some clobbered mullet shakin' his head an' rollin' his lips, with pain an' denial an' bewilderment in his ev'ry line, an' his face all like the Lord's lookin'

down from the cross an' he said – an' this was more like me brother talkin' – "She has the hair o' Mary an' I touched it with this hand an' Lord it was fine an' soft like a gift o' God", an' seein' a nail it stickin' out from the wall he drove that hand o' his upon it an' tore the flesh till it spurted rich an' red, an' in a tone as pleadin' as it was to me noble an' beautiful 'e said, "By the blood o' ev'ry saint that ever lived an' by their love an' mercy an' holiness I w'd never touch a hair o' that glorious head."

But Mr Judd never forgettin' Jamie's slur 'bout him an' Satan an' likin' me brother not the slightest bit, he snorted down his nose like some flamin' dragon out to get Sain' George while me I gave me brother a hankie for his bleedin' hand the two of us settin' after him to his cold foul-smellin' office where he sent for me father an' sent for me mother an' also for Barbie Baker's father an' said all dark an' menacin'-like that if me brother Jamie he is not taken out o' school there'n' then an' once'n' for all he would bring in the police an' lay serious charges 'gainst Jamie for wilful assault an' attempted rape. Barbie Baker's father hi'self a school inspector pettin' his Barbie an' coddlin' her an' callin' her "my baby my precious my angel", he was satisfied sayin' "A scandal is the last among our wishes" but not me own father who drivin' home held fast-like to the silence o' rage that like one o' them waterfalls I seen in a film crashin' an' breakin' an' shatterin' crashed out o' him as soon as we reached inside our house, an' there, b'fore Jamie he could breathe to three me father he seized his collar an' cracked his fist upon his head an' another 'bout his face an' Jamie wherever he ran me father he ran after him shoutin' "Yer' a disgrace to the name an' for me I had enough o' ya' " till they came upon the kitchen, me mother an' me trailin' but a step b'hind, me mother screamin' "Ha' mercy O Lord he's your truest child!", while me father an' Jamie they was facin' one another like ravin' bulls an' as red like I never seen 'em before an' I never seen neither o' them so crazed neither, me father lungin' out me brother escapin' in his escapin' pullin' over a chair an' tearin' down the tablecloth

an' sweepin' a kettle to flyin', not laughin' like he done long b'fore but shoutin' this time "She is Mary, God be me eyes, an' I done nothin' but touch her hair He take me if that ain't the truth" but me father like I said he was the slaughterer of the meat-works where they called him Big Mort and he was like no bein' I ever seen not on this earth nor in the heaven nor in the hell that was in Jamie's book that he had pilfered from the library, me father he grabbed a carver from the mantel an' with me mother pleadin' an' me addin' me own share an' the bottles o' spices rattlin' where they were an' even the light in the ceilin' tremblin' an' the curtains shiverin' me father he slashed after Jamie an' he slashed an' he slashed the blade o' the carver it fallin' towards Jamie, an' me I screamed I know I screamed 'cause me own ears like the shell o' eggs they were splittin' an' crumblin' an' pulverised to smithereens an' how I screamed, for me mother she reached out at that moment out to him to Jamie aimin' to cradle an' coddle an' pet like Barbie she was cradled an' coddled an' petted, an' it was she the blade it hit, an' where she ha' stood there she fell, an' her neck it was all bleedin' and her neck was all bleedin' an' her neck was all bleedin' an' . . .

An' Barbie Baker I will never forgive you as long as I breathe the breath me mother she gave me, an' from your grave Mother I hopes you hears me, an' in your prison-cell Father I hopes you hears me, an' in your hospital ward Jamie inside them walls o' brick an' concrete I hopes that you too you hears me, 'cause know that when I leave here this cursed goddamn'd sickenin' home for orphans I shall go out there an' even if I hang for it an' be the martyr Jamie that you me brother you never was, I shall hunt her down an' with that carver that cut our home to smithereens with that carver shall I go after her so help me God so help me the Lord so help me all them angels an' martyrs an' saints that ever went to heaven on account o' the wrongs an' evils an' the hurtful things done when they were breathin' the breath o' this earth.

An' pray to the Lord Jamie he should be me witness an' he should be me strength 'cause I will go after her that Barbie

Baker 'cause I will go after her O Lord I will even if I hang I will even if in hell I burn I will . . . O Lord be me guide me light me strength an' turn away your eyes when the moment of Barbie's destiny I bring it about for love for love yeh for love o' me soulful lovin' so-ill-done-by brother 'cause the routin' o' the Philistines will be as nothin' 'gainst her comin' despatch into the waitin' bosom o' Satan in the heart o' the fire . . .

Jewel in the Crucible

I caught the first inkling of the notion, of the revelation, just as she walked out of the surgery, glimpsed it, saw it, albeit still vaguely, more as an intuition, in the droop of her shoulders, in her unsure step, and, as she turned to say once more, 'Goodbye, doctor, thank you,' saw it, too, in her doleful countenance and in that bewildered sleep-lost red-eyed look, so full with shadowed crevices and puckerings and serpentine veins that brought a fleeting image of the russet leaves that I would rake up, come Sundays, in my garden.

She was not ill, Jennifer Coates, only lovesick, her chest battered by a thousand hammers, her thoughts muddled, her slow difficult words stifling in her throat with what eighteenth–, nineteenth-Century novelists and romantics called unrequited love. After nearly three years of living together, 'sharing everything we had,' her boyfriend had left her, resisting her hints at permanent union until, pressed once too often, too far, he had walked out on her, saying, 'I thought I might soon be ready. But I'm not. There's too much out there still to experience, and fetters, strait-jackets, babies' nappies, colic, runny noses – they're not for me, Jenny, they're not, they're not for me!'

The seemingly-interminable night, the fragmented dreams, the splintered images, paralysis, and the biting into sodden handkerchiefs and pillows – all this I had learnt from my own Joanne – had left Jennifer Coates enervated and, as a student counsellor, she could scarcely see out the work-day in her beaten state. As a doctor, I had listened to her and, sponge-

like, absorbed at least a portion of her pain, but unable to do more, had dismissed her after decent time with a certificate for two days off from work to regain her poise. I had also said, 'If I can help with anything . . .'; but that was formula, part of a trite scenario, none more aware of it than I, for I doubted that I could satisfactorily assist her in her dilemmas other than with platitudinous ivory-tower advice – in effect, a series of options – or with a prescription for tranquillisers or anti-depressants or hypnotics to dull the acuteness of her desolation – to blunt, as it were, its needling nettles and thorns.

'Nice kid, but unhappy,' I said to Mary, to Mary Somerville sitting behind the reception desk as Jennifer Coates' steps echoed leadenly down the stairs outside, aware that, at thirty-two, she was scarcely a kid anymore, aware also that the fullest ripeness of her body was already past her, however vehemently its wish, its *need* to conceive continued to importune, and aware, finally, that, all too cruel in their prematurity, she showed the criss-crossed maze of dry, tiny wrinkles about her eyes, her mouth, her throat. I hoped, for her sake, that she was not given to looking too frequently into mirrors.

In that early afternoon interlude between surgeries, I looked out upon the street. Grey was scarcely my favourite colour, yet that was the tone all around – not merely of the sky or the pavements or the windows of the shops and trams and passing cars, but also of my mood which had already been brushed upon me that morning by the argument I had had with Joanne. I gritted his teeth as I remembered.

'What then is she if not clumsy, awkward, flighty?' I had shouted, hovering over Julia who wailed as she wiped from the floor the slop of milk, Coco Pops and muesli she had spilled.

'My God, what's bitten you this morning?' Joanne had countered. 'Accidents *do* happen! She's only eight, after all . . .'

'Accidents!' I had huffed. 'She's an ungainly, brainless, twittish . . .'

'She's our child!' Joanne had cut me short. 'She's my . . .!'

I had walked out then, stamped out, putting on my jacket outside in the fog and the moistness and slamming the accelerator as I drove, my temper abating only after entering the Richardson's home to examine the wheezy bronchitic husband and his tuber-jointed arthritic wife. As always, they had offered me coffee; but as always, I had refused, even less inclined than usual to hear yet again Rupert Richardson's tales of valour at Gallipoli where, for love of country, king and flag, 'our boys did their damn'dest to rout the Turks from them cursed hills!'

'For love of country, king and flag,' I said aloud now as I watched two men in overalls carrying out a couch from Stapleton's Upholstery across the road.

'Richardsons' day, was it?' Mary Somerville said behind me. Mary was filing the patients' cards with her customary deftness. An indispensable part of the establishment, almost a fixture, she had come to know the patients well, in some details better than I. She had herself, as the saying went, buried one husband and driven out another and now lived alone, blissful in her independence, in a cottage in Garton Street where, evenings and Sundays, she painted watercolours of parrots, lovebirds and kittens. Her first husband had been a city councillor and a man of charisma but who with an autocratic will had over the years stifled all her regard for him, all her earlier love turned into fearful and resentful submissiveness; while her second husband whom she married on the rebound as it were, proved the complete obverse, a watery, spineless dependent man, given to sulking moroseness and to milking her forbearance *and* her means, drinking both away in every-lengthening alcoholic sprees until, as a final straw for her, he quit his post as a taxation clerk to creep under her feet at every turn, stifling her also, he with his jelliness as the other had done with iron.

'It's not that love is blind,' she had said then after her second debacle. 'God, no. It's simply a worm that eats you up inside even as you see crystal-clearly what the wretched thing is doing to you. Love is a vampire, a monster, a leech.'

There had been wisdom of a sort in that unsolicited offering, all the more persuasive as it was the gift, albeit a doubtful one, of authentic experience.

Across the road, as I stood before the window, I saw Frank Stapleton emerge from his warehouse, a large man with enormous flushed cheeks and still more enormous hands, then saw slight Father Murchison of St. Joseph's Church on the far corner step out of his car, and then Jennifer Coates again as she paused outside the chemist's to shut her purse.

I ran fingers and thumb down the rim of the curtain.

'Bloody, bloody, bloody love,' I said with rising emphasis. 'Poor wind-tossed powerless wretches. Poor miserable Jennifer Coates.'

'My, Dr Pearl,' Mary Somerville said airily behind him. 'You *are* poetic.'

All poetry aside, I feared for her, for Jennifer, though I did trust, had to trust, to the presence in her of a dominant instinct for survival and the resilience she had shown on past occasion upon her father's near-fatal coronary occlusion. But love, loss of love, both, were themselves dominant forces, so often virulent, which, when smiting, gave no quarter. If suicide, which had taken Teresa Mitchell, the grocer's adolescent daughter, was a savage god, were medals to be awarded for sheer wanton diabolical cruelty, then love, Eros, Aphrodite would merit a not-unearned generously-ample share. Whatever its delights – and with what easy glibness did poets and pop-stars compose verses and songs in its praise – love was in fact a thing of mischief, of villainy, tyranny and treachery.

That was the notion that had struck me, however vaguely still, as Jennifer Coates walked out of the surgery. But on reflection, the insight was in truth utterly banal, only the most basic superficial rendering of something more complex, labyrinthine, subterranean. What was love, what was love in the first place? Why did it so possess and bedevil, and so doggedly resist exorcism, even when, as Mary Somerville had said, the one who loved clearly recognised the worm that was eating

one up inside? Love might conquer all, as the comforters of the bedevilled might console, but how it could also ravage, pillage and devastate, even if it proved, in its time, requited – in such instances furtively settng the scene for later disenchantments, disaffections, complacency and vapid stagnation.

Yes, even stagnation. With all the tedium of it. Stagnation. Just as, standing before the window, I felt myself stagnating even now. For where, where, now that I had been led to think of it, was the love in my own life that once had been so acute, so galvanising and exalting?

Again, the memory of the morning jolted.

'She's our child! She's my . . .!'

The morning boilover rankled within me with heightened liveriness. My resurgent anger was not aimed at the child now, nor even at Joanne, but scattered as if from a blunderbuss willy-nilly to strike at any number of targets, at my sense of stagnation above all. I preferred not to delve into the issue again, but my thoughts, like an itch or a sneeze, could not be restrained.

The paradox was that I should, in fact, have been totally content. And satisfied. And buoyant. After all, at thirty-seven, I had attained to all I had ever wanted. My demands, in relation to my abilities, had always been modest and possessions therefore easy to obtain. My medical practice flourished, young Julia attended a private school that Joanne made sure was among the best, we lived in a two-storied house in Hawthorn, a formidable house of solid red-brick, architect-designed, completed but one year before, and, in harmony with Joanne's greater artistic sense, tastefully furnished. If there was a heaven on earth, I should have found it in his own home, particularly in my spacious library where the light, entering through the broad window, illuminated three walls of books reaching ceiling-high around me. I should have found it too in the prints of the Masters and in the local originals that hung on every wall in the house and in my ela-

borate immaculate Sanyo turntable and loudspeakers for which only Beethovens, Mozarts and Vivaldis were worthy fare.

But truth was that I was bored. Bored. Jaded. Bored. Not with life. That was ludicrous, too grand, and I was not given to dramatic hyperbole. But what had most recently come to irk me, and may well have been the mainspring for my irrational vendetta against Julia that morning, was the unremitting torpid sameness of every day, the monotony of the day's routine, the mind-deadening conversations so often repeated and despaired over with Joanne and our friends about children's schools, inept teachers, Queensland vacations, kitchen tiles, the cost of parquetry, and unreliable builders, and the mindless entertainments of over-rated movies and inconsequential stage-plays. If it was not a rut in which I stagnated, I saw myself then as plodding dully on flat land, across a vast featureless terrain beyond which lay nothing that could quicken expectation, stir interest, redeem the tedium of the passage. And I fell to wondering more than once what it was that even kept me within the marriage when, as for Jennifer Coates' boy-friend, there was so much still to experience – to see, to know, to explore – 'out there.'

But go – leave. Leave. And confront the attending complications, the recriminations, maintenance payments, the gossip. Even in quiet despair, there was still, in the marriage, much more security to be had than in the limbo of separation, and less energy to substain it was needed than to forge new liaisons and new attachments, these demanding renewed adjustments, themselves uncertain, possibly precarious and perhaps unsustainable, to different mannerisms, laughter, tosses of a head, body odours and breaths. Such effort was now beyond me. Besides, as I had read somewhere, why risk dying of thirst when clear streams flowed at my feet? And, besides, too, if pressed, I had to own that in my way I did love Joanne, though less springily than I had years before when, say, I had from the Union House watched her hurry towards me across the university lawns, smiling, buoyant, waving the tips of her

fingers from a distance, and dressed in luminous green, her face lunar, alive, and animated and animating both, causing me to hold my breath as I rose, tipsy with euphoric tingling, on beds of feathers. What counted, perhaps what held me to that vast flat unchanging terrain was, hence, my ability even after so long – fifteen years, sixteen? – to evoke that original emotion.

Evidently, such recall had receded beyond Michael Burton's capabilities or beyond his will and had in part led to the Burtons' downfall. Their story had made the newspapers, albeit as a mere six-line item, their calamity attracting less attention and journalistic colouring than the rise in the price of beer that headed an adjacent column.

Scanning the street, I now sought out the flower-shop, taken over most recently by the Monteaths on the near side of the cemetery. The name 'Sandy Burton's Flower Market' still stretched across the plate-glass window, but that was more witness to past history than to present reality and I wondered when the changed circumstances would be openly acknowledged.

They had been, the Burtons – to use conventioal jargon – deeply in love when, together, they first entered the surgery, leaving then in near-ecstasy after I had confirmed that Sandra was pregnant.

'Another lawyer,' Michael Burton had said, barrister-like furrowing his eyebrows and crooking his thumbs behind his lapels.

'Another florist,' Sandra had quipped.

When, two years later, the possibility of pregnancy again arose, Sandra Burton had come alone and sat discomfitingly tense as she watched me perform the test.

'Shall it be yet another florist,' I had said, 'or a High Court judge this time?'

She had smiled, true, but there was little mirth in her response, little animation or eagerness, only a bland and softly-spoken 'As long as it is healthy and happy . . .'

Scarcely six months after the second child – also a girl – was

born, Michael Burton presented at the surgery complaining of chest pains, headaches and fatigue. A word, two, quickly established that he was crushingly dissatisfied with himself, along with his work, his family and his social life, and that he had begun to pay attention to a young sprightly articled clerk employed by his office. His attachment was but an infatuation, he had repeatedly told himself, one that in time would pass, but daily proximity only fanned his ardour to a pitch he could only call love, but which to me bordered on an obsession which, while igniting a blaze on the one hand, enervated him on the other; until, physically, mentally and emotionally depleted, he yielded to shortness, argument and rantings which were devastating his marriage.

'The whole thing's too strong for me,' he had said, 'it's something overpowering, as if some devil within were physically turning me away from Sandra and driving me, whatever the damage, to Yolanda in the office, as if some fiery chemistry were annihilating all reason.'

Reason certainly urged Michael Burton to preserve hearth and home, but his chemistry had dictated otherwise. It became evident from Sandra Burton's mounting symptoms of anxiety and depression with which she came that the Burtons' domestic life was in turmoil. Suggestions, attempts to heal the widening rift – through marriage guidance counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and the use of medication – all failed; Sandra's behaviour became more erratic in its desperation, this only distancing her husband still further, until, one Saturday afternoon, when Michael Burton returned to his office to complete, so he had said, some outstanding work, she had succumbed to the despotism of her own chemistry. She took three wreaths from the shop up to the bedroom and there, drawing the blinds against the light and life, cut the throats of her two children and then her own.

Michael Burton, chastened, penitent and demolished, himself abandoned by Yolanda, packed together a few basic items,

left all his affairs to an executor and, shutting shop, simply disappeared.

Such was the might of that chemistry, I recalled yet again at that moment, such was its might that gave boil to dramas day in day out, dramas enacted in the curtained privacy of every house, dramas in the main resolved – who could even know their number? – but dramas, also, which sometimes spilled into the newspapers to tell, where one read between the lines, of guts spilled, brains exploded, stomachs washed out and arteries exsanguinated under the tyranny of passions, in truth of chemical laws, that affected all, all, who were ever with a navel born.

Phillip Stapleton, for instance, – a mere hair of his bull-necked upholsterer father, lean and angular in all dimensions, sunken-eyed, thick-lipped and hump-nosed, and gracelessly gangling. In appearance, intellect and conversation, he was the least prepossessing of his family and of his class and the butt of his sturdier, more assured, more accomplished peers. Had he been hunch-backed as well, he would have been Hugo's Quasimodo complete, tainted, rejected and misunderstood, yet capable – had he but *not* had that power! – of loving. He was obedient to the extremes of self-denial, obliging to the point of ingratiation, and clinging, clinging, to the very limit of endurance of those to whom he clung.

In the fourth form where, after two years repeated in the earlier classes, he was older than his classmates, he became attracted to Priscilla Perkins, a flush-cheeked, flashing-eyed coquette given to short skirts, tight pullovers, tinkling bracelets and a pendant that rocked loosely and provocatively between firm cupolaed breasts rendered all the more prominent by her peacock strut.

Not one to know the art of subtlety, he quickly betrayed his attraction and Priscilla was not among the last to become aware of it. If, at first, she showed disgust at having caught that devotee's eye rather than the fancy of her more favoured Julian Meehan, she expeditiously turned disgust to the

delights of mischief. Seating herself behind Phillip in class, she passed him paper hearts, tantalised him with messages written in red, and blew cool draughts of spearminted breath down his neck. Days there were when she let him accompany her home, if always in the presence of two or three other girls who giggled from behind, and days when she brought cigarettes to school, daring him to smoke them at recess behind the bicycle shed. She joked with him and touched his cheeks and, elated, he laughed, too, and for her, for her, for her, performed cartwheels in the quadrangle and straddled fences in mighty, if awkward, leaps.

And came the day she brought other kinds of cigarettes, crudely rolled, without label, with little taste, which made him more wild and daring and enterprising. He clambered up and jumped off the roof of the shelter-shed, rode a borrowed bicycle without hands against the traffic, and leapt fully dressed into the pool, while Priscilla, eyes, teeth, breasts all inciting, all exciting, egged him on with more such cigarettes and more and more, till cigarettes were followed by thin white powder, ampoules of water, and needles and syringes which, behind the gardener's hut in Curtain Square, she taught him to use, stirring in him a craving that progressively mounted and set him upon a succession of impulsive, compulsive pre-dawn break-ins into local pharmacies and doctors' surgeries. It was while climbing out through the window of my surgery one early morning that he was apprehended, his face and hands bleeding from cuts sustained on the broken glass, and dazed and dislocated by the suddenness of the arrest.

Called to survey the shambles he had made of my surgery, I had a last look at the feeble-minded youth. I had in the past treated him for ear infections and bronchitis and more recently for warts. Now, I cleaned and dressed his wounds, both of us wordless in the presence of two policemen, then laid a pitying solicitous hand upon his shoulder and watched him as he was led to a waiting car.

What followed, I learned from Mary Somerville who knew

the Stapletons socially. But even without being informed, I could have guessed. For even in matters such as these, there were formulae, natural histories and events that led in predictable directions in the realisation of clear-cut prognoses. – There was a trial, Phillip Stapleton was released on a good behaviour bond, then committed for therapy in a drug dependency clinic, lapsed from treatment, returned to marihuana, heroin and morphine, slid into vagrancy and periods of communal living in foul-smelling barely-furnished ramshackle terraces, to be found, finally, slumped in a public toilet in St. Kilda in a pool of urine, head askew, chin on chest, tourniquet about his arm, his arm itself a patchwork of festering scars and needle-pricks, with a dirty syringe, needle and ampoule by his side.

'All he ever wanted was to be accepted, to be loved,' Mary Somerville had said, echoing a guilt-ridden Lorraine Stapleton, in concluding her account.

Remembering the boy, I conceded again that perhaps Mary had been right, and reflected on how the simplest needs could lead grotesquely to the most sinister effects; but how I would, in this instance, have preferred instead a human enactment of Anderson's '*Ugly Duckling*' with its comfortable, homely lived-happily-ever-after ending, as in young Julia's brightly-illustrated, oh-so-optimistic, oh-so-sunnily happy story books.

But reach out and touch, the world was made of hardness. Hardness, not floss, not dough, not velvet. Scrape a hand against gravel and it will bleed; march a few kilometres and there will be blisters to count; play with fire and flesh will burn.

So was Lygon Street, my Lygon Street, all hardness now in this leaden-grey hour of afternoon. Brick, concrete, asphalt, timber, glass: iron, aluminium, copper, bronze and steel. The shops and the cottages stood impenetrably solid on the other side, trams clattered by, metal rung on metal, cars hummed and purred and hissed, and whatever voices reached me were themselves harsh and strident begging to be heard above the surrounding din. There *was*, to be sure, room for tenderness,

empathy, a pat on the back, a kiss, a smile; but the church to the right, Sandy Burton's Flower Market to the left, and the cemetery further beyond, and, reaching into memory of that morning, Rupert Richardson and 'our boys' of whom he boasted, all these told of more pervasive time-spanning bloodier realities. There was love in the city, in the world. There was; there was. The legend outside St. Joseph's proclaimed it: '*Through love of God is man redeemed*'; so did the visiting evangelist who had thundered, 'And love consumes the universe and the universe glows with the splendour of it!', and the ever-recurring lyrics of popular songs: 'So give me love, love, love', 'To know is to love', and 'Love makes the world go round'. That chemistry, those molecules of heart and brain and blood that wrought the emotion given the name of love teemed in fevered vibrato under every roof from Balwyn to St. Albans, from Brighton to Fawkner, from Rejkjavik to Capetown, from New York to Auckland. The English, so staid, could become drunk with it, and, with them, the Russians, Maltese, Brazilians, Nigerians and Japanese. Popular wisdom was to have folk hanker after it, political wisdom was to promote it, artistic wisdom to exalt it, religious wisdom to deify it.

And yet . . .

And yet . . .

Poor Jennifer Coates, and Sandra Burton, and Phillip Stapleton.

And poor old Cecilia Williamson, too, flying, soaring, riding in her private blessed fiery chariot in the Edgewood Mental Home, there loving God, and with hymns and devotions praising Him, and, with voice passionate and tremulous, pledging fire and promising brimstone, promising, foretelling, evoking the showering of hot molten hellish brimstone, upon all heretics, upon all atheists and agnostics, upon Moslems and Jews, Anglicans and Presbyterians, Eastern Orthodox and Copts, upon Hindu and Buddhist alike, the while crediting to Rome the truth and the love, the mercy and the forbearance that, were all men to turn to the faith and worship the Father and with Him His Son, would redeem mankind

forever and absolve it wholly, absolve it mightily, absolve it eternally from sin.

Such was Cecilia Williamson – Lion-hearted Richard, Torquemada, Savonarola, all in one.

Behind me, Mary Somerville had completed her filing. She had also straightened the magazines on the corner-table and adjusted the chairs and, now, taking her purse, said, 'Just nicking out to top up supplies.'

I watched her as she crossed the street where she paused outside the grocer Ralph Mitchell's window before entering Crawford's Newsagency. Harry Crawford, too, had a story to tell – but then, who hadn't?, who hadn't? Father Murchison, meanwhile, had come out of the church and driven away. The cross on St. Joseph's steeple stood austere and innocuous against the greyness. Heavy clouds had gathered beyond it, but they were not the sort that threatened rain. Rather, they merely subdued the surroundings, tempered mood and inclination and spontaneity. Outside Stapleton's, another van pulled up; a delivery boy followed by a collie cycled by; people were entering, leaving the grocer's, the chemist's, the dry cleaner's, the fruiterer's; Janice Monteath, the new florist, was sprinkling water on bunches of chrysanthemums, roses and carnations outside her door.

I looked further down the street. Against the murmur and movement of the traffic, the cemetery stretched gloomily, stretched so inert and so neutral and petered out of sight into distant dense and indefinable smudge. Tall pines surrounded the enclosure. Between their trunks, I saw the tops of crosses, tombstones and the attendant's hut. Against the railing stood slender lush-haired Brenda Lysterfield, her arms draped about the neck of a fellow leaning close. They kissed briefly, then laughed. Old gout-ridden Bertram Ogilvie, passing by, waved his stick at them, but the young ones, unperturbed, laughed again.

Watching, I jerked to straightness and felt the skipping of my pulse. A flush flooded my cheeks and I tingled with a hot titillating headiness and acute exquisite depthless sorrow as

what had earlier been a vague raw notion assumed fuller flesh.

There *was* love in the world, had always been, crucibles and vats and cauldrons of it. Small, privately-tragic, painful, annihilating, by-the-world-forgotten, time-and-grave-obliterated loves of such as Jennifer Coates and Sandra Burton, Phillip Stapleton and Mary Somerville, and of many more besides, loves ever-recurring and ever to recur across the generations; but transcending these, there were grand, ennobling, edifying, awesome and awful forms of love that, in the oratory of the evangelist, consumed the universe. – And how that love consumed! The martyrs and saints were witness to it; and the centuries, the millennia, and the continents; and art and poetry and liturgy; and the wind-touched crosses and the tombstones, and the cenotaphs and shrines, in nation and nation and nation – witnesses all to love set, so often virulently, against love, the same alchemy of worship and loyalty influencing contending Roman and Israelite, Moslem and Greek, Mongol and Kurd, Frenchman and German. To love was to suffer, true, all true; but to love was also to hurt, and, in the name of love, Love, Higher Love, – divine, national, brotherly-sisterly love – to burn, to hang, to disembowel, and to crucify, behead and gas, even as one bowed the knee – sing Gloria in Exelsis Deo – to praise, to honour, to glorify, to pledge, and to affirm. O, how love could straddle the sublime and the malignant, the splendiferously wondrous and the heinously mean! What bliss it could be, and yet what hell; what ecstasy and yet what villainy; what force towards creation, and yet what harbinger of devastation!

I continued to look outside. Brenda Lysterfield and her boyfriend had moved on. To what place, to what future, I could only guess. I wished them luck. I wished them freedom, too, freedom from the ravages of their affection. And I wished them more, more: a recognition, and a taste, however fleeting, of the purity of their affection, a taste of that jewelled purity such as I myself had known, myself had savoured in that precious moment when I, so long ago, and yet not really so

long ago, had stood outside Union House and watched Joanne, so bright, so brilliant and so immaculate in green, approach and felt my pulse quicken with her coming and felt, too, my every pore fill with hunger and thirst and need for her.

And I felt something of that now, too, as I stood before the surgery window, and, touched by a sudden idea, a happy thought, I teetered in wavering uncertainty. I saw Mary emerge from the fruiterer's carrying her calico bag, and saw near the corner Mrs Rafferty approaching the surgery. Joanne would still be home. Twenty minutes remained before she collected Julia from school. There was still time to act.

Heading for the telephone, I sensed the final lifting and dispersal of the morning's temper. I felt through all that I had seen and recognised bracingly washed and fresh and clean. And restored, reinvigorated, renewed. Quickly, breathing heavily – almost an adolescent again – I dialled, waited, listened.

Joanne answered the phone, her voice as ever mellow, open, rendered that bit musical by its terminal enquiring lilt.

'Ye. . .es?'

'It's only me,' I said. 'I just wondered . . .'

'Oh?'

'Wondered if we should go out to dinner . . . The three of us . . . You, Julia, me . . . Alone . . . I shan't be late home.'

'That *would* be nice,' she said. 'Should I book La Cocotte for six-thirty?'

Could I but reach physically across the distance! – I saw her full cheeks, her faintly-freckled nose and the dimples beside her mouth and remembered, too, her photograph as a girl just Julia's age, a child smiling, squinting into the sun, unaware of her future, but deserving only good of it, not hurt, nor dislocation, disruption or pain. I wanted to say 'I love you', but felt the expression to be mawkish, hopelessly trite and even in its honesty desperately inadequate and pale.

Instead I said, 'Yes, six-thirty's fine,' and added, 'Will you wear the opal pendant and those matching earrings? The green . . . they suit you . . . they . . .'

I did not finish. Mrs Rafferty was entering now, just ahead of Mary Somerville coming up the steps.

'Must go now,' I said. 'See you tonight.'

I knew Mrs Rafferty's complaint in advance.

'It's me 'usband. 'e drinks 'is fill o' beer, then tries ta' knock the daylight out o' me, then falls on 'is knees an says 'e loves me 'e does, falls on 'is knees and' says 'e loves me...'

But I was ready for her, I was ready for all the frailties and turmoil, all the caprices and waywardnesses of that magnificent volatile ever-boiling ever-brimming ever-restless human chemistry that claimed that name 'humanity'.

Let them come, I thought as I ushered chirpy long-suffering hardy Mrs Rafferty into the consulting room.

Let them come, I thought, all boredom, jadedness and gloom lifting off from me.

Let them come I thought, let them come, I thought. For humanity I am ready.

I am ready.

I am ready.

Let them come.