Sarah
&
Abraham

The Search for Miracles and The Stuttering Poet
Dedicated to the souls who risked their lives
so I could know blessings and pass on a path to miracles.
Dear Asa

Truth is a patient man’s game
Lies earn quick returns, while truth
Comes only long-term. And though
It promises a dividend of schadenfreude

There is no guarantee that one
Will be graced in life to see the bonds
Mature.

Yours truly,
God

From Skullduggery, Asa Boxer

“Master of the universe! I hereby forgive anyone who has angered or vexed me, or sinned against me, either physically or financially, against my honor or anything else that is mine, whether accidentally or intentionally, inadvertently or deliberately, by speech or by deed, in this incarnation or any other ... may no man/woman be punished on my account ...”

The opening prayer for peaceful sleep, especially if one does not wake-up. (From the Lubavitch Book of Prayers).
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My name is Sarah. In Spain I am Sarita. The Hebrew letters for the name are related to “song”, or to “sing”. In Hebrew, Sarita means “he who struggles with man and God and prevails.”

“… Not Jacob will you now be called, but Israel; for you have striven (sarita) with God.”

— Genesis 32:28

Avi, whose name had over time changed from Abraham to Abie to Avi, had christened me Vena, the name by which he had made me his when dark forces conspired to split us apart.

At 18, to consecrate our love,
We slashed our wrists
Pressed our wounds together
So our blood would mingle
Enter each other’s heart
Make us one forever.
Avi

Of Vena, he wrote, years later:

“We were innocent then, and more pure, and the name sounded perfect, for surely our life together and our love for each other surpassed all mortal names. I wanted to mythologize us, and the young men that would spring, fully-grown, from your immaculate thighs. Now ‘Vena’ sounds hollow, sterile, barren … And my ancient biblical Sarah is more alive, is more real to me than Vena.”

How had the biblical Sarah managed to bring forth life when man and nature conspired against her? “Barren, to old age,” we are told, Sarah ended up with laughter, gave birth to Isaac, which means laughter in Hebrew. But I could not miss the horror when her God-crazed husband Abraham took their miracle child to sacrifice.

Abraham did nothing by the book and neither did Avi.
I am Avi Boxer, son of Joel,
I am full of romantic clichés
Like I was carved from lightning
And stuffed with aching stars.
Look at my face.
I am Caesar, Rasputin, Heine,
Touch me, and you will never be the same …
Avi

At the end of his road, Avi would challenge: “Which one of us has the better excuse to have so royally fucked up?”

Nietzsche wrote: “If you have a reason ‘why’ you can take most any ‘how’.”

I had a “why,” the same “why” as Sarah: a child.
Father was frantic, puffing away at cigarettes, packing up what could be brought downstairs to the coal bin without attracting attention. Mother was cramming the suitcase with the barest necessities.

“Shnell, mach schnell, fast, hurry. Abbé Laroche will soon be here.” Father was rushing her, then, scolding her. “Heib nisht un tzu veinen yetz, don't start weeping now.”

Mother blew her nose and clutched her chest to catch her breath. She was holding the photo of her sister, my Tante Erna, surrounded by her husband and three handsome teenaged sons. Tante Erna had gone into hiding at the beginning of the systematic roundup of Polish Jews who had immigrated to France in 1929. My cousins had come to warn us ten days ago: “She came out of hiding and was home ten minutes when they pounded on the door and got her.”

Next she held the picture of her brother, Heini. Now living? Trapped? In the Warsaw Ghetto? Mother had begged him to leave Lodz where for generations the family had a printing shop, and come join us in France. Sometimes she asked out loud if she should have demanded he leave and in the same breath answered herself: “Erna left, and who knows where she is now?”

And her brother Raphael in Paris, who had thought his son Villy safer with us in Toulouse, France’s “free zone”. My mother would never get over the guilt of Villy being rounded up when she sent him
on an errand. That had happened yesterday. And this morning my father sent me to school to tell a lie.

I am to tell my teacher that I cannot stay in school because my mother has broken her leg, which she hasn’t, and I am needed at home to help with my year-old brother. No one is to suspect we are planning to escape to Spain. Even I didn’t know it.

I didn’t need to be told that horrid things were happening, like running crazed to bomb shelters with sirens wailing, planes roaring overhead and dropping bombs all around us. I knew about queuing for hours for milk, one litre for each child under 12. I knew about the ration tickets, which did not get us food anyway. I knew something even worse was brewing after Tante Erna was hauled from her home in a cattle car and my cousin Villy was picked off the street, and I knew it long before my teacher Mlle. Menard made me sit in the dunce seat because I was a Jew.

And I stand before Mlle. Menard as with a rock stuck in my throat to deliver my father’s message. My mother broke her leg and I am needed at home to help.

“And where is your father’s note?” Mlle. Menard asks, with a suspicious look. I have no note. “Take your seat.” She points at the seat in the back row. The class giggles, some give me the “shame” fingers as I curtsy and go to the dunce seat. I am in the grips of not having lied well enough for my father and having lied to a teacher, and what can possibly go worse?

Mlle. Menard sends for a replacement teacher. “I am going to take you home myself,” she says.

That walk with Mlle. Menard is a blur. Blind fury clamps my throat wordless. It is not just that I am nine years old and am made to lie that deranges the spirit of things in me. Lying for a matter of life and death and to save your parents and brother is noble, which I had failed to be. I want to feel like I belong, like I matter, like I am part of the goings on. Like my uncle Pinche—my mother’s brother whom Father in a fit of jealous fury has forbidden us to see—makes me feel. And I hanker for my uncle’s hug as I shudder for the banishment I have earned for a mission so botched. “Stupid like your mother,” with that dismissive wave of the hand is a mood I dread the most.

Not one hair of Mlle. Menard’s iron mis-en-plis stirs in the balmy breeze the young spring morning. Each step her hard, wiry body clacks out on the cobbled streets is executed as with Germanic precision.

Did my parents, in their panic, not consider that some teachers had brought their Jewish charges to detention centres, never to be seen again? Such were the bedtime stories wafting in from the kitchen that no one thought I heard, my bed in the next room up against the kitchen wall. And I shudder, where is Mlle. Menard taking me?

We pass the narrow lane of rue St. Germain, where Tante Erna had once lived. She was as fair as Mother was dark, the dynamo of the family. She drove a car in 1927 before the men did, Mother claimed. She ran the family business, as well as her husband and three boys. They teased me for my black eyes but applauded my performances of the tear jerking Yiddish songs Mother taught me: “kinder yoren zisse kinder yoren, childhood years, sweet childhood years.” That’s how it had been for my mother in the bosom of a bustling home of five spirited siblings. Before she was married she used to sing. Maybe I could live my mother’s dream.

“Surely another Shirley Temple,” Tante Erna said, fuelling Mother’s fantasy that I’d be a star.

They had moved to Montlucon where their business, selling spirits, had been meant to be more profitable. I start to weep and Mlle. Menard gives me a dirty look. Who knows what she thinks I am crying for? Actually, I don’t know exactly what I am crying for except fear. Nauseating fear. Inexplicable fear. Not only might I not be going home but would my parents still be there if I ever got there? They could have been rounded up as Erna had been and what would happen to me? And my uncle Pinche, what would he say to the mess I had wrought?

Uncle Pinche is the loving spirit I see comforting me. He reads fairy tales to me. He tells Mother not to show so overtly her favouritism for baby Jack. Did Pinche know that Villy had disappeared?

The month that Villy was with us he was given the chore of walking me to and from school. Only yesterday morning I had run to keep up with Villy’s long-legged strides, and at the school portals he had smiled his crooked boyish smile and said he’d be there when
school let out. But Villy was not there when school let out. Instead Father was there waiting for me under his large, black umbrella with heavy rain drumming down upon it. Father had one of his nervous smiles for me as he stood there with the other parents waiting for their young ones, but on the way home he did not speak and I did not ask why Villy had not picked me up. It may be something I did wrong again. Mother is tearing around the rooms, distraught. She had sent Villy on an errand after he got home from taking me to school. It is seven hours later and Villy has not returned. Living in the “free zone” had seduced my Uncle Raphael to believe that only German Nazis were out to destroy us. But the French of Marechal Petain did the Nazis proud.

That night — only last night — Father stayed out late. After 9 o’clock curfew. Either he returns or like Villy, he doesn’t. He has gone to arrange for guides. Then comes the next day, which is today, when he sends me to school to make it look like all is normal. And indeed, for us it is.

We pass the Monoprix fabric shop where Mother bought the silks, cottons and wool for the dressmaker to sew and for Mother to embroider. Mother was praised for the handiwork that had kept her father on cancer medication.

Next block is the market where Mother and other housewives had met and gossiped and bargained with the vendors hawking their wares of fresh fruits, vegetables, cacahuètes, and stinking old cheese. We walk by the places where father had dared tempt the God he was always challenging, by taking a daily aperitif in non-kosher cafés. For all the fear that constricts my throat, my heart yet melts at the sound of the music blaring out of those cafés. Music, that was so often to sustain me. And here, Tino Rossi, heartthrob of the young and the old, is crooning Le plus beau de tout les tangos du monde, “the most beautiful tango in the world is the one I dance in your arms ....” A bewitching melody connected to summer days at the piscine, a treat of pêche Melba, the seductive scent of suntan lotion glistening on sunbathers. Those were the days I didn’t feel the weight of having to tell a lie to carry my parents and brother to safety.

And it is a stinking walk with Mlle. Menard because of the break-
Sarah went to the guignol for the puppet show. She called me her best friend and I called her mine, until Christmas, when Father gave me the gift. I couldn’t guess what was under the large wrap Father was removing. It seemed to take forever for the surprise to emerge and then, at last: a toy butcher shop. Cardboard slices of meat for a cardboard butcher station. My father had expected greater enthusiasm for such a large toy. I would have liked a book, like my uncle Pinche would give me, or coloured pencils to draw with, not a clumsy box to deal in meat, even if the cardboard slices were innocuous.

The next afternoon Father had set me up in the courtyard for “business” and, when I saw Incarnation run out of her door, I had thought it was for our usual playtime but she came over to call me, “sale Juive, dirty Jewess.”

My legs wobble as Mlle. Menard and I enter my father’s store. Father jumps when he sees my teacher. He rushes over and kisses the back of her hand. I am transfixed by the elegant, though clumsy, gesture. He fusses about nervously looking for the chair that Mlle. Menard would have none of.

“Sarah tells me that Mme. Engelhard has broken a leg and needs Sarah home to help, but Mrs. Engelhard is not home. Sarah had no note to that effect. I venture to conclude that Sarah here is lying.”

“Vee, vee, yes, yes, Mlle. Menard,” he says. “My wife she did break the leg. She is with the brother.”

“So you don’t need Sarah at home.”

“Mlle. Menard, the wife of brother also sick.” Father puts his hands to his stomach.

She eyes both of us suspiciously. Turning to leave, she says, “We’ll see about this.”

I prepare for my deserved blows. I deserve lashes for the badly told lie. I deserve them for bringing Mlle. Menard, for not knowing how to save a horrible situation. For that and so much more I even deserve the silent treatment, the one I try to avert at all cost, the one where you’re not worth talking to because you are such a “shtick drek, piece of shit”. But just then the Abbé Laroche, in his long flowing black robes, turns the corner where Mlle. Menard has just disappeared.

The Abbé is like a family member. He studies Hebrew from my father. He brings me chocolate and pats my head. I especially like the Easter chocolate bunny. He has arranged for our guides.

“Noah,” he says, wasting no breath, “our contact at the gendarmerie has just been arrested. He will be made to confess names of people for whom he forged documents. Come to church, you will leave for the train station from my parish. Start rehearsing your new names.”

He points at me: “You are Thérèse Beaulieu.” My mother is now “Francine”, my father is “Jean”, my little brother is “Jean-Pierre”. “All of you were born in France.” He turns to Father. “Pack only one bag. And Noah, let me repeat my offer one more time, leave Sarah at the cloister with us. One of you will be sure to survive.”

“We die together or we live together, Mr. l’Abbé. Go now Sarah to Mr. Savoie’s furniture shop. Your mother and brother are hiding there. Tell her to come straight home and pack a bag.”

***

“Shnell!” Father is back from the coal bin, where my trousseau is being amassed (so far mostly bed linen), and Mother hurriedly wraps the beloved snapshots in a silk scarf and wedges them securely against the edge of the suitcase so they don’t suffer damage. Added to underwear and clothes for us all and a new corset for herself, those cinches and stays that I could hardly wait to get into one day, were monogrammed handkerchiefs, two new crocodile leather handbags not picked up by customers who had ordered them. Mother, ever the astute dealer, thinks she might yet sell them, wherever we might be. On top of it all, she folds diapers for Jack. Mother is not going to let go of this suitcase.

It is decided to take turns, Mother and I, lugging the suitcase.

I take up my duty, awkward, off balance. I lean way over to my right, in order to lift the weight with my left hand. It goes dragging and banging against my legs and bumping into Mother’s and Father’s. Now it is all our worldly possessions in my incapable hands and outside near the train the Nazis are booming orders.

“Lingst, lings, left, left,” they are hollering in German. Only Jews
night when my mother’s scream shocks me out of sleep: “Noah, vus tis dut? Noah, what are you doing?” “Die kinder, die kinder, the children, the children.” The shouts that bring my father back from the brink of madness, and her from the knife he holds above her heart.

We were sitting ducks those two and a half years in Franco’s Spain. No matter what we did, we were sitting ducks. We sat on a time bomb that could go off anytime. It could go off when our flat was quarantined because my two-year-old brother had scarlet fever. Or, my father reasoned, it could go off in the public bath if anyone noticed he was circumcised. So he didn’t bathe.

We rented from Magdalena, a spinster prematurely grey with a perennial song on her lips, who kept our Jewish identity secret.

I didn’t go to school. The choice was between being discovered as unwanted and illegal because a nine-year-old not in school would raise suspicion, or trying to go to school and being asked for our false ID’s, which could only protect us if no one asked for them. I was not allowed friends for fear that one of them might denounce us. I day-dreamed of impossible worlds in which I saved my people and had parents who felt blessed to have me.

However improbable the scenarios, the source of my fantasy was my mother’s cry: “They switched babies!”

In Toulouse when my brother was brought by the stork—two nurses tending babies at the nursing station brought the wrong babies back to two mothers. The alarm and mix-up was settled before Father and I arrived, but in my scenario no one was alarmed, so I imagined that the parents I was switched from smiled at me, comforted me.
be at my duties running after Jack and building castles with him in the sand.

One day Simcha was caught. He was the 20-year-old, whose parents had been hauled off in a cattle car like my Tante Erna. Simcha had family waiting in America. I don’t know who witnessed his capture, but news circulated that Simcha has been picked up by the “guardia civil,” police in tricornes, dressed in green. The National Guard and local police always wore round hats. Thus it was deduced that policemen in tricornes were like the Gestapo. Every time one popped up in front of us, my father lost another year of his life.

Mr. Grotsky quoted one of his Russian countrymen, a well-known chemist called Chaim Weizman, as saying: “The world is divided into two parts: those places where the Jews could not live and those where they could not enter.” We lived in Barcelona for two and a half years, until 1943 when Roosevelt, Churchill, and Mackenzie King met in Quebec, and Canada offered refuge to 350 Jews. The press release read:

“Last November, the Hon. Tomas Crerar, minister of Mines, announced that the Canadian government would give asylum for the duration [of the war] to 350 refugees in Spain and Portugal. A Canadian immigration official, agent Cormier, is to proceed to Lisbon to examine applicants...”

A new panic took over. Who would be the chosen? Which ages, which professions, from which country, what marital status, what material status, what state of health? Did protectzia, connections count? By what criteria would the choices be made? “It’s being chosen by lots,” some said. Some said it was by money; others said “mazaal, lucky stars.” Yet another pointed to the sky. “Up there, that’s where the decisions are made.” But God was left out of the equation by many: “There cannot be a God to allow such horror.” A few others said: “It is our sinning that brought the horror. This is the forerunner of Messiah. The long awaited one is around the corner. It is written that Messiah comes out of the greatest darkness. Hoping for Messiah is how you can survive the impossible.” For sure, it was not a good
idea to rejoice at good news because the next word from Canada could snatch away the plan. Over a period of several months, after many contradictory edicts, the Canadian government issued a refugee profile that included us: a family composed of a father, a mother and children under 18. I was twelve and my brother four.

Father paced more than he slept. Our fortunes could just as easily be dashed with the next requirement — health exams. Father didn’t know if a three-pouch-a-day smoker who coughed up phlegm and had rheumatism was healthy enough for Canada, so he smoked all the more. But before the medical check-up, came the professional one. Father flagellated himself daily for working in leather rather than bookkeeping like Mr. Grotsky, or being a furrier like Mr. Biron — a more relevant trade for frigid Canada. Maybe he should have claimed to be a Hebrew teacher or would that turn off the agents working for Prime Minister Mackenzie King who really didn’t want any Hebrew or Jew at all?

Finally, a non-practicing rabbi/handbag artisan like himself was deemed acceptable. When he had passed the professional hurdle and the health test, Father engaged Mother in a handbag design scheme to make us rich in the new world. He took to designing his creations on paper and my mother set to dreaming of a future life fantastic after Mr. Biron announced his plan to do business with my father.

“When we get to Toronto,” Father would say, “I will be designing the latest in women’s handbags which Biron will sell.” They’d be millionaires before the rest of their brethren could even think how to make a living, all depending on designs created by a man with no sense of style and a total disinterest if not antipathy for women’s fashion.

Then came more in-depth planning with the latest specifics out of Canada: families with children over 18, included Mr. Grotsky, who joined our team as a bookkeeper. The good news for the Grotskys kept mounting because the next demand required that entire families apply as a unit: married children and grandparents together. There was a lot of yammering and jammering in the park over their good fortune, for the Grotskys had made it to Barcelona with Mrs. Grotsky’s mother. That excitement lasted a month before the next edict from Canada crushed the dream like the foot stomps that demolished the castles I built with my brother in the sand. Mrs. Grotsky’s elderly mother failed her health test and the entire Grotsky family was disqualified. Father and Mr. Biron would have to tally up the millions by themselves.

But sure enough one day came a demand from Canada that almost made Mr. Biron laugh. “Original ID’s? Ha, ha, ha,” he mimicked the sound of laughter. “If it weren’t over a matter of life and death I would really laugh. How could we save ourselves carrying real identity papers? They might as well ask us to wear Star of David armbands!”

Finally, somehow, it was settled. We were registered to leave for Canada on the second of three proposed transports. The Birons were on the first. The Canadian Jewish News reported:

As a result of a complicated arrangement worked out between the Allies, the Nazis, the Canadian government, the International Red Cross, the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Redistribution Committee, an agreement was reached that three boatloads of Jewish refugees from Lisbon, numbering 350 people, would be granted ‘laisser passer’ to cross the Atlantic Ocean and enter Canada via the United States …”

It was regrettable, the Birons and my parents agreed, that we would not travel together, until a fated request came from Mr. Trapunsky who appealed to my father. Would we trade places with him? “My wife and I will be eternally grateful if you would switch with us for the safety of our baby. You are a family of four, we just became a family of four ...” And we switched.

In the port of Lisbon, we boarded the Serpa Pinto, dubbed Ship of Hope, bound for America. A harrowing moment occurred on the gangplank when my father in hellish horror cried out: “Jacky, where is Jacky, Jacky …” Hysterical, fighting back against the oncoming human stampede that poured onto the ship, until a voice behind him brought my father to his senses: “He’s in your knapsack, on your back.”

On the Serpa Pinto, when jubilant and grateful crowds celebrated their deliverance to the tune of Lehar and Strauss waltzes, my parents did not partake in the festivities. My father was against frivolities and
the pretty things that Mother liked. He had no ear for music, so the
songs that Mother sang irritated the soul she sought to soothe.

During the heaving and weaving over the 21 days that the Serpa
Pinto vaulted over frenzied waters, I stayed up hours before giving in
to sleep, trying with my full might not to be the extra 70 lbs. that
could sink the ship. Each time the vessel creaked, which was almost
all the time, I feared it was cracking apart. So tempestuous was the
weather that the captain forbade lifeboat drills. And after peering out
of portholes, nearly every hour, for what seemed forever but was
three weeks, at last: LAND! Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, as
I later learn the city was known as, placed planks on the docking area
under watch by armed guards. This was so as not to let our feet touch
U.S. soil. Thus we walked to the sealed train headed for Canada. In
April 1944 The Canadian Jewish News reported:

... Men, women and children ... were taken under armed guard
and placed in a sealed train for Canada .... The ship arrived on the
first night of Passover. This ‘coincidence’ was not planned ....

In Canada, one could plan to get from point A to point B without
plotting and hiding or escaping and running or lying and giving up
one’s identity. Coincidences are not as spectacular for those with firm
ground under their feet as for those who seem to be walking over
water. We landed in the New World under awe-inspiring circum-
stances, and even more awesome was the coincidence of arriving for
the Feast of Freedom.

How different people were in the land of the free. How straight
Canadian women stood. So unlike us, bent over, hoping to pass un-
seen. They were fearless. Efficient. Tables and chairs were immedi-
ately set-up for document transactions. One team dealt with official
papers and another mingled and directed. Men queued in alphabetical
order behind designated desks. It wasn't the panic of animal survival.
It wasn't the annihilating world deciding what to do with us. I could
be Sarah Sabina again. I had to remember that I needed not lie any-
more. But lying is not dropped like a discarded outer coat. Lying to

save one’s physical life is more likely to become lying to save the next
challenge in one's life.

I was 12 that March 27, 1944 and not yet my full 5'4 ½" height. The
man who met us on the boat was a 6’2” giant called David Rome. I
looked way up as he shook my hand but lowered my eyes when I saw
the tears in his. Person to person he went, welcoming each of us. Each
one a miracle saved. I didn't know then how relentlessly he had im-
portuned the Canadian government to save Jews. Knocking his head
against the famed, “none is too many” Jews allowed into Canada. I
was more transfixed to see that a girl my age who came to greet us
with her Canadian mother, did not curtsey like a well-brought-up girl.
Two boys with their Canadian father did not bow. “What primitive
manners,” my mother judged. But when a Canadian delegate blew her
nose and threw the Kleenex in a wastebasket, Mother flipped. “Where
have we landed? What kind of people use paper to wipe their nose?”

After two hours of milling and mingling, elated and exhausted,
Father rushed over to us brandishing our landing papers, our pass to
a life of money to be plucked from trees. Mr. Biron, already processed,
read aloud from his document: “Destination: TORONTO.”

Looking over ours, Father let out a piercing: “No, no, no!” and
rushed back toward the clerk whose hand he has just kissed and
cranked. “No, no, no, no, no,” he cried, shoving his way through
the throng in line: “Please! NOT MONTREAL!”

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We all gathered in a dining hall to celebrate Passover with the first
shiploads of WW2 Jewish refugees to Canada. My father had brought
old rites of his own, as was his wont. “Zol der malaach hamoves zie ein
nemen, may the Angel of Death take her,” he said cursing my mother.
With this bargain, our lives were launched in the New World.

On May 31st 1944, six weeks after our first Serpa Pinto voyage,
the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee newspaper re-
ported the fate of the second voyage, the one on which we were sup-
posed to have travelled except for a last-minute switch:
I made the decision in a toilet. It happened in the Ladies Room of Blue Bonnets racetrack. I was there with Libby to “powder our noses,” in the days when it wasn’t polite to pee. Libby and I were double dating, I with Harry whom I had met a couple of months before and she with his bachelor friend. Libby was 40, Harry’s age. I was 20. She was saying that Harry was a good “catch.” He had been a quarterback on the McGill football team and still kept fit with daily workouts at the gym, proud that even though only 5’7” he was a valuable asset to the game. He had gotten into McGill at 15 when there was a quota for Jews. As an electronic engineer, he had steady employment. It was when Libby, my toilet mate said, “the girl who catches Harry will have to be smart,” that I knew what I wanted.

I wanted to be smart.

Above all, he was accepting “used goods.” He would settle for a non-virgin like me, he intimated, but he did have reservations about someone who had seen a psychologist.

What impressed me about Harry was his brilliance in being able to make sense of a racing form. He scrutinized, calculated, examined and weighed the minutiae of speeds the horses raced, against which competitor, under what jockey, and when. Harry’s commitment to “beating the odds” was all consuming. He had set his sights at 19, when his first horse came in first, and now even when dining Harry couldn’t
break away. “It’s O.K. You can talk to me. I’m listening,” he would call out through the racing paper spread like a wall between us.

I wore the best dress I owned for my marriage to Harry. It was black cotton with a rose petal pattern on it. The proceedings took place in the rabbi’s study. When finally Harry arrived, the rabbi said that he could not go through with the routine without alerting my father, whom he knew. I would be told later my father fainted at the news that his daughter was marrying the man my parents had threatened to expose as a Communist. A man who saw himself as magnanimous for taking on a poor refugee girl with a lingering French accent. A man who during our courtship had kept on hoping someone better than I might come along.

Harry produced an $8 wedding band for my finger, none for his, and we were off to Saratoga Springs on our honeymoon. It was July and we spent the week at the racetrack. Evenings, Harry studied the next day’s line up. I spent my time reading Kahlil Gibran and Philosophy in a New Key by Suzanne Langer. It wasn’t Harry’s fault that I saw myself a sh*tck drék, piece of shit. But my father was wrong, not a “piece” of it, but I was full of it. Full of lies. Not knowing what was me, from what was expected of me, for life to work. So full of it that in Saratoga Springs I was rushed to the hospital for what was thought to be a fallopian tube pregnancy but turned out to be the shit I was holding in. “Make an Indian chief out of me,” the doctor encouraged, “each flatus is a feather in my cap.”

It wasn’t Harry’s fault that I was a lost soul. How could Harry know, if I didn’t, that after Avi, I could only settle? Who else but with Avi would the gods be made jealous? I wept even openly when I heard the “hit of the day” crooned by Nat King Cole: “They tried to tell us / we’re too young / too young to really be in love ….”

A year after our marriage, we moved to Media, Pennsylvania for Harry’s job at Burroughs. I was eight months pregnant and a Sir George Williams University Liberal Arts semester smarter.

We moved into a two-bedroom flat for which Harry bought a bed and sheets, a kitchen table and two chairs. There was no one I knew to wish me well. No mother to call on. When I had phoned to tell her I was pregnant she had said: “I can’t talk now, something’s on the stove …” and hung up on me. Avi had been awestruck at the thought of me carrying his babies. Harry saw it as: “In Russia women give birth in the fields and get right back to work.”

I couldn’t even buy Chiclets without asking Harry for the pennies it cost. I dropped into the new bed I had just made and Harry went to turn out the light in the kitchen. I wondered what took him so long to flip a switch. I could see him standing, his back against the wall, looking intently in front of him. “Harry, what are you looking at?” I called. “There’s a mouse …”

I flipped. If I were to look on the mouse my child might end up looking like one, or if I gazed at anything ugly, so went the old wives’ tales I didn’t want to challenge. After a sleepless night in which nothing Harry said could calm me, I called Dr. Howson, the gynaecologist I hoped would deliver my baby even after hearing my outlandish state of mind. His secretary wouldn’t let me through without first knowing the problem. She asked so I told her: “I’m going to give birth to mice.” “Look at it this way,” she said, trying to pacify me, “if you do give birth to mice it will be the eighth wonder of the world.” Yes, that calmed me. I could make world news.

Beautiful Robin was born. Harry never forgave her for not being a boy.

Two years later, 1957, Danny David, the boy he said he wanted, was born. Harry treated him no differently than he did Robin.

Meanwhile I had made friends and Harry was cajoled into letting me join the Main Line Players. I start out being cast as an extra for the market scenes in Inherit the Wind. “Amen” and “Glory, glory” and “Bow down! Bow down before the Lord,” I projected self-righteously, as a pastor calls down curses on his daughter’s boyfriend for breaking with custom. To Darwin or not to Darwin, was the question also known as the “The Scopes Monkey Trial.” This momentous match had been fought by the intellectual titans of the time. William Jennings Bryan, three-time Democratic Party nominee for President of the U.S.A. had overwhelming popular support for his G-d who created the world in 6 days until agnostic lawyer par excellence, Clarence Darrow, tipped the scale with one question: “And do you think, Mr. Bryan, that the earth was made in six days?”
We were eight families on the new block. When it was my turn to host the coffee klatch, the other housewives and I sat on orange crates. I compared myself to the women around me who talked of what I yearned for: budgets they shared with their husbands, rug-shopping, a kitchen set, children’s beds, chests of drawers. I wanted a vacation like they were planning as soon as they got the mess settled. “Moving is such an unsettling experience,” they all concurred. Except for a slight French accent, and my 24 moves since running for my life out of terror and insanity, I yearned to be like one of them.

I wanted some money of my own. As in, “our services must be respected, not taken for granted,” which was the burgeoning female buzz in 1955, while Harry’s “I earn and I get to decide where it goes,” was the practice.

When I questioned what he did with money that should be going to his kids, Harry said he was “investing,” and proved how close he was to winning, by always losing just “by a nose.”

I thought of what Avi had called an investment, a wedding band on my finger. During one of our arguments, I hollered so insanely that neighbors called police.

And what were my options? What work could I do to support the children? Someone said: “You ought to teach French on TV.”

I began that quest by offering French-speaking services in my children’s school and soon I was hired to teach evening adult classes in Cherry Hill High.

We did not live like other couples, either my age or Harry’s age. Those of my age were buying homes and furniture and baby jungle gyms. Those Harry’s age were marrying off children my age and buying jungle gyms for their grandchildren, after having amassed a wealth of art, music and furniture. We had amassed a basement full of racing forms. I made good my threat. I called the recycling company. I directed the driver to park in the rear closer to the basement but he declined. “It’s O.K. mam,” he assured me in he-man tone. “We’re used to doing this,” before bounding up the basement stairs and calling his truck mate to move the car round back. “We just hit the jackpot!” he called out.

Mary Belle was born in ’59, during a stampede to the tax haven of New Jersey where Harry was hired by RCA, located feather-throwing distance from Garden State Race Track. Harry saw good reason to buy a home nearby.

Marie Belle was six weeks old, Danny David two and Robin four, when we moved to Kingston Estates in a county that later became Cherry Hill.
Danny David was growing tomatoes in our back yard and had spent hours carving two tree branches to decorate the living room after I had finally furnished it. It clashed with the décor I was after to impress the potential stars I needed to entertain for my TV show. I told Danny David to remove his handiwork.

That’s where I was at when came a newspaper enclosure from my friend Rita: *The Montreal Gazette*—June 1970: a poet among poets, Avi Boxer pictured with Irving Layton, Bryan McCarthy, Milton Acorn, Eli Mandel, Margaret Atwood, and Niema Ash. And my heart went kaboom.

He had last written to me on July 2, 1954, when I was living at Rita’s after my escape from Hersh in Cincinnati. Back then I was seeing Dr. Mindess the psychologist, whom I was ashamed to tell of my sin, so I said nothing of Avi’s letter sent from the Abbaye Cistercienne in La Trappe. Que.:

“Perhaps it is not very important that I have, do, and will always love you. Perhaps it is not even important that I will never quite be really happy without you. But what is important is that I see you, before we are forever torn apart by oceans.

This is just a little note, written upon a moment, to let you know that you can contact me, at the Abbaye Cistercienne, if you desire to, within the next two months:

Meanwhile, I wish, inter alia, that you are happy and well—and want you to always remember that you will be with me in spirit until the day I die. Sans peur et sans reproche. Avi.”

In 1970, after all those years, it might have taken me longer to contact him had it not been for Betty Corson. Betty was an editor at Lippincott. A widow in her fifties, she was looking for a man. She would go to Montreal with me if I could pull off a meeting with Avi.

On November 21st I sent off an inane note and every so often my heart would go kerplunk wondering if Avi would give me the time of day.

After two weeks, Dec. 7, 1970, my heart leaped receiving an envelope with my name in his inimitable handwriting, which only a typewriter could duplicate in its precision. In due time I managed to rip it open and control my fingers enough to pull out the letter:

Dear Sarah ...

Your letter arrived this morning, and needless to say it took several readings to get my head reoriented to Montreal 1950 ... but several coffee-cups and cigarettes later, your letter left its luminous thumbprint.

I’m not quite sure I understand the paragraph about Betty, “an editor for the house of Lippincott.” Do I know this Betty? ... Let me just say that generally there are two main categories of homo-saps. Those who play for safety in life, and those who struggle against incredible odds to achieve their ‘neat denouement.’ I, like a blood stained gladiator, have survived. Further, I have returned to my mother-city as a champion. Within the next five years I shall be established as one of North America’s top poets. In short, I’ve won. I have very little competition or opposition. Now, it’s just a matter of sitting at the bench and carving out my poems. I’m that confident of my work and genius ... Avi

Summed up in a poem:

*I have grown tall*
*Strong enough*
*To reach up*
*And strangle a god,*
*For I have made love*
*To the Furies*
*On every battlefield*
*And cemetery of the heart,*
*And now return*
*To my cruel mother city,*
*With a fistful of poems,*
*And a burning stake*
*For her bloodshot sky.*

Avi
Seven months later I received his second letter:

July 8\textsuperscript{th} 1971.

Dear Sarah ... Sorry for the late reply, but I’ve been very, very busy and moving thru the country like an escaped convict on the run. Now that I’m back on Decarie, I’m trying desperately to unwind in spite of ringing phones and the persistent demands of madmen ....

... Did you once say that you had a girlfriend that worked as an editor for Lippincott? Can you find out for me if that house is aware that Canada’s poets are surpassing those writing in the U.S. If they are, I’ll send a Xeroxed copy to them. If they’re not — nothing lost ....

What’s been happening at your end of the line? Are you free to speak ... or are you still a locked-in member of life’s jury? Will you ever arrive at a verdict?

Seriously, I would like to see you again and chat with you somewhere — but I’ll leave that up to you — unless, you would like me to plan some secret rendez-vous for us somewhere in the Laurentians. Love and best wishes, Avi.

I fell for planning “some secret rendez-vous for us.” I didn’t know that, two months before, five months after hearing from me, he had married.

In the mix was my brother’s wedding to his Leslie. Our cousin Paula came from Cincinnati. Long divorced from Hersh, now a psychiatrist, she made yearly trips to visit our family in Europe. Why would I not join her this year? I could also get ideas for my next season’s TV shows.

To Paris first, to Uncle Pinche and Tante Dora, then to Villy and wife Hilda in Belgium then to Izzy and Manfred in Metz, the few of the family who had survived to tell of the Holocaust. It had been 26 years. On my way back home, I planned on flying to Montreal for a few days. Betty would get to Montreal before me by way of Philadelphia. Avi wrote:

I received a lovely letter from Betty, asking if it would be alright for both of you to come up for a weekend in a few weeks.

I’d love to have both you and Betty up for a weekend, but I had secretly hoped that I could see you alone first so that we could chat about serious and silly things before we met as a threesome. So please write soon and let me know whether Saturday, Sept, 18\textsuperscript{th} is when you plan on arriving — and whether you’re coming alone or with Betty, so I can plan accordingly. Love, Avi.

I wouldn’t know, until after Avi and Betty were dead, of the correspondence between them. The letters surfaced when Avi’s sister, Laura, was moving and was dumping Avi’s estate, which she had for safekeeping in six worn, torn and smelly lettuce boxes.

I thought them to be a malodorous intrusion on my space, time and writing, only to find, when I finally acted on my mantra, “gamzoo the tovo” this too is good, and tackled the intrusion as the blessing that it was.

And Betty writes:

Dear Avi. You use words like razors ... they slash deep and quick and cleanly. Your vision bridges Time, welding an ancient heritage to the twentieth century and its folie ... when we meet, we will talk further ... there must be dialogue ... I want to argue/find affinities/rebut and refute/support and confirm/shout and be silent ... feel the force of your will, the intensity of your feelings, the leavening of your humour ... and all of this because I read your manuscript ... Betty.

Avi responded:

Dear Betty,

We must get together soon. People with your sense of vitality and directness are rare — in fact, I demand, must have your loyalty and friendship. Life is too short to waste on trivia, domesticity and the mediocre ... So let’s make a definite time, find some neutral Gaza Strip, where we can meet, and talk, soon!
And do try to stretch out your stay in Montreal as long as possible. Love, Avi

P.S. your comments are the nicest anybody ever said about my manuscript. Incidentally, the first poem I ever published (and which Al Purdy has praised), “1:00 A.M.,” was written to you just before we parted.

1:00 A.M.

I press my young boy’s mouth
Against the windowpane
My fallen heart
Full of ballads
For the windfall
Leaves

I stand like
An O bleak shadow
In Hamlet’s dream
Pass through the curtailless window;
I kiss your black hair
And the light upon your black hair —
A chrysanthemum.

Betty proposed:

... I have a hearth that needs a skilled hand to make it leap into life. (I also need some decent wood!) I herewith invite you to kindle a fire thereon; I’ll be the barmaid, unless you prefer to do the mixing. Or I’ll keep the coffee pot piping full. What is your pleasure and when?

Avi replied:

You’re like a ladder of sunlight materializing in my underground prison ... Today is Friday — Sarah should be arriving at 11:05 tomorrow night. Re: getting together soon — your hearth interests me, and I have the ‘skilled hand to make it leap into life.’ I herewith accept your invitation to ‘kindle a fire thereon’ if you will play ‘barmaid’ and ‘keep the coffee pot piping full.’

To me Avi wrote:

Dear Sarah, Sat. Sept. 18th sounds good. 11:45 pm sounds good. It would sound better if you could remain one or two days beyond the 19th regardless of Betty’s arrival on the 17th.

Re: Betty’s concern about catching me with my “wife” or “something” — if she does, it might launch another poem or two. Yes—I’m married—but single. No — my “wife” won’t be here — no children — cats vacationing — just plants, furniture, 7 rooms, and me.

I was going to rush this letter off to your New Jersey address yesterday — guess I better send it to your address in France. Do you realize — are you aware that I will be 39 years old on Sept 8th? Where are you?

I look forward to your arrival, and Betty’s too ... I’ll play host to your every whim. Sometimes I think it is all a surrealistical dream. If it is, let’s show Dali how it’s really done — i.e., how to hang a limp clock over the branch of a stark, rigid tree.

At departure time, Paula cancelled, but I flew to Europe and however awesome it was to be back in the arms of family, it faded in comparison with the pyrotechnics exploding in me at the thought of seeing Avi again.
Closer and closer my taxi advanced me to where angels fear to tread.

I was sorry that Betty would be there to blunt the first impact. I wished as Avi had “secretly hoped that I could see you alone first,” such talk gets fantasies spinning. “It would be better if you could remain one or two days beyond ... Try to stretch out your stay in Montreal as long as possible.” Now, turning onto Decarie from Sherbrooke, I saw him standing at the curb.

He kissed my cheek and the fragrance of his beard and moustache sent me spinning. I turned to pay the cabbie who had heaved my two suitcases, heavy with gifts for the children and friends, on the sidewalk. We were left, just the two of us, standing, like the first time we met, looking at each other.

You disappeared without a word
Without leaving a trace
Of yourself
In any other woman
Left me at 19
Holding the most priceless bag
Of memories
In the world.
Now, after 21 years
You come back
To redeem those memories
As if they were coupons
That had reached maturity.
It’s truly like you never left …

It didn’t surprise me that Betty would not be there. “She cancelled at the last minute,” Avi said. So I had gone to Europe without Paula, who had proposed the trip and now I was in Montreal without Betty who had plotted for it.

He asked me to remain downstairs while he bounded up three flights of stairs with my suitcases, which he lifted as if they were children’s school bags though even the porter at the airport had grunted extra effort loading them on his trolley. I ignored the feeling in my gut that told me to ask him who was up there preventing me from washing up after a seven-hour trans-Atlantic flight? I had arrived two hours early. I had called from the airport to alert him.

He took me to “Chalet Bar B.Q.,” on Sherbrooke and Girouard, a few blocks from where he lived. Seated, he reached for a cigarette from the cigarette case (lighter included) I had bought for him when we were eighteen. He ordered for both of us, as if we had never left off from the tragic magic we had lived for six months in 1951. There was fairy-tale grandeur in all that Avi did, like when he had scaled a two-story red brick wall to climb through the window of the room I was renting. The enchanted walks we had taken to Beaver Lake for concerts and plays seemed to have happened only yesterday. Animals know their own without analyzing, but it had taken me years of running frenzied to find that all I had ever wanted was right in the palm of my hand.

Instead of saying this I babbled about seeing the Venus de Milo at the Louvre. I rambled on about Uncle Pinche, Tante Dora, croissants with café au lait for breakfast on the sixth floor of their tenement house overlooking the Seine with a view of Henry Miller and Anais Nin’s old neighbourhood of Neuilly. I nervously filled the air with cousins I hadn’t seen since the war until the waitress came to clear away what was left and yes I was finished. We wiped our hands with the wet serviettes. Yes, we would have coffee and it would be his turn.

He focused on the bauble around my neck. Extending his left arm across the table to take hold of, weigh in the palm of his hand and feel between his fingers what looked like a robin’s egg. It was fake jewellery, he said after thorough examination. Yes, I had gone after fake.

I looked pinched in the mirror Avi held up to me, but he slapped with one hand while caressing with the other. “Look how parallel our lives have been.” He too had written children’s television programs in New York. We had both mature-matriculated to get into college. He had done it on a “trial basis” getting a B.A. in joint majors—psychology/sociology. I didn’t tell him I’d got a scholarship. I had attended one year, got married, now getting divorced. He too was getting divorced. It was a marriage of convenience, he said. “A matter of financial details to work out,” he explained.

Coffee came. We both stirred in the same amounts of cream and sugar and he said: “I’m into Frazer’s Golden Bough. It’s about magic and religion, heroes and the ages of gods. What are you into?” I have lined up a devotee of Taillard de Chardin for one of my shows, I said.

No, I didn’t know about de Chardin, “but I am fascinated by the subject,” I said and Avi wondered how good can my TV show be with a host who doesn’t know of the mystic de Chardin? Twenty years of my false pursuits were falling on my head. Indeed, how could a show, or anything of mine, be good? And the stories of my exaggerated French-accented self, with which I’d planned to regale him for a thousand and one nights, those I hid from him.

“It’s your looks that made it easy for you, but they also got in your way,” he assessed. “In time, you’ll understand. Come, let’s go home.” He shifted out of his seat as if we’d been practicing this routine for 21 years.

***

What else could his abode be but our old paradise on St. Urbain street except more so? Three bedrooms, a living room, dining room and
kitchen, filled with more books, music, oriental vases and art. He had set my suitcases in the guest room, which was next to the master bedroom.

He was in the dining room when I came out of the shower.

“Do you know the Tarot?” he asked, holding a pack of cards.

I hadn’t even heard the word. Divination cards, he said. Going beyond the five senses. Reaching closer to our essence. “We were supposed to have learned this together,” he berated as I looked upon him admiringly. It wasn’t only because Avi handled the cards that gave them their power, the images symbol-laden with archetypal themes reaching deep layers of the psyche. “The soul sees in symbols,” he explained. I pulled the “hierophant” to represent me. She stands for “interpreter of secret mysteries.” I didn’t know that those mysteries meant surviving hell. Impressively, Avi had chosen the Magician.

The magic of Avi’s reading enflamed my devastating feeling that Avi had reason to mock what I had done with my life. Still trapped in the first chakra. Undifferentiated from Mother. Living according to what the neighbours think. Not a woman burning to fulfill a vision. Still not awed by the spiritual meaning of a “promise”. Still not conscious of the commitment that would demonstrate my path. Still not awed that Avi was my husband. I was a wanton wife, all this lay in my subconscious, which only Avi could dig up.

He still stammered but it was more controlled. He had actually prayed to God before deciding to depend on himself to get things done. It had happened on Yom Kippur, 1954, three years after I left him. A stranger in the synagogue offered him $1,000 toward his treatment in a speech therapy school in Indianapolis, for which his uncle Maurice had chipped in.

“Dear Maurice:

... Now, that the age gap of years, inter alia, that stood between us has been bridged by my life in the past three years. I venture to again hope that, when I return, I can do more than acknowledge that two hundred dollars (I thankfully received from you).

Maurice, can you understand when I say to you—my very life depends upon my present and last attempt to attain the oral dignity that I feel, as a poet, is more rightfully mine than anyone’s?? If I survive this emotionally cancerous impediment it will not only release me from the intense, personal humiliation and mental anguish it has inflicted upon me, by being responsible for nearly all my failings in my tragic quest for economic security and independence, inter alia, but will also affect the course my writings may take in the next five to ten years ...

Above all, I must not fail, for the very essence of my protoplasm, the very balance of my metabolism, the very marrow of my bones, survives on the sole proposition that defeat is foreign to my being ...

... Until the fourth grade I was a happy, proud, confident, rank-one pupil who prided himself, and rightly so, on being the most imaginative and distinguished reader amongst the younger set. I remember my father proudly prompting me to give an exhibition of my accuracy and speed of reading before you, in your book-laden room. I remember that night so vividly. I remember the way my father's face beamed and how you smiled and shook your proud head approvingly. O God, I don't think the memory of that night will ever leave me.

And then, tragedy struck. The fat, pompous child, with his marked Jewish accent, leather-kneed breeches, and suspenders lost his recently-learned speech. Withdrawing to his inner worlds, where he, and he alone, reigned at King Arthur's table (rescuing beautiful ladies and princes, while slaying the most wicked of monsters) ...

... But this cloister life is something I've more than needed for three years now. For although my life, love, and break with Vena (the first, last, and lost, intense love affair), three autumns ago, matured me emotionally, it made me acutely aware of the responsibilities I must accept if I was to go on living with myself.”

“Vena” he had christened me all for himself.

The school had helped with breathing techniques, how to form and project vowels and consonants, but God still had the upper hand. He hit rock bottom when members of his family turned against him.
“When my poor father died, things began to go very badly for me, and then my uncle and sister turned on me with such bitterness, jealousy and hatred, it was unbelievable! Such unbelievable sickness and evil!”

The brother and sister fallout had happened when 18-year-old Laura was living with her 28-year-old brother, Avi. A power struggle ensued, but in the end it was Avi’s apartment. Nevertheless, she would show him. When their father died, the opportunity was sent by heaven. Laura with Maurice’s help contested Avi’s share to the family country home in La Macaza. Avi had helped his father dig the well for that home and had a hand in its construction but, having defaulted on a few payments, he was defenseless.

When my sister
And uncle Horace conspired
To circle me above their heads
Like a white rooster
To project their sins
Then slander me
I understood
The hallowed family dwarf and forgave
Their terrible need
For absolution.

But when, coveting my plumage
Grew treacherous and foul
As an aging homosexual
I cocked one eye with disbelief
~ then pecking the hatpin
from this yellowing hand,
crowed in the Rabbi
and exposed the pigs.

But none deserved more of Avi’s righteous wrath than I:

… it’s truly like you never left
except when I think of the pig

who had you all those years
who you made love to
bore 3 children for
with the body I consecrated
rejoiced in, loved
20 years ago.

“Where were you when I needed you?” he kept stabbing. “I should have had my 10th book out by now, instead of the first. I wanted to fill our home with a dozen kids but I wasn’t good enough for you to become the mother of mine.”

This was the kind of love one prays to merit.

“Welcome home,” he said watching me in his kitchen preparing coffee perked with a pinch of cinnamon on the grinds. With huge steaming mugs we returned to the living room. He, in the large maroon covered armchair, always the lit cigarette between his fingers or on his lips, To his left at arm’s length was a barrel whose flat lid was perfect for an ever-full ashtray, pack of Pall Mall, matches and a maroon-coloured phone. I sat on the obviously more feminine deep blue velvet armchair. A philodendron plant between us on a narrow desk five feet long. Light was already seeping through the window and the birds were chirping their good morning song when he decided to listen to the record I had brought for him from France: Camille Saint-Saëns’ Egyptian Piano Concerto. Even the record player had been transported from St. Urbain to Decarie. I watched him, blue jean shirt and matching jeans, using the same gestures I dearly remembered, the same careful handling of the disk held at the outer edges with the palm of his hand so as to leave no finger prints, the same staccato shaking to make sure all debris was knocked loose, as we prepared to judge Jeanne-Marie Dare’s piano performance.

She was sublime and not just because I was in an altered state of consciousness.

Cats sense earthquakes before humans know that life is about to run riot. Ossie, Avi’s black cat, came to curl up against my belly. He was a powerful tomcat nearing old age and took on the role of protector. He showed me the way to the bathroom. He would wait at the
Sarah & Abraham

Sarah Engelhard

know of second-hand smoke then or even first-hand. In Chinese restaurants Avi chided me for being clumsy with chopsticks, and then there was Schwartz’s Deli where photos of celebrities line the wall and during lunch and dinner people line up in the street. We used to get scraps there for 10 cents, back when 10 cents was a fortune for us.

When not going out we “whisked” Knorr soup. “Whisked” read the instructions and we thought that was the funniest. With Harry, nothing had been a laughing matter. Thanks to my brother I still knew how to laugh. With Avi I split my sides.

But in my veins ran Pavlovian training. My parents had worked up the neighbourhood to scandal, enlisted a high school principal and taken me to court. Where did I stand now?

“Locked in life’s jury, still, eh? What will the neighbours say, eh?” He attacked and mocked. “Marriage is for the proletariat,” he would say. “Your marriage to Harry was never legal in the spiritual world. What is agreed to on paper can be dissolved on paper. You can’t dissolve what’s branded in blood.” Thus he convinced me to our bridal chamber and seduced me with the most heavenly words a woman can hope to hear: “You may be full of shit but you are mine. All mine.”

I was inconsolable over my weakness at 18. I blamed it on my parents for draining me of life. I was to write a condemning letter to my father, pounding away at him for the times that he had dumped on me. I wanted to punch until I was spent and then some, for never having heard a blessing but only curses. And though I didn’t say it, I wanted to tell him how it sapped me of life to hear him call on heaven to strike my mother dead.

I aimed to lock horns with him but my mother intercepted the note. “You don’t write a letter like that to your father,” she phoned to say. I was far then from understanding what came to be called post-traumatic stress. “The war,” she would point out, “the war made us crazy.” Too many years later psychology would catch up to her knowledge. She was protecting her man, but then I resented my mother for, as usual, controlling the situation.

If the “home” he had prepared for me on Decarie wasn’t the castle he would have preferred, Avi had a country place for me: four acres of land on Lac Theodore.
“Our love goes beyond good and evil. Beyond this little world of ours.”

To Betty Avi wrote:


Tishrei 4th 5732 or Thurs. 23rd Sept. 1971 C.E. The Day Sarah Went.

Dear Betty,

She’s beside herself, now … and needs you more than ever. Please touch her, teach her to celebrate her pain and sorrow, how to walk unafraid out of her cold loveless hell into the resurrecting flame … naked, proud, free.

We travelled together for six sleepless days and nights. She left her home for Cherry Hill, to rest on the seventh. I’ve given the bewildered angel all I can … perhaps too much. How she interprets and uses what she learned here after her twenty-one-year pilgrimage to me, I cannot control.

And it came to pass.

Tell my pretty one — that, on Sept. 19th, Yom Kippur, the day of at-one-ment, I promise to return and stand beside our people, anonymously wrapped in my father’s holy shawl — and pray, pray for us all.

It is written.

Talk to her Betty, talk to her,
Love, Avi

Three weeks later, October 10th, Avi wrote to me:

… Thank you for spending 6 days with me here in Montreal. It was nice to have you back in your home after 21 years. And perhaps, you’ve even learned something.

Yes, I will continue to love you — but, this time, in my way!

You know, dearest, you are more beautiful, more desirable than ever. You are a very talented, charming lady — and don’t for one moment think that you are unworthy of beauty or love.

We talked of Vena, and how we had moved on and Avi wrote:

It is so difficult for me to address you now as “Vena.” I love the name “Sarah” too — biblically, it goes well with mine. Also, it’s the name your parents gave you and it’s richer and rings more true than “Vena” — a name that came to a young romantic lad for his most beautiful lady.

On the third day, or was it the fourth, or the fifth day of my stay, if I had known to separate day from night, a woman dropped by to see him. Her name was Sheila. She was working for him, he said, doing research on the poet Blake. She had come to get something she had left behind, last time she had been there. There was no hint from him or from her that she was his wife though any blind man could sense that there was more than “research on Blake” going on.

On the sixth day, the “New Woman” returned to her children in Cherry Hill with Avi’s parting words reverberating in my veins:

“The story of my life
Is neat and simple
The story of my death
Is another story.

I splurged my love
On poor trolls and cripples
Who squandered it
On men less fortunate.

As for my house
I built it for a lady
Who is no
Longer with me.

So why should I
Deprive you of the lie
You want to love me for.

We talked of Vena, and how we had moved on and Avi wrote:

The story of my life
Is neat and simple
The story of my death
Is another story.

We talked of Vena, and how we had moved on and Avi wrote:

It is so difficult for me to address you now as “Vena.” I love the name “Sarah” too — biblically, it goes well with mine. Also, it’s the name your parents gave you and it’s richer and rings more true than “Vena” — a name that came to a young romantic lad for his most beautiful lady.

On the third day, or was it the fourth, or the fifth day of my stay, if I had known to separate day from night, a woman dropped by to see him. Her name was Sheila. She was working for him, he said, doing research on the poet Blake. She had come to get something she had left behind, last time she had been there. There was no hint from him or from her that she was his wife though any blind man could sense that there was more than “research on Blake” going on.

On the sixth day, the “New Woman” returned to her children in Cherry Hill with Avi’s parting words reverberating in my veins:
When you are most alone, talk to me—I am by your side—I can hear you! Love, Avi

A month later, November 12th, he wrote:

... I know I’m an arrogant, pompous, miserable son-of-a-bitch and I didn’t give you a fair chance to come through at your best—but I know you’re good—and for mixed perverse motives of my own wanted to see you at your worst as well. That’s the poet and madman in me. I meant no harm—there was so little time and I had to get to know you and your patterns of behaviour fast. Considering you were up against an old scarred gladiator ... you came through beautifully. I know where your blind spots lie, your feelings of guilt, inadequacy, weakness and strength. You’re quite a woman!

If there’s anything, anything I can do in any way, please let me know. I think we’ve been punished and what’s worse, punished each other, long enough!

I’m enclosing an interview with Louis Dudek published last weekend in the Montreal Star. He’s sure gone out on a limb in praising my book.

If Ted Hughes is England’s greatest poet, the nation is in trouble. I’ve gone through his work, and I’m pleased to conclude that I’m much, much better. I am enclosing for you my tour de force, ‘Yankel the Rex Pedlar.’ Then, I’m throwing a few things in my duffle bag and taking off. Something tells me, I’ve succeeded as an artist but failed as a man. Love, Avi

We were having dinner, the children and I, when there was a knock at the door and there he was, duffle bag on back.

I wouldn’t have done much different had I known he was coming except go sleepless over it. He enchanted the children he held against me.

Avi was in Cherry Hill but he did not belong to Cherry Hill. There were no cafés to explore and people to meet with real lives. Shopping malls are not where life happens. The big excitement was Ponzio’s diner where route 70 meets 38. You needed a car to get there even if you lived next door to it. The road was highway with no sidewalks.

The booths inside lined up so straight and un-artistic it zapped any creative thought. So I drove and drove and ended up in Mt. Holly. Mt. Holly is holy because in Mt. Holly I became engaged. For real this time. From off the ground on our way to a diner for our umpteenth cup of coffee, Avi picked up the compressor of a Coca Cola can and slipping it over my ring finger said, “Marry me, my dear.” How many people can make you feel that a tin ring is the Hope Diamond?

And Avi wrote:

Now life makes sense again.
You came into me like an icebreaker,
Your hands slide like dogsleds
Over my frozen body
And I thaw, quake into icef loes,
Leap from one to the other
Trying to stay together.

I wrote:

I feel like a candle
Full of contained tears,
But this time entrusted to someone
Who knows just when and how to light it
And how long to let it weep.

Ted Hughes need not worry.
And then:

I am Avi Boxer, son of Joel,
I am full of romantic clichés
Like I was carved from lightening
And stuffed with aching stars.
Look at my face.
I am Caesar, Rasputin, Heine,
Touch me, and you will never be the same ... 
Avi
Old Country family. Prochick. I got to meet a member in that portrait, uncle Moishe, on the far right. My father is the boy on the far left.

Toulouse:
Mother, me and baby Jack.

Jardin des Plantes, Toulouse:
Mother, Father and I. 1937

Old Country family. Prochick. I got to meet a member in that portrait, uncle Moishe, on the far right. My father is the boy on the far left.
Newspaper articles about some of the harrying voyages of the Serpa Pinto.
Cousins Villy, Izy and young Manfred, before their mother, Tante Erna was taken to be seen no more.

The “Serpa Pinto”. The ship we came on. She made more crossings of the Atlantic Ocean than any other ship, for which she was dubbed the “friendship vessel” or “Destiny Ship.”

April 1944: Passover meal for refugees landed in Canada. Father, first to the left, I, my hand extended to sugar, Mother and Jack.

April 1944: On board the Serpa Pinto, looking out onto a new world, America, Philadelphia, armed guards to ensure we don’t step on its brotherly ground. I am looking out from behind Mr. and Mrs. Glickson, Father holding Jack and Mother are behind him.
Citizen document that I allowed to get so besmirched.

4615 Park Avenue, half a block from Mt. Royal Ave. where the Joselefskys welcomed us, refugees in April 1944.

Clark and Fairmount, the balcony from whence father doused a group of boys who had come calling for me.

Baron Byng High school, St. Urbain.

Bancroft school, St. Urbain St. first school I went to from May to June 1944.
Avi, Montreal, 1951.

Avi and I, 1951, showing off engagement ring.