KATE GRENVILLE
(1950–)

Grenville was born in Sydney and educated at the University of Sydney. She has worked as a film editor and as an assistant director. She has published a collection of short stories, and three novels, including *Joan Makes History* (1988), which was written with the support of a grant from the Australian Bicentennial Authority.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

The banana-shaped tourists lie in chairs by the swimming pool and stocky Tamil waiters on bare feet bring them drinks. The daring ones have ice. The manager himself has assured us that yes, the water for the ice is boiled. Boiled and then frozen. Oh yes yes. Boiled, of course boiled.

For myself I avoid the ice. It's not exactly that I don't believe him. But I prefer to smile and shake my head. No ice, thank you.

Outside the cool marble corridors of this palace-turned-hotel, beyond the graceful arches framing the sky, the streets of Madras are hot. Out there the sun is a solid weight on the top of the head, a heavy hand across the back of the neck, but beside the blue water of the swimming pool the sun has been domesticated by umbrellas and palm-leaf screens. Where the guests sit turning brown or scarlet, Madras is as far away as a travel book.

Here by the pool, under a blue umbrella, Mr and Mrs Partridge involve me in kindly conversation.

—Travelling alone are you? You don't find it a bit . . . ?

Mrs Partridge's crepey old face puckers as if encountering a bad smell.

—A bit, you know, unpleasant?

Mr Partridge tries to clarify his wife's query. He rubs a hand over his bald head, red from the sun, and says:

—You don't find that these chaps. Ah. They don't let their own women out on their own. Of course.

They're kindly folk who do their best to conjure up the girl in white frills who must be underneath my baggy shirts. They even have a go at a little matchmaking. Mrs Partridge leans in and murmurs while Mr Partridge stares off across the pool.

—Sandra dear, we were talking last night to the young man who's here with the tour. A very nice type of young man.

Her husband brings his stare back from the middle distance and speaks energetically.

—Nice group of people here. The McFarlands. The Burnetts. The Pruitt chap. Good company helps, doesn't it? In this heat?

Mrs Partridge nods and shows me the pink plastic of her gums.

—That's him. Ted Pruitt.

I've seen Ted here by the pool carefully browning himself like a chop on both sides. I've seen the way the water pools around his body on the cement and the way the hairs on his legs stay flattened to the skin even after they've dried. I've enjoyed watching the hairs on his legs, and the shell-pink soles of his feet, that the sun makes translucent. In the small of his back is a dark mole, pleasingly symmetrical, the kind that can turn into a cancer. I have avoided looking at his face, filled with too many teeth, too much flesh, eyes of too knowing a blue.

On cue, Ted appears at the edge of the pool. His muscular arms glint with ginger hairs as he hauls himself out. The water streams down his head and makes it as flat as a dog's. He flicks his head sideways and glittering drops land on the concrete. As I watch they evaporate into the dense sunshine.

—Ted, we were just talking about you, says Mrs Partridge. Come and meet Sandra.

He stands over me, blocking out the sun. I squint up at him, at his face invisible against the glaring sky.

—Hi. What was it again, Sandra?

—Sandy, actually.

He stands above me, legs apart, water running down his body and spreading in pools around his feet.

—Sandy? Used to know a bloke once called Sandy.

He runs a hand over his shoulders, where skeins of muscle lie side by side under the skin.

—I mean, no offence of course.

He gestures and grins and watches me under cover of rubbing his head with his towel. I see him looking at my baggy pants and shirt, and my face half-hidden under the hat. When he stands up to dry himself, the muscles of his chest flex as he rubs his back,

and twinkling water is caught in the hairs of his curved thighs. He bulges heavily, thickly, unabashed, into the taut weight of stretched red nylon between his legs.

Mrs Partridge looks away as he rubs the water off his legs. Mr Partridge breaks the silence.

—I was just saying to Sandra . . . Sandy?

—Sandy.

—Ah. Just saying what a good bunch of people we've got here. Lucky, really.

Ted shakes water out of his ear.

—Too right.

He sits down, leaning back on his hands. I see his chest gleam in the sun but have to look away from the red bulge offered towards me.

—You been going around on your own all this time?

—Yes. It's been a lot of fun.

My voice sounds prissy in my own ears.

—Yeah?

He doesn't quite close his mouth after the word, so I can see blood-pink inner lip.

—Why'd a good-looking chick like you want to get around on your own?

He stares at me, waiting for an answer, but although I wet my lips with my tongue, I can't find one.

—You must have a bit of, you know, from the fellas.

He glances again at the shapeless pants and I wonder if he's thinking, on the other hand maybe she doesn't.

—Anyhow, any time you want to come around with us, just say the word. We'll look after you. No worries.

He smiles. It's the wide blank smile of a man who's looking down his own strong legs, safe in muscles and red nylon.

When the waiter comes over to pick up our glasses, I recognise him by the moustache, such a thin line on his upper lip that it might have been drawn with a ballpoint. Each morning this waiter brings my breakfast, knocking inaudibly before coming in immediately with his tray of pawpaw and the dazzling smile that

makes his moustache go crooked. I put a hand over my half-finished drink and he bows. He wonders too, when he sees me each morning lying in splendour in the canopied bed, why I'm alone. His black eyes dart from Ted to me and he bows again before padding off. He shouts in Tamil across the pool to another waiter and their laughter echoes between the arches.

The Partridges excuse themselves. They walk off arm-in-arm, slowly, like an advertisement for retirement. Ted and I sit in silence, and watch the waiter remove a toothpick from behind his ear and clean his fingernails with it. When he has finished, Ted sighs and says:

—Well, where you going next?

His voice seems very loud.

—I thought I might go to Bombay.

—Yeah? Look, we're all going there too, for the silver. Why don't you come with us? No good being on your own. For a girl especially.

He's watching me and I'm conscious of the size of his very white front teeth. His hair is starting to dry, fluffing out around his temples like down. I squint into the glare of light off the pool and picture myself diving in, trying to drown. Ted would rescue me, using the approved hair, chin or clothing carry to pull me to the side of the pool before administering artificial respiration. It would take determination to drown beside Ted.

—Well, thanks. But I don't think so.

Ted has not heard properly, shaking a last drop of water from his ear.

—Eh? That's settled then? We'll have a ball.

I have to raise my voice to say again:

—No. No, I don't think so. No.

Ted is in the middle of winking at me, thinking of the ball we'll have, when he understands that I have refused. The wink goes wrong and all the features of his face fight each other for a second. When they have resolved themselves into a coherent expression, it is one of suspicion and dislike.

—Okay. Suit yourself.

He gets up, flings his towel over the chair with a flourish, and dives in. He is a powerful swimmer, reaching the end of the pool in a few strokes and showing those pink soles in a flurry of water as he turns. He would hardly be able to imagine drowning.

—You've lost your young man!

Mr Partridge beams down at me. He and his wife are no longer arm-in-arm, but Mrs Partridge tweaks a thread off her husband's shoulder as he speaks. Behind the kindly uncle, winking at me from under white eyebrows, a sharp voice can almost be heard. Some people just don't want to be helped.

—We were counting on you to look after him!

Mrs Partridge's eyes disappear into a web of kindly wrinkles as she smiles teasingly. Behind the smile, embedded in the lines that pucker her mouth, is doubt. They both watch me, but I have nothing to tell them, and my smile is exhausting me.

Not far from the hotel, there is a cluster of shacks that squat in the dust, lining a path of beaten earth. Hens scatter under my feet and skeletal dogs run along nosing the ground. Pieces of cardboard cover the walls of the huts. DETER UPER WASH. They *are* the walls, I see when I look more closely. Women sit in the shade, picking over vegetables, while beside them their other sari hangs drying in the sun—tattered, dust-coloured with age, but washed. Is there another one in the dark interior of the hut? Is there, somewhere, the wedding sari, best quality cotton or maybe even silk, with the lucky elephant-border or the brocade border that reads GOOD LUCK GOOD LUCK GOOD LUCK all the way around the hem? As I pass, the women look up and stare, their lips drawn back to reveal stained teeth. They are not smiling, but only staring, and they look away when I smile.

Out of doorways a few small children appear, staring shyly, their huge dark eyes full of astonishment as they look at me. They curl one foot behind the other in embarrassment when I look at them and twist their bodies away as if fleeing, but their eyes never leave my face.

As I pass the huts the children drift out after me and at each

hut more emerge. I can hear their feet padding in the dust behind me. When I turn around to smile they all stop in mid-stride. They all stare, motionless except for a hand somewhere scratching a melon-belly, a foot rubbing the back of a leg, a finger busy up a nostril.

On the fringes of the silent group the girls stand, curious but listless, holding babies on their hips. They stare blankly, shifting the baby from one hip to the other, automatically brushing away a fly.

At last one of the boys lets out a nervous giggle and the tension breaks. Suddenly they're all shrieking, dancing around me, bravely reaching out to dab my arm and springing back, squealing and giggling.

They seem to know a bit of English. They yell:

—Good morning! Good afternoon! Good night!

When I speak to them they explode and cover their mouths with their hands to keep so much laughing hidden. They don't point, but they nudge each other and gesture around themselves, miming my clothes. One boy, bigger than the rest, wearing only a tattered pair of shorts that hangs precariously under his round belly, sweeps his hands around and stands before us. He stares up at me and says:

—You boy or girl?

His voice does not prejudice the question one way or the other.

—Girl. I'm a girl.

He stares, not believing. After a moment he grins enormously and laughs in a theatrical way to show how well he understands the joke. Then doubt clouds his face. He ducks his head as if overwhelmed by his question, but pulls at my sleeve:

—You boy or girl?

He stares up at me waiting for the answer. His round head, under its short fur of hair, seems too large for his frail neck. He cranes up at me for the answer.

—Boy. I'm a boy. Like you.

He considers that, but after a moment of looking at the front of my shirt he bends over with laughter again. Now he's

embarrassed and won't look at me. He says something to the other kids and they all stare at me. They're waiting for a proper answer. It's very quiet in this back lane. The horns of the taxis on the main road seem puny and very far away. It seems the kids could wait forever for an answer.

I start to walk back to the main road, but the kids follow, straggling after me along with the dogs and a hen or two. When I walk faster, some break into a run to keep up, even the girls, with the babies on their hips bouncing and crying. One by one they dart around in front of me and run backwards for a few yards to watch my face as they try again.

—You boy or girl? Boy or girl?

They're all doing it together so that the words have become a chant. Bah yo gel bah yo gel bah yo gel.

At the edge of the shack village they stop as if on a line drawn on the road. I walk on until finally I can wave goodbye before turning a corner that takes me out of sight. But they are still calling out even after I've disappeared. Bahyogel bahyogel. Their voices carry a long way down the quiet street.