

Two Letters

So, my dear – dearest – Noelene, you are engaged. Believe me, I do wish you well. Without irony, without stint, without the slightest reservation. In a universe of chaos where happiness is at a premium, cling even to its shadow. Jelly-like, a fragment of slippery protoplasm, happiness has a habit – no, a penchant – for eluding the grasp. I know. And I fancy that you are aware how I know. Mine are hands smeared with butter. I pray that, caught in the clasp of your own, your happiness may even grow. You see, I do believe in the possibility of happiness, only not in its eternity. And that is why I refused to let you ruin your life.

I gave you other reasons, of course. – I was too old for you. My existence was a winding-down, a waiting, a filling-in of time before the inevitable; I didn't have the energy, or the thrust, to begin again; why should a young woman burden herself with an aging man's swelling prostate or cantankerous moods or the hardening of arteries and grey matter into the strait-jacketed rigidity of thought, behaviour and expectation?

And yet, in a sense, I did love you, though I do use the word 'love' in my own particular way. Its conventional meaning I have come to hate; it is almost lascivious in a man of fifty-eight when applied to a girl just out of school (I exaggerate, true, but twenty-four, even with a PhD in the offing, is scarcely the age of full-blown maturity – and you must remember that both my daughters, Judith and Michelle, are older than yourself).

In any case after Joanna, I distrust the word intensely. What we call love is a sieve full of holes. Into it, I once poured torrents of feeling, often violent and irrepressible, whole cataracts of it, but it all streamed out from underneath. An artist is more exotic than a molecular biologist, so who can blame Joanna whose interests ever lay in macrame and mosaics, batik and sculpture, for leaving my world of cold facts and reductionism for that of art and inspiration? As a fully-fledged biologist yourself, you know what I mean, though, mercifully, you are able to divorce yourself, through youth, love, indeed through your very biological instincts, from the implications of biological truth. Your glands are still fresh. Those chemicals coursing in your blood are at their peak, exciting desires and passions that romantics and poets – and the more sensitive psychologists, bless them – label ‘love’. And that is a sign of health. But my own glands – they are atrophied. Physically, I am a man still – that, if I may be so crude, you already know (what a lapse of common sense that night was on my part!) – but distasteful as the thought may be, you involved yourself with an emotional castrato. When I say then, that I loved you, I use the word as a tool of convention, because I know no other more accurate to describe a constellation of desires – a desire to see your freshness preserved, a desire that you may never grow bitter, a desire that you may never age, that you may not undergo the same process of decay that all ‘flesh is heir to’, that you may never die. It is not the adolescent love spent in ogling and – forgive me – in sublimated masturbation, nor of the young adult flesh, throbbing to cling to a woman as its own. It is something more desperate, more of a protest, a desire to oppose and conquer death. And just as I would not wish that you waste your best years nursing my decay, I could not live, I swear it with the ever-present sense of your own ultimate mortality.

That is hardly something I could tell you outright.

When I received the invitation to your engagement upon returning from the laboratory last night, I thought a great deal about you. I sat in the dark, smoked, played Vivaldi – your

favourite – remembered the timid fledgeling who joined my department as a research assistant. It was shortly after Joanna left. Judith was already in Boston with her psychiatrist husband, and Michelle – needles in her flesh – was tramping around Europe, visiting every theatre, gallery and museum, dreaming of ultimately breaking on to the stage. In the dark I sat and remembered. The telephone rang twice but I just sat there. A breeze rustled the curtains through the open window but I made no move to shut it. Cars passed, a drunkard swore, I tasted the salt of the sea. The only times I moved were to turn the record over, first one side, then another, then the first again. Strange, but above the smoke of my cigarette, I could smell the cinnamon in your hair and when I shut my eyes, you stood before me, or rather bent over me, dressed in luminous green, pendant dangling, broad ribbon holding back your hair, your fingers long and supple, and pliant like a pianist's. I grasped them between my hands to offer praise for a project well done, and remembered the quiver of your body as you my fledgeling sprouted wings right under my eyes and, brazenly if I may say so, touched, then took my hand and drew it to your cheek. Noelene, Noelene! I was older than your own father! And right among the petri dishes, pipettes, incubators and tissue cultures. What would young Russell, so earnest a technician, have thought had he entered at that moment? Why do I mention Russell? You may never have noticed, but his eyes, his *eyes*, whenever you were close by – they clung to your very breath. Poor boy! How his juices must have flowed! The first to arrive in the morning, the last to leave, just to be close to you for as long as he could. And then when you left the department to lecture at the Institute, how that boy's bubble must have burst. At quarter past nine, we were still waiting for him. He rarely smiled. And come four o'clock, he couldn't leave the place quickly enough. He left a month later, said he was going abroad for six months, and would then return to full-time study. What precisely, he would decide while overseas. And – would you believe it? – he is back with me. He lay bricks for three months, sold ties and socks for another three,

worked his juices out of his system and now works as diligently as ever. But he *is* studying at least, one sure gain. Physiology. Part-time. You enchantress, Noelene, you!

What followed your overture was natural enough, though to this day, I can't really forgive myself. I find my excuse in biology that plays havoc with a man's appetites. Like the Ancients who blamed the stars, I find it easier to blame those deranged colliding atoms, that pandemonium of bristling molecules, than to face responsibility for my own lapse, and I console myself with the fact that the same pandemonium – though, in one so young, more excusable – must have possessed you as well. But there is conscience after all, though I know – yes, I do know, Noelene – that conscience, too, when reduced sufficiently is merely the manifestation of the interplay of molecules on a different plane. Politicians find refuge in demagoguery, mass murderers in ideology, the clergy in theology, and I, weak flesh, in biology. The devil, overworked genius, assumes many guises.

Biology. – What to me has always been so self-evident. Joanna could never accept. But then she was – or, rather, became – the artistic type. She rediscovered her interest – and her talent – late in life when the girls were virtually fully grown and when her hands sought activity that would offer, as she put it, some deeper meaning to her existence. From there on, our lives seemed to part. She felt with time the pressure of her age. Eight years younger than myself, she felt, at forty-six, that she was wasting herself, that her life was slipping away, unmarked by any tangible accomplishments other than the commonplace ones of raising daughters and seeing that her husband was fed when he returned from work. I understood her. I did. But my teaching, my research work, the administration of the faculty, as you know, Noelene, claimed the greater part of me. Joanna, acting finally and resolutely in pursuit of her own fulfilment, enrolled in a string of adult education classes and visited galleries and art displays for which, I confess, I had little taste or appreciation. My bent had always been scientific – though, where Joanna failed, you at

least did teach me the beauty of a Vivaldi concerto, the elegance of a Botticelli or the merit of books other than Sherlock Holmes mysteries or Agatha Christie thrillers. So, Joanna often went alone to savour of artistic fare, and one day returned, burning, declaring that she was trapped, that she was stifled, that she wanted freedom – absolute freedom – alone, to paint, to sculpt, to create. That I could accept. Even an obsession is biological. Like her waning periods, her nocturnal flushes, her middle-life ‘blues’. I was prepared, therefore, to bear with that obsession, expecting, as so often happens, the flame to wilt, the simmering cauldron to cool and the vapours to condense once more to sober sanity. But the fire burned more ardently than I had appreciated. She left. That hurt. But what hurt more was the fact that she did not remain on her own. – And here is the irony – or is it a paradox? Joanna is not really free – she is now living with an artist (himself a widower with children), while I, who never sought her kind of freedom, *am* free, and yet in freedom *am* shackled to a solitude I did not want.

In any case, while we still lived together, how was I to persuade *her* who had artistic inclinations that biology – molecular biology at that – explains all workings of life from the molecule to the gene, from gene to cell, from cell to organism, from organism to species; how clarify that biology provides an understanding even of the historical process of life of which a human being is a part, that it explains the functioning of his body, of his mind, his emotions, of his society, and indeed of the entire living environment with which he must come to terms?

True, there was no need to persuade her (you, yourself, model of tolerance for one so young, said as much). But the truth is – or was – that I did like to have things my way. From Judith and Michelle, I did not expect too much concurrence. After all, why deprive them ahead of time of their youthful idealism, their illusions, their – one may even call it – utopianism, in which men are perfectible through their own inner essential goodness or through a belief in God, and in

which the very direction of all human history is towards perfection? That, at least, was Judith's view – a hybrid undigested melange of Plato, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau and Marx (yes, Marx) – before she married her psychiatrist husband Norbert. Michelle was more flippant, flighty, her thoughts ever circuiting an orbit lit by floodlights in which she coursed, an Ophelia, or Lady Teazle or some faint-hearted Masha or Anna or Hedda or Julia, swooning and declaiming, scheming and suffering, basking in the fancied plaudits of critics, audience, admirers. Such vanity. Michelle, Michelle. Dark-eyed and dreamy, a freak mutation of my complement of genes. But Joanna! Joanna was adult, and intelligent – that, I never denied, even those few times you and I did talk about her (something I was naturally loathe to do) – a graduate in history and French, a teacher at Northcote High, the main force behind the students' magazine and co-ordinator of the library. She, at least, *understood* what I said about biology, but *accept*, no, she couldn't. If the molecule is all, she asked, where does music fit into your scheme? And art? And free will? And thought, love (that word again), motherliness, charity, ambition, evil? And curiosity, judgement, foresight, faith? Were these not, indeed your own questions when I made my views known to you? Though, I must confess, Noelene, that from you I had expected acceptance to match understanding. After all, a scientist, a biologist, *my* protege. Which proves yet again an observation I made: how easily people, even intelligent people, sever feeling from knowledge, emotion from reason.

No, Noelene, I don't accuse you of anything, I swear, lest by accusing you of inconsistency I accuse you also for being human.

Which, in a perverse way, reminds me of my faux pas at the beach today.

And what was I doing by the beach? You scarcely need to guess, Noelene. I, for whom sentiment, like everything else, is the product of a particular configuration of cells activated by a spurt of chemical substances – let's call them, after our own

private language, plasma and cerebral x-y-z – yielded to unabashed sentimentality. I went there to see again your eyes squinting in the sunlight, your immaculate body glistening velvety under its glow, your cinnamon-scented hair stippled with sand. I went there to hear again your rhythmic voice, your sensible laughter, your breath as you napped lightly, your head cradled in the cove of my neck. I went there to be a fool again, Noelene, yes, a fool, seeking to recapture time and love and a happiness that my buttered fingers let slip through into a gorge in which it vanished beyond salvage.

I was drinking coffee at a table outside Bill's Fish Grill, a stone's throw from the pier – our pier, remember? Every seat was occupied, the noise rose several decibels above comfort, peace was at a premium. Around me sat a few docile families and aging couples, but mostly the babel arose from a score of young people, the girls in tight, flimsy and colourful bathing costumes that sharpened their features, the youths bare-chested, bronzed, jaunty, vain. Three harassed waitresses incessantly weaving circles between the tables could scarcely keep up with their orders; sweat stained the armpits of their orange dresses. Far out on the razor-edged horizon cleaving blue from blue, a liner floated easily, barely moving. I saw your face among the passengers, Noelene, sailing away out of my existence once and for always, and then – horrors – my own, saw it with a rivetting suddenness as if I was sundered in two, with an odd sensation of disintegration, the one part escaping, with you, towards a freedom immaculate and hedonistic, the other tethered to a bondage, of habit, age, propriety and self, that cold rational self that would call such freedom mad anarchy – anarchy not of behaviour, nor of feeling, but of that overheated x-y-z that would scramble the very fabric of common sense. Even in my imagination, you see, Noelene, I cannot truly let myself go. Our love, our love-making – we are both adult, so we may be frank – was an anomaly, not unpleasant to be sure, nor from the sensuous side to be wholly regretted, but still counter to the grain of wisdom and reason. A man of fifty-eight – who knows but that Judith

over there in Boston might at any time make of me a grandfather? —, a girl of twenty-four, the one winding down, the other straddling the threshold of life in all its fullness, the one blighted, the other blooming; and both scientists, given to rational thought, deduction and insight who, knowing the source of desires and passions from their most primitive well-spring, might the better have been expected to control them. Noelene, my dear, my dearest. Conscience, conscience, conscience. A hammer on the anvil of human weakness.

I drank one cup of coffee, then ordered a second, this time with a generous slice of chocolate cake, and continued to look for you — on the sand, in the shallows, among the waves. All around me were young people, chattering, boasting, joking laughing. Judith's age, Michelle's, yours, and younger still. I was an intruder, together with an old overweight couple who sat fanning the afternoon heat from their faces. At the table to my left sat a sun-tanned girl with just your hair, your breasts, your thighs. She was slender, clear-complexioned; her brow was smooth, her cheeks full, her chin and nose somewhat sturdy, sturdy but elegant, just short of harshness. A young fellow held his arms about her; she held his hand, sipped cola and listened with a leisurely smile to the talk. Were I a sculptor, I should have for all time chiselled and smoothed that picture into stone.

Instead I nearly lost my head. It could have been the sun or the noise or the awareness of youth lost or the crushing knowledge of your engagement. I have not been able to admit it until now, but to deny is to lie.

A man is an animal. But no animal is a fool. I came close today.

Over coffee, I listened to the banter of the young folk around me — in the main, inconsequential talk of sport, clothes, parties, music and the ever-reliable back-biting gossip that is customary fare. Their faces, bronzed, at ease, glowed with health, their bodies burned with unabashed hunger. And if their laughter was any indication, they were happy. Happy, Noelene! Happy! Even ecstatic! And do you know why? Be-

cause their happiness was not a Pandora's box; they did not look into the source of their happiness, did not reduce it to the basic level of reflex or response or upsurge of serum x-y-z, did not see themselves as wound-up biological automata created by the chance merging of one egg among thousands with one sperm among millions, but rather, however deluded, as free beings full of potential and vigour and boldness, able to scale the mountains, the jagged peaks and the tyrannies of life. I know the feeling, Noelene, I too was young once. And it was not for me to disillusion them. Their happiness was thrice a hundred times blessed, if the word be no heresy for so God-denying a savant as I.

But here came the aberration. It was I, I, Professor Carlbach, Head of the School of Molecular Biological Research, apostle of reason and exponent of action founded on the fundamental base of verifiable knowledge, whose biochemistry became scrambled. Sitting in their midst, I became infected with and yielded to their sense of freedom, of future, of purposefulness. Under the afternoon sun, amid the babel, memories – of Joanna, of you, of fancies long withered and crumbed – stirred within me and stretched themselves as from an over-long hibernation. Mortised into a pivot enclosed by youth, and tension gathering in my arms, my thighs, my spine, I wanted to reach out to them, to touch them and enter into their chatter as though I were their peer. My words, Noelene, may not have been these, but their sense was the same: 'Take me in with you; let me be a part of you. My hair, yes, it is turning grey, I know, and wrinkles, true, nests of them, betray my age. They are the mere workings of biology. But our language, our *language* – no, not our mere spoken words, but the passions behind them – this is the same. Through language we are one. Share with me your youth, I shall give you wisdom. Teach me joy and I shall give you understanding. Let me reach out and we shall be one.'

And I did reach out, Noelene. That is the insane part of it. That girl with your hair, your breasts, your thighs. Someone waved at her and threw her a greeting. She responded. Her

smile was a flicker, a flutter so delicate and tantalising that it made me catch my breath. Inadvertently, I sat upright and reached out in her direction. She was scarcely three feet from me. Had she sat a hair's breath closer! Had I bent towards her a fraction more! How her skin burns under my fingers even now, Noelene, even though, fortune be thanked, I did not touch. I stopped short but she perceived my movement. With a startled jerk, she turned her face squarely towards me. Her lips trembled faintly, her eyes narrowed, her entire back stiffened with a tense bristling motion. I looked away, trained my gaze upon the liner now traversed the breadth of the bay, even looked directly into the sun that the pain may sear my thoughts, but I kept turning to her, her softness gelled into frosty caution. She leaned towards her companion and whispered in his ear. Glancing glacially at me, he nodded. Then, standing up, they gathered together their belongings – he, his towel, cigarettes and sunglasses, she, her handbag – bade their group farewell, turned their backs to me and, hand clinging to hand, strode away. Impulse bade me run after them, call out 'I meant nothing by that, come back, I am not what you think.' But they were lost in the crowd. I sat at my table, mortified, my hand encircling the cup of coffee grown cold, every filament of my being feeling suddenly old, decrepit, morally base.

Shortly after, I left.

A mild breeze drifted in from the sea but for me it reserved its sharpest teeth.

I did not return home immediately. The prospect of four walls echoing my desolation repulsed me. I drove instead to the laboratory, expecting among the incubators and refrigerators, the pipettes and flasks, and the dishes and tissue cultures to find restored a measure of stability to the ground on which I stood.

I was alone. The day being a Saturday, the laboratory was vacant. I moved among the benches, touching their solid surfaces, checking the solutions, even throwing feed into the cages for the mice.

I lingered on in the empty laboratory, undecided whether to remain or leave for home – whether to trade one solitude for another.

On my desk lay the draft of my projected Morgan Wynn Steele Memorial Oration entitled 'Biology and the Liberation of the Self.'

Almost snorting, I flipped through its pages, turned to the concluding paragraph and read.

'More than in any previous time, we may say with the strength of conviction that biology yields knowledge, knowledge leads to understanding, understanding to the liberation of the self and liberation to self-control, reason, happiness and peace.'

I gathered together the pages of the draft; biting my lip, I struck the flapping sheets against my palm. Despite the pain, Noelene – what else, if not pain? – I must admit I saw the joke.

Joanna appeared before me then, and Judith, Michelle, the bronzed young faces around the tables outside Bill's, that nameless girl with your breasts and your hair, and in their faces, their gestures, and their laughter I read with a clarity so luminous that what knowledge had until then informed me to be true was in its outward expression patently false. For knowledge and happiness, Noelene, are no kith and kin and one may say – and, ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, I do say! – that happiest may he be who is liberated from knowledge and released from reason.

Without remorse, I threw my oration into the waste basket where its pages came apart, then locked the laboratory and left for home.

I drove through streets cool and subdued. The evening breeze stirred in the trees. Here and there, a window came alive with light. People hurried or ambled along, each on his own course, each circuiting in his private constellation of thought and feeling and purpose. And from within the walls of my own decrepit solitude, I felt love towards them, Noelene, love even for their delusions which I had scorned, and for their caprices, their frivolities, their spontaneity, for their every

action which showed that they were free. For happiness is freedom – if not true freedom, a biological impossibility, then the *perception* of freedom which permits a man to live at ease with his delusions and his caprices, his follies and his fantasies, his appetites and inconsistencies. And for the second time I was prepared shamelessly to reach out, and, by reaching, to break the walls enclosing me and to trade my knowledge for their freedom.

And that is why, Noelene, I am prepared to be a fool again, even if it means damnation, and to appeal to you, even now, to return, to help me let go, to free myself from the tyranny of reason and propriety through which I lost you before. Love is a sieve full of holes, yes, I know, I said so before, and yet, without any lasciviousness intended in a man of fifty-eight for a girl of twenty-four, I love you. But, believe me, it is a changed love, a love prepared to take you as you are, prepared, as it was not before, to risk the fading of your freshness, to risk your growing bitterness, and to risk living with the sense, however desperate, of your ultimate mortality.

I believe in happiness, Noelene. Dare I, dare I cling to hope?

Emanuel.

Dear Noelene,

Congratulations. Believe me, I do wish you well. I shall be pleased to accept the invitation to the reception in honour of your engagement.

Emanuel.