

PART ONE

LIGHT IN THE DARK

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD

Bella's Longing for a White Cloth

*We were lying there in the dark.
Me and your daddy. Unable to move.
Eighteen months in a hole in the ground ...
I thought I would go mad. But I saw a white tablecloth ...*

Here is the hole in the ground,
the bunker with no space even to sit, let alone stand.
Lying down in this hole is a young man.
Next to him is a young woman.
With her eyes wide open,
stilling the images and daemons tearing her mind apart,
she holds back the enveloping dark by conjuring an image;
always the same scene, a *presque-vu* of anticipation.
A table laid out for the Sabbath.
A long table set with a crisp starched white cloth,
a golden plaited egg-loaf,
a pair of candlesticks with waiting-to-be-lit candles ...
Hush; she listens for the tender sound of familiar footsteps ...
Yes. Any moment her mother will come;

BELLA AND CHAIM

then will come her father and her sisters.

No. She knows that is not possible.

So she summons her God; the one whose name must not be spoken.

The one who declared as his First Commandment:

I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of the land of Egypt ... ⁶

Of this deity, in-whom-she-no-longer-believes,

having no other to take his place, she asks,

‘Let it be at least I will one day have the white *Shabbos*⁷ cloth.’

Must Not Wake My Mummy: Melbourne 1949

Dense dark.

A baby cries.

Is it me?

White light.

*Ah-ah-ah, kotki dwa, szarobure obydwu,
nic nie będą robiły, tylko Sara bawiły ...*

Oh, oh, kittens two, grey and beige both,
nothing will they do, just with Sara play.

Black dots on the ground ...

If I stand on one, I'll fall forever.

HELP!

Sha. Sha. Go back to sleep. *Frère Jacques ... Frère Jacques ...*

Dormez vous ... Dormez vous. Sonnez les matines ...

Sonnez les matines ... Ding dang dong. Ding dang dong ...

‘WAKE UP MRS ROTSTEIN! IT’S SIX O’CLOCK!’

Morning sunlight makes a bright splash on the white door. I stand in the corridor and wait. A tired voice, the voice of the lady who will soon be my beloved godmother, comes from behind the closed door.

‘Go awaay, Sara. It is too early.’

‘I want to play.’

‘Go and wake your muzzer.’

‘My Mummy is asleep.’

‘Go awaay, Sara.’

Let myself out of the big old house; on hands and knees I crawl
under tall trees through a carpet of spring flowers: blue forget-me-nots,
white lily-of-the-valley, and sweet-smelling pink flowers
which I will learn are called bergenia.

The street beckons. The gate opens easily. I am on the street.
The beach – just a few houses away; no one in sight. Hop, skip,
running and twirling on a long stretch of yellow sand in golden light.
All this space all to myself.

What is that moving speck in the distance? It is a lady. She walks a
dog. She comes right up to me. Her voice is horrible to my ears.

‘Little girl, how old are you? Nearly four?! Where is your mummy?
Your mummy should not let you out by yourself. There are bad people,
someone might hurt you. Go home.’

She glares at me so. She watches me.

So home I go, feet dragging, thinking ...

My Mummy is so beautiful: her laugh, her rosy cheeks,
her round brown eyes and long, curling brown hair so soft to the touch,
silly yucky lady-from-the-beach, if she knew my Mummy she would
know that it is not my Mummy’s fault.

Anyway, it is too early ... my Mummy is asleep.

I Learn of Grandmothers: Melbourne 1952

‘Wake up Mummy!’

Mummy stretches, sighs, opens her eyes. She sees me but, instead of
giving me her usual good-morning smile, she looks puzzled and says,
‘Why did you wake me? I was home, home with my mother ...’

I reply, ‘I’m sorry, Mummy.

It is time for you to get up. I will be late for school.’

She takes me in her arms. Holds me close. Questions fill my head:
where are these people you long for?

When will we see them?

But I do not ask.



BELLA AND CHAIM

It is 1952, I am six, finished with the 'bubs'. I am in grade one at South Yarra Primary School, just a short walk through Domain Park from our flat in Park Street. I can read and write. The words in our readers tell many stories and we are writing with lead pencils now. No more chalk or crayons.

The twins, Cheryl and Laurel, with radiant smiles, dark brown ringlets, matching dresses, are definitely the most popular girls in the school; every day at play and lunchtimes in the concrete schoolyard their friends surround them. I want to join in, but I hang back.

One sunny day, after we have stood in queues to collect our small glass bottle of fresh milk – yummy with thick cream on top – and I am sitting alone in the shelter shed, one of the twins – I think it is Laurel – comes over and says, 'Sarena, come and play with us.'

I bask in the glow of their friendship. Then one day they invite me to come to their home in Prahran; Mummy says okay.

That is how, soon after, I find myself skipping with them through narrow streets, passing houses that share their sidewalls with their neighbours and have small garden behind low timber fences.

Their house, of wood with a corrugated iron roof, is cosy, dark, musty. In an alcove, a lady with permed white hair sits at a sewing machine. They introduce me. 'Granny, this is Sara.'

She turns, smiles, keeps on fixing lace to a flouncy skirt.

Back home I look around our bright airy flat and I do not mind that we do not live in a house. As I inspect my mop of black curls in the mirror in Mummy's dressing table I think I would not be me with ringlets.

My plain clothes – hand-me-downs and often red – look fine.

But ... But ...

Now I know about grandmothers, oh how I want to have a grandmother. A mother for my Mummy.

My heart pounding, I ask Mummy,
'Where is my grandmother? Where is my twin?'

She gazes at me; she hesitates. I plead with her,
'Please Mummy tell me!'

Staring deep into my eyes, holding me by both hands,
Mummy Tells Me The Truth.

PART ONE: LIGHT IN THE DARK

'Your grandparents are dead. Your cousins, aunts,
their husbands and children, all are dead.
Your twin is dead. I did not have enough for two.
You were born first. You are alive. You are a big girl – nearly seven.
You are the strong one; Daddy and I love you.'
'Mummy,' I whisper, afraid to ask, but asking,
'Why did they all die?'
Her reply is as if confiding a secret:
'Because of the war.
They are dead because of the war.'

*So many questions unasked and unanswered,
but my need to tell is strong;
delving into Pandora boxes, setting memory in the record,
I bring you my parents' story,
as told to me in vignettes and dioramas;
words – being flawed and fragmented –
convey, even resonate in events unfolding today,
but they are not the thing.
It is the dark and light of my mother's longing
that both wakes me from deepest sleep
and motivates me through my days.*

*This feeling is more than Anemoia⁸ –
longing for a time I've never known;
I've found no word or phrase as yet to encapsulates this longing.
The Welsh word Hiraeth (HEER-eyeth) is a starting point:*

*... a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return,
a home which maybe never was;
the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for lost places.
To feel Hiraeth is to feel a deep incompleteness
and recognise it as familiar.⁹*

BELLA AND CHAIM

Add to that:

*immeasurable loss of entire family branches and trunks,
knowledge of what man can and does do, to, and for, his fellow man;
thus armed with courage to face the facts,
uncover immutable moments of treasured memories.*

Hold onto belief that even in the darkest dark, you can find a light.

*Mix well to make a brew potent and consoling
so long as memory persists.*

Make a new word to encapsulate:

Atoh-dachaia.¹⁰

Thus armed with gratitude –

Come with me.

PART TWO

PICTURE (IM)PERFECT

Warsaw pre-September 1939

NO GOD BUT ME

*'Why did you wake me? I was home with my mother.
My mother was such a nice lady. My father was so nice.
My sisters, the beautiful one and the clever one, were there.
Everything was so nice. Why did you wake me?
Oh how I want to be back home.
Home when the world was nice.'*

*'Did you buy and sell in good faith?
Did you have a set time for study?
Did you raise a family?'*

A saying from The Talmud.¹¹

CHAPTER 1: THE LAST SPRING

My mother's nice world is Poland. In the verdant forests of Świder, in a holiday cottage owned by her parents, she was born on 22 August 1923. Named Bella, known as Basia, she and her sisters, Zosia and Celina, immersed in the privileged life of a loving middle-class family living in a Jewish quarter, thrive in exciting, bustling Warsaw.

Basia's father is Pinkus Birenbaum. Pinkus comes from a village.

What was it called? I don't remember, but it was so small that people would joke that if you gave a yawn while travelling through you would miss it.

Oh, I remember now. Podelane – Wieś.

His father Eliahim has two sons¹² from a first marriage.

Pinkus is prosperous. A wholesaler in cotton and wool, he is of medium height, dark-haired, olive-skinned, portly, cosmopolitan; as a lover of good food, he even eats delicious forbidden ham when away on business. On ordinary days he sits at the table with his head uncovered without any hat or *yarmulke*, and on the Sabbath, as it is a bit far to walk, he catches a taxi to the Great Tłomackie Synagogue, but, as work of any kind on the Sabbath – which includes driving – breaks a commandment, he gets out a little before his destination, not to be seen.

Basia's mother is Rena Birenbaum nee Czosnek. Rena, pretty, capable, stylish, the youngest of fourteen children of which seven have survived childhood, came from Kraków, but was born in Działoszycze. She dresses in the latest fashion: delightful hats and berets, knee-length

skirts, she even has a fine sable coat with a mink collar for winter. She manages her gracious home with the help of only one servant, Pola – a young Jewish girl from a small town – plus a washerwoman who comes in every fortnight. While Pola does general cleaning and cooking, Rena sees to all the shopping; in her kosher kitchen she ensures the dishes – one set for meat, the other for milk – are kept separate as laid down by *Halacha* – Jewish Law. For the minor and high holy days, she personally prepares the specialties: *challahs* (plaited egg loaf), chicken soup, *lockshen* (egg noodles), *kreplach* (dumplings), *gefilte* fish (fish patties), *kneidlech* (matzah balls), and *cholent* (bean and barley stew) for *Shabbos* lunch. The *cholent*, taken before the Sabbath to the communal bakery for slow cooking in pots that are numbered then put into the ovens on long paddles, is everyone's favourite. While waiting to collect their pot, people joke that the baker should mix the pots up so a poor man might get a rich man's pot filled with meat.

*From the fragments of my mother's anecdotes
I build a Friday night in spring 1939,
forever the last spring of this time before War came to Poland.*

With school finishing early on Fridays, the girls rush home to help in the kitchen and in the setting of the Sabbath table. When the first star in the night sky appears, the sign that joyful *Shabbos* can commence, Rena lights the two candles, covers her eyes, and blesses the candles with the traditional incantation.

*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe,
Who has made us holy through His Commandments
and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light.

With everyone seated, there is silence while Pinkus intones further blessings sanctifying the wine and challah. Everyone says *omain* – amen; the challah cut into small pieces is passed around, the meal under way, tongues loosened by wine, speaking to each other in a Polish as fluent as that of any parallel Catholic home, the girls talk of many things while Pola serves the courses.

Rena surveys her brood. All is well. First, everyone is in good health. Second, tonight's meal has turned out delish. Perhaps a dash more salt in the soup? No, Pinkus assures her it is just scrumptious. Yes, she does love him, though without doubt she will have cause tomorrow to chastise him for playing cards on a Saturday, this being another irritating manifestation of his lack of respect for the many Mosaic rules. Thankfully, his irreverence pales beside his attributes: a caring husband, doting father, generous to her relatives, a good provider.

Not like her dear brother, Mayer Czosnek. Making money eludes Mayer yet neither he nor his wife Leah, known as Leyele, will accept anything from Rena. Despite abject poverty, Mayer radiates the soothing aura of a man of exalting faith. He is a sight in his full orthodox garb: a caftan and small brimmed hat.¹³ And to pray he wears a *tallis* (a fringed shawl whose every tassel is prescribed) and bound to his head and arms the *tefillin* (black leather boxes), symbolic and mystical elements of the ritual. Pious Leyele, her head covered by the prescribed *sheitel* – that wig looking not at all becoming – keeps their one-roomed apartment spotless. In their crowded yet organised home, Leyele and Mayer earn a pittance by spending their days and nights overlocking knitted fabric for a manufacturer. In this building, they live, work, and even pray, because conveniently located on the ground floor is a *shteibel* – a prayer house. Their daughter Sara is still at home; how do they manage?

It would be nice if only Leyele and Mayer would come to partake of the Friday feast, or lunch on Saturday. However, her own brother will not eat in her home for, though she follows the Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut* with meticulous attention, he says it is *trayf*, not kosher enough for him. At least Leyele pops in for a cup of tea on Saturday. No, she would not like Pinkus to be religious like that. Give thanks to her dear blessed parents for making this *shiddach*. Make sure to emphasise to the girls the wisdom of this tradition of arranged marriages. Tell them: 'My parents told me I would learn to love him and I have.'