

Mr Parker's Valentine

After only a few weeks Pearson and Eleanor Page were tired of living in the rented house. The rooms were small and stuffy, and the repetitive floral carpet depressed them every time they stepped into the dark hall. Pearson felt his wife would be less homesick if they had a house and garden of their own.

'House hunting will do you the world of good,' he said to her. Friends of theirs, just as recently arrived from England, were happily settled already, busy with paving stones, garden catalogues and plans for attractive additions to their new home.

So Eleanor looked at houses and quite soon she found exactly what she had always wanted. In the evening they went together to see it. It was old and had an iron roof. Wide wooden verandahs went all round the house, and faced the sun, or were shaded at just the right times.

On either side of the street were old peppermint trees, and there was an atmosphere of quiet dignity in the decaying remains of a once well-to-do residential area.

There was, however, a difficulty about the house. They stood together with the land agent out in the back garden, surrounded by a wilderness of full-skirted red-splashed hibiscus and flower-laden oleanders. All round them tall trees in a ring, sighing now and protesting, tossed their branches in the afternoon sea breeze. Cape lilacs, jacarandas, flame trees and Norfolk pines, green, light green upon dark. And, nearly as big as the house itself, a

gnarled and thickly-leaved mulberry tree, with early ripened fruit drooping, replenished the earth.

They stood in the noise of the wind, as if at the edge of waves, and were submerged in the swaying green, as if in water of unknown depths, to ponder over their problem.

At the end of the garden was a tall shed, stone-built with a patched corrugated iron roof. The door of the shed opened to the western sun and, in a little plot edged with stones and shells, herbs were growing and wild tobacco flowers. A short clothes line stretched between the door post and the fence. An old man lived in the shed.

'The trouble is,' the land agent said, 'he's lived here for years. The owners hope that whoever buys the house will let him stay on. He has no other home.'

'I'm afraid it's out of the question if we buy the house,' Pearson Page said, shouting a little to increase his authority and determination. He was a short man, fresh faced, looking younger than he was.

'Oh! I do so want the house,' Eleanor said. They stood remembering the recent pleasure of large fireplaces and polished jarrah floor boards, of high ceilings still with their graceful mouldings and, of course, the windows. Tall windows, each one framed and filled from outside with green leaves and woven patterns of stems and roses, jasmine and honeysuckle. And, all the rooms so fragrant just now with the scent of Chinese privet.

'I never had a house with such a spacious kitchen,' Eleanor said, adding to their thoughts. She wanted the house very much and felt the old man being there could make so little difference.

They all moved down to peer into the shed.

A great deal was crammed inside the shed, an old man's life-time of experience and possessions. Boxes were stacked and his lumpy bed was smoothed and tucked up in a black and grey plaid. Some matting covered the floor and there was a plain wood table and three scrubbed chairs. Over the wood stove were shelves piled with pans and crockery, and a toasting fork hung on a nail. Ivy, growing

in under the roof at the far end, hung down in a dark curtain catching and concealing the full sun as it flooded in through the open double doors.

'Place would make a good biscuit factory,' Pearson tried a joke, as he saw disaster in the corrugated iron and an old man's clothes hung out to dry in the sun.

The character and possibilities of the house were overwhelming; Beethoven in the evenings and perhaps the writing of poetry. Eleanor longed for such evenings on the verandah. She stepped into the shed.

'Pity to turn the old man out,' she said. 'But it would make a marvellous rumpus room for the boys.' She used the word 'rumpus' with the self-conscious effort of fitting in to the phrases of a new country.

'Ah, you have sons?' the house agent asked gently.

'Yes, two,' Eleanor explained. 'They are just finishing off the year at boarding school in England and will be joining us later.'

'Mr Parker's out shopping just now,' the house agent continued in his soft voice, his knowledge suggesting years of experience of Mr Parker's habits. 'He does not trouble the house at all,' he said.

The wind tossed the tumult of branches to and fro. 'Think it over,' the house agent said.

The Pages had always enjoyed a single-minded, smooth partnership in their marriage and now, for the first time, they were unable to come to some kind of agreement about the old man and whether he should be allowed to stay.

'I can't think why all this fuss,' Pearson said, his face very red because of the sun; he scooped out the fragrant flesh of a rock melon. Juice stayed on his lips. 'We can buy the house if we want it. There's nothing about the old man to stop us buying the house. It can be ours tomorrow. All we have to do is to say we don't want him there. And he'll have to go. It's as simple as that. I can't think why you're so worried.'

'But Pearson, where would he go? We can't just turn

him out. I couldn't live there if we did that.'

Neither of them slept.

In the end Pearson agreed to the old man remaining. 'Any trouble,' he shouted, 'and out he goes!' He did not want to disappoint Eleanor and, in any case, he wanted the house too.

On the day they moved in they were too pleased and excited at being able to unpack their own things at last to think of the old man.

Pearson strutted in and out of the empty rooms giving instructions. He was a sandy man and his face was fresh and rosy coloured, contrasting with the tired grey cheeks of the two men who were carrying in the furniture and the countless boxes; for Pearson and Eleanor had many books and pictures and other treasures.

In the evening the old man came up to the back door and introduced himself. He was small and clean and had the far-away voice of a deaf person.

'I've roasted a half leg of lamb, the shank end, I thought you'd like a bit of dinner. Six thirty sharp, down at my place,' he said. 'Plenty of gravy.'

Eleanor in her dirty removal dress was embarrassed. 'Oh, no thank you. We couldn't possibly spare the time . . .' she began, smiling kindly at his best clothes. But he could not hear her.

'Don't be late! Six thirty sharp; hotting up a roast spoils it,' he said, and went off down the garden.

So there was nothing to do but leave their unpacking and arranging, tidy themselves up and go in an awkward little procession of two down to the shed.

Inside the shed it was surprisingly bright and cosy; it was the wood stove and the smell of the hot meat. The old man told them about his life when he travelled round Australia at the turn of the century. He was just explaining about the quarantine camps of those far-off days, when he suddenly stopped, and said. 'Yo' know what day it is?' Eleanor, smiling, shook her head.

'Valentine's Day!' he said, and he climbed up on the

boxes and fetched down a grimy envelope from behind a rafter.

'Fifty years ago that was sent to me,' he said proudly. And he showed them the dusty paper pillowed heart, stuck all over with faded daisies.

'Who sent it?' Eleanor asked. She had to shout the question three times, self-consciously, trying to hide Pearson's boredom.

'Ah! You're not supposed to know who sends a Valentine,' the old man creaked with the far-away reedy laughter of the deaf.

Late in the night, they made their way up the dark garden. The house, neglected, was hostile with nothing done. Confusion in every room.

'Not even the bed made,' Pearson's voice was disagreeable with the wasted evening. He had wanted to put up pictures and arrange their Venetian glass.

'Oh Mr Parker's delightful.' Eleanor hurriedly found the sheets. Really Pearson's sulky ways made her very uncomfortable, especially as the old man was so friendly.

In the next few weeks there were some things to trouble them. Old Mr Parker, early one morning, painted all the verandah posts blue, spoiling the appearance of the house.

'Protection against the weather,' he explained. He chopped down the passion vine, his thin stumpy arms whirling the axe as if he had unlimited strength.

'Too old,' he pointed at the gnarled twisted growth of the vine.

Every time Pearson started to do some gardening, Mr Parker was at his elbow.

'Wrong time of the year to prune them lemon trees,' he said. And 'You'll not pull up all them bricks in that path, I hope.' The reedy voice irritated Pearson; he longed to work without interference. He sought for something to heal himself in the garden. He had come to a new post, his first university appointment, thinking to pour the culture and refinement of his mind over his new colleagues. It had been a surprise to him to find thoughts wider and greater

than his own, and a wider establishment of learning than he had thought possible in the far-away place he had come to. Every day he had to adjust to some new discovery of his own ignorance. The garden could have been a place for a quiet renewal of his spirit and energy, but it was not so with the presence of the old man.

Eleanor too was strange, she seemed to like Mr Parker so much. Pearson wasted hours waiting for Eleanor, who had slipped down to the shed for two minutes. Sometimes she was there in that biscuit factory, with the stupid old goat, for a whole evening. Really, the old man would have to go. Pearson felt he could not wait to get him away, together with all the rubbish there was down there.

Eleanor said the old man meant well, but Pearson was not so sure of this. He could not understand her attitude, and she was unable to accept what she suddenly saw as a cruel side in his nature.

In the night Eleanor thought she heard a tiny shout. She sat up. Again, a tiny far-away shout in the night.

'It's the old man! Mr Parker's calling us,' she roused Pearson.

'Oh don't fuss,' yawned her husband. 'He's used to being alone. He can look after himself.' He turned over and went on sleeping.

Eleanor went down, in the dark, to the shed. The night was fragrant with the sweet scent of the datura, the long white bells trembled, swinging without noise, and the east wind snored in the restless tree tops. Fantastic fire-light danced in the shed and the old man called to her from his dishevelled bed.

'I've got the shivers,' he said. 'There's a good girl! Make up the stove for me and squeeze me some lemons and boil up the kettle.' He gave his orders and his teeth chattered.

'Just a chill,' he comforted Eleanor. 'Get me warm,' he said, 'an' tomorrer I'll be right you'll see.'

Eleanor did as she was told.

The old man slept a little and Eleanor sat there beside him. In the small light he looked ill and frail. She thought

he might die. She thought it would be much easier if he did die. It was not that she wanted him to die, only that if this was the end of his life, and he had lived a long time, it would solve all their difficulties. Lately she had been so unhappy.

'Shall I get the doctor?' she shouted to him when he opened his eyes. But he laughed at her.

'Put some more wood on the stove, my dear. I got the shivers that's all, it's nothing.'

A bit later he opened his eyes.

'Yor husband's a quiet man,' he said. 'Still waters run deep they say.' He gave a little far away laugh, and then he said, 'Thank you, my dear. I'm much obliged to you,' and he slept.

Eleanor went back up the dark garden, the moon rode on the restless fragrance and she felt grateful for the old man's call.

'I think I should sit with him,' she woke Pearson.

'Whatever for, if we weren't here he would be alone.'

'But we are here.' Eleanor stood uneasily by their bed.

'I don't see that that comes into it. We bought the house it's true, and we live in it, but that does not mean we are responsible for the old fool, and his so-called illness.'

'But Pearson, he's really ill.'

'That's his look out. We can't look after all the old men who are ill. If he doesn't want to be alone, he shouldn't live there. You'll only wear yourself out.' Pearson added his warning.

They seemed to face a wall in their marriage, and they tried to sleep and could not.

By the next weekend Mr Parker was quite recovered.

Pearson was disappointed and angry to see him emerge from the shed as if nothing had been wrong with him. Ignoring advice, 'It's not the best time for it,' Pearson cut dead wood out of the hibiscus. 'Yo'll not touch them roses I hope,' the reedy voice followed Pearson, so he turned his attention to the flame tree. One great bough, he could see, was a danger to the house.

Collecting necessary materials, he set to work. He sat in among the thicket of leaves, straddling a branch near the trunk, and began with his well cared for saw to cut the offending limb. Slowly and methodically the saw went to and fro. Pearson was surprised the wood was so soft. He was surprised too at the sharp thorns the tree had all over the branches; from the ground the bark looked quite smooth.

Mr Parker stood under the tree.

'Yo' want to take that branch bit by bit,' he shouted, cupping his mouth with one hand, though Pearson was only a few feet above his head.

'If yo' cut it there it'll tear,' the old man warned. 'Them trees is best cut when the leaves is off.'

'Too heavy,' he explained to Eleanor. 'Too heavy!' he shouted up to Pearson.

'Oh mind your own business you old fool,' Pearson said, but of course Mr Parker was so deaf it didn't matter what anyone said.

Eleanor, standing by, wished Pearson would not look so irritable. There was no pleasure in anything they did now. She smiled at the old man.

'Mr Parker says the branch will tear,' she called up timidly.

'I heard,' Pearson replied grimly, the saw was stuck and he could see he needed something to pull on the branch.

'Throw me the rope,' he called down. Eleanor could pull at the branch from below.

'Yo'll rip right down the trunk,' Mr Parker called. 'He's new to our trees,' he explained to Eleanor.

'Yes, yes, of course,' and she smiled at him.

'Pull! Haul!' Pearson called to Eleanor when the rope was secure.

'What if the branch falls on me?' she cried.

'I'll shout and you run for it,' Pearson called back.

'Pull! Haul!' He saw her straining, but nothing happened. The white smile of wood remained tightly clenched on the saw.

'Yo' need to work at it bit by bit,' Mr Parker said to Eleanor. 'I'm a comin' up!' he called to Pearson. And the next moment he was up the ladder with Pearson's new pruning saw, and off onto the swaying branch along to the end of it, cutting twigs and little branches. Leaf-laden tufts fell to the ground below as he cut this side and that.

'Yo' want to lighten the branch and cut further out to start with,' he explained to Pearson who, red-faced with anger, still sat straddling his branch.

Pearson, before becoming a university professor, had a short but brilliant army career behind him, and he was not going to be ordered about by old men.

'Go down this instant!' he shouted at the old man. His voice was so loud Mr Parker heard it. He stopped his prancing on the branch and stared at Pearson as if unable to understand the reason for the anger.

In that moment Pearson seemed to see the old man as something more than a nuisance; he saw in him something tenacious and evil. And the thought came to him that perhaps many people had taken the house and been forced by reasons, unknown to the land agent, to leave.

'I must be ill,' Pearson thought to himself, 'to have such stupid ideas.' But as he saw Mr Parker coming slowly along the swaying branch he felt he would fight this thing, whatever it was, and he would keep the house; he would fight with all his strength. Mr Parker advanced slowly, in his hand he held the pruning saw and on his face was a strange expression.

From the ground, Eleanor thought he was going to cry, but the awkwardly pointing little saw, with its curve of sharp teeth, frightened her.

'Pearson!' she cried out.

'Go down this instant!' Pearson's voice was deep and loud. And still seated astride the branch, his back against the trunk, he pointed down towards the ground with authority.

'Yo' go down then,' Mr Parker said. In his reedy little voice there was no anger. 'You've more weight nor me.

Yo' pull on the rope, an' I'll get her out.' He indicated the saw.

Pearson recognized this as commonsense, but he was not going to be told what to do by this old fool.

'Go down. This instant!' he shouted, still pointing down.

'Well, orl right. I'll have a go on the rope with 'er then.' Mr Parker scrambled down the ladder.

'Come on Missus,' he said to Eleanor, and together they took the rope.

Pearson watched the pantomime below. Eleanor, in her unfashionably long skirt, pulling on the rope with the little old man dangling behind her. The morning had become ridiculous.

'Pull! Haul! Heave! Haul!' he bellowed.

And then, to his amazement, the cut in the branch suddenly widened and, with a roar, the great leaf-laden bough fell away grazing his thigh as it tore down the side of the trunk. He caught the saw before it fell.

'Timbahi!' he yelled. 'Run for it!'

Of course Mr Parker heard nothing of the warning. And Eleanor, leaping clear of the heavy falling foliage, tried to grab his shoulder to pull him away, but a forked branch came sharply and painfully between them, and Mr Parker was left there under the heavy fallen mass.

'Oh my God!' Pearson sprang from the tree and pushed through the leaves and branches.

It was an action accompanied by feelings he was never able to forget afterwards.

-Eleanor could only stand and watch. She saw her husband's bare feet, competent and clean in rubber thongs. She thought his feet looked cruel, and she realised they must have always been like that.

Pearson toiled like a sick man to clear out the shed. He cleared and destroyed as if cleaning himself of an infection. The whole place would be different by the time his boys arrived from England.

As he worked he found himself thinking all the time of the old man. He kept expecting to see the washed-out shirt between leaves and bushes, and he missed the persistent reedy voice at his elbow. The garden, so much the old man's place, seemed deserted.

He tried to discipline his mind. He thought about his boys and longed for the time when they would come. He longed for their voices and the noise of their healthy bodies about the house. He wanted to be concerned again with examination results, sports training and dogs and bicycles and the choosing of birthday presents.

The envelope, treasured up all the years, fluttered and fell with the dust being brushed from the beams and rafters. The old man again.

'Who wins a fight anyway,' Pearson muttered to himself. He had to put aside too, the thought that his boys were hardly boys now and would not want the same things from him.

'It's Mr Parker's Valentine,' Eleanor picked it up. 'And he never knew who sent it to him.' She experienced curiosity sadly. Beyond the double doors of the shed, doves laughed softly in the silky morning.

'Put it on the fire,' Pearson ordered.

He thought, as he dragged boxes and tore down ivy, that everything would have been different if the old man had found out all those years ago who had sent him the Valentine.

Eleanor, carrying the dirty envelope up to the house, was thinking the same thing. She had been fondly patient with Mr Parker and knew she was without blame, yet she felt the burden of Pearson's anger and resentment. He had shown how he felt, while she hid her feelings, so giving him full responsibility. She knew they would never speak of any of this now, and she could not reach Pearson in his grim remorse. All day they worked, separately.

'Pearson,' Eleanor called from the house.

'Coming.' He went slowly up the garden.

Some time earlier they had arranged to have a party, a

kind of house warming. Neither of them had suggested putting it off. It was time to start preparing for the evening and they tried to smile in readiness for their visitors.

'If they've really found her I don't care how much the salvage costs,' he said. 'I'll go down right away.'

'What about Brown's yard?' mother asked. 'Your tea's ready,' she said, she always worried about what to get him for his tea.

'I don't want it,' he called, 'you have it.' And he edged by the silver dainty doll he'd never taken on the river, and we heard the door slam and his feet racing to get to the police station before it closed.

Woman in a Lampshade

One cold wet night in July Jasmine Tredwell took several sheets of paper and her typewriter together with a quantity of simple food and some respectable wine and, saying good-night fondly to her dozing husband, she set off in search of solitude.

'I'm going up to the farm,' she said, 'I'll be home first thing on Monday morning,' she promised. But her husband, Emeritus Professor of Neo Byzantine Art, was encased in head-phones listening to Mahler and paid no attention to the departure.

It was not her custom to give lifts to strangers. Indeed, because of reported bashings and murders in lonely suburbs, she had, in an impulsively tender moment, promised the elderly Professor that she would never pick up from the roadside any stranger however pathetic or harmless his appearance.

She saw the young man standing in the dark. He seemed to be leaning rather than standing, the storm holding him up in its force. He was an indistinct outline, blurred because of the rain. It was as if he had come into existence simply because someone, hopelessly lost among words, had created him in thoughtful ink on the blotting paper. Immediately, forgetting her promise, she stopped the car and, leaning over, opened the door with some difficulty.

'Hop in quick young man, you're getting drowned!'

The grateful youth slipped quickly into the warm and secure fragrance. He tried, without success, not to mark the

clean upholstery with the water as it ran off him in dirty little streams. Jasmine took the hills noisily, the windscreen wipers flying to and fro flinging off the splashing as if the car boasted small fountains on either side.

'Thanks,' he said, 'thanks a lot.'

'Such a terrible night,' she said, 'are you going far?'

'As far as I can get.'

'Where shall I drop you?'

'Oh, anywhere. It'll do if you drop me off when you've gone as far as you're going.' He gave a nervous little laugh. 'Tah very much,' he said. 'Thank you very much, tah!'

That the young man had no definite destination did not cause Jasmine to wish that she had not stopped to offer him a ride. They hardly spoke. Almost at once Jasmine was touched to notice that her youthful travelling companion had fallen asleep.

'He must have been exhausted,' she thought and she wondered about his ragged soaked clothes. 'He's probably hungry too,' she said to herself.

Jasmine felt safe in the lamplight. And she felt safe in the lampshade, pretty too. She was not a pretty woman, she never pretended to be. But the lampshade, when she put it on, made her feel pretty, softly so and feminine. It was the colour of ripe peaches and made of soft pleats of silk. It was light and it fitted her perfectly. It was like a garden-party hat only more foolish because it was, after all, a lampshade. To wear the lampshade suggested the dangerous and the exotic while still sheltered under a cosy domesticity.

She never guessed the first time she placed it on her head how she would feel. She had never experienced such a feeling before. It had taken her by surprise. After that first time she had looked with shy curiosity at other women in shops and at parties, at the hairdresser's and even while passing them in the street, quietly noticing the private things about them, the delicate shaping of the back of the neck or the imaginative tilt of the ears. She wondered too about all the tiny lines and folds and creases, all the secret things. So recently having discovered something about herself, she

wondered what secret pleasures they had and whether they had known them long before she had discovered hers.

She sang softly,

I love my little lampshade

So frilly and warm

If I wear my silky lampshade

I'll come to no harm.

'Are you awake?' she asked the young man later that night. He was buried under a heap of old fur coats and several spoiled pages.

'Are you awake? Hey! Are you awake? God? how soundly you sleep! It's being young, I suppose, hey! wake up!'

'What's that? What the...?' he hardly moved.

'Young man, could you move over a bit, my typewriter's falling off my knee, it's giving me the most awful cramp. Also I'm getting a pain in my back. Ah! that's better. No, no further or you'll fall out. That'll do beautifully. Hey!' she laughed, pleased with the music of her own voice, 'don't roll back! You know, if you lie on the edge of the bed, you'll soon drop off!'

He drew the coats closer and made no sound.

'That was supposed to be a joke,' she said noisily rearranging the papers. 'But seriously,' she said, 'it's like this, I've got a young man, he's a bit of a nuisance really. First he's in a suburban post office in Australia. Can you imagine him behind the counter with his pale offended eyes about to burst into tears and all the little veins and capillaries flushed on his crooked boyish face, or something like that?'

'Then he turns up again in a depressing hotel in Calais where two lesbians have gone to have a bit of privacy. The younger one wants to get away from her husband and the older one is the husband's secretary, a really boring stuffy old maid. She's quite empty headed and very irritating to be with for more than a few minutes as the younger one discovers quite quickly. In addition, the secretary, the boring one, drinks heavily and is not really very clean. An unfortu-

nate situation altogether. Anyway, my young man's there at the hotel reception desk, in the night, being absolutely useless.'

'Who?' the voice muffled in furs could hardly be heard. 'My young man of course,' Jasmine, preening, fingered her peach-ripe silk pleats lovingly. 'He's left the P.O. to be a hotel receptionist in Calais,' she continued, 'And then, to my surprise, he moves to a cheap hotel in India, Madras to be exact, and I've got him there exactly the same, the pale offended eyes filled with tears, the same blushing capillaries, perhaps he's a bit thinner, more haunted looking and, as usual, he's no earthly use,' Jasmine sighed sadly. 'He's absolutely unable to help the guests when they arrive exhausted in the night. It's two more lesbians, younger than the others and one is very uncomfortable with an unmentionable infection. Not a very nice subject really but, as a writer, I have to look closely at *Life* and every aspect of it.' Jasmine sighed again thoughtfully, her long fingers reaching up restlessly plucked the folds of unexpected foolishness.

'*C'est un triste métier*,' she knew her pronunciation was flawless. 'In all the stories,' she said, 'one of the women is horrible to my young man. Absolutely horrible! I mean one in all three. So that's three times he has a really bad time, in all, he's despised, rejected and betrayed. But I'm glad to say that on all occasions the awful unkind behaviour is deeply regretted as soon as the resulting wretchedness is evident.'

'What's the trouble?' the young man sat up and yawned almost dislocating his lower jaw. Jasmine banged her typewriter.

'Can't you understand, I'm stuck! I'm stuck, stuck, stuck.' She shuffled the papers across the bed. 'Oh by the way,' she said as calmly as she could, 'would you mind not smoking in bed. My husband can't stand it.'

'He's not here is he?' the young man began uneasily, 'you said, I thought ...'

'No of course not,' Jasmine said, 'but the smoke hangs around and he's very sensitive, his nose I mean.' She laughed. 'But,' she said, 'whatever shall I do with them?'

'Who?'

'My characters of course. I suppose,' she paused, 'I suppose they could carry on in bed.' She began to type rapidly. 'Eh? Yeah!' He turned over.

'Mind the typewriter! Oops! I thought it was gone that time. That's better. You know I must tell you I've got a friend, Moira, well she's not a friend really, more of an enemy. Writers don't have any friends.' She settled comfortably against her mountain of pillows. 'Well Moira's trying to get a psychiatric musical off the ground. God! That woman's a Bore when she talks about her work. She never stops talking! All last week she was on about an official speech she'd been asked to write for the ceremonial opening of a deep sewerage system, I mean what is there in deep sewerage?'

'Quite a lot I should think,' he yawned again. 'Have you got going now?'

'No, not at all, it's awful!' she pulled another spoiled page from her typewriter. 'I'm afraid,' she said watching the paper as it floated to the floor, 'I'm afraid, well, you must feel so trapped and cheated. I mean, being here with me in this lonely place. Just think! I brought you all this way and then everything happening like that!'

'What d'you mean, happening,' he said patiently, 'I mean nothing has yet, has it?'

'I didn't expect my young man and the lesbians ...'

'I thought they was in Madras,' he interrupted.

'Yes, yes that's right, so they should be, but my young man ...'

'Well, where is he then? I thought the idea was we'd be having the place to ourselves and I'd work the farm and -' a note of disappointment replaced the impatience in his voice.

'It's such a nuisance,' Jasmine replied. 'Really I'm sorry. I was so looking forward, you know, to our getting to know each other and,' she paused, 'and there he is, stupid and useless!'

'Who? Where is he?' he sat up.

'In my brief-case. Would you mind awfully? I left it just outside in the porch, I'd be so grateful if you would.'

Reluctantly he looked at the cold floor.

'No stop!' Jasmine cried. 'Stay where you are in the warm. I must be mad! I'm the one who should go. It's my fault he's out there. I should go. I'm going out to get him. You stay in bed. I'm going!'

Jasmine slipped from the bed and pattered with quick bare feet over the boards. He heard the outside door open and slam shut. He heard the noise of plates and cups and cutlery, a plate dropped somewhere crashing and breaking.

'What's that? Who's there?' he called.

'It's nothing,' she replied through a mouthful of food, 'nothing at all to worry about. I'm just having a cheese sandwich.' She came to the bedside. 'Would you like some or are you the kind of person who doesn't like eating in bed? I've sliced up an onion and a hard-boiled egg. Do have some!'

'No thank you,' he said. 'I'm not hungry really no; no thank you, really not hungry thanks all the same.'

Jasmine ate ravenously.

'Have some Burgundy,' she said, 'or would you prefer a beer?' She poured a generous glass of wine for herself and opened a can for her guest.

'Just move over a bit,' she said with her mouth full, 'thanks.' She chewed and swallowed, 'I'm sorry, really I am,' she said, 'about these papers all over the bed. I'd like to be able to make it up to you in some way. You see I should never have picked you up. When I saw you at the side of the road absolutely drenched I simply couldn't help offering you a lift.' She studied the remains of the egg apparently lost in thoughts for which there were no words. 'Ever since I decided to become a writer,' she announced, 'I've been an absolute Pain! You hardly know me really. I mean, take tonight, I've been perfectly terrible. Please, please don't try to contradict me.'

In the silence of his obedience he hiccupped.

'Manners!' he apologized.

'Oh dear!' Jasmine was dismayed. 'Perhaps you shouldn't

drink beer in bed. My husband always gets hiccups if he drinks lying down. Try walking about.'

He was not inclined to leave the bed.

'Well,' Jasmine said, 'if you're shy put this old nighty on. You walk about and I'll think up a fright for you.'

Self-conscious and solemn in brushed nylon the young man paced to and fro on the creaking floor boards. He hiccupped at regular intervals. Every minute his thin body jerked.

'Manners!' he muttered, and one minute later, 'Manners!'

Suddenly she screamed, 'Help! Help!'

'What the, who's there? Where the hell are you?' he hiccupped. 'Manners!'

'Help! Hellup!'

He hiccupped, 'Manners! Where the hell are you?'

'Under the bed silly! Help me out there's not much space.' She was out of breath. 'Such a pity it didn't work.' In the brief silence he hiccupped again.

'Look out!' she whispered. 'Look out! There's a spider behind you. A great black spider. S.P.I.D.E.R. Look behind you!'

'Manners! What? I can't hear you. Manners!'

'Oh, it's no good. You'll simply have to wait till they wear off.' She was just the tiniest bit sulky. 'I really can't help it,' she said, adjusting the lampshade with one delicate finger, 'if He visits me in the middle of the night.'

'Who? Here? Who visits you?' He began to search through the heap of furs. 'Where's my clothes? I'd better be off. Look, I shouldn't be here.'

Jasmine laughed. 'Oh relax! The Muse of course,' she said, 'perhaps I should say My Muse.' She paused. 'It's very amusing really Oh! Her laughter was like a shower of broken glass. 'Oh!' she said, 'I made a pun there. I wonder if I could use it somewhere in here, let me see.' She rearranged several of the papers. She laughed again. 'You look so serious walking up and down in that tatty old gown.' He turned to look at her seriously and steadily.

'I've been wondering what's that, I mean, what's that on your head?'

'It's a lamphshade,' she replied.

'If you don't mind my arskin', why do you?'

'Always when I'm writing,' her voice was deep with reverence.

'But I thought we was going to have it away together.'

'Yes,' Jasmine said, 'I thought so too but it's my young man -'

'The one who was in all those places?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, I see,' he paused and said in a flat voice, 'praps I'd better go then.'

'Oh no,' Jasmine said, 'there's absolutely no need. I know,' she said, 'let's dance! My little transitor's here somewhere. I know it's here, somewhere here.' She rummaged among the bear skins and the ancient silver fox. 'Ah! here we are. If we danced, you never know, it might be better. I'll just see if I can get some music. Ah good! here's music. Listen there's a dancing teacher too. What a scream!'

The pulse of the music noticeably caused life to return and the dancing instructor's voice flowed quietly bringing shape and order into the disordered room.

'Now for the stylized step. Starting position,' the Irish voice was kind, 'beat one step up beat two step together beat three step back beat four step together up together back together and up together and back together arms loose relax and smile.'

'Come on!' Jasmine was laughing.

'I don't dance. Really, I don't dance.'

'Oh come on!'

'Not on beds. I don't dance on beds. It's too dangerous and, besides, it's rude.'

Jasmine laughing and breathless reached out and turned the volume on more.

There was a change in the music.

'Now the basic camel walk and step and kick and camel walk,' the instructor's patient voice continued. 'Beat one stub left beat two stub right beat three stub left beat four stub right beat five stub left beat six kick left beat seven stub right beat eight and kick and kick that's just fine you'll make

it in time beat one stub left beat two stub right think happy and relax beat three stub left beat four stub right that's great you're great the greatest!'

Jasmine fell off the bed with a crash.

'And now the Latin Hustle,' the dancing instructor's persistent voice changed rhythm as the music changed. 'Touch and one and two and step back three and four forward five and six repeat touch and one and two and step and one and two and one.'

'Now you've properly done it! The young man fell over the furniture. 'You've knocked over the light. Have you broke it? It's pitch dark!' He stumbled again, knocking over a chair. 'Where are you?' he shouted. 'It's pitch black dark. Yo' must 'ave broke the lamp.'

'Over here!' Jasmine sang, teasing through the music and the darkness.

'Where's the matches?' Panic made him angry.

'Yoo hoo! Here I am,' Jasmine was beside him, and then she was far away. 'I'm over here,' she called, and suddenly she was close again. Both were breathing heavily, gasping even, furniture fell and crockery crashed as if something was rocking the cottage. Jasmine was laughing and laughing, pleased and excited.

'Oh go on,' she cried. 'Don't stop!' she pleaded.

'Repeat these movements till you feel comfortable and confident in your performance,' the dancing instructor's voice, keeping time perfectly, penetrated above and below the sound of the music. 'Follow the beat sequence and turn and turn repeat and turn and repeat,' his patience was endless.

'I'm going outside,' the young man was polite and strained. 'If yo'll excuse me,' he said, 'I'll 'ave to go outside.'

'Yes, yes of course,' Jasmine said, 'Just through the yard and up the back you can't miss.'

'Thanks,' he let the door slam. 'Sorry!' he called.

'You'll make it in time,' the dancing master's voice consoled. 'Try once more beat one stub left beat two stub right.'

Jasmine switched off her tiny radio. She was laughing

softly, breathlessly. 'Now where's the other lamp and the matches? Ah! here they are.'

In the soft light she made herself comfortable with three pillows at her back. She began to type rapidly,

'My story just needs a bit of action,' she said.

A gun shot sounded close by, it was followed by a second shot.

'Splendid!' Jasmine said. 'That's just what I needed. Now I know what happens next.' She continued to type. 'He'd better do it at once. But not in Madras. He'd better get on a plane quickly.' Her typewriter rattled on. 'Oh well to save time he can do it at the airport.' She read aloud what she had written in the mincing tones reserved for her work. *Quietly he took the jewelled pistol from its silky case and held it to his pale crooked forehead. His eyes were full of tears...* She changed her voice. 'That's a nice touch, the crooked forehead, what exquisite writing. I've never written so well before.' She read again in the special voice, as she typed, *Closing his eyes, he pulled the trigger...*

The young man came in. He hiccupped.

'Oh my God!' said Jasmine. 'What happened?'

'I missed both times,' his voice was flat.

'Oh what a nuisance. So you're still here.' She pulled the page from her typewriter and crumpled it in her hand.

'Of course I'm still here. Where should I be?'

'But the shots,' Jasmine interrupted, 'I thought -'

'Oh that! I tried to get a rabbit but it was too quick,' he gave a shy laugh. 'I've never pointed a gun at anything before.'

'Useless, absolutely useless,' Jasmine was exasperated, 'you've muffed the whole thing. You muffed it. Can't you do anything properly?'

'I don't know,' he was almost tearful, 'I've never had the chance.'

'I suppose you've never tried for long enough,' she said.

'I would be able to if I stayed here. I -' he was eager. 'I've had a look out there. I like your place. It's just beginning to get light out there, I could see all the things that need doing. I'll fix the fence posts and paint the sheds. I think

I know what's up with the tractor, I'll be able to get it going. There's all the things I'd like to do out there.' He paused and then rushed on, 'on the way up here in the car you said I could stay and work the farm, you said you needed someone like me.'

'You never stay anywhere long enough, you said so yourself.' She put a fresh sheet in the typewriter.

'Well it's not my fault. Like I said, "I've had no chance."'

'What do you do?' Jasmine asked.

'What d'you mean?'

Outside a rooster crowed.

'Oh never mind!' Jasmine yawned. 'I suppose you're, how do they describe it,' she paused, 'discovering yourself.'

'I'm between jobs,' he shouted, 'That's where I've always been, between jobs. Between jobs. Between nothing!' he paused.

'But out there,' he was breathless and excited, 'I saw it all out there waiting to be done, there's everything to do out there. I'll fix everything, you'll see.'

'We like it as it is,' Jasmine said. 'My husband and I like it as it is, we don't want any change.'

'There's even a turkey yard,' he interrupted her, 'you'd like some turkeys wouldn't you, the yard only needs a bit of new wire netting. I'd have some fowls too.'

'But don't you understand,' Jasmine said, 'we only come here to get away from it all. We like the place as it is. It's only a weekender you know, we like it like this.'

'I'll measure up how much wire,' he ignored her, 'I'll need a bit of paper and a pencil. I'll work out how much paint.'

'Australia, Calais, Madras,' Jasmine said softly, 'what does it matter where I set him, London, New York, Bombay, Paris, Rome, it's all the same wherever he is. What does it matter where he pulls the trigger. First, I'll get him somewhere alone and then I'll kill him off.'

'What's that,' he said quickly, 'what did you say?'

Outside another rooster answered the first one.

'Oh, nothing,' she fussed through her papers. 'I think it's really quite light outside now. There's a bus down at the crossroads about five fifty. It should get you back to town

around eight o'clock. She paused and then said, 'I want you to know I feel really bad about the whole thing. I mean about bringing you all the way to the cottage like this,' she spoke rapidly, 'because of wasting your time like this, and I do feel bad about it, I'm going to give you this poem I've written. You can keep it. I have other copies.'

'Thank you,' he was only just polite, 'thank you very much.'

'Fourteen stanzas,' Jasmine crooned, 'fourteen stanzas all with fourteen lines and every one all about my adorable little black poodles.'

'What'll I do,' the young man said, 'when I get to the empty town at eight?'

'There's a little refrain,' Jasmine murmured, 'in the middle of every stanza.'

'What'll I do,' he said, 'when I get to the empty town at eight? I mean where will I go? What can I do there?'

'All the stanzas,' she continued, 'have this little refrain to include every one of my little black dogs.'

'I mean,' he said, 'where will I go when I get there? I'd rather stay here and fix the fences. Where will I go? What's there to do in the empty town at eight?' He smiled a moment at his own thoughts. 'You know,' he said, 'there's something good about putting new paint on with a new brush. Dark glossy green, I can just see it out there,' he smiled in the direction of the yard.

'When I wrote the poem,' Jasmine said, 'I knew it was good. I was really pleased with it. It's a good poem. I love my poem.'

'Where will I go in the empty town?' he whined. 'I'll have nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep. Can't I stay and paint the shed? Please?'

'I want everyone to be pleased with the poem,' she said.

'Eight's early to reach town if you've no reason,' he shouted.

'There!' Jasmine smiled, 'I've just thought of a wonderful line for a new poem. I must get it down because I forget everything I think up if I don't get it down.' She began to

type, made a mistake, and pulling the spoiled page out, started a fresh page.

'I mean,' the young man cried, 'where will I go when I get there? What's there in town for me to do?'

'I never realized before,' Jasmine yawned, 'that my young man in Madras is an absolute bore!'

He went to the door and opened it. 'Well, I'd better be on my way then,' he said in a quiet flat voice. He went out carefully closing the door behind him.

Jasmine sat in bed writing her autobiography. *My father, she typed, was the distinguished scientist who discovered heat and light.* She stopped typing to sing to herself,

*I love my little lamphshade
So frilly and warm
If I wear my silky lamphshade
I'll come to no harm.*

He wrote, she typed, in his lifetime, two text books, the one on light was blue and for heat, he chose red.

A Hedge of Rosemary

No one knew where the old man went every night at dusk. He sat to his tea in his daughter-in-law's kitchen and ate up obediently everything she put before him. She was a sharp woman but quite kind, she called him Dad and stirred his tea for him as she put the cup beside him. She put it a bit towards the middle of the table so he would not knock it over.

'Mind your tea now Dad,' she always said, and without looking up from his plate he answered, 'Thank you kindly, much obliged.' After the meal he would sit for a while with his boots off: he held them in both hands and studied the soles intently, sometimes shaking his head over them, and Sarah would get his dishes done out of the way.

Just about this time, as on other nights, his son John, who had a business in town, came in and he and Sarah had their dinner. When that and the necessary bits of conversation were over they all went into the lounge room and sat in comfortable chairs to watch the television. The house was very quiet with John's three boys all grown up and gone their ways, two to Sydney and one overseas. When the old man had sat a short while with John and Sarah in the lounge he put on his boots slowly and carefully and then getting up carefully from his comfortable chair he went out through the back verandah.

'Mind how you go Dad!' Sarah called after him and he replied, 'That's right, that's right!' and went off into the dusk round the side of the house and through a door in a vine-covered trellis and down into the street. After he had gone Sarah wondered where he was going. On other evenings she had peered out into the dark fragrance to see if he had gone up to the end of the garden. She thought he might have gone up to the shed for something. Sometimes she had looked in there and had even pushed open the door of the whitewashed place next to the shed thinking he might be ill in there. He never would use the one in the bathroom which was so much nicer. But he was never in either place. If she went out of the front door she could never see him: by the time she had picked her way across her neatly laid out suburban garden he was always gone from sight and all she could do was to peer up the street and down the street into the gathering darkness and go back into the house where John was absorbed into the television.

'I wonder where Dad's off to again,' she said, but on this night, as on all other nights, John was not listening to her.

'The Queen's not looking so well,' Sarah remarked as some activities of the Royal Family came on in the news. John grunted some sort of reply and they both sank into the next programme and did not think too much about the old man walking off on his own into the night.

During the day the old man did practically nothing, he tidied the garden a bit and stacked wood slowly and neatly outside the verandah so Sarah had only to reach out an arm for it. Mostly he sat in the barber's shop. He went shopping, too, with his battered attaché case. He laid it on the counter in the Post Office and opened it with his trembling old hands. Glossy magazines lay in neat rows over the counter.

'Mind my magazines now Dad!' the postmistress said, and he replied, 'That's right, that's right!' and when he had drawn his money he said, 'thank you kindly, much obliged,' and back to the barber's shop where the paint was peeling from the ceiling

and the shelves were littered with old-fashioned hair nets and curlers and other toilet requisites long out of date and covered in dust. Faded advertisements hung on the walls but no one ever read them.

Towards the end of the afternoon the shop filled with little boys from school and sometimes little girls came in and would take their turn in the chair unnoticed by the barber who did not do girls. The children ignored the old man and brushed past him to reach for old magazines and tattered comics which they read greedily sprawled on the linoleum. The barber greeted every customer in a nasal drawling voice. He spoke to the old man.

'And how are they treating you eh? Pretty good eh?' He said the same thing to everybody, and the old man replied, 'That's right, that's right.' If the children had asked him he could have thought up stories about the Great Red Fox and Brother Wolf, but the children never asked him anything, not even the time.

Some days he wandered by the river watching the weaving pattern of children playing on the shore. They never took any notice of him and he sat half-asleep in the shade of one of the peppermint trees that grew at intervals along the bank. He sat just a bit back from the sandy edges where the kind-hearted water rippled gentle and lazy and shallow. He was always sleepy at noon after his midday meal which Sarah gave him early at half-past eleven so that she could get cleared up in the kitchen. The children never came to him to ask his advice or to show him things. He supposed he was too old. Yet he knew a good many things about the foreshore and about playing in the sand. Back at home he had three things better than plastic spades; he had an iron gravy spoon and an ash scoop and an old iron trowel. These had been for his grandchildren years ago when he had brought them down to the shore to play, minding them for Sarah so she could get on and do the house and the cooking and the washing. He never thought about these three things now, they lay somewhere at home behind the stove, he never

thought about the Great Red Fox and Brother Wolf either. But if someone had asked him, he could have thought about them.

There was a little merry-go-round there, a corner of jangling music and laughter, a corner of enchantment. When the children went round and round on the little painted horses the old man forgot everything as he sat on a bench and watched them. They smiled and waved and he would nod and smile and wave and then shake his head because the children were nothing of his and were not waving to him. Once a child was crying on the path and he fished a penny out of his pocket and held it out but she would not take it and hid her face in the uneven hem of her mother's dress.

'You can't get anything for a penny now Gran'pa,' the mother said and laughing quite kindly walked on along the path.

When he went out in the evening he walked straight down the middle of the road, down towards the river. The evening was oriental, with dark verandahs and curving ornamental roof tops, palm fronds and the long weeping hair of peppermint trailing, a mysterious profile sketched temporarily purple on a green and grey sky. Fingers of darkness crept across him and the moon, thinly crescent and frail, hung in the gum-leaf lace. Dampness and fragrance brushed his old face and he made his way to the river where the shores were deserted. The magpies caressed him with their cascade of watery music. This was their time for singing at dusk and all night if they wanted to. Down by the water's edge the old man crouched to rest and his voice sighed into a whisper sliding into the great plate of smooth water before him.

'No one should be alone when they are old.' His thought and his word and his voice were like dry reeds rustling at the edge of the gentle water.

When he had rested a few moments he walked on through the stranded ghosts of the swings and the merry-go-round. The little wooden horses, their heads bent and devout, were dignified in their silence. The old man walked by unnoticed, for

why should the little horses notice him, he walked this way so often. A little farther on he turned up the grass bank away from the river. The slope was hardly a slope at all but he had to pause more than once for breath. Soon his hand brushed the roughness and fragrance of rosemary and his nostrils filled with the sharper scent of geranium, and he fumbled the wooden latch of a gate and went in and along the overgrown path of a neglected garden. The hedge of rosemary was nearly three feet thick and sang with bees in the heat of a summer day. Geraniums like pale pink sugar roses climbed and hung and trailed at the gate-posts, and again on either side of the crumbling woodwork of the verandah trellis. Later on the air would be heavy with the sweetness of honeysuckle but the old man was not thinking of this. He fumbled again at the latch of the door and made his way into the darkness inside the familiar place which had been his home and his wife's home and his children's home for more years than he ever thought about now. In the kitchen he felt about with his old hands till he had candle and matches.

Three years back he had been ill with pneumonia and fever and Sarah declared the place unhealthy and smelling of the river and drains, or lack of them; and herself finding it too much to come there every day to see to him and his house as well as her own house which took a deal of doing on her own. So she and John had come one Sunday afternoon in the car and fetched him to their place and had nursed him well and comfortable. And later, had sold his place to the owner of some tea-rooms further along the river, the other side of the swings and the merry-go-round. So far the man who had bought it had done nothing except sell the furniture, and even some of that, the shabby good-for-nothing stuff, was still there. As soon as the old man was better enough from his illness he had started to walk back to his place. At first he had only got as far as the barber's shop on the corner, and then to the postmistress where the road widened before turning down to the sandy wastes

by the river. And then one day he managed to get to a bench at the merry-go-round, and after that strength was his to walk right to his place. And he went inside and sat in the kitchen and looked about him thinking and remembering. But he did not think and remember too much, mostly he rested and was pleased to be there. He laid his attaché case on the kitchen table and opened it with his trembling old hands, he unpacked his shopping into the cupboard by the stove. He had little packages of tea, sugar and matches. Then he took out his pipe and tobacco and he sat and smoked his pipe. Sarah objected to the smell of his cheap tobacco in her home, even if he smoked out on the verandah. She complained all the time afterwards, and went from room to room opening windows, shaking curtains and spraying the air with something pine-scented to freshen the place up, as she called it. So every night he walked down home and had his pipe there. He did not say where he was going because Sarah would insist that he stay in her place to smoke and then all that airing and freshing up afterwards.

During the day he sometimes spent an hour tidying up the old tangled garden as much as an old man can. He stacked up some wood and split a few chips for the stove. People passing the rosemary hedge would wish him 'good day' if they saw him in the garden, but mostly people took no notice of him. They were busy with their children or with their thoughts or with each other. The old man came and went in peace and every night he came home to his place and smoked his pipe and sat and rested. He did not think very much because there is no use thinking over things when you can do nothing about them any more. His children were gone their ways, they mostly were like her. She had been a great reader and had sat reading her life away. She read everything the old postmistress could get for her, novelettes they were called years ago. Bundles of them had come to the house. The children had mostly been like her and she had taken them with her into the kind of world she lived in.

He had come, as a very young man, from the Black Country in England, from the noise and dirt of the chainmaking industrial area where people lived crowded and jostled together in indescribable poverty. The women there had muscles like men and they worked side by side with their men in the chainshops pausing only at intervals to suckle their babies. He had carried his younger sisters daily to his mother and had later cared for them in other intimate ways as he minded them in the blue-brick backyards and alleys which were the only playgrounds. When he had come to Australia he had gone straight to the country, where he had been terrified by the silence and loneliness. He was afraid of the heat and the drought too, but more than that he could not stand the still quiet nights in the bush when he was alone with the silence. And the white trunks of the gum-trees were like ghosts in the white light of the moon. He had longed to hear the chiming of city clocks through the comforting roar of the city and the friendly screech of the trams as they turned out of the High Street into Hill Street. He missed the heave and roar of the blast furnace and the nightly glow on the sky when the furnace was opened. All his life these had been his night light and his cradle song. So he went from the country to the town and found work in one place and then in another and later was employed to look after the foreshore, there was the house there for him too, and though it was quiet, the city and the suburbs were spreading towards him reassuringly.

If anyone had said, 'Tell me about the chainshop,' he could have told them about it and about a place he once visited as a boy where, in the late afternoon sunshine, he had walked with his father down a village street. Standing on the village-green were twelve geese. They were so still and clean and white. Beautiful birds, his father had said so. It was the stillness of the geese in his brief memory of the countryside that had made him leave the jostled crowded life among the chainmakers and come to Australia. But no one ever asked him about it so he

never really thought about it any more except perhaps for a moment while he sat smoking, but only for a moment.

So on this night as on all the other nights he sat and rested and smoked his pipe in the neglected old house which had once been his place. He was so comfortable there he forgot it had been sold. Though Mr Hickman, the man who had bought it, had called once when the old man was doing the garden. Mr Hickman had said he was having the place demolished in a week or two because he wanted to start building.

'You've got some fine roses there,' Mr Hickman had said after the pause which had followed his previous statement.

'That's right, that's right,' the old man had replied and they had stared at the roses together while the bees hummed and sang in the hedge of rosemary.

But this had been nearly a year ago and the old man did not think about it because there was nothing he could do about it. So just now he sat and rested and enjoyed his pipe and was pleased to be there. When his pipe was finished he remembered he must walk back. He got back to his son's place just after nine and Sarah said, 'How about a nice cup of tea before bed Dad,' and he replied, 'Thank you kindly, much obliged.' And he sat down in the kitchen and took his boots off carefully and stared at the soles of his boots. He shook his head a bit very slowly and set the boots down beside his chair. Sarah stirred his tea and put the cup down towards the middle of the table.

'Mind your tea now Dad,' she said.

'Thank you kindly, much obliged,' he replied.

'Have a good walk Dad?' John asked him.

'That's right, that's right,' the old man said and he drank up his tea.

'Good night Dad,' Sarah said.

'Good night Dad,' John said.

'Good night, good night,' the old man said and he took up his boots and he went off to his bed.

Kiss Erika

Paper Children

It was only when she was alone Clara despised the farmer husband, she was able to overlook completely that her despising was in reality a kind of fear of him and his piece of land.

'We are in a valley,' Lisa wrote to her mother. Clara tried to imagine the valley. She had in her mind a picture of a narrow green flower-splashed place with pine trees on the steep slopes above the clusters of painted wooden houses, like in the Alps, very gay and always in holiday mood. She tried to alter the picture because Lisa described tall trees with white bark and dry leaves which glittered in the bright sunshine, she wrote also of dust and corrugated iron and wire netting and something called weatherboard. Clara found it hard to imagine these things she had never seen.

No one can know when death will come or how. Alone in the hotel, Clara thought what if she should go blind before dying. She thought of her room at home, what if she had to grope in that familiar place unable to find her clothes, unable to see where her books and papers were. She lay with her eyes closed and tried to see her desk and her lamp and her silver inkwell, trying to place things in order in her mind so that she would find her way from one possession to the next.

What if she should go blind now here in this strange room, not knowing any other person here? In a sudden fear she pushed back the bedclothes and put her small white fat feet out of the bed and stood on the strange floor and groped like a blind person for the light switch.

'Lisa,' she said to her daughter gently so as not to startle the girl. Lisa turned, she had a very white face, she moved awkwardly and her face was small as if she was in pain. She was much younger than her mother expected her to be. Beside her was a little girl of about two years, she had fair hair cut square across a wan little forehead. The child had been crying.

'What a dear little girl,' Clara said as pleasantly as she knew how. 'What do you call her?'

'Sharon.'

Elizabeth Jolley

Paper Children

Clara Schultz lying alone in a strange hotel bedroom was suddenly confronted by the most horrible thoughts. For a woman accustomed to the idea that she would live for ever, having lived, it seemed for ever, these thoughts were far from welcome. For instead of being concerned with her immortality they were, without doubt, gravely about her own death.

Perhaps it was the long journey by air. She had travelled from Vienna, several hours in an aeroplane with the clock being altered relentlessly while her own body did not change so easily. She was on her way to her daughter. She had not seen her since she was a baby and now she was a grown woman, a stranger, married to a farmer. A man much younger than herself and from a background quite unknown to Clara and so somewhat despised by her. She confided nothing of this thought, rather she boasted of her daughter's marriage.

'I am going to visit Lisa, my daughter, you know,' she told her neighbour Irma Rosen. Sometimes they stopped to talk on the stairs in the apartment house in the Lehar Strasse and Clara would impress on Irma forcefully, 'My daughter is married to an Australian farmer and expecting her first child. All these years I have only a paper daughter and now my paper children, my daughter and son-in-law, they want me to come, they have invited me!' And Irma whose smooth face was like a pink sugar cake on the handworked lace collar of her dress nodded and smiled with admiration.

Elizabeth Jolley. From Woman in a Lampshade.

'Cheri?'

'No Sharon.'

'Ach! What a pretty name. Come here to Grossmutti my darling,' but the little girl hid behind the half open door.

'What a pretty place you have Lisa,' Clara tried. 'Pretty! Pretty!' She waved her short plump arm towards the desolate scene of the neglected hillside, cleared years ago, scraped and never planted; patches of prickly secondary growth littered the spaces between collapsing sheds and the tangles of wire netting where some fowls had lived their lives laying eggs.

The house, in decay, cried out for mercy, it was a place quite uncherished. The rust on the iron roof was like a disease, scabs of it scaled off and marked the verandah as if with an infection. Clara wondered why. Poverty perhaps or was Lisa feckless? Clara had no patience with a feckless woman. If they were poor, well she had money, and she would find out the best way to spend it. She wanted to help Lisa. All the tenderness stored up over the empty years was there to be poured forth, now on her child and her child's property.

'Have you hurt yourself Lisa?' Clara tried again, softly gently as if speaking in a dream. She had not expected a little girl. She knew only that her daughter was pregnant.

Lisa wants me to be near when she has her baby, my paper children want me,' Clara told Irma on the stairs and Irma nodded her approval. 'So I burn up my ships as they say in English and go.' Clara had taken many big steps in her life but never such a final one as this one might be. Australia was such a long way off from Vienna, it almost could not exist it was so remote.

'They have fifty cows and sheeps and chickens.' Such space was not to be imagined on the dark stairs of the apartment. 'Such a long way!' Clara said 'But air travel, you know, makes the world so much smaller.'

'Have you hurt yourself Lisa?' Gently she approached the pale young woman who was her unknown daughter.

'Aw it's nuthin', the girl replied. 'He threw me down the other night, I kept tellin' him "You're hurtin' my back!" but

he took no notice. "You're hurtin' my back," I shouted at him!' She rubbed the end of her spine.

Clara flinched with a real hurt.

'Pete, this is my mother,' Lisa said as a short thick-set young man, very stamburned and bullet shaped came round the side of the house. He threw a bucket to his wife. 'Mother this is Pete.'

As they stood together the sun slid quickly into the scrub on the far hillside and long shadows raced one after the other across and along the sad valley. Clara had never seen such a pair of people and in such dreary hopeless surroundings. She felt so strange and so alone in the gathering darkness of the evening.

The little muscular husband shouted something at Lisa and marched off with hardly a look at his new mother-in-law. Clara couldn't help remembering the Gestapo and their friend, they thought he was their friend, the one who became a Gauleiter. That was it! Gauleiter Peter Gregory married to her daughter Lisa.

'This man is my father's friend,' proudly Clara had introduced the friend to her husband only to experience in a very short time a depth of betrayal and cruelty quite beyond her comprehension. Friends became enemies overnight. Lisa's husband somehow reminded Clara unexpectedly of those times.

'Have you something to put on your back?' Clara asked. 'Like what?' the girl looked partly amused and partly defiant.

'Menthol Camphor or something like that,' Clara felt the remoteness between them, a kind of wandering between experience and dreams. She moved her hand in a circular movement. 'Something to massage, you know.'

At first Lisa didn't understand, perhaps it was the unusual English her mother spoke, Clara repeated the suggestion slowly.

'Aw No! Had a ray lamp but he dropped it last night! Threw it down most likely but he said he dropped it. "The lamp's died," he said. I thought I'd die laughin' but I was that mad at him reely I was!'

'Should we, perhaps, go indoors?' Clara was beginning to feel cold. The Gauleiter was coming back. 'I just have these few packages,' Clara indicated her luggage which was an untidy circle about her. But the young couple had gone into the cottage leaving her to deal with her baggage as well as she could.

Trying to hear some sort of sound she heard the voice of Gauleiter Peter Gregory shouting at his wife, her daughter Lisa, and she heard Lisa scream back at her husband. Voices and words she couldn't hear and understand properly from the doorway of the asbestos porch. She heard the husband push the wife so that she must have stumbled, she heard Lisa fall against a piece of furniture which also fell, a howl of pain from Lisa and the little child, Sharon, began to cry.

Clara entered the airless dishevelled room. Because of all she was carrying it was difficult, so many bundles. 'One cannot make such a journey without luggage,' Clara explained to Irma as, buried in packages, she said goodbye to her neighbour, 'Goodbye Irma. Goodbye for ever dear friend.'

Besides she had presents for Lisa and even something for that husband.

Lisa looked up almost with triumph at her mother.

'I'm seven months gone', she said 'and he wouldn't care if he killed me! The husband's sunburned face disappeared in the gloom of the dirty room.'

'Oh, Clara said pleasantly, 'she is too young to die and far too pretty.'

'Huh! me pretty!' Lisa scoffed and, awkwardly, because of the pain in her back, she eased herself into a chair.

'Who's young!' the husband muttered in the dark. Clara didn't know if he was sitting or standing. 'Well, we women must back each other up,' she said, wasting a smile. What ever could she do about Lisa's pain.

Clara fumbled with the straps of her bag.

'Come Sharon, my pretty little one. See what your Cross-mutti has brought for you all across the World.' The child stood whimpering as far from Clara as possible while the parents watched in silence.

And Clara was quite unable to fasten the bag.

She had never been frightened of anything in her whole life. Dr Clara Schultz (she always used an abbreviation of her maiden name), Director of the Clinic for Women (Out Patients' Department), University Lecturer, wife of the Professor of Islamic Studies, he was also an outstanding scholar of Hebrew. Clara Margarethe Carolina, daughter of a Baroness, nothing frightened her, not even the things that frightened women, thunder and mice and cancer.

Even during the occupation she had been without fear. They were living on the outskirts of the city at that time. One afternoon she returned early from the clinic intending to prepare a lecture and she noticed there was a strange stillness in the garden. The proud bantam cock they had then was not crowing. He was nowhere in sight. Usually he strutted about, an intelligent brightly coloured little bird, and the afternoons were shattered by his voice as he crowed till dusk as if to keep the darkness of the night from coming too soon. The two hens, Cecilia and Gretchen, stood alone and disconsolate like two little pieces of white linen left by the laundress on the green grass.

Clara looked for the little rooster but was unable to find him. His disappearance was an omen.

Calmly Clara transferred money to Switzerland and at once, in spite of difficulties and personal grief, she arranged for her two-year-old baby daughter to be taken to safety while she remained to do her work.

A few days later she found the bantam cock, he was caught by one little leg in a twisted branch among the junipers and straggling rosemary at the end of the garden. He was hanging upside down dead. Something must have startled him Clara thought to make him fly up suddenly into such a tangled place. When she went indoors, missing her baby's voice so much, she found her husband hanging, dead, in his study. She remained unafraid. She knew her husband was unable to face the horror of persecution and the threat of complete loss of personal freedom. She understood his reasons. And she knew she was yearning over her baby but she went on, unafraid, with her work at the clinic. Every day, day after day, year after year, in her thick-tensed spectacles and her

Woman in a Lampshade

white coat she advised, corrected, comforted and cured, and all the time, she was teaching too, passing on knowledge from experience.

But now, this fearless woman trembled as she tried to unfasten two leather straps because now years later, when all the horror was over for her, she was afraid of her daughter's marriage.

As Clara woke in the strange bedroom, it was only partly a relief.

There was still this possibility of blindness before death, because of course she would die. Ultimately everyone did. For how long would she be blind, if she became blind? Both her grandmothers had lost their sight.

'But that was a cataract,' Clara told herself. 'Nowadays one can have operation.'

Again in imagination, she blundered about her room at home trying to find things, the treasures of her life. But alone and old she was unable to manage.

And another thing. What if she should go deaf and not be able to listen to Bach or Beethoven any more? She tried to remember a phrase from the Beethoven A Minor String Quartet. The first phrase, the first notes of caution and melancholy and the cascade of cello. She tried to sing to herself but her voice cracked and she could not remember the phrase. Suppose she should become deaf now at this moment in this ugly hotel with no music near and no voices. If she became deaf now she would never again be able to hear the phrase and all the remaining time of her life be unable to recall it.

Again she put her small fat white feet out of the bed and stood on the strange floor and began like a blind and deaf person to grope for the light switch.

'Travelling does not suit everyone,' she told herself and she put eau de Cologne on her forehead and leaving the light on, she took her book, one she had written herself, *Some Elementary Contributions to Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, and began to read.

This time it really was Lisa, with joy in her heart Clara went towards her. The real Lisa was much older and Clara saw

Paper Children

at once that the pregnancy was full term. Lisa walked proudly because of the stoutness of carrying the baby. Though Clara knew it was Lisa, she searched her daughter's face for some family likeness. The white plump face was strange however, framed in dark hair, cut short all round the head. Mother and daughter could not have recognized each other.

'Oh Lisa you have a bad bruise on your forehead,' Clara gently put out a hand to soothe the bruise. Supposing this husband is the same as the other one, the thought spoiled the pleasure of the meeting.

'It's quite clear you are a doctor, Mother,' Lisa laughed. 'Really it's nothing! I banged my head on the shed door trying to get our cow to go inside.'

'One cow and I thought they had many,' Clara was a little disappointed but she did not show it. Instead she bravely looked at the valley. It was not deep like the wooded ravine in the Alps, not at all, the hills here were hardly hills at all. But the evening sun through the still trees made a changing light and shade of tranquility, there was a deep rose blue in the evening sky which coloured the white bark and edged the tremulous glittering leaves with quiet mystery. Clara could smell the sharp fragrance of the earth, it was something she had not thought of though now she remembered it from Lisa's letters. All round them was loneliness.

'Where is your little girl?' Clara asked softly. Lisa's plain face was quite pleasant when she smiled, she had grey eyes which were full of light in the smile.

'Little girl? Little boy, you mean! He's here,' she patted her apron comfortably. 'Not born yet. I wrote you the date. Remember?'

'Oh yes of course,' Clara adjusted her memory. 'Everyone at home is so pleased,' she began.

'Here's Peter,' Lisa said. 'Peter this is my mother,' Lisa said. 'Mother this is Peter.'

The husband came to his mother-in-law, he was younger than Lisa so much so that Clara was startled. He seemed like a boy, his face quite smooth and it was as if Lisa was old enough to be his mother.

Peter was trying to speak, patiently they waited, but the

words when they came were unintelligible. His smile had the innocence of a little child.

'He wants to make you welcome,' Lisa explained. She took her husband's arm and pointed across the cleared and scraped yard to a small fowl pen made of wire netting. Beside the pen was a deep pit, the earth, freshly dug, heaped up all round it.

'GO AND GET THE EGGS!' she shouted at him. She took a few quick steps still holding his arm and marched him towards the hen house. 'QUICK! MARCH!' she shouted. Gauleiter Lisa Gregory. Clara shivered, the evening was cold already. Her own daughter had become a Gauleiter.

'QUICK! MARCH! ONE TWO! ONE TWO!' Lisa was a Führerin. The valley rang with her command. 'DIG THE PITY'

The sun fell into the scrub and the tree tops in the middle distance between earth and sky became clusters of trembling blackness, silent offerings held up on thin brittle arms like starved people praying into the rose deep, blue swept sky.

Mother and daughter moved in the shadows to the door of the weatherboard and iron cottage.

'I am very strong mother,' Lisa said in a whisper and in the dusk Clara could see her strength, she saw too that her mouth was shining and cruel.

In the tiny house there was no light. Clara was tired and she wondered where they could sleep. In a corner a cot stood in readiness for the baby, there seemed no other beds or furniture at all.

'When my sons are born,' Lisa said in a low voice to her Mother, 'it is to be the survival of the fittest!' She snapped her thick fingers. Clara had no reply. 'Only the strong and intelligent shall live,' Lisa said. 'I tell my husband to dig the pit. I have to. Perhaps it will be for him, we shall see. Every day he must dig the pit to have it ready. There will be no mercy.'

Clara reflected, in the past she had overlooked all this, she had taken no part in the crimes as they were committed but, ignoring them, she had continued with her work and because her work was essential no one had interfered. Clara reflected

too that Lisa had never known real love, taken away to safety she had lost the most precious love of all. Clara took upon herself the burden of Lisa's cruelty now. She wanted to give Lisa this love, more than anything she wanted to overlook everything and help Lisa and love her. She wanted to overlook her purse to show Lisa before it was too dark that she had brought plenty of money and could spend whatever was necessary to build up a nice little farm. She wanted to tell Lisa she could buy more cows, electricity, sheds, pay for hired men to work, buy pigs, two-hundred pigs if Lisa would like and drains to keep them hygienic. Whatever Lisa wanted she could have. She tried to tell her how much she wanted to help her. She tried to open her purse and Lisa stood very close and watched Clara in severe silence. The cottage was cold and quite bare, Clara longed to be warm and comfortable and she wanted to ask Lisa to unfasten her purse for her but was quite unable to speak, no words came though she moved her mouth as if trying to say something.

She had never been so stupid. Of course she would feel better in the morning. Women like Dr Clara Schultz simply did not fall ill on a journey. It was just the strange bed in the rather old-fashioned hotel. Tomorrow she would take her cold bath as usual and ask for yoghurt at breakfast and all she had to do then was to wait for Lisa and Peter.

The arrangement was that they were driving the two hundred miles to fetch her to their place. Of course it was natural to be a little curious. Lisa was only two years old when she was smuggled out of Vienna. The woman Lisa had become was a complete stranger, and so was the husband. Even their letters were strange, they wrote in English because Lisa had never learned to speak anything else.

Clara knew she would feel better when she had seen them. All these years she had longed to see Lisa, speak with her, hear her voice, touch her and lavish love and gifts on her. She still felt the sad tenderness of the moment when she had had to part with her baby all those years ago.

'Lisa, my bed is damp,' Clara said 'The walls are so thin. I never expected it to be so cold.'

Lisa had been quite unable to imagine what her mother's visit would be like. In spite of the heat and her advanced pregnancy she cleaned the little room at the side of the house. She washed the *louvres* and made white muslin curtains. There was scarcely any furniture for the narrow room but Lisa made it as pretty as she could with their best things, her own dressing table and a little white-painted chair and Peter fetched a bed from his mother's place.

Lisa tried to look forward to the visit, she knew so little about her mother, an old lady now after a life of hard work as a doctor. Every year they threw away the battered Christmas parcel which always came late, sewn up in waterproofed calico. There seemed no place in the little farmhouse with its patterned linoleum and plastic lamp shades for an *Adventskranz* and beeswax candles. And the soggy little biscuits, heart shaped or cut out like stars, had no flavour. Besides they ate meat mostly and, though Peter liked sweet things, his choice of pudding was always tinned fruit with ice cream. The meaningless little green wreath with its tiny red and white plaster mushrooms and gilded pine cones only served to enhance the strangeness between them and this mother who was on her way to them.

Of course her mother was ill as soon as she arrived. She had not expected the nights to be so cold she explained and it was damp in the sleepout.

'My bed is damp,' she said to Lisa. So they moved her into the living room.

'No sooner does your mother arrive and the place is like a 'C-Class Hospital,' Peter said. He had to sit for his tea in the kitchen because Clara's bed took up most of the living room. She had all the pillows in the house and the little table beside her bed was covered with cups and glasses and spoons and bottles and packets of tablets.

'It is only a slight inflammation in my chest,' she assured Lisa. 'A few days of rest and warm and I will be quite well, you will see!'

Lisa worried that her mother was ill and unable to sleep. She tried to keep Peter friendly, but always a silent man, he became more so. She stood in the long damp grass outside

the cowshed he had built with homemade concrete bricks, waiting for him at dusk, she wanted to speak to him alone, but he, knowing she was standing there, slowly went about his work and did not emerge.

From inside the asbestos house came Clara's voice. 'Lisa! Another hot water bottle please, my feet are so cold.'

Lisa could not face the days ahead with her mother there. She seemed suddenly to see all her husband's faults and the faults in his family. She had never before realized what a stupid woman Peter's mother, her mother-in-law, was. She felt she would not be able to endure the life she had. Years of this life lay before her. Fifteen miles to the nearest neighbour, her mother-in-law, and the small house, too hot in summer and so cold and damp once the rains came, and the drains Peter had made were so slow to soak away she never seemed able to get the sink empty. This baby would be the first of too many. Yet she had been glad, at her age, to find a husband at last and thought she would be proud and happy to bear a farmer a family of sons.

'A spoonful of honey in a glass of hot water is so much better for you!' Clara told them when they were drinking their tea. She disapproved of their meat too. She was a vegetarian herself and prepared salads with her own hands grating carrots and shredding cabbage for them.

Peter picked the dried prunes out of his dinner spoiling the design Clara had made on his plate.

'I'm not eating that!' he scraped his chair back on the linoleum and left the table.

'Oh Peter please!' Lisa implored, but he went out of the kitchen and Lisa heard him start up the utility with a tremendous roar.

'He will come back!' Clara said knowingly nodding her head.

'Come eat! Your little one needs for you to eat. After dinner I show you how to make elastic loop on your skirt,' she promised Lisa. 'Always I tell my patients, "an elastic loop, not this ugly pin!"' she tapped the big safety pin which fastened Lisa's gaping skirt. 'After dinner I show you how to make!' Lisa knew her mother was trying to comfort her

but she could only listen to Peter driving down the track. He would drive the fifteen miles to his mother and she would, as usual, be standing between the stove and the kitchen table and would fry steak for him and make chips and tea and shake her head over Lisa and that foreign mother of hers.

She listened to the car and could hardly stop herself from crying.

Living, all three together became impossible and, after the birth of the baby, Lisa left Peter and went with her mother to live in town. Clara took a small flat in a suburb and they went for walks with the baby. Two women together in a strange place trying to admire meaningless flowers in other people's gardens.

Lisa tried to love her mother, she tried to understand something of her mother's life. She realized too that her mother had given up everything to come to her, but she missed Peter so dreadfully. The cascading voices of the magpies in the early mornings made her think as she woke that she was back on the farm, but instead of Peter's voice and the lowing of the cows there were cars on the road outside the flat. She missed the cows at milking time and the noise of the fowls. And in the afternoon she longed to be standing at the edge of the paddock where the long slanting rays of the sun lit up the tufted grass and the shadows of the coming evening crept from the edges of the Bush in the distance.

'Oh Liser! Just look at this rose,' her mother bent over some other person's fence. 'Such a fragrance and a beautiful deep colour. Only smell this rose Lisa!' And then slowly, carrying the baby, on to the next garden to pause and admire where admiration fell lost on unknown paving stones and into unfamiliar leaves and flowers unpossessed by themselves. The loneliness of unpossession waited for them in the tiny flat where a kind of refugee life slowly unpacked itself, just a few things, the rest would remain for ever packed. Only now and then glimpses of forgotten times came to the surface, an unwanted garment or a photograph or an old letter reminding of the reasons why she had grown up in a strange land cared for by people who were not hers.

In the evenings they shaded the lamp with an old woollen cardigan so that the light should not disturb the baby and they sat together. Lisa listened to the cars passing, in her homelessness she wished that one of the cars would stop, because it was Peter's. More than anything she wished Peter would come. Tears filled her eyes and she turned her head so that her mother should not see.

'Oh Peter!' Lisa woke in the car, 'I was having such an awful dream!' She sat up close to the warmth of her husband feeling the comfort of his presence and responsibility.

'Oh! It was so awful!'

She loved Peter, she loved him when he was driving, especially at night. She looked at his clear brow and at the strong shape of his chin. He softly dropped a kiss on her hair and the car devoured the dark road.

'You'll feel better when you actually meet her,' he said. 'It's because you don't know her. Neither of us do!'

Lisa agreed and sat in safety beside her husband as they continued the long journey.

Clara was able to identify Lisa at once. She had to ask to have the white sheet pulled right down in order to make the identification. Lisa had two tiny deep scars like dimples one on the inside of each thigh.

'She was born with a pyloric stenosis,' Clara explained softly. 'Projectile vomiting you know.' The scars, she explained, were from the insertion of tiny tubes.

'Subcutaneous feeding, it was done often in those days,' she made a little gesture of helplessness, an apology for an old-fashioned method.

In the mortuary they were very kind and helpful to the old lady who had travelled so far alone and then had to have this terrible shock.

Apparently the car failed to take a bend and they were plunged two hundred feet off the road into the Bush. Death would have been instantaneous, the bodies were flung far apart, the car rolled. They tried to tell her.

Clara brushed aside the clichés of explanation. She asked her question with a professional directness.

'What time did it happen?' she wanted to know. She had been sitting for some time crouched in a large armchair, for some hours after her yoghurt, wondering if she could leave the appointed meeting place. Outside it was raining.

'Should I make a short ram walk?' she asked herself. And several times she nearly left the chair and then thought, 'But no, any moment they come and I am not here!'

A few people came into the vestibule of the hotel and she looked at them through palm fronds and ferns, surreptitiously refreshing herself with eau de Cologne, wondering, hopeful. Every now and then she leaned forward to peer, to see if this was Lisa at last, and every time she sat back as the person went out again. Perhaps she was a little relieved every time she was left alone. She adjusted her wiglet.

Back home in Vienna she was never at a loss as to what to do. Retirement gave her leisure but her time was always filled. She never sat for long hours in an armchair. Back home she could have telephoned her broker or arranged with her dentist to have something expensive done to a tooth.

'Time? It's hard to say exactly,' they said. 'A passing motorist saw the car upside down against a tree at about five o'clock and reported the accident immediately.'

There were only the two bodies in the mortuary. Beneath the white sheets they looked small in death. Dr Clara Schultz was well acquainted with death, the final diagnosis all she herself who, with her own hands, cut the dressing-gown cord from her own husband's neck. She had to put a stool on his desk in order to reach as she was such a short person, and furthermore, his neck had swollen, blue, over the cord making the task more difficult.

They supported the old lady with kind hands and offered her a glass of water as she looked at the two pale strangers lying locked in the discolouration of injury and haemorrhage and the deep stillness of death.

Clara looked at her daughter and at her son-in-law and was unable to know them. She would never be able to know them now.

'I have a photograph, and I have letters,' she said. 'They

were my paper children you know.' She tried to draw from the pocket of her travelling jacket the little leather folder which she took with her everywhere.

In the folder was a photograph of them standing, blurred because of a light leak in the camera, on a track which curved by a tree. And on the tree was nailed a small board with their name on it in white paint. Behind the unknown people and the painted board was a mysterious background of pasture and trees and the light and shade of their land. She pulled at the folder but was unable to pull it from her pocket.

Not being able to speak with them and know them was like being unable ever again to hear the phrase of Beethoven, the cascade of cello. It was like being blind and deaf for the rest of her life and she would not be able to recall anything.

Dr Clara had never wept about anything but now tears slowly forced themselves from under her eyelids.

'My daughter, Lisa you know, was pregnant,' she managed to say at last. 'I see she is bandaged. Does this mean?'

'Yes yes,' they explained gently, 'That is right. Owing to the nature of the accident and the speed with which it was reported they were able to save the baby. A little girl, her condition is satisfactory. It was a miracle.'

Dr Clara nodded. In spite of the tears she was smiling. As well as knowing about death she understood miracles.

As soon as it was decently possible she would ring for the chambermaid and ask for a glass of hot water. Of course she wasn't blind or deaf and no one had come in with any news of an accident. She was only a little upset with travelling. Her fear of the failure of her body was only the uneasiness of stomach cramp and the result of bad sleep. She would have her cold bath early and then only a very short time to wait after that. Country people had to consider their stock that was why they were driving overnight to fetch her. It might be a good idea to start getting up now, it would never do to keep them waiting. She put her fat white feet out of the bed and walked across the strange floor to ring the bell.

It was a good idea to get up straight away because the telephone was ringing. Dr Clara, in the old days was used to the hand and listened to the Clinic Sister describing the intervals between the labour pains and the position of the baby's head. A little breathless, that was all, she sat on the chair beside her telephone, breathless just with getting up too quickly.

'Dr Clara Schultz,' she said and she thought she heard a faint voice murmur.

'Wait one moment please. Long distance.' And then a fainter sound like a tiny buzzing as if voices were coming from one remote pole to another across continents and under oceans as if a message was trying to come by invisible wires and cables from the other side of the world. Clara waited holding the silent telephone. 'Clara Schultz here,' she said alone in the dark emptiness of her apartment for of course she had sold all her furniture.

'I have burn up my ships,' she told Irma. 'Clara Schultz here,' her voice sounded strange and she strained into the silence of the telephone trying to hear the other voice, the message, her heart beat more quickly, the beating of her heart seemed to prevent her listening to the silence of the telephone.

'Lisal' she said, 'Is it you Lisa?'

But there was no sound in the telephone, for a long time just the silence of nothing from the telephone. 'Lisa speak! But there was no voice.'

Clara longed to hear her daughter's voice, of course the voice could not be the same now as the laughter and incoherent chatter of the little two year old. Now as an old woman holding a dead telephone she remembered with a kind of bitterness that she sent away her little girl and continued her work at the clinic paying no attention to the evil cruelty of war. She knew she was overlooking what was happening to people but chose to concern herself only with the menstrual cycle and the arched white thighs of women in labour.

'It's a means to an end,' she said softly to her frightened

patients when they cried out. 'Everything will be all right, it's a means to an end,' she comforted them.

Clara knew she had neglected to think of the end. Now she wanted, more than anything, to hear Lisa speak. But there was no sound on the telephone. She went slowly out on to the dark stairs of the apartment house. On the second landing she met her neighbour.

'Irma is that you?'

'Clara!'

'Irma you are quite unchanged.'

Irma's pink sugar cake face sat smiling on the lace collar which was like a doily. 'Why should I change?' Irma asked.

Clara took Irma's hand, grateful to find her friend. 'Only think, Irma,' she said, 'I am bringing home my daughter's baby!' she laughed softly to Irma. 'My paper children had a baby daughter,' she said, 'I shall call her Lisa.'

When Lisa and Peter arrived at the hotel they were unable to understand how it was that Clara must have been crying and laughing when she died.

Irma Rosen tried to explain to them as well as she could with her little English, and of course she was very tired with making the long journey by air at such short notice.

'When I find her you know, outside my door,' Irma said. 'I know, as her friend, I must come to you myself to tell. On her face this lovely smile and her face quite wet as if she cry in her heart! While she is smiling.'

They were as if encapsulated in the strange little meeting in the hotel vestibule. Lisa tried to think of words to say to this neat little old lady, her mother's friend. But Irma spoke again. 'Your mother is my friend,' she said, 'Always she speak of you. Her paper children and she so proud to be preparing to come to you. She would want me to tell you. Now I suppose I go back. Your mother say always 'But air travel, you know, makes the world so much smaller.' Is true of course, but a long way all the same! She smiled and nodded, pink, on her lace collar. 'Sorry my Enklisch iss not good' she apologized. 'Oh you speak beautifully,' Lisa was glad to be able

to say something. 'Really your English is very good,' Lisa shouted a little as if to make it easier for Irma to understand her.

The young couple wanted to thank Irma and look after her but as Lisa's labour pains had started during the long journey, Peter had to drive her straight to the hospital.

The Play Reading

'Whatever shall I get for Mr Hodgetts and Auntie Shovell for their teas?' Mother sat down at the kitchen table. She was so tired coming straight from South Heights the luxury apartments where she cleans every day.

'How about a nice mutton and sardine yoghurt?' my brother said. 'It might make them change their minds about coming here for tea every night.' Mother looked at him as if she was seeing him very tall suddenly there by the door.

All this winter Mother's been going to night classes. She says she can feel her brain expanding out of her head.

'I know!' Mother brightened up, 'We'll have a play reading.' She took her night-school book out of her bag. 'It's a play by a man called Ibsen. He had this idea that it's only when the body dies that people really come to life.'

'What's it called?' I asked.

'*When We Dead Awake*.'

'Is there any sex interest in it?' I asked.

'Nice girls don't ask questions like that.'

'It seems they've had it,' my brother turned the pages quickly. 'Here you are,' he said, 'page 226, He says, "It reminds me of the night we spent in the train on our way up here." And she says back to him, "Why you sat in the compartment and slept the whole way." And he says -

'That'll do,' Mother said. 'It's all highly symbolic. The writer sees the human body all laid out over the Bush and the fences and the paddicks.'

'How?' I asked.

A Child Went Forth

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon and
received with wonder or pity
or love or dread, that object he became. . .*

Whitman

When I was seventeen I sold my doll and all her little frocks and coloured knitted things. At the time I thought I ought to sell her, it seemed important to have some extra money. She was advertised for one pound. It was near Christmas, a good time for selling.

A woman came and I saw her alone with the doll in the front room where my mother had made a fire as she did only on Christmas Day and other holidays.

The parting with the doll made an unexpected dark space all round me. I never admitted to anyone that I gave the doll to the woman whose sharp, unfriendly eyes intimidated me and whose tale of a little girl who had never had a doll filled me with shame.

My mother and sister were waiting in the early dusk of the winter afternoon.

'Where is the money?' my sister said to my empty heart.

'In my purse of course,' I lied.

Byron wrote to Murray, his publisher:

*. . . all reading either praise or censure of
myself has done me harm—when I was in*

Switzerland I was out of the way of hearing either—AND HOW I WROTE THERE!

But Byron was very willing to write about himself, not only in his poems and journals but in twelve volumes of letters. He, clearly, often wrote a self portrait.

It is flattering to be asked to follow this precedent established long before and continued long after Byron's time. But what should go into a self portrait if it is to hold a reader's attention let alone convey something of understanding?

Perhaps a writer's self portrait should concentrate on those aspects of life which appear to influence the writing. Looking over my own work I have been surprised to find how important is the theme of exile.

It is not given to the child either to know or to understand the happiness or the sadness of the parent. Clytemnestra speaks of this to her daughter, Electra, when she arrives at the dirty hut where the banished Electra lives;

*... I agree, one should not speak
Bitterly. But when people judge someone,
they ought
To learn the facts, and then hate, if they've
reason to
And if they find no reason, then they should
not hate.*

My mother and father were married in Vienna soon after the Great War which ended in defeat and destruction of the Hapsburg Empire. Vienna was no longer the administrative centre of a large Empire. Filled with almost destitute inhabitants, it became an over large capital of a small nation. My grandfather, who had been a General in the Imperial Army, belonged now to that large class whose reason for existence disappeared with the Emperor.

It is not surprising that my mother saw in the young Englishman not merely an acceptable husband but a way

back to prosperity and social status. An understandable but disastrous error. My mother found herself in an England which was not made up of castles and country estates but which was urban, industrial, dirty and mean. An England and a people which were beyond her understanding. She responded to her new surrounding with imitation and contempt. My father must have made great efforts to compensate.

'Your mother has such pretty arms,' he often said. He defended her from the world and from herself. Perhaps my vicarious experience of homesickness and exile starts, without any knowledge or understanding, from the early memories of incomprehensible unhappiness.

My mother and father always spoke German together and I spoke German till I was six when I started school and then, surrendering to my surroundings, I stopped speaking German.

My father was an exile of a different kind. During the Great War he suffered brutal imprisonment as a conscientious objector. His father, my other grandfather, disowned him because of his beliefs and the disgrace of being in prison. He went to Vienna as a relief worker with the Quakers. His position in his father's house was not improved by his bringing back, as a bride, an impoverished aristocrat from an enemy country. When speaking of this, once in later years, he was not bitter about his father but he did say that he felt that for many years, because of the experience, he had been 'warped'. In an embarrassed way he was, at the time, trying to make some sort of explanation and apology to me.

When I was a child we lived in a neighbourhood where foreigners were regarded with curiosity if not outright distrust. Opinions were those of George Eliot's villagers;

*In that far-off time superstition clung easily
round every person or thing that was at all
unwonted. . . and how was a man to be
explained unless you at least knew some-
body who knew his father and mother?*

'My mam's bakin' yo' a cake,' a little boy I played with said, 'er says yor mam can't cook.' The cake was never delivered but it's the thought that counts.

My father was a science teacher. In him were contained all the conflicts between science, human effort and feeling and what is called, in a lump, religion. Thinking that children lost their innocence at school he took my sister and me away from school. I was eight years old then and my sister was seven. My father and mother and a rapid succession of French and German governesses, provided what education we received. Perhaps we learned most from the BBC school programmes. Images sprang at once from quality and tone of voice whether the voice was describing the plight of the Flying Dutchman, the remarks made in Parliament or the necessity of taking off one's vest every night to shake out the germs gathered during the day.

Children who do not go to school and whose family speak a foreign language are exiles in their own street. Like all lonely children we retreated into the fantasy and imagination. The people who lived in our dolls' houses are still alive. One of my characters, Weekly in the novel *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, though I did not realise this for some time, comes, in part, from the tiny, well cleaned kitchen of my sister's dolls' house. On bus and train journeys we drew pencil people in what we called Day Books and we shouted their dialogue and their actions across the other passengers to one another. This game lasted for years; perhaps in our letter writing we still continue it. It is continued on bits of paper, in solitude, at my own table now.

My mother never allowed us to have long hair. Some may recall the hair cut called a shingle. An old lady, passing the dusty hedge in front of our house, paused to ask us:

'Are you two girls or boys?'

'I'm Monica Elizabeth,' I explained, 'she's Madelaine Winifred. We're boys.'

At the age of eleven I was sent with my father's

reluctant permission to a Quaker boarding school in rural Oxfordshire. Being brought up as a Quaker is not the same as being a Quaker by Birth. I was an exile on the edge of the Birth Right Quakers. Unaccustomed to being with other children and missing the smell of the bone and glue factory and the heave and roar of the blast furnaces I cried. Between autumn-berried hedge rows I cried in the middle of a road which seemed to be leading nowhere. Brown, ploughed fields sloped in all directions, there were no houses, shops or trams and there were no people, only the rooks gathering, unconcerned, in the leafless trees at the side of an empty life-less barn.

The pain of home-sickness has to be cured in some way. I wrote stories, mainly about rabbits which were rather like people I knew, and sent them home to my sister. I made up stories to tell in the dormitory at night. I made for myself a picture of a longed for cosy home life which never existed but which, in thought, comforted.

Another edge of exile; the daughter of a teacher nursing in a hospital at a time when probationer nurses needed a well-to-do background in order to survive on twenty eight shillings a month and frugal 'keep'. As with the Quakers there was the feeling of being excluded from an establishment and its members. This time it was a layer of society called *county* in which tweeds and twin sets and pearls were not just a joke.

Perhaps the writer, in writing, overcomes and accepts feelings of exclusion.

'Are these tomatoes English?' I asked a Scottish green-grocer.

'Madam! They are Scotch!' and I discovered at once that to move to Scotland was to move to another country.

Being a stranger is not to reject one's environment. I store the images of coal mines, brick works and slag heaps. I can never forget the smooth hills of the Cotswolds and the wet tough grass and heather of the Scottish moors. I store too the regional sounds of voices, accents and dialects and the contemporary idiom of every place and of

every decade.

Perhaps, for me, encountering and accepting strange territory is a necessary part of learning to be a writer.

I came to Western Australia in the middle of my life. I realise that the freshness of my observation can distort as well as illuminate. The impact of the new country does not obliterate the previous one but sharpens memory, thought and feeling thus providing a contrasting theme or setting.

I am always being asked, 'do you write from your own experience?' Obviously any author must write from experience, but if the question means do I write accounts of people I have known or of a sequence of events I have witnessed the answer is decidedly 'no'.

The experience from which I write is created by things seen or heard or read about or imagined. I use small fragments, hints, suggestions of experience. The landscape of my writing is not to be found clearly on any map. A particular aspect of a tree or a paddock at a particular moment may be used. All my life since the earnest, hopeful prayers written in my diaries during the first real miseries of boarding school life I have kept journals in which I write about people and places; dwelling on, perhaps, some detail of human effort or the way in which a tree might change in the changing light of an afternoon.

The character of Miss Hailey in the novel *Mr Scobie's Riddle* is based on the sight of a woman in an unusual straw hat. That is all I noticed about her as I passed her in the street. But as I passed I imagined how pleased she would be to be able to tell someone the way.

A picture of the sea or even the sharp rise from the coastal plain which is characteristic of the southern part of Western Australia, as well as many other regions, is based on something seen but not seen in a sharply defined geographical location.

I explain, when asked, that my stories start with a character and not with a plot but I know that this distinction is unreal. Perhaps I start with a feeling for a character and then try to develop this in a number of

situations. Most of these situations will never be related in the final work. In any writing it is only what is actually written that counts but all these exploratory studies contribute to the character which is finally offered. I can use material only when it can be imaginatively transformed. Some personal experience, the nursing of soldiers sent back from Europe during the war, had to be accepted but I have not yet been able to write from this experience.

Some years ago I was offered teaching work at the Western Australian Institute of Technology and at the Fremantle Arts Centre as well as workshops in the country districts of Western Australia. I think that teaching helps my writing, certainly it does not hamper it. I have never ventured into the principles of criticism. With my students I look at a text and try to make clear what the writer is trying to achieve and how this achievement is brought about. This is of great value to me and I hope it is of value to my students.

I read a great deal. I realise that however much time I spend in reading I shall not be able to read as much as I would like to. It is necessary to distinguish between writers who have made a great impression on me and those who may have influenced my writing. I often re-read the *Elective Affinities* and *Rasselas* but I do not imagine that I write in any way like Goethe or Johnson. I suppose both have shown me ways of using words and ways of looking at people. This may be all that is meant by a writer's influence on another writer.

I am unable to name a book which has been a model for me. I read the same stories, plays and novels over and over again. When I am writing I find I have to avoid reading some of the 'strong' writers, Henry James and Patrick White, for example, because they intrude with the power of their words.

In times when I am unable to write I re-read a wide range of authors, Cervantes, Chekhov, Ibsen, James, Hardy, Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, and I read as many contemporary poets and fiction writers. Apart from the

pleasure of reading, I find it is better to read than to simply fret in despair about being unable to write.

I have to disagree with the often made remark that the short story is unpopular. Before writing or while I am writing a story I never consider whether it will be published or not, whether it will be saleable or not. I am drawn towards short stories both in reading and in writing and I continued to write them during years when I was not being published. I would have gone on writing even if nothing was published.

V. S. Pritchett in his preface to his *Collected Stories* has written about the short story:

... thousands of addicts still delight in it because it is above all memorable and is not simply read but reread again and again. It is the glancing form of fiction that seems to be right for the nervousness and the restlessness of contemporary life.

The same can be said of the short novel as it is written at the present time.