CHAPTER IV

NONFAMILY LIVING: DISEASE OF THE SINGLE SELF

It is not true that life is one damn thing after another - it is one damn thing over and over.

Elbert Hubbard

Addressing the National Conference of Social Work, Margaret Mead, in 1947, dealt with the war's effect on the family and expressed her serious concern on the erosion of the three- or four-generation extended family and its replacement by the nuclear family. Her criticism of the nuclear family continued unabated for nearly thirty years because, in her view, the banishment of the grandma along with the removal of many other support mechanisms made the young wife and the mother exceedingly insecure. Even though the nuclear family had nothing to do with the Bomb, Mead once said, it is "just about as dangerous as the Bomb." The obnoxious truth that "women can no longer stand having another grown woman in the house" was a decisive factor in the split. Sammler who has reached the next stage of fission looks alarmed at the single self who has been flipped into the void like a speck of dust in interpersonal bombardment. Speeding to the deathbed of Elya Gruner on the day of his destiny, Sammler surveys from Elya's Rolls-Royce driven by Emil, the subculture of the underprivileged Americans, Broadway at Ninety Sixth Street. Its teeming humanity shows him, as he says 'the final truth about mankind,' 'overwhelming and crushing' (MSP 225). What is it?

Life, when it was like this, all question-and answer from the top of intellect to the very bottom, was

1 Margaret Mead, qtd. in Robert Cassidy, Margaret Mead: A Voice for the Century (New York: University Books)56.
really a state of singular dirty misery. When it was all question-and-answer it had no charm. Life when it had no charm was entirely question-and-answer .... Also, the questions were bad. Also, the answers were horrible. This poverty of soul, its abstract state, you could see in faces on the street. And he too had a touch of the same disease - the disease of the single self explaining what was that and who was who (MSF 225).

Sammler rebels against "this vulgar, cowardly conclusion," "the populace itself being metaphysical and living out this interpretation of reality and this view of truth;" but that is the "sense of things," he says, that Broadway gave him. Sammler, like the numberless skid-row citizens outside Elya's gleaming Rolls-Royce is a decrepit, old single self, a victim of high-minded abstractions. But single selves, old and young, male and female are legion in Bellow. And singlehood is a central concern.

James J. Lynch, a specialist in psychosomatic medicine at the University of Maryland Medical School believes that loneliness kills. In his The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness, Lynch argues that social isolation brings emotional and then physical deterioration. Boston Irishmen, he notes, have a far higher coronary death rate than their brothers left behind in the more closely-knit culture of the old sad. Nevada, a freewheeling singles-oriented state, has a higher death rate than neighbouring Utah, with its Mormon tradition of close family ties. In a study, he has found that unusually close
family and community ties in Renata, an Italian American community in Pennsylvania helped keep down the number of heart problems. Says Lynch: "Medical practitioners must make people aware that their family and social life are every bit as important to health as dieting and exercising." In fact, he proceeds to call for "a medicine beyond science to help alleviate the spread of loneliness induced disease in our society. The answer, he believes, lies in reaffirming the importance of the family and in caring for friends and neighbors. "Simply put," he concludes "there is a biological basis for our need to form human relationships. If we fail to fulfill that need, our health is in peril." This is precisely what seems to be Wilhelm's need, the "heart's ultimate need," to cry for some one and to be cried over, in turn. Citrine, who decides to marry Renata after much initial hesitation expresses this need, this crying need for company in much the same way as Semmler and Kinget, in clinical terms.

I evoked Renata laughing brilliantly because I was in reality undergoing a major attack of my lifelong trouble - the longing, the swelling heart, the tearing eagerness of the deserted, the painful keenness or infinitering of an unidentified need. This condition was apparently stretching from earliest childhood to the border of senescence. I thought, Hell, let's settle this once and for all. (HG 414)

Herzog too has as much to say about loneliness but that is more amusing.

2"Loneliness Can Kill You," *Time* 5 Sept. 1977:46

3"Loneliness," 46.
He had read lately that lonely people in New York, shut up in their rooms, had taken to calling the police for relief. 'Send a squad car, for the love of God! Send someone! Put me in the lock-up with somebody! Save me. Touch me. Come, Someone - please come!' (H 210)

The extraordinary intellectual who believes in bettering the record of his own sayings puts it seriously, besides:

But a terrible loneliness throughout life is simply the plankton on which Leviathan feeds ... Must reconsider. The soul requires intensity. (H 319)

Unable to bear up against loneliness, he considers the prospects of a married life with Ramona though "the idea of marriage made him nervous" (H 209). He finds Ramona to be good and practicable and certainly will not 'castrate him' (H 210). He could be a patriarch, through this marriage, "as every Herzog was meant to be," "the family man, father, transmitter of life, intermediary between past and future, instrument of mysterious creation" (H 210). Ramona will certainly parade him as Frau Professor Herzog. "She senses that I am for the family" Herzog thinks. "For I am a family type, and she wants me for her family. Her idea of family behaviour appeals to me" (H 205). More than anything, on the practical side, Herzog finds "he couldn't stand the disorder and loneliness of bachelorhood" (H 210). He wants clean shirts, ironed hand-kerschiefs, heels on his shoes, all the things Madeleine despises. But still, in spite of all this reasoning and yearning for the family, he makes the conscious choice of embracing, ultimately singlehood. He balances himself against instability and when the inner tumult begins to subside in the end, he seems to have come to terms with the loneliness he loathed.
Herzog does not accept towards the end of the novel, Ramona's invitation to a party at Mississis. lest he should sound impolite, he invites Ramona to dinner. Turning to get into her Mercedes, in the presence of Will, Ramona momentarily puts her hand on Herzog's shoulder, a show of intimacy meant for the attention of Will, and says she expects a good dinner. Will plainly asks: 'Am I leaving you in good hands, Rose?' Herzog unambiguously replies: 'I'm not being left in anyone's hands' (H 345). Whereas he does not take pains to cover up his intimacy with Ramona, he assures Will that they are not going to elope. Will does not mind if Herzog were to 'marry five more wives' but it is his 'talent for making a fatal choice' (H 345) that causes concern. Herzog accepts that he cannot afford any more mistakes. He declines Will's offer of 'supervised rest' (H 340), an euphemism for psychiatric treatment, as well as money, and sets about making arrangements for mowing the field and scrubbing the floor. It is, of course true that he has been driven into such nonfamily living by "the perfect seducer with her cold carnivorous smile. All the same now he makes a conscious choice of singlehood, but not for want of the proper women. There is no trace of agony in the choice and the choice is made easier by his realization that he is just 'excited, not sick' (H 339) and his resolution to stop 'labouring with this curse' (H 341) of figuring things out. The loneliness that drove him has now opened up for Herzog a new mode of life where he embraces God minus symbols saying 'Thou movest me' (H 347). Even married men like Joseph in Dangling Man are up against loneliness. Joseph "an apprentice in suffering" (DM 67) struggles with a terrible solipsistic

closure because of his chosen estrangement with his wife and his roaming habit. This leads him into violent eruptions. "In speaking Ita," says Malin, "he spews his own narcissistic image."  

Semmler is a thinking island on Manhattan island, living away from his formless daughter. He thinks that humanity marks certain people for death; he counts himself among this "written-off category" (MSF 165). He is a symbol, he believes, because 'friends and family had made him a judge and a priest.' (MSF 75) Yet he is not sure what he symbolizes. He once killed the German soldier he ambushed in the snow in Ennsicht forest relishing his own violence. He did not believe in God then. But now he has relaxed into crusty prejudices. He feels responsible to 'higher values,' and to civilization (MSF 75). He cares much for his daughter, his only contribution to the species, but is at once filled with 'heart-ache and pity that he and Antonina had not blended better' (MSF 94). This one-eyed septuagenarian lives to see his cousin Elya Gruner die. Still unsure of what he himself symbolizes, he is quite knowledgeable about the values Elya stands for. In Elya, Semmler has lost the values he began to cherish after his providential escape from the mausoleum. With his death Semmler stands bewildered, condemned to a worse nonfamily existence than he has hitherto experienced. Semmler is a unique solitary who has brought much critical odium to his creator through his utterances. Reviewers like Clayton, Max Schulz and Beverly Gross expressed surprise and dismay at

at Sammler's jeremiads. They see in the novel a 'new Bellow' an aging ideologue, another dated establishment litterateur, and not their beloved King Saul, innovator, trend-setter.

Leaving the Yellow House is a curious short story where we see a displaced female of the same age as Sammler. But she is not subject to any intellectual agony and is not at all concerned with the perplexities of her times. She is absorbed in her own personal fate. In moral restraint, she is the opposite of Sammler. She has led a terribly anarchistic life. She would knock her old yellow house and make a raft of it, as her neighbor Jerry Rolfe says, and float on it if Sego Lake turned to whisky. His wife Helen says: 'Life sober may not be much of a temptation to her' (MM-LY 16). She never wants to discuss, as per the wish of India who has given her this small yellow house, Eastern religion or Bergson or Proust. She has 'no head' (MM-LY 21) for all this; and India blames her drinking on Hattie. After her husband John seagoner divorced her she lives with Nicks the cowboy for sometime. Now after turning him out she lives all alone. 'In other houses, in someone else's house, to wait for mealtimes was her lifelong punishment' (MM-LY 39). Her disorganized life breaks her utterly at last when, drawing her 'last will and testament' (MM-LY 38) bestows her property on herself. As her drunken blood soars to her head, she blinks at her beloved house and her fragmented life. 'See how beautiful it was here?' she thinks. 'It turned you out. How empty! It turned you into ash' (MM-LY 42). Bellow took delight in writing this story and

The Old System. Not many writers in his generation or earlier
cared to devote an entire story to an aging, old drunkard and
dead as a woman. The story testifies to his mysterious fasci-
nation for the motif of singlehood. Many of Bellow’s characters
wear out their mortal selves in loneliness. Singlehood, in fact
is the central paradigm. How can a writer who is dead set
against the Westeland outlook fall in love again and again for the
ruptured home? Does he want to establish the value of culture
and civilized life by denying the same to his characters?

Even a scientist like Dr. Braun, in The Old System written
up for his research in Time does not know better than to reminisce
and shed scalding tears over the past soon after he wakes up,
alone in his apartment. Even before he opens his can of coffee
as the story opens, he plunges into philosophical conundrums.
He thinks of the vitality that links man with a dog or an ape
and the power of the mind that sets him apart from his animal
forbears: The inference that I am or I am not. He is as much
pleased with being as with its opposite. Of course, Dr. Braun
is critical of the 'unhealthy self-detachment' (MM-OS 45) that
every civilized man cultivates for learning 'the art of amusing
self-observation and objectivity' (MM-OS 45-46). Then he is lost
in thought; in a reverie that unfolds in the mind lucid vignettes
of kinship now lost for ever. There is no further movement in
the story after he drinks coffee. His highly charged reminiscen-
ces show him his childhood conjugal accident, and a train of
events centering around Isaac lasting unto the defiance and death
of Tina. Dr. Braun too broke down, along with Isaac — he reflects
as he sips coffee— when she quit. Now 'in the close black dark-
ness when the short day ended' Dr. Braun looks up at the stars
as the show ends, through 'the dark kitchen' wonders: why life, why death and why, after all these Times and Images? Star-gazing inevitably leads one to the mighty truth that there is not much meaning invested in life. Loneliness has its blessings however for the intellectual who is endowed with a vision. Herzog speculates and peeps into stellar dust.

The human soul is an amphibian, and I have touched its sides. Amphibian! It lives in more elements than I will ever know; and I assume that in those remote stars matter is in the making which will create stranger beings yet.

(§ 265)

What are stars after all? For the Bellow loner, it is "endless fire." Stars are not what they seem to be. They yield the only meaning they are capable of, whoever looks at them.

When Herzog opened his eyes in the night, the stars were near like spiritual bodies. Fires, of course, gases-minerals, heat, atoms, but eloquent at five in the morning to a man lying in a hammock, wrapped in his overcoat. (§ 7)

Their eloquence is radiance; they never hide the truth. Dean Corde also looks at 'the living heavens' (DD 306) from the dizzy heights of Mount Palomar.

If you came for a look at astral space it was appropriate that you should have a taste of the cold out there, its power to cancel everything merely human. (DD 305)

Corde is not a loner. He has just seen off Minna for a while for her professional obligations. But whereas the clear headed astronomer looks at the eloquent dots in terms of facts and figures the Dean is carried away. He leaps, in the characteristic Bellow
way, to intimations one would normally shun; and contributes a lot to the ideals of loneliness.

The sky was tense with stars, but not so tense as he was, in his breast ... And it wasn't only that you felt, but that you were drawn to feel and to penetrate further, as if you were being informed that what was spread over you had to do with your existence, down to the very blood and the crystal forms inside your bones. Rocks, trees, animals, men and women, these also drew you to penetrate further. Under the distortions ... to find their real being with your own. This was the sense in which you were drawn.

(DE 306)

This is how not only Corde but all Bellow men, especially his loners are drawn. Maybe Bellow himself is drawn. Herein lies perhaps the answer for the paradox of the dual vision of Bellow. On a conscious level he sets out to speak up for civilization and culture. But as an artist he is 'drawn' by the compulsive fascination for metaphor into deeper and deeper layers of comprehension. The singlehood motif is the most convenient mode for a metaphysical quest - a truly metaphysical quest inevitably ends up in stellar dust - and that is why perhaps Bellow is fascinated by the theme. Corde's words have intimations of the ageless truths of life: earth's primeval atmosphere, Precambrian rocks, forms of self-producing life initiating earth's first great revolution nearly two billion years ago, protoatmosphere changing with micro organisms producing chlorophyll, so on and so forth until at last in the Great Chain man and woman resulted. Corde is, so to say, on a penetrating spore, placing mortal man against geologic processes, a high level exercise. Out in the
wilderness in Africa, far removed from wife and children in self-exile, Henderson watches every night "the stars flaming like oranges, those multimillion tons of exploding gas looking so mild and fresh in the dark of the sky;" realizes that he "had gone clean out of the world" and that "the world is complex" (HFK 48). Corde's reflections evoke an entire process.

Man "descended" from the private, the primate "descended" from the cell, the cell "descended" from the molecule, the molecule "descended" from the atom, the atom "descended" from the quark. We were engendered in the initial explosion, in the heart of stars, and in the immensity of interstellar space. In the purest Hindu tradition, we can truly say that all nature is the family of man.7

It is significant that the Dean who plunges breathlessly into the heart of the matter is a married loner, who sleeps daily on the periphery of his bed with his irascible wife.

Big bang or steady state, life evolved from complex reactions in interstellar dust and ended up incredibly in man and woman. Bellow's learned loners, his crisis men look at the stars in their high moments not without realizing their literal and symbolic content. Stargazing leads to a nihilistic vision though Herzog does not end up that way. Whatever one believes or one should believe, like Citrine and Humboldt about an afterlife, life as far as our knowledge goes ends where it ends. If there is something abiding in life it is mainly some changeless essence and not at all the particular instances, the Tines and Isaacs and even the Brauns who torture themselves with their memories.

Bellow is as much absorbed in the problem of universals and such fundamentals. Such reflections as in *The Dean's December* must be pleasing for the reviewers who became unhappy with Bellow's ideological commitment in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. The ruminations of Bellow's loners come very close to Mailer's pronouncement: "If the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self." Here one can charge Bellow with nihilism. But then a reductive view, be it revolutionary or reactionist, is not at all helpful. Corde is very much committed to positive social action. The purpose here, in dwelling on the ultimate searching look that every Bellow hero, minor or major, beams at this and the other side of the grave is the common heritage of the nonfamily solitaries. Ijah in *Cousins* stays away from marriage for the same reasons as Citrine. Citrine admits that 'solitary old age would be horrible' (K 328). Ijah thinks: "And about marriage ... single life was tiresome. There were, however, unpleasant considerations in marriage that must not be avoided" (HW-C 288).

Looking for *Mr. Green* is irresistibly symbolic. It is a "minor classic of our time," "releasing ripples upon ripples of concentric meanings that vanish into the mystery of an evocative silence." George Grebe gets no help in his solitary quest.

8 Norman Mailer, qtd. in Ben Siegel 123.

He is not at all able to place the crippled Mr. Green until the very end. Instead a corpulent, married woman clunders into him and hides the truth. Mr. Green may not even be alive. But if he is alive, after all, he can never be his normal self in the company of this cruel realist, who is most probably his wife. He must certainly be another estranged single self, utterly lost to quotidian existence. The search for the Gonzaga manuscripts is more futile and disappointing. Again it is a lonely quest as fruitless as the philosophy of the solitaries. He might have put his time to better use. In fact it dimly passes over clearence Feiler that 'a live woman Miss Ungar would make a better guest than a dead poet' (MM-3M 128). Feiler’s apprehensions prove true at last as he learns from Alvarez-Polvo, after all his 'endless gallant bunk' (MM-3M 131) that Countess del Camino took the love poems with her to the grave. Rogen, in Father-to-Be fortunately, escapes from the fate of the masochists, their metaphysical loneliness, mainly because of Joan’s baby talk and possessive blandishments. Mosby opens, in Mosby’s Memoirs, his account of abstractions with his cynical, of course true reading of nature, the aggressive music of the birds. Bougainvillaeae pouring down the hillside and the humming birds spinning in the skies do not cheer him up but make him sick. 'Behind the green and red of Nature,' he thinks 'dull black seemed to be thickly laid like mirror backing.' (MM 149) The symptoms are nothing but those of classical grief in Bellow, the disease of the single self. He, too like the other blighted heroes is 'a fanatic about ideas' (MM 151). And he has made some of the 'most interesting mistakes
a man could make in the twentieth century" (MM 49). One of them, perhaps, is his acceptance of a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation to write his memoirs. It is no wonder then that Lustgarten, a Marxist seeks him out for discussing 'the American failure to preserve human souls' (MM 152) and Pascal's terror of universal subtleness. His own barren life among ideas is reflected in Lustgarten's funny talk about the difference between empty space and space in a bottle. However in his typical state of illness or health as a Bellow Loner, Kosby himself swings Lustgarten's wife, who has already been stolen. The sadder truth is, that the theft does not quell his tumultuous loneliness. He stays away from conventional religion and family and naturally peace, is denied to him. He wonders in the end:

Having disposed of all things human, he should have encountered God. Would this occur? But having so disposed, what God was there to encounter? (MM 173)

Life is thus, as it is for Sammler and company, question and answer. Both the questions and their answers are most often meaningless. As he goes down the stairs, he is frightened.

His heart was paralysed. His lungs would not draw. Jesus! cannot catch my breath! To be shut in here! To be dead here! Suppose one were! Not as in accidents which ended, but did not quite end, existence. Dead-dead. (MM 174)

Jesus must help him out. But this sick intellectual never takes refuge in faith because his knowledge revolts against "the opiate of the masses." He might save himself from fears by taking refuge in the conventional family. These again perhaps he has
doctrinal difficulties. Let him suffer then because it is the plight of the single selves.

'I am very much alone in Vancouver! In Shawmut writes to Miss Carla Rose, in Him With His Foot; and -limbs in the same breath, 'but that is my fault too' (H. 15). His wife Gerda is dead. His only friend in Vancouver is Mrs Gracewell, who reads occult literature. Shawmut swallows all sorts of pills, Imeldal and quinidine for hypertension and cardiac disorders. He is deeply distressed, because of 'a variety of psychological reasons' and has lost his 'ego defenses' (H. 3). The story takes the form of a long rambling letter to Miss Rose, who may not even remember Shawmut. The letter gives him an occasion to discover himself. He is still unable to stop playing his favorite word game. 'Recreations of a crumbling mind, Miss Rose; 'Shawmut confesses seriously, setting aside his habitual passion for quirks. 'Symptoms perhaps of high blood pressure ... (H. 58). It is Kinget's diagnosis. However, Shawmut works against this inner destruction by trying to move close to God, closer than Kosby. She listens to Mrs Gracewell, forty years a widow, about the Divine Spirit. She instills hope in him saying:

The world's grandeur is fading. And this is our human setting, devoid of God, ... But in this deserted beauty man himself still lives as a God-perveded being. It will be up to him - to us - to bring back the light that has gone from these molded likenesses, if we are not prevented by the forces of darkness. (H 59)

Even bigamists are blighted by loneliness. In A Silver Dish Woody Selbst "lived alone, as did his wife as did his mistress: everybody in a separate establishment." He is dynamic and does
his big weekly shopkeeping but is still not free from a never-ending "life survey"

Over Woody's residence and place of business
there had gathered a pool of silence of the
same perimeter as the church bells while they
were ringing, and he mourned under it, this
mournful morning of sun and autumn. (HW-SD 220)

Woody Selbst is subject to a sudden 'big heartache' and refuses to let his Pop go. Living alone has, after decades of writing, become a matter-of-fact condition in Bellow's fiction. The writer has taken it so much for granted that he does not bother to go into the causes. Loneliness launches the hero and the author into their pet business: figuring out.

Bunice came out of the hospital, Ijah reflects in Cousins, after major surgery and told him that she had "no one in all the world to talk to." Her husband Earl, she accused, was not emotionally supportive. Ijah, in his characteristic irony, takes it to mean that she wanted to say that her husband was close-fisted. Before they went out to dinner, Bunice had drinks in his apartment on Lake Shore Drive.

She said, "All these dark old rooms, dark old paintings, these Oriental rugs piled one on top of the other, and books in foreign languages - and living alone" (meaning that I didn't have horrible marital flights over an eight-dollar gas bill). (HW-C 229)

Marriage implies quarrel and tension. Ijah does not believe in this institution. He looks upon his divorce as a blessing and turns his attention, to "higher activities" in much the same way as Citrine turns to "higher life."

To "long for the best that ever was" this
was not an abstract project. I did not learn it over a seminar table. It was a constitutional necessity, physiological, temperamental, based on sympathies which could not be acquired. (N.C 232)

This is the common hobby of the solitaries: mining, mental journey, metaphysics, the one outstanding attribute of singlehood. Human absorption in faces, deeds, bodies drew me towards metaphysics. I had these peculiar metaphysics as flying creatures have their radar. Maturing, I found the metaphysics in my head. (N.C 232)

Broadway's Hotel Gloriana in *Seize the Day* looks like marked out for retired people.

Along Broadway in the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties, a great part of New York's vast population of old men and women lives. Unless the weather is too cold or wet they fill the benches about the tiny reared parks and along the subway gratings from Verdi Square to Columbia University, they crowd the shops and cafeterias, the dime stores, the tea rooms, the bakeries, the beauty parlors, the reading rooms and club rooms. (SD 4)

Adler a retired diagnostian in his eighties and Tsvikin are among the most illustrious occupants. Wilhelm with his "genius for failure," feels out of place, living here among these old people including his father, as his wife "holds over his head the custody of his two beloved boys."¹⁰

What emerges from the reflections and loneliness, of the nonfamily heroes is a view of wasted life. Herzog successfully understanding of meaninglessness with the right dose

¹⁰*Upper West Side,* rev. of *Seize the Day*, *Newsweek* 19 Nov. 1956: 142-143
of faith but rejects the paraphernalia that goes with it. Citrine tends to believe the Baptist's parting words that men are supernatural but still stand on slippery grounds not quite able to make out. Samler fervently clings to faith; Shawmut grapes towards that. Corde comes to terms with the inexorability of a naturalistic order. Ijah and Kosby suffer. Dr. Braun looking at "these things," the stars "cast outward by a great begetting spasm billions of years ago" (EMCS 81) is lost in geological time. The overwhelming consciousness among the broken ten, therefore, is not a God-created life but Russell's "result of huddle and the accidental collections of atoms." 11 The dreariness of their perched life drives them into the most commonly available means of emotional fulfilment: recreational sex.