

The Storyteller

1

At birth, I sucked milk at my mother's breast. Then at bedtimes, I heard her songs. And then, the age of understanding having come, I listened to her stories.

A rabbi called on the richest man in his town and urged him to donate generously towards the orphanage. The man turned him down. 'Listen,' said the rabbi, 'give me the money and I will offer you my share in Paradise.' The rich man now agreed. 'Done!' he said. Overjoyed, the rabbi used the money to enlarge the orphanage.

When the rabbi's pupils heard of this, they stood aghast. 'Rabbi,' they said, 'how could you possibly do such a thing?' 'My sons,' he replied. 'Twice a day in my prayers I say, "Love thy God with all thy soul and with all that you possess." But children, I am but a poor man. What is it that I possess with which I can serve God? Only my share in Paradise. So, to serve His children, His orphans, it is with this that I must ever be ready to part.'

Once, someone asked Motke Chabad, 'Tell me, Motke, you're a smart fellow. Why are noodles called noodles?'

Motke threw up his hands.

'Ach, what a question to ask!' he said. 'They're long like noodles, no? They're soft like noodles, no? And of course they taste like noodles, no? So – why shouldn't they be called noodles?'

There was warmth, humour, homeliness in that parabolic ambience my mother wrought. Otherworldly rabbis spun wisdom out of the flimsiest gossamer, cantors' tremolos stirred sleeping seraphim to thrall and visionary dreamers built palaces in air, while on firmer ground, garlic-breathed matchmakers oversold their wares, indigent *shlemiels* fell backwards and landed on their faces, and hapless hatters fretted that with their luck people would soon start being born without heads.

She told another story, my mother, another story that etched itself like an engraving into the deepest layers of memory's inconstant and rugged terrain.

A king once decided to build a town and chose the site. His astrologers approved of the place on condition that a child be walled in alive, but brought voluntarily by its mother.

'So it shall be,' said the king, 'but if within three months no mother comes forward, then I shall send forward my soldiers to bring me a child.'

All mothers for miles around came to hear of the king's plan and were afraid. But one mother did go forward voluntarily with her child.

Her friends, though relieved, chided her. 'For a king's whim,' they said, 'you would sacrifice your very blood?' And her husband said, 'Do you so hate me that you can wantonly give up the bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh?' While the child in its turn said, 'Am I to be taken forever from my friends and never be able to grow up like them?'

Nonetheless she came before the king and said, 'This is the child I have brought to you that you may proceed to build your town.'

The king ordered that she be showered with riches and praise. But just as his order was about to be carried out, the mother turned full-face towards him and said, 'Before you take my child, your majesty, may I be permitted to ask three questions of your astrologers? If they answer correctly, may your will be done; however, if not, may your plan be fully revoked.'

'Ask,' said the king; and the mother, turning now to the astrologers, asked, 'What is the lightest, what is the sweetest, and what is the hardest thing in the world?'

The astrologers conferred and in their turn said, 'The lightest is a feather; the sweetest is honey; the hardest is stone.'

Whereupon the mother shook her head and drew the child back to herself.

'No,' she said. 'The lightest thing in the world is an only child in its mother's arms; the sweetest, surely, is the mother's milk to her child; while the hardest, by far and forever the hardest, is for a mother to bring her child willingly to be buried in a wall alive.'

And so were the astrologers confounded, and the child was saved, as were all children who lived in those parts.

If such was that child's mother, so too was she mine – young, lovely, clever, wise, soft and safe – who, as she told me her stories, also ruffled my hair and brushed my cheeks and cupped my chin, while heaving sometimes or rubbing the corners of her eyes, weary from sitting day in day out behind

the treadle of a sewing-machine in a dusty dingy shirt factory in the sultry heat of Flinders Lane. Her very energy depleted, she still found the strength within herself to give. She always gave; she loved to give; she *begged* to give. 'When a parent gives to a child,' – so ran the proverb – 'they both laugh; when the child has to give to its parent, they both weep.' Mother saw to it that in her presence there was only cause for laughter, as also for comfort, and for solace; the laughter, comfort and solace being that which came from giving, even as her own father, my Zaida Natanyahu, to hear her tell of him, must have loved to give.

'Do you know what manner of man was your *zaida*, your Zaida Natanyahu?'

I knew. Yes, I knew. She had told me before. But I asked – begged – that she should tell me again.

At the gates of Paradise a procession of human souls came before the Heavenly Tribunal.

First came a rabbi.

'I am learned in the Law,' he said. 'Night and day I studied the Word of God. Surely I deserve a place in Paradise!'

'Wait!' called out the Recording Angel. 'First we must investigate. We must first satisfy ourselves as to the motives behind your study. Did you, for instance, apply yourself to learning for learning's sake? Or was it to gain personal prestige, or honour, standing or monetary reward?'

Next came an ascetic, a saint.

'How I fasted in the world I left behind!' he said. 'All of the six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* did I observe. Several times a day I bathed and studied the mysteries of the *Zohar* without cease. If anyone merits a place in Paradise, surely it is I!'

'Not so fast,' cried the Recording Angel. 'Of virtue there is plenty, but we are duty-bound to investigate the purity of your intentions.'

Then an innkeeper approached.

'I simply plied my trade,' he said. 'I opened my door to the homeless and fed the hungry and gave to the needy, and had little time left for learning, piety and prayer.'

And the Recording Angel stood aside.

'Open the Gates of Paradise!' he cried.

'*Such* was your Zaida Natanyahu; not an innkeeper, but a printer who would return home with his nails chapped and his fingers black from type, bringing now an apprentice home for dinner, now a fellow member of the Poalei Zion, now a visitor to Warsaw from Lemberg or Bialystok or Lodz. And un-

til ten, eleven or twelve into the night, they would talk over Russian tea and argue and debate, your Buba Guta too, who taught young children in the *folkshule*, sang the ‘The Internationale’ on the First of May, and waved the flag for President Piłsudski. Wise King Solomon had such as her in mind when he wrote his *eshes chayil*, singing the praises of the woman of worth whose price was above rubies, who opened her mouth only in wisdom and spoke with the law of loving-kindness ever on her tongue.

‘And Zaida Lezer?’ I asked then as I had asked so often before. ‘What about Zaida Lezer? And Buba Malke Sheine?’

‘Zaida Lezer?’ repeated Mother, deftly smoothing out my quilt with the palms of her hands. ‘Listen.’

The Baal Shem Tov, accompanied by his disciples, once went on a journey from Mezibuzh to Mezhirich. Late at night they came to a wayside inn. He knocked on the door and asked that he and his disciples be let in. But it was bitterly cold, and the innkeeper refused to get out of bed.

Full with wrath, the Baal Shem Tov called up to the innkeeper, ‘As all these disciples are my witness, I decree that tomorrow your inn shall burn down to ash and cinders!’

Frightened out of his wits, the innkeeper got out of bed, cold as it was, and let the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples enter. He treated them with every hospitality and laid out a feast before them all. Satisfied and mollified by the innkeeper’s eagerness to please, the Baal Shem Tov raised his face unto the heavens and cried, ‘I now decree that this inn shall *not* burn down tomorrow!’

And wonder of wonders! Do you know what happened? It happened exactly as the Baal Shem Tov had said. The good man’s disciples themselves were witness to the miracle. They saw with their own eyes that the inn did not burn down the following day!

‘That was your Zaida Lezer’s favourite story. He was a small man. When he was young he wore a long capote, had a full rounded beard, and had gone first to *cheder* and then to *yeshiva*. But one day he was browsing through the shelves of a library in Praga that overlooked the Vistula, and he discovered ... he discovered ... What did he discover, *Liebeniu*? ...’

‘Spinoza!’ I said, delighting in the sound, so exotic, so exquisite, so rare. ‘Spinoza!’

‘Spinoza, yes. And from Spinoza to your Zaida Lezer, not another *apikoros*, not another heretic like him ever lived. But your Buba, being to her dying day a true *malke sheine*, a most truly lovely queen, in loving God,

also loved her husband, now shaven, hatless and modern in his dress, protected him against the Evil Eye – who must have surely seen his waywardness and been preparing to descend upon him – and waited, waited, waited always, for him to repent and return to God, her God, her people's God, our God. Do you understand all this, *Liebeniu*, do you? If not, you needn't worry; some day you will. As sure as oceans and mountains will never disappear, some day you will, you will understand it all.'

2

In time, other questions surfaced.

'Where are they – Zaida Natanyahu, Buba Guta, Zaida Lezer, Buba Malke Sheine?'

'They are in the heart,' Mother said at first.

Then as I grew older she said, 'In the memory are they.'

And when I had added another notch to my years, she said, 'They have been turned into *dybbuks*. Yes, into *dybbuks* have they been turned.'

'*Dybbuks*?' I said, I asked, I probed.

'*Dybbuks*,' Mother repeated. 'Souls that, released from an earlier body, ever find newborn ones to enter, that they may themselves within each live on and live through the generations, one after another, until the coming of *Mashiach*; yes, until that time when the Messiah will come and the bones and spirits of all who have ever lived will regain human flesh and be filled again with human breath, and will worship with never-ceasing song and praise Almighty God Who created the world and Who created man and created the notion of perfection that is given to every man to strive for, with the very possibility of ecstasy on its attainment.'

For some time Mother said no more about my *zaidas* and *bubas* but, with Father as ally, diverted me with books instead, with the fantasies and fables, allegories and folktales from their own one-time coming of age: in short, with the webs of narrative woven by Sholom Aleichem and I. L. Peretz, by Nachman of Bratslav and Mendele Mocher Sforim, who, in homely endearing prose, told of beadles and milkmen, matchmakers and cantors, kabbalists and simpletons, sinners and orphans and *shlemiels*, amongst a crowded multitude of others besides; to the point that while the ground I trod daily was that of Melbourne's St Kilda, and the trees I climbed and the fences I scaled and the parks where I ran were fixedly antipodean and of the

here and now, yet was my head ever gliding on clouds that swept over such places as Yehupetz and Kasrilevke, Tunayadevka and Cherkassy, exotic little villages and *shtetls* that were real, more real, and mine, more mine, than even neighbouring Elwood and Armadale and Elsternwick and Caulfield where I went to school or Yiddish classes or to *shul* sometimes.

3

As I neared my Barmitzvah, other names came to the fore. Interspersed with talk of *dybbuks* and *Mashiachs*, of Evil Eyes and women of worth and *Spinozas*, Mother came to speak of furnaces and of starvation, of typhus and of gas, and of an inhuman beast called Hitler, as well as of places bearing the names of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Treblinka, where, in *Kiddush ha'Shem*, in Sanctification of the Name, Zaida Natanyahu, Buba Guta, Zaida Lezer and Buba Malke Sheine, along with uncles Chaim, Yosef, Ksiel and Yirmiah, and aunties Hela, Fraye, Shoshke and Baile, went up in smoke, their ashes strewn into the vastness of space, forever to wander homelessly about the universe, borne by whatever breezes and windstorms happened to blow across the face of the earth and in the reaches of the galaxies. And so, they were not only within me as *dybbuks*, those *zaidas* and *bubas* and uncles and aunts, but also beside me and around me, above me, and accompanying me, yes, at all times accompanying me, whether in my going forth, or in my lying down, or in my rising up.

In the hold of those saints and heroes and wags that peopled the novels and anthologies that I kept adding to my bedhead, I came to want to create too, indeed I vowed to create – if ‘vowed’ was not too strong a word – or better still, to recreate, in all their fullness, sanctity and warmth, my blessed forebears’ truncated lives.

And in moments of transport, I tore out pages from my exercise books, sharpened my pencil and wrote:

It happened that Natanyahu Kirschenboim had been away and on his return just before *Shabbes* on a day of blizzard and bitter cold found himself short of wood for fire ...

Ah, the ecstasy of it!

Buba Guta gave birth to a child with six toes and went to her rabbi to learn why she had been so punished ...

The delight!

Zaida Lezer who was said to be a wise man, like all the men of Chelm, was once asked, 'From which end, the head or the feet, does a person grow?' For a moment he thought and then said ...

The sheer delight!

Malke Sheine was truly a *sheine malke*. Already at birth she was clothed in the dazzling muslin white of a bride ...

The magical exhilarating flight of invention!

Early, then, was my life's course as good as mapped out. That, like Chekhov, Cronin, Bulgakov and William Carlos Williams, I should in time become a doctor was incidental, even given that my motives for entering into medicine were the most unexceptionable, earnest ones of service and fellow-concern. Because come what may, a writer, a storyteller I would also be. And if I needed any sanction among my peers for a pursuit so esoteric, I found it in a single, simple and resonant refrain – in Mother's fervently held and invigorating credo: 'When a child or a man is blessed and consecrated with a gift, more than he owes it to himself he owes it to others to use it.' I enjoyed the flow and rhythm of her way of speaking. Her Yiddish cadences were borne on a smoothly rising-falling lilt, like that of a lullaby, and though I could not know it then, they were in time to insinuate themselves, surreptitiously at first and then more boldly, into my very work.

Believing that of all those I knew, my Yiddish teacher, Jacob Kuznitz, would most appreciate my efforts, as also – how I craved it! – bless me with his praise, I brought myself in an impulsive moment to offer him a sheaf of stories.

Taking them from me, he held on to them a week, then two and three, until towards the end of one of his lessons a solid month later, he bade me remain behind.

He was a lean man nearing seventy. His hair was thin and his sockets deep, rendering his gaze the more intense, while what seemed like chicken flesh hung loosely from his neck. He had been an actor in Vilna and a leading light in the local Yiddish theatre. Reflecting on him now, he might well already have been ailing from the disease that was within a year to claim him.

With a minimum of preamble, save to seat himself on a chair before me and place a thin hard-tendoned hand upon my arm, he said, 'I see you like stories. Then listen, let me tell you one.'

An aging king once wanted to give one of his nearby palaces to his son and daughter-in-law that they and their children – his grandchildren – might be close to him in his last days. But the palace was too small for his son, who needed more room not only for his family but also for a large number of attendants and servants who would free him for his necessary duties of state.

Furthermore, the palace, which had once been a most regal edifice and had seen balls and banquets and the coming together of the greatest men in the realm, was in dire disrepair, having been ravaged by fire in its upper floors, by neglect in the lower ones, and by vandals who as always made wanton destruction their sport.

The king was thus faced with a dilemma, and he summoned his son to discuss the matter with him.

'You know I want to give you another palace in which to live,' he said. 'On the one hand, I want you to have more space; on the other, I want you near. But what should I do that will be best for you: offer you one of the larger more spacious palaces that is, alas, far away from here, or demolish the one nearby and erect a wholly new one in its place?'

And his son said, 'Yes, it is true that I need a larger palace. And I too wish to be near you. So I do not want that more distant one. But neither do I wish to have the near one pulled down. I would urge you rather to build on it, for though the palace is outmoded and shabby and in seedy disrepair, yet does it remain a monument and a remembrance of more glorious times, and as such ought forever to be preserved.

'So I would say,' his son continued, 'add to it. But add to it quarters in a modern style, with modern materials, modern bricks, timber, fittings, glass. Let the newer part be in the modern mould, for though the older part will testify to our most splendid past, the new shall bring the whole building into the present, be used again as it was before, and be a meet place for living in and for folk to notice and feel at ease with, for it will in this way be attuned to their age and to their sensibilities, to their expectations and their spirit.'

And the king said, 'Blessed am I to have a son so compassionate and wise. I will do as you say.'

And so it was. The old was preserved and, indeed, restored to its earlier nature, and the new added, suited to its time and its place and in keeping with the people's expectations and sensibilities and spirit.

Having finished the story, Jacob Kuznitz, my Yiddish teacher, paused. His gaze flitted and danced across my face as it might have done in the theatre

to gauge the response of his audience. ‘Tell me now, my precious child,’ he said. ‘Whom are you writing for?’

In my own mind I thought I had known, but confronted by the specific question I faltered.

‘Do you understand what I am saying?’ he went on.

This time he did not pause for answer.

‘Listen to me, *Liebeskind*. What you are doing is very nice. Your stories are fine and they show that you have a Jewish heart. They are of course young stories still, a beginner’s stories. But that is not what I want to say. For with time they will improve. Important, though, is this, the question you must always ask yourself: Whom did Sholom Aleichem write for? Or Peretz? Or I. J. Singer, or even his brother Bashevis who is writing today, and Abraham Reisen and Nadir, and our own Herz Bergner and Pinchas Goldhar? Am I clearer to you yet?’

The pause that ensued could scarcely have admitted two words from me.

‘Yes, what you are doing,’ he repeated, ‘is both nice and fine, as I said. You are preserving or rather perhaps prolonging the past, and your stories are lively and clever and quaint. *But*, precious heart, you cannot write as they wrote in that past, for that past is destroyed, vanished, gone, may God in Heaven never let its like ever happen again. A new generation has arisen that speaks with a different voice, a generation that knows little of those *shtetlach*, forests and villages of which you write. If you want to reach the people out there now and touch their hearts, then you must first *look* at their hearts, and *into* their hearts, and see and study and try to understand, try to understand the lives they lead today. Then you may the better write of them, and write *for* them, as Sholom Aleichem and the others did for their generation in their day. So if you want to be a true writer, your duty lies in telling of everything that *this* generation, your parents’ generation – along with your own – has known, and all that *they* have lived through, and all that *they* have suffered and survived.’

He cupped my chin within the palm of his hand and raised my face, the more squarely to meet his own. His was a bony hand but inordinately light in touch.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you do understand what I am saying, no?’

I nodded. Yes, I understood, even though I was aggrieved that my pieces had not met with a keener response than being passed as merely nice and

fine. I did however come to look about me with different eyes, to look *into* the heart, as my teacher, the Yiddish actor Jacob Kuznitz, had bade me do.

4

As a consequence of this, however, I gained not only knowledge but also fear. For those words and names and phrases which I heard so often recurring like a set refrain in an ongoing lament – the Aryan side, Treblinka, deportations, hiding, gas-chambers, slaughterhouses, death-camps – searingly brought home to me my parents' orphanhood in the world. I recognised their bereft disoriented solitariness as strangers in a forbidding land where all they had started out with on arrival was a bed, a table, a chair, and whatever else work brought in piecemeal; I saw how important a Yiddish newspaper could become, or a Yiddish play, or a Yiddish word exchanged with friends, these being their sole means of establishing tenure where tenure seemed precariously tenuous in a wilderness, as Mother called it, to which they had come out of necessity and by the most unforeseeable, unimaginable capriciousness of chance. And when on contemplating their past – in Warsaw, Irkutsk, Samarkand, Tashkent and a multitude of other byway stations that I traced upon the map – I turned inward, into myself, those stories that like some repetitive driven ritual filled our lounge-room and our kitchen of a midweek evening or a Sunday afternoon, I felt within myself, also, first the rumblings, then the roaring, and then the eruption of an alarming, breath-denying terror.

Terror! – Confronted by the night's yawning darkness after a visit by the Grinbergs or the Waiskopfs, I saw in that darkness the strutting forms of steel-helmeted soldiers, I heard their clamour, their boots against the pavement and their fists upon the door, and heard them lurking outside my window, and rehearsed, a hundred times over, ways of escape, of retaliation and of hiding should any of them come to take me away. Behind each black shrub breathed menace; every crash of a gate made me hold my breath; while every rustle of branches against a fence or crackle of leaves in the wind made me stop, alert and wary, and run from that peril that emerged at night and brooded brutishly about our house and its surrounds.

So did I come to detest the nights.

But the days, too, were not without their reminders. Especially those days of lowered eyes and memorial candles, of switched-off radios, low

voices and melancholy talk. Those days, too, I disliked. Days when with my parents I went to the Martyrs' Monument at the Carlton cemetery to be submerged and subsumed in the midst of three hundred, four hundred, five hundred others come to remember and mourn before the seven-branched candelabrum of stark white stone enclosed on three sides by tier upon tier of windswept graves. The women stood in black dresses, head-scarves and overcoats, their cheeks blanched from grief and April cold, while the men, in skullcaps or hats, seemed to hug that white memorial at whose feet were engraved the names – Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, Majdanek, Buchenwald – that I had come to know as sacred, sacrosanct, not through events that had brought glory or exaltation or cause for praise, but through the blood, the million-times, six-million-times spilt blood of martyrs.

On one such day, I stood in the multitude, my parents beside me, masses of others all around.

The service, duty of commemoration and homage, began.

First to speak was Simcha Hirshbein, president of the Association of Former Camp Inmates, waxing passionate as he admonished the gathered never to forget, nor ever forgive, the bestialities wrought upon their people. Then my teacher, Jacob Kuznitz, stepped forward to recite three camp and ghetto poems in tones that throbbed and sent vibrations along the length of my spine. Cantor Neumann followed with the chilling elegiac prayer for the dead *El Malei Rachamim* – 'O Lord, Who art full of compassion' – at which both the men and the women openly wept. And then Rabbi Aaron Siegel, Head of the Beth Din, took Cantor Neumann's place and began to speak, his tone at first soft and slow, so soft and slow that it fully haunted. He was nearing sixty, had a thick, coarse grey beard, and was dressed as my Zaida Natanyahu in a photograph hanging back home had been dressed: black caftan and black hat, beneath which dark coiled earlocks had been swept.

And Rabbi Siegel told a story.

When Moses led his people out of Egypt, he carried the bones of Joseph and his brothers taken out of the Nile. He carried them himself on his shoulders for the forty years of his people's sojourn towards Canaan. He needed to build an army, he needed the strength to enter Canaan. From where would come that strength? From the bones, yes, from the bones on his back which made him cry, '*Kadimah!* Forward! Only forward!' For behind him, if ever they were to turn back, were the bones of the dead.

‘So today, in our day,’ he went on, ‘we too must go only forward, and we too, my brothers, my sisters, we too are to carry the bones of the dead wherever we are, lest we forget the six million who died. And though we give our dead no rest, may we be forgiven for it. And though we permit them not to lie in peace, for this too may we be forgiven.’ And raising his face towards the heavens, he exclaimed in the loud plaintive tones of petition, ‘Forgive us, O mothers, forgive us, O fathers, for not allowing you to rest! Forgive us, dear parents, for allowing you no peace! For as we dare not forget, neither do we dare permit you, dear fathers, dear mothers, to lie in peace!’

And so Rabbi Siegel talked on, and told of Jeremiah who said that a catastrophe was like a disaster that had befallen at sea. For a short time the signs remained, and were seen, and remembered. But then the waters swelled, the tides rose over, and all became as if nothing had happened.

‘But there *are* signs!’ he said, looking upward again, his very beard quivering with emphasis.

Grey rain had begun to fall, at first scattered drops, then a fuller shower.

‘The rain, my brothers, this rain, my sisters, these are the tears of those who have died; the very heavens weep! The very heavens, look up, look up, they weep!’

And a strange thing, a remarkable thing, to me a thing beyond expectation happened. Rabbi Siegel also wept; he wept until he could speak no more and the air around me was, except for the pattering rain, consumed by silence.

Then, with a strength rising through and above the choking constriction of mourning, three hundred voices, four hundred, all five hundred, sang, sang in unison, sang even in the rain, sang the song that their generation – mercifully, miraculously survived – had come to sing into a hymn.

Never say that there is only death for you,
 Though leaden skies may be concealing days of blue –
 Because the hour that we have hungered for is near;
 Beneath our tread the earth shall tremble: ‘We are here!’

Under such circumstances, what was rain? So I became wet, so my hair was flattened, so my jacket grew heavier. What of it? Such discomfiture was scarce reason for cowering, much less for flight. And when, outside the cemetery gates, Mother touched my head, my shoulders and my arms in a way that was private and close and devoid of words, I cherished that hand

which had survived and had endured, and in that instant I recognised truly the generation I should write of, the generation I should write *for* – as Jacob Kuznitz had said – to enshrine them in prose as a written memorial, just as the candelabrum at the cemetery was a memorial in stone, to the past that had been Mother's, Father's, my people's, mine.

5

Scarcely reaching home, I sat down at my desk. As I had done before, I tore out lined virgin pages from an exercise book, took up my pencil and, responding vaguely to Mother's question as to what I should like for dinner, began to write:

When Rivka Bultman saw her mother being herded to the gas-chambers to the left, she went mad. So everyone had said. She let out a scream, tore open her coat and blouse, and cried, 'Take me too, take me too!' But ...

Shlomo Zeidler was the least-likely-looking hero that could ever be imagined. But when he sprang upon the guard beneath his window in the Vilna Ghetto ...

Late at night, Ber Grinberg, his brother Shimon Grinberg and Chaskiel Bennett planned their escape from Treblinka. By the dim light of a smuggled torch ...

They were raw, they were unpolished, they were crude, those fragments, I knew. They were written in white heat, and with passion, all the more intense for being adolescent, and with venom, and with anger too, yes, with anger, seething anger against those who, scorning civilisation – and what civilisation! Goethe, Beethoven, Heine, Kant – had, as Mira Zeidler had once said, sunk to pits of such inconceivable bestiality as to place themselves beyond the pale of humankind. They were written with fury, and with spite, partnered with rage against those, also, who, though heirs of Chopin and Mickiewicz, had been beguiled, benighted, and had zealously abetted and acquiesced, according to Vigdor Bultman, in the demonic ruination wrought by those latter-day Huns; and they were written with indignation against the world, the very world itself that – as Shula Bennett said – had stood by untouched and untouched, unmoved and unmoving, stone-deaf and stone-mute, at all times looking obtusely the other way; and lastly, they

were written with pity, with pity and with grief, and with veneration and with love, for all who, being of my flesh, and of my bone, and of my blood, had been so pointlessly, so pitilessly and so primitively destroyed in the flurry – as Ber Grinberg put it – of one crazed Austrian's manic insanity.

But even as I wrote, another force no less compelling than the one holding me to my seat was drawing me away. Contemplating the camps and forests and mines and ghettos I had heard spoken of, and the incarcerations and entrapments of those who had fallen there; recalling the attics, cellars, vaults and bunkers, along with the cemeteries, convents and Siberian steppes where the more fortune-favoured had survived; summoning up all these, I was beset by an assault of claustrophobia so acute that I had to break away, had to flee my room, and did flee, heading, as I often did after an evening's study, for the spaciousness and release offered by the sea at St Kilda Beach nearby where I could let vision, thought and imagination reach out, reach out far across the vast arcuate light-bordered bay, and thence across distance and across time, unencumbered by the earth-tethering, constraints and mundane concerns of the day.

At the rim of the bay, I sat on the parapet there. I was alone. After the day's draining surfeit of emotion that in its aftermath had so hotly charged the lead of my pencil at my desk, I welcomed the solitude, even if the chill about me did sink its teeth into my flesh and the air was still damp from the afternoon's rain, making me raise my collar to my ears and bury my hands deep into my pockets.

But it was less the chill that took hold of me as I sat there than, perversely, a feeling of heat, a flush that rose to my face and burned and prickled and stung as if I had been slapped. For with scarcely any warning, I stiffened and held my breath under the onslaught of a painful sense of betrayal. And it was all the more painful because of all people I could ever conceive doing so, it was Mother most of all who had done the betraying. For when she should have been telling me stories that truly mattered, she had mollycoddled me for so long with fantasies and fictions, with folktales and fables of times fifty, a hundred, a thousand years past and oceans, continents and innumerable archipelagos distant.

The need for stories remained, as also the urge to tell them. But the age for doling out saccharine, treacle and floss was past. The stories Mother should have been telling, telling from the very first, ought to have started like this:

When Yudel K awoke from what he thought had been a most peculiar dream, he found himself to be a cloud of smoke rising from the furnace below ...

or like this:

As Justus Indyte approached the pyramid that under the sun glistened white and gold and every variation of diamond luminosity, he saw that it was in fact a mound of human skulls piled high. And the skull at the very summit which still had a jaw attached to its cranium spoke to him and bade him draw near for there were things till then unheard and untold of that it wished to whisper into Indyte's ear. So Justus Indyte drew near ...

or like this:

Between two full-stops in the dispatch that correspondent Blaze Tidings had written about the strife in Boschtown, another two thousand people died.

These stories not having been told before, it would fall upon me to tell them. These were the bones I should have to carry, through them would I give my *dybbuks* voice.

But was I possessed – *would* I ever be possessed – of the sustaining vision and the strength to see it through? If there was a God who disbursed gifts upon mere mortals, had He given me sufficient to carry through my purpose? Or, if God there was, did He perhaps fear the bestowal upon mere man of gifts too great lest that man – in this case, I – should turn against Him, even as Job in vigorous and brazen defiance had done, or as Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, too, who had challenged God, asking,

What do You have against Your people Israel?
Why do You afflict Your people Israel?

and vowing,

I shall not stir from here,
From this spot I shall not stir,
There must be an end to this,
The exile must come to an end!
Magnified and sanctified be His Name.

Given the gift for storytelling, might it not in fact prove a curse, for who was to know where that gift might lead? Fired by the fuel of abomination for the

evil He had done unto His people or had permitted to be done, might I not, for instance, be tempted to utter my own blasphemies against Him, writing, say – as even now I wrote in a fifty-cent notepad I had brought with me –

One day, it transpired that God and the devil were one and the same, the ostensible two being but polarities of one aberrant erratic schizophrenic psychopath. And the feckless artless Adam ben Adam took it upon himself to play the psychiatrist to God ...

Or, having no bar of Job's ultimate meek and cowed submission before the voice that issued out of the whirlwind, or of Levi Yitzchak's untouched abiding adoration, with what venom, with what wrath and opprobrium might I not myself be galvanised to challenge:

What do You have against Your creation Man?
Why do You so afflict Your creation Man?

But if ... But if – dared I even to contemplate it? – if, withal, there *was* no God? ...

O, the seas of narrative, the oceans of possibilities that stretched before me! How deep the waters, how unpredictable in their turbulence the tides on which I might yet venture out! And were I there and then to leave my perch and set sail upon the world – the world real and proverbial both – what shore, what harbour, what reef would I arrive at, that was not in some way tainted with blood shed by human hand, where I might not have reason to cry out, and to protest, and to howl, as in our time the writer who would be called 'writer' had to howl – *had* to howl – 'Man! Man! Have you no shame?'

For this, too, strength was needed, and gall, and if called for, obduracy, however perverse. Did I possess them? Would I, untested sailor, dare indeed set sail upon what were for me uncharted waters; would I, untested scrivener, dare indeed take up the prophet's, reformer's, rebel's pen, and howl? Or would I turn back, turn away my face to safer fare, even to my mother's breast again and to her soothing hand, and to her oh-so-lovely pastoral legends which I would update to something like,

One day, a little St Kilda tailor called Zvi complained to his neighbour that the man's pet rabbit was chewing up his materials ...

or,

It happened that the Jews of Melbourne, many of whom had come from Chelm, one day got it into their heads to trap the moon and make use of its light ...

Sitting astride the parapet, perched on that solid steadfast divider between the footwalk on one side and the sea on the other, I huddled deeper within myself against a chill rush of wind that swept in from the bay carrying with it the rancid tang of sulphur, seaweed and brine.

Where the ground was securer underfoot, on the side that was familiar and firm, it rose in a grassy flowered incline towards the Upper Esplanade where the clocktower stood, where cars and vans and semitrailers hurtled past, and where the shorefront gave on to a dense and crowded lit-up neighbourhood that yielded on to others and to others still which in their vast collective aggregation formed a mapped identifiable city that since my arrival had been cosy, safe and haven home.

Opposing this on my other side, in the distance from whence that gust arose and where I knew the bay swung round to its terminal point, the horizon began, unseen in the increasingly mist-enshrouded darkness, beyond which stretched space more open, more vacant and unpeopled, and for that reason more intimidating, fearsome and daunting.

Which would I choose? What choices did I have? What options?

There were two, and each a curse: the curse of treason through either silence or old-time quaintness, which in essence were one and the same, or a sustained defiant wrathful howl of protest, attended for life by the curse of the soul's most purgatorial torments.

Braced by the wind and the cold, I looked up at the embankment on my right, upon the clock, the streets and the buildings where lights shone in ways that were bright and clear and familiar, and then turned my gaze out to the sea on my left, where all I had to guide me through the clotted darkness were a raw imagination and audacity and abandon. Flipping the pages of my notebook over and over with my thumb, I looked back and forth, right and left, back and forth again. I had it in mind to throw that flimsy spiral-backed notebook into the air, and whichever side of the parapet it fell, that way I would go. But I thought of Mother then; I heard her voice behind the songs she had sung and the stories she had told; I remembered what I knew of Zaida Natanyahu and Zaida Lezer and of Bubas Guta and Malke Sheine; I recalled with a tremor what my teacher Jacob Kuznitz had

said; I beheld an image of bones carried on the shoulders of Moses and then of myriads more, all coming alive with restored recovered flesh; and at the same time I felt a closing in upon me of what was clearly the nocturnal cold, which in that instant seemed more like a crush of souls, of *dybbuks*, piercing, entering, reaching into me, rushing in through my every pore to possess whatever part of me I might be prepared to give.

And in that moment, swivelling swiftly on the parapet and alive with the inescapable legacy and destiny I had imbibed and was at once both blessed and cursed never to shed, I leapt. My feet sank into the sand. Before me, over and beyond the waters, stretched that vast and vacant dark expanse towards which I began to walk.

Above, the stars glinted faintly in the mist-laden darkness predicting, promising nothing. Down below – in that chill, offering up his own soul for the final peace of others – another storyteller was born.