

VOICES FROM THE CORNER

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In honour of my fiftieth birthday, Gilbert Curtis, editor of *Empyrean* which had for more than twenty-five years published my work, invited me to write an autobiographical piece.

Reluctant at first, I let myself fall to Gilbert's honey-tongued persuasion, and, to do the assignment justice, thought it best to retrace the landmarks of my life, beginning with a visit to those homes of my childhood that had been the earliest mainsprings in my evolution as a writer: the welfare boarding-house in Carlton's Pitt Street; our first home in Coburg; the milk-bar in St Kilda's High Street; and, later, our flat in Barkly Street nearby.

Where, however, the Pitt Street boarding-house had stood, there was now a playground; the Coburg house had become a nursing-home; and the milk-bar had long before been levelled to allow for widening of the road. Only the Barkly Street block still remained, a dismal, grey and grubby-faced affair, an irremediable eyesore short of total demolition in its torpid small-windowed ponderousness - a far cry from the bright and spacious home I had come, long after, to acquire before a cascade of domestic upheavals compelled me to return full circle to a flat.

I had lived in that dreary three-roomed Barkly Street block for more than half my life to that time, having moved there when I was twelve and out again fourteen years later as a groom - on the one hand, seeming now but yesterday, on the other, a millennium past; yesterday because it had scarcely changed a jot, a millennium because so much else had taken place in the near-quarter-century that had passed since then. And the uncanny thing was that even as I walked up the path towards Flat No.7 that had been my home for so long and touched here a brick, there a window-ledge, here a balustrade, there a cob-webbed vent, I saw, I swear - I actually saw, however fleeting - at their windows, in their doorways, on the steps, or in the rear yard, a goodly number of my one-time neighbours: the Gibsons and the Riches, the Rubins and the Horovanskys, the Valoises and the Callanders, a motley lot, storekeepers and fitters, fruiterers and scrap-metal dealers, leather-workers and machinists. Mr Valois alone, Claude Valois, being an accountant, was a cut above them all - he had always been a cut above us all - and, stiff-backed, high-nosed and bespectacled, bore himself with the full knowledge of the fact, a man who looked straight along the raised scarp of his nose at Jack Rubin, say, our dealer in second-hand goods; who frowned constantly when we, the boys, and girls, came out to play our games; who, without the least pretence at an "Excuse me," pushed aside anybody in his way; and who, on summer nights, emerged *en famille* (wife and two snooty daughters and one other, giggly one) with deck-chairs to hog the whole backyard there to savour whatever warmth the evening had to offer. Louis Valois truly hated Jack Rubin; ever-sweaty, ever-swearing Jack Rubin, in his turn, thumbed his own nose at Louis Valois. With their hate taking up the extremes, all else that passed between the other tenants, however cool or correctly cordial, might have touched the hem of family affection.

Within an instant, they were all gone, these older adults tangential to my youth. But those who appeared in their place now as I walked on like some foreign tourist eyeing all, were of my own one-time more sporting, larkish, and, in the case of the girls, coquettish crowd. Before me, just as I reached Mickey Rich midway along the path, he leapt with a triumphant "Howzat!" as the ball he had bowled at Marty, at "Farty", Callander struck the fruit-box they'd been using as a wicket; Kevin Gibson, "Rabbit" because of his buck-teeth, seemed to take that as his cue for turning cartwheels; pint-sized Lindy Horovansky hooped her hoop around her knees to the self-applauding clapping of her hands; Rita Rubin, as whackingly adipose as her mother and foul-mouthed as her father, stuck her head out of her window to the blare of Bill Haley coming from her radio; while, leaning against a wall, all of fifteen, pouting her breasts and rolling her hips, stood the giggly one of the Valois girls, "Friskie Frenchie", Dominique, who, were Claude Valois but to catch her like that, there would have been murder in the camp.

Had I not come for a very specific purpose, I might well have joined them in their antics as I had done all those millennia before. Instead, I waved a hand at Mickey and Rita, simply said "Hi!" to "Friskie" in her every-curve-enhancing yellow summer frock, "How're tricks?" to "Rabbit" and moved on. For their part, they continued as before. Oddly, I may as well not even have been there, and, as I turned into the second entrance towards my former home, I wondered, in passing, whether anyone in those flats had ever read, or indeed had as much as heard of, the books, *In Southern Haven*, for instance, or *Jesters under One Moon*, or *Spokes in Fortune's Wheel*, or the most recent, *The Fallen Raised Up* that "Bookworm" Dudi Rivkin in No. 7 had eventually gone on to write. I could not imagine it; but then what did I know of their eventual paths?

Outside No.7, the mat was frayed, the step was chipped, and the mesh of the outside door was tattered. The inside door stood wide open. I looked in through the mesh, listened, heard nothing, and let myself in. The flat had lost none of its familiar gloom. The passageway, as always, smelled of naphthalene balls placed in certain corners to ward off moths; a deep diagonal crevice ran the length of one wall; stock Coles landscapes of Nice and Lake Lucerne hung on the other; the overhead globe was hooded by a matt-pink 'fifties lampshade; while the carpet was the same threadbare sickly sea-weed green long in need of replacement. In the living-room beyond the hall, my father lay on the sofa, sleeping, while from the kitchen to the right there issued a periodic hiss which came, I recognised, from beneath the iron with which my mother must have been pressing the week's washing just taken down from the line.

As I looked in, Mother raised her head. She smiled; faintly, rocking her shoulders ever-so-slightly, forward and back, forward and back, without for a moment pausing in her ironing of a handkerchief. Then she spoke, doing so, however, in the tone of one coming out from a trance.

"I'm glad you're here, David'l," she said. "You really have been away a long time. And, having been away for so long, Dudinke, have you found what you once wanted so? Now that you have all those books behind you, have you?"

She did not wait for answer. She simply ironed down the last fold of the handkerchief before her, set it aside on a pile of clothes already done, and took up one of Father's shirts. I could have been to her but a fleeting image. She might have thought that, had she reached out, she would have encountered nothing but void.

I stood there awhile, for my part actually reaching out but not fully reaching. I watched her, a breath beyond my outstretched fingers, as, with bent head and an arm sweeping the iron to and fro, to and fro along a sleeve, she set to humming a tune, a lullaby, whose words I remembered from the times she had still sung to me:

"You're the only, you're my only,
My most precious in the world,
Ai-li-liu-li-liu."

From then on, I remained in the kitchen just long enough to take in again the white, scratched enamel sink, the old green Metter oven and stove, the calendar on the wall with the platinum blonde on the bonnet of some primeval Holden, and the alarm clock, still unreplaced, with the angled minute-hand ticking to a rhythm of its own that slowed time's passing by two minutes every hour. "At this rate," Father, not generally a comic, had once quipped, "we'll be having fifty-four weeks Rivkin-time each year to everyone else's fifty-two."

I was about to proceed towards the lounge-room where Father slept - he had evidently been reading, for the morning *Age* lay askew across his chest - when I heard a rustling of papers and the thud of a book in the room to the left that had formerly been mine. The door was ajar and, on looking through the breach and then entering, I saw a youngster in school pullover, open collar and college-cut bent over his desk. Not only the desk - chipped and narrow, ink-stained and scratched, and second-hand long before it came to me - was, in its every detail, familiar; but no less the very turmoil on its surface, the jungle made up of history books and physics texts, mathematic manuals and atlases, Ibsen's plays and the stories of Leibush Peretz, along with papers, pencils and fragmentary notes - all lying higgledy-piggledy under the lamp whose cone of light fell stingily upon a dull and matt-papered sixpenny pad.

For all the evidence of industry about him, one thing I saw very quickly: he wasn't studying. That is not to say he was not engaged on concentrated work. He was; he was! For, from the way he supported his brow in the palm of a hand, wrote a line, sucked at his pen, then struck it out, only to proceed instantly to another idea, he was concertedly engrossed in assiduous busyness. But what he worked on bore as much relation to his studies as tepees to Alaska. None of his texts, for instance, was open; there were no formulae, chemical symbols, tables, graphs or illustrations in any of the papers on his desk; and what I did recognise were certain names, words, phrases and sentences of a vastly different realm of occupation.

It happened that on returning one time for *Shabbes* from a long journey around the country to sell the boots that were his trade, Yankev Mintz found both his wife, Yocheved, and son, Leibish, abysmally cold. They had used up all the wood they had put away in the shed behind the house, but because it had snowed heavily for the full week since *Shabbes* last, they had been unable to go out to cut and bring home more. Further, they had

eaten all that had been in the pantry, and, as well as being cold, they added hunger to the curses that had befallen them. *Shabbes* was near and they had neither *challah*, nor fish, nor wine.

On reading this over his shoulder, I cried out loud and forcefully, "Dudi!" into his ear, and followed that with "Stop!"

He seemed neither surprised nor put out by my presence. The only acknowledgment he gave me was to hold up his pen in mid-sentence, and return, scarcely diverted, to his work.

They were bewailing their lot when there was a knock at the door. Of all people it could have been, it was a beggar with a calico sack over his shoulders. He was crouched at the door, barely able to hold himself up on his hands.

"I ask for your mercy," he said. "Just a piece of bread...Even the smallest piece will give me back my strength."

"How I wish we could help you," said Yankev Mintz. "But we too do not have as much as a crust. What we had is all gone and we are no better off than you."

"Then I will have to stop here, at your door," replied the beggar, "for I don't have it in me to go on."

"Stop what you're doing!" I said. "If you value living, normal pleasures, happiness, then give this up."

Dudi went on moving pen across paper.

"Give it up?" he echoed, his brow perhaps creasing a jot. "Give it up?"

"Even now," I said. "For the sake of your happiness, your equilibrium, your future, your freedom..."

And sure enough he dropped down and fell with his back against the doorpost.

Looking at the beggar, young Leibish remembered then that several nights before he had been eating a piece of bread in bed, when he had fallen asleep. Struck by an idea, he went to the bed and, lo! there it was, lodged between the bed-covers and the wall. Retrieving it, he took it to his father.

Now, after his long journey, Yankev Mintz was hungry. But his wife, Yocheved also. And certainly his Leibish. And, to complicate matters further, the beggar also.

So Yankev, his wife and his son discussed the matter.

Dudi's cheeks were smooth; he had not yet begun to shave, but a fuzz of darkness above his upper lip showed that he would soon be losing the innocence of unspoiled flesh.

And Yankev said, "For my part, I was taught always to live by faith, by hope and by charity, of which charity is the highest of the three."

And Yocheved said, "And my father said that he who is gracious to the poor lends to the Lord."

And Leibish said, "I too won't take the bread. It will only help my hunger for a while, but if something happens to that man, I will have to live with that always."

"But it's only a story," he said. "And I'm enjoying it. There's no harm in doing what one enjoys, is there?"

"Even heroin can be enjoyed at first," I said. "And that's what writing is, Dudi. Heroin. A drug, with the stakes rising with every fix you take."

Just then, a Johnny O'Keefe song descended with customary full force from Rita Rubin's window. On looking out, I saw Dominique Valois just outside, herself now spinning Lindy Horovansky's hoop; Kevin Gibson let out a whoop just then too in the execution of one of his regular cartwheels; while Marty Callander was heading back to bowl to Mickey.

I turned back to Dudi.

"You want to enjoy?" I said. "Then go out there. Tossing a ball can be fun. Petting "Friskie Frenchie" can be even more so. Or go wrestle with Kevin, chat with Lindy, take yourself off to a football match, a dance, a party."

He flicked a dismissive wrist.

"Kids' stuff," he huffed. "Besides, I want to finish this story for Mary. Mary Hoffman. I want to give it to her."

"Mary? Forget it," I replied. "She'll only laugh at you. I know. And it will hurt."

And so, together they gave the bread to the beggar .

He took it, bit off the tiniest of pieces - scarcely more than a crumb - and returned the rest to Yankev.

"Thank you," he said, "I am satisfied."

With that, he rose from his place. Where, moments before, he had been bowed, wretched and lined, he now stood erect, his earlier dull grey eyes developed a sparkle, all the wrinkles of his face disappeared.

"More than you have restored my strength have you rekindled my trust in man," he said.

Here he left to go his way.

When Yankev Mintz, Yocheved and Leibish turned back indoors, they found a fire burning magnificently in the fireplace, the table was laden with all the silver and food they could have wanted for a *Shabbes* meal, and at its centre stood *Shabbes* candles that, in their home, had never shone more brightly.

Whereupon Yankev Mintz said before washing his hands for the meal, "One can never tell beforehand but that the next man one meets might be Elijah."

"So, your story is finished. It's a nice story. Cute. Folklorish. Something of Peretz in it. Fine. But, Dudi, listen to me. Your navel's not yet wholly dry. You're young still. Choose life, real life, not the stuff of what you must believe is all gossamer or floss. Whatever it might cost you to do so, tear it up. Even now. Scrap it before you go any further. Your shoulders will have burdens in plenty even without this superimposed albatross."

Dudi swept an arm about his bookshelves.

"Someone has to," he said. "*They* all did - Chekhov there. And Dostoevski. And Hemingway. Maupassant. Kafka..."

"And what good did it do them?" I said, cutting him off. "Kafka was an outright neurotic. Maupassant ended up syphilitic. Dostoevski suffered from depressions the blackest that any man can know. Hemingway blew his brains out. Chekhov, like Kafka, died young, both remaining without family. And the time will come when you will learn hard truths about Nietzsche, Gide, our own Itzik Fefer and the Spaniard Lorca."

The window was open and, carrying with it Rita Rubin's music, a breeze swept into the room. It rustled the curtains and caused the papers on the desk to flutter.

"It needn't be like that," he said softly. "It really needn't. I..."

"Of course not," I said, cutting him off again, "not if you are at all sensible and go into, say, carpentry or plumbing or dentistry or doctoring..."

From beneath a textbook titled *College Physics*, Dudi withdrew a stapled sheaf of Jotter paper.

"Dentistry?" he echoed after me. "Doctoring?"

He held out the sheaf to me.

"Here," he said. "Please look at these for me."

I did not need to ask what they were. *Brideshead Revisited* had nothing on this in terms of revisiting. Something long mummified had found its way back into the light of day. The very script, slanting upwards in its crowded minuteness left to right, was, to me, like the proverbial back of my hand.

Nevertheless I did ask.

"What are they?" I said.

"Ideas," Dudi replied. "Ideas for stories. Plans. Characters. Names."

I looked at the top sheet. I read aloud.

"A boy wants to become an artist. But his father pushes him into law."

I stopped reading.

"Here, take it back," I said, thrusting the sheaf back into his hands. "You think I don't know what happens? Of course I know. 'Study. For love of your father, study', his father keeps saying. 'For love of your father, study, study for the law', his mother also urges. And as for the boy?...What, in the end, becomes of him? Weak-kneed that he is, he does become a lawyer. And at what cost? What else if not that of no longer loving his father."

Dudi nodded.

"Yes, that's it. A strong story, no? He becomes a lawyer but no longer loves his father."

"Strong?" I repeated. "Strong? I suppose so. But what the story really needs is a different ending. For the boy should *thank* his father, he should more truly *love* his father, and prostrate himself before his father's feet. And why? Precisely for having guided him to so practical a vocation above the cloud-cuckoo-land conceits, pretensions and self-indulgences of the writer."

"Well, it is only a story," Dudi defended himself. "And what I wanted was simply to give it the strongest ending I could. Someone else might have written it differently. And here," he went on, holding out to me again those stapled sheets, "here are some others. Giuseppe Giuliani, an Italian janitor among the flotsam and jetsam of the commission flats he services. And Raphael Lazarus, artist, portrayer, foreteller of death, bringer of death. And Benny Liner, my plagiarist, who, seeking fame, finds infamy instead. And then Daniel who..."

With what exhilaration Dudi spoke! Seeing him as he was, young, smooth-cheeked and enthusiastic and also as he would in time become, I cut him off, I had to cut him off.

"Yes, yes, Dudi, I know. Daniel, a young man who in wartime Europe goes out among the soldiers in the field to bring an end to the fighting when his appeals to the leaders fall on deaf ears... Yes, Daniel...Do you know what he'll cost you when you finish with him? 'Too many commas,' from a particular Emanuel Glantz. 'Naive!' That from an Abraham Blayer. While another reader, Shaya Cymreich, who really knows what things were like, will pull up a sleeve to show you his number and snort, 'If one writes about Treblinka, one should at least have been in Treblinka.' And you know what will happen then, Dudi? You will write nothing for every bit of six months after that and, what's more, you'll discover the two kinds of blackness that exist in the world: the banal and benign ordinary blackness of night at the end of a day and that other kind that doesn't distinguish between night and day, a million-tentacled blackness that reaches into every rift and crevice of the soul dragging it sometimes, against its every resistance, to the very brink of annihilation."

Dudi heard, I knew, but dismissed it all with the merest shrug of a shoulder.

"They're only stories, for goodness' sake," he said, varying his earlier reply the slightest jot.

"Then, if that's all they are, Dudi," I challenged, "it shouldn't be too hard to tear them up, or burn them, should it?"

His face tightened, his nose hardened, his brow acquired deeper longitudinal creases

"I won't!" Dudi countered, more firmly.

"Oh? But, Dudi, like you said, they're only stories," I pressed.

"I won't!" he repeated, this time with a vehemenceheightened to rank defiance.

"Dudi, Dudi," I said by way of placation. "Listen, just listen."

He was not prepared to listen.

"I want to write, and I'm *going* to write!"

"Just the same, Dudi. Listen. Your heart is in the right place. It's nice to see. But people with hearts in the right place don't fare very well. They get hurt; and, what is more, even without their knowing it, even as they busy themselves creating art, they go about destroying others. Of what value, then, are four books, five books, six books to one's name, when at the end of the day, there is none to welcome one home either with a kiss and a 'How was your day?' or, with the key not yet out of the door, a simple, the most simple 'Hi, Dad.?' Or when his children have, without his noticing, grown up and grown away, when his wife has become something of a stranger, when, on truly needing them, he recognises that his friends are few, what has he then of his art, of his adolescent innocence, of those visions of prestige, fame and adoration he has entertained by the sea, on summits, on...on..."

For some moments, I did not continue. I could not continue. There were times when the merest breath could cause wounds thought healed to fester again and when breath itself could stifle.

I fell silent. Dudi turned to a fresh virgin sheet in his Jotter and picked up his pen. For some time, neither of us moved.

In that interregnum of stillness, I looked out through the window. I saw "Friskie Fenchie" still standing there, Dominique Valois, who had once offered to let me touch her breasts for a bubble gum. I saw Mickey Rich bowling again to "Farty". I saw Lindy Horovansky now skipping to the turns of a skipping rope.

In this way I recovered poise, I recovered voice.

And, standing behind Dudi as he sat in his own silence contemplating the blankness before him, I said, "Dudi, tell me something. Who reads Mendele nowadays, grandfather of Yiddish that he was in his time?"

He did not so much as acknowledge the question.

"Tell me also," I pressed on, "are you prepared, as Sholom Aleichem had to do, to deal with hard straits, with creditors, with bankruptcies?"

I could have spoken to the wind.

But still I pushed on.

"And tell me, too - even while it was once given to them to carry a torch, what do the names Bjornson, Deledda or Undset mean to anyone today? And what will Hemingway, Montale or Seferis mean to anyone tomorrow, not to say anything of Dudi Rivkin?"

I might have been prepared for any counter from him, but it was not from him that the ensuing response came forth. It came from behind me, shrill, forceful, urgent.

"Let him be!" it cried. "Leave off! Let him do as he must!"

I turned. From a corner beside the window, a figure was materialising, a spindly fidgety reed of a man wearing a paint-bespattered brown beret and looking every bit an animated scarecrow.

"Lazarus!" I said. "You!"

The apparition could well have been sneering.

"Yes. Lazarus. Raphael Lazarus. I."

He fixed me with a sharp bird's-eyed gaze and, adjusting his beret over his curly red hair, said also, "What are you trying to do? Are you bent on stopping him, when the time is ripe, from telling my story?"

"*Your* story?" I interposed here. "You *have* no story. Except as a figment of my imagination, you don't even exist."

"Oh, is that so?" he set himself before me, hands on hips. "And the others whose stories you told, they don't exist either, I suppose?"

"I have created you all. You are, all of you, Thumbelinas, Ugly Ducklings, Rumpelstiltskins. Artifices, inventions, my creations one and all."

At that point, Lazarus clicked his fingers and waved his hand over a shoulder.

"Hey, Benny!" he called. "Ziggie, Keppel, Professor, Rosalie, Sztayer, Walshansky... Come forward a moment! You must hear this! We're not real, he says; we're only figments of his imagination."

From the same corner from which Raphael Lazarus had come, those others, too, now emerged. At first, still caught in shadow, they were more form than substance. But form gained flesh, flesh gained features, features gained names. Dudi's room, empty a moment before but for the two of us, was now crowded.

"Benny!" I said. "And Levick, Keppel, Silber, Rosalie Richter, Professor Bainton! And Shraga Sztayer, Kuznitz, Professor Kincaid and Angelika, Nussbaum!"

"So!" said Lazarus with a huff. "We're not real, ha?"

"You are real only to the extent that I gave you reality," I said, holding to my position. "Beyond that..."

"There is no beyond that!"

It was Benny Liner who had cut across, Benny - as I had once described him - rubbing his hay-fevered nose and then passing his fingers through his scraggy third-rate Vaudevillian beard.

"Has it never occurred to you that, as a writer all these years, you have in fact been taking dictation from us; and that if *we* hadn't chosen *you* to tell our stories, it would be *you* who, as a writer, would not exist?"

"I, taking dictation?" I echoed.

"Yes, every word," replied Jefferson Kincaid from his wheel-chair, behind which Angelika, his former student, disciple, now wife, nodded affirmation.

My Professor Kincaid passed a hand through his mane of professorial white hair as he elaborated in his distinguished broad round and resonant tone.

"Every word," he went on, "dictated by vagabond souls that we are, each with a story to tell who will permit no author rest until he has told it. So, you may have believed that, as an aspiring author, it was you who drove yourself so hard all those years. Fact is that all this time you were more truly driven from without."

"By you?" I said.

"By us, who placed all trust in you," said Joseph Silber, absently turning his signet-ring.

"By us," added Shraga Sztayer, as disconsolate as ever over his unpublished poems, "by us, who found in you our truest soul-mate."

"By us!" said Isaac Walshansky. "Chosen by us, you, who, we believed, having grown up amongst our kind, would understand us so well."

I dismissed their claim with a wave of a wrist.

"Bunkum!" I said. "Mystical hoo-ha! What I wrote has all of it been my own invention!"

"You want it to be so?" countered my invented Yiddish teacher, Jacob Kuznitz, contemplative, mediating, in my mind always wise. "Then let it be so. What we are we owe to you. But, just consider, might you in your turn not owe what you are to us?"

"What I am I owe to my art!" I said. "And to hard work, to perseverance through interminable black days and to long sleepless nights sustained on coffee and sheer will and clinging always to a vision that was in every way mine, mine and mine alone! Just as, where there came in time a price to pay along the way, I alone paid it. I! I! And, knowing the price, while there may still be time I want to stop Dudi from having to pay it all over again."

Ziggie Levick, my New York collector, raconteur, impresario, sculptor, flautist and antique dealer, stepped forward. In his seer-sucker suit, gold cuff-links, pure silk tie and Italian shoes, he was as immaculate as ever.

"He has no choice in the matter," he said, waving two index fingers semaphore-liketo press home the point. "No choice."

"No choice?" I repeated.

"None," he said more firmly. "He wants to write. And we are to be his subjects. The artist, if he be true, can only become an artist by becoming servant to his art and, by extension, to the subjects of his art. He is thus our servant..."

"Even if he is destroyed along the way?"

Where Ziggie Levick had opened the theme, the others - Professors Kincaid and Bainton, Angelika, Walshansky, Sztayer, Lazarus, Benny Liner, Rosalie Richter, Joseph Silber, Jacob Kuznitz - each in turn pressed home a point.

"No man, whatever he does, come off lightly. Every man comes in time to carry some heavy baggage or other."

"Meanwhile, he will not be without gain..."

"His art will take him on voyages of inner exploration..."

"He will make great discoveries..."

"Even as he gives life to our souls, so will our souls enrich his own..."

"And he will acquire understanding..."

"And find ways of making people see themselves as they have not done before..."

"And perhaps come nearer to the great secrets of life..."

"And nearer to truth, Truth, capital T, applicable everywhere and for all time..."

"And find honour..."

"Be celebrated..."

"Reap acclaim..."

"And fame..."

"Fame, such as he is already privately hankering after..."

"As you did in your time, wanting to make people notice and applaud you even while pretending that all you wanted to do was to tell stories, entertain, make people laugh, make people think..."

A spring, wound tight within me during that refrain, now uncoiled with intractable rapidity.

"Stop!" I cried out. "Celebration, you promise him? Acclaim? Fame? Oh, yes! But what of the guilt? The alienation from others? The retreat, the failure as husband, father, man? The breaking of his bread alone over dinner? I want to spare him... spare him..."

"He will come through," said my artist Raphael Lazarus, softly, placatingly, the while picking paint off a thumbnail.

"As all men ultimately must," added Benny Liner, who had himself "come through", "and then simply get on with living and with their work..."

"Even as you have done, if I may be so bold as to point it out," said Jefferson Kincaid in his resonant tone.

"But when one is called upon to answer, 'What for?'" I asked, "has any of it been worth the candle? To have given life to a few characters? To have left behind a few books? To have put together a mass of words, destined in time to gather dust in second-hand bookshops, on unvisited library shelves, or in crammed and greasy garages, with none to see the labour pains experienced in their creation, the sweat, the real-life mutinies, the price attending their issuing into the light?"

With forefinger and thumb, I rubbed the inner corners of my eyes, and took deep breath.

"Is any of it worth the candle?" I repeated. "Is it? Is it?"

When I re-opened my eyes, the entire contingent of visitors had disappeared, retreated, I guessed, into the shadows, shadows that were at once my past and Dudi's future.

The only person who remained was Dudi, apprentice to a loner existence hemmed in within the tang of naphthalene, enclosed within the all-pervading, all-too-familiar, old-time mustiness of mildew and dust. Turning back to him I wondered how much he had seen or heard. Probably none of it, I guessed. For he was again immersed in his papers, again writing, scratching, writing, scratching, now checking a word in his dictionary, now seeking another more precise one in his thesaurus.

And I said to him, softly this time, "Dudi! Dudi!"

He did not respond.

I reached for his shoulder but his shoulder gave no sign of having been touched; whereupon I passed my hand across the circle of light fanning out from the lamp, but it cast no shadow, neither on the desk, or his books, nor on the papers before him.

With nothing more to do there, I left the room. In the hallway, I came across Mother who was just then heading towards her bedroom carrying a pile of freshly-ironed clothes.

"Mother," I said, indicating Dudi's room. "Stop him. He doesn't know what he's getting himself into. Stop him while there is still a chance."

"Stop him?" Mother said. "Stop him?"

"Yes, he might yet listen to you."

Mother clasped her ironing more closely to her chest and rocked her head.

"As you listened then, David'l, mm," she said, "when you sat in that same place where Dudi sits now and I said, 'Go out and play with the others, get some fresh air, get some sun?'"

With that, Mother turned to pass through the lounge-room where my father stirred momentarily, raised his head, saw me and returned to his sleep, rejecting again his writer son who had long before declined to follow the law for love of his father.

And so I left. I stepped out to the path now leading away from No.7, where Mickey Rich was again bowling to Marty Callander, where Kevin Gibson executed a somersault, where Rita Rubin leaned forward with arms akimbo on her window sill with Ray Charles now singing behind her, and where Lindy Horovansky still hooped the hoop, and "Friskie Frenchie" Dominique passed an inviting hand down along a butting hip. What had become - what was to become - of them that they might escape this enclave of dreary cob-webbed and dust-encrusted drabness? I had never found out, but in a story I came to write, I had Mickey sensibly become an import clerk, Marty a newsagent, Kevin a plumber, Lindy a travel consultant, Rita a shopgirl and Dominique owner-manager of a boutique, each married with a child or two or three, each always taking holidays *en famille*, celebrating birthdays, anniversaries and festivals with hoo-ha - balloons, streamers, candles, cake and all - none of them concerned with anything but the day, or with others' lives, others' souls, and not one of them hostage to words, words dictated from the ether and giving one's life meaning wholly through the redemption of the lives of others.

So I left.

And when, with the deadline approaching, Gilbert Curtis called me about my piece for his *Empyrean*, I told him I'd been ill. I'd come down with influenza, I said, then with a protracted bronchitis, although had he seen me, he would have found a man, at fifty, variously roaming St Kilda's streets, clinging to its shopfronts, pausing before the entrances to Luna Park, the Palais and the Palais de Danse, and coursing nightly along its beach, and, on seeing this, might have recognised that, in that man's search and retracing of his still-unspoiled youth, his malaise ran deeper by far than any wrestling with bronchitis.

In the end, however, I wrote that piece. The occasion being reason for celebration, I celebrated. My readers learned that I had begun writing at sixteen in a pokey Barkly Street flat, that I had always found writing an exhilarating process and exquisite challenge, and that little could so raise one as the flights of mind and imagination experienced in the throes of creation. To write was also, so they learned from me, to take dictation, to endow reality to itinerant disembodied beings out there crying out for life, to explore and discover, to acquire understanding and thereby be oneself enriched, as one opened windows to the world and manipulated a multitude of lenses refracting the variegations, complexities and marvels of the soul.

Readers read it; fellow writers complimented me on it. On the strength of it, I received invitations to speak to raw, doe-cheeked, so freshly innocent youngsters at high-schools, to aspiring novices in writing workshops, to assorted clubs and societies, reading groups and forums. Everywhere, I expanded on what I had written in *Empyrean*, just as, everywhere, there were things I deemed more prudent not to tell them.

And how they all fell one after another in near thrall over the things I told them, clinging sometimes to every stone of my carefully erected, inviting and perfidious edifice of lies.

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