I knew only one person in London. Lionel Bowman met me off the boat train at Waterloo Station around noon on Friday 21 December 1951, in perfect English winter weather, cold and dark grey. Rising that morning before dawn I stood glued to the rail of the *Edinburgh Castle* to see England loom out of the dank mist. The moment I set foot on the quay at Southampton I dropped to my knees and kissed the ground, believing I was at the start of my journey but, in truth, my real journey had begun in a small village in Lithuania and in Stepney, in an unpredictable confluence of persecution, hardship and the search for refuge. Sometimes I feel as though I am a representative of all those who went before me, especially my father, who did not have the opportunities that were offered to me. This is not fanciful or sentimental but real. I cannot be precise about the moment I formulated a command to myself which was never to forget the distance I have travelled.

Because I had overspent on the ship, I arrived with seven shillings and sixpence in my pocket. Fortunately, my mother had sent money in advance to Lionel, with which he greeted me. He had booked me in at the YMCA off Tottenham Court Road and took me there in a taxi, instructing the driver to go via Trafalgar Square. I sat on the edge of the seat, spellbound by glimpses of the city that had for so long possessed my imagination. He had also arranged for me to accompany Raymond to the theatre that evening to see a pantomime, *Cinderella*, with Derek Roy and Christine Norden at the Prince's Theatre, now the Shaftesbury. Around five o'clock Raymond collected me and gave me tea at a Lyons tea shop. It was already dark with the lights of the buses, the taxis and theatres glowing, flaring, sparkling, creating expectation for whatever excitement might lie ahead, like an orchestra tuning up for the overture. Ever since, I have seldom failed to be elated by the early onset of darkness on a London winter's evening.

Raymond, known professionally as R. B. Marriott, almost always wore a dark brown felt hat to cover his balding head. He was short, wore glasses and had a tinge of Lancashire in his diction. He had an encyclopaedic memory for matters theatrical and literary. Born a Catholic in Manchester he had rejected religion in any shape or form and, in his teens, became a devout socialist and

pacifist. When war was declared he registered as a conscientious objector and was put to work as a hospital orderly. Although he never talked much about that period of his life, not to me anyway, I had the impression that the experience was appalling and that, like many others, he had been victimised for his convictions and, given the times, for his sexual orientation. He was not at all effeminate but he could, after a few drinks, display a flighty streak by batting his eyelids, pursing his lips and flicking a wrist. His favourite expression, tiddly or sober, was, 'Fancy that, Hedda Gabler, fancy that!'

The milieu in which he was most at home and to which he gave me a fleeting introduction was London Bohemia, now long since vanished, the pubs and clubs of Soho and Fitzrovia, inhabiting a world wonderfully described by Julian Maclaren-Ross. Raymond knew many of the denizens, glassy-eyed men who propped up bars waiting to be bought a drink, and glassy-eyed women who always seemed to be clumsily made-up, sitting at corner tables also waiting to be bought a drink. He introduced me to some of them, of whom Nina Hamnett I remember best because she flirted outrageously and was entertained by my embarrassment. I was not used to a woman giving me her full, frank attention as if there was no one else in the world. Somewhat raddled by the time I met her, she had been a celebrated figure in London and Paris, a gifted artist and writer, the author of *The Laughing Torso*, and immortalised by her contemporaries in paintings, sculptures, novels and poems. Our meeting must have been in 1952, four years before her horrible death when she fell from a window to be impaled on a fence 40 feet below. The question whether she committed suicide or toppled when drunk was never satisfactorily answered. Her last words were, 'Why don't they let me die?'

One evening, in the Salisbury public house in St Martin's Lane, Raymond told me that Dylan Thomas was downstairs in the gents. I had never heard of Dylan Thomas but was assured he was considered among the greatest of living poets. All the regulars were clearly excited by his presence. Later, he made his appearance supported on either side by two friends. He had been sick down his shirt and was a dreadful sight. 'Do you want to meet him?' Raymond asked, but being slightly prissy and fastidious I demurred and don't really regret it.

All this was shortly before Thomas set off on his last American tour. He was dead a few months later.

To begin with I was a little intimidated by Raymond; he gave the impression, or so I imagined, that he disapproved of me and didn't hold out much hope for my future. I suspect my displays of self-confidence and apparently indiscriminate enthusiasm were entirely foreign to him. Nevertheless, he was thoughtful and generous. On my first Friday night at *Cinderella* in the West End, although I was disappointed at seeing a pantomime instead of a straight play, Raymond, after curtain down, made contact with the show's press representative, Inky Stevens, shabby and dilapidated, looking as though he'd been cast for the part by an unimaginative director. They took me backstage to meet the Ugly Sisters, Vic Ford and Chris Sheen, female impersonators, a double act since 1936. Ford and Sheen reeked of the theatre, of carmine and mascara, tatty dressing rooms, stale beer, tobacco smoke and gaudy costumes, emblematic of the provinces, music hall, concert parties and summer shows. One was cheery, the other lugubrious; both were vulnerable, longing for praise, which we showered on them. I had my first taste of Guinness in their dressing room and when they learned I was hoping to go to RADA, one of them said, 'RADA? Oh, la-di-da!' And the other chorused, 'Yes! La di-definitely-da!' and screeched with delight, wishing me well. I suppose I slept that night but I somehow doubt it. I had not properly entered my new reality and I was impatient to explore the city. When daylight came I set out.

London was smaller then. I walked all morning, down the Charing Cross Road into Trafalgar Square, then Leicester Square and across to Piccadilly Circus to make my pilgrimage up Shaftesbury Avenue, passing the theatres so familiar to me from *Theatre World*, the Apollo, the Lyric, the husk of the Queen's damaged in an air raid, the Globe and, in Cambridge Circus, the Palace. Bomb damage still scarred the city. The sites on which once had stood houses, offices, flats and shops were now nothing but gaping holes covered in rubble sprouting rosebay, willow herb and buddleia. Soho with an abundance of cafés, dicey drinking clubs, French and Italian restaurants was raffish rather

than offensive as it later became. Night and day men and women lolled in doorways, not aggressive but definitely sleazy and somehow alluring; the streets then were not filled with large aimless, milling crowds.

Although six years had passed since the end of the War, Londoners had not yet fully recovered. Rationing was still in force, clothes were uniformly drab, but the wartime camaraderie lingered and the city exuded friendliness. The Welfare State had been introduced in 1945 by Clement Atlee's Labour government, but shortly before I arrived the Conservatives had been re-elected with Churchill becoming Prime Minister for the second time. I had the impression that the pre-war and wartime London I knew from films, plays and novels was little changed.

The West End theatre was dominated by H. M. Tennent Ltd. and its managing director, Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont, who presented all the leading actors of the day, among whom John Gielgud, Edith Evans, Ralph Richardson, Margaret Leighton and Laurence Olivier more or less guaranteed the 'House Full' boards out on most nights. Binkie's theatre was the theatre of Good Taste, beautifully designed and costumed, productions to please but not alarm. Television was in its infancy and the theatre was central to London, indeed to the cultural life of the nation. That first Saturday afternoon, I took myself to a Tennent production at Wyndham's Theatre to see Peter Ustinov in his own play *The Love of Four Colonels*. I was naïve, not to say stupid: because most of the house was full, I bought a seat in a box and irresponsibly overspent my meagre funds. In retrospect I am pleased that I did. Years later, when my own play, *Another Time*, was playing at the theatre, I sat in the same box to watch a performance.

In the evening of my first Saturday, I stood beside an old woman selling violets in Piccadilly Circus, my back to the Criterion Theatre, watching the world go by, seeing the Schweppes neon sign on the corner of the London Pavilion effervesce at regular intervals. The newness of things bombarded and delighted me.

The YMCA was too expensive for more than a couple of nights, but through the small South African mafia Lionel made enquiries and found me

digs first in Ealing with a Capetonian, Gladys Mayer, and her then husband, a doctor. They did not really have enough room in their flat, so a week later I moved to West Kensington where Percy and Ethel Helman, also Capetonians, lived in Charleville Mansions, a run-down Edwardian block with cold, oddly shaped rooms and high ceilings. Percy was doing Part One of his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons and was then a Registrar at the Royal Cancer Hospital, now renamed the Marsden, under a famous cancer surgeon of the day, Laurence Abel. Ethel had her small child, Michele, to care for, and since Percy worked ridiculously long hours I was company for her and, in return for a meal or two, a convenient babysitter. I handed over my ration book and my coupons were a help to the household. Percy and Ethel were a delightful couple and wonderfully kind. They remained lifelong friends. On their return to Cape Town, Percy became a leading cancer surgeon but died tragically young, somehow predictably, of cancer. Years later, Ethel, too, succumbed to the disease.

I had three letters of introduction. My sister-in-law, Nola, had cousins in London, the family Oliver, Josh, Cissie and their two children Michael and Valerie. They gave me dinner soon after my arrival. Michael in time became a distinguished entertainment lawyer and we, too, have remained friends. Another letter was to Sir Michael Balcon, famed as the producer of the Ealing comedies. If I had thought he would take one look at me and say, 'I want you in my next film,' I was mistaken. With the air of a kindly uncle he advised me that should I obtain a place at RADA, work hard, then come to see him when my studies were done. I met him again when we were both members of the Garrick Club. Seated next to him at lunch, I reminded him of our first meeting of which, of course, he had no recollection. He looked at me, slightly concerned, and asked, 'Was it good advice I gave you?' I said it was and he seemed greatly relieved. His daughter, Jill, the actress, was to become a neighbour and a friend when we lived in Hampshire.

The third letter was to Rabbi van der Zyl of the Upper Berkeley Street Reform Synagogue. I duly presented the letter and the Rabbi, rather shy and retiring, invited me to attend a Friday evening service, and then to accompany

him to his home for the Sabbath meal. He lived in a modest house in Golder's Green and, somehow, although he and his family were complete strangers to me, they made me welcome. But my most vivid impression of that Friday evening is of the Rabbi's ravishingly beautiful daughter, Nikki. I, being seventeen, thought about her often, but had to wait more than 50 years before seeing her again, when she was present at a lecture I was invited to give named in honour of her father.

London did for whatever religious fervour I may have possessed in adolescence and, like Nikki van der Zyl, was not to reappear for many years. Since Judaism is deeply connected to a sense of community, I suspect my new environment goaded me into believing that I would have to reinvent myself and the notion of belonging. In this I only partly succeeded. My doubts and uncertainties were and are always with me; my ability to write was yet to surprise me, the obsessions my change of career would encourage had not yet manifested themselves and so my sense of alienation seemed always to lurk in the shadows.