Vredefort by **Anthony (Tony) Fagin**

"Say *'Sh'ma Yisra'el'* for Grampa Robert," my father encouraged me. We'd come into the forecourt of Vredefort, an imposing block of flats on Beach Road, near the Sea Point Pavilion. My grandfather, tall, stooped, nearly bald, had just arrived home and was closing the heavy garage door after parking his car.

"*Sh'ma Yisra'el, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Ekhad*," I piped. I was five years old. For the past week my father had been teaching me to say it: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.' "It's a very important prayer in our religion."

"Clever boy," Grampa beamed down, laying a hand lightly on my head.

Dad and I had arrived, as we did most Sundays, for the family lunch.

Sometimes before lunch Grampa would take me for a walk along the beach-front. On occasions we'd bump into a friend of his from the old country and the two men would talk in a language I did not understand.

With his foreign accent Grampa spoke softly and had a special fondness for me, his first grandchild, born on the eighteenth of July, the day before his birthday, the nineteenth. He said I was the best present he'd ever received.

In the early days, Grampa Robert and Granny Miriam lived in the countryside, in a place called Bot River, where they'd had a hotel and a farm, growing vegetables for transport to Cape Town. Grampa came to be known as 'The Onion King of Bot River.' There they had three sons: Alfred, Maurice and Bernard. Lorna, their fourth child, born after they'd sold up and moved to Cape Town, was my mother.

In the early 1920s, Grampa set up The Permanent Trust Association, which became one of the city's leading estate agencies, specializing in property management and the sale of plots of land for building holiday homes by the sea.

Not long ago my grandparents had downsized to a flat in Vredefort from ‘Harmony’, their spacious family home in Fresnaye. I don’t remember the house, but when my memory gropes back, I recall a large garden with lush banks of hydrangeas and a pool with goldfish, seldom seen.

Into the foyer with Dad and Grampa. Up in the lift to the fourth floor and the aroma of Sunday lunch: roast chicken, crispy roast potatoes, the sweetness of carrots and parsnips and peas with mint. With his key Grampa opened the door to Flat 402.

The first object you noticed in the hallway was a tall ceramic cylinder for umbrella and walking-sticks. Painted in the Chinese style was a series of scenes telling some ancient tale. Once, seeing a stick standing erect in the cylinder, I poked around inside, to discover several inches of sand.

From the hallway into the living-room, where Granny Miriam, Uncle Alfie, my mother and my sister Beverley were sitting. Mom and Bev had come earlier and hanging in the air were shreds of a conversation about Mom’s problems with Dad.

Granny, a full-bosomed lady, had installed herself in her favourite armchair. Her hair had been permed with a blue rinse and a cameo brooch studded the ruche of her pale violet blouse. I kissed her proffered cheek – hint of Eau de Cologne – and helped myself to a chocolate.

Tony with Granny Miriam in Adderley Street, Cape Town

Uncle Alfie, whom Bev and I called ‘Poegie’, got the two of us aside to do his ear trick, which never failed to amuse us. He folded the flap of his left ear, tucked it into the earhole and grinned till the flap popped back into place. Then he winked at us.

“Where are Bernie and Zelda?” Granny was irritated. “They’re late!”

Shortly afterwards the latecomers, with their son Michael, arrived in a flurry "Sorry – Sunday traffic on De Waal Drive," Bernie explained as we all made our way towards the dining-room.

Uncle Bernie had short, dark hair and a clipped moustache. Zelda, his wife, was an attractive woman, always warm to me. Michael, my cousin, was half-a-year younger than me. At the dining-table, Granny patted the seat on her right, for me. Auntie Zelda came to sit on my other side. You wouldn't have thought so, but I liked her smell of lipstick and cigarettes.

As always, the large table was perfectly laid: starched white cloth; place mats; stainless steel cutlery; glass tumblers; for each diner a linen napkin tightly rolled and clasped in a monogrammed silver ring; knife-and-fork rests; a small brass bowl of water for each person, for greasy chicken fingers. Two large jugs of water. To pour, you had to remove a gossamer net fringed with tiny coloured glass beads that clinked together faintly.

The meal was presented by Barbara, the cook and housekeeper, a large, chatty, middle-aged Coloured woman, who had been with the family a long time.
She had seen all four children growing up. She had never married and seemed to have been 'adopted' by our family.After helping to serve the food, she stood against the kitchen door-post: "Madam says I must peel the carrots and parsnips before I boil them but I say to her 'No madam, I wash them, yes, but before I roast them, I parboil them still in their skins. It's much healthier so."
This 'dispute' was mild compared to others she'd had with Granny.
Apart from me, Barbara seemed to be the only person not intimidated by the mistress of the house's manner.

As we began the chicken, which Grampa carved, Granny confronted my father with: “Lew, I happened to be on the bus going into town at nine-thirty, one day last week and when I passed the bottom of The Glen, I looked up the road and saw your car still parked outside your house. May I ask what is the usual time you set off for work in the morning?”

“With all due respect, Mom,” replied Dad, “it is none of your business.” There were gasps. Mom wilted. The set of Granny’s jaw became harder.

Having got the wishbone, I reached across to Uncle Alfie for our usual game.

The bone snapped; I was the lucky one.

“What d’you want to be, Mark, when you’re big?” Alfie asked me.

Gales of laughter when I replied: “I want to be a grown-up.”

Dessert was a custard jelly trifle with green strips of angelica and plump, glistening red glace cherries.

Conversation was now between Grampa and Uncle Bernie, who had taken over the reins of the business: “.....Permanent Trust.....Kleinmond.....Permanent Trust.....Onrus.....a new estate in Hermanus.....a hundred holiday homes in Betty’s Bay.....Scarborough and Kommetjie.....Permanent Trust.....Permanent Trust.....”

Bernie was sipping from a milky drink prepared for him by Barbara.

Over coffee, talk of cars. Alfie had decided to “splash out and treat myself to a Mercedes.”

“How can you?” came from Bernie.

“What d’you mean?”

“Mercedes is a German car.”

“So?”

“I make a point of never buying German.” He was beginning to sound strident.

Zelda laid a restraining hand on his arm: “Darl.....”

“That’s you, not me.” Alfie was dismissive.

Brushing Zelda off, Bernie insisted: “You should never buy a German product!”

“Aren’t you being a bit extreme?”

"Yes, that's me. I am extreme."

Alfie went silent.

Later, in the car on our way home, I asked why Uncle Bernie didn't like German things.

"It's because of the war," Mom explained. "He was a soldier in North Africa. He was caught by the Germans and put in a prison camp. Wrecked his stomach."

Usually after lunch Bev, Michael and I would go through to the spare room, next to our grandparents' bedroom, where we played games like Scrabble, Monopoly, Cluedo, dominoes or chess. Bev and I played together against Michael, who was unable to beat us at Scrabble.

The spare room had been Uncle Alfie's room before he moved to a flat of his own. In one corner was sports equipment he'd left behind: a large, brown leather golf bag, containing different-sized clubs; tennis rackets, some in their presses; a squash racket and a badminton racket; canisters of tennis balls. Occasionally I stayed the night – a real treat. This space I came to claim as 'my room'. Here I spent hours reading, happily alone. It was my den, my retreat, my haven, allowing me the undisturbed quiet denied me in the tempestuous house I shared with my parents and my sister. 'My room' had its own safe smell.

One entire wall was taken up with shelves of books. One shelf was given to a thirty-six-volume set of The Chambers Encyclopaedia, each book with a navy-blue cover and lettering in red, highlighted in gold. I pored over the biographies of famous people with exotic-sounding names and gazed at their portraits and photographs. I did not understand what the 'Fra' stood for in 'Fra Angelico'. And women writers with names like George Sand and George Eliot mystified me. I felt pity for Lady Jane Grey blindfolded, kneeling before the chopping block.

Through very fine sheets of tissue paper the perfectly formed limbs of 'The Water Babies' enchanted me.

One of the stories in ‘The Treasure Casket’, a collection of tales for children, was ‘Gulliver in Lilliput’. The illustrations fascinated me, especially one of the massive Gulliver lying tied to the ground with hordes of little people swarming over him. What the point of this was I did not know.

A copy of Anne Bronte’s ‘The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’ had been ‘presented to LORNA DEBORAH KAPLAN’ at St Cyprian’s College for Girls –

‘STD.X PRIZE FOR CLASSICS.’

My mother had excelled at Latin and Ancient Greek.

There were several of the old university notebooks of Maurice, the middle one of my mother’s three older brothers. Books filled with algebraic symbols, complex mathematical formulae and neat, labelled diagrams of elaborate apparatuses with interlinking levers, pulleys and crankshafts. I was in awe of all this, but not for me, I decided.

Maurice Kaplan had been appointed Professor of Civil Engineering and later Dean of the Engineering Faculty at the University of Cape Town. He was acquiring an international reputation as *the* authority on the use of reinforced concrete in nuclear bunkers (I asked Granny what ‘bunkers’ were) and lived overseas, in London, with his wife and their two daughters. Sir Solly Zuckerman, a fellow South African, had invited him to join his Think Tank. Granny let it be known: “There is talk of a knighthood for Maurice.”

As I got older, I became aware of the books on the shelves for adults. There was ‘The Old Man and the Sea’ by Ernest Hemingway, with its brightly coloured jacket: fish weaving their way among vivid green, yellow and orange underwater vegetation. Thomas Mann’s ‘Joseph and his Brothers’ looked thick and sombre. Beside Uncle Alfie’s golf and tennis trophies were H.V.Morton’s ‘In Search of South Africa’, Alan Paton’s ‘Cry, the Beloved Country’, Israel Zangwill’s ‘Children of the Ghetto’ and

'The Jew of Rome' by Lion Feuchtwanger, which bore on its flyleaf the inscription:

19th July 1935

To my dearest Robert,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY & many, many more.

All my love,

Miriam xxx

There was a pile of copies of 'The Jewish Post', which Grampa received weekly.

An Old Testament in Hebrew and English. And 'The Yizkor-Book of Seduva', which Grampa explained was a book to remember all the people who'd died in the war in Seduva, the small town in Lithuania he'd come from.

On a separate shelf were Granny's books, newspapers and magazines: Mary Baker Eddy's 'Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures', 'The Christian Science Herald' and 'The Christian Science Monitor'. In front of these, a framed colour photograph of Granny with a friend standing on the steps leading up to the Mother Church in Boston.

Many years ago, my grandmother had converted to Christian Science, taking with her Alfie, her eldest child, but somehow not the other three. A rift had opened between her and her husband.

Mom explained that Christian Scientists did not consult doctors and never took any medicines. Granny believed in positive thinking and 'Mind over matter' was a frequent phrase of hers.

It was late one misty afternoon; the distant foghorn moaned. Coming to the door of my grandparents' bedroom, I was taken aback to see Granny in bed, reclining against a mound of pillows. By her bedside in the lamplight, comforting her, sat Mrs Georgia Smith, her practitioner. The two women looked across at my intrusion. Granny seemed ashamed that I should see her not being strong.

'Overseas' – this word had a special magic for me. Aware of the pull that 'Overseas' had on people, I wondered where this faraway, magnetic place was. Well, one time my grandparents actually went 'Overseas'. There was always excitement when a postcard or photo arrived. Granny and Grampa looked happy in the piazza in front of the Royal Palace in Naples.

Grampa Robert and Granny Miriam on their overseas trip in Naples

Eventually they returned, with gifts. For me, Scottish gear: a Shetland pullover; and a scarf and beret in red, black and white tartan. The beret was crowned with a red pompon.

Granny was especially taken with the beauty of Scotland and enthused about "Loch Lomond and the Trossachs". So memorable was the trip that she created a large photo album, which rested on one of the bookshelves in 'my room'. Giving flesh to my vague notion of 'Overseas', I gazed at the pictures and memorized the names: Big Ben, Trafalgar Square, Buckingham Palace….. These places were in a safe country. Aware that where I was living was not safe, I determined that, as soon as I was able, I would go 'Overseas' to this safe country and live there.

Here too began my love of French. I managed to get my tongue round 'Versailles' and 'Fontainebleau'. And when Granny corrected my pronunciation of 'Champs Elysees', I repeated the exquisite sounds: "Shaanzeleezay, Shaanzeleezay." The phrase became even more charged with splendour when I discovered it meant 'Fields of Heaven'!

What also appealed to the embryonic poet in me were the names of places in Italy, like 'The Fountain of Trevi' and 'The Blue Grotto'. I was moved by the story behind 'The Bridge of Sighs': so sad were condemned prisoners that, when they crossed the bridge to their execution and glimpsed the beauty of Venice for the last time, they sighed.

From my grandparents' bedroom a glass door opened onto an extensive balcony with panoramic views. To the right were the slopes of Signal Hill and the rise up to Lion's Head. In the opposite direction, across the glittering sea, lay Robben Island. And beyond, Table Bay swept round to the sands of Blouberg. In the sunset the dark purple mountains stretched on up the coast.

On a Friday afternoon I would sit on the balcony watching the Union Castle Liner leave the harbour. Many times, I would sit till the ship disappeared over the horizon. Presumably, I speculated, if you went as far as the horizon, a further expanse would open up, with another horizon. How many expanses would you need to cross to reach 'Overseas'?

From the balcony you looked down onto the gardens of the Arthur's Seat Hotel, a grand colonial building with a colonnaded verandah. Here residents and their guests sipped drinks served by waiters in smart, gold-braided uniforms.

One or two of the palm trees reached up almost to the height of the balcony.

Across the lawns a peacock roamed. Thrilling to see it fan out its splendid tail. At night, in 'my room' for a sleepover, reading in the lamplight, I sometimes heard the bird shriek. And on misty nights the foghorn sounded mournfully from the Mouille Point as I drifted off to sleep.

The balcony was Grampa's favourite spot. With his sunhat on, he would sit reading his newspapers. In his last years, when the Parkinson's came, the pages between his hands shuddered.

On the Sunday after Grampa's funeral the family gathered as usual for lunch.

In his last hour Grampa had wanted only Barbara to be with him.

Everyone was anxious to hear Barbara telling of Grampa's end: ".....You know, the old people when they are dying, they become like little children again. Their Mommy and their Daddy come to fetch them and stand by the end of the bed. So that's what happened. *I* couldn't see them but Master Robert sees them. His pain is *vreeslik* and I'm holding his hand. He calls to them. It was in Jewish so I didn't understand but I did understand 'Mama' and 'Papa'. I think he was saying 'Mama and Papa, I am coming to you.'"

After Grampa's death the Vredefort flat was sold and Granny moved to the posh Schweizerhof Hotel near the bus terminus. I visited her regularly and, on occasions, was her guest at meals in the elegant dining-room. On most visits I had after-noon tea with her in her comfortable suite on the third floor.

In her sitting-room she laid out the china tea-set with the delicate rose pattern that I remembered from Vredefort. And there was always a platter of pastries bought fresh that morning. Granny still dressed smartly but her hauteur had been clipped by sadness and age.

We sat in silence; just the clink of cups. Somehow, I found the courage to ask her the question that had long been on my mind: "Granny, why did you become a Christian Scientist?"

"Oh," she replied, "it's a long story." She sipped her tea. "I couldn't find peace. My sister Pearlie had, some time before converted and was much happier, so she persuaded me to give it a try. I started going with her to the church in The Gardens. It felt peaceful there. I met some people who were kind to me. And slowly I felt a burden, a very heavy cloak, was slipping from my shoulders."

"Didn't you like going to shul?"

"My parents were very religious so when I was young, I had to go. But I didn't like it: the women upstairs, not involved in the service, chattering away. It had no meaning for me. And then later, after the war, all the Jews could talk about was Israel, Israel, Israel." Her lips contorted and the word came out as 'Eez-kkgghhrr (a hideous guttural sound) -raah-el.' I was horrified to realize she was doing a grotesque parody of the way Grampa used to speak.

Seeing me flinch, and knowing my Judaism meant much to me, recently barmitzvahed, she pulled back in regret at having gone too far. As a pacifier she gave me:

"But what always moved me though was on Yom Kippur when the rabbi stands in front of the open Ark and chants '*Adonoy Adonoy Adonoy El rakhoom v'khanun Erekh apohyim v'rov khessed v'emet*.' I was astonished. Never had I heard a word of Hebrew pass her lips but here it was, tumbling out.

We sat in silence.

"Granny, what does it mean?"

"Erm.....it's a.....quotation from the Torah. The rabbi is begging God to show mercy and forgive the people.....for all their sins."

Soon after, needing fresh air, I left. Instead of getting the bus home along Regent Road, I decided to walk down to Beach Road and go past Vredefort..On the way I passed Costa Brava, the block of flats where Uncle Alfie lived.

He had gone into a reclusive bubble; I hadn't seen him for over a year; he hadn't even come to my barmitzvah. On, past the Pavilion to Mimosa Court. Auntie Zelda had moved here from Claremont with Michael after the death of Uncle Bernie from stomach cancer. In her grief she had cut herself off from the family.

After crossing St John's Road – VREDEFORT. For the first time I realized that the building had a pronounced nautical aspect. Its seven or eight storeys were stacked almost as if they were decks on a ship and some of the windows were round like portholes.

I stood in the forecourt beside one of the stout columns that supported the facade of the building. Here several years ago my father had prompted me to recite 'Sh'ma Yisra'el' for Grampa. Before me was the garage where Grampa used to park his maroon Plymouth, in which he would drive Granny and me to Suikerbossie or Hout Bay for Sunday afternoon tea.

To the right of the garage, fixed to the wall, was a metal plaque: 'Managed by The Permanent Trust Association.' Above the text was the firm's logo, '**P T A**' enclosed in an ovoid. The letter 'T' in the centre towered over the 'P' and the 'A' on either side. The crossbar of the 'T' extended its arms as if to protect the two smaller letters. I longed for Grampa.

The Permanent Trust had passed out of the family's hands. After Bernie's death it had been sold to strangers, like Flat 402 after Grampa's death.

The glass doors into the foyer could now be opened only by entry phone.

I peered in: there was the lift which took you up to the fourth floor. Who, I wondered, was living in Flat 402 now? Had the flat changed much? And most of all, who was living in 'my room'?

I walked slowly back across the forecourt to the pavement and stood looking up at the building. **V R E D E F O R T**. 'Vrede' – Afrikaans for 'peace'. A 'fort' – a strong, secure, safe place.

The sun was setting as I walked home along Beach Road and, wishing to salvage something of what I'd lost, I began to re-create Flat 402 in my mind.

Vredefort by Tony Fagin

A word about me:

My name is Anthony (Tony) Fagin. I was born in Sea Point in 1950. I attended Sea Point Boys' Junior & High Schools.

I was barmitzvah-ed at Temple Israel, Green Point. After considering whether to become a lawyer or a doctor (I did first-year medicine at UCT), I went on to do a B.A., majoring in English & Drama. After that, I did a B.A. Honours degree in English Literature. I then left SA & travelled overseas (mainly Israel & Finland), eventually coming to London, where I did a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. My professional career of almost 40 years was in Teaching English to Foreign Learners. About 10 years ago I retired. (I'm now into my 72nd year.) My main focus these days is on writing stories. I had a lot of time to do so during lockdown! My ambition has always been to be a writer.

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