



COMING FROM BEHIND

HOWARD JACOBSON

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About the Book

Sefton Goldberg: mid-thirties, English teacher at Wrottesley Poly in the West Midlands; small, sweaty, lustful, defiantly unappreciative of beer, nature and organised games; gnawingly aware of being an urban Jew islanded in a sea of country-loving Anglo-Saxons. Obsessed by failure – morbidly, in his own case, gloatingly, in that of his contemporaries – so much so that he plans to write a bestseller on the subject.

In the meantime he is uncomfortably aware of advancing years and atrophying achievement, and no amount of lofty rationalisation can disguise the triumph of friends and colleagues, not only from Cambridge days but even within the despised walls of the Poly itself, or sweeten the bitter pill of another's success ...

About the Author

Howard Jacobson is the author of eleven novels and four works of non-fiction. He won the Everyman Wodehouse Award for comic writing in 1999 for *The Mighty Walzer*. His latest novel, *The Finkler Question*, won the 2010 Man Booker Prize.

ALSO BY HOWARD JACOBSON

Fiction

Peeping Tom

Redback

The Very Model of a Man

No More Mister Nice Guy

The Mighty Walzer

Who's Sorry Now?

The Making of Henry

Kalooki Nights

The Act of Love

The Finkler Question

Non-Fiction

Shakespeare's Magnanimity (with Wilbur Sanders)

In the Land of Oz

Roots Schmoots

Seriously Funny: An Argument for Comedy

for
ANITA & MAX
and for
ROSALIN

Coming From Behind

Howard Jacobson

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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'THAT'S EET, THAT'S eet! Yo'm found eet, yo' bugger! Yis, that's eet!'

Lynne Shorthall, mature and by all accounts responsive student from Cradley Heath, on her way to collect the degree her husband never wanted her to study for, calls in at the Polytechnic in order to show off her ceremonial finery and say a last goodbye and thank you to her lecturers and tutors, and stays a little longer than expected in Sefton Goldberg's room.

Sefton Goldberg, on all fours above her, his knees and elbows glued with the perspiration of effort and anxiety to the polytechnic linoleum, as naked as Noah but for the academic gown and hood which Mrs Shorthall insists he wears, it being degree day, hopes to God he has remembered to lock his door. While Lynne Shorthall wrinkles up her nose and bites the air and gargles Black Country familiarities, Sefton Goldberg can think of nothing but the position of the little metal nipple on his Yale lock. Is it up or is it down? He thinks he can recall depressing it, but what if some fault in the mechanism, a loose fitting or some over-zealous spring is at this very moment urging and encouraging it up again? Is he imagining things or can he actually hear his door unlocking itself? What he would like is to get up and check, but such alarmism is inconsistent with his idea of manliness; and he is not well placed even to take the rudimentary precaution of stealing a glance. Now that his gown has ridden up his back and hangs over his face, he is as blind as a school photographer, and it is his other end, anyway - hence the degree of his anxiety and vulnerability -

which confronts the door. Simultaneously recalling what he has read of the Japanese girl who has the gift of sight in her nose and the joke about the patient who swallows a glass eye, Sefton wonders if by sheer effort of will he can make himself see through that part of himself which he has never seen – achieve, quite literally, tunnel vision. He does not, on this occasion at least, make medical history, but the amount of muscular flexing and stiffening required merely to *imagine* an anal squint makes Lynne Shorthall noisily, nasally happy, and causes her to prolong her last goodbye and thank you. Sefton's own happiness is kept within reasonable bounds by a sharp stabbing pain in his bowels, and the sudden recollection that he has experienced an identical discomfort in identical circumstances once before.

He was younger then, and in another country. And wet-eyed, smudgy-featured, orthopaedic-looking Helen Burns only resembled Lynne Shorthall in that she too was not someone Sefton Goldberg would willingly – supposing him to have had a choice in the matter – have invited on to the floor of his office.

How they got there, these women he did not really care for but who could by no means be said to have coerced him, was a mystery which Sefton, being of a fatalistic faith, did not trouble himself to solve. It was a bit odd, that was all. And Helen Burns's presence was if anything, considering the competition she faced, even odder than Lynne Shorthall's. At the Polytechnic, Wrotesley, you took pretty well whatever was thrown at you; whereas when Sefton was a young man teaching first at the Coryapundy Swamp Institute of Technology and then at the University of Woolloomoolloo, New South Wales, he could afford to be as pernickety as a sultan. With the exception of Helen Burns, who wore orphanage shoes and indeed looked as if she were on day-release from one of Dr Barnardo's poorer homes, the girls he taught were all tall and tanned and sociably athletic and had sand between their toes. They

came to Sefton's lectures twirling parasols, their books and folders wrapped in floral towels, and were somehow able to give the impression that their studies were merely an amiable interruption of that perpetual holiday referred to in other parts of the world as life. Sefton loved them for the width of their shoulders and for the way their sentences invariably ended in an interrogative curl as if everything (including Sefton) was so wonderful and amazing to them that they could only ask questions about it. And because he was Jewish and short and knew all the answers they loved him in return. And yet it was on Helen Burns - blurred, white-skinned, academically ambitious orphan Annie - that Sefton forgot to lock his door.

Reluctantly recalling it all now, Sefton is thankful the Polytechnic, Wrotesley, does not run to a campus postman. If you ever get any mail at Wrotesley it waits for you, a month late, at the bottom of a tin drawer which you share with a hundred others. Well, so much the better right now, thinks Sefton, as he listens for sounds outside his door and hears, over the roar of years, the cheerful tread and the incessant whistling of Frank, spitting image of Ken Rosewall and the University of Woolloomoolloo's most popular, most reliable, most relaxed, and most ironical campus postman. Unflappable Frank! So untouched was he by what he saw of human hopes and passions as he did his rounds in his grey shorts and his matching short-sleeved grey shirt, whistling his way through the Italian operas as if they were all comedies, that he might have been of a different species altogether. But even Frank paused fractionally, on that hot afternoon, after he had pushed open Sefton Goldberg's unresisting door and found himself staring into the raised, white, unambiguously busy hindquarters of the visiting Pom. At that moment of supreme shame and exposure Sefton became cruelly alert to every accompanying sight and sound: he heard the blood rush from his body, listened to the icy echoing plummet of his temperature, and he

detected a quite un-Puccini – and un-Frank-like intake of breath in the final whistled bars of *e lucevan le stelle*. For a millionth of a second the stars had stopped their shining and unflappable Frank had flapped. But not for any longer than that. He was a postman. He had a job to do. He hadn't called on Sefton to check on his teaching methods – if he'd found the Pom in the attitude of a rat up a drainpipe, that was the Pom's affair – he had come with a letter. And so he did what he was paid to do and posted it, where it wouldn't go astray and where it somehow seemed to belong, between the now motionless, frozen cheeks of Sefton Goldberg's buttocks.

I only hope that isn't from my mother, was Sefton's first coherent thought. But it was only after Helen Burns had silently slipped from under him and slid back into her institutional shoes and stockings and crept from his room, that he could summon the courage to reach behind him and find out. It was all right. It wasn't from his mother. It was only a bill from Heffers for the latest book they had sent him – F.R. Leavis's *Nor Shall My Sword*.

Defenceless on the floor with Mrs Shorthall, the front of him still blacked out by the drape of his gown, the rear of him still raised as if in supplication to the genius of Linus Yale, Sefton Goldberg takes the measure, for the first time, of the exquisite Australian for bearance implicit in Frank's literal performance of his duty. Sefton is not taxed to imagine the consequences if there were campus postman at the Polytechnic, Wrothessley. 'I didn't want to disturb you like, when I could see you was busy, and I didn't, you know, want to leave it with the Head of Department in case there were any questions asked, so I kept the letter for you. I haven't held it up to the light or anything. Do you mind if I keep the stamps?' Followed by the damp expression of some dismal Midland vexation, followed by the circulation of malicious but dispirited rumour. Followed by anonymous notes and phone calls to every member of Sefton Goldberg's family.

Followed by pictures of Sefton Goldberg on the paedophile page of the *News of the World*. Followed by Sefton Goldberg hanging himself from the Yale lock in his office; bound for that exclusively English circle of Hell where once respected public figures lash themselves for petty crimes.

Sefton finds himself missing everything he has ever known that isn't English. Specifically, in this context, he cherishes the memory of the mirth with which big Bob Rourke, senator and wine grower from South Australia, confessed on national television to his enthusiasm for opening his flies every time one of his secretaries entered his room. Resign? For what? For not being a poofter?

Not being a poofter himself, but being Jewish, which is worse, Sefton Goldberg considers that he is already guilty enough without the added *tsorris* of being found on the floor of a polytechnic, in Wrottesley, in the Midlands, in England, with a woman who, quite frankly, would not make him the envy of all his friends. And therefore, although he is tenderly and teacherly, although he is even momentarily transported, he is massively relieved when Lynne Shorthall finally departs to collect the degree her husband never wanted her to study for because he was frightened about who she might meet while she was studying for it.

Not that Norman Shorthall could ever have imagined, even in his blackest moments of fear and fantasy, what goatish Jew, initiate of secret rites and rituals, would at the eleventh hour do the deed of darkness with his wife. The thought that he has been demoniacally lecherous and done a disservice, into the bargain, to a gentile from the Midlands, is Sefton's only consolation on this unexceptionally wretched Wrottesley afternoon.

And enables him to return, with a brief spurt of energy, to the application forms which spill out of his In tray and into his Out tray and over the sides of his desk. He has spent the morning filling them in and posting them off, but there were more waiting for him, after lunch, at the bottom of the

communal tin drawer. His colleagues were astounded by the number of positions he found, in these austere times, to apply for.

‘I’m desperate,’ he told them. ‘And I’m flexible.’

Accordingly he didn’t confine his attentions to advertisements which stipulated a specialism in the Long Novel – that area which he had made all his own and which guaranteed him a near-perfect freedom from the bother of student interest and enquiry. He applied as well for Curatorships and Wardenships, for Extra-Mural Tutor Tutorships and Intra-Mural Research-Assistant Superintendentships. He tried for Deanships and Rectorships and, when there were any going, Vice-Chancellorships. He put himself forward as Keeper of rare collections of books and as Caretaker of significant buildings with literary associations. He let it be known that he was prepared to consider being a Community Poet, although he had never written a poem, and a Playwright in Residence, although he couldn’t abide plays. He offered himself in an administrative capacity and an entrepreneurial, in an advisory and a managerial, and even, in reply to a vacancy in *The Lady*, in a companionable. He recognised no limit to his choice except a geographical one; he would do anything (academic, of course; or at least academicish) provided it wasn’t in Sheffield or Leeds or Leicester or Newcastle or – obviously! – Wrotesley; anything provided it *was* in Cirencester or Windsor or Cheltenham or Winchester. London, or more specifically Hampstead, was no doubt where he belonged, but it would have to wait until Sefton could enter it in triumph. In the meantime what mattered was to get away from the perplexed nasal querulousness of working-class Wrotesley. The defeated and the defeating poor. Other people’s poverty depressed him far more than his own. What he wanted now, simply as a background to himself, was other people’s wealth. O, for a beaker full of the warm south! The inane ululations of the indiscreetly

well-to-do? – music, sweet music to Sefton Goldberg’s ears, after the mutterings of the Midlands! Their unshakeable complacency and prejudice? – bliss, bliss, like the warm sun on his back, after the wrung-out despondency of Wrotesley!

Of course, he was perfectly aware, with a name like Sefton Goldberg, the sun might not turn out to be the only hot thing he would feel on his back in these demiparadises. He had picked up from an Oxfam shop a *Jewish Year Book* which gave the Jewish population of every town in Britain which had a Jewish population, and by Jewish population they sometimes meant no more than seven families, and a synagogue in a tent – but Winchester did not even make the list. So it wasn’t going to be home-from-home exactly, and the residents were not likely to be hanging the Israeli flag or their daughters from their bedroom windows to welcome Sefton. But the warfare would be fairly open. You knew where you were with the middle classes; they never pretended to be anything but rude. Very well. Sefton didn’t mind that. It was infinitely preferable to the urban guerilla tactics of the Midlands: complain and run. He liked a clean fight. And you could always get them to admire cleverness in the end. One way or another he would squeeze a bit of regard out of Winchester. Whereas five years in the unpretentious working town of Wrotesley had him huddled into his overcoat, shrunk into himself, his head grown beneath his shoulders like one of those Othello beguiled the innocent Desdemona with traveller’s stories of, in deference to the raw susceptibilities of the natives. Who, after all, in local parlance, did he think he was?

He should by now have known. His name, his address, his marital status had gone down as requested many times today. He paused on the seventh line of an application for the position of Head of Pastoral Care at a Church of England College of Agriculture in Bath and wrote against RELIGION – having toyed with ‘tentatively agnostic’ and ‘aggressively Jewish’ – ‘none’. He told again the story of his life, lying a

little about his qualifications and a lot about his interest in students and their welfare. From a sheet of what was once a hundred identical photographs of himself trying to look earnest and genteel he cut out an example, deciding this time against shading in the bridge and bottom of his nose with black biro. He pasted the back of the photograph and punched it into place on the form. He had reached that stage of an afternoon's applying where he didn't care if he got the job or not; so there was a touch of recklessness in some of his answers, a suggestion of unconcern in the illegible flourish of his signature. And behind the recklessness and the unconcern there was a faint, mad hope that those might be the very qualities that were being sought.

He had been trying to get out of the Polytechnic, Wrotesley, from the day he had got in it. Even as he had shaken hands with his new colleagues and collected his allowance of paper clips and drawing pins from the stationery office his pockets had been stuffed with prospectuses from other institutions. But just recently his efforts to escape had become more urgent and determined. There were two minor reasons and one major reason for this. The two minor reasons were the coming on of old age, signalled by his thirty-fifth birthday, and the coming through of his divorce at a time when he was enjoying none of the things he had originally wanted a divorce for. The one major reason was the coming out of Godfrey Jelley's second book – just when Sefton Goldberg had reconciled himself bravely to the coming out of his first.

Godfrey Jelley had been Sefton Goldberg's best friend and closest rival at school. The rivalry had been mainly literary – each attempting to have heard of more books than the other or to have run up bigger fines at more local libraries – but they also kept a watchful eye on one another's style of dress, debating technique, and success with girls. They were the only two Jewish boys in the school who were planning to

go to university to study something other than dentistry or law. As befitted his strenuous intelligence Sefton Goldberg went off to fret and worry over literature at Cambridge, while his friend and rival went to Oxford to read a bit of philosophy, a bit of politics, and a bit of economics, as befitted his instability and flashy brilliance.

It didn't take Sefton Goldberg long to perceive that Godfrey Jelley was enjoying Oxford a lot more than he was enjoying Cambridge, was getting a lot more out of his irresponsibility and frivolity than Sefton was getting out of his seriousness. When they met during vacations back in Manchester Godfrey was blooming, full of gaiety and assurance and laughter. Whereas Sefton was prim and tight, practising those disapprovals which as far as he could see were indispensable to a formed critical intelligence.

'I had afternoon tea with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor,' Godfrey Jelley announced. 'They often come back up for the theatre.'

'Did you really,' Sefton replied, trying to control the bottom part of his face. 'That must have been a bore.'

'It wasn't. They were very sweet.'

'Sweet? Is that an Oxford word?'

Oxford sounded an altogether brighter place than Cambridge, and when Godfrey referred familiarly to the High and the Broad, as if they were his, Sefton was unable to find any Cambridge equivalent to which he could refer familiarly in return, and he was forced to switch the conversation around to Dickens and D.H. Lawrence instead. In town at night, chatting up the girls they both frankly missed at their respective universities, Godfrey succeeded effortlessly in making his Oxford experience a part of his charm, whereas the more Sefton enlarged upon his interest in Fanny Price and Little Dorrit and the young Ursula Brangwen the less likelihood there seemed of the evening resolving itself in the way it was supposed to.

‘They’re just scrubbers,’ Sefton would whisper to Godfrey, the minute the girls tripped off to the toilets.

‘Isn’t that the point?’ Godfrey would reply.

Later on, fortunately, Fanny Price didn’t stand in his way. When Sefton Goldberg took his degree there was still only one *Educational Supplement* and a Jewish boy from Cambridge could still count himself somebody. Temporary lecturing jobs in the giant holiday campuses of Australia came easily and he found himself enjoying offering his disapprovals (and even developing some new ones) to a couple of thousand smiling surfies and Olympic swimmers at a time. He worked up a line in lecture patter that had more to do with the night club than the academy. He grew his hair, wore a leather tie, smoked cheroots, and from time to time tore up famous books in public. Despite taking advantage of his female students (or being taken advantage of, by them – he never really worked it out) on a scale that no one who wasn’t Jewish or Welsh could ever possibly understand the need for, he still rooted critically for Little Dorrit and the burgeoning Ursula; but his audiences supposed he was being ironic and his reputation for cruel dry wit soared. He even began to wonder himself if he hadn’t been practising irony all along. So it didn’t matter in the least that stories and examples of Godfrey Jelley’s journalistic successes back home in England floated across the waters to him every now and then. Godfrey was now making his living having afternoon tea with sweet and famous people and writing about it afterwards for the Sunday papers. ‘Poor Godfrey,’ Sefton was even sometimes able to find it in him to lament, ‘having to spend his afternoons with that lot. He deserves to get on, God knows.’ They had carved things up neatly between them; Godfrey belonged unequivocally to middlebrow showbiz and he belonged – yes, Sefton belonged to serious scholarship enlivened by cruel dry wit and not too encumbered with

knowledge. Strictly speaking, they were not in competition at all.

But when Sefton decided that he had outgrown the naive and too readily responsive cultures of the new world and returned, unremarked, to the old; when he discovered that England wasn't inclined to take him up and that Australia was not able, because of some foolish new policy of favouring nationals to take him back; when he found himself having to turn his thoughts from the idea of a personal Chair somewhere elegant to that of a junior job in a polytechnic somewhere vile – if he was lucky; and when he finally understood that no journalist anywhere had any intention of enjoying afternoon tea with *him*: then Godfrey Jelley's fame became a problem for him. After a couple of years in Wrottesley it became an obsession.

It wasn't though that he was jealous.

He had had a long naked stare at that possibility, and he wasn't.

However he hadn't read what he had read (which was a damn sight more than Godfrey Jelley had read!) without learning that these things can creep up on you if you are not careful; so he decided it was probably best all round if he kept well away from any magazine or newspaper in which the latest of Godfrey's afternoons with the famous was likely to appear. They unsettled him, and he didn't derive any pleasure either from observing how servile his old friend's prose had become. He really didn't.

But then came the book. It was no more, in fact, than an anthology of pieces already published describing afternoons long since spent. But Sefton Goldberg was incapable of taking the idea of a book lightly. For him a book had magical properties. In a book the word was made holy. Why else did he disapprove of so many so vehemently or make such a ritual out of tearing them up in lectures? In a world where reputation was evanescent and human passions were

transient, only the book was stable and permanent. Even to be remaindered was to be remembered.

In the main Wrotesley was a pretty good place to live if you wanted to keep away from books. Most of the shops in the new precincts – and there wasn't much of Wrotesley that wasn't new precinct – sold baggy jeans and built-up shoes. It was hard enough to find a jacket that wasn't made of leather with a death's head on the back, let alone a book. But there was something about Godfrey Jelley's book which Sefton was sure would recommend it even to Wrotesley taste. He knew it was out there somewhere, and he knew that the only way to arm himself against the shock of coming up against it suddenly and unexpectedly was to go and find it. See it before it saw him. Embrace it as a saint might embrace a leper. With this intention he hovered about W.H. Smith's for days, his coat collars turned up, his fists plunged deep into his pockets. He was used to temptation and, being Jewish, he was used to a quick capitulation to it, but he couldn't work out on this occasion which the temptation was: going in or staying out.

On the morning of the third day, having decided it would be best for him to stay out, he went in. He wondered which course of action would guarantee him most misery – asking an assistant if she had a copy (and thereby forcing himself to pronounce the title and the author), or going looking for it on his own. In the event he did not have to make a decision; two steps into the shop and there it was, or rather, there *they* were – an immodest pyramid of them, stacked high like the most popular soap-powders on special offer by the entrance to a supermarket. And clearly discernible on the cover of each was a collage of photographs of his old school-friend and rival, Godfrey Jelley, clowning with Morecambe and Wise, exchanging punches with Mohammad Ali, smiling beneficently at the Pope, chucking Germaine Greer under the chin. Sefton Goldberg, sick at heart, took a couple of turns about the pyramid and relived the whole of

his life. He reached out his hand to one of the thick shiny blue volumes tentatively, as if it might go off or bite. He held it finally in his right hand and tried to coax his left to turn a page. It wouldn't. It couldn't. All feeling and power had fled from his fingers. He twisted it in his hand and stared at the blurb on the back of the jacket. Through a mist he read the words EMINENT RICH POPULAR SUCCESSFUL CHARM INSIGHT BEST MOST.

He returned the book unopened to its pile, went home and put himself to bed.

Sefton Goldberg would not have thought very highly of himself if he had not been able to arrive at some rather more generous acceptance of his friend's triumph. Especially as it was no less true than previously that they were not competitors. They were doing different things and just because Godfrey had done his and Sefton was still musing and mulling it didn't mean that the battle - supposing there to have been a battle - was over. Oho no! For many years now he had been planning a sort of history and vindication of the will to failure in art. He had always hated the determination that makes men finish things and deemed it a fanatical and essentially gentile quality. His book was to be a defence of spoiled canvasses and unfinished symphonies and abandoned novels. It occurred to him that the highest tribute his book might pay to failure was not to get itself written at all. This notion had much to recommend it, but its subtlety might well be lost on Godfrey Jelley, and Sefton was keen not to disappear from his friend's recollection altogether. I've a shock or two in store for him yet, he said to himself, and although this pronouncement didn't lead to any resumption of his book on failure it did help to take his mind off his friend's book on success.

He was further helped by that same friend's sudden disappearance from public view. For a good year Sefton heard nothing of him, read nothing by him, came across no

references to his afternoon conversations with the famous, concluded or to come. It was becoming safe to read the newspapers again.

‘So much for fame in that sort of world,’ said Sefton to himself with still cautious satisfaction. He was always gloomily superstitious and he knew that if he showed too much complacency Godfrey Jelley would suddenly show up as President of the United States. In which eventuality Sefton was not certain that he would be able to resist the one surefire way of writing himself into the history books. So he made a point of thinking clean and open thoughts, and not pushing his luck.

It was only on the publication of Godfrey’s second book that Sefton gained any knowledge of where he’d been or what he had become. How it had happened was still not clear, but Godfrey Jelley had tired of the tinsel and the tea-cakes and the talk. He had torn away the veil and ripped off the mask and lifted the scales and washed off the motley and stared into the heart of things. Not content with that, he had also peered into the abyss. But not on his own. It had been a group activity. A certain well-known intellectual guru had, in a fit of more than usually obstinate hagiological fidgets, collected together as many spiritually jumpy actors and actresses as he could find in order that they might discover the truth that was both of them and beyond them in one of the driest and most unaccommodating stretches of desert known to man – that is if anything can be known to man. Godfrey Jelley had gone off with them, but only secondarily as a journalist. Primarily he went as a fellow questing human being. Tents were pitched, cameras were mounted, texts were thrown away, all inhibition (that curse of the moderns) was abandoned, a bedouin tribe trouped by on cue (on divine cue, that is), and the search for the silence on the other side of language and the language on the other side of silence began in earnest. Godfrey Jelley, newborn, pink and tender as an unhealed scar, watched in

wonderment and as he watched he wrote – or rather, the he on the other side of he wrote.

It seemed to Sefton Goldberg, who bought the book immediately this time, in order to familiarise himself with its appearance and so not be shocked by suddenly seeing it somewhere else, that his friend's style and vocabulary had not changed all that much. Incredibly, he still began sentences with adverbs like *incredibly*, followed by a comma. He still found people sweet even if this time they were nomadic lepers. And he still dropped names, though here again there was a slight shift of emphasis and he now referred familiarly to the Japanese Noh Plays and the Persian Passions as he had once referred to André Previn and the Promenade Concerts, and Jimmy Connors and Flushing Meadow. Myth, legend, and ritual were, however, newish in Godfrey; as were the blind mendicants who saw more without eyes than we saw with them, and the crazed herdsmen who were more sane in their insanity, and the deaf mute camel drivers who drove a greater distance and spoke a deeper language.

Sefton was in no way surprised when the newspapers frothed about the book's great diffidence and wisdom. He was not shocked when the *Observer* admitted that it had found the book so readable that it had not been able to put it down; and he was not saddened when the *Sunday Times* confessed that it had found the book so disturbing that it had not been able to pick it up. He even kept his head when the reviewer from the *Yorkshire Post* vowed that after reading Godfrey Jelley his life would never be the same again. What did for Sefton was the enthusiasm with which the serious academic world took up 'this journey through the desert wastes of self. Even the Drama boys at Sefton's own Polytechnic went mad about it and stuffed copies on the library shelves and on their courses. They insisted that they knew no better work on the religious nature of drama and the duplicity of meaning.

The old tacit working agreement which had apportioned the garish to Godfrey and the serious to Sefton was now broken. Godfrey had turned his back on popular journalism and frivolity and had overnight become a notable literary figure. Overnight! Without having studied English Literature! That's what really nettled Sefton. Godfrey hadn't even suffered the deprivations of being at Cambridge!

No bed was now large enough for Sefton Goldberg and his shame. He made the terrible mistake of being honest with himself. 'Bitter? Of course I'm bitter!' he repeated to himself each morning as he made his way across the ring-road which separated the Polytechnic car park from the Polytechnic. The wind was always especially sharp and bleak here and the lights were always against him. The students coming to and from lectures were dowdily dressed and looked slow-witted. At the bus-stop long queues of Wrotesley working people muttered and complained through running noses, and the Jamaican bus-drivers had mad glints in their eyes, as if they were thinking of ploughing their vehicles into the lines of waiting passengers.

'Poor bastards!' thought Sefton Goldberg, meaning the drivers. 'Bitter? I'll say!' meaning himself.

And he made the even more serious mistake of welcoming envy into his heart, instead of going on pretending, as is sensible and usual, that he hadn't noticed it was there. It was a demanding and a time-consuming guest. Once he admitted that he envied Godfrey Jelley it became a kind of terrible duty to admit that he also envied everybody else. And not just successful writers and critics. He envied television announcers, disc-jockeys, sprinters and politicians. He envied Mick Jagger and Herbert von Karajan and Andrew Lloyd Webber and Stockhausen and the panel of *Any Questions*. He envied Bruce Forsyth, Henry Cooper, Chairman Hua, and even Virginia Wade for winning Wimbledon. He didn't have a clue who Barry Sheene was, but he envied him. His envy was rapacious and did not

discriminate on the grounds of race, colour, creed, age or sex. It simply hurt more if the object were his age, male, and Jewish. If he also knew him personally it was agony.

Envy on this scale made it impossible for him to find any refreshment or relaxation outside of himself. All of those activities whose very virtue is that they enable you to think about what isn't you were denied him. He didn't dare pick up a newspaper for fear of what it would tell him of the success of some old *shmuck* of a friend. He couldn't become absorbed in a good book because he resented the author his talent if he had any, and envied him his fame either way. He couldn't go to a concert because he envied Harry Blech and the London Mozart Players their skill and their life-style and their applause. If he went to the theatre he would sit sullen in the stalls, pondering the good fortune of the actors, the happy chance that had made the director the director (while something quite different had made Sefton Goldberg Sefton Goldberg), and imagining what a terrific time *they* were going to have when the curtain fell. Films, naturally, were out; so were cricket, horseracing, darts championships, snooker exhibitions and, surprisingly even to him, ballet.

His only consolations during these terrible days came in the form of the unexpected demise or humiliation of someone famous. An idolized pop star ate himself to death. A beautiful film actress took an overdose of sleeping pills. A yiddish rock opera called *Shiksa* written by Pinchas Finklestein who had been in Sefton's class at primary school flopped on its first night in the West End. All these things helped. Slowly his confidence began to trickle back. He was still alive and he hadn't flopped. A tragic aeroplane crash killing twenty of the world's most popular and successful novelists, travelling back from a convention in Hawaii on the future of the novel, came just at the right time.

'Fame!' he reflected. 'So who wants it?'

He began to feel almost jaunty again. Not strong, but up and about.

But it had been a narrow escape and the lesson was clear. He had to get out of the Poly and he had to get out of the town it was in. As long as he spent his afternoons on the floor with the likes of Lynne Shorthall he was not proof against the news, say, that Godfrey Jelley had been seen dancing the night away at Annabel's with Valerie Perrine. His idea, when he had taken the job, that he might make something, for a while, out of being a big fish in a small pond, had proved misguided. Big fish need big ponds. Being Jewish, Sefton didn't know much about the names or breeds or needs of fish. But he knew a bit about himself. He should never have gone among the gentiles – at least he should never have gone among the poor ones.

'Trouble with your eyes?' asked Peter Potter, popping his head around the door and picking his words as if they were ripe strawberries.

Sefton Goldberg, having completed his application to St Michael's Agricultural College, Bath, had stretched himself far back in his office chair from which position he could focus the window of his room so that it perfectly framed the nearest of the football club's floodlights. Over the years he had become intimate with it but every afternoon he still counted the individual lamps on the pylon, checking and rechecking his addition in order to satisfy the meticulousness of vacancy. He could also make them dance and disappear by closing first his left eye and then his right. In which occupation Peter Potter found him as he popped his head around the door.

'Yes, there is,' said Sefton. 'They are too old and they have seen too much.'

Peter Potter's head was still the only part of Peter Potter in the room. Even to Sefton's old and experienced eyes this ability to send out the head so far in advance of everything else was remarkable. There was no sign of a body, not even a hint of one. Only a pair of pale eyes, themselves not all