Move over ...

Illustration from a painting by Jean Wythe ©1991

... Adam

An anthology of short stories by women
of the Federation of Worker Writers
and Community Publishers

Move Over Adam

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES
BY WOMEN OF
THE FEDERATION OF WORKER WRITERS
AND COMMUNITY PUBLISHERS

ISBN 0 906411 05 X

Published for the Federation of Worker Writers
and Community Publishers
by Prescot Community Publishing,
12 Aspinall Street, Prescot.

Wordprocessing, typesetting, design and compiling
by Michael Kirkland.

Thanks to the City College,
Hope Street, Liverpool,
for the use of equipment and patient advice.

Printing by Inspiration,
Haydock Street, St Helens, Merseyside.

All characters in this book are imaginary,
and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead
is purely coincidental.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

This anthology is the result of a project embarked upon by a collective of women in the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers. The idea arose from a successful women's day on women's writing, organised by the FWWCP.

Women were asked to submit scripts. The response was good and the final selection, published here, we hope reflects the rich variety of the Federation's membership.

The collective chosen by the FWWCP consisted of:
Liz Rutherford, Commonword Project, Manchester.
Wendy Beachamp Ward, Tottenham Writers, London.
Stella Fitzpatrick, Gatehouse Project, Manchester.
Sally Flood, Basement Writers, London.
Laureen Hickey, Tottenham Writers, London.

Other women also helped, for which we are grateful. We enjoyed coming together to work on this anthology, and needless to say, we have learnt lessons about such projects for the future. We hope you enjoy the anthology.

Laureen Hickey.

Foreword

The short story is an art form. Like a painting, the canvas of the short story has a limited space - strict confines in which the artist - the storyteller - has to entertain the reader. The writer's palette is the pen - or, today the wordprocessor. The colours are the words, to be carefully selected and blended to build up the finished work - the story.

But the short story differs from a painting in one important respect; whereas a painting is presented to the viewer as a whole, in its entirety, the printed story gradually unfolds its purpose to the reader. The writers in this anthology have all used this advantage to fine effect, so that the reader eagerly seeks after each succeeding paragraph, and is never disappointed.

This collection of short stories is the work of word-artists from all walks of life. That diverse experience of living is seen on the rich canvas painted here - life's colourful emotions of joy and sorrow, love and hate, envy and greed - often painted on the grey canvas of ordinary, colourless, everyday living.

So wander through this fine gallery of stories - see, perhaps, a glimpse of your own experience of life set in print - and, most of all, enjoy the experience.

Ken Burnley Community Print Tutor and author 'Portrait of Wirral' and publisher 'The Wirral Journal'
March 1991

A World Apart

She filled the doorway, arms folded like two great, pink hams beneath her bolstered breasts. She held one eye closed in a squint against the early morning sun that glittered onto hair screwed into a torment of steel curlers under a haze of purple net. Her face was dissatisfied, mouth tightened as if with disapproval of the day itself. Two tiny, black eyes and a knob of a nose were embedded in the round bun of her face. The small feet encased in fluffy pink were seemingly too dainty to support the whole massive bulk of her. Magpie sharp were the eyes flashing as they swept the still sleeping street. Ohhh ... where was that dratted milkman! and her just about the only paying-up customer left in the whole village. Nothing "on tick" for her. She bristled with pious indignation.

Her foot touched a fat, sleeping cat, so that she bent and scooped up the limp, unprotesting body with a swift, surprising agility.

"Ahhh ... Tiddles ... does he want his milk then?"

She held the hot fur-smell of him close to her face as he struggled to be freed, claws raking the pink quilting, pulling strands of cotton loose. She turned her gaze back to the street with a sigh. No sign of life at all.

Not long ago, even at this early hour, the same dusty street would have been filled with action. Men on their way to work the day shift, swearing and spitting. Women beating rugs, shouting and laughing. Children jostling, getting in the way as children do. Now the pits were closed and women and their menfolk still abed while children grizzled impatient to begin a new day. She sighed.

Somewhere behind her she heard the sharp sound of a well-caught, crackling fire in the dim yet shining room. A woman of habit was Mrs. Evans, up at five of the clock every morning, unable to sleep after a lifetime of warming Tom's working clothes, of cutting his "box" and putting it together with his flask of hot, black, sweet tea into his old haversack. Lunch that he used to eat as he sat among the neatly hewed out coal, food that was soon covered in a thick layer of coal dust and dusty tea that went down his parched throat as sweet as a nut. There he would have sat in close companionship with the blackened men about him, unseen except for sudden flashes of white teeth and red-rimmed eyes.

Often she had wondered about the pride of those small, bent men. With lively wit, and a trade at their fingertips. The land then had been rich and generous. Such a bond had those men ... ever ready to help

out a butty in trouble, should it be the missus's money, drink or the "bums" as they called the bailiffs. There had been accidents in many underground, with the men ever ready to have a quick whip round for the poor family of the deceased. Off the foreman would go, cap in grimy hand, respectful of watery eye, uneasy of feet yet proud of head. Money would have been handed over with well-rehearsed words used throughout many years. That had been the done thing. Like the booze-up to see "good-ol' " Gwyn, or Dai, or Fred off in style. Or to wet a new baby's head. Then home they had all staggered arm in arm, singing lustily, yet tunefully. Any excuse for the ol' drink, she thought. But proud she was that her man had taken the pledge was Mrs. Evans. A cut above the others like. Evenings spent to the ticking of the clock as he read from the good book.

Always the Welsh spoken in their house! Detested the flat English monotone she did. And knew few words of it even now, when the village youth were fluent and refusing to learn their sweet mother tongue. A chapel woman was Mrs. Evans, and Tom too was a God-fearing man. Each of them sang in the choirs, and many an Eisteddfod they had won too. Their only social life was through the chapel. And social enough it had always seemed.

Behind her in the dimness she heard Tom's bubbling cough, then a hiss as he hawked and spat into the fire. Her mouth grew into a tight bud. One of the oldest in the pit, he had been one of the first to go. To be made redundant. His lungs ravaged by a lifetime of grovelling through black mud and dust. The hills, so innocent in the sunshine were honeycombed beneath. Over the years there had been many roof falls and men in plenty entombed where they had died, for fear of other falls in a vain effort to reach those certain to be already dead ... hopefully. Her Tom, with peering slits of short-sighted eyes, deep lined from squinting in the dim light of his miner's lamp, sitting now with bowed head, and no longer able to read the print of a Welsh newspaper or the familiar words of the family Bible. He had never drunk, nor cursed as far as she knew. He had earned a good wage and due to his long working years and short life expectancy, had been allowed to stay in the two-roomed, whitewashed old cottage that they had filled with potted plants, lace, heavy dark furniture and pictures of long dead ancestors glaring down from the walls, surrounded by carefully stitched religious mottos and brass plaques.

Waiting now for the milkman, Mrs. Evans let her mind dwell on what they had achieved over the years. From Tom's stiff, detached collars that held his neck in a vice-like grip, to her best black for

chapel and his shiny back-sided suit that he had worn each Sunday, funeral, wedding and christening since their own wedding all those years ago. Her face softened at the remembrance of their courting days. He, all so proper and her a wisp of a thing just seven stone to his broad-shouldered form. How all that had altered. He had been so masterful ... her Tom ... with his centre parting and carefully waxed moustache. A good catch for the young girl who tied up her wealth of jet-black hair into a tight bun as soon as she was wed. Who had stacked their best china and put mothballs into the great chest of bed linen. A young bride who had trembled without reason on her wedding night, and attacked the housework with pride and fervour. They had achieved ... nothing!

A jangling tore her thoughts back to the present. She let the cat escape with a hiss of indrawn breath. Daio the milk led his pony, foot weary up the empty street. Past the chapel and pubs, halting now and then to ladle out creamy milk into big jugs thrust through half opened doors. The old pony emptied his bowels along the road, to be scooped up with shovel and bucket for the rhubarb ... very good for the rhubarb was ol' Joe's manure.

She did not hear the milkman sigh, but she heard his cheerful banter as he made his way towards her cottage at the end of the row. Dusty sheep rose panting in haste from doorways. Strident voices were heard. A slam of a door. A wail.

"Late again then Mr. Jones ... cart broken down is it?" She spoke in Welsh. "Sorry, Mrs. Evans, wife bad again this morning she was ..." She scowled as he answered in English. Blinking. She snatched at the jug of milk that slopped over her thick fingers. The cat moved about her feet, its mouth opening and closing in a soundless mew ... the milkman turned rapidly away. Start talking to her and he'd be there for the morning listening to her gossip. Ol' News of the World they called her, and not without good cause.

Her mouth was a dot. Never found time to talk to her did he? Oh well, what did she care. Him and his drunken ol' wife! She flounced in and slammed the door with such force that the Brown's baby started wailing next door. As if the dratted thing didn't keep them awake enough with its teething screams.

Mrs. Evans made the belated tea. Banging the kettle and tea-pot until Tom looked up in alarm, then began again on his cough, hawk, spit. She rounded on him as he lay back in his chair, his eyes on the dancing flames that were boiling his black gob of phlegm. Exasperated

by his indifference she breathlessly slammed about, wiping, washing, polishing in a fret.

Slowly she climbed the twisting stairs that led to the overfull and low-beamed bedroom. Hot it was ... she opened the small window wide and pulled back the bedclothes to air. Today she felt so strange. Nostalgic like.

"Whateffer is the matter with me!" she chided herself.

She stood near the open window gazing down into the neat yard. Tom was there, puffing on his old pipe as he untied the pigeon cot ... calling fondly, "Cwwm, cwm ... coo cwm up then, my beauties, my loves ... cwm ..."

Mrs. Evans pursed her lips. Those darn birds. More fond of them than her he was. She blinked her eyes rapidly. Duw, she'd never get to chapel at this rate. She watched Tom a little longer, stood he was, like a small, bowed statue as his beloved pigeons soared free in the blue sky, swooshing down towards him with much flapping of wings teasing, rainbow colours. Darting and diving. Wheeling and turning. She sighed.

She dressed slowly. Her hot body heavy. Her best black was getting a bit shabby. Ah well ... perhaps a bit of a new white collar ... she could begin one after tea. She pulled on her white cotton gloves, then settled her black hat on top of her head, the white feathers her only bit of frivolity. She picked up her well-thumbed prayer book holding it close before opening it at the first page. Feeling again the familiar hurt begin. "To Mammy from Dafydd with luv". Written in childish, wobbly writing. The knot in her chest grew too painful to bear. She slammed shut the book and flounced downstairs. The peace on Tom's face irritated her no end today. She went to the back door and called. "You should come to chapel this morning instead of tonight Thomas!" He nodded and coughed chestily; his eyes in the sky. "He doesn't listen" she thought. "When did we stop talking?" She watched him a moment longer.

"Cwm ... Come my lovelies ... my beauties ... cwm ..."

Spoilt ol' things they were, she thought. Hardly ever won a race. Homing pigeons. Huh.

She walked through the living room, eyes flicking from side to side to see that everything was spotless and in place. Her eyes fell on the photo. She lifted it slowly. Such a lovely, curly-headed, serious-faced little boy. Eyes just like Tom's had been ... "Davie ..." she murmured. She felt dizzy and closed her eyes as she replaced the photograph on its brass frame. He had not wanted his photograph taken in his pretty

frilled shirt and velvet trousers. She had fussed and tugged him tidy as he had scowled. Cheeky he'd been to her that day. She couldn't have let him be so disrespectful. How was she to have known that he would run off like that. Dear God in Heaven ... the hours of waiting while the men scoured the hills. The horror when they had carried back his small, wet, dead little body. Fallen down the ol' shaft he had. It was then ... then that Tom had stopped speaking to her ... blamed her he did.

Mrs. Evans pulled at the front of her dress and walked out into the heavy sunshine. The chapel steps were slowly filling with groups of softly clucking women. Whispering because they were so near the house of God. Skipping children bumped into her, laughing. Their feet raising the thick, black dust. Shrill their voices rang through the day...

"Bloody's in the Bible, Bloody's in the book ... If you don't believe me, take a Bloody look ..." Outraged she shook her fist and they fled shrieking. No respect had the young today! Her Davie ... He would have been a man now. Perhaps even minister of the chapel. Her eyes flicked to the silent pithead wheel then away ... He had been such a good, quiet boy really. It had all been in the hands of the Lord. So ... why had Tom blamed her? She had loved them both so much! Her two 'men".

Suddenly she felt breathless and paused. She could smell the clean scent of Davie, all about her, filling her nostrils and taking away her breath. Above, in the clear blue of the sky, the pigeons soared. She glanced up. Duw ... there's funny her ol' head felt. Dizzy like. She was weary. So tired ...

About her, yet far away, she heard voices. Her name called loudly. Dark it was ... "Mrs. Evans, Mrs. Evans ... Duw. There's a funny ol' colour ... quick ... going she is ... Run and fetch Tom ... quick ... Oh Duw, Duw. Lay her down will yew!"

The pain was fleet through her chest. She blinked her eyes in annoyance. Tom and that dratted pipe, an' his chest so bad too. She smiled at the sudden sight of him, so handsome, always so correct, bending now with his heart in his eyes. How light she felt ...

(... and he had swept her off her feet and carried her to bed. Gently .. Oh so very tenderly ...)

The chapel stood firm, watching the little gathering below at its feet. "Mair ... Mair my dearest. Tom's here, my beauty, my pet ... my little love ..." The birds fluttered unheeded in the sky as she closed her eyes, content. Tom held her gloved hand close to his chest in his gnarled ol' fist. Kneeling on the steps that many feet had worn thin,

with the minister flapping about not sure what to do except pray for the dearly departed. Tears ran through the channels of Tom's deep-lined face.

"My beloved ... cwm my beauty ..."

But Mrs. Evans was past any recall. She was soaring free, leaving Tom hunched over the body of a fat old woman on the chapel steps.

Joan Batchelor

In The Dark

She was righteous and indignantly so, puffing out her bony chest and pursing her mouth to a straight line. "Why can't I then?" she asked, "Why can't I have a bed of my own? Grandad can have our big bed an' there's two little beds in Grandad's room ... eh mam?"

"But lovey, you would be cold without our Anne snuggling up to you ... and anyway, there's just enough blankets as it is," her mam said.

"Oooohhh mam, I'm fed up of her peein' down my lap every night. I stink of it an' the kids in school think it's me!"

Her mam sighed. It was alright for her mam ... she didn't have to lie in bed feeling the wet heat turn cold and smelling the tart, acidy urine smell as it pervaded the room. She shook with a deep hatred she could ill control, not towards her small, curled up sibling but to the actual wet that poured out two or three times a night. That blasted kid should wear night nappies an' rubbers she thought, moving her leg gingerly and feeling her supper bread an' milk heave with disgust.

Now in the silence left by her mother's footsteps a frenzied scrabbling began yet again in the wall. She turned her eyes towards the sound without moving her neck. She stiffened and her widened eyes felt cold. She could almost see the palpitating mass, suckers on tentacles and teeth that were gradually tearing their way through the solid brick to her quaking, pee-sodden little body. Now and then it paused as if listening and judging her bearings as she gasped at the slight pain in her starved chest, she drew in breath gingerly, quietly, hard. She dare not call her mam or it would be in an' at her. Her heart hurt her lungs as it beat them into one painful bruise. She eased her way from her sister and the child flung out arms an' legs to wrap around her, then wet down her leg yet again. She shoved her away with hard fingers, her mind racing ahead of her trembling body, moving across the room-sized landing where THINGS lurked in wall cupboards and a glass skylight allowed creatures of the night to peer in, on across the glass corner where THINGS waited watching for her shrinking shadow to pass in the moonlight. Cupboards swung open and THEY willed her closer still ... on down the stairs, each creak making the TROGS beneath aware of her solitary presence, then the dash past their outstretched talons at the foot of the stairs, whimpers tight in her throat as she decided to race the 'lectricity and tried to bash the switch on before the shock managed to kick her elbow. Light was by far preferable to the stalking THINGS of the night. They feared the

light. Sobs filled her throat as the power hit her elbow and shoulder with a terrific force. Chest dry and sore she stood rubbing her arm beneath the harsh, shadeless light feeling the creatures retreat to the very edge of darkness. Painfully the blood began to flow through her small limbs again.

Her toes curled cold on the lino. She opened the door to the passage, smelling dad's wet mac and the rubber floor covering. The green, shiny walls sweated coldly so that her small fingers recoiled. Her soaked knickers and vest were clammy cold and raising goose bumps all over her body. Hairs rose at the back of her neck and her scalp felt tight. Sweat beaded her upper lip. "They've got the wireless on ..." she thought, hearing the loud rumble of voices, unfamiliar, harsh voices ... she obeyed some inner instinct and her feet slowed until she crept forwards, silently, motivated by her fear mixed with a sixth sense. Her scalp crawled as she reached the heavy kitchen door which stood ajar. Her hand stopped in mid-air and her mouth never spoke the words it had been opened to say. Her blood froze and her small world crumbled like her soft mouth.

Her father rose, cold-eyed, from his chair by the dying fire and moved towards her mother, menace in his every move. She heard her mother sob as if heart-broken. Her wide-apart eyes and jaw ached yet refused to close. "Me dad's gone mad," she thought, "Me dad's gone stark ravin' mad!"

"I'll kill you ..." her dad snarled the words and she leapt inside at the strange tone. She bit her tongue, tasting blood. The cold had fled and her blood pounded strong and loud behind her taut lids. Ohhh her dad, he was goin' to kill her mam! There was a flurry of sound and she saw her dad had taken her mother by the throat, his long, strong fingers firm. She moaned deep in her chest and her dad froze. She saw his eyes move towards the slit in the door and with terror she backed away. Her dad was a stranger. He was a mad stranger. One who would kill her for sure, he would ... her mam had often said her dad would kill her when he got in ...

"He'll kill you if you aren't asleep when he gets in ..." she used to say. An' now he would. An' she loved her dad she did, an' her mam ... she loved her mam most of all an' now they were going to be dead.

She forgot the terrors of the night about her and turned and fled the way she had come, bare feet numb with cold but fleet, mounting the stairs two at a time. The scrabblings ceased and her small sister growled deep in her chest as she hurtled beneath the bedclothes.

"Gerrowff!"

She snuggled up tight, feeling the hot reek of the bed burn into her icy limbs. Slow, hesitant steps began up the wooden stairs that creaked on the seventh and tenth step. They halted, listening, after each creak.

"OOooohhh grandad!" she could hear the old man's snores from the narrow bed in the next room ... an' her dad stealthily moved closer, the dripping carving knife that he so carefully sharpened each Sunday held in his right hand ... the other strong, square brown fingers reaching out towards her ...

In a moment of sheer cowardice she thought of changing places with Anne. He loved Anne, he did, he wouldn't hurt her. But the thought of laying in a pee puddle where mam had put an old mac beneath the sheet made her gag with the mere thought. It was far too distasteful.

"OOoohh mam ... my mammy is dead ... oh mam ..."

The footsteps were at the door now. Oh, she'd forgotten to close the door. She wriggled deeper and the springs twanged causing her heart to halt.

Breathing sounded loud to her ears, echoing and laboured, holding itself back. Her lungs filled painfully with air that she could not expel, blowing them up like twin balloons. She let it out in hiccups a bit at a time - like sighs. Fluff tickled the lining of her nose, spiders crawled over her tummy, worms writhed up her arms, unnamed creatures laughed silently from behind the paper on the walls.

"Jay love?" Her dad's creepin' voice, the one he used when he'd upset her an' didn't know how to say sorry. She stiffened, waiting for the blow. "You awake lovey?" Her arm fell asleep and became an agonised weight beneath her sharp ribs. The sharp smell of urine made her eyes water and burned her throat. In discomfort she lay rigid against the familiar damp of her sister, pressing herself even closer. It seemed an age before he slowly turned and was gone.

Silence fell heavy with foreboding. No scrabbling sounded, the owls in their tree outside the window sat still as death. Grandad was into his deepest sleep and his snores had ceased. Anne's lids jerked in dreams. She moaned for her mam. She thought of her now, the soft Welsh voice, singing, her quick, shy smile, her warm welcome to strangers. Her heart bled. She moved and life flowed back to her arm until it felt swollen with agony.

OOoohh my mam, my mam ... she'd be in the News of the World that dad had always teased her for buying. Me lovely mam. Me dad's killed her.

The wet bed and room began to recede, spinning away into a deep, black hole. She was alone and cool and clean. Scented of flowers, cuddling warm, furry creatures that loped around unafraid. Her breath deepened and calmed. Weights lifted from her heart and mind, her mouth twitched with dream laughter. Soft.

Waking was hard. Something she fought against. The bed was cold and hard. The oldest sheets mam used because of Anne's bedwetting looked tatty in the grey light. Rain tapped at the grubby, Winter window panes. Waking her, calling her. Anne ... she leapt out of her bed to try and stop the child from finding her mam dead and cold on the floor. Terror flooded her ears and mouth. Her eyes saw through a reddened mist. She fell on the stairs to rise again and again. Her knees were stiff, she was bruised and afraid yet determined.

She was half way up the passage when she heard her sister prattling. She came to an abrupt stop, listening until her tilted neck ached. Water splashed, the kettle spluttered to hiss at the fire, a spoon's clink sounded against the rim of a cereal bowl. She could smell porridge and gaseous coal burning. Then to her utter heart-rending joy she heard the trill of her mother's laugh and her voice musical as a bell in the grey morning.

"Mammm ... mamm ... mam?"

She whispered it, her voice rising at the tail, the blood drained from her causing her to stagger faint to the kitchen door. All was light, bright ... hard, cruel, cold, beautiful light.

Her mother turned, laughter dying from her face as she caught sight of the white face.

"Jay cariad. What's wrong love?" and the child went down, falling further on to the hard floor, away and on into the spin of space. Then back as if on elastic, and the small stomach drew up and away from her body heaving the supper from the night before, painfully into a bowl her mother held below her chin. Fingers were icy cold on the sweat of her head.

Much later, washed sweet and warm in her grandad's small bed she lay sorry for herself and feeling the weak tears ooze from her eyes to flow down the cheeks. She allowed herself to think as her mam sat and stroked her hair back from her neck. Duw! She'd have to be good at this miracle. She gave a small frown as she thought of the hard chapel pews. Her mother shushed her.

"All happy families quarrel my lovey. It means nothing. You and little Anne quarrel don't you now? Yet you still love her? Mam and dad don't quarrel often, but it is good for us when we do and we love each other more than ever after."

The child turned her tired, cry-heavy eyes to her mam's soft face, listening, not really understanding. She traced each familiar line and crease carefully, storing them to memory. Her small finger crept out seeking her mother's, catching them between her own hand.

The house was silent. Sympathetic. It receded slowly as she moved away into the hole. The furry creatures loped, waiting. Smiling she sighed deeply and slept.

Joan Batchelor

Entrance

A child awoke alive in yellow sheets, warm bed, wishing one of the grown-ups would come and say "Good morning!" She spent a long time listening, reaching with her ears to 'phone conversation, adult talk. When would she be remembered?

When would she be remembered? She had no sense of being her, no defined boundary without the grown-ups' definition, delineation. She had no specific time, age or place, space. She lay travelling a long way back from the woken moment, longing for a morning not yet noticed, back in and out of trance, dream, remembrance, the full mind's eye.

The sight of a stone lion on a wall drew her. The stone curled out and away around the symmetry of the open face. She looked at his open mouth. It called her in. There was a long thick tongue, alive. If she lifted it, or it moved, she could look through, through that space, dark, between windpipe and gullet. That spot, removed, she looked through and through. In the open throat was theatre: thick curtains deeply folded, red as the inner folds of flesh, soft she hoped to the touch, but there was no time to touch. Her eyes were drawn on unrelentingly by the dark stage.

A clown was there. A clown stagepainted in extremes, black and white, fur-ruffed, pale-clad, showing one side a grin, then turning the other tearful cheek. But she cannot know him. He is tragicomic, real emotion-less, stiff yet moving, a style not a man. He walks in a queer way, predictable, back forth, back forth, not smiling, not crying.

She saw clearly. She watched, noted. She noted "The clown is not funny. He is not real. He is a mask. He pretends. I am frightened, a bit frightened." The fear clutched her stomach, then trembled her guts.

Adults' voices in reassurance mode muttered "It's just a play! Don't be afraid. It's nothing. It's just a play." But she knew this happened in her real life. What else did she know? Another time voices told her it all was illusion, real life was but a play. She repeated the words, again, as though the energy of their repetition would make their truth feel real inside her: "It's just a play, it's just a play." But her doubt was loath to be parted from her and secretly in her heart, her louder voice whispered more clearly "But I am real. I really see." Her heart shouts, screams. She would not be joyful to be a player: she would rather be real, woman in touch.

She is in touch, she is real, she affirms herself. It is necessary to reassure herself: of course she can play games, but she is real as well.

Sometimes there are real emotions: come back! She made herself look back again, back into the stage.

The clown continued his unfunny tragic march: back forth back forth across, predictably across the stage. Suddenly from the left a supple dancer ran forward. Her looks were like a rag doll, a black pinhead, a flat chest. The child found it hard to see her face, she was so droopy. Was she a rag doll or a marionette? She could be so limp, was so supple, could bend drooping, dropping from the waist, or move forward like a swan ballerina gracefully floating. Her head, hands floated down to the ground falling, floating, falling following a downwards musical bar. Then just as easily, as suddenly but not surprisingly, she could jerk fast back and bend back, backwards like a rubber toy, but with grace, ease of movement. Her waist was a centre point, a narrow pivot. The watching child was unaware of the legs which moved easily, carrying the woman dancer fast all over the stage. The clown was restricted to a tramway of motion only, back forth across the darkening part of the stage. The eyes of the child were drawn to the woman: from her waist down her body was clothed in many soft light layers, rainbow bright colours, legions of them, legions, emotions, spirits floating, pulling, moving, pushing, around and around. She was fire, air, earth, water. Life itself in the face of Death, that masked clown man. He was struck, trammelled, pinned down, a dead beetle. She, showering over the stage the lot he'd refused, was stuck with too much.

The proscenium arch faded, the watching of the child moved. She had seen enough. This was her parents' drama. Those were their roles. It was too intense to stay for very long. She knew she could not watch more. She attempted reassurance again, telling herself to leave them there on the stage, telling herself to be free. "Free, free me!" she'd scream. She managed it this time.

Coming out of the lion's mouth, while she was yet emerging she paused for pleasure. It was warm, dark, cavernous. Remembrances of a myriad of pleasant places murmured in her. She thought "I always did love grottoes." With her entranced eyes she could reach Easter gardens in English churches, small pale flower heads glowing warmth from a damp dark earthiness by rocks. She sought caves, old smells, safe hides. There had been a cave grotto in the fisherman's chapel by the sea. She'd looked in to see relics, ghosts, rocks, lights of small candles: a consecrated place of beaded prayer.

In the mouth her mind's eye filled with adult stories: the stone that rolled away, women weeping, a man golden-blooded and light-radiant,

all powerful, saying "Touch me not!" Her anger is up, red like the enfolding flesh, the curtains of her cavern. She visits the day her young bridegroom hallucinating deceived herself into a holiness that said "Don't touch!" She, cast away, spent years cast on herself, repeated this tragic act, time and time more, to hear: "Do not touch!" The male command only served to increase her desire to touch. She sees clearly. He was afraid of her sight. A man told her to hide her beacon light. The man was afraid of laser beams: was that her power?

Now she must know what she is. She must be real, be true. She feels she has seen so clearly she can change so easily, understanding chameleon, how to adapt, to fit into man's patterns and plans. This drift of thought carries her beyond, too far. She wants to come back to her real work. She comes back now to remember clearly, to get into vision ...

Gardens: her attention is taken to gardens. She must get into the garden. Her mother's voice insistent within her screamed for the garden. The hysteria about life in plants and trees and gardens was ridiculous to the child. It brought anger into her. She thought anger at her mother must be very wrong so she decided to be rude to the roses instead, and to stick out her tongue at the lilies. There were several ways to reach the garden. The way did not matter to the child. All of them pleased her. She would watch her mother who fretted and wept when the one way she wanted she couldn't. At such a moment, who was the child? She was to be her own mother's comforter, as spoilt and raging mother's anger was termed depression and breakdown. What child was long deceived by the outer shell of an adult's body? Back to the garden: in they had to creep through the damp, dark exciting cellar, a basement window framed by lovely green ferns and tongue-like frond plants, long and licking. Both were in dungarees. The young child sank to her knees for work with her tiny trowel, finding slugs, worms and slaters. She saw her poor child-mother, exhausted with tantrums and anger, collapsed limply on the grass, grumbling if it was not warm. Inside this child a longing grew for a grown-up mother, but she added, in comforter-mode, "Never mind." Her mother was happier to be the dancer on the stage. Strong women surrounded them, grown-up women frequently rescued mother and child from their impasses. Her mother would sleep.

Wide awake herself she wondered how her parents made each other more extreme, father clown, mother rag doll. The child would find it reassuring to think father understood feeling. But somehow she knew his losses led to bitterness, to resignation, a life denied expression. Her

body, in the presence of this breaking thought, heaved with motion, huddered silent sobs, dry tears. She'd like to have been rescuer:

"Mother reaping harvests of hungry tears for years
Now's time to touch my Father's human hand
But I feel wary of undamming his ocean of emotion."

It is too much for the human child. She stands back. She has seen nough. She understands. To grow, to be free, to be herself she will eek her own heroes and heroines.

Looking through windows to gardens: a shared experience for each hild. To be big enough to reach a handle, to have the strength to turn key, to act on the stage oneself. She considers roles: being someone or a while, wearing a costume, a mask, restricting an infinity of eings to one channel, paradoxically still being herself. It feels angerous. She worries about trapping herself in a part, destined orever to give one mode of expression, fixed as she saw her parents ixed. She could cast the light of her gaze beam there when she hooses, they are ever there, from the outside looking in, that is their rison. It need not be hers.

She runs back out of the opening, the mouth of the roaring lion, and tretches in slanted sunlit dust by the window. She snuggles back to he yellow pillow as adult steps tread stairs. The door opens. "Good norning!" A grown-up cup of tea.

Richenda Power

A Gem of a Day

A sudden, gentle puff stirred the trapped dust as she dawdled across the bridge. "Unwillingly to school" - Shakespeare's words. Usually Liz went willingly for she enjoyed teaching. But it was a gem of a morning: a real gem. Such rare mornings should be idled on lonely moors to the music of lark and curlew. The cacophony of shouts and laughter from the playground echoed across the foul, black, sluggish river. Suddenly the piercing shrieks of a whistle demanded that she hurry round the corner, down the hill, up the worn stone steps, through the front door for teachers and visitors only, and into milling whirlpools of energy.

"Morning Miss, morning Miss" - shouted, whispered in thin piping voices and deep growls.

"Good morning - 'morning - 'morning" spoken breathlessly, as she dodged and pushed her way to the stairs. Mrs. Grant, coming through the door of the girls' cloakroom, blocked her passage.

"Your Jean Jackson appears to have been out all night again. I've given her a clean towel, and told her to get a shower."

The words froze the half-formed smile on Liz's cheerful face, and she pressed pretty lips into a hard thin line to shut in the words racing through her mind.

"You ought to have given her food and a drink instead of a clean towel: she's probably had nothing since school dinner. Moreover she's no more my Jean Jackson than yours; she isn't my special responsibility - at least she shouldn't be mine, just mine."

Aloud she answered, "I'll have a word with her when I've taken the register."

Mrs. Grant's words had shattered the serenity of the morning. Liz felt the irritation rising. The classroom with its large, new windows was hot and stuffy, the pupils noisy.

"Couldn't anyone have opened a window?" she asked testily.

Several of the pupils did so, quickly, and the others, sensing her mood, were quiet.

Liz, Mrs. Martin - a cheerful, rounded mother of two, with a sense of fun and a quick smile, was well-liked, but a little feared, for she demanded discipline and hard work and could enforce both with a sharp tongue. The register was marked quickly, homework collected, reminders given, a request that the plants should be watered, and the class dismissed for the first lesson. First period, Fridays, Liz had no class. She had planned to mark books, but now she would have to go

and find Jean. She ought to go straight away, but she sat, red cheek resting on the propped-up fist, her right hand drumming the ball-point pen on the desk blotter, thinking, worrying. It was almost two years ago that she had come to school earlier than usual, to prepare an examination, and found Jean, curled up asleep in a staffroom armchair. Her natural warmth had won Jean's confidence and she had listened sympathetically to the child's tales of misery and ill-treatment, but the seeming lack of power, or will, of the authorities to act, and everyone's eagerness to push Jean's problems on to her, had built up an angry frustration, alien to her. Soft, shuffling noises and Liz's head turned to see Sue Jenkins hovering round the open door: a clearing of the throat, a hesitant, "Please Miss, please, ahem - can I - "

"Come in, close the door, sit down." Liz knew why she'd come: a thin, plain girl, Sue was Jean's only friend.

"What has happened this time, Sue? I've no time to waste, so please tell me".

Sue, sitting nervously on the edge of the chair, studied the floor and made several attempts to begin a sentence, but failed.

"I know she's run away from home again", coaxed Liz, more kindly, "but I don't know why. You know, don't you, Sue? If you want my help, you must tell me".

"She says she won't go back this time, whatever the social worker says", looking sorrowfully at Liz.

"Another row, another beating?" urged Liz.

"Worse than that, Miss", with head bent low.

Liz wondered what could be worse than some of the beatings Jean had been given.

"Her mother took two men friends home last night", a blush slowly stole across Sue's face and she squirmed so much she almost fell off the chair.

"We know all about her mother's men friends, Sue. No need to be embarrassed", and Liz bent her head sideways, trying to look into the hung down face.

"There were two of them, Miss", Sue muttered, emphasising the two, stumbling over words, "You know what I mean, Miss", and turning her face slightly upwards, she gave Liz an appealing look, begging her to understand. Liz thought she understood, but did not wish to understand the hinted obscenity. She scrutinised Sue's bright pink face, as she asked, slowly, deliberately.

"Are you trying to tell me that Jean's mother wanted Jean to go to bed with one of the men?"

Susan nodded her head vigorously, sat back on the chair, relieved at not having to mouth the words herself, and whispered "Yes, Miss".

"But she's only thirteen!" Liz protested, banging her fist on the desk.

"Last April, Miss", Susan volunteered more brightly.

"Has this - or anything like it - ever happened before?" Liz asked quietly.

"Oh yes, Miss", came the quick reply.

"Why hasn't Jean told someone - me, or the social worker? Was she too afraid?"

"Told me, made me promise not to tell. The man went away because Jean told him how old she was. He swore at her mother".

Sue's confidence grew and the words flowed.

"She told the man this time too, but he said it didn't matter because her mother said it was OK. Her mother said it was time she earned her keep and hit her. There was a big row, and Jean ran away. She did go back, but the door was locked. Jean's frightened, Miss. She wants to go and live somewhere else - you'll help her, won't you, Miss".

A long despondent sigh and "I'll do my best, you go back to your class".

They walked to the cloakroom together. It was empty.

"She'll be in the park, Miss. That's where she goes to hide. Do you want me to find her?"

"No, I'll go".

But first she would have to tell the head. He greeted her with a friendly smile, wondering at the worried look. Liz's story brought a flush to the cheeks of this middle-aged family man, but he believed it: he had known the mother's reputation for some time. He admired Jean, admired her tenacity and grim determination to break away from a mother who lived on the perimeter of petty crime.

"I'll get on to the Social Worker, and find someone to take your next class. See if you can find her".

Liz crossed the bridge more quickly this time, her thoughts on Jean and where to search. The park, an old one, had been extended to the river, after the demolition of crowded streets of terraced slums, and was now quite large. Underneath it were old air raid shelters, and the council and local children waged an unending battle, blocking and unblocking the entrances. They were a favourite with "runaways", tramps and seekers of adventure. Liz would not be looking there. She crossed the road to the huge, Victorian wrought iron gates, standing wide open, welcoming all, but there was no-one about: too early for

the old, and the truants would be well hidden in their secret haunts. "I ought to have played truant", mused Liz, "caught the bus in the opposite direction, wandered the moors on this gem of a day", and she made a wry smile at the regiments of red and pink geraniums, bordering the path. She walked more slowly as the grey path twisted and climbed up the hillside to where the playground lay hidden behind massed rhododendrons. A swing was creaking, slowly, regularly. Perhaps? She'd found Jean there once before, slowly swinging misery away.

That was the time she had shown Liz the bright red weals across thighs and buttocks, but, when questioned by the school doctor, Jean had changed the story, saying an uncle had beaten her, not her mother. Jean had many uncles that came and went, and couldn't be found. Liz completed the form "Suspected non-accidental injury", sent it to the Education Offices for filing: a safeguard for the school.

That form had been joined by others, in its neatly labelled folder. There had been the black eyes and the split lip that needed stitching. The mother told the "cruelty man" Jean fought often with her older, stronger brother. The brother defended his mother. Jean, they both said, was violent, told lies. Liz wondered if mother and brother would ever be caught in the web of lies they spun.

A young woman was gently pushing a toddler on the swing. No sign of Jean. The young woman looked across, curiously. "Hello Mrs. Martin, looking for truants?"

Liz recognised the former pupil, and was glad of a pleasant chat, but the young woman had seen no-one. The increasing heat and the futility of the search slowly impressed themselves on Liz, and she sought a shady spot beneath one of the few ancient trees still growing in the field that sloped down to the lake. Leaning against its century-thickened trunk, Liz scanned the scene, nothing moving, nothing: even the birds were hiding from the heat. Below, the lake quivering gently, not even a duck. Beyond the lake, the bank of green, still trees, the children mistakenly called the woods, and rising above them the grey rectangular monuments to the twentieth century, catching the sun in myriads of glass, diminishing the blackened tapering spires, the tall, slender chimneys, neglected monuments of earlier centuries. Tired, relaxing, welcoming the shade, thinking, musing, dreaming: they ought to have found foster parents for Jean years ago, when she had asked, begged, lived in hope someone, somewhere could give the love she desperately wanted. Now it was probably too late. Foster parents preferred younger children.

Bella, Jean called her, never Mother. Liz had met Bella once, the morning she had arrived angrily demanding Jean return a missing five pound note. Bella was a surprise. Liz had expected the elaborate hair, the chiselled magazine-cover face, even the expensive clothes, but not the elegance, not the style. That had been a shock. Bella was no tramp, not outwardly, but when Jean vehemently denied the charge, she became a harlot, screeching abuse. Jean fled; she was missing for several days.

"Hello, Miss", and Jean standing there, a half-asleep Liz blinking open reluctant eyelids.

"Hello, Miss", again, in an unsurprised voice, as if it were usual to find Liz dozing in the park in the middle of a school morning.

"Hello, Jean, I've been looking for you".

Daydream or awake? There was such unrealness about it all, she wondered what time it was, and looked anxiously at her watch.

Jean standing there in a too-large summer dress, unperturbed, her mother's classical nose and high cheek bones, but sunken, pallid cheeks, hands cupped against a flat chest, and through gaunt fingers, something fluttering. Jean dropping on knees into the sumptuous grass, thrusting out scrawny arms and hands carefully parting to show a tiny, juddering sparrow, its head rapidly jerking. "It can't fly, Miss. The cats have been at it. I think they've hurt its wing. I found it trying to hide under the bushes", and she cooed to it soothingly. "That's the trouble with this park, Miss, too many cats and dogs wandering around loose. People here don't care about their animals, don't really love them - just throw them out all day".

Some of them don't love their own children, let alone their animals, thought Liz. Aloud she asked "Shall we take it to Mr. Neilson? Perhaps he'll have somewhere to keep it until the wing heals".

"We call him 'The Vet'. Did you know that, Miss?" and a faint smile melted the melancholy face. "All the kids bring their injured pets to him".

"Don't we know it!" Liz said, grimacing, "The putrid smells from that lab! But then he did grow up on a farm: he does have a magical touch with living things, including obstreperous pupils. He'll doubtless have some suggestion".

"Wish I lived on a farm" Jean murmured wistfully.

Relieved at Jean's willingness to return to school, Liz rolled onto her knees, and slowly stood, brushing down her dress and picking up her bag.

"Do you think the sparrow will be alright in the pigeons' cage? There are no pigeons in it", and Jean turned appealing blue eyes, hopefully searching Liz's kind face for encouragement.

"I don't know, a sparrow is such a tiny wild creature that it could die of fright in a cage, or just pine away with loneliness".

"If we left it in the park it would die anyway. The cats would have it. There are wild cats in the woods, Miss; cats people have thrown out and they've turned wild, had wild kittens. The boys go looking for them. It might live in the cage."

Together, strolling across the grass to join the path meandering to the open wrought iron gates, across the road and the bridge, and not a word said about anything except the wounded sparrow and other dumb creatures rescued by pupils and healed by Mr. Vet Neilson. Round the corner, down the hill, and up the downtrodden steps to the front door.

Suddenly Jean stopping, turning to Liz, mouth pulled into a thin, hard, doleful line, eyes narrowing obstinately.

"I'm not going back to Bella this time, Miss. I'm not going back, not for you, not for Miss Grant, not for anyone! You can tell them all. It's my life, and she's not selling me to buy a new coat. I hate her, I hate her. You can't make me go back, no-one can. I'll get a job and if I can't get a job I'll steal. If I get caught it won't matter because they'll have to do something then." The defiant, staccato voice becoming more and more shrill, and the nerve in the hollow cheek jerking and jerking and jerking. Liz swallowing hard, hoping she wouldn't turn and run.

"No, Jean, you're not going back. I promise. We'll make them do something. Mr. Langton has phoned for Miss Grant. Perhaps she's here, already. We want to help you, but you must help us. You won't get a job and stealing will solve nothing. Please come in", pleading gently, putting a hand on a reluctant arm that was snatched away, pushing open the swing door. But Miss Grant was on leave, the Head told them when they reached his small office, his expressive eyes showing his annoyance.

"A young man is coming - the duty Social Worker."

"Much use he'll be!", and with a jeering sneer, Jean tossing her head derisively and turning away from them to stare at the blank wall.

"Now Jean, enough of that! None of your recalcitrance. Mrs. Martin has already spent a whole morning looking for you. If you want our help, we must have your co-operation. Perhaps you and Jean should get some dinner, Mrs. Martin". Signalling to Liz with kind eyes and his bushy eyebrows that they should leave his room.

"We'll take the sparrow to Mr. Neilson first".

Without a word, a scowling, sullen Jean stamping angrily down the corridor followed by a sighing, weary Mrs. Martin, but talking to Mr. Neilson about the sparrow, the truculence evaporates, and a tender sadness creeps into the lovely eyes.

The sun had emptied the dining room, but from the kitchen came the sound of women cheerfully singing above the rattle of plates and clatter of cutlery. The plump, rosy-faced cook greeted them pleasantly in her Irish brogue. "Plenty of food. Where they've all gone I wouldn't be knowing, but they haven't come in here, that's for sure. Trouble?" and she looked meaningfully from Liz to Jean and back to Liz.

An abruptly discouraging "Yes" from Liz, and "Only a little for me, please", watching lashings of food being ladled onto Jean's plate.

"Could you do with a cup of tea, now? We've just brewed one for ourselves".

"I could that, Mrs. Boyle. I'd love one".

Jean ate avidly. Mrs. Boyle brought two mugs of strong, steaming tea, and said there was more in the pot. Liz sipped the tea gratefully, stealing wary glances at the forlorn, despondent figure opposite. Abruptly Jean putting down knife and fork, saying gently, "I wish you were my mother".

Liz, stunned, slowly lowering the mug to the table, taking deep breaths, biting her bottom lip, bending her head to avoid the searching, wistful glances.

"That is one of the most wonderful compliments I've ever received. Thank you Jean. If I only had myself to think about, I'd take you home with me tonight, but you know I have a husband and two children. It's their home too. I'm sorry. I've told you before, you're welcome to come and see us, but you haven't been for a long time".

"It's alright Miss - just wishful thinking", and a poignant smile flickering across the wan face. The swing door gradually moving, Liz welcoming the intrusion. "Come in Sue". Jean telling her friend about the sparrow, and Liz suggesting they go to see how it is faring, an opportunity to escape for a short respite before the coming battle. Her answer had been sincere, she liked Jean, admired her savage independence, resilience, persistence, determination not to be subdued by a mother who used her as a chattel. Liz's husband saw things differently, thought she got too involved in pupils' problems, ought to look for another post in a "better" area where she would be expected to teach, nothing else. Her round face creased into a wry smile; he would never understand.

A boy brought the message, the Social Worker had arrived. Liz opened the door of the Head's room to see a dark-bearded young man overfilling one of the small armchairs.

"Mr. Ellis - Mrs. Martin" said the Head rising and pointing to a chair. Liz sat at right angles to them, between them, and studied Mr. Ellis.

John Ellis fidgeting uncomfortably in the too-small chair, cleared his throat several times, glanced appealingly to the Head for rescue from the intense scrutiny of this conventional, motherly woman. He hadn't relished coming here, especially after his superior had warned him that the school had wanted Jean Jackson taken into care for the past two years, and told him to resist the pressure. But Mr. Langton, explaining there were matters that needed his urgent attention, abandoned him. Mrs. Martin made no move, sat silent, her whole demeanour radiating impatient disapproval. Dropping his head, gazing at shuffling feet, hands clasping and unclasping between open knees, 'umming and 'arring, talking about the difficulties, what could and could not be done, excusing, vacillation, the young man was oblivious to the rising flush of anger in Mrs. Martin's grim face.

"For Christ's sake, cut the lecture! I know as much, if not more, than you do about the Young Person's Act. I haven't taught in this school for twelve years and learned nothing". Voice terse and fingers drumming, drumming on the wooden arms, the words flooding out harshly ordering him to immediate action. Startled, attempting to stem the angry torrent, protesting that he was misunderstood, squirming, swallowing hard, and unutterably relieved at the arrival of a secretary bringing coffee. Silence, impenetrable hostile silence, and Liz realising the senselessness of blistering rage and animosity, an unwilling participant, said, warily, dully,

"Jean will not go back home. She's adamant. At thirteen, she has the right to decide that. She is not her mother's possession, a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. The law protects her from that. You represent the law, and there is no way you can wriggle out of your responsibilities".

Stealing a quick, sideways glance at this obstinate woman, he sensed the futility of further argument. Rummaging for words, he repudiated ill-deserved accusations of smugness, supercilious text-book solutions and lack of genuine empathy. Acknowledging to herself that she'd vented cumulated frustrations on the young man, but remorselessly implacable, Liz asked what action he intended to take.

Subdued, he asked tentatively "A Place of Safety Order?"

She dropped her head to hide the fleeting, gloating smile, but before she could reply, the Head returned.

Mr. Langton's ethics were such that he had never for a moment considered any other course, and had already arranged for a magistrate friend to sign the order.

"Will you tell Jean whilst Mr. Ellis rings Richmond House?" he asked, oblivious to the strained atmosphere.

A happier Jean, sitting contentedly in front of the pigeon cage, whispering, guarding,

"He's feeling better already, Miss, stopped shivering. Mr. Neilson says his wing will mend and then we'll take him back to the park".

To be caught again by the cats, thought Liz, but aloud,

"I'm glad. I'm sure Mr. Neilson's right."

A pregnant silence, and then, hurrying out the words,

"It'll have to be Richmond House for the time being, Jean. That's where you went last time, isn't it?"

Jean slumping on the stool, a taut scowl and the nerve in the cheek jerking and jerking and jerking, sourly protesting she had done nothing wrong, grimly objecting to being locked in with thieves, and begging Liz to agree it was unfair. Liz tenderly placing an arm around Jean and promising to visit, to nag authority and not give up. The plaintive desolation in Jean's voice made Liz ache, the monstrous injustice lacerated her: she spoke words of hope she didn't believe. Maybe the young man had been right when he said the best place for Jean was with the family, despite everything. The doubts grew. Quizzically she asked "Are you sure you don't want to go home?"

Slipping from under the protective arm, off the stool, back against the cage, surprised, reproachful eyes, the nerve in the sallow cheek jerking and jerking and jerking, fiercely hissing "I told you I don't! I told him I don't! Don't you believe me? I thought you believed me".

"Of course I believe you. I just have to be sure I've done the right thing. Come on, sit down. I'm sure you'll find foster parents and be happy. I know you will, I have a feeling everything will be as you wish it this time".

Liz hoping her words sounded convincing, smiling encouragement. They sat facing each other, feet resting on the rails of the stools and Jean was back in happier days when she'd lived with foster parents for nearly two years. Then Bella had claimed her. For the first time tears glistened in Jean's eyes. She had not wanted to go with Bella, but no-one had listened to her. Older, wiser, she was determined to make them listen this time, all of them. The lab was quiet and still. The

school was quiet, only the clanging of buckets and scraping of chairs in a distant classroom.

"I'll go and ask Mr. Langton what is happening. Coming?" Liz asked.

"I'll stay here".

Mr. Langton said he was on the point of coming to collect Jean. Everything was settled. The three of them walked back to the lab, making trivial conversation. Opening the door, Liz saw an open cage and no Jean.

"She doesn't trust us. She doesn't trust any of us", and she looked despairingly at the two men.

The homeward traffic drummed and pounded across the bridge, whirling the dust and debris of the day into eyes and mouth. It was a longer route home across the park but Liz crossed the road and entered the wide-open gates. She needed the green serenity, needed to be alone. If Jean had sought refuge in the park, it would be where no-one would find her. The torrid heat had gone off the day, but the sun was still resplendent in a magical blue sky: a gem of a day, but flawed, oh so bitterly flawed.

Margaret Ingham

Greengages

Under the table there was a small tin bath that always seemed to be full of greengages in summer and on top was the machine with which Mrs. Elizabeth made the straw hats. As the machine whirred, she fed the long strip of straw into it, shaping it with one hand and it went round into all kinds of hats, but mostly bonnets. She had promised the child that when she had a bit of time, she would make her a straw bonnet to go to church in, like little princesses had.

About mid morning, the farmer, whose fields ran along the back of the cottage gardens, came in. He had some more greengages to top up the tin bath and the straw hat machine whirred on while he chatted with Mrs. Elizabeth. He'd brought a sack with him too today and he called to the little girl as he picked it up and undid the string that tied its neck tightly. He only had one child, a teenage boy, so he was fond of her. He'd promised to show her the ferret and now she stared, impressed by the sharp teeth in the pointed little yellow head that he kept a tight grip on. She'd like to have tried to touch the little animal, even offered him a greengage, but Mrs. Elizabeth, the long strips of straw still running through her fingers, warned her not to go near those sharp teeth that could break a rabbit's neck, had already broken several that morning.

At dinner time, she sat and swung on the gate that led into the field as she often did, eating sandwiches in the company of the farmer, his tall thin son and the fat land army girl in dungarees. The sun was very hot overhead and there was no wind to ruffle the tall gold wheat or the red poppies that grew in among it and which stretched away in the distance to the green slopes of Dunstable Downs. The child always chatted easily with these three and the farmer teased her about that place she came from whose name he could never remember for the life of him.

"Befnal Green - I *told* you!" she giggled and he would scratch his head and say as how he didn't know how them Germans could possibly find it to bomb, seeing they was foreigners and he couldn't even say it himself and him an Englishman born and bred. Then she would laugh till she fell off the gate as she often did when he made her laugh.

When the three adults went off to get the big harvester, the child wandered back along the garden, past the big Fuchsia bush with its heavy red and mauve flowers and back indoors to eat more greengages

while Mrs. Elizabeth carried on shaping a bonnet from the straw on a ball that never seemed to come to an end.

The stout little woman had had many children and their pictures were everywhere in the cottage. There were photos of their children too, but the small girl could never remember who was who, though Mrs. Elizabeth had told her many stories about them. Now they were all gone away, the boys into the army, the girls married and all the beds upstairs, except for the one she and sometimes her mother too, slept in, were empty.

She sat under the table by the tin bath until the exciting sound of the tractor pulling its load could be heard. It was so loud it even shut out the noise of the straw hat machine. Promising Mrs. Elizabeth she would be good and keep well clear of the blades, the child ran out of the back door again.

All afternoon the combine harvester droned around the edges of the big wheat field, throwing out the bundles of wheat with poppies mixed in, while the small girl swung on the gate in the hot sun. The adults carried on the easy chatter of earlier in the day, but as the square of uncut wheat in the middle shrank, and the beige dust hung thicker in the air, it became harder to communicate across the widening gap to the busy adults. At first she didn't mind because there was the fascinating sight of rabbits, baby rabbits and field mice running out across the stubble as their hiding places disappeared and the big harvester grew smaller in the distance.

Later more people came to help, all grown-ups. At first some soldiers, then the Italian prisoners-of-war with their strangely patched jackets, then more girls in dungarees, all following the big vehicle to catch and stack the sheaves it threw out. At last with the sun low behind the Downs, all the tall wheat was cut, the droning engine turned off and there was cheering. Food was brought out and the labourers settled down to eat and pass bottles around at the edge of the field near where the child still sat on the swinging gate.

She smiled at her friend the farmer as he sat among the other grown-ups, but he didn't seem to notice her. Now he belonged to the circle of people who lolled about on the grass bank and talked in low, relaxed voices about things she didn't understand. Some of the soldiers had their arms around girls and as the long shadows almost disappeared into the hazy dusk, one of the Italian prisoners began to sing a slow sweet love song.

The song sounded very sad. The small girl suddenly shivered in the cooling air and felt her eyes fill with tears. She slid down off the gate

aware that no-one noticed her going and turned in past the Fuchsias whose flowers seemed to hang much more heavily now but when she reached the back door, the whirr of the straw hat machine grew louder as if to welcome her back.

Without looking up, Mrs. Elizabeth said: "I'll get you a bit of tea in a minute lovey - as soon as I've done this one."

The child crept into dimness under the table and took a greengage to fill the empty place inside her.

"You'll be able to tell your mum all about the harvesting when she comes, won't you?"

Her mouth full of the sweet juicy fruit, the small girl could only nod. Mrs. Elizabeth's big cat came in at the back door and looked round.

"There's old Tabby come in for her supper now, see?"

Still the machine whirred, the pile of bonnets grew and the everlasting strip of straw went up and up and the cat crept in between the child and the bath of greengages. Glad of the warmth of the animal beside her, the small girl started thinking about Saturday when her mother would fetch her and take her on the train to London for the weekend.

When Mrs. Elizabeth next looked under the table, both child and cat were asleep.

Jean H Archer

Lady Luck Spits Again

One day, Dozy Danny found, quite by chance, a mediaeval leather trading token on the Thames foreshore. He didn't know it was a mediaeval token.* He gazed at the circular object and toyed with the notion that it might be a tap washer, or an early design for a French Letter that went wrong, before dropping it in his pocket. Danny acquired his nickname for serious reasons. He was dozy. If a man can spend his time asleep and/or just pissed enough to be happy but not sick, Danny would have been entirely satisfied. He could have been called a beach bum, if you could call the foreshore a beach, which you couldn't on a chilly March morning with a stiff east wind blowing through the holes in Danny's trousers, but, compared with the attitude of Danny's old woman when he returned home from yet another day's non-achievement, it was downright hospitable and warm.

Danny thought no more about the object in his tatty coat pocket. He watched the gulls, and raised two fingers to the early spring tourists on London Bridge, and then, he went home. Dozy Danny cohabited with a lady who wore Oxfam shop dungarees and a home-made haircut, but she could do more for him on a cold night than his Yogi Bear hot water bottle, and fair play to her, she'd stood by him for eight years. Her only real protest at his impecunious handling of any luck he had, was that, as the money got short, the grub got worse. It was rumoured her menus had inspired the dietary regime in prisons. Bread puddin', it would be. Leaden creations like doorstops, larded with pebbly currants, and tea made with thrice-recycled leaves stewed within an inch of their lives. And a withholding of the old conjugals. Not that Danny missed that too much. He'd said, in his cups, that it was just like trying to have one of her bread puddin's.

So, Danny went home, with his find nestling unrecognised in his begrimed anorak, and, when he walked in the flat, Kath was lying in wait with a bread puddin' and a bombshell. Yes. Kath, unromantic, sallow, overstressed undernourished Kath was in the club. Danny emptied his pockets, then took himself to the park with a bottle of the old Irish Angels' Piss, and for several days, he more or less forgot where he lived, and indeed who he was and which end he was sitting on.

Surfacing at last, with a five o'clock shadow and a ten o'clock headache, he went round to see his friend and fellow-philosopher, Scouse Jim. The tide-table imprinted by habit on his brain, told him Scouse would be at home. He was. He was in bed, having a rest,

because unlike Danny, he had been working that morning. He made Danny a potfull of black coffee, and forbore to ask after his luck. The coffee cleared Danny's wits, and, by way of conversation, they discussed some of the things that had come their way. By one of those strange quirks of the grey matter, Danny recollected the last thing he'd picked up on the foreshore - the afterthought he'd almost thrown back.

As he described it, Jim's demeanour changed. He turned as pale as his reddened complexion would allow, and his eyes stuck out like a page three girl's knockers. He leaped from his pit and delved among a small but useful collection of books that he kept on the shelf above it. "A medieval Johnnie?" he laughed, stabbing a page of an obscure publication with a finger shaking with uncharacteristic emotion. "You silly bastard!" Danny stared at the illustration, and the price quoted beside it, in an auction house's catalogue dated 1953. Dimly, he became aware of what Jim was saying. "They haven't found one since that's in one piece ... did you hear me, you ... ? I said ..."

Danny sat down. "Ohmigawd!"

"Where is it? What did you do with it?"

"I emptied me pockets ..." said Danny " ... and I put it on the kitchen windowsill ..."

"You put it on the kitchen windowsill?"

"Yeh. It was all tat, mostly. I thought I'd clean it up later, it might fetch a few quid ..."

"Sufferin' Jeesus Danny, we better get round there."

Jim galloped downstairs ahead of Danny. They had to go on the bus, because Jim had never learned to drive on principle, namely the principle that if man was meant to be motorised, he'd have been born with casters on his arse. Round to Danny's they went, fretting with dreaded anticipation. Kath was busy having morning sickness in the kitchen. They brushed her carelessly aside and leaped on the motley junk on the windowsill. Its composition had changed in the last two days. It was now all female junk - hairpins, spent nail varnish bottles, discarded eyelashes, mucky soapdish.

"Where is it?"

"Where's wot?" said the green-faced Kath.

"All the stuff I left 'ere."

"I threw it out. In the bin. There was fifty pence in it. I used that for the meter."

They brushed her aside again, and left her clinging to the sink. Down in the yard, they wrenched open the doors to the rubbish chute, and gazed at the huge binful of unspeakable crud. It was the day

before collection time. Jim shrugged. "I'm game if you are," he said, "for a fifty-fifty share".

"All for one and ... and ... and" said Danny. They wheeled the container out of its place and trundled it off to the seclusion behind the garages where the tom-cats had their lovenest. Then, Danny and his mate went through the whole bloody thing. They sifted through the veg peelings, chicken bones, vindaloo remnants, dead budgies and torn up electric bills. They upended and shook every milk carton and Kentucky Fried box, into which the treasure might have slid. They added the odours of every meal the flats' tenants had had for a week to their clobber, and a few other things besides. They bravely risked tetanus and the shits, and all for nothing. There wasn't a sign of the token. It wasn't even stuck to the bottom of the bin itself, when they upended it with an almighty crash.

"I fink we oughter piss off" said Danny.

"I think I agree with you" said Jim.

Danny wanted to die. For the first time, a real bit of luck, and he'd blown it. They legged it away from the mess they'd created, round to Danny's to hose themselves down. Danny could have taken himself down Blackfriars Bridge then and there, and done a Roberto Calvi impression. Kath had gone off to join the scrum for the baked beans in the supermarket, so Danny sat down and banged his head on the table while Jim ransacked the place for a drink. Danny watched him top up the measures of Gold Watch from the cold tap, which wasn't leaking like it usually did, and had been doing for the last week or so, until now ... until his old woman had fixed it with the most valuable bloody washer ever seen in Poplar, or the United Kingdom, and possibly the Western World.

**There were in times gone by, trading tokens issued by merchants, shops, tradesmen and pubs, in lieu of lower denomination coins, which could get into short supply - getting worn out quicker and being just as labour intensive to strike as a sovereign. In medieval times, some of the tokens were made of leather, though very few have ever been found.*

Liz Thompson

"An Ill Wind"

The curtain stirred.

"She is there watching" the boy said to the other boy who clutched the clean new football to his chest. "She is a witch, everyone knows she is a witch":

"Granny Bower, Granny Bower,
Old and sour,
Shut your door,
And shout no more"

He half sang with mock bravado, adding in a whisper,

"Besides, she'll tell my dad."

Straight-jacketed, in the arthritic arm-chair jammed between the window and the half-lit gas fire, the old lady watched the boys. From her look-out, she watched all the comings and goings, all the callers and visitors, arrivals and departures of neighbours she never got to know. With a wry smile, she chanted aloud:

"Merry devils, merry devils,
Full of fun,
Free of care,
Beware! Beware!"

Not another soul in the street. All morning, the murky, cloud-blanketed sky had drizzled onto shiny black slates and flaking red bricks. From a hole in the gutter, the rain dripped with monotonous regularity onto the stone window-sill, drip, drip, drip - dripping pain and misery into crackling arthritic bones.

She glanced away from the window to the old, friendly settee. It would be warmer there, in front of the fire, but getting up from the settee's enveloping cushions, softened by years of use, would be agonising. Better to wait until after tea.

The boys were arguing. Peter, from next door, was demanding that the other go with him to the playground at the bottom of the street. She couldn't hear all the conversation - only the bits shouted in anger. Peter was talking earnestly now, stealing furtive looks, with wide open, blue eyes, at her window. No doubt he was trying to impress his new friend with the story of her broken window, a story distorted by the many tellings. No-one had understood that it wasn't the broken window that upset her, but the shattered cut-glass vase; her mother's treasured possession. They had replaced the window, bought another vase, and been unreasonably annoyed when she had refused it.

The dark boy's family had moved into the house opposite a week ago. She'd seen the dark boy and a lovely, older sister several times, but not their parents. According to the corner shopkeeper, they were "wogs" and "dagos".

"We're getting out as soon as we find another shop, before all their dago friends and relatives move in. The district will go down then. Much better to get out now", she'd advised her customers.

"Some of us can't get out. Some of us don't want to get out" the old woman had retorted proudly, straightening her aching shoulders. "Some of us have lived here all our lives".

The boy looked like most other boys, carefree, with the bright mischievous eyes and a mop of black, curly hair. Moreover, she had never liked the brassy young blonde who put extra pennies on everything, and grew impatient when swollen fingers fumbled with tiny coins.

Ah - they're off! Off to the playground made from the bombsite.

"It's an ill wind blows no-one any good" she could hear her mother saying, but war was more than an ill wind. It was a dreadful obscenity, a terrifying evil that destroyed the living as well as the dead. It had robbed her of family and friends. If there had been no war, perhaps she'd still have a husband, maybe even children and grandchildren. If - if - if - if all the world were paper and all the seas were ink. And outside the sun is shining and the twins, killed by the bomb, are turning the rope and she and Jessie Long are jumping, jumping and chanting:

"If all the world were paper and all the seas were ink ...!" The identical brown, wooden doors are half open, children run in and out, women call to each other, and on the corner a group of men, flat-capped, shabby, roll cigarettes and talk politics. And now a misty autumn day, the gas lamp already lit, and herself stretching, throwing and throwing again the old washing line over its outstretched arms to swing around the yellow light. Feet hard against iron, pushing off, twisting and untwisting, and bang - head cracking, stopping and rubbing the bump. Nostalgia? None for hollow-eyed men with cardboard soles in worn-out boots. None for sickly, sunken-cheeked children with sparrow legs. None for aged young mothers with poverty-haunted eyes. Plenty for doors on the latch, plenty for a life lived in the street, plenty for that close smell of people, laughter and tears shared. The proud new doors, all vying with each other are locked and bolted. Voluminous nylon nets hide the life within.

Neighbours keep company with two-dimensional people, paid to mesmerise, and Coronation Street helps to fill the void.

The taut mouth relaxed, and wrinkled eyelids drooped over the water blue eyes, as Granny Bowers drifted into childhood happiness.

She woke gradually from the gentle doze to the boisterous shouts of the returning boys as they kicked the ball from one to the other. Suddenly the new boy dived into the road, to block the escaping ball. Even she hadn't seen the car purring round the corner. It was the awful shrieking of brakes that startled her out of the chair, painfully pressing gnarled hands onto wooden arms to force legs to straighten. Silence. Then piercing screams! Grabbing the walking stick from its resting place, Granny Bowers hastens slowly down the narrow, damp lobby, fumbles desperately with the door chain and bolts, cursing her clumsy, distorted hands, and fading eyes. Summoning every ounce of strength, she tugs at the door, and the cold, dank air smacks her cheeks. With her free hand, she clutches the old black shawl across her chest, hobbles to the rag-like body, drops her stick, and kneels awkwardly beside it. The dancing eyes are closed, the rosy cheeks grey. Gently she takes the stilled head into her mis-shapen hands, demands a coat - anything - from the legs that have appeared. Someone crouches, puts down a folded jacket. A voice says the ambulance is coming. Granny Bowers drags the shawl from her bent shoulders, covers the small, limp form, demands more warmth, more air, from the gathering legs. She feels the warm wet on the torn jeans, and ripping open the tear, presses swollen thumbs hard into the spurting blood. Someone kneels beside her. A brief glance. It was the boy's pretty sister, fist crammed in an open mouth, eyes frightened wide.

"He's going to be alright. Get your coat. Lock the door. You must go with him to the hospital."

When the ambulance arrived, the men lifted her onto her feet.

"Thank you Ma. You've done a grand job."

A young woman picked up her stick and offered her arm. The journey back is slow and arduous. As she nears her front door, she sees Peter huddled and shaking in the next doorway.

"Bring him in. He's suffering from shock".

The boy shrinks away, but the young woman pulls and pushes him through the door, down the lobby, and sits him firmly on the settee. After strong sweet tea, drunk in silence, the young woman bathes grazed, stiffened knees and hands, then leaves saying she will call again. The boy hadn't spoken, but now, slowly at first, he begins to sniff, then shoulders and chest heave, shake, and he sobs and sobs.

"Have a good cry, lad. You'll feel much better afterwards. Crying is nothing to be ashamed of. Here, take this hanky." And Granny Bowers leans across the gas fire, smiling sympathy, and wishing she could put comforting arms around him.

"Your friend will get better. I'm sure of that. Young bones mend easily. He was lucky. The car flung him into the road. It didn't run over him. Now you will understand why we worked so hard to get that playground."

Peter raised reddened eyes inquisitively, and the sobs lessened.

"Yes" she said, noticing, "We had to work very hard to get that playground. They wanted to put a warehouse there on the bombed site. Said they hadn't the money for a playground, but all the people living round here then, fought for a playground and we won."

"I didn't know the playground was a bombsite. What happened? Did houses get bombed. Did people get killed? Did you live here then?"

The torrent of questions upset the old woman. She hadn't meant to trigger distressful memories. The young were so unimaginative in their questioning.

"I think" she said, "I can hear someone moving about in your house. Perhaps you'd better go and find out if your mother has come home. If you're really interested, I'll tell you about the bombsite another day."

"Yes please." Too enthusiastically. "Goodbye, Mrs. Bowers - and thank you."

"You may call me Granny Bowers. And make sure you close the front door properly," she shouted to the retreating figure.

All evening she worried about the injured boy, but the house opposite remained in darkness. The accident had wearied her, and after watching the nine o'clock news, she drew the curtains and prepared for bed. It was then she missed the shawl. She was so accustomed to it being around her shoulders, she had forgotten it. She was annoyed with herself. The shawl was old, but it was warm, made of good wool. Her mother's handiwork. It was of no value to anyone else. The hospital would probably dispose of it. She felt peeved and called herself a stupid old woman for being so forgetful.

Granny Bowers slept badly. She heard the wailing of the siren, the never-forgotten, steadier drone of approaching bombers, the dull thuds growing even louder, and the answering "crack, crack, crack" of the anti-aircraft guns. She saw the sweep of searchlights across the room. Heard again the terrifying whistle, felt the shuddering and shaking of

earth, heard the crumbling, crunching bangs and shouts and screams. She awoke sweating. An unearthly silence filled the room, but her heart was thudding. She saw herself running with others down the street to scrabble at rubble with bleeding hands, hoping, hoping. Her mother-in-law's home a mound of fallen bricks and splintered timbers. Only part of the parlour wall still standing, and hanging on it, the picture of the Victorian sisters picking buttercups in a peaceful Summer meadow. She rescued it. It was all that was rescued from her husband's family home. Now it hung over her gas fire - a memorial. Slowly, with a resigned sadness, she slipped into a more peaceful sleep.

She awoke still and sore, remembered the shawl, and was irritable. The morning was quiet in the street. No-one called. The knocking when it came, was unexpected. She must have dozed, for she hadn't seen anyone approach the door. Three people stood there. The man, bowing his head slightly said,

"Good morning, Madam." She recognised the girl.

"Please come in."

The girl had a parcel tucked under her arm. Granny Bowers hoped it was the shawl. She invited them to sit, but the man remained standing. He called her madam and thanked her gravely, in his stilted English, for helping his son. A small squat man, he radiated dignity, and spoke with sincerity. She was pleased, but anxious to know about the boy.

"He has concussion, broken limbs, but will get better. The doctors have set his limbs. Just now, before we left, he opened his eyes, he knew us."

The mother's anxious eyes relaxed into a weak smile as she nodded agreement. Granny Bowers took an instant liking to the small, rounded woman with pink cheeks like her son.

"The hospital gave us your shawl," the girl said, "but my mother wishes to clean it, before returning it."

Granny Bowers began to say it wasn't necessary, but the mother put her hands together as in prayer, and said "Please, please. I wish."

There was an awkward silence. Granny Bowers offered tea, but the man refused politely, saying they had to go to work at the cafe. She asked them to call again and tell her about the boy's progress, and the man said they would. The mother smiled and said "Thank you's" all the way to the door. The girl apologised for her mother's lack of adequate English words to express her feelings, then added her own "Thank you's" graciously.

Granny Bowers half hoped Peter would forget about the bombsite, but he came, armed with questions. He'd told his teacher about the accident and the playground. The teacher had encouraged him to find out more.

"I can do it for my project" he told Granny Bowers. "Sir says it will make an interesting project, and the best one wins a prize."

Granny Bowers sighed. "What have I done?" she thought, but someone had to teach them war wasn't an adventure, remote excitements portrayed on film and in comics, with the right side always winning.

Aloud she said, "Have you brought a notebook and a pen?" He showed her both.

The next afternoon she was waiting for him with home-made cakes. He brought a packet of biscuits and more questions. She began to hope the project would last a long time.

When the girl returned the shawl, she brought an invitation. Her mother didn't work on Sundays, and please would Mrs. Bowers come to tea. The unexpected invitation shocked the old woman into silence. The girl, mistaking the reason, began to urge acceptance. Smiling at her entreaties, Granny Bowers said she would be glad to accept.

Slowly limping back to her chair by the window, she tried to remember when she'd last been inside any house in the street, but she couldn't.

"After all these years" she murmured. "A door is opened to me again, opened by strangers from a foreign land. I wonder what the woman in the corner shop will have to say?"

Her last new dress, although several years old, had been rarely worn. The following day she took it from the wardrobe, carefully sponged and pressed it, and hung it in the living room to air. The girl came for her. She was ready, and together they crossed the road. Mrs. Bowers was surprised there was no carpet in the hall, just lino scrubbed and polished. The girl led her into the front room, which like hers was warmed by a gas fire. The whole room was painted white. The furniture was sparse. There were only two well-used armchairs, a small round table, surrounded by four wooden cafe chairs, and the inevitable television. The floorboards had been stained, and a large, colourful rug was the only covering. The original mantlepiece was crowded with framed photographs of different shapes and sizes of people young and old. On the walls hung scenes of Cyprus, cut from holiday brochures. Mother and daughter ushered her into the most comfortable of the armchairs, the daughter explaining that her father

was at work. Mrs. Bowers was relieved, for his formal manner unnerved her. With the mother and daughter she felt very much at ease in this pleasant room which boasted so few luxuries.

"Please to call me Lucy" the mother said. "My name is Loukia, in English - Lucy. My daughter's name, Mary. My son's name, Andrew." Shyly, the women approached each other, speaking of families, of children. When the mother didn't understand or could not explain in English, the girl interpreted. Granny Bowers told them how life had been lived in the street before the war, spoke of the bomb that had obliterated all the houses where the playground was, killing all who lived there. All, that was, except the men away at war. One of those had been her husband, but he too had been killed - later - by a bullet. The woman from Cyprus threw open her arms in despair, and a painful sadness filled her bright eyes.

"Ah war, it destroys our families, happiness, lives. It destroys everything." And she began to speak of more recent times, of a war that had driven the family from its village, of brothers killed, and a mother dead from grief. Covering her face with both hands, she cried inwardly, silently, then drawing the hands slowly down her face, she whispered "That is why we came here, to England. That is why we leave our lovely island. My husband has brother here with cafe. We must have money to live. He brings us here. We work hard, very hard, but not much money, and it's cold, so cold! I want to go home. Where is my home? Turks live in my village, in my home. My daughter she don't remember Cyprus. My son born here", and the mother moaned softly as she shrugged her shoulders and slowly shook her head at the hopelessness of it all.

The women warmed to each other as they talked of their lives, of loved ones killed, of hopes crushed, and the appalling waste of war. The girl sat and listened. The woman from Cyprus described her village as it had been, the family house, the olive groves. Mrs. Bowers spoke of the street as it was when she'd bounced a ball up and down it, countless times. Remembering different lives, lived far apart, but knowing the same joys, the same sufferings, they became friends with the same yearning for peace.

Mary brought in the parcel as Granny Bowers prepared to return home.

"My mother" she said, "would like to give you this. She wants you to have it. Please take it."

Opening it, Granny Bowers saw a beautiful, black shawl. She began to protest that she couldn't possibly - then she saw the hurt in the mother's eyes, and faltered.

"Please take. I make for my mother, but she die too soon. Please - I want you to use it - keep you warm - so cold here, so cold. You help my son. Please take."

With Mary's help, she put the shawl around her shoulders and bending her face into the downy softness to hide the tears pricking at the corner of her eye, murmured "It's beautiful. The best present I've had in many years. Thank you. Thank you. It's so very kind of you ..." Her voice trailed away, as clenching her lips together she gulped hard. All very well to tell a young boy he could cry, but she was an old woman.

"I thank you for looking after my son. Please. You come again. You be my friend." And Lucy tenderly wrapped Granny Bowers' contorted hands with her own plump flesh. "I'd like that very much. I have few friends now, and none live near", she said, a slight tremble in her tired voice. "We're both lonely, your mother and I", she told Mary as they crossed the road.

"It's an ill wind" she could hear her long dead mother saying as she chained and bolted the door and ambled down the lobby.

"How long will my new-found friends stay in the street?" she asked herself. How long before Peter's lively interest in the past waned. "Don't dwell on the future" she told herself firmly. "Enjoy what you have whilst it's here. Nothing is certain in this world. Everything changes."

Humming happily, she went into the kitchen to make her goodnight drink. She'd sleep well tonight - of that she was certain.

Margaret Ingham

Lizards and Loganberries

She was nine years old, a city child. Her aunt's friends would say, "She will soon settle down in the country."

Her country world had existed, long before the war had decided to extend this summer holiday with her favourite aunt. She wasn't to be evacuated with her brother and sisters; she could stay here. Her mother had recently died, and she felt safe and happy with her aunt.

Her previous "countryside" had been a world behind her father's shed, on the allotments. There, yellow-bellied lizards ran over her bare feet, and they sat together and rested quietly in the sun. After having stolen as many loganberries as wouldn't be noticed by the bare centres, like bald heads on stalks, (a precaution she always took), she would sit and eat, and admire the purple stains on her fingers, and the golden yellow of the lizards' bellies.

Now she was to live in the real country, sharing the streets, and cobbled stones, the water-cress beds, the spinney, the fields, and the freedom. She joined the families when they went off for the day, wooding. The dads and sons would have made small wooden trolleys. These were boxes on wheels, with two very long handles. They would all take sandwiches and tea, and made-up lemonade. And all come back laden down with wood for the winter. (They never did this in Portsmouth.)

The boys would use the same trolleys to do their "dizzy" rounds. She thought that was what they did. They collected empty bottles from their neighbours, and went along to the brush factory, to have them filled with some kind of cheap disinfectant, to sell. It was a lovely purple colour. They never did that in Portsmouth, either.

She would go fishing for tiddlers, and sticklebacks, down by the watercress beds, bearing them home in a jam-jar. Once she kept a red throated stickleback for a week. But they mostly died, and she would set them out on her aunt's windowsill, much as she had seen the dead fish laid out on the fishmonger's slab, in Portsmouth. Or on the stalls in Charlotte Street there, with the flaming, gasping gaslights, and crowds of hurrying people. The boxes of "junk" (her dad called it), and the cages of puppies and kittens, ducks and chickens, and sometimes ferrets. The hills of fruit, and the gutters of rubbish and running water. A far cry from the watercress beds.

The war had helped her to become a country girl, and "belong" again. She only lived with her auntie for a year, for in the meantime, her father had rented a house on the Isle of Wight. He had managed to

get a job in the aircraft factory, Saunders Roe, and as her brother and sisters had already been evacuated over there, this was to be their new home. A great-aunt who was always a visitor whilst her mother was alive, was now with them permanently. This was the new family.

The thoughts of living on an island, a country island, filled her with dreams and pleasure. These were short-lived.

This island was full of bustling people and shops. She had disliked the smell of the boat, and hated the long, never-ending walk up a steep dark hill, to their new home. It was cold and empty, and ... nothing.

In the morning, it was different. Everything is different in the morning. It was sunny and warm, and there was a big, really big garden to their new house. There were fields everywhere. There were no loganberries or lizards, but there were fruit trees, and hollyhocks.

She asked her aunt who the man was with the ladders. Her aunt said, "That's the painter. The landlord sent him to paint this God-forsaken place."

Sitting on the stone steps, and watching the painter replace a "thingy" on the front door, she asked him what it was. He said, "It's a door-knocker, silly girl. A special door-knocker. The other people must have left it behind."

After he had gone, she got a box and stood on it, to have a good look at this "door-knocker". It was set in a metal plate, and the trellis top lifted to reveal, more clearly pictured (or rather, cast in the metal), a well, and beside the well, a donkey was walking round the inside of a large wooden wheel. Underneath this, it said, "Carrisbrooke Castle, the donkey and well." As the trellis fell back, so it formed the door-knocker. She had not seen one like this before. Door-knockers were big brass things, not wells.

She waited until her father came home, and asked him about it. He told her that the donkey had to walk round all day in the wheel, to work the rope, and in turn pull up the water from the well. She asked, "Why did they make a donkey do that? Donkeys should live in a field."

He said, "Yes, but donkeys have to work, the same as everyone else, I'm afraid. One of these days, I'll take you to see the donkey." But he never did.

* * *

Many years later, and still living on the Isle of Wight, she started her training as a nursery nurse. Another nurse, who lived on a farm, asked her to go and stay with them for the week-end.

On arriving, she found to her surprise, a very updated and smart well in pride of place in the front garden. It appeared the farmhouse had once been two old cottages, and they had shared a well. It had been reborn, so to speak, and stood out in all its splendour. It made her feel uncomfortable. She wasn't quite sure why this should be. Keeping away from it, she enjoyed the rest of the week-end, and many, many more, on the farm.

* * *

She had been married for a few years, and had two small children, having left the Isle of Wight, and all thoughts of wishing wells, long ago.

They had moved to a remote cottage with a large, large garden. It was a very modern cottage, with its own cess-pit and water system. Very unique in those parts. The landlord had built it for his favourite game-keeper. They rented it, and loved it. Her third child was born there.

On exploring the huge garden, she found, in what was the vegetable garden, an old disused well. It didn't have a wall, just a lid securely nailed down, and a pump and trough. A peach tree was growing alongside it, supported by a trellis. They were there four years. They never had any peaches, and never looked in their well. She kept the children from playing there on their own.

All her children now live in their own homes. She walks alone. On one of these walks she found a well. Or, maybe it found her.

It was old, and tired weeds grew round it. Its two stone arms reached up, no longer supporting anything. The iron bar had long since gone, along with the rope and bucket. Only the wall sat comfortably around its edge, its depth unknown.

Resting on the wall, she took her shoes off, and eased her toes. For a while she dozed. A yellow-bellied lizard woke her up as it walked over her foot. She smiled, feeling warm and happy. Another lizard joined his friend. She vaguely wondered whose garden it had been. Could there be any loganberries around? What was its history?

She said aloud, "This is a resting well. It doesn't really matter."

Sitting against the worn stone, she felt so warm and safe. It was more than she could wish for. She dozed off again.

Falling ... falling ... faster ... faster. Now terribly frightened, she made no sound. Like a stone she had thrown into the well, she made no sound. She didn't struggle. She used all the strength she had, to hold on to her mind.

* * *

She awoke to find her legs were turned away from her. They didn't hurt. They didn't belong to her. Her arms hurt, and her face was sore and grazed. She was sitting in a puddle in a dry well.

She tried to rearrange both her body and her mind. Her mind responded. Her body refused to move. Her mind was telling her, "You are now sitting at the bottom of your hospitable well."

It had drawn her into itself. It had quietly swallowed her whole. There had been no scream, no splash. No awareness of landing. Just the silence of falling.

* * *

A day must have passed, because in the space of light way above her head, stars shone. She just waited. She really didn't hurt. She knew she smelled horrible, and she knew how cold she was. But she had always felt cold inside.

"Things" were crawling and sliding over her skin. Some moved rapidly over her body, others moved more slowly. Feeling around, she put her hands on her legs, and drew back, sickened by the feel of a large slug-like thing on her leg. Her leg couldn't feel it. Her fingers could.

It was some time before she began to feel thirsty. All she could do was dip her fingers into the now larger puddle she had landed in. Her own urine had deepened it. It didn't matter. She licked her fingers, and played with the cold wetness.

Becoming accustomed to this quiet darkness, she could see insects busy at their work, and could now see young green ferns, uncurling above her, reaching out to her from the walls. She found she no longer needed to drink from her now evil-smelling puddle. It was possible to lick the walls, and sometimes crystal-clear drops fell into her open mouth.

She began to feel hungry, and was pleased at the taste of the green fern shoots. She didn't mind the insects crawling over her. The slow-movers made her feel comfortable. It was as if she were being touched, and quite gently fondled. They were company. They did her no harm. Then the hunger became much worse. She could smell rice pudding, and the Sunday dinner. Visions came of cakeshops, their counters looking for all the world like ball gowns, with cream trimmings.

She tried to think of food she disliked the appearance of. Of food she loathed. Of smells of food she loathed. But they would not come. They were all blocked out by the smell of freshly baked bread.

Biting into its slimy skin, she didn't shudder. Surprised, yes, that it was so tough, and so tasteless. How disappointing. But it was food. It was live food, she knew this, for she didn't know how to kill it. But then, as she chewed, she reasoned with herself, "I'm not dead, and before I took you from my leg, you were eating me. We are just eating each other. If you had been a lizard, I would have died. I couldn't eat a lizard."

She chewed, drank drops from her walls, and slept in her stench. No longer waiting for anything, or anyone. Time or people no longer existed.

* * *

The voices were far away, yet close. She heard the gasps of breath. She could hear the complaints of her stench.

She was feeling much more pain, now, from the walls of her well as they dragged her up. The well and its world had saved her life. She felt no pain as she fell in ... now it hurt.

The well was about to spill her into another unknown world.

"Will there be loganberries and lizards there? Yellow-bellied lizards? I hope so," she was saying, "I do hope so ..."

"What is she talking about?" they asked.

"What is she talking about? Lizards and loganberries, I think."

Jean Wythe

Is There Life After Match of the Day?

Lynne looked down at her husband Paul, who was lying stretched out on the living-room carpet. It was Saturday night, and he was reading the telly-page out loud:

Dr 'Ooo ... Rubbish! ... Play Your Cards Right! Na-a-a-a! Play YOUR cards right, Doll, and tonight could be your lucky night!"

With some effort, he raised himself up on one arm and turned with a leer to Lynne, and rolled his eyes questioningly. She sighed and looked away, lighting up another cigarette.

"Lynne, Lynne, do you love me, Lynne?" Paul asked jokingly, well used to her coolness. He lay down again, and carried on reading the Leicester Mercury. "'Ere, Lynne! Look at this! ... THIEVES ESCAPE WIV' CHURCH LEAD. BRAY-ZEN THIEVES ES-CAPED YES-TER-DAY WIV' LEAD WERF OVER £1,000 WHILST WED-DING CERE-MONY WAS IN PRO-GRESS! ... That must 'ave bin ol' Narky, Lynne! Good ol' Narky! Ere ... just a minute ... he asked me for a fousand for it! Greedy pig! £500 would 'ave bin too much! You just wait till I cop the ..."

Paul stopped here with the effort involved in producing a loud fart, then carried on:

"... bastard!"

Lynne looked down at her husband, giggling now. Inside his jeans, his body looked like a tube full of water, rippling and bubbling occasionally. She smiled to herself at the thought.

With surprising agility, Paul sat up, folded the newspaper and tossed it onto the sofa, reaching for the bottle of Coke. He threw his head back, took a large and noisy swig, lowered his chin and gently rubbing his stomach, eased out a gigantic burp. He smiled with satisfaction at Lynne.

"Bloody pig!" she told him, looking away to hide her smile. Even she had been impressed. Paul got up, and made for the door in two or three heavy strides. Lynne could hear him rummaging in the bread-bin. In a few more noisy strides, he was back in the living room again, eating a monster cheese and brown sauce sandwich. The whole sofa heaved as he sat down. When he had finished the sandwich, he began reading the paper again, his face was completely concealed. Lynne pictured his concentration: the frown, the lips working, pursed. She waited: there was another loud burp, and she smiled freely, now he couldn't see her.

It was nine o'clock, only nine o'clock. She chased a piece of ash around the tray with a matchstick. In an hour it would be MATCH OF THE DAY, and time for her to go to bed. No point in her staying up after that! She wondered how many other women were spending their Saturday nights with one eye glued to the clock, knowing that the evening would be over with the start of that awful signature tune. It was like being some kind of Cinderella ... only at 10pm ordinary otherwise pleasant husbands and lovers suddenly became mad football fanatics instead of pumpkins ... well, in her Paul's case, she thought to herself, there was already quite a resemblance to pumpkins! She wondered how many nights of passion had been brought to an abrupt end by the awful anthem: DA - da - da - da, de - de - da - da -. She had visions of space-age cities, with millions of android lovers listening in to Match of the Day music over their BIG BROTHER intercoms in bed at night - well, it would be cheaper and safer than the Pill, wouldn't it! ...

"Lynne! Lynne! Listen. Here's that advertisement again:

Come to Glorious Cromer for all your Deep-sea fishing ...

From £15.00 per week per person, June to August ... blah blah blah.

Come on, Lynne! What about it, eh? Markie and me really enjoyed our fishing last year. And what about that smashing flatlet ... now that was really ace!"

"Very bloody ace!" Lynne thought, remembering the cramped conditions, and the two-ringed contraption Paul had expected her to conjure up miracles from every meal-time. No, she'd prefer to go to a hotel one of these days, where someone else would cook meals for her! She was sick of Cromer, with its decaying holiday 'apartments'. She'd like to see Scotland ... touring ... yes, that would suit ... the newspaper fell sheet by sheet, gracefully, from Paul's open fingers. He was asleep. One arm was across the ripples of his belly, his chin lost in the folds of his neck. His mouth was slightly open, emitting a soft, rhythmic snore. Quietly, Lynne wandered over to the large picture window. She pulled the edge of the curtain aside, and looked out. A passing stranger might have thought that she was looking at him, but there was nothing else to look at. Letting the curtain fall back, Lynne wandered round the room. Paul sighed, shifted his position slightly, then settled down again. Lynne lit another cigarette, then switched the telly on.

She could hear the car tyres screeching in the background, and the racy music ... was it Starsky and Hutch, or Hooper? She didn't know. These car chase programmes were all the same to her. The music

faded out, then the adverts followed. That favourite of hers came on, the one where the three husbands are making ready to go to the local pub, under starter's orders. She watched as the spiv slicked down his Rudolf Valentino locks, then the second wife straightened her husband's bow tie. She always liked the look of that woman ... Then they were off! Doors open! Little legs racing! She smiled as she turned to look at her own husband, asleep now, but runner in many such a race!

To the interesting woman standing in the doorway on screen, she said, "Off now, is he! What's now, then ... washing up, is it? Why don't you leave that for once, and come in here for a quick one ... I think there's still some Vodka left over from Christmas."

"Ooooh! I could just murder a Vodka! Hang on a minute ... I'll just get my coat, and put me teeth in ..."

Lynne's face lit up with surprise. She stared at the screen, then looked back at Paul. He was still asleep, and the room was as empty as before. She looked back at the telly again.

"Yes, it was me, luv! Look, give me five minutes and I'll be there!"

Her door closed, and the adverts carried on as before.

Lynne sat there in a daze. Then she walked over to the telly, and looked behind it. She tried each of the channels, then left the interminable car chase on as it was before. As she was puzzling it all over, there was a rat-a-tat-tat at the door. She threaded her way through the furniture to the window, and peeped behind the curtains. There was a car!

Whose was it?

Rat-a-tat-tat!

Paul sighed and carried on snoring.

"Get a grip on yourself, woman!" Lynne said to herself. "It's just someone at the door, silly!"

She boldly opened the front door, and Vera stepped in; the woman from the advert, clutching an old beige mac round herself. She looked frozen.

"Thought you were never coming, then!" She held a cigarette between her lips as she struggled to get her arms free of the mac. "Well, don't just stand there, luv! Close the door! ... What are you staring at?"

With a start, Lynne closed the door, and said shyly, "Well, it's just that you look exactly like you do on the telly ..."

"'Course I do! Who else should I look like? Princess Di?" she said with glee, straightening her skirt over her ample thighs. "Come on,

let's get sat down in front of the fire!" she said, making for the living-room door.

"No!" Lynne said, urgently. "He's in there! It'll have to be the kitchen, I'm afraid."

"No matter, luv! So long as it's warm, I'm not mithered!"

There was a peaceful silence, whilst Lynne busied herself with the kettle for the coffee. Lighting up a fresh cigarette, Vera leaned back, warmer now, and said, "So what's new, then? It's not Saturday nights, that's for certain, isn't it!"

"Well, I'm still waiting for me night of passion, if that's what you mean!"

"Ooh, I'd rather have a good steak, meself!" Vera said, helping herself to sugar and stirring her coffee. "Do you know, I'm so sick of straightening me ol' man's bow-tie three times a night in that advert, and seeing HIM off for a good night out at the pub, that if I have to do it once more, I'll bloody strangle him with it, Lester Piggot or not!" Lynne agreed, silently lit a cigarette, and fiddled nervously with the match.

"I'm so glad you asked me round here tonight, I was hoping you would, I really was ..." Vera tried again. She looked lost for a few moments, then, frowning with the effort of the last puff on her cigarette, she said, "You know, Lynne, you're a quiet one, aren't you! You mustn't let it get you down, you know. Perhaps we could make it a regular thing, every Saturday night, eh? Better than being by ourselves anyway!"

"It's not just Saturday nights ..." Lynne began, then tapered off.

"Hmm ... this sounds like a Vodka-job" Vera laughed. "Get the bottle out!" And with that, she reached for her cigarette lighter, preparing to concentrate.

It was some time later, and Lynne was standing behind Vera, who was sitting on a kitchen chair in front of the bathroom mirror. Lynne was cutting Vera's hair.

"He'll never notice the difference," Vera said to Lynne, trying to suppress her glee. Lynne was also flushed and child-like with excitement.

"Ooh. I must tell you this one," Vera continued. "Marge, my friend at the hairdresser's, well, she had to take Tina, her Junior, down to the police station last week. Tina was going home from work you see, when this fella in a car pulls up whilst she was waiting for her bus, and in broad daylight, he exposes himself! Well, almost broad daylight - it was only six o'clock! Well, Marge takes Tina straight down to the

police station the next day, and they're making a report of it, when the man at the desk asks Tina, he says, 'Now look, luv, I'm sorry I have to ask you this, but you understand see, it's important for the records ... did this man have an erection?' And Tina stands there thinking about it then she says, 'Well, actually, I think it was a Datsun!' Well, you can imagine, even the sergeant had to leave the room!" Vera exploded into giggles again, and even had to put down her drink. Lynne tried to laugh. It really was funny, but somehow, she always felt embarrassed by rude jokes. It was like admitting to having a sex-life of one's own ... that seemed like something forbidden to her, something she ought to conceal at all costs.

Vera, unawares, carried on snortling and alternately puffing on her cigarette until Lynne finished cutting her hair. Lynne pulled Vera to her feet. Side by side there, in front of the mirror, there was indeed a striking resemblance.

"Na-a-a you take it from me, luv" Vera said to Lynne. "He's going to be too full of Tartan Bitter and Manchester United to notice the difference!"

By way of reply, Lynne turned slowly to Vera, raised a sardonic eyebrow, and smiled. It was a challenging smile.

The last set of adverts were playing out before Match of the Day, when Vera closed the door behind Lynne. She knew she'd got to get a move on now; and as she ran the hot water for a shower, she could hear Lynne driving off in her old banger. Once out of the shower, she towelled her damp curls, then sprinted up the stairs. Surely she'd be able to find something suitable, not too obvious? In Lynne and Paul's bedroom, she went through each drawer in turn, then realised, with dismay, that things were going to be more difficult than she had at first thought. She sat down on the bed, and lit up a cigarette, trying to think where Lynne would keep that sort of thing. Slowly, her gaze took in every detail of the room. ... from the severely functional bed with its tightly tucked in sheets (no room for hanky-panky there!) to the pile of ironing a week high in the corner. There was the insomniac's bedside table, scattered with tablets, tissues, a novel, a clock. It was all a depressingly long way from the Honeymooner's Suite. Opening the wardrobe, she was surprised to see the sheer mass of clothes hanging there, waiting. For what? Lynne never seemed to wear anything but old jeans and tee-shirts. Here were never-to-be-worn evening dresses, pretty Summer dresses fresh as the day they were bought. They belonged to someone who lived always on the edge of things, always on the edge of her possibilities.

Vera rummaged about half-heartedly at the top of the wardrobe. "Bloody 'ell", she thought to herself. "What 'ave I gorn and let meself in for now!" Then she caught sight of something at the back. She gave it a tug, and a glossy bag slipped into her hands. It bore the legend BON TON.

"Hmm," murmured Vera, as she fastened her cigarette between her lips, leaving both her hands free to finger the nightgown. Nothing cheap or tawdry here: it was a matching set of negligee and briefs. She set to work. Downstairs the strains of the Match of the Day anthem grew louder. It was over - over, that is bar the action replays, the autopsies, the informed comment, and the not-so-informed comment. Vera wondered if anything followed the Match programme? Had any woman ever stayed up long enough to find out? As Vera entered the living-room, Paul was just lighting up a cigarette.

"Stoopid bastard! Fancy letting THAT one get in! Couldn't stop a pig in an entry!" He drew hard on his cigarette, and flung the match away in anger. As Vera moved to turn the set off, he bobbed his head and shoulders athletically round to try and see the picture she was obscuring. He waved one arm wildly.

"Get out of the bleddy way, Lynne! Stoopid bleddy woman!" he began, then froze like the action replay he was trying to watch. His mouth fell open. He swallowed hard, then sat up and back, slowly. His eyes bulged as he made a deliberately lustful face, and a sound escaped from his lips. Vera quickly weighed up the situation.

"Cheer up, Chuck; you could score yet!" she suggested, reaching for the cigarettes and matches. Paul made a grab for her wrist, and at the same time, gave her left breast a sharp screw clockwise. Vera had been taken by surprise, and knocked off her balance. She fell awkwardly across him. Just as he was about to take an enormous bite out of her exposed neck, she managed to jerk his head back by wrenching his hair upwards.

"'ang on a minute, mate! You're not in the Motorway Caff, now, you know!" She slapped off another wandering hand from her thigh, and added with a little more dignity, "Tonight's supposed to be a five-course meal ... so you could act as though you knew which knife and fork to use first!" She managed to disentangle herself, and moved to the far end of the sofa, rubbing her sore wrist. At his end of the sofa, Paul crossed his legs so that his body was partly turned away from her.

"Bleddy women! Givin' you the ol' cum-on-an'-get-me line ... then cryin' Wolf as soon as things are starting to look interesting! Where

did you get that bleddy ol' thing from, anyway? Cost me the best part of a week's wages, that did! Fat lot of good THAT ever did me!"

The sofa shook as he pushed himself abruptly up, and strode out into the kitchen. Vera followed him. He was rummaging around in the cupboards, looking for something to eat. Then he bent down to rustle around at the bottom of the fridge. Part of his buttocks were exposed, bound round with the worn and discoloured elastic of his ancient underpants. Vera spotted the Vodka, and moved about pouring first herself a drink, and then one for Paul. She could hear him muttering about the lack of food, complaining about her housework ... or rather, Lynne's. As he stood up, she looked at the great, loose pouch in his jeans where his backside had been bulging a moment ago. She giggled ... she looked at the vast expanse of his belly stretched over with fading sweatshirt ... and the giggle grew louder, becoming a full-throated laugh.

"You what?" he said, irritated. "Stoopid woman ..." He tried to ignore her, but as she leaned on the worktop, unable to stand straight she was laughing so heartily, he gave in to his curiosity and turned to see what the joke was. She was pointing at him.

"Wot?" he said, looking at his stockinged feet. "I can't see nowt ..."

Vera staggered over to him, trying to smooth the extremes of laughter from her lips, but not quite succeeding. She leaned one plump arm on his shoulder, and tugged with the free hand at the fluted elastic of his underpants standing out at the edge of his jeans. He still looked puzzled.

"Well, just look at yourself!" she laughed, and tugged at the fly-zip. It opened with little difficulty, as it was well-worn.

"Ere, 'ang on a minute" Paul tried ...

"Gerrum off" Vera shouted, using both hands to tug at his jeans now. Paul wriggled his hips in a little belly-dance, and raised his arms to suggest the elegance of the Kasbah. He rolled his head and eyes, and then stamped his feet gleefully as the trousers dripped suddenly round his ankles. As he pirouetted his great bulk round the kitchen in an imitation of the dance of the seven veils, they both shrieked with laughter. Remembering the shop where he'd bought the lingerie, he flaunted:

"Good morning, Sir! BON TON at your service, Sir! A nightie, Sir? Oh no ... socks, Sir? Underpants, Sir? ..."

At length he stopped, panting. He took a gulp at the Vodka.

"Jeezus!" Vera said. "You must have thought aerobics was just another air-freshener until tonight!"

"You wot?" he asked, red in the face, but smiling now.

Vera lowered her gaze and surveyed him. She took a sip of her Vodka, picked up the bottle and sauntered over the room towards him. She put one arm round his shoulders. In an effort to show bravado, in the face of this unexpected turn of events, he pulled a wide-eyed face, and took a long sip of his drink. Vera slowly turned his body round, and led him towards the stairs.

"Come with me," she suggested. "I can see we've got a long night ahead of us - but if you mind your Ps and Qs, you could be teacher's pet by morning!"

Be-bam, be-bam, be-bam. ... whistle-whistle. Vera was startled awake by Paul thundering down the stairs. She heard him relieving himself of a very full bladder, and following it up with a loud fart. It was 7.15am. She rolled over and tried to doze, but Paul was clanking about in the kitchen. She found herself recalling the night's events. It hadn't been too bad. ... "But he could do with a little help with his starters" she giggled to herself. Outside, there was the sound of a vehicle approaching, loud and fast. It screeched to a halt outside their house. The street-silence was shattered by a BEEP! BEEP! The house shook as Paul crashed out of the front door, slamming it to behind him. He whistled his way over the front lawn to his mate's van. Vera pictured his mate leering out of the window as she heard him jeer: "JEE-SUS! You're a bit bleddy cheerful this morning'! Don' say you finally got yer leg over?"

"Ah-ah-ah! Got it in one!" was all Vera heard as Paul slammed himself into the van. As the van roared off into the distance, she had the uncomfortable feeling that some vast mechanical fart had been emitted over the house and its neighbours.

Much later, after a morning's hard work, Vera sat down to mull things over. Drawing alternately on a cigarette and a steaming cup of coffee, she remembered breakfast. Yes, breakfast with the child had been a bit tricky. If she'd been discovered then, nothing much could have been achieved, and she'd felt Mark had given her too many inquisitive glances for her to be entirely confident in her disguise. Yes, it was going to be a bigger task than she'd anticipated. There were so many socks and old clothes lying round, especially under Paul's and the boy's beds, that Vera sensed Lynne's despair. There was dust everywhere, and odd items like matches, letters, pencils lying about on every available surface, as well as the daunting pile of ironing. Vera felt marooned in Lynne's sea of other people's neglected trivia. Depressed, she lit up a cigarette. Ash dropped unnoticed, as Vera

realised that not a soul had visited that morning, nor had the phone rung once. Through the picture window, Vera could see into the wilderness of the empty suburban street, where only the odd EMGAS or TELECOM van flashed into sight for the odd second or two before vanishing into some other client's routine. Vera looked at the red, flickering figures on the video digital-clock: it was only 11.30am. She leaned forward, her elbows on her hunched-up knees. What now? More ironing? More dusting? Her gaze fell on the crumpled newspaper. With the cigarette clasped firmly between her lips she turned the pages with resolution, till she reached the VACANCIES. Slowly she worked through the columns, eliminating jobs, section by section. Engineering; Shop Assistants; General; Clerical ... hmm. ... Clerical. Finally she settled on a single advert, mouthing the text to herself. ESTATE AGENT ... assistant ... counter-duties ... part-time ... Mr. Hayward ... telephone ... She stubbed out her cigarette, and reached for the phone.

That evening, as Vera squeezed herself past the front door into the narrow hall, she snagged a shopping-bag, spilling and breaking eggs on the carpet. "Oh shi ...!" she started, stopping as she noticed Mark's jeering face peer round the doorway.

He pointed at the mess, shrieking with laughter, and then pushed the door to in her face before she could gather her wits together. Should she burst into the room, and chastise him now? She felt like it. Still, on second thoughts, a cuppa might be best rather than risk a confrontation at this early stage. She was just waiting for the kettle to boil, when the door crashed open and Paul imploded into the kitchen. "FO ... OD!" he hollered. "FOOOOD!" His hair had turned a few shades paler over the day with cement dust. His face was also grey, and his once-blue overalls were streaked all colours. Striding towards the cupboard and the biscuits, he flicked Vera's left earlobe as he passed and clamped a hand onto her buttocks.

"Don't!" she exclaimed. "You could have made me spill the boiling water!"

"It's for yoooo!" Paul exclaimed at the screeching kettle, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Vera unpacked the shopping. "Guess what ..." she shouted to Paul. Paul was crooning in his best Tom Jones voice: "THE OL' HOME TOWN WAS SLEEPIN' ... "

"Guess what, I've been for an interview today, and I think I've got ..."

" ... AS THE TRAIN ROLLED DOWN THE TRACK ..."

"Did you hear me?"

"Where the hell's the bleddy soap, Lynne? What the hell do you do with it ... not cleaning, that's for certain!"

Vera appeared in the doorway, and pointed to the soap. It was in the handbasin, right next to the bath.

"There it is," she said firmly.

There was a brief silence, then Paul jabbed his finger in the direction of Vera's chest. "You just get me that bleddy soap, woman!"

"Get it yourself!"

Vera walked back into the kitchen. She sat sipping tea, when Mark came in smirking. First of all, he peered into the oven, then the grill. The smirk became a snarl.

"What's for tea?" he demanded.

"Well, Prince Harry, if you care to ring for the maid, there'll be bangers and mash served shortly on silver platters!"

"Oh no! Not that rubbish again!" Taking two dry slices of bread, he swiftly made for the bathroom.

"SHE says it's bangers and mash AGAIN!" he betrayed, jerking his head back towards the kitchen, before disappearing again into the living-room and telly-oblivion.

The milky-white torso of Paul appeared out of the steamy depths of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel. He strode deftly towards the kitchen counter, picked up the package of sausages, strode across the kitchen and jettisoned it clumsily into the rubbish bin. Returning to Vera, he jabbed her shoulder:

"There! That's what you can do with yer bleddy sausages, woman!"

"No" Vera said quietly. "That's what you can do with YOUR sausages." A puzzled look came into his eyes, his bottom lip jutted out in uncertainty. "You know, something's got into you lately."

"Well, it's more like something getting out, actually," she levelled with him.

Paul closed in on her, cradled the back of her head in one hand, twisting her face up into his with her hair.

"Well what about getting out of HERE to get us some decent dinner for a change? Eh, woman! What do you say to that!" He tossed her aside then, and swaggered over to the mirror. He slicked his damp hair back into an Elvis Presley, and then went upstairs. Vera rubbed her neck, then lit up a cigarette. She poured some tea. It was cold now, but she didn't seem to notice. After a while, Paul came down, dressed for going out.

"Mark! Mark! Get your coat on! We're going out!"

"Don't you think we'd better talk about this?" she said quietly to Paul.

"Never mind your bleddy talking, woman! You just make sure there's a decent meal ready for us when we get back woman, or else!"

Mark came in, dodging between them for his coat. He wore an odd expression. An uncertainty played around his eyes, but his smile was triumphant. He fidgeted and fussed, playing with his coat buttons as if they were the words he was trying to sort out, but he was startled by his father shouting "MARK! Come on!" With one last look of regret, he followed his father outside.

Vera picked up the phone. She found it strange dialling her own number ... she had to think carefully to remember her number in the correct sequence.

"Lynne ..." she spoke, "it's Vera ... things aren't going very well. You'll have to come over here straight away. Oh ... and bring something to drink with you. I've finished all the Vodka!"

Twenty minutes later, she opened the front door. Lynne stepped in and stood hesitantly on the doormat. She hadn't been away from home for more than a couple of days, and yet the house now felt strange to her. The smallness of the hallway pressed in on her. She wondered how she hadn't noticed it before. Perhaps this had been part of the problem all along. If only they had been able to afford a larger house, would everything have been more agreeable?

"Don't just stand there like one of Lewis's!" Vera broke into Lynne's reverie. "Take your coat off, and go and sit down. We'd better get on with it - there's no telling when they'll be back!"

Vera bustled about in the kitchen, finding glasses and ashtrays, whilst Lynne sauntered into her lounge. How blank it seemed with its suburban array of furniture; the telly dominating the view. The budgie was, for once, in its usual place by the window, and not in the bathroom where the men moved it to in order to keep it quiet. There were no books, no pictures - unless you counted the tiny framed picture of Lynne and Paul, taken twenty years earlier in a photo-booth. Paul was doing a passable imitation of Neil Sedaka, and Lynne was wearing white lipstick with coal-dust round her eyes. As Vera burst into the room, Lynne tried to shake off her dismal mood. "Well, I'm afraid it's really bad news. Your two really are tough nuts to crack, Lynne." Lynne relaxed her clutch on her handbag, and opened it, searching for her cigarettes.

"Here ... have one of these!" Vera jumped forward, offering hers, whilst Lynne took one, remaining perched on the edge of her seat. Vera started to explain.

"Is he always ... well ... so heavy handed?"

"He wasn't always like that ... well, not in the early days, anyway ... but now ... he thinks just because it turns him on to shove his hand up my jumper, or down my jeans, that it should do the same for me. He just can't ... or won't see ... that women are different ... Men - their desire seems to come out of thin air! Anything and nothing puts them in the mood! I've tried explaining to him that we're different ... we like a nice romantic build up ... I can see why Barry Manilow is so popular - not that I can stand him meself - but half the women round here aren't lying back and thinking of England; they're thinking of Barry Manilow! ... surely it can't be beyond Paul to occasionally put one of our 'Golden Oldies' on the record player ... or buy me a bottle of wine? Even cider would do; I'm cheap to run! But no! I've told him, I've asked him, I've even made a joke out of it ... but according to him, it's me that's frigid because I don't run around naked or half-dressed in a bath-towel when he comes home. No-one calls HIM frigid because he can't be bothered to dim the lights or anything! It's not fair! It just isn't fair!"

"Hmm ... well he's certainly into the 'tough' guy image ... must be afraid he's queer or something!"

"Queer? Don't talk to me about bleddy queers! He's always out with Richard, his mate. They can't go anywhere without holding each other's hand. His Jackie's in the same boat as me ... only he's made sure she's got a couple of kiddies to tie her down. They say they're off to price a job up ... and come back after 11pm! They must think we were born yesterday!" Lynne laughs harshly, then takes a quick drink.

"Well ... it's been no better for me either ... I thought this swap lark would be a bit of a giggle, and that maybe, just maybe, we could improve things a bit for each other ... I was hoping Paul might have been different ... but it seems all they are concerned about is how THEY feel, and what WE feel just doesn't enter into it!"

Vera sniffs, and says, almost to herself,

"... the species could become extinct at this rate! We could always leave the boy-children out to die, like the Spartans used to? ..."

Lynne thinks of Mark, and says, looking quickly sideways at Vera,

" ... Don't you think that might be a bit drastic?"

The budgie pipes up in the window: WHO'S A PRETTY BOY THEN?

Thinking of all the hours the poor bird had spent in the white-tiled bathroom, Lynne quickly added,

"On the other hand, you could just have something there!"

They both smile tightly, take a drink each, and concentrate on their cigarettes. It's as if they're afraid to remove the next layer, to see what the next step might be ...

A car sounded outside. Both women sat up, straining to recognise the ensuing noises. After a few tense moments, Lynne sat back, confirming that it had only been a neighbour's car. Vera sat back with relief.

"Thank God for that! We'd have had a pretty job explaining the two of us sitting here! Anyway, ... we'd better get cracking ... let's work something out! ..."

"We? You mean the two of us? I thought ..."

"Look here, Lynne ... your Paul and Mark would take some beating, but my old man's no Valentino. I've forgotten what it's like to have a kiss and cuddle. In our house it's either an in-for-the-kill grope, or a pair of legs behind a newspaper in front of the telly. News and sport, sport and news! I was right ... They didn't notice the swap-over - I bet they wouldn't even notice if we weren't there at all!" She jumps up, and stubs out her cigarette.

"Come on Lynne! We've work to do!"

About nine o'clock that evening, the front door opens. Paul pops his head round, and calls out gently at first,

"Lynne? Lynne? Do you love me?"

He steps in more boldly now. Mark follows impatiently, walks into the lounge and switches on the telly. It's warm and cosy, the telly-lamp is switched on. He doesn't notice that the budgie is gone - well, he wouldn't, would he? He tosses his anorak onto the sofa, where it slithers off, and he kneels down before the gas-fire. He can hear his father banging about in the kitchen, muttering,

"Women ... bleddy women ..."

Paul and Mark have had fish and chips at the Club, so they're in a better humour. Any moment now, Mark will be thinking about Coke, and Paul will be thinking about earlobes and buttocks ...

Look at him now, lifting the lids of the saucepans on the stove. There's sausages in all of them. You what? he mutters in disbelief. Under the grill, toasted sausages are cooling now. Markie, Markie, look at this ... he whispers, to himself, really ... He turns absent-mindedly, and notices the table, set for two. Shining cutlery, huge, pint-glasses full of squash, and sauce ... oh, lots of sauce! ALL

the sauces are there! He leans back against the counter, rubbing his neck ... the oven is warm. He's opening the oven, there's a casserole. Carefully now, lift it out with the tea-towel. Set it down on the counter ... lift the lid. There's the clipping. It's a piece of paper. Newspaper. Slowly ... it's crispy now ... it's an advert ... for holiday flatlets in Cromer

... it's been filled in, with a Biro ... the booking has been made ... for one adult and one child.

Mark is watching telly very closely now ... He's watching that little man standing in front of his hall mirror ... straightening his own bow tie. The man keeps looking round as though something is missing ... then he reaches for his cap ... with one last puzzled look back into the hall, he's off.

Mark is puzzled ... the adverts change ... there's a new one ... hear Mark calling, gently at first, but louder now ...

"Dad! Dad! It's Mum!"

Paul enters the room, bewildered. On the screen the two women are just leaving a Hertz Rent-a-car office. They have the keys and the documents, and they're waving to a smiling agent in the background. There's bagpipe music playing in the background, and their car sets off into rugged Scottish scenery. There's beautiful it is, and the luxury and comfort of a brand new Volvo, too! In the lights of an oncoming car, we can see the two women silhouetted. There's luggage piled up in the back ... and on the top is a budgie in a cage.

Mark and Paul rush for the bathroom. Paul gets there first.

It's empty.

Mark's in a panic now. He rushes back to the telly. The advert is ending now, the bagpipe music is fading out. What's that we can hear? Is it singing? Well ... it's chanting, really. The two women are chanting ... Da-da, da-da de-da-da ... de-da, de-da, da-da ... It's the signature tune to Match of the Day.

Wendy Whitfield

Pie and Peas for Three

Alice Bartles' deepset eyes signalled danger as in her usual hectoring manner she thrust her heavy body through the half-open doorway of the shop at the corner of Sabina Terrace.

Sid Needham, newsagent and owner of these backstreet premises was industriously pencilling-in the house numbers on the latest editions of the Nottingham Evening Post, in preparation for delivery by the four newsboys he was expecting to turn up at any minute. Scarcely concealing annoyance at the interruption, he glanced from his tiresome chore to face Alice who now leaned exhaustedly over his magazine-strewn counter.

Former argument and discord, relating to credit, had already strained this particular customer-shopkeeper relationship - so stifling his curiosity Sid spoke with a practised drawl.

"What's up, Alice?"

"It's our movver - she's 'ad it."

The alarm in her voice and the sight of her filthy bespattered dark grey coat activated him. He mouthed the word "ambulance".

"No! Cops - It's them we'll be needing now." Alice wheezed, exhaling with difficulty through her uneven teeth as Sid smartly reached to the shelf behind him for the dusty telephone.

Giving the scantest details as a reason for the 999 call, he hastily replaced the receiver only to see Alice's bulk recede out of vision down the street. "It's me as'll get it in the neck if it's just a damned false alarm," he muttered miserably, returning to his task.

Alice was now cautiously retracing her steps over the crumbling wet pavement, past the narrow row of two-up two-down seedy looking dwellings, where corrugated iron shutters vied with an abundance of broken glass, reflecting this gross deterioration in the rays of the street lights as large snowflakes replaced the vexing sleet, and the all too familiar agony of aching feet slowly rose to jar her already taut nerves. This recurring pain she had lived with for as long as she could remember. Strange how the familiar feeling should flood her head just now, making her strain to try to recall whether there had ever been a time when her feet had not hurt; only reasons crowded in to pace the floor of her weary mind. Same damn things - she winced, remembering the years of sweating in the dye-works canteen, the never-ending loads of shopping, housework, fetching, carrying, trying to cope, day in, day out - God, how tired she felt. Why though, on this rotten Saturday had things changed - erupted like one of those

spuming volcanos you saw on telly. Questioning she allowed herself a sigh - there'll be a bit of rest now - Oh! movver, she whispered silently. No tears would come, only the sound of a wailing siren invaded her partial awareness. The chronic pain up the back of her head forced her to close her eyes, momentarily forgetting her throbbing feet. Reality for this woman had come asunder.

Earlier on this murky morning, Alice and her husband Percy had gone, at her insistence, to visit the home of one of her work-mates, but on the journey homeward, Alice's wearisome voice had taunted -

"Doris 'n Burt's got a car now - we've not got a car ... and the've got a brand new council house - we've not got one yet - not even an offer of an old 'un - 'course, they would get one."

After a pause, she resumed her vocal efforts -

"Why 'aven't we got one - that's what I want to know - Why?"

"We sh'll get one when our name comes top of the list," Percy had answered between clenched teeth. He knew well this answer would not placate Alice, but he hoped it might shut her up for a while.

"That glass-topped table was really nice," she droned on. "I've allus hung my nose over one o' them."

"Fat lot of good a glass table'd do us." Percy's retort had been disagreeable and Alice's eyes had narrowed.

"Are you going to start on about our movver again?"

"'Old yer noise, woman."

A comfortless silence enfolded them.

Alice's mother was the last subject on earth Percy wanted to think about. At that moment he wished he was at the Forest football ground. Still - maybe now he had been out with Alice, albeit begrudgingly, she would slip him an extra quid later, so he could get out of the house and go for a drink. She was the one who managed all the family finance, but the fact that he had given up most of his precious Saturday might warrant a slackening of the purse-strings. He allowed himself a smirk, well concealed behind his rather old-fashioned heavily drooping moustache. This notion warmed him, but the hidden resentment lines soon hardened again around his thin mouth as he recalled Doris and Burt, smugly showing off their new house and flashy furniture - all on the never never, Percy surmised. In fact, a distinct chill had hit his stomach as Alice and her mate had enthused so vociferously, only lowering their voices when rent and heating payments were slyly referred to. He knew too well how vehement Alice was in her desire for such a house - and all because of the amenity of an indoor lavatory. He was the first to admit to being particularly squeamish where bodily

functions were concerned, and to his way of thinking the only rightful place for the "thunderbox", as he called it, was as far away from the house as possible.

Gertrude Meakin, Alice's mother, had lived at No. 6 Sabina Terrace, since her marriage to Jack Meakin on a hot afternoon in June 1921. This pair had waited until the 1914-18 war was over, and then waited another three years, because of Jack's wracking cough - the legacy of a poison gas attack over the trenches he was holed up in at the time. Blighty and marriage however, turned out less of a paradise than the one he passed over to, only three months after the wedding. The bitterness of this trauma never quite left Gertie.

"'Ave nowt t'do wi' men, our Alice - they only leave you up the stick," she'd warned her offspring as the child she had been left to carry and give birth to alone, reached puberty. This advice had been heeded until just before Alice's thirtieth birthday. Then quite unexpectedly, this diffident daughter had eyed Percy Bartles as he carried a plate of baked beans and chips from the canteen counter where she had diligently laboured ever since leaving school at fourteen. The dour appearance of Percy she had misread for strength and sobriety.

"Best to 'ave an 'usband, Mov - besides he's a regular worker."

Alice convinced her mother of Percy's suitability and thereafter pursued this phlegmatic man. The two women fantasised about an easier future and Percy convinced himself it was a smart move - two women to look after him in a ready made home. So the trio was complete. Alice Meakin changed her name to Bartles and after a weekend honeymoon at Skegness - paid for by their respective work-mates taking up a collection, life seemingly consolidated in a repetitive but contented pattern. Undeniable indifference soon rather superseded snugness but the partnership survived because it was minutely more tolerable than isolation.

Sabina Terrace had been threatened by the bulldozer at more or less the same time as Alice's mother retired. A careworn sixty-year-old who had worked as a jennier in one lace factory after another and whose body and mental springs had kept time with the twanging of shuttles and clattering of machines until that particular day she had wound down quicker than a gravitating yo-yo. To eke out her pension she trimmed lace at home for a while. Percy scavenged an old pushchair so that she could, if unsteadily, totter to and fro to the factory with her completed bundles. Finally rheumatism and incontinence diminished her faculties to such an extent this last

activity was denied her, and served to add to her daughter's drudgery and subtract from her son-in-law's patience.

Fatigue, more than any other factor forced Alice to constantly pester Percy and harass the housing department; continually pointing out her mother's urgent need to easy access to an indoor lavatory as a means of relief, not only to the old woman's bladder but from deteriorating relationships.

On the ill-starred Saturday, premature twilight descended as the sulky couple had trudged the last few yards of their homeward journey. Alice suddenly stopped.

"Perce! You go and see if our movver's alright. I'll nip to Arnold's chippy and get all on us a pie and peas ... put 'kettle on."

The roar of this afterthought had echoed on the icy breeze.

Percy had thankfully arrived home but his chilled fingers had hardly left the doorknob before the lapels of his overcoat were seized by his mother-in-law's clawing gnarled hands.

"Where's our Alice?" she had wailed. "I've 'ad a spill."

The pungent stench of stale urine lent significance to her words, nauseating the shivering Percy.

"Strewth," he had yelled. "Yer've a commode by yer bed and a po in every room in this house. I'm fed up with yer ... yer dirty ol' ..."

At Gertie's snivels, years of hidden hostility welled up in his throat.

"Gerroff down to the thunderbox," he'd shouted and lurched forward menacingly then steered her with a fierce shove through the back door.

"Tea ready?" Alice had called almost cheerfully, returning with the steaming parcels of food. Then stopping abruptly as her eyes focused on her husband, peculiarly poised, just inside the passage leading to the scullery. Assertively he had thrust out at arm's length an old willow-pattern teacup to within a half-inch of her weather-reddened nose, and with greater passion than she had ever witnessed in him before, he'd hissed.

"Look what the old bat's done in my cup."

"What have you done to 'er?" a flustered Alice had shrieked, sighting the backdoor swinging on its hinges. Peas and pies spilled crazily from the greasy bundles all over the floor, as she, with hands outstretched, had fairly leapt outside, followed by her irate spouse, who hurled the offending cup plus contents after her. The whole lot, together with Alice had slithered down the rickety wet wooden steps leading to the cobbled yard, then - those same plump hands had flown up to clasp over her mouth, stifling a horrified gasp rising deeply from

her throat as the inert, frail old form of her "movver" sprawled face downwards in the fresh slush came into view. Wheeling round to see Percy glassily staring at her, disdainfully she had ignored his unhappy gawp and bent down instantly to retrieve a serrated piece of the shattered china and with feline agility lunged her ample bulk at him, shredding his neck and jaw with repeated ferocity, stopping only when the cries ceased and the limp body crumpled to the ground ... panting and heaving, Alice Bartles had felt sweat trickle into her stinging eyes as she slawmed her stained hands down the front of her coat and strode back across the yard as a light sprinkling of fresh snow turned slowly to a sickening shade of pink.

Margaret Flanagan

About the Federation

Founded in 1976, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) grew out of a desperate need for working class writers to be united and acknowledged. The English Literary Establishment scoffs at the idea of working class writing, and reviewers and critics often refuse to take it seriously. Yet for many years working class people across the country have been writing and publishing their own stories for a large and usually local readership. The Federation is our collective, national voice.

The Federation comprises almost forty member groups, including writing workshops, local history projects, community publishers and literacy-based writing and publishing groups. All the groups are committed to new kinds of writing based on working class experience and creativity, which include a strong contribution from women, Black and Gay writers. As Sally Flood of Basement Writers, in London, comments, 'The Federation offers people like ourselves the opportunity to say, "I too can write. I have something to say that is important and now I have a voice, I shall use it." '

The Federation Annual General Meeting is a festival of writing, debate and comradeship. At this event we elect a voluntary executive which runs our affairs during the year, with the help of two part-time paid co-ordinators. We also hold regular workshops, readings and education days. Through these events we gain confidence and friends, and publicise our writing and our books. We produce a quarterly newsletter and occasional anthologies, as well as promoting the many publications of our member groups. We are grateful to the Arts Council and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for their support.

Also published by the FWWCP.

Writing. 1978. (Out of Print). An Anthology of poetry and prose.
Gizza Poem. 1988. An anthology of poetry.
Once I was a Washing Machine. 1989. An anthology of poetry and prose.
Post-a-Poem. 1989. Packs of poems printed on postcards.
It's Our World. 1990. Writing by Children.
Stories for Children. 1990. Stories by adults for children.

The above publications may be obtained from FWWCP, 68 Grand Parade, Brighton, BN2 2JY.

The stories in this anthology have been written by women of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers. From fantasy to tragedy, from humour to very serious social comment, there is something here for all tastes and all moods. £2.50 spent on this book is £2.50 very well spent, but don't feel you have done your duty just by buying it. If you don't read at least some of it, you will have missed everything. If you don't read every word, you will have missed something important and enjoyable. Having taken the text through all its stages, from typing the originals to the final search for that elusive missing comma which always seems to evade capture, I must have read every word at least a dozen times. Each time I read it, I still enjoy it.

Michael Kirkland

Price £2.50

ISBN 0 906 411 05 X