

THE FINEST EDGE

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ABSTRACT

In the stories 'A Tale of Four Cities – Fremantle, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa', 'Secrets' and the novella *The Finest Edge*, I have attempted to come to terms with my experience as a child of a family involved in the Holocaust.

'A Tale of Four Cities' introduces my cousin, the writer Simon Louvish, and how our first meeting in Perth celebrated a reunion with Simon, his wife, my brother and myself while attending a Jewish Writer's Conference. 'Tel Aviv' examines my meeting in Israel with Ya'akov Ariel, my mother's nephew, and his family. 'Jerusalem' takes me to the home of my mother's first cousin, Misha Louvish. 'Haifa', brings me to the city and mountain, Mt. Carmel, after which I was named.

Family history unravels in these four sections as I make my first trip to Israel. Memories link the story's parts – my mother's memories of her village and family, my own memory of growing up with her.

In the novella, three characters – Esther, Arn and Monique – meet and encounter each other in a private clinic dealing with drug related problems. The theme of Holocaust enters again in a fictional setting through the reminiscence of the character Esther, who is portrayed as a child of Holocaust survivors. She views her own past and identity in the light of this historical event. The characters take turns addressing each other in a series of dramatic monologues.

The story 'Secrets' examines the manner in which five people attempt to come to terms with their Jewish background and the difficulties they face in an Australian setting.

The writer Aharon Appelfeld, said of his own oblique approach in writing about the Holocaust, 'one does not look directly at the sun'. I have used both ficto-memoir and fiction to describe the space where history and memory merge.

A TALE OF FOUR CITIES – FREMANTLE, TEL AVIV, JERUSALEM, HAIFA

FREMANTLE

The sea is sweeping down each street blowing in the wind and along the sea wall winding against the new shiny glass fisherman's wharf where all visitors are drawn to taste the calamari and fish scooped out of the blue sea onto gleaming plates. The buildings wind their way into a long street where stucco ornamentation has been painted in pastel colours – mustards and pale pinks and creams and blues and greens – and light winds its way into leadlight windows. I am visiting Fremantle with my friend, Mena Matias, and she has taken me to see how beautiful Fremantle is once again. And in this tiny cafe I sit with Mena, my Filipina friend. Mena tells me how important it is that I learn to love myself. 'You will need to learn that no-one can create this love for you, you must create this love for you.' And the seagulls wheel and dive. It is a sharp sunny wintry day. The different coffees chalked onto the blackboard – macchiato, short black, long black, latte, flat white, cappuccino – and the streets are impossibly clean like a dream, they have been swept clean this morning, the fresh fish gleaming for sale, each fish washed individually and placed on ice.

In essence her message wasn't wrong, but Mena didn't know my family history. It's hard to love yourself when you don't quite know where you come from, or who knows you.

These long streets lined with terraces form a pastiche of colonial architecture – pink and blue and yellow and green ornate mouldings, blending with Noongar craft-

shops, video game parlours, long jugs of beer – ‘dog chasers’. Mena tells me that I have to learn to love myself from the centre, that no-one else can do this for me. And I tell Mena how I tried to escape myself again and again, that being myself, even after all these years, is almost too hard. How do other people manage it? To get close to others you have to tell them your secrets, whisper to them your fears, tell them when they say and do things that hurt you, and you have to decide which people to avoid, which ones to leave to wash away in time without you, which ones too difficult to cure, heal, recompense. Which ones could destroy you. You have to listen and act. You have to love yourself enough to live. And sometimes it is too hard. You have to go away and hide for a while.

I had to know who this self was, my origins. The need to find my mother’s relatives started in 1993. I wrote a letter to her nephew, Ya’akov Ariel and he wrote back to say that he was ill with cancer. From that moment I felt like running, running at enormous speed. I didn’t know how I’d get the money for the fare. After much persuasion, the Teachers Credit Union gave me a loan and I found myself in Frankfurt being inspected by Israeli police checking my luggage with rifles slung over their shoulders. I stumbled off the plane in Tel Aviv, and there was my cousin Ya’akov Ariel with his son, Eli. They were carrying a sign scrawled with chalk that said, ‘CARMEL’. How could I miss them? Ya’akov had only months to live. I’d known as sure as the sky, that I had only a short time to find them.

Eventually, I met Ya'akov, his son Eli and wife Tamar, daughters Roni and Yael, son Svi, Cousin Myra and husband Al, and in Jerusalem, my mother's cousin, Misha Louvish. Misha's son was the last person I was able to meet.

I met my cousin Simon Louvish for the first time in Fremantle, one week before joining Mena Matias there, when we were attending a symposium on Jewish writing in Perth. He came as a guest speaker accompanied by his Scottish wife Mairi. Film maker, novelist, dreamer, poet, humorist. He had written a quartet of novels featuring the notorious Avram Blok, escapee from an Israeli mental asylum. I had been longing to meet him for years, ever since I found out we were related in 1993, and having fallen out of bed hysterical with laughter reading about Avram Blok in the middle of the night. I had missed him on my trip to Israel, because he lived in London, and I had run out of chutzpah to track him down. He had served as a military camera man in the Israeli Defence Forces during the Six-Day War in 1967. Shortly after this, disillusioned at Golda Meir's instruction to destroy Palestinian villages on the border, he left for England to teach at the London School of Film. And then came the opportunity – he was coming with Mairi to the conference and I would be reading there as well. And my brother David was to give a paper on my mother's family, the Louvish family. David had already met him once in London for afternoon tea. And so this was quite an event, quite an occasion for us all.

When I finally set out for Israel with my brother, we had no idea what our relatives would be like. Strangely enough, we found we had an enormous affinity with them. Was this accident, fate, genetic inheritance, cultural influence? Cousin Myra was

a writer, Misha a writer and translator, Simon a writer who was very much a socialist and a supporter of the Palestinian people. And some of these influences had marked our own family. There was a rapport between us. We felt we had met a part of ourselves, people we could reach out to and respect. It was an extraordinary piece of good fortune.

I think of Tamar, Ya'akov's wife. She takes me shopping in Tel Aviv. She is petite, blonde, pretty. She asks me why my marriage has failed. I have the impression that in Israel a marriage is valued highly. From the look of the shops and clothes for sale, I can see that money is hard to come by and that two incomes are better than one. Tamar is practical. She feels that my divorce is a major social and financial drawback. She is aware of the value of two people supporting each emotionally and financially to achieve a feeling of security in life in a poor economy. I am looking at her and thinking if only I had been able to see her and the rest of the family more often, and she is thinking, how did I manage to survive? In her eyes, I had lost not only family connection, but the fight for survival.

Simon and Mairi and my brother David and I, decided to visit Fremantle by the sea while visiting the conference which was held at the University of Western Australia. We went to visit the hard and brittle waves. We went to watch the sea and the seagulls and the people come to the edge of the sea to eat sardines and calamari and I went to listen to my own voice. I recalled when I first suspected we were related. My brother saw *The Therapy of Avram Blok* in a bookshop. Louvish was my mother's surname. There is only one listing for this name in the entire Israeli telephone directory.

I had not met him because my mother, Nehoma, did not reach out to meet the ones who had survived the Holocaust. It was too painful to be reminded of those who had not. And I found out later in Israel that this was a well-known phenomenon. Without saying a word, she let me know from the time I was a small child that this was a door that would not be opened. I had only gone to find my relatives in Israel in 1993, long after her death and when the cousin who was the main link with her family, Ya'akov Ariel, was dying.

I think of my Scottish grandmother on my father's side, Winifred, and see myself as a small girl of five wearing a print frock that my sister Helena has sewn for me. It is Christmas day in Manly and I already know that the fact of my mother being Jewish defines me as different, outside the norms of fifties Australian social life. All that time of growing up in Australia, I am aware I'm unable to share this with anyone except my mother and my siblings. By the time I grew up and my mother's brother Zahir had died, my mother no longer had much contact with other Jewish people.

Secrets of souls hidden away – some of them lost. But – Simon, Mairi and David and I found each other at last after more than four decades. We found the water on a sunny, wintry day. We walked to the sea.

And now my cousin is walking along the sea wall. My cousin Simon Louvish, writer, writer. I find I share with him a desire to support the rights of the Palestinian people and the wish to see the peace process succeed. My mother was not a Zionist, but she always expressed the hope that a fair compromise would be reached and that 'the

lion would lie down with the lamb'. My political affinity with Simon is an unexpected gift.

I will tell you what family means to children of survivors. It means you're not lost, not wholly abandoned by fate, not wholly lost to history, not wholly lost to time. It means that you've beaten history – slightly – at its own game. It means that your sadness can be shared, often without words. It means you can hold on to something. It means a thousand things. It means the eyes of your cousin. It means his life.

But is it possible in four days to reconstitute a family, to draw together various threads from different parts of the world? After meeting we began to email, write to each other. We couldn't afford to phone very often. It is amazing how we lived emotionally off this one meeting, used it to bring us all together again. In some extraordinary way, it worked.

Simon, child of my mother's first cousin, Misha Louvish, whose family had escaped to Glasgow and managed to evade the Nazi trap. We share two great-grandfathers who were brothers – Nathan Nehemiah Louvish and Avraham-Abba Louvish. And the sea and this scene will always remind me of this first meeting. The Noongar man who performed in the street. The seagulls swooping and flying, time somehow trapped in these small streets and terraces, the limestone Maritime Museum, these plastered ornate decorative terraces, like small wedding cakes in rows, an aesthetic to create delight. Why did they give me such pleasure? Because the utilitarian function of a building had been given a festive air, people had gone to the additional trouble to give

pleasure to the eye. There was a celebration there. So many kinds of architecture in this small city: Victorian Gothic-Tudor revival, pointed arches, baroque stucco, verandahed facades, variations on classical revivalism, art nouveau stained glass work, Georgian, Victorian corner hotels with wooden verandahs, verandahs recessed behind arcades, arcaded pediments, rusticated iron work. What did this mean, this desire to create space and visual joy? It said something about unalloyed delight, something not tainted by human hatred, something purely designed for human happiness and pleasure. Buildings in ice-cream colours, that you could lick like honey, like sweets, like paddle pops. And I went and stared into a stained glass window on a verandah and tried to imagine the lives that had been spent there. Buildings the colour of those little coloured pill lollies you could buy in packets as a child. And my cousin, I am aware of you. And the sea wall and the sea where we met. All moments start to fade – until we meet again.

The beauty of the terraces said that something else could happen, that there was another path, that life didn't have to be so savage. And yet this architectural wonderland seemed fragile. Beneath its surface were those same cold blue waves out on the peninsula, warning us that we could be claimed again for some new and unforeseen historical nightmare. Our sense of security at this meeting was fragile. Would we have time and money to meet again? Would history divide us once more? For those four days, Simon's brown eyes were a gift beyond price

I think again of Mena, my Filipina friend, and Mena telling me the hardest person for me to love will be myself, and it is true I have found it easier to love others. It is hard to love yourself without a sense of belonging. Within weeks of my visiting my

family, my brother followed. Putting together my family history on my own had been too difficult. I hadn't known how to bring it all together – to actually buy the plane ticket and make the bookings happen. Contacting the relatives at the other end seemed too hard. What if I had been greeted with indifference, distaste? But no, when I got off the plane I was kissed, hugged, welcomed. Ya'akov took us to his small elegant flat. The works of art on the walls, the beautiful pink and blue clay Mezuzah set an angle on the external entrance – all of it said 'Welcome'.

I remember my cousin Simon's eyes, the loveliest softest eyes. His name is pronounced 'Shee-mon'. And he came and took me by the arm, and there was such sweet affection in his brown eyes. I remember the peacocks at the University of Western Australia trailing their deep aqua feathers across the limestone and the huge Moreton Bay fig spreading its brown-green leaves above our heads. Subiaco where we had coffee, sessions of the conference where we sat together and he drew me funny drawings to illustrate a point and make me laugh. The soft eyes of my cousin, the wind, the sea. Time flying into eternity. Does it matter how we met? There is only one year between us.

Around my neck I have a Star of David. It is made of gold and inside the star is a filigree tree – the tree of life. I wear a gold *chai* – the Hebrew alphabetical letter for life and a silver *Menorah* – the seven-branched candelabrum symbolising wisdom. My cousin Myra gave me the Star of David, the *Chai*, and an amber necklace made from huge round pieces of yellow amber from the Black Sea. These gifts were to celebrate our first meeting, in 1993. Some of the amber pieces are a brownish colour. Some are a

pure mellow yellow and some are as bright as honey. The silver *Menorah* is a gift to myself. The seven-branched lamp holder made of gold kept burning at all times with olive oil in the Jerusalem Temple. It symbolised the divine wisdom of the Torah, and was compared to light. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert, Moses cast gold into fire and the original Menorah formed itself.

Simon gave me a copy of his latest novel, *Days of Miracles and Wonders*, and I gave him *Jewels and Ashes* by Arnold Zable and Morris Lurie's *Welcome to Tangier*. He suggested to David and me that we make a film about our family's diaspora, the history of the Louvish family. We will commence our research in Harbin in Northern China, where my mother fled from Romania in 1925, when anti-Semitism at the University of Bucharest prevented her from continuing her legal studies. We will start there. We will meet there.

TEL AVIV

I wanted to stand in the places where all the lost people I never knew had lived. By standing there, by being among the people they had lived with, I thought I could come as close as possible. Otherwise they would be just phantoms, names my parents mentioned.

– Eli Rubenstein in interview with Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*.

When the Tzaddik came from Odessa to visit the town of Marculesti, he held audience in the house of my grandfather, Rabbi Avraham-Abba Louvish. My grandfather was an ecstatic who travelled to Odessa regularly to spend time with the Grand Rabbi in Vienna – dancing and singing, drinking, celebrating the Divine manifestation in all things. Sometimes I think this ‘cult of joy’, as the Hasidic Jewish sect was commonly known, was where my mother Nehoma acquired her aversion to fear and suffering. She always insisted on seeing the brighter side of life. In fact, on occasion, she accused me of being insufficiently celebratory and joyous. The Hasids, it is known, danced and sang in the cattle trucks on the way to Auschwitz, and even danced and sang in Auschwitz itself. The sense of the sacredness of life was part of the doctrine, as was the belief that it is possible to achieve union with the creative force through joyful prayer. I like to think that the insistence of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, on spontaneous expression of feeling, eventually filtered through the generations to my mother’s consciousness. And the confidence that the source was sacred – that religious teachings without inner awareness are a dead convention. The Hasids believed that there is structure in what derives directly from the heart. For these liberations, I thanked

my Hasidic grandparents, tied as they were to religious rituals. And my mother for passing them on.

As a teenager, my mother Nehoma Louvish would sing beautiful songs to me. I learned them off by heart in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Russian, without knowing any of these languages. There was one song which was a famous Hasidic song. In translation it said: Two men meet each other on a road and one man says to the other, 'From where do you come?' The other man replies, 'Sadagera.' The first asks, 'And what do they do in Sadagera?' The other answers, 'They laugh and they sing, they dance and they spring, they eat and they drink – and they have a wonderful time!'

I loved that song. And I would sing these songs with my mother, alone with her in the house as a teenager. I loved their plaintive tones. Even then I was aware that I was sharing something unique. She was inviting me to relive her memories of her village, of her people, who were no longer alive, who had been killed by the Romanian Iron Guard. I was helping her to reconstitute a lost world.

The other aspect of the song was that it told the tale of how my mother's Hasidic Rabbi father used to go away for a year at a time to 'dance and sing' with the Grand Rabbi in Vienna. Apparently my Grandmother, Raissa, would complain bitterly that he left her alone to look after the children and the house while he was enjoying himself dancing, drinking and singing and celebrating 'the divine spark'.

My mother Nehoma came from a small village in Bessarabia by the name of Marculesti, with little more than 1,000 inhabitants in the year of her birth, 1906. Begun

as an agricultural settlement, it gradually grew into a town with its own trades and crafts. Marculesti was founded in 1837, and survived for a little over a hundred years, until 9 July, 1941, when the Romanian army unit, which had previously taken part in the massacre of the Jews of Jassi, murdered the village's Jews.

The mystic sect of Hasidism emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century in Podolia and Volhynia in the Ukraine, in response to massive pogroms led by Cossack Bogdan Chmielnicki in the previous century.

Rabbi Louvish and his wife migrated from Poland to Bessarabia. Eventually, Bessarabia became part of Romania, and is now known as the province of Moldova in the Russian Federation.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, offered Jewish people a direct communication with their God, bypassing the orthodox rabbis and their observances. Ordinary daily routines could be a source of learning, as the divine 'spark' of creation could be found in the most minute events. He taught that the creative force could not be absent, that evil was an illusory phenomenon. Despite the shift of emphasis away from intellectual studies, many Hasids still upheld the tradition of scholarship and were well-versed in the Torah and the Talmud. There were strict rules for cleanliness and the rituals for Holy days. Because my Grandfather was a Rabbi, the family had to be an example to the village. But the soul of the Hasid was the main preserve of holiness. And when her father died, my mother always maintained that the man who had replaced

him, his son-in-law Moshe Blomfield, to use her own words, 'observed the letter but not the spirit of the law'.

My mother's memories of the village and the life that accompanied it, seem millions of light years away now. The town and its inhabitants have been destroyed. How reliable is memory? Can it recreate the sounds, tastes, characters, buildings, culture? Does it exist in the mind like a negative of a film that can be submerged in some chemical solution and come to life again? I have seen a video of a recent meeting in Tel Aviv of some of the 400 survivors of Marculesti. And on that video is an old gramophone recording of one of the famous singers who later went to America. She used to sing at my Grandfather's synagogue on Holy days, to announce to the village that the day had begun. And her voice is the mellifluous and passionate voice of no other, calling out to the world in painful ecstasy.

When you erase a story, a whole village, a whole community, and there is nothing tangible left but the sound on a record of a wailing voice, it is in that voice when you hear it, that you live and breathe. Your whole identity rises and falls with that voice, the voice of the singer from Marculesti. I have always longed to know my mother's community intimately. And that recording is the only moment that gives me a sense of immediacy about what had once been. The singer apparently escaped from Marculesti and eventually went to live in New York.

In the town of Marculesti, there are now only two houses remaining and a few gravestones. I have seen a photo of one of these houses. It has a large plate window at the front. It looks as if it may have been a shop. It is beautifully designed. A wooden house. I have often pondered if I should go to Kishinev, the former capital of Bessarabia, and ask a surviving villager to take me to Marculesti.

‘There is no point’, said Ze’ev Davidsohn, Chairman of the Survivors’ Association, ‘there is nothing there. There is no longer a single Jew in Marculesti, only a few gravestones’. ‘Tell me Ze’ev’, I asked, ‘how did you all survive this experience?’ And his answer was, ‘the children’. And I recalled that on the video I had seen his two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, and the careful way that he had led them to their seats.

When the mystic Tzaddik came to Marculesti from Odessa, he wore a hat with a fur trim and Sabbath robe. My mother told me she recalled him bringing her a tangerine. The whole village gathered to greet him. On one occasion there was a severe frost lasting several weeks. ‘When will the frost break, Rabbi?’ they asked him. ‘In the morning’, he replied. And it did. My mother hid behind a door and listened while he advised people about their personal problems. A couple came to see him, hoping for a child. My mother overheard the Tzaddik advise them, ‘Take a trip across the water...’. Apparently they did take a journey by boat and, one year later, a baby was born.

When I first arrive in Israel, I spend a great deal of time with my mother's nephew, Ya'akov Ariel, in Tel Aviv. When Ya'akov walks, he walks with joy. He uses a walking stick. Ya'akov, my first cousin, son of my mother's sister, Esther. Ya'akov and I proceed. His eyes are grey-green. He takes me to the newsagency to buy *The Jerusalem Post* and then to the bakery where he orders a special bread made from cornmeal. And he introduces me to the shopkeeper, a thin wizened man, wearing a blue *yarmulka*. 'My cousin from Australia.'

The roofs of the flats in Tel Aviv open on to the sky and are crammed with television aerials. It is on the roof of one of these blocks of flats that I put out my clothing to dry, with a wash of blue sky above me, the roofs extending back in layers. I have been greeted with the foods of my childhood, prepared by Ya'akov and his wife Tamar. I've had dill pickle with rye bread, various grades of delectable cottage cheese, fresh herring, tahina, also cheese in various grades of low fat content, hoummos, steamed buckwheat, kasha with noodles, dried apricots and figs and nuts, eggplant purée. I realise suddenly that my mother had reproduced exactly the foods of her own childhood. There is no mystery about the quality of this food and its combinations. There is for me, a feeling of almost unbearable nostalgia. Each time I eat it, I feel overwhelmed.

'Even Yitzhak Shamir lives in one of these flats.' Ya'akov is seventy. He is dying of cancer. I came to Israel just in time to see him. He is the link with the rest of my family. His hair is grey, his head shaped like a hard nut. We crawl down the street at snail's pace. I feel the way I did as a child when I walked beside my mother's brother,

Uncle Zahir. Each step we take is precious. He feels that I am precious to him. I cherish each moment, each second. The love and acceptance he gives me is sacred ground. It is the kind of love you only dream about. I cannot bear the thought that it will end. You are only ever that precious to your own mother, and once again it is happening to me. I care for him beyond measure. I have not felt this happy in years.

We go together to an outside cafe and have coffee. He talks about his mother Esther, Nehoma's sister whom she loved so much. Esther had married a man my mother revered. A quiet, simple and kindly man. Ya'akov takes me to the Post Office to help me to buy some cards to send to my family. We walk excruciatingly slowly back to the flat, Ya'akov bent over and feeling ahead with his walking stick. The sensation of being worshipped has not happened to me since my mother was alive. Such a beautiful feeling, to be totally loved without reservation. I persuade him to let me record the history of his family on tape but I make the mistake of playing it back to him. He is embarrassed by his rich accent and clams up, refusing to utter another word!

Ya'akov can hardly wait to take me on a tour of the surrounding houses and streets and introduce me to everybody. Everything seems on such a small scale. For years I have been seeing letters addressed on the back, '12 David Street'. Is it possible I should eventually walk down this street? But my first impression is that every face I see is the face of a survivor. The neighbours stop and chat. 'My relative from Australia', Ya'akov says. And then to me, 'He speaks no English'. And one day he leads me to the strange hexagonal park at the top of David Street, dry and somewhat bare of foliage, lined with shops that are extravagant, reminiscent of the famous circle in Budapest. One

delicatessen in particular specialises in every kind of gourmet food. It is absolute exotica. The window is crammed with blintzes, boorekas (cheese, meat and potato turnovers), breads sprinkled with poppy-seeds in plaited shapes, as soft and as delicate as down, made with eggs and slightly sweetened with honey. Casseroles of *rakotrumpli* (layered potatoes), chick peas, felafel, every variety of salad. *Kreplach*, (meat dumplings to serve in soup), beef goulash, salmon pate, *lochshen* (noodles) baked and fried, herrings in different marinades and *lekach* – honey cake. I stand and stare in anticipation.

And for the first few mornings I come to sit in the park and read *The Jerusalem Post*, with a sense of dim wonder, listening to my radio playing Hebrew pop music. Ya'akov has devised a wonderful plan for my orientation. I circle the park on one occasion, followed by a man with yellowing teeth, who speaks to me in Polish. Every day unemployed Russian classical musicians busk on the pavement, playing violin or keyboard. The refugees keep flooding in. I sit in the park dazed, watching the people come and go around the curved shopping centre. I have been trying to imagine this city since I was a child when the beautiful presents first began arriving from Ya'akov – a silver filigree oval brooch with Queen Esther on it, regarding herself in a mirror, a delicate bangle made up of small silver triangles, each with a tiny red bead at the centre, an amber necklace made from lumps of lemon amber folded over with a tie of silk tassels, a Yemenite necklace of gleaming brown river stones attached to a plain silver hoop – and most beautiful of all – a transparent silver filigree globe on a hand-made chain.

It has been a long journey from Australia to Tel Aviv. I sit there thinking, 'I am listening to Hebrew, the language of my people'. It feels wonderful to hear the radio announcer's voice in Hebrew, each song. There are no words for this experience.

Out of that silence of a kitchen in Australia where two women sing to each other in languages that I do not understand, there suddenly emerge voices. Before my mother died of cancer, I asked her if she would like to visit Israel. For the first time she said yes, that she would. Unfortunately, she then seemed so frail. I did not arrange to take her. A terrible mistake. If she had only glimpsed the amazing love and acceptance that were waiting for her. Perhaps she feared that because she had married 'out', that she would be judged. But it turned out that her surviving family in Israel were not strict Orthodox Jews. They were cosmopolitan sophisticates who would have glimpsed her world. It breaks my heart that she never got to meet her cousin Misha. And Misha mourned her to the end. He spoke about her as a person who was very much part of himself, although he never met her. Separated by war, countries, huge distances of water, she was already dying, bone thin and living alone in a flat in Kirribilli. Walking at times by herself down to the water's edge. And on the day the *Yizkor* memorial book arrived telling the story of her village, describing the deaths of her family in the massacre, apparently she howled in grief. She told my father later that she was alone on that day, when the mere presence of another human being would have given comfort.

JERUSALEM

Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul had almost dwelt in silence.

– Old Testament, Psalm 94, verse 17.

I caught a taxi to number 52A Bustenai Street Jerusalem. I found the block of apartments marked A. I climbed to the first floor. And there on an embossed brass plaque, were the words, 'M. Louvish'. I felt such a sense of returning on seeing this name, such a restoration of longing. I had found another relative who had survived. M. Louvish was my cousin, Misha, formerly in charge of the Government Printing Office when Ben-Gurion was in power. He wrote articles for the *Jerusalem Post* and did a weekly piece on Israeli current affairs for the tourist magazine available at the counters of the hotels. Misha was father to my second cousin, Simon Louvish, the writer.

Misha Louvish answered the door. Amazingly, he had a Scots accent. He was from the Scottish side of my mother's family, who were centred for many years in Glasgow. He was remarkably like my father who lived in Scotland until he was eleven. Is Scottish culture more indelible than Jewish genes? Superficially, it would seem so. Misha and my father were born only four years apart at the beginning of the Century and somehow the era had left its mark on the way they spoke and viewed the world. Misha too was a socialist, but unlike my father Patrick, a more tempered one. He had actually had the opportunity to see the kibbutzim and been able to observe their practice.

The brass plaque beside the door said 'M. Louvish'. I never dreamed I'd see a plaque bearing my mother's surname on the doorway of a block of flats in Jerusalem, snow falling in white flakes against the pale sandstone. By edict, all buildings have to be built in this stone, including new apartments and hotels. I was introduced to Misha's boarder – a quiet Romanian man who commuted to Haifa every weekend to see his wife. The small flat was crammed with books. Misha had written a book on the founding of Israel. He supported the Labour Party and the kibbutz system. On the Sabbath, wearing his skullcap, he took me to meet his son and his wife and their children. That night he took me downstairs to a flat to meet the frailest of ladies who served us soup and emanated a joy and softness of a kind I had only met in my mother. She had compassion and gentleness and gaiety. She travelled overseas regularly with friends. There were memories of lost cities, lost towns. Misha had shared *Shabat* meal with her every Friday. She was fey, almost not there, girlish and innocent, witness of a bizarre nightmare. Shadows around her.

The people I met seemed to be existing in some ghetto. Over fifty years after the end of the Second World War, they still seemed like the ones who have survived, huddling together for warmth, and fearful, with a kind of desperation.

I think of my cousin Eli, nervously smoking cigarette after cigarette. He fought in all the wars and had completed his military service of several months a year. 'Every year', he told me, 'I killed Arabs. The public don't know but they are coming over the border all the time.' The current explosion of violence between Israelis and Palestinians is an acceleration of an ongoing war. And then Eli and Rebecca's two daughters – Roni

and Yael. Roni with her fine red Titian hair and grey eyes, delicate features, exquisitely beautiful at nineteen. Yael, seventeen, with gold hair, the old gold of a Renaissance painting, blonde, blue-eyed. Recently a bomb exploded in the market place in Tel-Aviv and Roni and Yael missed being hit only by minutes.

I go back a generation and wonder about the fates that drew people to Israel. What crime had Misha's friend committed? Everyone I met raised this question for me. Why why why why why why? Why? Was it because of some qualities? I recall Ya'akov saying before he died, 'They destroyed some of the best minds in Europe'. It's flattering to think that was why they were hated. And yet nothing eased the pain. No self-congratulation, pride in intelligence, compassion or beauty eased it. They lost the Yiddish and the Hebrew words, the heavily coated accents in whatever languages, the humour, the ceremonies. As I get older the pain of all these deaths sometimes becomes intolerable, enveloping me in a fine mist. Joining a group for children of Holocaust survivors has helped. I no longer feel such depth of loss that I feel it's going to annihilate me. But I often meditate on the ones who have died. Their beauty and the terrible waste. The current political crisis robs us of any consolation. The use of biblical history to disenfranchise the Palestinian people perpetuates another layer of suffering for all involved. For there to be restitution there must also be justice.

From the time I was a child, I felt placed in the role of audience to other people's lives. There was a sense of some gigantic drama surrounding my life. And at the same time I

had a desire to be ordinary, not surrounded by history with a capital 'H'. I felt as if I carried some unforeseen tragedy in my veins

To some degree I enjoyed the status of connection to an outlandish historical event. It said we were brave and had attracted an unjust fate. I boasted to other children about being Jewish until the reality finally sank in that some of them did not share my sense of celebration. The ludicrous stereotypes regarding wealth, pecuniary meanness and physical appearance, the legacy of two thousand years of Christian parody, came as a shock to my liberal upbringing.

I am walking through the old city of Jerusalem with my cousin Misha Louvish. Misha is eighty-three and we are rugged up with scarves and coats and hats. The snow is falling on stone walls, and it scatters across our shoulders in icy flakes that melt almost instantly. The walls of King David's city at the point where we entered are nearly 2000 years old. We stagger down a stone alleyway, lined on each side by Arab shopkeepers selling their wares – Bedouin belts, softly woven, every size and shape of earring, necklace, bangle, bowl. I try to take a photograph of a man in a *djellaba*, sitting outside his shop, and he rises with fury to prevent me with one glance. Misha takes me to a *kosher* restaurant where we eat his favourite kebab and hoummos combination with a cold bottle of Mt. Carmel white wine. And then we go to the Western Wall which extends like a vast arena before us. It is part of the retaining wall built by Herod the Great in 20 BC to support the landfill on which the Second Temple stood. In 70 AD it was destroyed by the Romans but according to Rabbinical texts, the *shechina*, or divine

presence, never departed. A *bar mitzvah* is being conducted and a young boy is carried on his father's shoulders. It disappoints me that the women must stand apart and watch, but this is no Reform Jewish wailing wall. They stand in a fenced off area wearing their scarves, some watching the boy.

We enter the Archaeological Museum in the Israelite Tower in King David's city, and there I look at the model of Jerusalem, with its endless layers of occupation marked out in coloured ceramic. The different colours stare brightly at me, drowning my own life span. The Tower itself dates from the time of the Babylonian siege and destruction of the First Temple around 580 BC. It is an extraordinary feeling to connect written word and history to the roughly flagged stones which witnessed them.

Like Tamar, Misha lets me know that he sees me as slightly lost. He suggests I migrate to Israel and that his family will find me accommodation in Jerusalem. Then I will have a sense of belonging at last. I tell him that my father's family did not welcome my mother and that I was aware of this as a child. Misha himself departed Scotland for Israel because of anti-Semitic remarks made to him as a young school teacher in Glasgow. 'Come and be with us', he requests. 'You will have a home here.' But for me, that would have been to start the struggle to belong all over again. To learn Hebrew, to familiarise myself with customs I didn't fully understand, even though sections of this family are not highly religious, seemed too big an ask. And the place called Israel, accepting of Jews from all over the world, is embattled, at war, unable to find firm footing. I would feel insecure all over again.

I heard from Misha a very unusual story. One day, in Jerusalem, one of his sons brought home a photograph from school. It was a photo of my mother's brother, Moshe, lost in China when he decided to go into Manchuria to purchase furs. I asked Misha who the family were who had known my uncle, so many years ago. He said he couldn't remember. He had not attempted to track down the school child and his parents. I couldn't understand why he failed to do this. Ya'akov, living then in Tel Aviv and obsessed with family genealogy, had moved heaven and earth to try and find them. Fragments. Members of family, swallowed by history. In my mind I see the black and white photo of Moshe's two lush children and his wife, Devorah. The girl, aged about six, has enormous melting brown eyes. She is wearing a huge satin bow on top of her head. The boy is standing to one side wearing a leather school bag on his back. They are dressed in very fine, expensive clothes. My mother told me she had loved them beyond price. When Moshe took the family into Manchuria, she never saw them again.

Once again, I obeyed Misha's instructions and took a bus trip. I returned to the theme of the synagogue on the edge of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum. I stood among the ruins. The synagogue dated back to the 4th Century AD and collapsed centuries ago. It was made from Galilean limestone blocks in the Graeco-Roman style. The sea was blue-grey. It was raining. I carried an umbrella. The stone lintels lying on their sides on the ground were engraved with fruits – grapes and pomegranates. Part of this ancient synagogue had been restored. The columns and part of the roof were still in place. The sea moved without voice, barely yards away. Not far from here were some ancient

graves, even older. Between the fruits of the seasons was the Magen David, the six-pointed shield, which over three hundred years ago became popular as a symbol of protection. This rich ancestral beauty had been lying here for sixteen hundred years near the lapping waves.

It seems as if protection has never lasted for long. I mourn the fact that every Easter and Christmas in Romania, my mother had to hide at the river bank with my grandmother Raissa, like Moses among the reeds. Whipped up by the impenetrable hatred of the Romanian Orthodox priests, the peasants got drunk with rage against the Jews and raided the village. The men would stand guard with pitch forks.

All my mother's sophistication, her fluent Russian, French and German, her aristocratic Moldavian, Yiddish, Hebrew and Romanian, her passionate reading of the Russian writers, her love of Goethe, her wonderful teachers from France and Germany, the intense intellectual life of her small village were not valued. Eventually, in 1925 she withdrew from the University of Bucharest, under racist threats, one of only two Jews in Romania to gain entrance to the Faculty of Law under the quota system. People spat at her in the street and verbally abused her fourteen years before Hitler came to power. Seventeen years later, in 1941, the students of her small high school were ignorantly butchered. All the fringed and shawled rituals of Judaism were destroyed.

At that time, my mother was safe in Australia. She did not know about the massacre until the early Fifties. According to my father, on the day the news arrived, she sat in front of the fire in the front room in absolute silence for a very long time. He

did not dare to speak. She never spoke of it until the day the Yizkor book arrived some years later, the memorial volume written by survivors which told the history of her village.

I am the voice that speaks. From a thousand and one suns to infinity my story remains unbroken. And it has been broken in a thousand places. Like the story of the stone that is washed into a thousand seas. I cannot be found. My origins are obscure. We turned in flight from one thousand countries one thousand times. At one time we were in Spain, I know that, and then in Constantinople. In Constantinople we achieved fame as the Chief Rabbi. In Poland we became obscure, in Moldavia we were a minor Rabbi. And on the day of the massacre I wore my festive cloak, my amulets and instructed the villagers to follow me calmly. We dug our own graves and then they shot us in the back of the head. Your Aunt Sarah, was shot on her back verandah, your grandmother, Raissa, shot and left lying in a back room. It is only one story.

HAIFA

I have gone to Mt Carmel where ships enter and leave port for destinations unknown. I climb the hill among white stone houses until I find the Baha'i shrine of Bab overlooking the port. On each side of me, a sculptured peacock stands in gold and blue and green, elegantly stepping forward. The stone shrine has been inspired by Mogul architecture and is covered in gold fish scale tiles. The surrounding Persian gardens are restrained. People queue to be allowed to enter one bare, snow-white room, covered in glowing Persian carpets. The Behulah could not resist the impulse to proclaim that he had delivered the one true message. In some ways the Jews have shown a certain restraint in still waiting for the Messiah.

I wander among stone houses and try to understand blue Matisse wooden shutters and delicate green ones. I am chased by a Palestinian shopkeeper down the street and shouted at for not entering the dark recesses of his shop to buy dried apricots, dates, nuts. I dine in a restaurant which sells creamy hoummos and kebabs roasting on hot coals, where the girls are as fresh and beautiful as ripe plums. Someone has recommended I stay in a Christian Youth Hostel owned by Jews who had changed their faith. I wonder how the people in the city connect with each other and try to grasp my relationship to this landscape. Mesmerised by the story of how my sense of connectedness has been broken, I feel I've lost all knowledge of my origins.

This view of Haifa Bay confronts me with a mystery I cannot solve. It is harder, precisely because I have not been raised in a Jewish community, to talk about what I have lost than for someone who has been raised in one. I felt, however, that there was no option but to identify with my mother and the Jews. Every day of my life my mother Nehoma had proudly declared that she was a Jew, flying in the face of history with profound contempt and sublimated rage. 'They can kill the lot of us but I am who I am', her body spoke.

That defiance when she walked so proudly down the street. I decided that I was a Jew also because my father's Catholic relatives didn't seem to like the idea. I was intensely loyal to my mother. But she cut her links with her surviving family out of despair over those who died. She couldn't bear to meet those who still lived because it would have meant she had to face the murder of those who had gone. My cousin told me in Israel that this phenomenon was well known. And Nehoma cut her links with religious Jews through her atheism.

Nehoma's febrile links with the Jewish community in Sydney were also broken in the war years due to her communism and internationalism. She was seen to be a threat to the local Jewish community, putting them in a dangerous light when they needed every friend they could find. She became a well-known public speaker for the Communist Party and the Sydney community threatened to have her deported from Australia! It was painful for me to contemplate the family and community that had been destroyed. It is only in recent years that I began to form links with the Jewish

community in Australia, since my trip to Israel and the welcome accorded by surviving relatives.

For several days after my birth, my parents could not decide how to name me. A visitor brought around a bottle of Mt. Carmel wine from Israel. Finally, at the last minute, my father grabbed the bottle and hit on it. In Hebrew, the name Carmel means vineyard or garden.

I never managed to see the vineyard on the side of Mt Carmel outside Haifa. But I saw the sea from an immense height, the thin rim of life around the water's edge.

I know no-one in this city. I wander among the Persian Gardens near the Baha'i Shrine. The trees and plants have been carefully manicured and I eventually sit down on a curved iron chair in a glade. I try to reconstitute the facts in my mind about my family. It is archaic history. Was it fictional? Did it exist? The thread binding the present to the past is as fragile as a spider's web shivering in a slight movement of wind. The unique personalities, born of extraordinary circumstance and the will to survive, have been lost. Chaim Potok said in *The Chosen*, 'The rich treasure of European Judaism has been destroyed'.

Always those familiar film clips of Jews in the Polish ghetto haunt me. The old men with their beards and skullcaps, children, parents, relatives, caught on film for one millisecond before obliteration. They seem harmless in their chants and psalms and mystic teachings, meeting in synagogue to speak of love and compassion from the Jewish texts. Then dragged blindly down streets by men in uniform. The camera pauses.

Stops. To the still photograph. The Palestinian shopkeeper chases me down the street in Haifa, screaming at me for not buying his wares. What could it possibly mean? When I get in the bus to climb the steep hill to the Baha'i Temple, an old man on the bus starts yelling at me because I haven't left him enough room to sit on the seat. I argue with him, because there are no spare seats. And then in Rehovot I go to the bus station early in the morning to get a bus to Tel Aviv and the ticket seller yells at me for not reading the platform numbers for the departure buses. In Jerusalem, the taxi driver abuses me when I ask him how to find Bustenai Street. It seems the men feel they have some imprimatur for abusing women. But do they abuse men as well? My cousin Myra tells me there's a lot of rough behaviour from people under enormous pressure. Because of the religious laws regarding marriage, a young man of twenty-one can refuse to sign the papers that would grant a woman a *get* – a divorce. And that many demand flats and cars from their wives before they will sign. Only a religious marriage is recognised. And all civil marriages are conducted outside Israel. The state keeps some control of the swelling population of Palestinians. Men in the street have a sense of their temporal power that is alarming.

I go again, this time by bus, to the top of Mt. Carmel overlooking the port, past white houses that climb into the cubist dimensions of a Paul Klee painting. And then from the exquisite finery of the Baha'i temple gardens, exactly overlooking the port, I observe way below at water level the cranes, the ships offshore, the busy trucks that come and go. A port that over hundreds of years has brought people, taken them on their myriad

ways. And it's here I contemplate that I've been taken out of all traditional by-ways, displaced beyond any diaspora, no longer even a wanderer, alien or lost. I've become someone outside the recognition of kinfolk and yet I'm one of them. In Australia, my mother married 'out' and turned her back on her parents and Hasidic grandparents. The rituals of Jewish life in Romania had been carefully extirpated.

I have joined a small group, 'Children of survivors'. Children of survivors of the Holocaust. What can I tell you about this 'second generation'?

We meet at roughly six-week intervals. There are four of us although the membership has grown and then dropped again. Initially, we told of our families, how they had been destroyed. And then we noticed, over a period of seven years, that our focus changed, shifted, found a new dimension. Initially, we read books about the Holocaust, lent to us by the member in whose home we mainly meet. We attended functions at the Synagogue such as High Holy Days. Eventually, we began to hold dinners featuring Jewish food. We began to celebrate. We listened to each other's tales. We kept in touch with each other's lives. Always we have this bedrock – the connection. We have a similar sense of humour. One of the distinguishing features of Jewish humour is the ability to laugh at yourself, admit your own failings. And also to indulge in delusions of grandeur. I think of Woody Allen addressing the audience in one of his films, saying, 'Everyone knows I'm the best lover in town' or words to that effect. We watch *Seinfeld* replays until we can no longer bear the repeats because of the absurdly exaggerated feelings of distress. Another example: 'My life is a mess, my

friends no longer care for me, and I can't make ends meet'. Response: 'I should be so lucky'. Things get so bad and then you start hoping again. And laughing yourself silly.

As I stand between the carved gold peacocks at the Baha'i temple, overlooking the continuous moment in time down on the docks, one of the group members comes to mind, Daniel. His face has the reddish hue of a man trapped in memory of his parents' nightmare at the hands of the Nazis. And my own mother, Nehoma, almost caught in the web of the Romanian Iron Guard. She made her fortuitous escape from history, from the horror show, with the extraordinary gift of a brother's dream.

In Australia, Nehoma's brother Zahir, dreamed that she was alone in Harbin, in Northern China, and contacted her family in Romania for the first time in twenty years. He sent her the money for the ship fare to Australia. Nehoma got out twenty-four hours before the Japanese moved in and started arresting the small anti-fascist cell she had joined at Harbin University. She had socialised with the exiled White Russian officers, skated with them at the ice rink, shared hot chocolate with them, wearing her brother Moshe's furs. They had lived it up as a family: Moshe, his wife, the two children and Nehoma at the Hotel Celebre in Harbin.

Until Moshe made the mistake of going into Russia to buy up furs from the peasants who had ransacked the aristocratic estates. Nehoma warned him. She told him the communists would not tolerate black marketeers, and, just as she predicted, they picked him up and later he died on a punitive island. Nehoma got down on her hands

and knees, pleading with him to stay in Manchuria, but he wouldn't listen and so she lost touch with the brother and wife and two children, never to see them again. Then the ship ticket arrived from Zahir who had dreamed she was alone and without money in Harbin.

My mother's brother Moshe and his wife and children disappeared then into Manchuria, leaving her a small amount of money to pay her bills at the Hotel Moderne. My mother was recovering from an ear infection and was being looked after by a wonderful Chinese amah. She told me she would look out of her hotel window and see the Russian women prostituting themselves on the sidewalk, part of the White Russian community who had fled the Russian Revolution and run out of money. Every day her brother failed to return, she contemplated that this would be her fate. Her family in Romania simply, didn't have the money to bring her home.

Finally and amazingly, the money arrived from Zahir. While in Harbin she had attended law lectures, which actually happened to be the old Tsarist law, no longer with a future. Some instinct urged her to attend lectures in the English language. She was invited to join a small anti-fascist group at Harbin University after having spoken out publicly against the fascist allies. She was warned her life would be in danger because there were Japanese spies in the audience. She left Harbin twenty-four hours before the Japanese invaded and heard later that they arrested several people who had been in her group. She virtually begged her way down to the port of Shanghai, relying on the hospitality of Portuguese friends of her brother. When she boarded the ship for Australia, she had no money to tip the waiters and the Chinese crew. In disgust, they

gave her cabbage soup for six weeks and not much else. She studied an English novel assiduously all the while on the six-week boat trip. Her brother Zahir was a linguist who eventually came to speak eighteen languages and who ended up working as a translator at Mascot Airport. Nehoma had similar skills in languages. After studying Russian secretly in Marculesti as a High School student, because her father had not approved of it, she still managed to translate on stage for the Russian Ballet at the age of seventy when they visited Sydney in the 1960s. She got off the boat speaking English and wearing a deep chocolate fur coat, a gift from her brother Moshe. She'd sold the diamonds he had given her to pay for food in Harbin. Waiting, on the shore was Zahir who had not seen her since she was three years old. She'd been saved by a brother's dream. And subsequently, so had I.

That is how I came into being, by virtue of the love between a brother and a sister, mysterious change, fortuitous circumstance.

Thinking that the Romanian peasants around my mother's village would have embroidered such an item, I bought my mother the most beautiful blouse. It was made of black georgette, gathered at the wrists and neck. All across the front were dense vermilion flowers with tiny flecks of yellow. I had seen it hanging in a Hungarian craft shop in Sydney. Nehoma had treasured it and wore it on high occasions. Red was her favourite colour. When she died, I gave it to my girlfriend Laurel who had adored my mother.

The refrains of the Yiddish and Hebrew lullabies my mother sang me. Always with a vein of sadness running through them. She knew how to love. I never had any lack of it. It was poured over me like *lekach*, Jewish honey cake. I learned from her what it was to feel adored. All that love leavened by generations of Jewish mothers who had to protect their young. I was told that I was wonderful on every level. A difficult matter to prove later in life, and an obligation which for some Jewish children became an untold burden. But I learned later what she had been preparing me for. She had witnessed and sustained gross insult from the time she could speak and walk. And in the remembering is still the loving and the agonised witnessing. The pain and at the same time the hope of a different world.

Koshmar. Horror. The word the hysterical relatives cried out when they arrived at my grandparents' house in Romania, fleeing that Ukrainian murderer Petlyura and his gang who raped and pillaged and persecuted the Jews. As a young girl, my mother had watched them hysterically recounting and recounting in her parents' home, the home of the village Rabbi. Ukrainian Jews for generations had suffered *koshmar* and in the end there was more where that came from. I say in dedication, 'Mumma, let this story not happen again'.

Before his death, Rebbe Wolfe told his servants:

'I can see... a day will come, and it fills me with fear. The world will lose its stability and man his reason ... A day will come and it makes me tremble. Do you hear me?'

'Yes, Rebbe. I hear you.'

'I ask of you to tell it to our people. Tell them that on that day none will be spared, not even men like me or you. We shall have to delve deep into our consciousness to find the spark. Will you tell them?'

'Yes, Rebbe. But ... when that day comes, what must they do in order not to go under? Do you know the remedy, Rebbe?'

The sick man sighed: 'When that day comes, tell our people that I have foreseen it.' He turned against the wall and was gone

– From *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* by Elie Wiesel.

THE FINEST EDGE

ESTHER

We are witnessing the privatisation of human suffering.

– Dr Winifred Childs

When I descended the stairs in the middle of the night, two flights were exposed on one side by glass, and ferns grew lushly at the ground floor level. Do you recall how small turtles floated silently in a simulated rock pool near the kitchen? And then occasionally woke from their slumber to move toward pieces of raw meat thrown to them at nightfall by the staff? Those carnivorous turtles were gruesome, don't you agree? They suggested that something brutal and relentless was going on. And yet the intention of the hospital administrators had probably been to introduce a note of benign nature into our lives. Later on we realised that this glimpse of some kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest was strangely appropriate.

The light in the glassed-in courtyard shone with a green glow. From the first floor lounge we could observe who was passing up and down the staircase leading to the second-floor bedrooms, bathrooms and group therapy rooms. Sometimes I paused at the point of descending those stairs in the middle of the night, peering through the glass to the blackened pit of the fernery, knowing that a small square of night sky could be glimpsed through the skylight, where stars imprinted on silk flashed and burned. Occasionally, I would find you there in the main lounge room, leaning forward with a cigarette in your hand, gazing obsessively at the floor, your pitch-black hair falling over your eyes. You never wanted to talk to me in the middle of the night, and I didn't blame

you. It was the witching hour, when all our worst fears would rise to confront us and being mute was the only response to it.

Silently, those of us who could not sleep descended, mirrored in the glass hall divider like fish moving gently in water. Our despair floated like a flag above us as we approached the nurses' station where the staff kept watch, waiting to be beguiled into making us hot chocolate.

'Can't sleep. Would it be possible to have a cup of hot chocolate brought to my room?' I'd ask.

We weren't allowed to eat or drink in the first-floor living-room and had to return to our beds and wait patiently in the dark for a nurse to return and place the hot chocolate on the chair beside the bed. This was Belgrave Private clinic, considered the most liberal, enlightened setting for people recovering from drug addictions, domestic violence, breakdown of relationships and various stages of anxiety or fear. It was intended to be a place where we could find solace, counselling, and a retreat from friends and family. On the whole, we could come and go as we pleased, as long as we reported our whereabouts. And it was under the guise of an enlightened approach and a measure of personal freedom that the clinic enticed new patients.

But the battle between patients and staff was a war that engaged us most of the time, as you would recall. They wanted us to do one set of things and we wanted to do another. You were one of the bravest in setting limits on their abuse and mistreatment which usually took the form of insistence on absurd rules. Sometimes, there was an ironic result from their bloody-mindedness. One night, the Filipino nurse who you'd had

some real stand-up battles with, refused to give me the tranquilliser that the other nurses administered without question. He jacked up and said he could find no evidence of the prescription on his books. As a result, I had to sit the whole night in the lounge room, wondering if I was going to go into severe withdrawal. But nothing happened. Eventually, I had to notch up that nurse as one of my saviours. As a result of his stubbornness, I eventually got off the Serepax which I'd been too scared to abandon in case the withdrawal became intolerable. I remember him physically struggling with you and another patient that morning, for what reason I cannot recall.

Remember how important it was for us to impress on others that we hadn't been abandoned? We produced books inscribed by friends, vases and prints given as gifts, 'proof' that others valued, cared for us. The despair generated by our own condition was so great, our failure to survive so patent, that only another person's regard could rescue us from a sense of total meaninglessness. Patients who had husbands, wives, daughters or sons who regularly visited, were envied. This imprimatur of social recognition conveyed a kind of grace – it indicated the potential to return to the outside world. Because without these props of familial attachment, it was always possible, even if we recovered, for some unforeseen event to shatter us again and leave us without a reason to rescue our broken lives. And so in each room, the photographs on sideboards, or carried in handbags, the wallets to be produced at will, proof that we mattered, that there were people who cared whether we lived or died.

I envied those with families who arrived to offer love and hope of their relatives' recovery. I suspected that somehow they stood a better chance – that their dysfunction couldn't be so grave as to merit their complete abandonment. And yet you had nobody,

absolutely nobody to support you in there at all. All your immediate family were in Turkey, and whatever friends you had rarely came to visit. I wonder to this day how you managed to keep going.

I would brush my teeth in the bathroom on the second floor or wash myself in the shower, viewing my body distorted in the glass, dismayed to acknowledge I'd lost control of my mind and was considered almost beyond hope by those who knew me. The divorce had left me with a pain in my head that never seemed to lift, and the drugs I'd been prescribed did little to remove the headache. A few friends whom I'd cajoled and pressured into retaining contact, hung on. James Woods, who I met through the Salvation Army Careline, Jenny Martin, a former flatmate from years before, Sigrid and Anthea, who offered me the occasional night at their home for tea, and my niece, Rebecca, when she could face the disaster of my life. Rebecca loved me too much to see me often. Some had abandoned hope of my recovery and with it the capacity to witness my nightmare. I clung to only one possibility! That the Matron and staff wouldn't drag me screaming from this private clinic to a public ward where I suspected I'd have little say in the treatments that would be administered to me. I'd hold on till the bitter end, even though I could feel myself slipping daily, waking up crying more often, unable to hide my distress in the television room in the mornings. Surely, soon, the director of the clinic would have me scheduled, dragged away. And yet, mysteriously, it didn't happen. I managed to keep performing daily routines that maintained an appearance of coping, not seeming to the staff to be getting any worse. And patients who could have reported me crying in the television room in the morning, didn't do so. I attended group therapy with the boring, fair-haired social worker, Mary, and expressed my fear that I was about to lose all control, be unable to continue, be swept away by a

huge flood and drugged, shocked, subjected to the ultimate obscenity of psychiatric abuse. It always amazed me that they didn't heed my warnings and act. And suddenly, in the middle of all of this, I began to recover. How and why is the mystery that I will unfold to you, obtuse as I actually am as to the exact nature of my recovery.

Horror. Mary Immaculate Private Hospital. The old man is struggling to get out of his chair. 'Come on!' browbeats the nurse. 'You have to learn to do this by yourself!'

He's old, he's sick. The nurse turns to me confidingly: 'You can't let them get too dependent, you know?'

The old man is in his eighties. He needs help. He won't be able to make it. 'Get up, get up!' orders the nurse.

The place is a nightmare. It flashes interminably before my eyes. I'll mention Sister Kindly at the reception desk, grinning maliciously. I'll mention the two, obese nurses, like fat dumplings. I'll mention Professor Martin, evil monster, who made me strip to my waist, lying on my back on the floor, to measure my pulse in the presence of a lard, lump of a nurse. I'd never encountered a place like this. The huge sculpture of Christ, crucified on the wall, the three storeys crammed with human suffering. The infra-red light on the ceiling of each room, rotating so that, as soon as a patient moved, a red neon sign lit up in the office of the nurse on night duty. I remember that you found it difficult to believe that I had been placed under such surveillance.

Whatever blind force exists in this universe, save me forever from Mary Immaculate Private Hospital! May I never end up in one of those wards! The pink ward, with its pink opaque glass door, where they kept the cases of senile dementia and the totally insane. The illegal shock treatments, the story of the woman whose husband helped her to escape. My own escape. I will tell you about this later Arn, when I can bear to relive it!

I remember the day the Italian family arrived at Belgrave Private clinic – daughters, sons, gentle husband and other relatives engulfed the softly-spoken wife, Rosetta. I met Rosetta in group therapy. She told the story of a car accident in which her young grand-daughter could have been killed. Rosetta was the driver. I questioned her again and again. Even though the accident hadn't been her fault, Rosetta had been overwhelmed by the possibility that her grand-daughter might have died. In fact, the child had been uninjured. It took ages to find this out. In all sessions she'd been silent, afraid to speak. I eventually felt tempted to take over from the counsellor, Mary, who seemed to have little to say about the whole affair. I operated on the assumption that something had been concealed. I questioned Rosetta till her guilt emerged. Strangely enough, Rosetta recovered within the next few days and left the clinic! She'd been ill for two years, too afraid and ashamed to tell the doctor of her guilt. In the group session, all the patients forgave her for nearly being a party to death. They told her she was not to blame. Rosetta left the clinic in a fanfare of celebration. Her family delivered chocolates to all the patients and flowers to the staff. How was it that in all her two years of illness, the psychiatrist had not unearthed her guilt? It seemed incredible! And Mary had shown no interest in finding out what was behind Rosetta's first faltering comments. Rosetta

announced in her last session that it was the first time she'd been able to talk publicly about the event. Surely her doctor knew that recovery involved some kind of exorcism, otherwise guilt lay buried like a cancer. I felt that my own relentless probing may have had some bearing on Rosetta's sudden recovery. If so, how strange, how satisfying, and yet how ironic that my own condition mysteriously continued to evade healing! You never got involved in this particular drama, Arn. I suspect you deliberately distanced yourself from other patients' problems for fear that they would start asking you questions you would not choose to answer.

The nurse Jacinta, was part-Samoan, but she didn't display any interest in that side of her origins. Her exotic face, like a dark frangipani, lit up the living room. She invariably sat next to the piano on a stool, cupping her hands around the flame for the next cigarette. She seemed kind, dispassionate, chatting in a friendly way to anyone who chose to address her. She was middle-aged, somewhat plump, and conveyed a kind of calm as she turned to ash her cigarette, as ever, on the tray on the piano. She talked about herself, her children, now in their twenties, a boy and a girl, the death of their father. She had an interest in betting on the horses and was constantly arranging bets with other nurses. There was a quiet wisdom about her when it came to handling her children and their problems. She told the patients how she would encourage them to make their own decisions, form their own opinions. She also didn't mind giving advice to the patients. She seemed sensible, approachable. But she had an absolute respect for the hierarchy of authority in the clinic. If it came to a dispute, the patient could never be right. On one occasion I recall that she behaved callously towards you, barging into your room and rifling through your cupboard drawers. It turned into quite a scene with

you screaming at her in the corridor. I could never understand on that occasion what you had wanted to hide.

Her craven obeisance towards authority and unquestioning support of any other nurse indicated a desire to retain her job. After all, in how many jobs would she be paid to sit and watch and talk to people and even play endless games of five hundred? And then, she did contribute something to clinic morale. Once a week she held quizzes, which she meticulously judged and for which she gave prizes of chocolates and sweets. We formed two teams, or several small teams, and Trivial Pursuit was played, or maybe a game which involved filling in the missing letters of unusual words, names of authors or film stars. In these games, the particular knowledge of various patients came to the fore.

Arthur, you may recall, favoured science questions in Trivial Pursuit. Doreen, who was over eighty, was unbeatable for the names of film stars and movies. Other patients excelled in their political know-how or general knowledge or names of rare plants, animals and fruits, makes of cars, and classifications beginning with randomly selected letters of the alphabet.

At times their knowledge seemed formidable. There was Monique, with her razor wit, knowledge of arias and who occasionally snapped out her answers in French. Clare, with her quiet, private school accent, equally merciless humour and extensive memory for literature. Claudinia, a former ballet dancer who had travelled widely. And you Arn, whom we called 'the Armenian', and who dealt only with the most esoteric knowledge. The others were formidable opponents. They'd travelled widely, spoke several languages, and were well read in the Arts and Sciences. They'd had affairs with

dangerous outcomes, reached out to life with a flair and *savoir* that evaded their captors.

The nurses were confounded. We were connoisseurs of life's pleasures in ways they could only guess at. Who were we? How did we know these things? Why were we 'ill'? And a feeling of uncertainty would come over them. Perhaps their paradigm for emotional or mental incapacity had left something vital out.

We knew too much. If people who were smart and knowledgeable could fall ill, then what of their own fate? Were they at risk themselves? These were intolerable thoughts designed to complicate what should essentially be a very simple situation. Perhaps it was the very unusual nature of our varied backgrounds, which had proved to be the risk factor. We certainly did not fit into any predictable model. The nurses constantly reminded us that we were incompetent and needed their help. If we were given too much leeway, who knows? We could lodge complaints, turn over card tables, take over the clinic! So the attempt to treat us like children was perpetuated, sometimes in awe, sometimes in fear. The hierarchy had to be maintained at all costs and all decisions kept where they truly belonged, with the Director, the matron and the nursing staff. After all, at times we were pathetic, begging for support and comfort over trivial things 'normal' people would have found easy to handle. Obviously, we suffered some defect of character that made us vulnerable. The overall philosophy of the clinic, perpetuated by the matron, her two counsellors and the nursing staff, was that as individuals we were responsible for our own fate, our own reaction to events. You and Monique and I shared a profound distrust of this assumption and it helped define our strong sense of affinity.

The woman who had lost her daughter to a drug overdose, was responsible for reacting to the death in such a way as to break down. In other words, there was no legitimate grievance for which we did not bear the burden. 'Fault', if such a word could be used, lay in an imperfect emotional response, in some weakness or flaw which prevented us from surviving normally like the rest of the community. It was the knowledge of this, which ultimately gave back the nursing staff their confidence. After all, however astute some of us might be, we lacked the wherewithal for survival. We were, despite all appearances, child-like, and had to be treated as such. You and I kept up a subtle campaign of sceptical remarks about their attitude, which did not endear us at all to the staff.

I'm peering into the face of the night nurse, Carl. I can hardly see him in the dark. His head seems disembodied in the air next to my bed. His voice conveys kind emotion.

'What's the matter, Esther? You seem upset', Carl said.

'I want to tell you something private, Carl, and something very personal. Can this be confidential? Actually, I'm not sure whether I should talk to you about this. It's about Arn.'

'Oh, Arn. He's a bit of a recluse, isn't he?' said Carl.

I didn't want to say why you and I were having difficulties.

'He's so hostile to me. It's almost as if I can feel his hatred beaming into me. I've tried to write him letters, but it doesn't work. It's because I offered to help him write his

autobiography. I don't want to tell you about it in detail. I don't want to breach his privacy. But I tried to write up a visit we made to a gay bar in Oxford Street and now he's taken offence at what I've written. He refuses to talk to me about it or discuss it or tell me what's upset him. He's unrelenting. Promise me you won't tell anyone about this?'

'Yes', said Carl. 'I promise not to tell.'

Now it no longer matters how I viewed you, or how I confided about you. Carl has left the clinic and you are in Turkey. But I had to have someone to talk to in that place. Otherwise I would have had nowhere to turn.

Privacy was at a premium. To have any sense of personal life, we had to plead and beg with the nurses not to tell the matron what we were thinking or feeling. Matron Roberta Garfield had instructed all the staff that no conversation with a patient was permitted to be confidential. Tensions built and built in the three floors. There was always a moment when you needed someone to talk to, someone who would give advice or just quietly listen, and we treasured our privacy like a fine wine. And it was forbidden. Our hearts and minds were constantly revealed for all to see, hear, and talk about. The sensation was like being under constant anonymous display. Monique used to say to us both, '*Les murs ont des oreilles*'. The walls have ears. Whenever we spoke about private matters the sensation was that of being taped, overheard. Even private conversations with other reliable patients had this quality of uncertainty. Were there bugs in the walls? I actually recall looking for them! Did you ever do that yourself?

But this lovely nurse, Carl, had some decency in this respect. Was it because he was gay? He knew the human right to have some small shelf to retreat to, that we all deserved a space which was our own which nobody could take away from us, which only chosen people should be allowed to view. This inalienable right, the right to confidentiality, was constantly being removed. It was our last precious gift, the privacy of our own thoughts, which they wanted to deprive us of. All dignity was gone. The atmosphere was that of a gulag, a place of interrogation. Fear, not trust, reigned. And yet, we were constantly told: 'If you don't feel we are entitled to know your problems, it means you don't trust our good intentions'.

'Mesdames et Messieurs', Monique would mutter under her breath to us, 'we do not!'

Carl was a sweetie. One night, Carl, Violet and I were in the kitchen. Violet, who was in her fifties, had a rather girlish dress sense. She wore satin bows in her hair, pearl earrings, a light, gauzy, mauve scarf. Carl, lisping quietly, answered, 'Of course', to her every parry.

'So you told the psychiatrist you wanted to go with him to Acapulco? Well, of course you'd tell him that on your first interview!'

Seriously, with a slight lisp, a ludicrous parody of agreement to all Violet's quips, hopes, dreams, suggestive comments. For some reason we all became hysterical. We hooted with laughter. I nearly collapsed on the floor. Carl was a precious gem. He had an extraordinary effect on all the patients. He could coax even the saddest to laugh. He was a genius of the human spirit, a clown extraordinaire. I never understood why you

never laughed at his jokes. Perhaps you wanted to keep your straight camouflage because Carl made no attempt to hide the fact that he was gay.

He would arrive on shift and walk busily through the rooms greeting everyone with comic speed, and with an exaggerated walk that was meant to convey that a humorous situation was in motion. ‘Morning all!’ Sometimes he wore a stethoscope around his neck, like one of the mad psychiatrists from the Mel Brooks film, *High Anxiety*. Joy greeted him wherever he went. He had a humorous remark for each person. There were nights when he held concerts at which the patients, danced, sang. You would sit there in the lounge room, but rarely participated. He accompanied requests for songs effortlessly on the piano. He abominated ‘Morning has Broken’, an eternal request of one of the patients, Jim. He was Master of Ceremonies and entertainer. And then there was the fabulous *crabe bisque*, which he always promised, but which never eventuated. I always longed to taste it, and to this day I have never done so. At supper time, *hors d’oeuvres* appeared, crabsticks, cheese dips, which Carl had somehow managed to concoct from the kitchen refrigerators. It was a feast, and Carl presided. We adored him. He was clearly and obviously on our side!

It was your cold withdrawal which eventually led to my despair. I told Monique and Monique invited me to go to a Catholic service to pray. We went to a large church on the hill near the clinic, and as I watched the children in school uniform file into mass, I looked on with envy at routines that seemed to offer comfort, even though, as you know, I wasn’t religious myself in any formal sense of the word. My family were Sephardic Jews who lived for a while in South Africa, but my parents eventually drifted

away from attending Synagogue. I missed the ceremonies, the High Holy days, the sense of belonging, and it had crossed my mind to begin taking part in communal *Seder* during *Passover*.

Monique wore her tight white pants and gold belt, her white jumper and white cardigan and the luminous pink lipstick which she always slashed bravely across her small, thin lips. Her eyes were huge and blue. Her blonde hair was really a wig she'd acquired since losing her hair as a young girl in her twenties. I can only tell you this now, because she would have been horrified if I had revealed it to you at the time. She had abandoned her singing career when she was hospitalised for tuberculosis in Belgium and the drugs she'd taken had caused her hair to fall out. But she had infinite faith in the power of her God and prayed to Mother Mary always. There was a power Monique believed greater than humans, clinics, bureaucrats, and suffering.

Strangely enough, when we returned from mass, you started talking to me again. There seemed no rhyme or reason for it. You had spent nearly six weeks ignoring me. Monique had told you we were going to church, and you had an infinite respect for churches and what went on in them. Perhaps my new-found piety had prompted you to forgive me for whatever crime I'd committed.

Matron Garfield. I see her supervising the weekly barbecue, instructing the Thai cooks in the kitchen as to how many chops and sausages should be put aside for people arriving late. She wore a short, fawn cardigan and her slacks were freshly ironed and pleated. Her shoulder-length brown hair was cut page-boy style. She gave off an air of great authority. It was obvious she was in control. Even at the barbecue – ostensibly for

the enjoyment and pleasure of the patients – control was evident. The therapist, Joel Ashburg, was always present on these occasions with his strange, slab-like face and black hair in long thin curls. He was another person you kept your distance from, no doubt because along with the Director, he had enormous influence over who was permitted to stay or depart the clinic. He had the appearance of a dropped-out sixties style ‘hippie’. And yet this was confusing, because he too gave off an air of authority and it was a mistake to ever approach him. I attempted it once and he was clearly indifferent and difficult to communicate with. He was there as a symbol of staff/patient participation, but he didn’t interact with us. The fact was, he didn’t believe in socialising with patients outside group therapy sessions and he seemed to maintain this stance on all social occasions. He’d previously worked in a jail before coming to the clinic. Perhaps the strict rules he imposed on groups and his unalterable distance were also a measure of his previous job. We got the message. Sometimes at the barbecue, the staff and patients sat together under the same sun umbrella, symbolic of a shared human awareness, the need to eat and be merry. But always the fine line was drawn between the sick and the well, the unhinged and the balanced, patients and staff. Carl himself, who loved to sit with patients in the dining room, was told to discontinue. I could see that he could play favourites. He preferred to sit with patients who were close to recovery. He would have had to take turns to sit with every one of us in order to be fair, so in this instance the rule made sense. But surely, at the barbecue, outside in the open, the Matron and senior psychologist could have relaxed their guard and chatted with us. But no, the divisions continued. You maintained your distance as ever, on these occasions. The only evidence of your presence would be a thin stream of blue-tinged cigarette smoke, curling and dissolving into the air.

My room was a desolate space and I never took you into it. The two beds were made up every morning by the nurses because during the night I would move from one bed to the other. There was a wooden panel dividing the two beds, a painting on the wall by some child which had been framed, a cupboard with my clothes, the table where my small collection of possessions lay confused and dull. There were letters to you, which I tried to hide in various ways so that no-one could find them. I had no music, no radio or cassette player when I lay awake at night. And the view out of my window was into an ordinary house where a man worked in his garden on weekends with his small child. What torture it was to look on this familial scene, the lovely normalcy of a man being helped by his tiny little girl. And beyond that, roofs and roofs. And some nights I just lay there, holding onto the bed in sheer terror and fright with no landmarks, waking from the pain in my head which seemed to be getting worse. Torture beyond belief with visions of back wards of asylums passing through my mind in what seemed to be my inevitable end. And the room had no real decoration. When my niece, Rebecca, brought me roses, I handed them out to friends who came to visit. I carefully displayed these signs of love. Somebody loved me, still loved me. I was not entirely abandoned and despised. And I placed them in vases in my room to say to the nurses: do not despise me entirely; there is someone who cares.

You sat on the lounge, your long, black hair falling to your shoulders, cupping the flame from the lighter to your endless cigarettes with both hands. You always lit cigarettes beautifully. It was a very intimate gesture. Sometimes I had the occasional cigarette with you, even though I despised your lack of concern for your health and well-being. It

gave me the opportunity to draw close as the flame illuminated your face. For one second I was near your hands, almost touching you. It was a theatre of its own.

You had it all but you had been broken on some fragile cross and only knew courtship in the language of dominance and defeat, and you did not know how to play seriously with women, although you knew how to flirt with us only too well. You only knew how to engage seriously with men. But you wavered there with me for a while, playing with the possibility. But in some ways innocently, not knowing how. You held me close for the time I was in the clinic and you made it possible for me to exist.

Now I see you sitting on the lounge in the sitting room. You're disturbed, restless. What's on your mind? The sky can be faintly glimpsed through double glass doors. It's daylight. You've come in late. You spent the night out drinking in bars and you 'had sex', as you later told Monique, with a boy at the Cross. You're nervous, slightly elated. You look fabulous in your pale blue shirt. As ever, the cigarette is lit. Your hair falls in a curtain over your face. Which bars? Where? Who do you meet? It takes me a while to find out it's men you follow. I offer you my friendship. I tell you I care for you very much, like a mother for a child. It isn't entirely true but contains some truth in it. Monique and I are oddly relieved when we find out that it's men you care about. At least to some degree we are spared jealousy. And truthfully, I loved you without the desire for personal possession.

To love. There are many meanings: erotic, fatherly, sisterly, brotherly, maternal – the list is endless. And that undefined love we call friendship. I admit my passion had an erotic dimension which was emotional and visual. When I saw you, I felt complete. I didn't want to investigate other layers. There was no need. It was enough that you

moved me. I was fortunate to find you in that desert. What a mystery it was. 'Might I but through my prison once a day behold this maid: all corners else o' the earth let liberty make use of; space enough have I in such a prison.' Fernando in *The Tempest*. I would repeat this to myself.

You had the ability to defend yourself beautifully in words. The way you moved was feline. You were deadly, I knew that. If anyone crossed you, they paid. You seemed to need some concept of ultimate authority. You believed in the Armenian Christian God. You were cunning. You knew how to survive. You knew who you could afford to alienate. When it came to your survival, you knew who to butter. You could be coward as well. You did cruel things. You only knew love if you could make people suffer. I found out later you enjoyed me loving you. The more I suffered, the more proof you had of the impression you'd made.

I'd been meeting you since I was a young girl, in many places. I'd known you for thousands of years. My ancestors had come from the same city, migrating from Greece to Constantinople over one thousand years ago. Your relatives had migrated to Turkey from Greece, Albania and Switzerland. In Istanbul you had found the city to match your heart. It was the city between Europe and Asia. You loved to boast to me about the nightclubs, the films, the girls walking down the streets with one breast bared, the music, the daring of the Orient and the Muse. You told me about your life there and tried to recreate it for me. The Bosphorus, that romantic river. Your home dripping with indoor plants, three storeys, designed by the French. The parquet floors, huge Egyptian vases, the chandeliers shattering the light in tiers, the antiques, the different Persian carpets in each room, the emerald Royal Albert China, exquisite with the gilt rim. Your

sister, poised like a fuchsia at the top of the stairs in her pink tulle evening gown, about to descend to the Club ball. What a life! What a city! What dreams, what fanfare, frankincense and myrrh, coffee, spices in every shade, weighed out at the markets in brass weighing scales, the indelible sweets, Turkish delight, belly dancing where the girls shimmered their hips up to the men who tucked notes into their satin belts. The night life! Cafes open all night! And the boys! Hidden as always somewhere in dreams where they couldn't be found. But you found them in bars at the hotels where you worked. And the men, they found you. You were compellingly attractive. You were privileged. Your mother worked for an international agency. You were the confidante of your sister's friends. You knew who loved who. You gave your sister away when she married the French lawyer. What a life! Sitting on the edge of the Bosphorus, at the club all day on weekends, watching the water. Swimming, dancing, friends, then out to a restaurant and film and nightclubs till dawn. You were one tropical bird!

Once again, the view of the house next door through the window at midday, the vision of a normal home. But at night, the view of flats and roofs through my window in the moonlight took on a vision of a hell, a landscape burning in a desert, a wasteland where no human emotion dwelled, except for my own dull pain, dull horror. What an emptiness was the mustard carpet, the bed covers, the walls. My fear of falling even further, being taken away to a far worse hospital. And here again, my niece's gifts of flowers could make a difference. I gave presents of a single white rose, a single red rose. But even they seemed sullied, contained within the horror story, no longer liberated or free. And outside, when I hung out my clothes on the line, the sunlight flooded, the trees danced. There was a waft of breeze from the sea beyond the hill.

There should have been a sense of release, freedom. Instead I felt terrified by the unending pain in my head. It wouldn't go away. Even in the laundry, washing, doing those homely things, the pain never left me. It was going on and on. Would it ever end? I was also frightened that the Matron would expel me from the clinic for using the staff toilet on the ground floor. At least this had been her threat. Sometimes I encountered a nurse downstairs outside the laundry having a quiet time reading a magazine or in the downstairs room having morning tea alone, or the counsellor seeking a quiet space. Even then they radiated the power and the privilege of the normal, the 'sane', who could come and go as they pleased, sleep well at night, wake in the morning, eat breakfast, come to work, love and be loved, conduct daily routines. I think you and I shared this desire for predictability, security, but few of us had been able to achieve it.

Every morning the downstairs television room was used for group therapy. The windows were above eye level. All those who were sick were imprisoned in there, trying to explore some moment of freedom outside their pain. The only freedom I experienced was when I spoke. To reason, judge, recall, gave the only pleasure I had. And for this reason alone, being able to talk to you and Monique was my salvation. In the end, my love of language and my search for understanding saved my life. My curiosity led me to discover the way humans abuse each other. For I felt we were all victims of abuse, though some pretended not to be. And the patterns of abuse were subtle, deadly cunning, unerringly premeditated, calculating and cruel.

None of us could believe. That was the trouble. None of us could believe the cruelty we'd experienced. And that is why we cracked up and tried to escape through another door. And some practised cruelty as revenge. I longed to flee the clinic. Every

journey back there was an agony. I wanted to escape all that happened there, imprinted on the dead corridors.

Oh the moments of freedom! Monique took me to her room to show me her painting of riotous poppies. She was more 'well' than I was. She was in the clinic to escape the violence of her husband from Bordeaux and be gently medicated into a kind of calm. He was a brute. Suddenly Monique and I heard a strange sound. You were standing there in the corridor, your brow bleeding. You tried to defend a man in a bar. The barman, a Vietnamese, had got you up against the wall of the pub and belted you across the forehead. You said you wanted legal advice. We drove you to an old lawyer at Rose Bay who had a decadent air and looked as if he'd been in every shady deal that had ever been invented. He sent for the police record of what took place. Monique and I took you for a test to find out if you were HIV positive. You said you told your doctor you'd been tested before, and that the test was negative, but the doctor pricked himself while stitching the wound and demanded you have another test.

Two weeks later, you were temporarily discharged from the clinic. Your doctor beliebelieved it was time you sought work and made an effort to recover from your alcoholism. Monique and I dropped you off at your fashionable small terrace in Woollahra which was painted grey inside. You let it out to tenants who guarded your antiques. Monique parked her car at the corner. I followed you up the road, waving my finger at you over your fence.

'Don't you ever take sides in a quarrel between Monique and me ever again?' I shout at you.

It seemed to me that you and Monique often took great glee in ganging up against me over trivial matters. Your face looked white and startled behind the green hedge. You bent your head in acknowledgment, without saying a single word.

‘I’m sick to death of you and Monique ignoring me, and treating me without respect!’ I shouted.

It was the first time I saw you back off. You were capable of being afraid after all!

For the first time Monique was afraid of me too. I refused to get back into the car. You and Monique had been picking on me for months. I went to the phone across the road and tried to ring a cab. Finally, I condescended to get back into the car. I’d got you both on the run for the first time. With my back against the wall, I’d finally found the resources to defend myself. You could push me no further with your sarcastic comments and constant fault finding. I came back fighting. I’d opened the door of Monique’s car while it was still moving, threatening to get out. I’d scared the hell out of you both. And to think you’d both been intimidating me for months! Finally the tables had turned.

I went to see your GP, a seedy doctor in a small stuffy room in Paddington. ‘I’m worried’, I said. ‘Arn has had headaches since he was beaten up.’ ‘Tell him to come and be checked for head injury trauma’, the doctor told me. I went to your house and left a note on the door telling you to report to your doctor. Later, you informed on me to the clinic staff, saying I’d interfered with your life! No-one could never win with you. Every gesture to help you was an invasion. And maybe on this occasion it was. The kind of help you wanted was pity, not concrete action. Any practical help was seen as an

insult to your capacity to cope. You were a proper bastard, I knew that. And a coward. You told tales. And finally that night, I'd followed you up the street, and I'd won. You backed off. I'd found my power at last!

The night I first met you, you were loitering outside the back terrace looking quite intellectual with your black-framed glasses and austere manner. I invited you to join Monique and I for dinner. You told us how you'd lost your job as an accountant in a big company. You'd been sacked for knowing too much about the dealings of a shady mercantile bank. There'd been mysterious lapses in accounting records. 'Funny' money being deposited then withdrawn by clients. Money which had never been seen on the table. 'These big mercantile banks are like sharks' you told us. You looked myopically at us over your glasses. You had the certainty of your own convictions, a strong sense of self.

Later, I sat chatting on the lounge with Evan. The radio was on and the music was lousy. We decided to change the station and Evan made disparaging remarks about the choice of music. You were sitting on the lounge, further down the room. 'How can anyone listen to this trash?' Evan commented. And suddenly from across the room came your clipped accent.

'Leave that station alone and show some respect for other people!'

What surprised me was that you were prepared to defend music that was clearly not to your taste. Later, I sat down next to you on the lounge and said, 'I'm sorry Arn, if I offended you. Our behaviour was insulting and rude'.

I realised your magnetism, your enormous pride. You were a tangible force. You called people to attention. I felt I had something to learn from you. You knew your power, limited as it was to the clinic. I had another awareness at the same time. You were stunning, unbelievably attractive, but not by any physical measure. Behind the student-like appearance, something flashed. It was a shock. That night I invited you to join Monique and I on the terrace. Monique experienced the same insight. You had a drama and power about you, which even in that place was indelible. Where you derived your sense of self from I didn't know, but many times I looked at you and envied the speed with which you defended your boundaries. Your self-respect at one level was intact in a way that few had achieved. But later, I found there were layers of self-repulsion and despair that couldn't be plumbed.

Monique and I sat outside with you till late, Monique and you lighting each other's cigarettes. And soon it was Mary, the therapist who used to sit with you for hours before each group session. I stayed on in the room after group therapy and discovered to my amazement that you were flirting with her as well! How extraordinary that you had all these women loving you. You clearly relished the attention. But I realised you were always trying to find little ways to hurt me. And then the kind moments which followed, came like an irresistible refrain. I realised you knew all about heightening pleasure through pain. Your cruelty cut through my consciousness like a knife. Did I need it in such a place? Nonetheless, your presence cancelled out my own private hell and the hell I witnessed all around me. I'd found the only thing which seemed to provide a permanent distraction. It was you.

My memory is of Monique. She's at the wheel. She's Belgian. She drives to perfection. She's strangely kind to me. I'm her ally in a dead dark world. There are things Monique hasn't mastered, like lawyers and social security. I persuade her to go on the pension. She's in the clinic because her husband, Jacques, verbally abused her. Monique tells me that she was repelled by his taciturnity and the way he insisted on sex, conducted without finesse. She decided to live separately from him under the same roof. She's a strict Catholic. There are her children to consider, a son and a daughter, and with her Catholic upbringing she felt she couldn't leave the marriage without providing a bad example to them. She supports me in an insupportable place. But she's also in love with you, and she undercuts me at every opportunity. As a result of the two of you, I've toughened up – I'm a hard nut to crack now. You've made me like this. Now the words flash from me in self-defence.

Monique's tongue is like a whip. A young girl, Mia, wears clothes she designed herself. They are made up by her personal dressmaker. Her lingerie is exquisite, and sometimes late at night she descends the stairs into the lounge room in a salmon-pink lace concoction. She comes back drunk from parties after going out to dinner with her lawyer husband. She sways her body in front of you and dances to the late night radio with her low-cut back to you, saying, look at my gorgeous arse. You appreciated the view, Arn, and the attention. One night Monique is downstairs when Mia descends in a blue silk gown. Monique says in full hearing of everyone: 'The lady has no shame. What would her husband say if he saw her parading around like this in front of everyone! *Putain!* Whore!'

And Mia leaps up and runs crying to her room. She is no match for Monique who sits in her manicured clothes delivering her ultimatums. And you are clearly impressed. You like Monique's forthright nature, the way she claims the stage, and the way the women fight over you!

Remember 'Claudinia', as Monique called her? She was Claudine to the other patients. She was one of your favourites because you adored her dress sense. She wore earrings of the most tender pink amethyst, with the palest blush of mauve in them. Transparent they were, her birthstone. They hung in two exquisite lozenges from her ears. She'd her hair cut by one of the finest cutters in Paddington, Alphonse, the brother of one of the patients. I went to him myself, on one occasion. Alphonse owned a salon decorated with kitsch Egyptian designs around the edge of the ceiling. He'd swing around his clients in a black cloak, blond hair flying around his shoulders, page boy style. He'd pause to view the results of his cutting in the mirror, measuring one section of hair against the other meticulously. Then he'd pause, make one or two more telling snips. Then, 'Aaah. Perfection!'

You were always one of her very vocal admirers when she acquired a new haircut or new clothes. She usually wore her hair short and blonde and she gleamed with the boyish charm of one of Fellini's satyrs. She loved to surround herself with drama, and the élan of her hairdresser exactly fitted her mood. She always got along brilliantly, she told everyone, with gay men, and I must confess her long conversations with you often left me feeling quite jealous. Monique once made an insinuation that Claudinia herself had been interested in women. I never saw any evidence of it. She kept up a continuous

repartee in French with Monique in the lounge room in the presence of the other patients. It was only later that I discovered that you understood every word she was saying, but chose not to let on. I sensed that it would have been worthwhile to be able to speak French to be privy to their intimacies. I could tell that the two of them revelled in the fact that no-one had a clue what they were talking about.

Claudia was unfailingly unpleasant to me. It turned out that people who were careless with their appearance disgusted her, because she'd once neglected herself badly. Apparently, the reminder was more than she could bear. Now she was as lean and slim as a blonde racehorse, and in fact, one of her activities was teaching riding at Centennial Park. I didn't doubt she took the whip to her horses. The man in her life had a small child, and was reluctant to make a commitment. After leaving her, each of her two previous husbands had nervous breakdowns. Was she the cause? She took a potpourri of drugs, which I feared would only damage her in the long run. Strangely enough, the rest of her life had a very alternative flavour; health foods, acupuncture, astrology. She'd travelled widely and been on numerous adventures. You were the one who told me that she'd sailed around Jamaica on a private yacht and that at one stage she'd almost been a prima ballerina. She'd cut her mother out of her life for good. But as she continued to mistreat people, it didn't appear that she'd learned very much. She did me one wonderful favour. She helped me compose a letter to my doctor at a time I couldn't think straight. It was a marvellous letter, explaining why I'd made some disparaging remarks about the doctor to another patient. She wore the most beautiful clothes, gauzy blue floating tops and glittering jewellery. On these occasions you always complimented her in an elaborate fashion and she would discuss with you where and how she'd purchased such and such a garment.

Lucia was someone you never really wanted to know. Everyone had their favourites, selected by some mysterious mental chemistry, and you were not someone she sought out either. She would refer to you occasionally, but as she had never been privy to your private life, her attempt to understand you was a bit of a guessing game. She used to sit in the lounge room and watch everything that went on. She was deeply depressed. Sometimes her face took on the cruel lineaments of a Roman Caesar. Lucia could damn with faint praise and then suddenly, unpredictably, be supportive. But she always backed the line of authority in the clinic and favoured the patients who were the most popular. She had a very keen sense of power. She hunted with the hounds. Occasionally, she'd drop from her table some crumb of wisdom, but it didn't mean that her allegiance went beyond a private moment. Once she invited me to her house for lunch, but after that she ignored me, intent on keeping in with the intensive therapy group. The occasions she walked past my table in the dining-room were agonising to me, as she always had something interesting to convey and one of the few distractions I had was knowledge. The patients in the intensive group were seen to be more interesting because they had the opportunity to delve more deeply into their pain.

They dealt with the subtler aspects of grief, pain and loss on a daily basis. They had the privilege of putting into words the intensity of their suffering and had the reward of the accolades of their fellow group members and the therapist.

The therapist was sour, lemon-faced, and I suspected, misogynist, with an overwhelming sense of his own importance in dealing with pain. He was the arbiter of what it was possible to feel and voice. He ran the show. You commented to me on one occasion that you observed him to be subtly cruel and quite merciless. But for some odd

reason, he never went on the attack as far as you were concerned. He could expose people to mockery and group hatred. He could make them afraid of exposing themselves and he often tried to break people in the most sadistic manner. The man wore the mantle of chief priest and altar boy. Which God he was worshipping we never knew, although it was suspected he worshipped often at the altar of his own ego.

There was a part of the clinic that was particularly dead and empty, the laundry. It was next to a small hill of exposed earth which separated it from the next-door flats. Sometimes I would find a nurse sitting there, reading a magazine and having a cup of coffee. It was next to the toilets used by the kitchen staff. It was forbidden for the patients to use them. I once took a patient there and it caused quite a scene. Margo desperately needed to go to the toilet, so I walked her through the kitchen with a nurse screaming at me to stop. The next day it came up at the morning meeting. You were present during the incident and you came to my defence. 'Margo is the wife of the French Ambassador', you announced in a tone of outraged propriety. 'She should not be denied the right to use the nearest toilet when required!' You were immensely status conscious and used it to effect. 'Also', you added, 'the nurse has befriended a dog which she allows into the kitchen. She's contravening health regulations!'

It was true! The line of authority and obedience in the hospital had to be maintained rigidly for the nurses to maintain their control. The Matron maintained these petty rules to the letter. I was threatened with expulsion if I used the staff toilets again. On that occasion, Arn, you also accused one of the nurses of playing the poker machines till dawn, then failing to come to work the next day.

‘I saw her at the Taxi Club’, you snarled. ‘It was clear by three o’clock in the morning that she had no intention of going to work!’

All of a sudden an air of unrest blew up among us. Your vicious face at the meeting was a sight to behold. Those of us who hated authority gained a sense of fragile power through you because you could be relied on to go over the top and do the dirty on anyone who crossed you. You were outlandish and created a kind of hysteria in me and Monique that could only be released in choked laughter. There was a counterbalancing force on our side. It was you. Also, it dawned on me later that you’d been defending me from the possibility that they would expel me from the clinic.

Monique’s talents also extended to dealing with any particular patient or nurse who crossed her. They got a magnificent serve in English and French. But when it came to the Matron or the therapists, she was excessively careful, as you would remember. She literally had nowhere else to go and dreaded expulsion. It was a gulag all right, if not in scale, then in intensity. Sometimes I feel, despite all odds, that I must have a talent for survival and being protected. I’d chosen the two most powerful patients in the clinic as my closest friends. Why you’d chosen me was another matter. Was it because I’d told you both I loved you, and that in this world love was the most precious commodity? It was good fortune to have two people so skilled at self-defence as my protectors. Despite the grief you caused me, I felt without you I wouldn’t have survived. How had I found you, and how had you found me? It was because I appreciated your qualities and told you so. I’d responded to Monique’s Belgique insouciance, and your sophistication of taste in matters of wit, opera, clothes, food, antiques. It was a mutual admiration society. We were worldly enough to appreciate each other.

The wonderful thing about you was that you had a sense of luxury. In winter, you took us to the top of the Five Ways Hotel where there was an open fire, soft lounges. We ordered crushed banana daiquiris and took in the elephant motif on the architraves around the ceiling. This old hotel, with its beautiful wooden doors and picture rails, was a joy to visit. Who, at the clinic, would believe that this was where we spent our time? In some ways, I congratulated myself that I did have a talent for choosing the right companions. You were a connoisseur, not only of antiques, but out-of-the-way restaurants. Medical insurance covered the clinic fees, leaving us our social security benefit to spend on living it up. You took us to the antique markets. It was such an adventure to be with you. You knew how to live in the moment. We had warm chicken salads, and Caesar salads and... How to enjoy each second! In some ways I wondered if we weren't having a better time than before we all 'got ill', to use the hideous term the nurses used. Before I became 'ill', I'd wasted years mourning useless relationships. I could have been having a good time. Afterwards we went to your terrace in Woollahra. You let yourself in with a key. The house was temporarily empty. You served Monique and I tea from porcelain teacups so delicate and fine, they seemed hardly to be there at all. You had several contemporary paintings, some magnificent Aboriginal paintings from Utopia Station, and on the coffee table, a small tree made from gold set in a piece of opal from Lightning Ridge. What could have looked kitsch was actually quite delicate and refined. You had impeccable taste. It all helped to relieve the monotony of the clinic and its dreary routines. We were feasting on beauty and there was no-one to stop us. Bravo Arn! They hadn't defeated you yet. You taught us how to live again!

When we stood crowded in the downstairs bar of the hotel, I asked you: 'What's it like Arn, being gay?' And you'd said, 'You know how women complain about men who can't express their feelings? Put two men together who are like that. It's hell on earth!'

It was true that you were passionate and sensual. That you liked the verbal expression of feeling as well as enjoying art and music. As far as your sexuality went, you believed that compatible partners were hard to find. You told me that your physical attractiveness had diminished with age, and your ability to attract young lovers. You told me, 'Young lovers are the best because they haven't experienced sex with other men, and there's a chance they'll fall in love with you, and stay with you. But the older they are, the more men they've had, the less faithful they are. It's harder to keep them'.

For me, who had never seen physical attractiveness as the sole reason for being drawn to a man, there seemed something harsh about these judgements. And yet in the heterosexual world the same rule often prevailed. People were judged, not by their awareness, their intellect, personality, but on physical appearance. It was hard for me to know to what degree your comments reflected your own failure to value yourself. But either way, I sensed your unhappiness.

ARN

My teacher said to me, 'The treasure house within you contains everything, and you are free to use it. You don't need to seek outside'.

– Zen Master Dazhu

These are the characters. First there is you, Esther in your early forties, your Jewish diaspora, the deaths and betrayals that historically wound their way into your life. There is me, Arn, forty-five, Armenian from the Bosphorus, who loved the social life of Constantinople, the wine, the liqueurs, the men, the music, the culture, the art. And Monique, now in her sixties but still with the sense of adventure that comes of making wild decisions in a conservative framework: her lovers, her music, her French, her opera, her humanity.

I think it's time for me to leave this clinic. I'm joking, humorous, laughing, powerful, no longer at the mercy of nurses and staff, invincible and loved because I love myself. No longer the outsider, on the run, in charge of my own life at last and outside all the cruelty that could be inflicted on me. Laughingly in control. You always commented on my great pride. It's still intact. It has not wavered.

I feel as if the walls of the clinic are caving in, the horror show held in place by the Samoan nurse and her evening games which you recall so well, her guessing games. The sour distressed vision of patients poisoned with horrific chemicals, slowly disintegrating in their chairs, is falling apart. An end is coming to this clinic and I am its

witness. I'll stand outside the broken shell watching grey embers glow red as they fall at my feet, feet sheathed in the soft leather shoes like ballet slippers that I wear like a vision of Marcel Marceau, walking softly, liquidly though water. Will I disappear into the sky like a Chagall painting, and hover over this pit of hell? A hell which I did not deserve to inhabit, but to which I've been sent by fate?

Even here, in the microcosm of the clinic, miniature wars are carried out and enacted. Monique's war with domestic violence, your war with your Jewish family history, and my own against a father who denied me the breath to live. All I want ultimately is to make my escape and begin my life anew with power and friendship and love, above all with love and faith in myself, despite all the obstacles.

The trouble is that microbes interfere with innocence. And this is the part of the story I have not been able to bring myself to tell you. My essential innocence has been compromised. I'm going to be condemned, by the Armenian God, a heterosexual bias in the community, a deadly virus and, a very young boy. As vicious and deadly as the day is long. I told you he was an unacknowledged murderer – Vernon. I also told you that I found the AZT tablets. But for some reason, which I do not understand, you never made the next step in your thought and allowed yourself to realise that I'd acquired the virus myself. Vernon will never be charged for knowingly spreading the virus to me, he'll never end up in court. There are crimes of a daily nature that society is unable to trace, identify, apprehend.

So much that is exquisite and beautiful has been compromised by ugliness. I think again of the antiques which you know I love so well. The gold, the gilt, the midnight

blues, the emerald greens. Margot's flat in Paddington with the big Pacific island hand-carved wooden bowls. The faint allegiance I owe myself and those around me.

All the time I'm conscious of the love you bear me, an underground stream, secret and strong and finer than glass. It gives me confidence and strength. At last I know that you no longer bear me ill will. We are united now. The sun will come out and rest lightly on the berries on the tree outside your window, touch the trees with that frail light. Light falling in from the sky with a promise in it. I don't want to be confined any more to the clinic. I want my job back and my choices and my social life and the meetings with people and the precious moments of shared consciousness that spell away the loneliness.

I'm determined I'll regain my power, claim it back. I've not finished with any of them. Those that have harmed me. I'll find a path to revenge, and my revenge will be deadly and deep. The whole problem with this life is how to regain my purity of thought and deed. You always used to say to me, 'Try and think beautiful thoughts'. Very difficult. If I'm departing the clinic and leaving this place it's because I have other places to be. This clinic is a momentary haven from the prospect of having nowhere to live and no human association. You were one of the few people who gave me solace. I'm preparing to depart, I've packed my bags for the last time, I won't be re-entering this place again. In the end I'll be the judge and prosecutor, no longer the prisoner in the dock, and various people will be apprehended and held accountable. Their crimes, so carefully disguised within a bureaucratic framework, will be held up for all to see and examine. I'll be the prosecuting judge this time and they'll be given no defence counsel. They do not deserve one. Justice will be executed harshly on all those who failed to

love and acknowledge another human being's suffering. The poisonous cell of the clinic is losing its life, shrinking to its horrible encasement of grey film.

I have told you so many times about the cool corridors of my parents' home in Constantinople. The contrasts of light and shade in the courtyard, the emerald view of the Bosphorus from the garden, the sky pale green as dusk falls. Each leaf, each branch, each tree trunk comes to me in the glare of an eastern sun.

In this dream, I'm no longer victim to Vernon, to his sly insinuations and deadly carelessness. I'm immune to the paralysing love for him that can only bring me pain because it isn't returned. I'm complete within myself, cured forever of that romantic love that afflicted me and turned me victim for the delectation of a sly and ruthless child. Whatever has been the vulnerable moment in my psyche is now healed. I no longer need the approval and the return of love from somebody who's incapable of it. In this moment I become myself again. I love myself as I've never done before and no-one will be able to take this away from me. My father standing over me when I was three, persecuting me for not using my knife and fork properly. Do you remember me telling you about this? Then all those defections of spirit that sent my long lost family away from me. My sister? Do I ever write to her? I seem to have forfeited the right to have anyone care about my life. Without partner, without wife, without children, without the friends that come and go from my life. And you, Esther, you have offered me something so foreign, I don't know how to deal with it. It's outside my comprehension. You are a woman who loves me. How can I make love to you? What would I have to do? Would I have to? Is it really necessary? For you, it has never been necessary.

You told me that loving me was such a joy, it didn't require physical expression. Just to see me was enough, you said, to sustain life. And so out of the molecules of the seas, over millions of years evolved this dimension which is psychic and imagined and wholly compelling. The love of one human being for another transcending social conventions, sending society into a tailspin. A gay man falls in love with a woman? Why not?

I've got no chance at all. All chances have run out. All dreams and memory have lost their capacity to beguile and disguise the present, the harsh reality of my failing health and the absence of compassionate love in my life. All dreams of love are based on future, and in this scenario there is none. How can I fantasise about being valued, being loved, when my life is running out like sand in a timer? When the sand is running out in rifts and dunes despite the presence of the sea and what's eternal? And so the dreams of a future hope, a love affair, suddenly seem futile, and the fantasy is stripped away to bare bones. Where there is no reprieve, and no presence of the loved one. No acknowledgment that anything ever took place. Vernon has ripped it all to pieces. It was a one-way journey without reciprocal expression. Did it take place at all? What has been gained from my involvement with that young boy, but a deadly illness? Nothing has been gained that could be measured, that can last. That is the tragedy. There will be no commemoration, no mourning, that will mark the experience. It is a silent death without mourners and the beloved turned out to be evil beyond belief!

I could never bring myself to tell you the silly way that fate has trapped me. You could not envisage all the things that were done to me that would leave me without freedom of choice. So often I observe myself and say, 'Is this me? How could this have

happened? I had nothing to do with it!' In essence this is true. I've had nothing to do with it at all. It was circumstance, fate, a particular mother, a particular father, loving men, loving the wrong men. Who would have believed the carelessness and the inexorability of it? If I'd known where it was leading at any moment I would have called it off immediately. I'd have changed the direction I was going in. But I didn't know. It's like the Greek tale of Oedipus, Greek like me. A man marries his mother and then goes blind from the horror of it. But that's simply to tell the world he'd been blind all along. He wasn't able to see the direction he was drifting in. And then Cassandra, fabulous Cassandra who could read the future, the prophetess. It's terrible, this being brought up as a small vulnerable child in a family that was so disturbed they created the direction of my young life from the moment I was born.

And then it's impossible to undo the influence and the power of the experience until it's too late. All the time I'm in my own story, I'm the observer, the amazed observer. How on earth did I get into this situation? I'm amazed that I've broken down at the hands of a young boy. A careless young boy. How did I become vulnerable to Vernon, to such horrific abuse? Allow someone I thought I loved to hide from me that he was HIV positive, to destroy me? How did this occur? How did this take place? Why did it happen to me? You always used to say to me that I should try to see the brighter side of things. But you never had an inkling of what I was attempting to face, what I was going through.

My tenderness betrayed me. The kind part that forgives people and believes them capable of restoration. I've been betrayed by my faith in people, and perhaps it's been my mother with all her idealistic notions who did this to me. 'It's all right, darling. The

only reason they're treating you badly is because they haven't been loved enough at home.' That was how she would salve the pain of the childhood bullies. 'Forgive and forget, Arn. Extend a welcoming hand.' To the stick of gelignite waiting in the other person's palm!

I'm enclosed in a space from which I have no escape. Can I escape my own thoughts within my own body? And if this illness worsens, how am I to deal with insanity, dementia? Will there be no reprieve? Where will I hide? If I'm too ill to hide within a thought, there's nowhere to hide. This, I presume, will eventuate. You will no longer be beside me. But for the moment, while my health still wavers, I'll relish each moment. I'll go down to the beach and lie on the rocks at Bondi as I've always done and stare at the blue sea until I'm brown, almost as black as the rocks themselves. And always on the way down to the beach I will see that beautiful historic Federation-style house, rented by some celebrity, speaking a life of luxury and moment. Maybe dinner parties with intelligent, cultured, people. Once I ran a house like that myself, in Paddington, where friends came after the opera to talk and chat. *Così fan tutti*. Verdi's pining arias. I'm familiar with them all. I could open my wardrobe and lift out an item of clothing, perhaps one of my blue Italian shirts, to inspire pure joy. The kind of shirt that you always complimented me on. It doesn't matter that I might have a grim and ignominious death. For the moment I'm fine. I'm enjoying every minute of my life. I'm about to depart the clinic, the nurses, the therapists and all their mad games. There are still enough friends out there that I made in my good/bad days to construct a life for myself. There is another thing only that I wish. That you and I could spend some time

alone together. Not necessarily to talk, but just to be there, to be with each other's soul, spirit.

I'll stay with Margot and Monique. And you might even condescend to visit me if you have recovered from my angry moods. I'll stay in the garden studio and from there I'll conduct a life that will make sense for me, recreate some of the beauty. After all, that was my initial intention. I longed for the vision somebody else held of me, the admiration, the respect, the love of young men. It made me beautiful in my own eyes in a way I felt unable to accomplish myself. But now, mysteriously, I feel I can achieve this myself. I don't need another person's insights into me, or my reflection of them. My own beauty is astounding. I need no proof of it. I'm the reflection of the eternal. I don't need anyone else to tell me so. All that mad striving, running around town trying to get Vernon to love me, a mad bad boy. Just to see the wondrous beauty of that young man was to be a part of it, to bathe in the reflection and then see Vernon's yearning longing for me illumine my own vision of myself as Madonna or whatever God I chose. And now those reflections have ceased. I no longer need the essay of a love affair to read my divinity. I am saviour and saint. I have arrived at a most sacred place. The self where no-one can harm or injure me. I'm in my own presence.

I no longer feel condemned. Feeling condemned is a matter of collusion, compliance with fear. I refuse to be intimidated, to have that lovely sense of my personal power taken away from me. No circumstance, no grief, no physical illness will bow me. I refuse to be a party to fear and terror. I won't be made subject. I won't bow down. I won't be defeated. I won't be robbed of my most precious self. I won't give in. I won't do homage to any of the false gods. I won't be terrorised by a microbe. I'm

larger than that. I have contempt for it. The microbe can't compare with my intelligence. It's a sly, devious entity but I'm superior to it morally and spiritually. It can't eliminate me. It can only play a deadly game. My evasion and refusal to be bowed will give me the victory. My spirit will endure. I'll live on in the houses and the streets and the people who knew me and knew my sense of humour, my capacity for compassion, for amusement, my rigorous opposition to the power mongers, the bureaucrats in the clinic and in society at large, all those who destroy happiness. I'm ruthless with destroyers. Pity I didn't recognise my own until it was too late. But you know that I recognised others with their deadly hand to destroy. I saw them, I witnessed them, I called out against them. I named them and exposed them. I didn't remain silent. I spoke up when I saw injustice. You saw it happen. You were present. And this is my last fight and the victory will be as insoluble as the sea or the sky – the blueness of it. I'll live on in a leaf turning in the wind on the grass in autumn. A message of myself will endure.

You telling me you loved me that day on the back terrace of the clinic created an irreversible change in me. For some mysterious reason the fact that you valued me created a shift in my own estimation of myself. I'd given you the imprimatur to pass a judgment on me that I could believe. I felt my face flush the instant you told me. A wave of irrepressible joy passed through me. You created a change in my self perception. No matter how painful the encounter turned out to be, I was blessed. It was a miracle.

Now all the leaves are falling. It's autumn. They fall with only the faintest breeze. I felt humiliated to be so attached to you. Humiliated beyond belief at times by jealousy

and the careless way you appeared to shift your allegiance to other men. But the sum total of the experience was that it was a blessing. The nights I lay awake hating you, praying to be released from the humiliation. Even then, when I asked myself how I should view the experience, the answer came back each time, 'with compassion', 'as a blessing'. I felt too afraid to move towards you. For that I condemn myself.

I knew I'd left you with nothing after all your trials. But so what? Isn't that always the outcome? Have I ever known it to be otherwise? Has there ever been an occasion in my life when I've been passionate about someone, when I've managed to be with them? If so, there was always some horrendous down side. Nothing to be gained at all.

I even envy the checkout girls their boyfriends, the young boys at bus stops with their arms around somebody. There's something so simple about their happiness it confounds me. Was it ill luck, or mismanagement on my part? There's never been the certainty of regard, the return of affection that I crave. Never in my life. And now it's happened with you, and I don't know how to handle it, what to do. How to be consistent, how to be fearless, how to trust the next second, the next moment. I'm confounded beyond belief. And the hell is that it's so secret and humiliating I can't tell anyone about it. I can't share my grief that you've gone with a single living soul. I watched you the afternoon you left the clinic. But I didn't let you know. And I didn't go out to stop you, call you to stay. I knew you were going for good when the taxi came. And I could see you'd been hiding in the corridor so that nobody would see you leave. Clearly, you hadn't wanted anyone to know that you were leaving never to return. And especially, I realised, you were frightened of me. I knew my anger had been surfacing every time we spoke. My anger at your faithlessness or what seemed to me to be so.

And also I'd been feeling sick, and you made a good target, a good person to blame, because I always felt you'd forgive me in the end. But on that day I didn't let you know that I felt any grief at you leaving. I didn't want to give you the satisfaction. 'If she wants to flirt with straight men (I said to myself) – let her!' I wouldn't be there to observe. And so I watched secretly as you climbed into the taxi. I walked straight past you, pretending I didn't see you hiding in the corridor with all your goods and chattels. I didn't indicate a single moment of recognition. And then I went upstairs and watched you with a pang of sorrow.

I wasn't going to say good-bye and you weren't going to plead with me, I knew that. I didn't relent. Good riddance! And then the taxi pulled out and you were gone. The driveway to that horror show was empty. There was silence. You'd gone. All the echoes of our nights together – the wine, the meals, the movies, all of it gone. Your presence above all. Your smile. Your compassion for me. Your attempts to help me. Your love for me. You'd gone. The story was over. The love affair was over. It was one of the longest I ever had.

We have come to the end of our association. It's sad to leave you, even though our lives have been so hard and lonely. I'll go on a little longer here, then I'll oust Monique from the inside bedroom and leave the garden studio to live in the house with Margot. Monique will leave in a great fury I know, probably accusing me of everything under the sun and losing all faith in me and her grand passion. You will hide in the countryside, Esther, fearful that I'll find you because you'll become afraid of my simmering fury. And I will go on to play my last cards and possibly the Queen of Spades. Remember Pushkin's novella, *The Queen of Spades*? He persuaded the old lady

to give him the secret of winning. And in the end he lost. Maybe at the last moment I'll find an escape route from this hell that doesn't involve too much madness and pain and doctors and nurses and their vile tricks. Maybe I'll find a good doctor who'll overdose me with morphine when the time comes.

In the meantime, nothing has come to matter any more. All the things that once moved me, like the wind in the leaves, have no more impact. I can see the pattern of people's lives – the births, the deaths, the marriages, and all the ideologies. Religions and passions no longer engage me for the faintest second. The only way to live is in the present, and for that you need someone to talk to, preferably to love. There've been those who have been lucky, and those without luck at all. Those who at the right time did everything according to plan. And others like me who have never been in a long-term relationship, or fathered, and that's a regret. Spiritual truths can't make up for the absence of a small child, a laughing voice, or the sound of someone opening the door as they come home at night. And for many years I've lived without all of that. For decades. For centuries. For eternity.

In the end, there's no-one to hear or to tell me that it mattered, that I matter. I'm just an echo, a voice. Without begetting, a stray cat who walks alone. And this means in the end that all my loneliness – and that essentially is what the pain is all about – will end in the same way as anyone else's. Does it matter that I haven't achieved happiness in my personal life? Yes and no.

For some reason it would've been good to die and say I had no regrets, that I'd experienced the pinnacle of human happiness. And with you Esther. Preferably with

you. Yet how many people will be able to claim that? It's only the few who can. And the checkout girl and the boy at the bus stop will be able to claim it more than I can. That's the irony. Sometimes I wonder if I've been far too smart for my own good, that I should have settled for something more ordinary. It's only in retrospect I've been able to see the ways I've been manipulated, all the time with the consciousness of observing it with amazement. To wrest any sense of power from the situation comes and goes. Sometimes I have it, sometimes I don't. But the amazement remains. I've had so little say in what's happened in my life. That's the astonishing part. There were times I articulated it all to myself and the occasional friend, with insight and understanding, but the offence remains. That for the most part I've been grappling to undo the events that took place in the first quarter of my life, and only in the last few minutes have I achieved my own power. But still, this is a blessing. I've made it, finally and ultimately. A blessing at the last minute and one that's going to be taken away from me before too long. *C'est la vie.*

MONIQUE

Would you believe? Remember my sister, the one who owned the art gallery in Paddington? Well since I saw you she died. And left me all her paintings! But then I find out some of them are *forgeries!* Three years the legal case has been going on and next month a decision will be made about compensation for the artist's wife!

I'm telling *you*, things haven't been easy since I last saw you. I've so much to tell you it's going to take an afternoon at least. Hear that little bird? That's my little bird. Quiet! It's hard to hear you speak. Yes, I still paint and you will have to come over and see my new paintings!

I went to visit Margo in the clinic but I stopped seeing her eventually. I decided she was too mad and sick. But Arn was there on one of my visits. He became very close to one of Margo's daughters. And the other daughter took her own life. Did you ever meet her? And then later Margo told me that Arn has gone back to Turkey. I don't understand that. He doesn't have friends there any more and he never spoke about Constantinople to me. To *you* yes, he might have, but to me, never. He's hardly got any family there at all now. But these things are so long ago and so much has happened to me since then!

Jacques has not changed, not one little bit. *I'm telling you he's worse than ever!* He had a stroke a couple of years ago and I was going to the hospital all the time and I thought he wouldn't last, *but he's still here!* If you'd rung ten minutes earlier I was

nearly on the way to the hospital with him. But once again we quarrelled. I refused to go in the taxi with him. He's harder to live with than ever, *mon dieu!*

Any men in your life? There is a French saying, 'Let the ribbon on the hat trail a little bit!' This means don't jump on men, be friendly, flirt a little bit, but give them time to think about the offer. Don't leap on them! I'll tell you all about this when I see you. We have a lot to speak about.

My sisters. One died in Belgium and another died a few months ago. Remember the one I told you gave me the difficult time? My son still comes over to help me to clean the house. The children have been very good to me. I've missed you very much and it will be wonderful to see you again. Would you believe I haven't been on a bus since twenty years in Australia? A train? Once. Inner city trains. Yes, a few times. It's car or nothing.

Yes, Arn did go for an HIV test, remember? That doctor asked him to get another one after he pricked himself with the needle. But the second one was negative. He never said otherwise. And then he went to Turkey. He was trouble, I'm telling you now!

Well, this little house is lovely isn't it? A lovely wooden house and with the Catholic church and the church school at the end of this street. It's a very nice *cul de sac*, is it not? But the church wanted to seal off the end of my street from cars and I fought against it. I would have had to drive in a circle to reach my own front door! And then to put out the garbage would be an impossibility. Well it's lovely to see you. See all the paintings? Every single painting in this house is painted with my own hand. I'll give you one. I give them away. I don't sell.

Well, I'll tell you what happened after you left the clinic. I helped Arn find a flat for a hundred and seventy dollars a week in Woollahra, and then I found a flat for a similar amount for myself for two weeks in Clovelly. There was no way at that stage I'd go back to Jacques. And then Margo came out of the hospital and invited me to take a room in her little house in Paddington. There was a studio out the back and I invited him over a few times and you know how he flattered all the women? Margo, me, every woman he met! And I said to Margo, 'What about giving Arn the studio flat?'

And Margo she say, 'Fine'. Well, he was happy, I'm telling you! No rent to pay! And so he moves in. There's a lot of glass in the front of it, like the front wall is made from glass. *And would you believe, for ten weeks I looked after them!* I cooked, I shopped, I cleaned. You know my cooking! I really looked after them. Anyway, Arn started going places with Margo. Little art exhibitions and he goes with her, that sort of thing. And I begin to feel, 'Hey, something funny is going on here!'

And then Margo, she goes to the pool to swim, the Redleaf pool one day, and she meets the Hungarian. Remember I told you he was visiting from his country and didn't know anyone in Sydney? And she starts talking to him and then she brings him home one day. I came home one afternoon and she introduces him to me and says, 'Meet Szabo. We just had sex!' And I say to her, 'Fantastic!' What else do you say to such idiots with nothing better to do with their time? I thought, maybe it'll give her some entertainment and stop her from being so crazy! Anyway, one day I come home and she say to me she wants me to move out! That Arn is going to move into my room and she wants me out that day! I couldn't believe it! The bastard! And he stays away so that he won't be there when she tells me. And before that I quarrel with her because I can sense

what is happening between them, and she had to go into the clinic because she said she was frightened of me! Frightened of me! I've never killed anybody! And then she comes back and says I must go. And so I try to pack and the Hungarian comes to speak to me. I tell him, 'Did you know I wash, cook and clean for these people and now they throw me out?' And he doesn't know what to say. And Arn comes back early because he thought I'd have left by then. And I shout at him, 'So, you got rid of me! And it's true you will see the last of me! I'm going back to live in my own house! You'll never see me again, I'll never speak to you again! You've betrayed me!' And I've never seen him again! Well that's the last I saw of *him*!

Jacques and I live together here but we're separated. It's still my house and I've been here now for seven years!

But I went to visit Margo in the hospital and she told me her second daughter committed suicide. The daughter ask to live with her father, he say no. She ask to live with a family friend, he say no. She ask to live with Margo, she say no room! And this young girl, she took her own life! And I ring after Margo two days later and she say come out drinking with her at the hotel. I thought, 'Terrible'. I say I will meet her at her house. She tell me the father of that poor girl, the husband, he say to Margo, 'Well, now you have nothing to worry about. You don't have to worry about this daughter any more'! It break my heart! I thought what kind of people are these? So I stop seeing Margo, she is too mad. And the husband! No love for his own child. These kinds of people, I don't wish to know. And Arn, he started to go out with the youngest daughter. You know how the women liked him! And Margo say to me Arn is taking her out! The

woman is crazy! Arn only likes men! Anyway, that is the last I see of Margo. And I haven't seen her since.

Claudinia? You say she spoke to me in French? You know I can't remember this woman at all! But I'm so glad you have come back into my life. Seven years! What kept you away? Why didn't you come to see me? And will it be another seven years before I see you again? Heh?

And now I'm going to give you some soup and then my son Marc is coming for lunch. He always comes, every day. He's working for a new firm. He's a very good mechanic. He still does repairs for his old clients on his day off because he's so good. And I'm giving you a special French meal. Come, sit down. He's late. He's probably staying away because he knows that you're coming. Now sit here! The soup's made with chervil and green peas. Do you like it? But I won't feed you the main course until after Marc's come. He's only here for half an hour. And that wife of his. He's just had the fourth child. She said she wanted four. This is too many, I tell him. You'll never retire! This woman, all she can think about is babies, babies. But I'll say this, Marc's children are bright, spontaneous, they have something to say! But Ingrid's children... She's separated now for four years. Her oldest girl is seventeen. Nothing to say! They stand there, they look. Nothing to say! Terrible!

Well, now he's gone, you and I can talk more freely. He never liked coming to visit me in that clinic. That's why I say when you ring up, don't talk about the clinic when Marc's here. He hated visiting me in that place.

Well, I wanted to tell you about the court case. But before I do that I feed you. Now this is *crevettes*. I'll tell you the recipe. But these prawns are without taste today. Cut the tomato in half, remove the seeds. Now you make the mayonnaise, but this is French mayonnaise, believe me, with French mustard. You taste! You chop the boiled eggs, mix with shallot chopped finely, the mayonnaise, the *crevettes*! Fill the fresh tomatoes! The *crevettes* in Belgium, the tomatoes! The taste! I'm telling you! No, it's not the fertiliser. They use no fertiliser. Yes, perhaps the soil is richer. And the potatoes. I cook in a mixture of sunflower seed oil and virgin olive oil. Olive oil is too slow on its own. You like it? Good. I make this specially for you. How I miss you, and now we're together again. And now I'll tell you about the court case.

The case will be decided next week. The case has been going on for two years. Now my sister, Jeanne, leaves most of her paintings to her own daughter, and to my daughter Ingrid. Yes, she leaves one to me. But, the paintings she leaves to Ingrid are supposed to be by that famous painter, you know, the one who died. Now, I'm telling you that my sister appoints a man to be executor, mind you, of her will. And then she's selling these paintings all the time by the famous artist. It's a sketch of a torso – number one, number two, number three, many of them. The head's chopped off, the legs are chopped off. Anyways, I don't think much of this artist, I don't think much of his work. But, in the end his wife gets to hear about it and she comes to the art gallery and she tells my sister, this isn't the real thing, these are *forgeries*. She was very angry. And then my sister dies and comes the court case, and the executor, he tells the court he paints these paintings himself! That they're not by the famous artist! Well, I'm telling you this'll be decided next week and I'll tell you what comes of this one! My sister was making a *fortune* from these paintings.

For two years now I'm looking after Jacques. And it's not easy. I cook for him, I clean for him, but officially we're separated under this same roof. But my conscience will be clear if he goes, I'm telling you. I've done everything the right way. I'll have no accusations for myself. And that hospital. I hate it. It's the worst place. No pictures, no prints, no paintings, nothing. People come there, they're ill, and there's nothing for the eye.

Now, with my paintings. I was going once again to the class and now I can't leave Jacques for one hour. He's too ill. He's in hospital now, and they think the gangrene is starting. I hope to God not! So I can't even take the time to go to art class, and I can't visit you where you live. But I'm painting all the time. See the walls? The walls are covered with them and they're all mine. Yes, that one is like Cézanne. I'll give you one eventually. I never sell, I only give to friends.

Thank you for the chocolates. I rarely get to see anyone these days. I invite very few friends here because Jacques is such a difficult one. But luckily for you he's in hospital for three days. I want to show you the photo of my house in Belgium. Can you believe it! Three floors! It's a mansion. And the garden! And at night we had parties and they lit up the garden with these beautiful lamps.

This is the best part of my life. I've never had a life to equal my childhood in that house. After that, everything goes terrible. The tuberculosis you know.

And my fiancé before Jacques. When I met him he'd been in a concentration camp. And something had happened to him. Something was wrong with him, you

know? And I say to myself, this is not a man. I couldn't marry him. Something had happened to him in that place.

Oh how I loved the opera and my costumes with the sequins, my beautiful dresses, my voice – it was a mezzo soprano – and Puccini, above all Puccini. Madame Butterfly. What an opera. What a story. She sacrifices herself, gives the child to her lover. Well, I had such a happy childhood, the music, the opening nights, my parents adored me and then came the tuberculosis. The end. The end of that. Have you ever thought how many times it's happened to you? You start with the life you love, the ambition, and then something happens to stop you from continuing in that direction. I pray still. I still pray to Mary. Something had to be learnt from this. But my marriage in this country has been hell. If I'd left Jacques I'd have had to start from scratch in some small bedsitter somewhere. When we officially separated he promised me a hundred dollars a week. I've received nothing from that day. Not a penny. And here in Australia, the life is not the same.

What happened to you? Why did you disappear? You say you were wanting to forget. I understand. And then all those dreams. My parents gave me such an amazing childhood. The parties alone. I could spend nights telling you about the parties they held. Well, you said you wanted to leave the clinic behind. Why was that? Did you need to leave me behind as well? Well. Maybe it was harder for you, yes. I was really only using the clinic to get away from Jacques. It was better than a women's refuge. Such a way to end my life. With a man who abuses me verbally every day. Physically no. But he's someone who's always hurting me with words, with complaints. He's never expressed appreciation. Not for my cooking, not for looking after him, never. At least

now, I don't have to have sex with him any more. He's agreed to that at least. So this has been my fate. I started as a young girl, with such hopes, dreams.

They say this always about women. They say, 'She started with hopes and dreams'. Nothing has changed very much, has it? And tell me about the men in your life. Remember what I told you? If you like a man don't jump on him. Be cool, be a little distant. Flirt a little, give him the idea to think about you but don't overwhelm him. I'll tell you as much as you want to hear about this.

I've never had so many good times as I had with you. Arn was there too. I admit it. He was there. Making trouble for everybody. I loved you. I still do. We won't lose sight of each other, now, will we? Never again. What good times we had. Remember the antique markets, and the restaurants? We'll go there again. To Paddington and have a wonderful meal. I can't leave Jacques for very long, you know. Remember how I advised you about your clothes, and we went shopping so many times? I used to look so smart. Now I don't care so much any more. And this afternoon we'll go and look at the markets and see what we can find. There are good clothes there, I'm telling you, second-hand. And good food. Ethiopian, would you believe? We'll look at the jewellery, you and I, and think of the good times. Shall we do that? After lunch. They're not far from here and most of all I want to buy you the fig jam. This woman, she make the fig jam from whole figs, and if you're not careful you will eat the jar, I'm telling you.

And they have a small jazz band and we'll sit there and pretend we're having one of the nights out we used to have.

Remember when I sat at the piano at the Oxford Hotel and sang Piaf and all the gays, they crowd around me. Remember? They loved my deep voice. One man he approaches me. I think he thought I was, you know, transvestite! *Mon dieu!* But they like me, that's for sure. And Arn, he was very proud of me. He'd bring men over to me. 'Meet my friend Monique. She was an opera singer in her youth and now she will sing *La Vie en Rose*'. I had company, I had an audience. It was better than sitting in this house all day with Jacques, I'm telling you. Those gays were kind to me. They were kinder to me than Jacques has ever been!

Well, *ma petite*, let's go now to the markets and I'll show you everything. Now the best food there is from the Ethiopian woman. Her face is so thin and elegant. She make little pastries, they are so light, filled with meat. The place to have coffee is always there, part of the building. It's National Trust! The place to buy the best second-hand clothes is also in the building next to the art gallery. I meet my friends there. And the woman who makes the jams – she is on the corner. First we'll look at the second-hand books and then the jewellery, the precious stones. I like especially the amber. And the little plates, old crockery, lace doilies with beads to put over milk jugs. So expensive. I can make this myself.

For a while in the clinic they gave me tranquillisers, Valium. I have a fiery nature. No-one can match my temper except Jacques. But Jacques could squash me, that's for sure. And all the time the children visited I couldn't speak against their father. The children are glad I still live with him. It makes them feel secure. What a life it's been! Marc comes to clean the house, to vacuum. In the end I had to calm myself. I've an artistic temperament. You see how I live? Paintings, vases, sculptures, my brass

Buddhas, *objets d'art*! A mess. Everything is everywhere! Keep your voice down! When the neighbours are home, they can hear everything! Wait! Let me see if they can hear! No, they're not home. Still, be careful! Someone could come in the door!

Remember that time we went with Arn to the cinema in Oxford Street and we met first at the restaurant across the road for lunch? Remember how he used to choose the wine? And he was so caring for us, the way he filled our glasses and suggested things for us to eat. What an excitement it used to be just to eat with him, you remember?

I don't think he ever had – you know – HIV. He looked quite healthy to me. You know they can be healthy for a very long time and no-one can tell. I never disbelieved him. Why do you worry about this? That doctor of his, what a coward. He sends Arn for the test. Why didn't he have one himself? Why didn't he wait? Yes, it's rather strange that Arn went along with this. Maybe he went for his own reasons. The second one he say negative. He say it was negative. If it was positive, I'm telling you, I would have known it! I am very sensitive and I would have been able to tell from his attitude! There are little things that people say and do that give them away. For a start, he wouldn't have been able to enjoy himself so much when we went out with us. Also, there would have been times when he was very sad – *triste*. Bitter, he could be. Definitely! But he wasn't a tragic figure. Too proud anyway. But I can assure you I would have been able to tell. I would have picked up the vibration. Yes, I remember when we used to talk about it and we used to wonder. But I never for one minute took it seriously. But admittedly, he took risks. He took a lot of risks but I thought being intelligent he would have been careful. I didn't like to think about it anyway. Life was too hard in that place. To think about that as well would have been terrible for us. He was giving us a good

time. To the best of his ability. Before, that is, he betrayed me. Until the time he betrayed me I make no complaints! He and I had a lot in common when you think about it. First of all he comes from Turkey, some way to Europe you admit. And then the opera. Did you know that he could speak French? Now this will surprise you. All the time I was speaking French he understood every single word! His mother was Swiss, don't forget, and she work for the United Nations. Well, something must've gone wrong there because I'd say some words to him in French and it was obvious he knew what I was saying. But he hate to speak himself. He'll not let the words cross his lips. And then I try more and more, and he always answer in English. Finally he tell me, 'I will not let her language cross my lips!' Surprise, heh! A man with secrets. Too many!

Well, that is enough for now. We'll meet again. Yes! I'd love to meet you in Paddington! Yes! We go to small little restaurant. This is the best way because you live too far from here. And we'll remember! And we'll start again! This is just the beginning! I miss you so much. I've the best time with you! You did not know much I love you!

ESTHER

There was the night I recorded in my diary when we all went out to a restaurant at the Cross and sat on a balcony overlooking the thistle fountain. The leaves of the trees were illuminated with coloured lights and were a translucent apple green. The square below looked idyllic, the small park so romantic. The neon lights lit up like decorations. The French meal was superb. You had a hand in choosing the menu and Arn's choice of wine was excellent, as ever. You were beautifully dressed and wearing such a smart red leather belt with tight black pants. The whole time I knew you, I never saw you in a dress. And you also had on an unusual necklace made of glass fruits in matt colours which you'd bought in Paris, and which glinted in the night. A special kind of French glass called Lalique. Yet, as we looked down into the fountain, I could see the homeless children emerging from the dark, the young boys melting out of the black trees to the edge of the fountain's illumination. We had a balcony position for the horror show. They were soliciting. I knew that some had become HIV positive. Reading Dickens had always made me feel that the worst was behind us as far as child abuse went, and yet reality showed otherwise. And it had been happening for years in all the big cities – the sexual abuse of children. We sat and ate and got slightly drunk. It was not exactly a setting that left one delighted to be alive.

Forever Arn denied he'd gone back to find Julian. But I believed otherwise. And it became a reality at certain times when things Arn did and said presented me with a mystery. On that night he'd appeared to quarrel with Julian over the dinner table, mock him and challenge him. But I was partly to blame for this. I'd felt that you and Arn were

treating me appallingly at the hotel before we left for the restaurant by deliberately ignoring me. I had given high praise to Julian for something he'd said, knowing that Arn would feel jealous of the attention I was giving him. Before too long, Arn and Julian were quarrelling. And yet later, clearly, he'd gone back to the Rex Hotel to see if Julian was still there. Julian had sidled up to Arn when they were on the footpath and I'd told him to back off. Later, Arn told me that Julian was a prostitute. Did he ever tell that to you? I seem to recall that you'd also been told this by Arn. And so? There were things about Arn that stared me in the face that I was never prepared to see. Why couldn't I see clearly? Obviously, he'd a strange cross to bear. His life had the most complicated dimensions. I remembered our conversation at the Five Ways Hotel. I felt I'd caught him in one of those rare moments when he was willing to confide about himself. I believed him when he said he felt condemned. Nothing had hinted to me that this was what it would be like for him. Arn was a passionate man with a depth of feeling. The coldness of other men distressed him. But Julian wasn't cold. Julian was warm and vulnerable. I suspected Arn had spun me another tale. Or perhaps the men he was drawn to were ones who couldn't respond to him. It's strange, isn't it that both of us fell in love with him, and especially odd that his being gay was not an obstacle for you. You're much more of a pragmatist than I am and yet you were unable to resist him.

Arn had met a young man, Julian, at the Oxford Hotel and invited him to join us at the restaurant. Julian was smart and brave and desperate and abused at home and on the street. He told a tale of how he'd been hypnotised at a gay party and made to strip naked. God knows what else had been done to him, but he hinted at something ghastly. We listened to this tale and watched his tense, taut face. Arn got drunk and refused to go back to the Clinic. You got drunk and refused to go home by taxi. You insisted on

wanting to go back to your car at the Oxford Hotel so that you could drive back herself. You were so drunk, you'd have killed yourself together with Arn as well, if I had allowed you to drive. I shouted at you both. Julian wheedled and pleaded with Arn on the sidewalk to take him for another drink to the nearby Rex Hotel. Suddenly I found my strength. I told Julian it wasn't on. I bundled Arn, who came reluctantly, into a taxi with you and ordered the driver to take us back to the Clinic. When we arrived, Arn and I literally carried you up the stairs, your feet barely touching the ground, you were so drunk, muttering to yourself in French, your wig slipping to one side. And then Arn went back downstairs alone to pay the taxi driver. I watched him from the first-floor window, and suddenly I realised that the taxi was reversing with him in the back seat! He was going back to find Julian! Julian had confessed to me over the bar at the hotel that he slept with men just to get some affection. He'd told me that he never asked them if they were HIV positive. He'd said he trusted them on an honour basis. I'd felt my heart go down as I looked into his pastel blue eyes.

Arn is sloping through the valley near the beach. He's in one of his black moods. He's murderous. We pass him on the way back from the beach. He hardly looks up. There are unspeakable things between him and I once again. The vision of him walking abruptly alone down to the beach through the tropical palms, self-obsessed, silent and bitter. All too familiar, isn't it? How many times did we see him there in that mood? What was it he held to himself? Some vision or nightmare. You never questioned him about his private life, and I knew things I felt I could not tell you. I kept praying for a reprieve from the unrelenting hatred that he sometimes bore me, anyone that came too close. That part of his 'autobiography' I'd written had obviously upset him. I'd thought he was

over it, but since the night at the restaurant he'd closed down once again. Remember the day in Paddington when you both helped me select clothes in a second-hand shop? How kind I felt he was being, but how hurtful to enact this parody of caring. And yet you insisted that whenever I went out, left the clinic for the evening, that he missed me more than he'd admit. Sometimes I sat with him silent in the television room, trying to get him to talk and he sat there refusing, denying me any kind of response. It seemed as if the time in this clinic would go on and on forever without release. Where was the end to it, how would we all make our escape from our own past, and the punishment it had inflicted on us?

The wife of the pop star came to teach us yoga if you recall, resplendently pregnant and symbolising security, continuity, fidelity, love. And then in the group sessions, the confessionals went on and on like some kind of painful exorcism. You were exempted from these rituals because you were seen to be someone taking temporary refuge from Jacques and not requiring in-depth therapy yourself. The very beautiful patients always had the ear of the therapist. There was the Croatian girl, who'd been abused by her brother and become a model and before that worked as a prostitute to maintain her heroin habit. Her clothes were superb, weren't they? I recall her arriving once in a black suit with a short skirt with padded shoulders on the jacket. She looked exquisite with her silver-blonde hair. There was another girl, Jewish, who was afflicted with the pain of early family relationships. And these two committed suicide suddenly. You were as shocked as I was, even though you had not known them well. But still there were occasions when you engaged in conversation with them in the lounge-room. These deaths reverberated like some obscene nightmare in the midst of daily routines. I thought it was the drugs they were on which had created unbearable

side-effects and chemical dependency. I knew, thank God, that you would never fall prey to that degree of despair. You had enormous reserves of strength, and what's more, your childhood had been a happy one.

Sometimes I wondered about my own history and the reasons I was in the clinic. My own Jewish history with the massacres and betrayals and hairs breadth escapes, the endless historical nightmares with their endless permutations. What part had this played in my own vulnerability, the painful stories from the past until now? For a child of Holocaust survivors, every loss of intimate association repeated itself again and again with deep intensity. Because to lose a person from your life was to miss them a thousand times over with the memory of all the other losses. I always felt I had your sympathy on these matters because you told me how frightful it was when the Nazis occupied your parents' beautiful old house in Belgium down on the lake, and how you had to bow and scrape to them. You resented them immensely.

I'd seen a picture of the gymnasium in my mother's village before the war. And it looked so warm and friendly. A picture of a girl in the school playground doing a backward somersault. And then the large photograph of all the children in the High School, taken together. Nearly all of them had been murdered in a massacre in the village. This was the pain I couldn't put into words. All the love and happiness in that school playground had been coldly and calculatingly destroyed. It seemed to require a continuous act of faith on a daily basis to contradict that sickening event – the Holocaust. I always had your support over this, Monique. You were a source of great comfort to me.

The thing was that I loved all the people in the photographs – my family, the villagers. I loved them all with a terrible and deep love, and I hadn't been able to save them. It was now too late to warn them of the terrible danger that they faced. And would they have had the money to escape, even if they'd known? And would foreign countries have granted them visas, allowed them to leave? I knew them all, I loved them all – my aunts, my uncles, their children, my cousins and all the members of the village I'd never met. They'd been forced to dig their own graves before they were shot. They belonged to me and I mourned them and had never known them.

And then there was the difficulty in recognising evil. I was so familiar with evil in its gross historical context that I hadn't been able to recognise mistreatment of the ordinary variety in daily life. I'd tolerated relationships that you and other people would have walked away from because nothing could compare to the horror of what my family had suffered. Everything else seemed mild in comparison, and of course it wasn't. I'd laid myself open to abuse through being unable to define the scale.

You always impressed me, Monique, with your pride and instant recognition of when people were out to get you. You had a very high self-esteem and if anyone annoyed you, you let them know immediately. There was no delay. Sometimes I wondered if this is why I had been so drawn to you and Arn, because I had so much to learn from you both.

One of the worst aspects of the pain in my mind and body about the people who'd been killed was the fact that I'd been unable to talk about it. I simply didn't have the words to translate the experience. When I was younger I kept a diary, but later, when I'd found out about the massacre, I suddenly couldn't write things down any more. There

seemed no way to communicate my shock, the loss of all those people I'd never known. And a friend of mine told me there's a kind of grief which is an expression of loss, not just for one's own relatives, but for a whole community! How could I communicate that? I remember you telling me that you'd broken off your engagement with a Jewish man who'd been in a concentration camp. You'd said he'd struck you as empty, somehow bereft of energy. Survivors were affected in so many different ways.

Always that memory of my mother, so proud in her fur coat, but with a kind of slippery glittery shine of desperation in her coal-black eyes, a desire to wipe out the past with her many political activities and commitments. There was always *that story* behind all the other stories, the daily events, the attempt to take part in the present. How could I place a tale like that, how could I place the evil of it?

So how had I ended up in the clinic? It was because time and time again my parents had told me that human love could cure all ills, even heal the perpetrators of evil. And it wasn't true. Your parents had been far too smart to ever tell you such nonsense. My parents had tried to give me a better world to live in, make it seem a more benign place. And perhaps they'd perpetrated these myths for their own sake as much as mine. It seemed to me, that despite the stories they told me to make the world seem more comprehensible, that they were, underneath it all, as canny and streetwise as you. Both my mother and my father made judgments about people that were far more astute than my own. Perhaps it was because they'd come from close-knit communities as children which had made it possible for them to assess people, whereas I'd been raised as a lonely child without community. The stories of redemption through love that they preached to me were a myth they hadn't practised themselves. I'd believed their

Eldorado, their fantasies about kindness and goodness conquering all. I felt that if I was going to include a notion of love and forgiveness in my life, that it had to be based on reality, not dream. Their myth-making had left me totally exposed. I knew now that I had to distance myself from destructive people. I couldn't cure them, I couldn't cure the Holocaust. I had to shun evil. I felt my parents hadn't protected me, or aided my survival. I felt like a snail without a shell.

Suddenly Arn would appear from nowhere. He went to the beach to tan. Remember the occasions when he tanned too much? He used to come back with his skin burnt. He still walked with that unbearable intensity down to the beach, past the lovely old houses and extravagant trees, hugging some sordid secret to himself, harbouring some depth of self-rejection and hatred. There seemed no love in his universe, only pain and hatred. I remembered the night he took me dancing to a gay bar in Oxford Street and we danced so happily together. For some reason you didn't go with us that night. I think you had gone home to do the weekly house-cleaning. Once again, I thought Arn was being incredibly kind to me, treating me like a friend. We danced together and I hadn't been so happy in years. I remember he was wearing a beautiful salmon-coloured shirt. At one stage he left the room and I began chatting to a young boy wearing a cap and listening to the repetitive disco music. Jason. Jason was high on something and was seductive and intimate, holding me and kissing my cheek. Arn returned from where he'd been and saw us, and then began the freeze. From that point on he refused to dance with me. Later, I saw him dancing with Jason and kissing him on the lips. The three of us left the bar and tried to enter another bar where men were wearing leather and chains. Arn explained to me that this was to intimidate homophobes who might otherwise attack

them for being gay. He said that really these men were the gentlest of all. It didn't quite square with their appearance, but in the end I was denied entrance on the grounds I was wearing sandals instead of shoes! You would have laughed at that, Monique!

Meanwhile, through the doorway I could see a table of men and women kissing each other. And then we went on again to another bar where a troupe of men dressed in glittering costumes sang and danced and kicked their legs in the air. It was a hotel that you had come to with us and played the piano. It was absolutely packed on a Friday night. At the end they advised the audience to go home and have safe sex. At this point Arn, who was squashed up against the bar with me, became vituperative. 'What lies are told here!' he spat out. 'They talk about safe sex! And once people have taken drugs they'll be unable to judge how much they've taken and take more, and safe sex will be the last thing on their minds!' And he raved and raged with fury at the performers and their message. Then he looked around him at all the men and women in the bar and told me that the place was a regime of deception and betrayal and lies and that the whole message of safe sex was a farce. When I arrived at the hotel I felt quite relaxed and welcome. People had spoken to me in an affectionate manner. There'd been no sexist remarks directed at me. You remember how nice they'd been to you at the Oxford when you played the piano there? Very accepting. Arn's rage clearly had some personal background to it. In the end he stormed out into the street with me and left me there on the pavement, deciding to go on to other bars, other men. He hailed a taxi and put me in the cab, directing the driver. His charming manners had returned. And as I drove off, I turned to see him with his arms around Jason and a plump boy who'd come from nowhere, staggering to yet another bar. Always I remembered the day at the second-hand clothes shop when he so carefully selected clothes for me to try on. And I'd

thought if only he'd cared for me. And yet it was a mad dream that a man who'd had male lovers for years would care for me in that way. Everyone said it was impossible. You were the only person who implied that his feelings went deeper. He wasn't even bisexual. There were certain premises and assumptions about attraction that we'd all been raised on that said it was impossible for a man with his history to come to care about me in that way. There was something about him as you well know, so beguiling, despite all his bad behaviour. Was I tuning into a lie? A fantasy? An impossibility? No less?

One day he told me the story of how he'd fallen in love with Vernon, such a polite name. And how Vernon had driven him mad to the point of no return and he'd ended up losing his job and residing in the clinic. Vernon was a young man in his twenties who came from a middle-class North Shore family. Arn never discussed him directly with you. He used to confide in me about Vernon a great deal. Vernon attended a private school and ended up in some kind of job in marketing. Arn had fallen in love with him and they'd lived together for a short while. And then Vernon went away for the weekend and, looking through his bags, Arn had found the packet of AZT tablets. He confronted Vernon, who had assured him when they met that he wasn't HIV positive. And then Vernon confessed that he'd had the virus all along. I think if I'd told you about this confession, Monique, you would have been a bit more suspicious than I was about whether Arn might be HIV positive himself! When Arn told me the story, I assumed, but only assumed, that Arn hadn't been practising safe sex. No doubt that was why he'd carried on in such a hysterical manner at the hotel. But it was amazing how I always repressed this part of the story, any possibility that Arn himself had been

infected. Obviously it was a thought I found too difficult to bear. I suspect you would have jumped to that conclusion immediately!

After storming and crying and throwing Vernon out for the deception, Arn demanded that he return to him. Vernon disappeared. Arn said that some instinct told him where to look for him. He wandered around Neutral Bay until he saw Vernon entering a house and accosted him outside it. Later, in the local newspaper he read an advertisement from a man offering his services as a chauffeur. Every instinct told him it was Vernon. Arn hired the limousine and ordered it to wait for him outside an expensive waterfront restaurant. And when he got into the back seat it turned out he was right – the driver was Vernon! Vernon was stunned and amazed and blindly drove Arn to his destination. Further encounters brought tears and recrimination.

You would have been fascinated by the next development! Arn wanted Vernon back! He wanted to forgive him and have him back in his life. But Vernon was adamant. He'd moved on. I never felt free to discuss this part of Arn's life with you, because it was the very secret part of his story. But there were other things he confided with you about, such as his family. I think the way we all listened to each other was crucial. I think now, looking back on it, that this was how we healed each other. We really cared about what had happened to the other person. It was a drama that mesmerised us. We really wanted to know the secret parts of the other person's life with passionate interest. And I think it was this sense of vital connection that annoyed the staff. We considered our own story far more important than anything we ever told them!

So here was certainly a case of attachment to the wrong man. Vernon was a cold-hearted exploiter who saw no obligation to keep the virus to himself. A man who

wanted to spread his own dread and despair as far as possible. Arn's rapt adoration had been returned in the most sinister way. His romantic obsession had received a savage and bloody-minded response. I realised that it was no wonder that his behaviour seemed to demonstrate such extremes. It would have been enough to undo anyone's moorings. It would have been difficult enough loving an inadequate person, someone who was indifferent, but someone who was intent on destroying him, that was the ultimate shock. This is where romantic notions had led Arn. A man whose capacity to detect abuse of power seemed infallible in ordinary social situations but who'd mysteriously lost his radar with Vernon so that he was unable to detect the malevolent intent. Arn had let down his guard. Been betrayed by the desire to love and be loved. And I felt that this was the ground on which we had all been betrayed time and time again. Would you have believed that our smart and canny Arn could be such a fool? I'm sure you would have been astonished at his gullibility!

On the whole, the people in the clinic were a friendly lot. Even Arn had his softer moments, and clearly would not go out of the way to injure anyone without provocation. Why were we, the victims, in the clinic? Where were the perpetrators? The perpetrators were all out there, conducting their daily affairs. And this was the part of the story which you were very familiar with. Your crazy Jacques had all the credibility in the community, and you had none. You and I know that aggressive personalities released their anger onto us, and as a result we became depressed. Those who have no outlet become cast down and some with depression are often put on heavy drugs and even hospitalised. We were acutely aware how close we came to being permanently hospitalised ourselves! We saw the terrifying possibility of that on a daily basis!

I often thought of my own fate in relationships, not only with men I'd been involved with but women who'd befriended me. You were as tough as nails, and yet Jacques had still managed to bring you to the point of entering the clinic! The number of times I'd been put at risk by someone sensing in me a suitable victim, a soft touch, a gentle voice, the desire to be loved, protected. And then, the outcome. A cold hard selfish encounter, with a price to be paid. Arn's fate was a warning to me against being gullible. All those times I'd been told wonderful fables, let down by the gap between dream and reality. How well evil could disguise itself! The whole art of mental survival seemed to be not to allow myself to be overly impressed by it, move on and find kindness somewhere else. Sometimes the evil came too early, when people were too young to protect themselves, and the destruction took place before they had a notion of choice or how to escape. I'd met several people like that in the clinic. Some, for instance, had been sexually abused as children and became prey to depression in later life. Remember the two girls who committed suicide? They had their minds interfered with by the deadliest of drugs and lost all control and any chance of rescue or escape. So many had been lost this way. If I ever got out, I vowed I'd find some way to speak up about child abuse and the large number of people who had been subjected to it. You have been very fortunate in this regard, Monique. I never heard you to talk against your parents. They seemed to treat you beautifully as a child. Perhaps that's why you had so much chutzpah and strength!

Where was the peace, simplicity and reliability of someone's regard? Arn indicated to me that he'd never found it. The Armenian Christian church which was quite patriarchal, was a structure that still held him in thrall, even though his homosexuality was frowned on there. He always said in a respectful tone of voice that,

regrettably, he could never go into a church. He appeared to condemn himself at some level for his sexual preference. Perhaps Arn's fondness for me stemmed from my confession of regard, the fact our friendship was independent of any sexual intimacy. I told him I loved him in a rather oblique way, and perhaps that was why he put up with me in all my endless distress. I thought to myself that he was my ultimate distraction. And at times he didn't seem averse to making me his. You were very aware of my feelings about him. And I think you were even more aware of his feelings about me.

Arn became cold and hard. I saw him getting more and more burnt by the sun, till it seemed he was unreal, almost black. He wore a transparent black shirt with a hint of glitter in it, as treacherous and malevolent as his spirit seemed at the time. He ignored me on the stairs. He certainly knew how to treat somebody as if they didn't exist. On one occasion he did talk to me and said that he'd been frequenting a male bar at Bondi. And that was it. Nothing else. I felt as if something unrelenting was going on in him forever, that he would never bend. And what was it that I'd done? I'd helped him to write his autobiography and when we'd got to the section about Jason he'd suddenly leapt up from the sofa in the living-room and from that moment refused to write with me, talk with me, or explain what I'd done to upset him. He cut off from me in a silent, cruel and savage way.

The fact that he was writing his autobiography with my help, had created a bond between us. Poring over his document had given excitement and interest to our evenings. We would meet after dinner in the lounge room and there was an air of

excitement about it. We felt we were doing something very important and slightly clandestine because it actually involved a critique of the clinic and what went on there. He would dictate to me and I'd write everything down with slight amendments. He would insist that he and I sat together alone, and Monique, you respected that. 'Esther and Arn are writing the autobiography', you would announce to the others in a tone of great importance. It was such a precious project. I loved being involved in it. It brought Arn and I together in a real intimacy and closeness where he trusted me with his slightest feelings. We wrote it for weeks. It created an escape. And also a strange magic that this dross that was our lives at the moment could be transmuted into something of value. I'd told him he might even get the manuscript published one day! I wonder where it is now? He never trusted me with a copy of it.

He had an obsession for detail. All the events had to be portrayed in their exact sequence. Interactions with the nursing staff and doctors were meticulously relayed in terms of a war of wills in which he always managed to win.

One of the terrible stories he narrated was how, while sitting in the lounge room of the clinic, he'd swallowed tablets to take his own life. Here again, it was an occasion when you were absent. You usually went home on week ends to clean the house. I told the nurse in charge that he had threatened to do it and she had left him to his own devices without even checking whether he had the tablets on him. He had the pills in his pocket the whole time.

It was because they wanted to discharge him for breaking his contract with the hospital not to get back too late at night, or stay out the whole night. He threatened to take his own life because he literally had nowhere to go. He'd sub-let his house in

Woollahra and put all his antiques into storage, so really there was nowhere to return to. I don't know where they expected him to find accommodation. It seemed a very cruel thing to me. All the years he'd lived in Australia since migrating eight years earlier had been spent in Paddington in fairly salubrious quarters and all he could afford to turn to would be some kind of doss house.

Arn was left to sit in the living room. I went to sit with him, waiting for the nurse to come and remove the tablets. When she didn't arrive, I tried to take the small yellow tablets from him myself. We struggled in the lounge-room. He was too strong for me. He left the room to go the bathroom and then returned. He told me he'd taken the tablets. I rushed to tell the doctor on the ground floor. There was still no nurse in attendance. By the time I returned his speech has started to slur. I couldn't find the doctor. Finally, I found a nurse and grabbed her by the arm and screamed at her, 'Arn has taken the tablets! I told you he'd take them! For God's sake, what do I have to do in this place to get any help!' You were as furious as I was when you got to hear about it. And I'd wished you'd been there because you would have been far more effective in dealing with the situation. People were afraid of your angry outbursts under ordinary circumstances. You would have created a scene they would have been unable to forget.

Finally the nurse was willing to believe me. An ambulance was called. Arn was taken to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. There were some red faces over the incident and some questions asked of the doctor and the nursing staff. Later, Arn remembered everything. I felt the doctor was reprehensible because when I went to inform him of Arn's intentions he told me that all patients threaten suicide but few of

them did it. And that Arn had to leave the clinic as requested because he had to learn a lesson. He thought Arn was faking it!

Arn dictated the story to go into his autobiography in great detail, evidence to him of the nefarious cruelty and negligence of the whole system. And I couldn't but agree with him. By then you had got to hear about the whole affair and were just as incensed as I was! Rules were made without much care for a person's private despair or grief. The hospital operated on a strict notion of personal responsibility and accountability which simply didn't hold up when people were sick or ill and needed protection and looking after.

Later Arn built this story in group therapy into an elaborate case in which I was witness for the prosecution. Then, to my amazement, he suddenly switched around entirely and repudiated my evidence in the group therapy session, siding with the staff! On that occasion you actually took Arn's side against me. Sometimes your love for him led you to behave in the most abominable manner! You could be utterly treacherous when you chose. I was left to carry the burden of proof alone. It was extraordinary, but obviously he felt vulnerable and unable to fight authority. He didn't want to alienate the clinic with an accusation of gross negligence. He needed a roof over his head and he'd been given one more reprieve.

When the beautiful Croatian girl slashed her wrists it seemed clearly wrong to me to send her home so early. She should have been forcibly detained until she was fully recovered. Instead, she'd returned to the clinic with her wrists bandaged to the elbows and been allowed to come and go as she pleased. Because it was a private hospital and understaffed, they didn't provide twenty-four hour supervision. Sometimes the laissez-

faire attitude, which for the most part suited me very well, created a situation where there was insufficient surveillance. I remember having the most intelligent conversation with Despia. She was absolutely lucid about herself. A wonderful girl who'd been subjected to a drunken father among other things. He used to come to visit her at the hospital looking very concerned. No doubt he had come to feel very contrite after the way he had treated her as a child. Three weeks after her attempt, she went to the Gap, elaborately folded her clothes into a pile at the cliff edge and jumped to her death. She'd been threatening to attempt suicide for weeks. She should have been put into a public hospital under observation. But then, given the terrible drugs she was on, would that have condemned her to a life of lying on beds, hallucinating, descending slowly into insanity? And so Arn had almost become another statistic. Thank God Monique, you only ever took Valium!

And there were the times when you and I and Arn laughed ourselves sick or went to some outdoor restaurant on the weekends and ordered exquisite food and Arn suggested the wine, the salads, with his connoisseur's knowledge of the rare and the delectable.

He told me the relationships he'd had before Vernon had been broken up by women who desired him and resented his attachment to his male partner. Actually, I can believe it. He'd even swear about it under his breath. His world certainly had a blight on it. The charms, the delight of being with him were so delectable, I wondered at his failure to enthrall other men. Was it because he was perceived as a foreigner by Anglo-Celtic men? He was in fact part Greek, part Albanian, half Swiss. He took us both to the antique markets and did we enjoy ourselves! His knowledge was detailed and I think

you and Arn had gained some satisfaction from knowing a lot about it. And then to the small, out-of-the-way antique shops. He would choose a delicate Chinese bowl, a French vase to pick up and examine. Everything of beauty he relished. And it was indeed a contrast to the pain and suffering we wanted to escape.

We introduced him to Margot in case he needed accommodation when he left the clinic. Margot owned a neat little two-storey terrace in Paddington with a basement. It was tastefully decorated with paintings and pottery collected on her various trips overseas. Her husband had been a diplomat and they'd travelled widely in the Asia-Pacific region. Margot still worked part-time as a travel journalist for a fashion magazine. What had brought her into the clinic was that she'd been robbed and assaulted in the own home and found lying in a pool of blood. Her marriage to her husband had fallen apart due to her alcoholism. But what had that been due to? There are always layers beyond layers.

Arn did move in eventually and I remember that when you finally left the clinic you moved in as well, so the three of you were there together. Then to your absolute shock, you found that Arn had persuaded Margot to throw you out of the main part of the house so that he could move into your room! It was beyond belief! I recall you ringing me and telling me that you had given him a loquacious speech in French. He'd been living in the garden in a kind of studio and had conspired to replace you as the person in the house. And that was the end of your friendship eventually, and your adoration of Arn. It went up in proverbial smoke. You later visited Margot in the clinic and she told you that Arn had left Australia for Turkey. I must confess I found it astonishing that he went to those lengths to get you out. After all you'd done for him. It

was an act of absolutely treachery and a complete betrayal of the bond that we'd all shared. To this day I don't understand how he came to do it.

Months of wining and dining and being part of a mutual admiration society, excursions in your car to pubs, restaurants, movies. A lifestyle that echoed and mimicked some kind of delight in living which oddly enough transcended the boring things I'd been doing for years prior to meeting you both. How ironic. That I'd finally learned to enjoy myself by putting enjoyment, not duty, first in my life. This was Arn's great art and skill. He knew how to create an atmosphere. Unfortunately, he'd lost his \$80,000 a year job. Now he could only dream about the luxuries he'd once been able to afford. His beautiful shirts for instance. The delicate blue one from Italy that had the shimmer of blue summer days in it. Eventually it would become threadbare. You often took him window shopping in Paddington, and very occasionally, bought him a new shirt.

The clinic collected people of talent who'd lost the ability to practise their métier, the special skill that they demonstrated in the world. Claudinia, as you know, had once trained as a ballet dancer and then drifted into teaching horse riding. You were painting, Monique, painting with flair. You were an artist, there was no doubt about it. And your mind was so sharp and clear.

As I lay on my bed I could feel the pain travelling through the nerves of my body. All the memories, the opportunities for some kind of sacredness would go if I parted from Arn. The pain and sacredness were one. I hoped I would never again be able to moralise about why people came to care for each other. There were no rules. The sea turning on its own waves in a calm gesture, the sadness within it, the knowledge of time

going on forever. The waves breaking at the beach turning to endless spray. I remember watching him in his black shirt as he walked out to the furthest point on the rocks at the bottom of Shelley Beach, beneath the cliff face. He wanted to be alone with the sun and the wind and the sea. I cared for him but it wasn't enough. Time was against us, circumstance and other people. There would never be that moment. There would never be unalloyed time to explore. It was an impossibility. I knew it from the start. I would have given anything to have spent just one day with him alone, wandering around the sea edge. But whenever we went out, we went as a threesome. I engaged with my love for him because he beguiled, promised something that would heal the misery. I was riding down the grief of it. I couldn't go to him. I couldn't cajole, plead. The emotional second was locked. I never let you know how much I'd come to care for him. First of all, you loved him too much yourself to hear it, and secondly, I don't think you ever romanticised him the way I did, even though you were in love with him yourself.

The three of us in fact were in love with each other in a funny sort of way. We gave each other a sense of excitement in our elaborate escapes to bars and restaurants. The staff resented the fact that we had our own system of authority, that we didn't get down on our knees and grovel to the matron, the senior psychologist, the doctors. We had our own power and it caused anger, as I told you before. I suspected that the decision to ask Arn to leave had been prompted by Joel Ashburg, the psychologist. When I had pleaded with Joel to allow me to enter the select group therapy sessions, he told me that he'd allow me to join only on one condition – that I ceased my intimate friendship with Arn. The man was a sadist at the core. He wanted to break the connection between us. Did he want me to become vulnerable to him instead? Was he jealous of Arn's influence? Or

did he want power over Arn? Was he jealous of my influence? Whatever the reason, it was an unconscionable threat. You were spared having anything to do with him, because you never went into the intensive therapy group. You seemed to have a kind of instinctive suspicion of him anyway.

And all the time the waves were curling into the beach nearby, near the park with its palms and historic house. For the thousandth time I arrived at the clinic in a taxi, at the bottom of the weirdly balanced three-storey brick building, hating its pre-eminence. I began to think that the pain that afflicted my head was lifting. Then it would descend again. I attended a Pentecostal meeting in the southern suburbs where the people spoke in tongues. And I was asked by the minister to come to the front and the whole congregation gathered around me with their hands over my head while the priest prayed that God in heaven release me from my head pain. Could this have been the beginning of my headache lifting? There was an Italian market gardener and his wife in the congregation, and a Maori man, a big strong truck driver, whose wife had died recently in a car smash. They were a gentle group of people, praying for each other. The man who'd taken me there was a bit of a strange psychologist who had his own problems. He kindly arranged for me to be picked up from the clinic by a friend and driven for miles into the wilds of the suburbs to take me to this meeting of loving people. Could it be then that the pain began to lift? Impossible to know.

Then later, when Julia came into the clinic, so witty and irreverent, and confessed to incest in her family, I spent hours persuading her to confide in her doctor, to take it out of the secret realm so that she could acknowledge the fact that she herself had not

been guilty of anything. I wondered if my efforts had also absolved me of the pain of entirely different situations for which I had accepted a burden of guilt. At the time that Julia confided, I began to feel better. One morning I awoke and knew that by the middle of the day the pain would disappear. A mysterious day. And yes, it happened while Julia and I were shopping. So in the end I knew I would make my escape. I suspect also that the many times you took me with you to Mass supported me as well, because it seemed to involve the hope of a healing. We used to meet after church and have little cakes and it was a pleasure I always looked forward to.

There was one weekly festival – the barbecue held outside in the garden where the sausages and chops smoked blue fumes into summer air. Those rare occasions of happiness in summer were celebrations of some sort and it was at one of these occasions I met the lovely Julia who was sitting with Carl. I had no idea she was a patient. Julia had such a humorous irreverent air – it was hard to match her satirical commentary. She and Carl and I sat under the sun umbrella, enjoying the salads, the laughter, the talk. Somehow I always managed to find someone who would be my ally and Julia turned out to be one. We had an elated shopping trip to Paddington where Julia, as if by like magic, found everything she wanted to buy. I bought a watch which had a small gold moon with stars on it that set in a small arc over twenty-four hours and a smart, soft, leather shoulder bag – the first gifts I gave myself for my recovery.

It was on that fabulous summer's day that I told you when I got back to the clinic that I had spent nearly five hours in sheer enjoyment without experiencing head pain. Was it Julia who had effected this miracle? Was it her cheeky smile or something deeper? Was it the fact that I had helped her explore her reasons for being in the clinic?

We had stumbled on some mystery together. But I know that your constant support had helped as well, and even Arn in his own way by giving me attention and demonstrating concern. A few days later, the Saturday before she left – she was only in the clinic for one week – we went down to Shelley Beach in the morning. The sea was smoking. The waves were rolling in with a smoke of spray rising from them. The whole sea was reeling with lights. Julia and I sat on a bench on the grass and watched in silence. I wondered if she too sensed something. ‘Isn’t this incredible?’ I said after a while. We were in the same moment. The early morning sunshine was clear as cut crystal. We were overwhelmed. The sea was teeming with lights and it was vast, monumental. This was the second day of my recovery. Was Julia the cause or the witness, or the precipitating factor? How would I know? I’d never know. All I knew was that the morning before, when we’d gone shopping, I sensed that I’d have a day without pain. Something was in the offing. Yet, at the time, everything was lousy. Arn was equivocal again. There was a girl who made cutting remarks and made me feel miserable. And yet Julia, in some extraordinary way, not only cancelled out the games of the other patients that were going on at the time, she lifted me out and over my own pain. Was this woman magic?

You were always a bit of an extremist. You wanted to keep in touch with me if I left the clinic, but I felt embarrassed by you socially. I am ashamed to admit to it because you had kept me alive with your nurturing, with our social excursions, with your tales of husband and children and singing of *La vie en rose* and other Piaf songs in French at the piano – and your humour. You relieved the deadly monotony. And yet later I was afraid to bring you into my life, was embarrassed by you. Shameful but true.

I now ask your forgiveness. There was something extravagant about you and I feared you wouldn't be contained, that you wouldn't stay within the boundaries I'd assigned to you. I was afraid you'd spill over, invade other parts of my life especially if you felt left out or angry. You could be quite violent and aggressive if you chose. You'd have to admit this was true. And it was these very qualities that made you my protector! How ironic and sad that I felt I couldn't bring you into my life, even though I'd vowed I would and wanted to. It was to take seven years before I could summon the courage to see you again. It was not so much you, despite all my excuses. I think it was part of the whole need for starting again, afresh. If anything ever happens to you I feel that it will come to me in a dream. I know your health is fragile and that because of the tuberculosis you have periodic bouts of bronchitis and even pneumonia. Look after yourself, for God's sake! I'll always bless you, always consider it a miracle to have met you in that place. How difficult it was for you, dealing with Jacques' insensitivity, with your many affairs on the side and the job in a pub where so many offers were made to you all the time. It was very hard for you to resist some of the attractive men who came your way. Arn respected your vow of chastity to Mother Mary in particular. It was a vow you made on the last occasion you nearly died from bronchitis and it had been a very hard vow for you to keep. It was an important vow, one to be taken seriously, and one which Arn had no intention of making himself with his midnight excursions to the Cross! But he respected you, Monique, for making it, and I felt a bit naive in the face of your acceptance of physical need. It was something I'd never been able to handle separate from loving someone, and you'd both sensed this and treated me as a bit of a child. Both of you prided yourselves on your sexual experience.

Once I spent the night away at Evan's place and Arn's cutting off from me seemed to begin after that. It was obvious he'd assumed that something sexual had taken place between us. When I tried to explain that this hadn't been the case, his suspicion and withdrawal only seemed to get worse. Could it be possible he was jealous? It seemed improbable and out of the question. You were the only one who had ever suggested such a possibility! He'd done such a good job of persuading me I was worthless, even to the extent of telling me that the Jewish quarter in Constantinople smelled! He used racism to good effect. His excitement though was strange whenever I went out. You used to claim he became agitated when I went to visit friends. Could this mean something? Could it be that he cared for me? If so, he'd done a good job of disguising it for nearly a year. And when I tried to describe what happened the night I'd stayed with Evan, or rather what hadn't happened, he became more and more distant and detached. When Evan turned up one night to visit me at the clinic I paid him a lot of attention. Arn wouldn't talk to me for days. His suspicion had been instant, incontrovertible. I began to realise that he couldn't tolerate the slightest hint that I might be interested in another man. You were right all along, Monique! But I doubt that anyone else would have credited it! Gradually it dawned on me. How could this be? He'd never admitted to bisexual inclinations. He boasted so proudly of being interested only in men, and he'd hinted in so many ways that if gay men were despised, women were even more so. Women he knew, were at the bottom of the pile. So how on earth could he have come to care for me? Impossible. So I pushed the thought away. But I think I underestimated the effect of telling him that I loved him. It seemed he'd begun to feel jealousy. I knew what an agony it was. He'd made me feel that way time and time again. And here he was suffering the same experience. I sat alone with him in the television room and cold anger came off him in waves. When Arn chose not to communicate he could be glacial.

But it was true that when someone you really cared about flirted or expressed an interest in someone else, it was possible to eventually hate them. The desire to expunge the person from your life became paramount, and in that setting it was still possible for Arn to make himself unavailable. Everything was hinted at, nothing was spoken. If he cared about me, he certainly didn't want the staff to know. He would have been ashamed if anyone had guessed that he'd come to love an unattractive woman when he'd acquired the reputation for being drawn to seductive young men. What a humiliation it would be. He'd be despised by the macho males in the clinic all over again!

So even if I suspected he cared, it was impossible to talk to him about it. And I couldn't expect you to discuss it with me in depth, because of your jealousy. He punished me instantly for the slightest defection of interest. I realised that in that sense he had no trust whatsoever. He had no staying power or the belief that my regard would last beyond a momentary encounter with another man. He lost faith immediately if I even appeared to have an interest in anyone of a superficial nature. And punishment came swiftly afterwards. No trust in permanent love had been established or proved since he was a child. And to think that someone who could be so attractive should have had so few demonstrations of reliable love in his life. He couldn't trust me to care for him for more than five minutes at a time. He had no belief that caring for me would carry him even into the next second. And he seemed convinced that an appreciation of his worth in the gay world was eternally febrile. As for me, I'd been loved, adored by my parents, but I hadn't found much loyalty outside that framework either. So there we were, me capable of absolute devotion, and Arn incapable of believing in it. And in my silly attempts to make him jealous, I hadn't realised how much he cared for me. I drove

him further away into a cold state that removed him from me almost entirely. Finally the answer came to me. He'd cut off contact because I'd kissed Jason in that gay bar. He'd assumed that I was interested. That had been the punishment. Then it had happened again when I'd given a lot of attention to Julian at the restaurant. He cared. He definitely cared. But the punishments were so extreme. His comings and goings from the clinic had their own strange pattern, unrelated to anyone there. I knew he was going to Bondi to the beach. He came back more strongly tanned each time. There was a bitterness growing in him that was almost tangible.

While I was in the clinic it never entered my mind that he might be HIV positive. It was only afterwards when I left that the possibility came to me with powerful force. And it was clear it had never crossed your mind to entertain it seriously at all! Was this the reason that Joel Ashburg had tried to separate me from him? Could he have been afraid that if we were to have an affair that I'd be at risk? The whole time I was pining for him he was watching me. I remembered his strange mood of excitement when I left the clinic at night with new insight. And the ways he'd give attention to other people when I got back. It was the principle that if you wanted someone to continue caring for you, you had to hurt them at the core of their being again and again, otherwise they'd lose interest.

You know the way people behaved at school, in adolescence in the days when sexual attraction was hidden and forbidden? You know how much he made me suffer. And to be honest, you must have experienced as much pain as I did as a result of his games. All along there'd been the possibility of acknowledgment between us, of saying 'let's relish each moment'. But fear of losing, fear of loss had kept the sad game going.

And at the same time, he'd kept me from dying in that infinitely sad place. But later, after I left, I realised even the dream of love for him was beginning to fade. I feared the lengths he might go to punish me. After all, I'd finally realised, he'd gone off for the night with Julian because I taunted him and given Julian too much attention. I sensed when I passed him on the way to the beach that he was achieving a deadly anger. It was a descent into hell. He no longer had anything to lose. I felt it was no longer really connected to me. After all, I sensed that I had become just one of a number of people who had betrayed him.

All the dreams and tender feelings between us began to become too problematic. He'd entered a new layer of dread and despair. One which I felt I couldn't penetrate. And you said yourself that he had reached a point where you could no longer communicate with him. No Armenian God could forgive or even help him. Yet when I thought this I hoped it wasn't true. It was very hard to think about losing him. I felt a keening grief at the thought. You loved him as much as I did, so you must have felt his withdrawal as much as I did. I'd never held him, never owned him. It had been impossible. And I'd never been allowed to acknowledge him. I would never be able to claim him, not even in death, because no-one could corroborate our association. The fact that he had moments of kindness like a soft breeze, his humour, his capacity to create an ambience, a sense of excitement and the fact that if someone was truly troubled he wouldn't hesitate to help them. Most of his postures were defensive gestures. I knew that and so did you. There was a very fine pain in it, because I could never tell him I loved in an unalloyed way. There was a deep despair in that, somewhat like an adulterous affair. I could never belong with him openly. I suppose it is unfair of

me to talk so exclusively of my love for him. You also had to bear the pain of loving him.

And what of the time I held him naked, stroking him? I never ever told you about this, did I? You would not have believed me. It was after Vernon had visited him at the clinic on his request and then made it clear that he would never see Arn again. I knocked on Arn's door afterwards because I knew how disturbed he was. He must have known it was me. He said, 'Come in, Esther'. He was lying on his bed, face down, his body barely covered by the sheets. I stroked him and held him and he never looked up at me. But he allowed me to hold him. And I then then left the room.

If there are any stepping stones that can save you at all in this mad bad world it is when people express love for each other. Does anyone have the right to dictate how that will be expressed? And these stepping stones of caring are like windows on eternity, capable of rescuing and carrying us onwards. These opportunities to love came rarely. Everything that seemed bizarre, his adoration of Vernon, had this seed of love in it, the capacity to worship. If anything was ever going to rescue me again it was going to be one human being's kindness to another. Nothing else can be relied upon. And I feel I underestimated the love and support you gave me, Monique. Despite the occasions when you sided with Arn against me, you always swung back to make sure that I was surviving, that I was coping. The ability to identify with another, to say your pain is my pain, is the only way to heal and help another human being.

ARN

You used to wonder why I looked so despairing. I'd pass you on the way to the beach where the beautiful palm trees stood, and sometimes I couldn't even bring myself to greet you, to smile and say hello. There were things I couldn't tell you. I always told you that my tests were negative. What else could I do? Did I want to be thrown out? Could I trust you not to speak? And I sensed deep down that you really didn't want to know because you loved me.

You could understand my family background for a start, what it meant to come from a very cultured middle-class European family. You knew that my father came from a highly educated Albanian family, and my mother, being Swiss, spoke perfect French and mixed in diplomatic circles. You and I understood each other – the family background, the way of life. It was a bond, no doubt of it. And you loved the music as much as I did. We shared that as well. You could have been an opera star. It was a great tragedy for you that you got ill, because it had been your fate, the way of life that you had lived since you were a small child. You knew all the major operas – and the arias – off by heart. I knew them too but I wouldn't quote lyrics in French to you. My mother's language is something I would rather forget.

And Esther too. She loved me also. She made it very clear from the first time she met me. And she also shared a lot with me, her family being Jewish, the child of migrants. We all had a kind of mutual European *savoir*, we understood each other. And what is more I fell in love with her. I can't tell you why. It was out of the blue. It's been

young boys for me ever since I can remember. But there was something about her. Hard to put into words. She made it clear she understood me.

In the end, I came to tell her everything. I told her about my family background and I told her about Vernon, and how he tricked me, his treachery.

But Esther never guessed how I'd come to feel about her, not unless you told her yourself, Monique! You were smart about it too. You used to narrow your eyes at me whenever Esther went to stay the night with her friends or her family. You used to say, 'Arn, you are missing that woman!' And I'd say, 'Merde!' the only word I ever said in French. 'You are a silly fool!' But that psychologist was an idiot. I would never have put Esther at risk. She was *naïve* – about men, about life, about everything. I would never tell that bastard about it anyhow, he always had a sneer on his face.

No, the reason I became so despairing was because I knew I was trapped. The day I found the AZT tablets in Vernon's bag, I went freezing cold and then hot within minutes. I received an enormous shock. Of course I had to summon up the courage to have a test. My doctor in Paddington had a lot of gay clients and I knew it wouldn't bother him to handle my case. He put me in the clinic when the results were positive. My doctor was already helping me for alcoholism and supporting me about losing my job. And then he told the doctor who was the director of the clinic, and of course that bastard of a psychologist was told. There was no getting around that. They said it was in the interest of the patient – me supposedly – and of the hospital administration! No privacy! There was no privacy in that place. But none of the other patients were ever told. Thank God for that, because if they'd told them, I wouldn't have stayed there another night, that's for sure. And for a start, I'm sure it would have affected the way

that you felt about me. You would have become so concerned, I wouldn't have been able to think straight!

It was very hard to handle the news when I got the results. For several weeks I couldn't speak to anyone. I could only sit and watch television all the time and smoke. Luckily, I found out right at the beginning. But the hardest part was to know how the virus had entered every part of my body. And my problem was to come to terms with this occupier that was inside of me. This occupier. This vicious little beast! And when I went to see my doctor, the one who was in charge of me at the clinic, he told me I needed to visualise my body destroying these little cells. What! In their hundreds of thousands!! But the good thing is that I got onto the therapy straight away and kept the viral load as low as possible. And what's more I knew that with my lifestyle I could improve my immunity. That's because I eat well, and I swim. I go to the ocean, and I just lie there in the sun and I tell my body, 'You can make it'. And of course being European I know something about food. I only eat rye bread and since leaving the clinic I only eat organically grown food. And the very best muesli. The most choice fruit, the most choice vegetables. When I eat out, I'm careful what restaurants I eat in. My doctor tells me I could last for years and years. Combining different drugs means that it's unlikely the virus will develop resistance to them. And because I'm taking several different drugs at once I can afford to take lower doses than if I was on the old monotherapy. Luckily, I was smart enough to act fast. But it's still a hard life to live. All the time I feel I'm keeping the virus at bay.

When I took the drugs, I always went to my room and I got permission to keep my door locked. That's why I got furious with that nurse, when she came sneaking into my

room. I never invited you and Esther to come into my room, if you would remember. It was a very difficult time for me, being in that horrible place and trying to come to terms with what had happened. I had been such a fool about Vernon. But somehow you and Esther eased the pain of it. We went out so much from that place, sometimes not getting home until two in the morning. I know Esther was worried about me getting involved with Julian, that time we met up at the Cross and went to the restaurant. When I went back to meet up with him, she panicked because Julian told her in the bar at the Rex Hotel that he didn't ask his lovers if they were HIV positive. The silly girl! That didn't mean we didn't take precautions, especially me. Would I have wanted that on my conscience, that I'd given this virus to another person? And Julian was smart; he knew how to protect himself. She should have known me better.

I no longer attend the Armenian Church, but I know the difference between right and wrong and that was the reason partly that we all liked each other. We were all a bit puritan, a bit strict, in our own way. We drew boundaries, although some people would have said we didn't. But I had to live and I had to survive, and most of all I had to live with my own conscience. My conscience is clear. The silly girl. Did she think I was an idiot?

By the time I left the clinic I'd actually reached a point where I'd begun to enjoy myself. When I left my job I received a redundancy payout and my lawyer invested it for me and it gave me just enough money to buy the best food and enjoy myself a little. And then later, you introduced me to Margo and she offered me her studio to live in. It was a huge saving for me, and what's more Margo used to write for *Vogue* as a freelance journalist and she knew all the right people. She took me to gallery openings,

and book launches and little *soirées* here and there. But you got very jealous. You wanted my exclusive attention and Margo didn't want to share the attention with you. In the end, you became more and more furious and started a big shouting match with Margo. Quite frankly, it wouldn't have bothered me if you'd come along, but Margo wanted me to herself. It was only when she met the Hungarian that she began to take him out with her instead of me. But you were shouting and screaming in French and Margo had to go back into the clinic for a week. Then she decided to throw you out and asked me to take responsibility to say that you already had a house in Centennial Park with your husband and that when winter came I was going to freeze outside. I went along with it, but I didn't feel happy about it. In the end I was glad to see you go. You were becoming an embarrassment. Always hanging around. Cooking for me was fine; I didn't mind that. But your jealousy was something else. You wore me out. I didn't think I could go out with you any more, socially.

You yelled and screamed when Margo told you that you had to leave. And I stayed away the whole day hoping to avoid you. But when I arrived you were still there and you were in a fury. Your face was brilliant red, your wig tipped to one side, you threw things at me. It was too much. I saw you next when we both went to visit Margo in the clinic after her daughter committed suicide. I used to take out the other daughter, the older one, Maria, and she and I got along very well. She was an art student and she appreciated my company and our conversations. A very intelligent girl. And attractive, I might add. But I wasn't attracted to her. She didn't turn me on; it was as simple as that. It takes a peculiar chemistry for something to work in that way, and for me it's men that make it happen anyway. Esther was an exception.

In the end, I left for Turkey. There was a lot of family business I had to sort out. My father died, and my mother, horribly enough, was made executor of his estate. I wanted to make sure I'd been left the money and the property he'd intended for me. I stayed there for about five months, revisiting the old scenes and my friends, catching up with my sister and her family who have always been quite reasonable to me. I didn't tell my mother my situation. I told my sister and I've no idea whether she'll tell my mother in the end. I no longer care if they all know about my life and the way I live. In any case, my lifestyle was more acceptable all along in Constantinople. I didn't explain it to my parents as a courtesy but there was more acceptance for me there in that city. For a start, the men are more affectionate to each other there. You told me about this yourself. It was well known. They hug and they kiss. If you're gay it's easier to maintain your privacy.

When I got back from Turkey I didn't bother to contact Margo. I was tired of that scene. Sometimes I see her daughter, and I give her a ring wherever she's staying to catch up. I heard that you are now with your husband and that you don't go out much at all. You finally forgave me, which was a relief to me, I can tell you! I've resumed my old life, with my old contacts. Esther is still in the country somewhere. She's never made any attempt to contact me, but you let me know that she keeps in contact with you. It's her choice.

I think a lot about this period of my life. I remember one day after lunch when we all got ready to go out together. You were looking very smart. And I as usual, was wearing black pants and a blue top. We were waiting for Esther in the lounge-room. We were going to the antique markets and then out to the Oxford Hotel and a restaurant.

And we felt so happy to be together, a kind of passion. And I remember another afternoon at Bondi Junction when we all went looking for second-hand clothes and I helped Esther try things on and choose them. After each garment she would go and change and I'd stand in the mirror with her and suggest the next one, and any fool could see how much she meant to me. And she did too, but she didn't know what to make of it. Whether it was just pity or friendship or what. But we were so close on that day, so very close and Monique, you were so caught up helping to choose things that you didn't mind. We all had our areas of expertise, didn't we? You and I enjoyed clothes and music and good food.

You knew Esther didn't have many clothes and wanted us to make suggestions. Esther felt very embarrassed about her appearance because she didn't have very much money and she didn't look very smart. And she was much too plump with her blond hair unstyled and always blowing in the wind around her shoulders. She used to wear the same black jacket all the time. Nice – but a bit boring. And on that day we found a few items she could wear for variety. It was a lovely day. We all walked down to the beach and the waves were very blue and crisp. But on that day she told me that she had stayed the night at Evan's flat the night before. I didn't know what to make of it. I felt she was playing with me. We sat outside, the three of us, in that little street that leads down to the beach and ordered nice food and wine and watched the waves. And I felt helpless because I was afraid to let her know my feelings. I didn't know what to do with the situation. It was too unknown. I didn't know what would be expected of me. You wouldn't have been very sympathetic anyway, Monique. You were so possessive about me.

Now I can see that the story of this part of my life is coming to an end. It was a wonderful episode really, when you consider how bleak and horrible that clinic could be at times. I was really very fortunate to meet you and Esther when I did. You took care of me. You always looked after me. ‘Arn’, you would say, ‘let’s go shopping and choose you a lovely new shirt’. And you had such good taste. You used to cheer me up immensely. Every morning you checked me out and I could always tell you the truth about my lifestyle, what I’d done the night before, who I’d met, who I’d slept with. Your great virtue was that you were unshockable! What’s more, you’d had a few passionate affairs that you’d had to keep secret from that brute of a husband of yours. There was too much at stake if you walked out on him. I could say to you, ‘Monique, I went with a gorgeous young man last night’, and you’d chuckle and give a deep throaty laugh without any condemnation. We had a lot in common, you and I. Of course, I could never tell Esther these things, though I suspect you passed them down the line to her. Esther was too pure, too careful, too caught up in romance. But on the other hand she was very perceptive. She said that it was my romantic inclinations that had allowed me to be deceived and betrayed by Vernon, and that had put my life at risk. Little did she know. She didn’t seem to ever want to explore the possibility that Vernon’s AZT tablets ended up being my fate also. I don’t think she could engage with the possibility. And despite your tolerance and worldliness, I always felt instinctively that this was one piece of information that I could not confide in you about. Esther loved me too much. She was a beautiful girl. She saw the very best in me always. She would say to me, ‘Arn, try to have beautiful thoughts. Don’t think about the people who have betrayed you and how evil they are. Brush it aside, concentrate on goodness, it’s the only way to survive’. And she was not wrong I tell you, not wrong.

I wish in some ways we'd remained close to each other. Perhaps if I'd been able to tell her how I felt about her, things could have been different. I don't think we could ever have had a relationship, but we could have protected each other from being hurt, we could've arranged not to make each other jealous, spend time with each other and truly love each other. What a magic that would have been. Sometimes I think our entire lives are spent waiting for that moment to come along. But we don't know how to arrange it. We're too afraid to ask for it, too embarrassed to tell each other how much we care and then the beautiful moment passes. I remember seeing a French film directed by Jean Cocteau, *Orphée and Euridice*, a modern version of the Greek myth. There comes that moment when *Orphée* has crossed the River Styx and is on his way back from the river of death to life and the outside world. Then, for one fatal second, he looks back to see if Euridice is following him, have one more glance. Then he realises he has lost her, he will never see her again.

And this is the story of what happened between Esther and I. Except the trouble was that I didn't glance back. If I'd glanced back and gone to speak to her, who knows, we might still be friends until this day. I could still have had her in my life. This is a sad business, a sad ending, *une relation triste*. I vowed I'd never speak French again, but there it is. It was a tragedy. We missed each other through pride. I think you can understand my sentiments, Monique, even if you may not be particularly sympathetic to Esther's role in my life.

Well, life goes on, even my life, which has a very definite end to it. I doubt in my lifetime that they will ever find a cure. And in the meantime, I have to do my best with my relationships. Now having a sexual relationship has become so difficult, all the

precautions you have to take. And of course somebody who hasn't got the virus isn't inclined to take the risk. It's people with it who end up being your partners.

At the moment I'm living, ironically, with a French man called Marc. I think you would like him a great deal. We get along quite well together. He's about thirty-five, somewhat younger than me. We share the same tastes, the same interests and we like to entertain. I still have my gold tree set in opal, the one that you and Esther used to love so much. And my Royal Albert china. In my opinion, life is so brief, the least you can do is surround yourself with beautiful works of art.

In the end, I hope there'll be people who can mourn my death. I know I'm a good entertainer, that I keep people amused and interested. And one of the reasons for that is that I don't hesitate to speak my mind. I'm very much like you in that regard. If I don't like something I say so. If something shocks me, I say so. And I'm endlessly surprised at how cruel and evil this world is. But I 'tell it like it is' to use the Australian expression and I've never regretted it. I'm still beautiful, I'm still handsome. I know that this is true. I still know how to beguile women because I understand the feminine sensibility, the gentler side of things. Thank God I no longer have to go to Oxford Street and look for men. I was getting so fed up with it, so tired of it. One's body is such a demon. Driving you and driving you and not letting you rest in peace. It's a total tyranny. But Marc is very sympathetic. The first mature man in years I've had a good relationship with.

When I die, I hope you and Esther will send flowers. I hope that Esther gets to hear of it. I'll have to make arrangements so that if anything happens to me that you will contact her. Surely, you will know how to find her. And I want to imagine the flowers. I

want to be able to see them there. I would like them to be pure white roses, not different colours, just plain white with some green ferns. I want to imagine what Esther will say, if she will grieve for me. Because in the end, life comes down to this. We want to know that someone has known us well enough to grieve properly when we pass on, that they feel that we've contributed something beautiful to their lives. We should of course be aware of this before people pass on, but it's hard to tell people how much we love them to their face. I've lost a lot of friends though AIDS. And one thing this has done has been to make me value each person. I've a very strong sense of the importance of each day, each sentence, each word, how our every action can affect each other. Esther told me she once heard on the radio an interview with a concentration camp survivor who said that you realise after such an experience that everything you do and say counts, that every moment counts, that the way we all meet each other is sacred. That we have a responsibility to make every second a better moment, a better place. *C'est la vie.*

MONIQUE

Well, *ma petite* Esther, I've something to tell you! Something so amazing that I want you to guess. Try and guess, try and guess! I've heard from him! He's back, he's living with a man, *ma cherie*, called Marc! French I might add! Despite the fact he tells me he won't speak French with *me*! With a man, yes of course, but with me, no! And I've met them both! And he sends you his best wishes. I don't expect you to jump with delight however! I know how he tortured you day and night! He says to tell you that he's sorry if he ever caused you pain, caused you hurt. *Can you believe?* I think we are both smart people and we do not believe! Nonetheless it is interesting, eh? It make me laugh. The little bastard knows how to win us over, eh? And I've something very sad to tell you as well. Something very sad. He tell me he has the virus. You were right all along. But he's taking some drugs for it and he say he has a low, you know? The virus is very low and his doctor say he can live for years! The man has nine lives, *I'm telling you*. I like this Marc. We speak French to each other at dinner for Arn at his house and we get along *parfaitement*. He is *très charmant*, I'm telling you. And Arn, he hate us talking in French together, and he has a face like a scowl the whole time. But he should know you put two French together and you cannot stop them. He was outnumbered for a change! He has invited you to come with me for tea to his house. And I say, 'Oh how Esther will love to see you!' What bullshit you know! I know you run a million miles not to see that little torturer!

He is living with Marc in a house in Paddington, a tiny little house, and everything is beautiful as you can believe. He still has the opal tree. Do you want to come with me

and pretend it's fine? I don't know how long he can live but he looks very well. I still have some good memories.

You remember how he took care of us? I tell him, 'I forgive you everything'. Not quite, but what can you say when he tell me the news? He tell me Margo ask him to tell me he need to move into the house. He tells me he is sorry for this, very sorry. *Would you believe this bullshit! Mon dieu! He make excuse to the very last!!* Anyway, I'm a good Catholic, I always go to Mass every week, and I say to him, 'Arn, I forgive you. You have the virus and it's a hard life. Let us move on together'. And he say to me, *listen to this!* 'Thank you Monique for cooking for me, and for looking after me for all those weeks!' I say to him, 'Arn, it was my pleasure'! But I'm telling you, I forgive but I do not forget, and for what he did to me, I never forget, NEVER!!

Well, Marc, he doesn't know much about all this. And Arn, he say he got my address from the clinic. And first he write to me. And then he come to see me. And then I visit him. But I do not tell you straightaway because I know that man did much damage to your heart, treating you the way he did, not speaking and carrying on like that! And I invite him and Marc to come and see my sister's paintings. They are all at Ingrid's place and Arn, he love to do that because he say he want to judge how good they are, whether they are the real thing or not. You know how he loves paintings. And I say to him, actually they are forgeries, and he say it doesn't matter! He still want to see for himself. And so I made a time and I did not say you would come with us, because I know how he hurt you. 'Where is Esther?' he ask me. 'I want to see her again.' And I say, 'Esther has gone to the countryside to live and we don't know where she goes!' So! I protect you in case you never wish to see him again. But if you change your mind, just

let me know. He is the same as ever, nothing changed. The same sweet talk. But still we could go out to tea some time, and let Arn choose the menu again, just for old times' sake! You think you could handle this? If not, no worries. I know sometimes you have to say, 'This is the end! I torture myself no more!'

And then he say to me something so strange, I feel my body go cold and my skin – my skin it shiver all over. He say to me if he die he wants you and I to bring flowers to the funeral. And I say to him, and I find I cannot help say to him, 'Of course. But don't speak like that *ma cherie*. *We love you too much*'. And I think to myself later, Esther, how could I say such a thing? He does things that hurt us all the time and then he does things so marvellous we cheer, 'Bravo Arn! Thankyou Arn!' He is a torturer! He mixes us up like no other man. We hate him and we love him. I think if he die I will still love him. Always. It will be easier then.

SECRETS

MISS MARTINE

On a Wednesday afternoon after ballet class, my mother would meet me at Circular Quay and we would get on the train together to take the hour's trip to Gosford. She would be waiting for me with wonderful fresh bread and brilliantly orange fish roe from David Jones'. I recall the fetta cheese, the boiled eggs, the Melbourne salami that was so soft and moist and delicious that I would eat round after round squashed into the rye bread. She knew good food, my mother.

Now let me tell you how my ballet classes proceeded. Miss Martine had been trained in Paris by the Ballet Chantal. Unusually for a dancer, she didn't start learning ballet until she was sixteen, far too late for most prima ballerinas. But somehow she had made it. I recall the way she would pause, with her hand to her forehead, while she composed the next few steps for a piece. Her harshness with the class came from her belief that the harder she pushed us the better we would be. I particularly felt sorry for Alouette, who was an excessively beautiful dancer, but too tall for any *corps de ballet* at the time. Alouette had thick plaits and a body made from plasticine. She bore the insults and goading of Miss Martine with great fortitude and courage.

Miss Martine was small, dark, petite, and her standard always seemed impossibly high. But if she smiled at me in the lift when I bumped into her before the class, she was honey itself and, in my small, eight-year-old way I was madly in love with her. I still remember one day when the lift doors opened and she suddenly appeared in the most gorgeous dress with pink puffed sleeves to the elbow. She had all her clothes

made by her own dressmaker. She had married a rather quiet Jewish businessman who clearly adored her and whom she'd met in Paris. Apparently, he used to wait for her at the stage door with bunches of roses after her performances. She had the satisfaction and confidence of a woman who was truly loved.

And then there was the day that Miss Martine announced she was pregnant. Her annoyance with the class increased markedly from that point on. It became clear that she did not like being pregnant and saw it as an immense inconvenience. Within a week of giving birth she was back with her ballet classes and there was an air of relief about her. She loved teaching and she loved choreographing. Her style was excessively romantic, syrupy. In all her concerts there were men carrying roses between their teeth and offering flowers, women throwing themselves to the ground in despair over broken love affairs. There was nothing neo-romantic about her compositions, they were all unashamedly romantic, and to some degree out-of-date, even in the fifties.

Most of the pupils were Jewish and we all shared an acute sense of drama at dealing with Miss Martine's extreme strictness and demands. It puzzled me enormously, that Selina, her favourite pupil, used to play a ridiculous game of running across the front of the stage while Miss Martine would still be teaching the preceding class. We would stand in the wings and watch her annoyance when Selina flashed past. No-one in their right mind would dare to do it, and Selina herself was a rather timid girl. But for some extraordinary reason that we never understood, Miss Martine would let her get away with it.

Every lesson, held Wednesdays and Saturdays, was an opportunity for us all to parody Miss Martine. Behind the thick heavy curtains in the change room at the back of

the hall, we would enact her posture, her comments, in a hugely exaggerated style and we had a coded language for making fun of her that gave us endless delight. Ruth, who was diminutive, would drag herself across the floor making gruesome expressions and pretending that she was Miss Martine trying to teach with an injured foot. Selina would stand on a chair, giving orders with an imperious expression on her face for Alouette to do endless *pirouettes* until she fell over. On one occasion, Miss Martine burst in on one of these performances and then mysteriously exited straightway. We suspected that she understood exactly what was going on.

I'm standing in Miss Martine's class doing my *pliés* at the bar and my *fouettés* and touching the tip of Selina's perfectly straight back in front of me. It is Saturday morning and the sunlight is flaring on the cherry-red wooden floor of the Church Hall, right at the top of the city, near the Harbour Bridge. We are going to practise for our performances after the class, and I have been given the humiliating role of being Selina's male partner in one of Miss Martine's hideously romantic concoctions. At one point in the dance, with my hair plaited in a curve around my shoulder so that I look like Prince Valiant, I get down on my knees and support Selina on stage at Her Majesty's Theatre while she carefully turns on one foot in her toe shoe, and we do the most complicated balancing act in the *Pas de Deux*. I hate being given the role of male companion and having to support Selina with one knee on the ground and one knee raised. I want to be the girl in the tutu made from frosted ice-cream, not a boy wearing a maroon velvet cloak. But Miss Martine's relentless recreations of ballets from previous classical eras have us trapped. There is absolutely nothing that I can do about the situation.

Miss Martine had her favourites and her damned and her choices were quite mysterious. We knew we had come together as a result of her Jewish contacts. How she made them I have no idea, unless she'd placed an ad in *The Jewish News*. I have no memory of how my mother came across her. Rebecca, she despised for her laziness and constantly mocked her failure to achieve the right curve in her foot. Alouette, she literally tortured with her criticism. It always amazed me that Alouette didn't burst into tears. I never understood where my own particular immunity came from because it was clear to me that Miss Martine had a rather refined streak of sadism. But the day eventually came when I did something so terrible that Miss Martine never quite forgave me. I cut off my hair to shoulder length without informing her. The fact of the matter was that I hadn't realised that my role as a medieval courtier depended on my two beautiful plaits that I crossed over at the back of my head in a loop. As soon as Miss Martine saw me she let out a howl of fear and rage. I had spoiled my whole appearance for the *Pas de Deux*. It took her a remarkably long time to recover!

Selina and I became good friends. I sometimes used to stay the weekend with her at Wollstonecraft where her parents owned a hairdressing salon. I envied her for having her very own *barre* built into the salon where she could practise her exercises in front of a huge mirror. Selina's mother was small and had her hair dyed a daring honey red while Selina had rich dark black hair like her father and was much taller. Mrs Hoffman demanded that Selina hang out innumerable wet towels from the salon on the clothes line on the roof above the flat and I had to help her in this task whenever I stayed. I found it a very onerous duty. Mrs Hoffman had the most piercing whining voice, like a can opener. Every second phrase was Selina do this, Selina do that. It was clear that she had been given permission to be slightly hysterical. But Selina had the most unending

patience. She told me her mother's family had suffered nightmarish experiences during the last war. I had the impression Selina's father was also very patient with her for the same reason. But he was also excessively strict with Selina.

Selina read her Jewish bible every night, the first five chapters of the Pentateuch. At one point she was reading *Exodus* by Leon Uris and the way she explained it to me revealed she had a strong sense of her own identity, an understanding of her connection to the Jewish faith and history. I never asked if the family attended Synagogue but I suspect they did. Her devotion to her parents and to God filled me with envy. I was not conscious at the time of how difficult it was to be half in and half out of a culture. I would not have been able to articulate my desire to fully belong to the Jewish community. But I knew I would have become enormously annoyed with the endless demands made to help out with the salon. Selina was almost saintly about it and used to lecture me on how much her mother needed her support. I could never understand why she never complained. I realise now that she was an exceedingly wise child. We had both read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and I could only imagine what had happened to Mrs Hoffman's family. The details were never revealed. But in her presence, Selina had an air of great pity and reverence. Perhaps she was privy to events that she never revealed to me.

One weekend her parents took me to a Dutch restaurant built in the shape of a windmill somewhere near the Port Hacking River. I was terribly impressed by the serviettes, the knives and forks so beautifully displayed and the overwhelming decorum of Mr and Mrs Hoffman in public. Mr Hoffman watched Selina's manners like a hawk and I watched Selina meticulously before lifting my fork so as to do everything in the

right manner and not reveal my ignorance. Eating out was not a pastime that my parents indulged in.

Eventually, my parents decided to return Mr and Mrs Hoffman's hospitality. They invited them to come on a picnic to Gosford that would take place in the bush. The Hoffmans arrived with fold-up canvas chairs, knives and forks, serviettes and plates. My parents brought sandwiches and drinks and proposed we sit on bare rocks next to a pool to eat our meal. It was easy to see that Mrs Hoffman found the lack of propriety upsetting and when the flies and the ants arrived she was visibly distressed at the primitive arrangements. She produced a can of Mortein that did nothing to endear her to my environment-conscious parents. If anything was to point out to me the gap between Jews raised in London and Jews committed to living in Australia, it was my parents' flagrant adoption of the Australian bush. They also perceived themselves as intellectuals and portrayed Mr and Mrs Hoffman as 'bourgeois'. Little did they realise how much I desired the elements of that same 'bourgeois' lifestyle, such as Selina's polite bedroom with the blue walls and pretty curtains. On the other hand, I perceived that their rules and rituals were stifling and that I wouldn't be able to last long in that setting without wanting to break free.

Finally, when we were about fifteen years old, Selina and I parted ways. She went on to the famous Scully dance school and eventually became a member of the *corps de ballet* with the Sadlers Wells company in London. Miss Martine advised my parents that I was not a suitable candidate for further ballet study on the grounds that I didn't have the dedication to become a full-time ballerina. A strange decision indeed when I look back on it. It really didn't matter that I wasn't going to achieve Miss Martine's

ambitions. I was enjoying myself immensely and dancing made me fit and happy. I was even awarded Honours in the third year exam by Dame Peggy van Praagh. I wonder now if Miss Martine may not have resented the ease with which I achieved it, given that I had no particular desire to succeed. On the other hand, she may have wished to save my parents the cost of further lessons, which in her opinion would not have resulted in a life-long profession. It was a very sad day indeed when I departed, because I had loved the intimacy of the classes and the friendships that I'd made. I missed the other students a great deal.

A lasting memory of Selina was when she invited me to visit her at Scully's while I sat and watched her put on her pink satin toe shoes and tie them with the traditional pink ribbon. The final time I saw her was when she invited me to attend her performance in the 'Elementary' exam. I was awed at her technical excellence and terribly envious at the same time. I wished it was me there, turning on one toe to the quiet adulation of parents and teachers.

RENÉE

Whenever Renée gets a new boyfriend, she drags me into some new absurd experience. They've dragged me on stage into their ridiculous drama. Renée and Sebastian have got me into this! And there she is with her pitch-black hair, shouting out something mysterious to the audience. To my absolute horror they're both dragging me along and trying to make me climb into a coffin! Renée whispers to me that the whole theatrical exercise is to get the audience to face their own death! Face your own! I whisper

desperately. I don't want to face my own death, I want to run away from it at a million miles an hour. The first excuse I have I'm going to run out of this ridiculous theatre and run for my life!

The audience participation bit is over and the coffin is closed and I'm back in my seat. I didn't have to run down Beauvoir Street to get away from them after all. Look at Renée strutting her stuff. How did I come across someone who has the capacity to disrupt my life at a second's notice?

All those aeons standing in the women's toilets at the Macquarie University watching her put on layers and layers of eye-liner, fake eyelashes and lash thickener. It used to take so long I'd go and have a coffee and wait till she'd done it all. And her hair in a beehive. She used to wear a pale blue jump suit. She'd say to me, 'Everyone says I look stunning with a tan'. When I think about it she looked cheap, like one of the Supremes wearing her thick, dolly pink lipstick. Her taste was appalling! At least her appearance improved when she began dressing like a hippy!

Aah! They've persuaded someone to climb into the coffin! That girl doesn't like doing it either. She's looking pale. Renée is dressed in black with heavy black eyeliner and her black hair is springing out in a bush. Her face is a mask and she's whipping that poor girl around the back of the legs with a cane stick! Renée's favourite play is Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry and she's decided that Theatre of the Absurd is her metier.

When I think about all her schemes, her crazy activities... But there's no doubt she creates some excitement. The strange thing is that I was the person who got her into the theatrical society. And when it came to the auditions, I was the one too scared to go on

stage and she just flew into it. From that time on, she called herself an 'actress'. Suddenly I was running after her, trying to find a time to meet for coffee.

The pumpkin dinner! And the time she rang me up and said a giant rat had broken into her cottage out at Stuart Plains and she hadn't slept a wink trying to find it. She'd come home after being away for the night and the cottage was in chaos. Food scattered everywhere, vases thrown off cupboards. So I went out there to cheer her up and we sat down on her lounge to chat and have a cup of tea. The next thing you know I could feel something moving under me. The rat was hiding under the lounge cover. I levitated, I truly did.

Now it's interval and I'm going to have to socialise and tell people what a wonderful play this is and that yes, I was terrified climbing into the coffin, but that it was a truly fascinating experiment. That this kind of theatre is the cutting edge and before too long conventional theatre will be closing down because it no longer has anything to offer.

Everyone had to bring a course for an evening meal, and the ingredients had to include pumpkin. It came about because Jessica and Alex won the vegetable competition at the Kempsey show and brought around the largest pumpkin ever seen. We divided it up and brought different dishes for tea to Renée's cottage at Stuart Plains. We started with pumpkin soup naturally, followed by pumpkin curry with pumpkin rice. Renée's Uncle, a good cook, was visiting from Melbourne. He made a sweet pumpkin soufflé. We became sick to death of pumpkin – after that meal no-one would touch it for years!!

Before my mother died, Renée used to come to visit. She'd bring baklava and white wine and we'd all talk and talk and talk. People don't talk like that any more. What's the matter with them? She used to look so gorgeous in her gipsy earrings, with her dark hair. She let it dry without combing it and then brushed it out until it was really wild. I gave her a black satin dress, and the top was the most exquisite *broderie anglaise*. I bought it for her at an op shop in a country town – Lennox Heads I think it was. I've still got photos of her in that dress. She loved buying things in op shops and antique shops. We'd always stop when we were travelling together and take time out to look at cups and saucers. Once, she picked up an antique cup, saucer and bread plate made in China. It had been painted a dull gold and all around the bottom and the edge it had thin green, red and blue stripes. A most exquisite piece of work. Whenever I visited her we had tea in those cups – delicate, beautiful and small – like she is.

Her different boyfriends – each one of them a new challenge, a new difficulty. Geoff! Geoff took her climbing in the Blue Mountains, and persuaded her to go abseiling, hanging off the edge of a cliff. Bob eventually became a film director, but before that he made life hell for all of us. Peter Bolt – now there was a one. A petty crim with a saccharine voice who liked crooning over a microphone. And now Sebastian, fascinating in a way with his plastic sculptures, but a real psycho!

Sebastian is trying to strip off his clothes. Is there any real need for this? Sex and death. Aren't the themes for this a bit obvious? I'm not going to look at this part. I don't want to see him naked. I'm supposed to be having dinner with them after the show. And now Renée is starting to peel off her jacket – no, they really can't go through with this.

Grafenberg! That's it. That was the name. For years her parents told her that the reason she had such beautiful black hair and black eyes was that she was descended on her father's side from a South American Indian. I could never work out how that happened. Howard didn't sound or look like a man who'd mixed with South American Indians to me. Supposedly, this Indian looked like his mother and she had passed on the coal black eyes and satin dark hair to Renée. Then it finally came out that Howard's mother was Jewish and had been named Grafenberg!

Renée got involved with Sebastian when he was a student radical at university. He's pro-Palestinian. They both turned up at a student party one night and Renée was wearing a Palestinian headscarf, the kind with black and white zigzag patterns worn by Yasser Arafat. She told the men at the party that she was visiting from the Left Bank and that her name was Sonia Arafat. All the men wanted to dance with her, particularly the Africans, and in the end she had to escape the party to get away from them. Sebastian thought it was a huge joke! But when he found out that Renée had Jewish ancestry, it caused him a real problem. He wanted to see the Palestinians wipe Israel off the face off the earth. No compromises, no reconciliation, no nothing. Renée found it hard to get him to accept that there might have been a reason for Jews fleeing to Israel in the first place, and that it was a bit late to send them all back home.

We've reached the second interval. Only one more to go. This section hasn't been too painful. Time for coffee and cake. The coffin has been closed and moved off stage. The worst is over. I'm going to walk over to that pale girl and commiserate. She looks a bit tremulous and in need of a strong black.

Renée and Sebastian now have a child, a little girl. But the Jewish question is always a source of pain for her. Sebastian has clearly put Renée in a difficult situation. She told me recently she was beginning to feel that she couldn't be herself, that she felt rejected by him. Her mask-like expression in the play. How much did it hide? She told me that Sebastian won't let her explain to her daughter that her grandmother is Jewish.

ELAINE

Her eyesight was rather myopic. In fact some people thought she wore double lenses. And her red hair was the same colour as her mother's, although her mother has gone grey now, and you wouldn't guess. Her smile is what beguiled me, I'd have to say. Well, she was cheerful. She found life hilariously funny and she believed that if you had a good sense of humour, there's always a choice word and an amusing insight to lighten the day. Of course she was bored to death by bores but she felt that there was nothing she could do about them – except laugh at them! Remember Michael? She said he didn't even know how to kiss her when they first met years ago. He just rubbed his lips against hers and said, 'What the hell is this all about? There's nothing in it'. She told me he was an ingenue if there ever was one. She said, 'I know you look on me as rather experienced, and the fact of the matter is that I am. I've never had any guilt feelings about sex and I suspect it's because nobody tried to inform me about it'. As a result, she never received any negative information. It had been fun all the way! Her parents were very tolerant people, anyway. For parents in the sixties they were unusually easygoing. They never tried to find fault with her. Even when she failed at university two years in a row, they didn't say anything.

She was madly attracted to Peter. He was entertaining, amusing and desirable. She said he was delectable. Eventually, she moved him into her parents' house and they never even guessed what she was getting up to. She got pregnant and had to have an abortion. Now that was a disaster. A very distressing experience. Peter moved out, but they kept up their relationship for many years. Humour wise, sex wise, she thought he was divine. She told me she licks her lips over him to this day. And Peter was extremely beautiful, an Adonis. Something she never claimed to be. She described herself as, 'slightly hunched and pale and freckly. Not what you'd call an attractive woman'.

I was surprised when I found out she was Jewish, because she never made a thing of it. Her parents ran a very ordinary Australian bakery, and neither of them ate kosher food or anything like that. They led very ordinary lives. She told me that I was always looking for some exotic element to her family and as far as she was concerned there wasn't any. Her parents felt no pressure to carry on cultural traditions from Europe.

I felt very comfortable with Elaine's parents. They were lovely, calm, placid people and very accepting of others. They never referred to being Jewish and if she hadn't told me I wouldn't have guessed. She told me that being Jewish had actually had no impact on her personal life. 'I feel that it's time to stop tagging people. A little bit of sophistication, please! Can't we all move on a bit and take each other as we are without dragging up nationality, ethnicity, the rest? I like to think of myself as going beyond these barriers.'

She knew in the end that she'd lose Peter. 'I mean a man with such luminous green eyes, such a gorgeous smile, such an exquisite sense of humour, how could I expect to hold onto him forever?' When she bumped me in the street she introduced me

to Harry and told me that they were getting married. Later, she told me that she was sick of being on the fringes of gorgeous men's lives. She wanted something for herself. I stopped seeing her for a while, because my own boyfriend at the time was a snob and considered that Elaine wasn't sufficiently intellectual. Elaine was no fool and picked it up straight away. She told me eventually, 'What a bore that man was. Didn't he know that a good laugh is worth more than a thousand books?' On another occasion, when she told me she was getting married, she was cold and distant toward me. After all, I'd dropped her, so why should she get enthusiastic? She'd concluded correctly that I was a snob and so was my boyfriend. She told me eventually, when we resumed our friendship, 'I didn't fulfil your romantic notions about Jewish people doing well at university and proving that they were intellectually bright... You know, the idea that we had to be a kind of guiding light to other people and the world. I let you down, with all your half-baked fantasies about becoming well known for contributing to the community! I just wanted to have a good time'.

The thing about Elaine was that she was usually right and had no hesitation in pulling me up for what she perceived as my pretentiousness. She told me, 'In the end, I had more fun than you – which didn't mean I didn't know what was going on in the world. You were the loser, not me! You felt you had to prove something every second of your life. I just wanted to be happy. I didn't want all that hype – history pulling me down. And what's more, I didn't even care about it. I didn't even make that decision. We were just an ordinary family, and I just wanted to have fun'.

MAYA

Well, I think of you in the high mountains practising your yoga and meditation and I know it has been hard for you up there with that bitch of an ashram director telling everyone what to do and setting up people in conflict with each other – divide and rule in the old style. But the setting you were in was superb, and I cannot but believe that your health is miles ahead of all your contemporaries – getting up to exercise at four in the morning. We've all gone a bit grey except for you. All those *asanas* were a price worth paying!

Your eyes, Maya, the greenest eyes and your joy, unlike mine, can still be untainted. I don't think I ever managed to express the level of joy that you still achieve despite all the things that went wrong. I have an awful confession to make. I was attracted by your beauty when I first met you and that was why I wanted to know you better. As you grew older you must have commented on the crassness of men. So many of them have only one standard. But you had it all – intelligence as well as beauty.

High up in the mountains and high up in the vegetable gardens, the view was astounding. The buildings were architect-designed, with gleaming polished wooden floors and surrounded by trees. The yoga students would be woken at four in the morning and some of them actually struggled up to sit in front of a huge log fire before commencing their exercises. We knew the food we were eating there was always delicious and healthy – the dahl, the breads, the fruits. All delicious. And so we wondered how you would fare as the years went by. Horribly enough, you ended up

being persecuted by one of the women in charge. You found out, as we all did, that abusive personalities often manage to get themselves into positions of power.

Your green eyes. By all accounts you had the most fabulous Jewish grandmother on your mother's side. Your mother told you she ran some kind of grocery store on the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s. Both your parents were now practising Catholics, so that side of your history had been swallowed up, overlaid. You would tell me about her, but she had made no obvious inroads into your family life.

When I found out you were Jewish I wondered then if we weren't attracting people to our family at some unconscious level. How did it happen? There turned out to be too many of them to make sense! The outrageous humour – was that the clue? Could it be that life had been so hard over generations, that there developed this kind of exaggeration that made us laugh, that trembled on the edge of disaster, tragedy?

You were innovative, and at the same time you were a perfectionist. You had a desire to excel at whatever it was you were doing – cooking, making a garden, or editing a book. To do things well was the criterion of your own sense of self-esteem and the admiration you created in all of us. Was this a legacy of thousands of years? Am I drawing too long a bow? Did your special way of being have in fact something to do with your Anglo-Celtic dad?

My memories of you bicycling along the side of the lake. Cooking exquisite food. The lunches we shared. Your knowledge of herbs. Your hope for the future and the desire to help others with meditation and Tai Chi. The lake glittering that day you took me to your home and you, leaning against your bike, offering to ride with me around the

complete circumference of the lake. In the Ashram, the cedar floors a deep red. The sanyasins with their shaved heads, carefully gathering their dahl in their bowls with chapattis. How I envied what I thought was their peace. And then suddenly, on one occasion, the director of the ashram stood up and ordered one of the orange robed disciples out of the room. There was a shouting match. 'Get your things and leave!'

I witnessed disputes, difficulties, on the occasions when I visited, the times you wanted to defend the director who was later charged with child abuse. The case went to the High Court and was dismissed but many people were left with doubts. Later, you chose to leave yourself, because that woman had it in for you. There was the desire to find the 'truth' which we all needed. You were never quite sure if the director was guilty. For a time you talked about a conspiracy against him but in the end you found that too difficult to maintain. I did not blame you because I too was seeking something and it is possible to make grand mistakes. It was difficult to achieve unalloyed happiness, an unalloyed 'truth', even in that Shangri-La where the autumn leaves fell on stone paths in such brilliant shades of red and orange.

How many centuries since your ancestors worshipped the Torah and the Talmud? Here you were, still trying to find the correct position to take regarding the law. And I shared with you a desire for law. A way to live that would create security, certainty, peace.

Dearest Maya, I think of you now in the middle of the night and I know that we still love each other, despite the misunderstandings. What else can I tell the world about you? We have both struggled with addictions, broken love affairs, betrayals, poverty. And then we wonder if we will be left alone in our later years to experience some

tranquillity. Unfortunately, the place to find it may not be in an ashram – the wisdom may be somewhere else.

PHILLIP

I'm trying to remember the night we first got together at my aunt's place. You picked me up in a hearse 'lent' to you by a friend! You drove me back there and you were as nervous as hell knowing you'd decided to make a move on me. After a few drinks you got down on the floor on one knee in front of everyone and pleaded with me to go out with you. You even ended up sucking my toes! What an outrageous actor you were! You always said that you should have persuaded me to make love to you the first night you took me back to your flat. My subsequent prevarication went on for weeks. I remember we argued at my aunt's place while other people were talking. A ridiculous conversation which I could barely believe. You seemed to be supporting the Palestinian people as long-term victims of Israeli Government machinations and I agreed with you. But the other things that you said about Jews were crudely anti-Semitic in a common and predictable way. Something about their wealth and avarice and physical appearance. I wondered why you bothered. It didn't feel real and I wasn't offended. When you took me back to your flat to talk you dropped it all and spent a long time trying to persuade me to stay the night. And somehow the conversation never went back to the earlier one.

My marriage was falling apart by then but I really didn't understand what was going on. You were beautiful with your grey-blue eyes and mad Irish ways, quoting

Dylan Thomas to me and telling one tale after another. You could talk, you could feel, you were a performer and I loved your heart. I was crazy not to make a commitment.

Some time later you got involved with someone else and I was heartbroken. We had an affinity that would never be matched. By then my marriage had finally dissolved and I found out that I'd been deceived and lied to for years. I should have taken a gamble on your insouciance, your inimitable charm. Your anti-Semitic spiel had surprised and disappointed me, but I'd taken comfort in your ignorance. There was something tinselly about it, something unreal. I felt if you'd been a dyed-in-the-wool anti-Semite I would have reacted, but something warned me that you weren't serious, that it was a posture, a game. In the end you got married and had three more children.

You had a diamond in one ear before anyone else. You were fun, attractive as hell and I turned you down! Sometimes I just can't bear to think about it. I stupidly held out because of that deceitful husband of mine who hadn't touched me in years and who I believed might one day come back to me. You were kind and funny and we had so much to share.

I would arrive at your house on the weekend and I never forgot that Beatle track 'Here Comes the Sun' playing over and over. *Abbey Road* was a delightful album. You grew marijuana plants in little packet seed containers that you bought at Coles. You used to take me out at night to a French restaurant in Bourke Street where we had chicken in the most delectable suave peanut sauce. I was shy and you finally succeeded in wooing me.

I remember seeing you at a party about twenty years later. You had acquired a paunch and were such a disappointment because you got drunk and made crude sexist remarks to the women and touched up their bodies. You seemed to have deteriorated in a most unpleasant way. It was not long after that that I found out that you were Jewish on your mother's side. Your mother's name was Rossi. It was a well-kept secret for many years and you certainly managed to fool me. I always felt that your grey-green eyes were part of your Irish heritage. Suddenly it made sense that you were such a ranter, such a raver, that you could talk all night, and drink all day and quote and recite poetry. I'd met a number of Jews who could entertain me till dawn.

BURIED TRUTH: ESSAY

BURIED TRUTH

In remembrance is redemption.

– The Ba'al Shem Tov

To redeem implies restitution. For writers and film-makers affected by the Holocaust, memory entails reliving destruction and loss as well as being able to retrieve what has been precious and valuable.

The degree to which it is possible to represent the events of the Holocaust in literature, film or drama, has been subject to much debate. There exists ambivalence as to whether it is possible to use artistic means to do justice to the events and effectively deal with memory. Indeed, some of the memories for second-generation post-Holocaust writers, will be 'imagined', simply because they rely on transmitted accounts. States Henri Raczymow, 'What right does one have to speak if, as in my case, one has been neither victim, nor survivor, nor witness of the event?' (Cited in Fine 1988, 43). Because the first generation survivors were often reluctant to provide the details of what they had experienced, their children were sometimes stranded in silence and speculation.

The debate about representation was heightened by Theodor Adorno's now famous statement, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. (Adorno 1967, 34). Aharon Appelfeld, in reference to the obliqueness of his own writing about the Holocaust said in conversation, 'one does not look directly at the sun'. (Cited in Lang

1988, 8). Nevertheless, writers have succeeded in conveying their experiences in varied ways.

Transmitted accounts of the Holocaust were given to the second generation in the form of a multitude of individual accounts. In her book, *Children of the Holocaust*, Helen Epstein writes, 'I set out to find a group of people who, like me, were *possessed by a history they had never lived*'. (Epstein 1979, 9).

Those termed 'the post-Holocaust generation' must carry the burden of what Fine has termed '*collective memory*' (Fine 1998, 189) – the myriad stories and reports that have been handed down from many different sources. Henri Raczymow, writer of the post-genocide generation in France, refers to '*absent memory*'. (Raczymow cited in Fine, 187). Fine goes on to argue:

...this nonmemory or lack of memory comes from the feeling of exclusion both from the experience and from knowledge about the experience. The '*absent memory*' is filled with blanks, silence, sense of void, and a sense of regret for not being *there*. Linking the collective memory with the absent memory is the central image of the shadow that occurs throughout the texts, both in psychological profiles of the post-Holocaust generation and in memoirs and literary works. (1998, 187).

Fine identifies two prevailing experiences for the second generation. One is the failure of parents to provide details of what took place while at the same time making indirect reference to the events with '*...glances, fragments of conversation among themselves and other survivors, emotional responses to current events, the display of old photographs, and other forms of nonverbal communication*'. (1988, 191). The other and contrary experience is that of parents who debriefed with their children constantly

and sometimes tragically at an age when they were too young to deal with the information (1988, 191).

Despite the obstacles facing children of survivors in claiming their own experience, there is a need for written, filmic and dramatic expression. The psychiatrist Dori Laub believes that language can free the survivors, both first and second generation, from their distress and entrapment. But she believes that the condition for healing is not simply the telling of the tale – that there must also be an audience, a listener, someone who can respond and react to the events recalled. Only then, she believes, can people move forward and start to repair the damage. ‘There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*.’ (Laub 1992, 78).

Dori Laub was the co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. She was a psychoanalyst treating Holocaust survivors and their children, interviewing the survivors who gave testimony, and was a child survivor herself. Laub describes three levels of witnessing: ‘...the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself’. (1992, 75).

In telling their stories, the survivors sometimes make the claim that they gave their testimonies in order to tell their story. But Laub states:

In listening to testimonies, and in working with survivors and their children, I came to believe the opposite to be equally true. The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in

order to survive. There is, in each survivor an imperative need to *tell* thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. (1992, 78).

It is in this sense that Holocaust literature, film and drama, achieves an important function in the process of the healing of memory. A creative text can provide a witness for survivors, which has the potential to heal as well as provide a history for those not directly involved.

A review of some of the novels and films in this field demonstrates some of the aesthetic responses of the second generation. The large and growing literature, both filmic and textual dealing with the Holocaust, has brought about new challenges to creative writing practice.

'Fictional autobiography', 'historical novel', 'non-fiction novel', are among terms used for emerging genres in this field. In these, writers assume the liberty to interpret the past in ways that challenge the claims of history and memory to absolute truth.

Two contemporary written texts, the novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels, and an autobiography, *The Fiftieth Gate* by Mark Raphael Baker, provide examples of the manner in which writers are currently attempting to deal with the Holocaust.

Fugitive Pieces is structured in the form of a memoir written by Jacob Beer, '...a translator of posthumous writing from the war...'. Whereas autobiography is viewed as a sequential ordering of events, memoir, though more formal in expression, gives greater licence to explore different time frames The first person narrative commences

with an account of Jacob's rescue at the age of seven by Athos Roussos, a geologist who discovered him hiding in a bog while he excavated the ancient peat city of Biskupin in Poland. Jacob, a Jewish child, hid in a cupboard in his parents' home when Nazi soldiers burst in and took away his parents and his sister Bella. Athos takes him to his home on the island of Zakynthos in Greece, where he continues to hide him during occupation.

The structure of the narrative is fugal with recurrent streams of memory surfacing as Jacob tells the story of the war years and his subsequent migration with Athos to Toronto, Canada. 'Athos – Athanasios Roussos – was a geologist dedicated to a private trinity of peat, limestone and archaeological wood.' (Michaels 1996,19). And Jacob states, 'Because Athos's love was paleobotany, because his heroes were rock and wood as well as human, I learned not only the history of men but the history of earth'. (1996, 32).

Jacob's relationship with his sister Bella is another strand. Bella is the great love of his life. He cannot forget her and he speculates about her endlessly.

Grouped passages are separated from each other by a typographical device resembling a feather. Chapter headings are printed alone on the page. These sections no doubt constitute the 'pieces' of the title. 'Fugitive' appears to indicate the hidden nature of Jacob's life during Nazi Occupation and the flight from painful memories that are elusive and difficult to retrieve.

Given the conventions of a historical memoir, Michaels manages to evade the more formal aspects of this genre by giving her character licence to recall non-

sequentially. There is the contrast in these long sections between barbarism and historicity, between the time required to build civilisations, meteorological layers, Arctic ice, and the swiftness of fascist destruction of towns, cities, human beings.

Athos engages Jacob with his own fascination with time frames that dwarf individual human experience – the time required for fossils to endure, past civilisations to build and be destroyed, the substance of matter itself to turn to earth. These sections, interlaced with Jacob's memories of familial scenes with his sister Bella, resemble a mosaic. They take the reader into stretches of time and then into moments of horror in Jacob's young life, moments of destruction. The cumulative effect of these sequences is an oscillation between release and shock. These contrasting passages prove almost unbearable as they move both towards and away from a confrontation with supreme evil. There is the story of the intricate creation of the universe and then the incomprehensible contempt for nature and humanity demonstrated by mass murder. This crossing and recrossing of the divide between what is miraculous and what is unbearable constitute the swing of a survivor's notebook, the ever-present contemplation of contradiction. And there is no 'solution' offered in this process but the observation of a mind in agonised witnessing: 'But in my continuous expectation of the burst door, the taste of blood that filled my mouth suddenly, many times a day, I couldn't conceive of any feeling stronger than fear'. (1996, 19). Jacob goes on to write:

Athos said: 'Sometimes I can't look you in the eye, you're like a building that's burned out inside with the outer walls still standing.' I stared at pictures of prehistoric bowls, spoons, combs. To go back a year or two was impossible, absurd. To go back millennia – ah! that was nothing. (Michaels 1996, 30).

We see in the novel an integration of form with the mental processes of recollection. Michaels constructs the process of thought as it attempts to deal with unbearable pain. But for the reader it is a confrontation with a puzzle that can never be solved. The brutality Jacob Beer has witnessed in Poland and later in occupied Greece during the years that Athos hides him in his house, can never be assuaged.

This is the essential dilemma of memory around Holocaust events. It would seem that an investigation into the nature of evil can never resolve the distress. But it is in the description of events and the pain they cause, that Anne Michaels comes close to healing it. What leaves the reader devastated is somehow rescued by her delicate prose. The nightmare is transmuted mysteriously by the pleasure of language. This novel is a paeon to the rescuing power of human thought, speech, written word – the telling.

The memoirs of Ben, married to Naomi, take over the story of Jacob Beer's life as it is viewed by others. Ben also continues a vital connection to the thematic direction of the narrative as the child of Holocaust survivors living in Toronto. He reflects on his relationship with his parents who have been terrorised out of a belief in a benign present. Ben's father is obsessed with food, his mother fearful he will not return every time he leaves the house either as a child or an adult. Ben, as narrator, continues Jacob Beer's belief that sentient life and non-sentient matter remember the existence of past lives.

Ben addresses his own memoir of Jacob Beer to Jacob himself, referring to him as 'you'. So in this way the narrative folds back in on itself. The connecting thread in this last section of the book, is the way in which Ben attempts to come to terms with his own experience as a second-generation survivor. The intensity of grief has not

diminished in this last section, but there are added reflections on how the grief and fear have distorted and twisted lives.

The prose itself hovers on prose poetry and is astoundingly evocative and beautiful. The recounting of human knowledge in the areas of science, music, history, geology, elegantly enumerated. There is only one major omission – art.

David Lodge has said, ‘Time-shift is a very common effect in modern fiction, but usually it is “naturalised” as the operation of memory’. (Lodge 1992, 77). Lodge refers to ‘...the memoir or reminiscence of a character-narrator’ as being ‘more formal’ than interior monologue (1992, 77). In observing interactions between other people in his narrative, Jacob Beer and later Ben, shift to free indirect prose. In fact, within the structures of the ‘memoir’, Michaels utilises most of the literary conventions including interior monologue and stream of consciousness.

Despite the device of memoir, the reader is very conscious of the presence of the author. And this becomes more obvious with the construction of the second memoir by Ben. It becomes clear that ‘someone’ has juxtaposed these two narrative streams. Who but the author? But the author herself, in interview, strives to maintain the ‘fiction’ of authentic memoir and is very strict about limiting her own narrative voice to the novel:

The novel clearly has a deep personal meaning for Michaels but she refuses to say what it is. Nor will she say whether or not she herself is Jewish. She says she is not interested in talking about herself because the book is too important. ‘Let Jacob’s story be the one that’s told’, she said. ‘I will only say that I had questions I wanted answered. I wanted to know whether faith was possible after such a catastrophe, to know whether answers could be found in the physical world, how to live better and love better. Something has to be personally at stake for me to

write.’ (Cited in Wynne-Jones 1997, 22).

All this points to the very real dilemma of writers who try to maintain a separation between themselves and their characters. I had to face this issue in regard to my own writing. I found it difficult to use first person narrative because of the degree of personal exposure involved. I have in the past used first person to ‘open up’ the sensory realms of colour, taste, scent, touch, emotional feelings, and then reverted to third. Where the material is so emotionally disturbing, it is a difficult decision. Writers such as Michaels clearly crave the privacy of a firm division.

Anne Michaels writes an exquisite poetic prose. She has succeeded in an enormously difficult task. The point at which the writer/poet ‘enters’ the historical event will always present a new dilemma on a subject of such relevance to twentieth century history.

Mark Raphael Baker’s book *The Fiftieth Gate*, a Holocaust memoir of Baker’s parents, makes an interesting comparison to *Fugitive Pieces*. States Richard Guilliat, ‘At times he simply leaves hanging the contradictions between his parents’ memories and the historical records, an iconoclastic approach that adds to *The Fiftieth Gate*’s novelistic style’.

Baker comments:

My initial idea was to have my parents’ voices and add my own voice as a commentary around them [...] But I had to let go of that idea. That was something my parents taught me, that there is a deeper meaning or truth than the facts – or *fecks*, as my father likes to call them. (Cited in Guilliat 1997, 9-11).

The unique dilemma for Holocaust literature is to deal with historical fact in such a way that it is realised for some of its emotional implications. States Aharon Appelfeld:

Over the years, the problem, and not only the artistic problem, has been to remove the Holocaust from its enormous, inhuman dimensions and bring it close to human beings. Without that effort it would remain a distant and unseen nightmare somewhere off in the distance of time, where it would be easy to forget. It is the great Jewish experience, also a non-Jewish experience, and if it is not assimilated as it ought to be, one day we will be like grown-up children who have been deprived of a basic truth of life. (Appelfeld 1988, 92).

The degree of departure from a factual account will dictate the genre, whether it be memoir, ficto-memoir, ficto-criticism, or novel, short story, poem or play. In dealing with this history it has been seen necessary for Anne Michaels to preserve the shape of an historical account. On the other hand, in order to contemplate the events, she needed to distance herself as author from any personal connection to them. Mark Raphael Baker finds, as an historian, that he cannot deal with the history without using 'novelistic' devices. Even so, the feelings and views of his parents about what actually happened to them are largely absent from his book. There is an overall silence about what hurts most. Where there merges such depth of emotion with history, the lines become blurred and a postmodern blending of genres is inevitable.

In the field of film, to confront violence, genocide, the Holocaust, makes special demands on documentarists. It requires enormous courage to deal with issues that many film-makers find too painful to face. The directors who work with such material question the social agendas that bring about crimes against humanity. One of their hopes is for people to realise and confirm the sacredness of life. Jean Cayrol's plea at the end of his film *Nuit et Brouillard* is that people will remain alert to these crimes and

do something to prevent them – confront the ‘night’ as Elie Wiesel has termed it, of human evil.

In *SHOAH* Part 1, director Claude Lanzmann presses for answers in ways that cause pain to the people he interviews. He justifies his highly intrusive form of *cinéma vérité* with the need to extract a verbal account of the Holocaust, despite the reluctance of the victims and perpetrators to publicly tell their story. His rationale is to end the silence that surrounds events the horror of which is recorded in the film footage taken by the Nazis themselves and by the Allies after the concentration camps were liberated. Lanzmann’s refusal to use visual record and insistence on language leads him to an impasse. When the people he interviews, such as Motke Zaidel, are too distressed to speak and are moved to tears, he pushes them to give account. Lanzmann fails to show sufficient concern and sensitivity to the distressed victims. This has the effect of distracting the audience from concentrating on the Nazi’s war crimes.

He interviews a train driver who transported Jews to Auschwitz. The driver expresses genuine regret over their fate. Polish peasants who worked in fields near the camp say they warned the Jews of their imminent fate when the trains slowed down by making a motion with a hand across the throat. But while they tell this story, some appear to be amused. Lanzmann does not ask why *they* are laughing. It seems as if the Jewish witnesses are singled out to provide evidence of their pain and suffering. Translations from Hebrew, French and Polish of interviews with witnesses make it difficult to be certain about verbal nuance. The ambiguities of translation are often too great to be borne. Long tracking shots of recreated train journeys to Treblinka, Auschwitz and other camps are designed partly to assert that these journeys actually

took place. The Nazis tried to hide and dissemble the terrible crimes they committed with a view to denying the existence of the Jews themselves. Lanzmann's attempt to force the silence can be understood, but not justified.

James Moll's *The Last Days* tells the story of five Hungarian Jews who survived deportation to camps when the German troops invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944. It shows the obsessive paranoid racism of the SS who continued to round up Jews and murder them less than three months before the camps were liberated by the Allies. Around 440,000 Jews were incarcerated in concentration camps in the last few months of the war.

Moll duplicates the childhoods of the five people in a highly personal series of interviews. The names of the five participants are not mentioned on the film poster, which would have been the case if they had been actors in a fiction film. Somehow this creates a sense of anonymity around these five survivors. They are however, listed on the back of the poster given to the audience and published as part of the film's promotion: Tom Lannos, the only Holocaust survivor to be elected to the US Congress; Renée Firestone, lecturer on the Holocaust and human rights; Alice Lok Cahana, artist; Bill Basch, retired fashion industry executive; and Irene Zisblatt, grandmother and businesswoman. Interviewed in their homes and while visiting the sites of death camps such as Auschwitz, these 'social actors' never interact with or view the interviewers. The camera provides an impersonal record, very much in the style of oral history. Whether sitting in a lounge-room or in an open field they speak to an audience off screen. Why would they reveal themselves in such depth unless there was someone present who knew them? They become the anonymous displays of a film archive. The

technique adds to the anonymity of the thousands who were murdered, reduces those interviewed to examples of concentration camp victims, rather than the unique survivors they are.

Moll's overall approach is to reproduce each person's life in identical sequence: early childhood, black-and-white footage of home towns, wartime footage, and then current colour footage. There are interviews conducted during trips back to the particular concentration camp for each survivor and in home towns in Hungary as they are today.

This is not to say that this parallel interviewing is not meaningful or moving. The emphasis on duplication is designed to create a sense of inevitability. But the film hovers on a fine line between reducing information to a dangerous sameness and the need to show the relentless duplication of Nazi horror. The repetition of each person's account becomes trite, the nightmare reduced by predictability of presentation. There is one series revealing how each person felt on arrival in the concentration camps when they are stripped of their clothes and identity. The rapid cross cutting abbreviates to such a degree that the editing becomes offensive. Each person's account, ultimately sacred, loses effect. And here the director, the anonymous 'narrator', becomes the unseen author of the text.

By telling each person's story in such a deliberate sequence, the pattern becomes recognisable to the audience. They are told again and again where they are going. Because the names of the interviewees are only mentioned once, and not repeated in interaction with the interviewer, individual identity is reduced. The director has made a blancmange of human suffering. Inevitably one senses Stephen Spielberg, executive

director, attempting to contain horror within a predictable format. 'This too can be assimilated, this too can be understood. I will make it easy for you.' The irony is that something highly personal has become impersonal. If each story had been told in tune with individual memory, with differences in tempo, recollection and sequence, we would have been left with a more profound experience.

Nuit et Bouillard (Night and Fog), directed by Alain Resnais, was one of the most important documentaries to attempt to deal with Auschwitz. The commentary of Jean Cayrol in the form of a film essay, subsumes a universal theme of human persecution and suffering. The film makes a deep statement of the need to preserve the sanctity of human life. The most horrific images are those of bodies being shovelled by tractors into ditches. The critique by Robert Michael in *Cineaste* (1984, 36-7) is that the narrative does not mention that the victims were predominantly Jews and met a fate sought out for them by Nazi anti-Semites. Michael acknowledges that the film is caught between its desire to universalise and a failure to identify the centuries-old persecution of the Jews by Western Christian nations. But the film must be praised for its humanitarian impulse, despite the lack of specificity. In matching imagery to language at the level of prose poetry, philosophical statement and historical record, it achieves great simplicity and power.

Hiroshima Mon Amour, based on the written text of Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais, received acclaim for its integration of film footage of burnt victims of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima and the story of two people who are never named, who meet and love there. Marguerite Duras' poetic text returns the two characters again and again to their own memories – a Japanese man and a French

woman who had an affair with a Nazi during the war. At the beginning of the film, the woman is making a film about the peace movement in Hiroshima. Horrific archival images of the bombing of Hiroshima are replayed along with post-war footage of a peace march. During the march, small children and adults carry huge displays of paper flowers, strangely moving and commemorative.

The two characters constantly repeat the name Hiroshima. The need to remember and the need to forget the horror of Hiroshima is matched by their own need to remember and forget the suffering in their own lives. In the case of the woman, her own involvement with the Holocaust as a collaborator confirms the thread of twentieth-century nightmare, where the abusers and the abused are not always clearly defined. The film with its pauses, allows time for the audience to reflect on their own experience. When the two people make love, the juxtaposition of images of ecstasy with scenes of nuclear holocaust are shocking. The agony of burnt bodies, footage of people stumbling in nuclear heat after the blast, is unspeakably horrible. Referred to as a 'semi-documentary', *Hiroshima Mon Amour* conveys wartime suffering and the dual need for people to remember and also forget, to be released from memory. Through recollection, the characters manage somehow to deal with the unspeakable. This film is a remarkable testament to the writer's and the director's subtlety of word and image. In many ways brutally confronting, it manages to remain elusive. Perhaps because the theme of sexual love has the power to heal the human soul even through the grimmest layers of grief.

The continuing replay of twentieth century horror, from the Holocaust to the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, provides a nightmarish backdrop to the history of our civilisation. Writers, film makers and dramatists have an essential role in constructing the narratives that will shape our past, present and future identity through these tragic events, ‘...positioned between history and memory’. (Sicher 1998, 13). They face a difficult task, because although the events of World War 11 are behind us, new instances of genocide continue to take place in many parts of the world, leaving their inevitable legacy of grief and destruction. States Efraim Sicher:

Telling the story is a form of working through trauma, which ideally ends with the separation of the second generation from the dead and their connection to a real past, to a family and people in which they are a living link, transmitting a heritage for future generations. (Sicher 1998,13).

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