

The club met fortnightly, each time in the home of one of the members. The meetings were social evenings and also for discussing and arranging the various activities, - the tennis club, amateur theatricals, country walks.

One week, at the home of a boy called Adrian, there was someone new, a tall, broad-shouldered young man whose sleek fair hair fell over his forehead and was pushed back with a jerk of hand and head; and a bone-hard, watchful face. - This is my cousin, Karl, said Adrian. - He's from Germany.

Karl barely nodded at Lucia, unsmiling, then turned away. She was immediately intrigued by this cold indifference.

When they had finished the evening's discussions, and tea was being served, she moved around until she was standing next to Karl. - Are you here on a visit?

- I come to learn English, he replied.

- Do you like it here?

He shrugged. - I don't know England enough. And a moment later he turned his back on her and talked to someone else.

But when the week-end came, and they all went swimming together, he was more friendly. When she climbed out of the water he came and sat beside her on the grass and said - You swim good.

- I enjoy swimming.

- Is it right, I say: you swim good? Is it the right way?

- You should say, you swim well. Lucia enunciated the words carefully. He repeated, echoing her intonation - You swim well.

Then she said to him - Are you happier now?

- Happier?

- Last week, at Adrian's house, you didn't seem to like it very much.

- Oh no, I like it all right. I am quite happy, thank you.

When they parted, he clicked his heels together, and holding her hand, made a little bow. - Would you like to come walking with me and my friends next week? We go to the country.

- Yes, I would like that.

- It might be hard. We walk hard.

- I can walk hard, too, she told him.

- Maybe. But we are German boys.

The way he said it made it seem that to be a German boy was very special, the answer to everything. She was determined to show that an English girl could measure up to a German boy.

The German boys looked like professional walkers, or even mountaineers. She felt silly with the little canvas bag slung over one shoulder; the bag

contained sandwiches for lunch, and an orange. They had proper knapsacks on frames shaped to their backs; they wore heavy walking boots with thick socks. They talked and joked a lot in German when the walk began; they sang rousing German marching songs. There were only two other girls. An older man whom they called 'Doc' was their leader. After lunch, when they were all lying around and resting, Doc read them an article from a magazine about the family life of German leaders. The year was 1935. Lucia was not interested, but she pretended to be listening as she relaxed in the sun and watched Karl's face; he was absorbed, very serious, very earnest. He gave Doc his complete attention, listening to every word. Afterwards the only things she remembered about the article was that Goering had a big family and Hitler loved little children. What did she care? Karl had two deep lines like extended dimples in his cheeks; high cheekbones; eyes that seemed partly hooded by heavy lids. She loved his kind of face.

When the day was over, and she had acquitted herself well despite the hard walking, Karl took her home. ~~When~~ They parted outside her gate, he shook her hand, and ^{they} arranged to meet the following week.

Karl. She day-dreamed all week long. She had told him where she worked. Perhaps he would phone her. Hard and self-confident. Handsome and unsmiling. A boy you could not be sure about, closed and secretive. She felt his personality to be a challenge; the English boys seemed soft and insipid beside him, She wanted to discover what he was really like.

He did not phone, but she did not stop thinking about him.

It was Sunday; they had arranged to meet at the station where the German group were to catch a train out of town for another long country hike. She woke in happy anticipation, to a cold day with grey falling rain.

- You're surely not going hiking in this weather? asked Rose, when Lucia came downstairs dressed in her shorts.

- Yes, We're taking a train to Fellworth and walking across the hills.

- But it's pouring. You can't walk in the pouring rain. It will be too muddy for one thing, and you'll get soaked and catch a cold.

- It may clear up. I think it will. There was a light streak along the horizon - I could see it from my room. It often starts like this and turns fine later on.

- Rain before seven, fine before eleven, said Rose, but doubtfully. - At least you must take your raincoat - and a hat. But she had arranged to spend the day with her sister, and she wanted to go. Lucia would not go with her, and Rose did not like to leave her alone in the house,

They met at the ticket office at the station. The group talked in German

in their loud voices. Talked and laughed a great deal. She sat silently beside Karl in the train, wishing he would translate some of what they were saying. When their arms and shoulders touched with the swaying train, she felt so strong a physical impulse that it had to be generated by both of them, it could not be hers alone. The boys wore khaki socks up to their knees, and light-coloured shorts that revealed their thick, muscled thighs. They had jerseys, and raincoats that covered them and their packs when they were walking, and hats with little feathers stuck in the bands. On the train they swung the big knapsacks off their shoulders and put them on the floor between their legs. They took over a whole portion of the train; the other passengers eyed them cautiously, attracted by the noise, the foreign language; perhaps envious at their exclusion.

They walked until lunch-time in intermittent rain, but the route became too muddy. They decided to cut the hike short, and go back early.

When they alighted from the home-going train, the German boys swung their knapsacks back on their shoulders, and Karl said something to them in German. It must have been a joke, because they all laughed a great deal, and Karl made a face, and gestured downwards with his hand as though to silence them. Then they walked away, still shouting back at him, and he and Lucia walked off together.

- I will see you home, he said.

As they left the station the rain came pelting down. Karl held his raincoat over both of their heads, holding her close to his side, and they ran across the road to shelter in the doorway of a shop.

Rain and laughter and hair dripping in their eyes. She was fresh and young and blooming with the exercise and the sharp air and lovely rain. Young and green and no appleblossom.

- Come, Karl said, getting ready to brave the rain again, - we will run to the room of my friend. It is close by - much closer than your house.

- Will your friend be in?

- It does not matter. I have a key to his room. I stay with him once.

- Karl, she said, I would rather go home.

- Yes, but in this heavy rain? Why not to my friend? He looked at her with those hooded eyes, and a small smile on his lips. He smiled with his lips, but his eyes were always wary. - You are afraid? You think something terrible will happen?

- No, I'm not afraid, she replied, and she was afraid. - But it's not right - my mother will be expecting me back. The voices of her friends seemed to say: It's asking for trouble.

He looked at his watch. - Look, he said, indicating the watch face, - it's one, two and a half hours before the other train. You're mother won't be expecting you so soon.

They had already begun walking down the street.

- Well, but I don't want to go to your friend's room.

Then he stopped in the street, with the rain still falling on them both.

- Lucia, I will make you a promise. Nothing will happen that you don't want it should happen. I promise I will not do anything you do not want.

She was doomed.

They climbed the stairs to his friend's room. Karl had the key in his pocket - they knocked first, and there was no reply, then he took out the key. The room, lit only by an attic window, was already half-dark. Karl put sixpence in the gas meter and lit the gas fire. They draped their soaking jerseys over a chair. The room was neat and almost empty. The divan, a small table, one chair, and a shelf with a few groceries and books; and a picture of Hitler over the bed.

She pretended to be interested in the photograph. - So your friend admires the great leader? she asked.

His face seemed to darken, and with a tight mouth he replied - He is a great man and the leader of my people. One day he will show the world.

- Show the world what?

- The true meaning of leadership. Your British politicians are weak and soft.

- Why are you so cross? I didn't mean to offend you. I don't know anything about Hitler and German politics, to tell the truth.

- No, you are a woman -- - Oh! she cried in protest - what difference -

He interrupted her - But it is not Oh! It is to be expected. A woman is not so concerned with politics and should not understand all these things. A woman is made to bear children. To be loved. He put an arm over her shoulder and drew her towards him. Then he stopped, opened his knapsack, and took out a towel, which he spread on the divan - so that we don't make the cover wet - and drew her to sit down beside him.

She began to shiver. - Karl, I want to go home, she said.

- I will take you; when we have had the cocoa. He had pumped a primus stove to boil some milk.

- I don't think I'll wait for the cocoa. Uncontrollable shivering shook her body.

- You are cold, he said tenderly. - Have the cocoa, it will warm you up. Then we will go to your home.

They sat side by side on the divan, their hands cupped around the cocoa mugs. She drank the cocoa, but she was still shivering.

He took the two mugs and placed them on the table. He drew her close, murmuring her name. He kissed her with a hard, thrusting kiss, forcing her lips apart. She had never before known a kiss with an open mouth, only with closed lips. She resisted a little, and finally managed to turn her head away. She began to talk quickly as a means of defence. - You don't waste time, do you? Particularly

when you were so cold, the first time we met.

- No, I was not cold. Not cold to you.

- Don't you remember, when we were introduced at Adrian's, you simply turned your back on me?

- Oh then -- I thought you were Jewish, he said.

- I'm not.

- No, I know now. Someone said one of the girls was a Jew.

- Do I look Jewish?

- Not at all. You have fine Aryan features, a straight nose, I did not look at you carefully that time, perhaps because your hair is so dark --

- Well, Freda's Jewish, but she's fair, very fair. Anyway, what's wrong with it?

He said slowly, emphasising each word - I don't like Jewish girls.

- Why not?

He did not want to talk any more. He held her again in his iron grip and silenced her with his iron kiss. One hand searched her clothes for buttons, openings. She heard the gas fire hiss and hesitate, and gusts of rain blowing against the fanlight. His heavy eyes were almost closed.

She tried to get up, but he forced her down. - Karl, Karl, please - let me go Karl, please. I want to go home. Karl, you said, you said you wouldn't - please, please, Karl!

He was too strong. He was over her, forcing her down onto the divan.

- Lucia, baby, little girl . . . I won't hurt you, no, I won't do anything. Don't fight me baby. I won't hurt you, it won't hurt.

Her shirt was unbuttoned, her brassiere unfastened. He released her breast, bending down, moving his mouth over it. - Don't fight me, baby, he murmured.

- Be still, be still.

- Karl, but you promised - please, I don't want to, Karl, you promised, you promised -

But she was losing, and losing fast. He had her legs on the divan, he had her shorts undone, he was pulling at her pants. - Open your legs, baby, don't be afraid, you are a beautiful little girl, Lucia, baby, beautiful -

She trembled and trembled, and could not stop. She tried, feebly, to push him away. She gasped and she shivered.

- Little bird, he whispered, then forced himself into her again and again while the rain streamed down the shut dark window.

The pain was almost unbearable but any sound she made was only a gasp in her throat, oh, oh, oh, and her mind said, this is what it is, then, but her mind could not comprehend the pain. Is this it, is it some kind of exquisite agony? Agony, yes, but not exquisite. Well, this is what it is about, just

the same.

A final great shuddering thrust. Then he was breathing in gasps like a man who has run a race, and his face was wet, his lips still seeking and murmuring with burning breath, into her hair and her averted face.

The semen trickled down her legs and joined the little red petals of blood on the white towel. He got up and buttoned his trousers with his back turned to her, then walked to a small mirror and took a comb from his pocket, to comb back the fair hair that had fallen over his face. He kept his back turned until she had time to pull on her pants and shorts, and straighten her disordered clothes. She put on her wet jersey and raincoat, and whispered - Would you lend me your comb?

He handed her the comb without a word. When she had combed her hair, and handed it back to him, she picked up her canvas bag to go. - I'll see you home, he said.

- No, you needn't.

- Just to the bus, then.

The rain had stopped. A whirling mist haloed the street lights. They walked in silence, in silence stood waiting for the bus. It came out of the mist, familiar and dazzling with lights. He looked at her unsmiling, indifferent, and said - Well, goodbye Lucia.

- Goodbye, she replied, and climbed onto the bus. As she sat down she saw that he had already turned and was walking rapidly away.

She had only one need - to wash the pain and the smell of him away in a hot bath.

Next week they would joke in German, and their jokes would be about her. They would tease him, she knew, and he - he would boast. English girls were so easy. It was a victory, a notch in a belt, proof of superiority.

She could not bear it.

She stayed away from club meetings for a month. Then she met one of the girls who asked her why she had not been coming. - Oh, I've been so busy, she said. Her friend said - Well, We're meeting at Adrian's on Thursday. Do come, we're discussing casting a new play, and we haven't enough people.

- Who was at the last meeting? Lucia asked.

- Oh, all the usuals - Bob, Adrian, Phyllis, that new girl, Flo something or other, Nicky . . .

- What about Adrian's cousin - the German boy, Karl. Was he there?

- He's gone back to Germany, she replied. - Did you like him? I didn't fancy him myself. I don't like those selfish masculine types who think they own the world.

She went to the meeting, and she needed to ask Freda a question. So at the

end, when they were all drinking tea, standing around a table and talking in little groups, she said softly - Freda, Adrian's cousin Karl told me he didn't like Jewish girls. Why did he say that?

- Because he's a fascist, you fool! Freda replied sharply.

She was hurt and silenced. But in a little while Freda came up to her and apologised. - I didn't mean to be so rude. I just got fed up with you, because actually you're not a fool --

- Well, thanks very much!

- Oh, you know what I mean. I just thought you should know better. You liked him, didn't you? Sylvia said you went hiking with the German club one week. It just made me sick.

Then she spoke about Germany and Hitler and anti-semitism, things Lucia knew she should have known about, but had refrained from recognising. - And did you really like him? Were you keen on him? she asked.

- Yes, I was a bit. He was very sure of himself, you know - different from all the others. I suppose I was intrigued by him.

- But you didn't really fall for him?

- No, not really.

She sighed with relief. - I'm glad about that. He would have been bad for you. Don't laugh - you know what they want, those German boys? They want to prove that they're the masters. They really do. They want to violate as many English girls as they can and then go and boast about our decadence.

Then she apologised again for her coarse and over-frank way of speaking, not knowing just how unwelcome were those unwanted truths.

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She could not discuss it with anyone at all, least of all Freda, with whom she began to be friendly, as though they were drawn together by their mutual contempt for the world's Karls. She wanted very much to tell her, but she knew she could not, she knew it must remain her own, burdensome secret. An uneasy honesty compelled her to go over the events of that afternoon again and again, and to face the fact that she could not shift all the blame onto him. He had no right, he used force; but she had wanted it, only she was not ready. And certainly not ready for such an episode with someone with whom she had not yet established a true relationship. She should have refused to go to that room with him. She must never again allow herself to be manoeuvred into such a position. The ugly features of his assault on her were not natural nor instinctive; they derived from what he was.

Still she thought there could be LOVE, love pure and alone, love in a vacuum, love on a pedestal, by itself. Still she believed that this private and individual and almost secret union of emotion between two individuals

had yet no part of the whole pattern of social relations. Still she could not recognise the fact that love had no reality save within the context of the immediate world, and that the pattern of behaviour of the individual, even in this, the eternal, the 'being in love', or loving, was conditioned by times and customs and cultures, by politics as well as personalities, by education as well as instinct. She knew the need to transcend the prison of self, to unite with another, to become more than just one separate being. But she thought it would bring complete one-ness in thought and feeling, that there would be no tensions, no conflict.

But something began that Sunday afternoon in Karl's friend's bed-sitter with the disastrous rain scouring the window and the gasfire hissing in the darkening room. There were questions now that would arise, questions she would have to ask her lover, when she found him, whoever he might be, and which would have to be accepted and answered before his kisses would silence her mouth.

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The day came when she was convinced that she was pregnant, she knew she must be pregnant, when she felt almost as though she was in a delirium from the throbbing boil of her anxiety - thirty-five days! She had counted and checked and gone over the calendar again and again; not satisfied with a simple sum of addition and subtraction, she had marked each day with her forefinger as she whispered the mounting inexorable total to herself. Whatever way the sum was worked, it always came out the same. She had not added a week by mistake. It was indeed five weeks and not four; and still the days passed and nothing happened.

She was now tasting the real flavour of being female. Nothing would equal in nagging worry the days of uncertainty before the relief of finding there was no unwanted pregnancy. It was not the responsibility of having to bring up the unwanted child that worried her to distraction, it was the social consequences - what will I do? What will I do? How to confess to her mother, how to face friends, neighbours, relatives; the whisperings and glances, the enormous shame of it, the ghastly stigma that marked such unfortunate girls, the unanimous disapproval and condemnation, still so Victorian in its severity.

In the shadows behind Lucia, behind all the misery of young girls who become, or think they have become, pregnant, there were all those millions of women with too little money and too many children whose lives became poisoned by this same fear, who erected between themselves and their husbands barriers of irritable antagonism to prevent themselves succumbing to tenderness, to intimacy, to the consequences of midnight consolation, and who even in the moment when they partook of their conjugal love, felt their spirit withdraw as the body succumbed; spent years in this withdrawal, pressed down by the weight of the burden imposed by the consequences of yielding to the momentary sweetness of sexual love. The ovum fertilised, a new life growing in the womb, the years and years and years of draining, destroying problems.

Lucia's anxiety had started long before her period was due. What she now knew was derived almost entirely from what she had read, and what she had read about love and pregnancy and childbirth was in novels. The clinical details were not delineated, only the romantic aspects. Therefore what she had learned in the main from the books she had read was one very simple fact on which they were all most explicit: that you only had to sleep with a man once - nice euphemism, what had sleep to do with it? - and you could become pregnant. The young country thing was seduced; she gave herself, open-hearted, to the sophisticated man whose jaded urban thirst was slaked by her innocence and her candour. But in the cold light of morning, he knew it would not work; and for her sake as much as his own, he left silently without a word or sign. Years later, by chance he came back to the same place,

and there was the grave beneath a tree in the orchard near the stream where she had drowned herself and her unborn child - his child. She could not be buried in consecrated ground because she had taken her own life, and the life of the ~~child~~ child within her. Oh, the apple tree, the singing and the gold! It was beautiful, and all laden with sadness, betrayal and nostalgic love, the sadness of the gulf between the dream and the reality. And it all brought to light this single earthy detail: only once, one night only, and you became pregnant.

The rest was mystery, mysterious to Lucia as the nature of menstruation. She knew nothing of a woman's cycle of fertility, nothing about ovulation. She knew the monthly period stopped with pregnancy, but she did not know why it stopped. There never was a story in which the girl made careful calculations about dates and could then deduce the likelihood or not of pregnancy. They were all just as ignorant as she; and nothing she had read conveyed the intolerable anxiety of a woman counting the days and watching for signs of menstruation, privately and locked in her own unrevealed dungeon, watching and feeling and thinking about it all the time. Nor did she know of any male equivalent to the unremitting gnawing of this anxiety; when even the kindest of husbands or lovers might murmur, Don't worry, we'll think of something, or, We'll manage somehow; then turn and go to sleep. All over the world were those women with too little hope, lying sleepless and counting the days and praying they ^{that} have miscalculated, as the men lay on their backs and snored.

Menstruation - a sort of toothache in the stomach - was not an ordinary stomach-ache. Yet now there was no means of telling, of distinguishing the pain. It seemed as though the ache was starting down there at least ten times every day, only to disappear as soon as she began to notice it. She went to the lavatory to examine secretly and with increasing depression for any signs or stains on her pants. She woke each morning so miserable and uncomfortable that she was convinced it must have happened while she slept. But nothing happened. Even when she forgot about it for a moment there was a sort of goblin in the back of her mind who kept telling her: You're unhappy about something, don't look out of the window now the rain has stopped and the sun is shining because you can't enjoy it, you're unhappy about something . . . don't wake with a feeling of joy and anticipation, you have nothing to look forward to, nothing but an enormous worry.

More than anything else, she wanted to confide in someone, to share her burden, to discuss it. She did not know anyone she could trust enough. She feared that even pledged to absolute secrecy, one would whisper the scandal to another, and soon everyone - meaning her mother mostly - would know. The risk was too great.

The women's magazines had pages of letters from people seeking advice.

Dear Aunt Prudence (or Patience, or Primrose)

I am in trouble and don't know what to do.

Everybody knew what was meant by 'in trouble' - for a young woman there was only one kind of trouble. Still, perhaps she would be more explicit.

I think I'm pregnant. Please give me some advice . . .

Of course, it was not advice she was seeking. What she wanted was a magic elixir to dispose quickly of an unwanted pregnancy; a pill that would make you start menstruating.

But there were too many difficulties attached to writing such a letter. A reply in the magazine might take months. If you wanted a quick, personal reply you had to enclose a stamped, addressed envelope. Usually her mother did not open Lucia's letters, but she had a way of putting a letter on the breakfast table or bringing it to Lucia saying - There's a letter for you from . . . she would peer to try and decipher the postmark - from Chichester, I think it is, dear, now who do you know in Chichester? And she would watch Lucia's face while she read the letter, and if Lucia said nothing she would ask - Good news, I hope? She was not good at lying.

In addition she suspected that Aunt Prudence would not be much help, but would write a kind little note full of Sensible and Sound Advice: The first thing you must do is tell your parents. I know this is difficult, and I know how much you dread doing this, but after all, they are your best friends, and they will have to know eventually. The sooner the better . . . She had seen replies like that in the magazines. This was not what she wanted.

She also thought about suicide, although this seemed a bit hard on her mother - Widow's only daughter leaps to death; her mother dressed in black, with a thick black veil pushed to one side so that she could wipe away the tears, being supported on either side by aunt and uncle as the coffin was lowered into the freshly-turned grave. Vision of tombstones. If it was decided at the inquest that it was suicide (while of unsound mind), would she then be buried all alone in unconsecrated ground?

She was also deterred by her inability to find a suitable method, something easy and painless. The thought of the disagreeable moments that would have to be endured: suppose she threw herself into the Thames; it would be a foggy night, the water would be greeny-black and icy cold; Autumn; she gasped for breath at the very thought of the icy shock of the plunge into the water. You will be dead in a few minutes - what does it matter about the water being cold? But dying in that way, sinking to the bottom among the mud and rusted cans and London slime, a silent trail of bubbles rising to the surface - bubbles of air, from her lungs, her mouth choked with sludge, gasping in great mouthfuls, great lungfuls of black river . . . then she was fighting for

air, fighting to breath, fighting to follow the bubble-trail to the top and burst out into the night, struggling to rise from the water and to live . . .

She abandoned drowning. It was not a good method.

Cutting arteries in the bath? If you took a very sharp razor, so they said, and severed those blue veins at your wrists, it was quite painless; you gradually lost consciousness as you bled and bled into the water, as though you were falling into a warm, misty sleep. There were two important deterrents to this method. Little as she bothered about her mother's feelings in the general course of events, the thought of Rose finding her dead in a bath full of bloody water was really too much. She could hear her terrible screams as she saw the colourless face floating beneath the deep-dyed water; it was horrible. Also, she had been impressed by a short story she had read, written by Jack London. A tired doctor, after a hard day, was sewing up the throat of a botched suicide. You'll be all right now, he told the man; next time you want to commit suicide, he went on with a kind of grim humour, don't thrust your head forward - hold it back, like this. Then you'll sever the jugular vein. Some hours later the doctor was called out of bed again; this time the man had taken his advice and done it properly.

It was all too messy and horrible. Severing arteries was out.

She considered, and rejected, various other methods that were beset with too many difficulties, such as shooting and taking poison; and finally came to the conclusion that the simplest and best way was to throw herself under a tube train just as it entered the station. There was the live rail - had she not heard that you would be electrocuted immediately if you touched it? - and then there was the impact of the train itself. She hoped her body would be crushed and mutilated and they would never find out she had been pregnant, and if she did it carefully, they might even think it was an accident. This was obviously best for all concerned. The magistrate at the inquest would say she slipped; at the very worst, return an open verdict.

Once she had worked this out, she worried a little less. As long as there was a way out, even an ultimate way, a last escape, it was as though the burden of anxiety had lifted - no, eased, just slightly. Terrible regret surged in her at the thought of all the things she had not yet done. To have missed out on so much life! The places she yearned to see, the exotic countries and peoples . . . no more exquisite Springs, no more watching for the first crocuses and daffodils, no more going walking in the bluebell woods. A bitter-sweet sadness veiled her days. There only remained the consolation of the thought that if she could find some way out of this mess, it might not be necessary. As long as there was a margin of doubt, there was a measure of hope.

When finally she sought advice it was on impulse and her choice of confidant was instinctive.

She worked in an office with three other girls who did similar work to hers, of a general clerical nature. They got on well together at work, but they lived in separate suburbs and went their own ways after working hours. They usually ate their lunchtime sandwiches together in the office.

Two of the girls were pale suburban flowers like Lucia herself, from discreetly genteel homes. The third was a sharp, hard little Londoner from the East End, a sparrow with restless eyes and a small, pointed beak. Her name was Lilian.

The two were alone in the office one day when Lucia simply blurted out - Lil, I've got a friend who's in the most awful fix, and she doesn't know who on earth can help her, what she should do - then the door opened and one of the other girls came in, and Lilian, wise as she was, simply looked at Lucia with raised eyebrows and a small smile.

Later in the day they were alone again, and Lilian asked - Your friend, you began to tell me - ? Now, of course, Lucia regretted she had said anything, but it ^{was} too late. She stumbled with her explanation: - Well, you see, actually she's very nice, but she doesn't know anything about these things . . . you see, she's been going with this boy for some time and they were planning to get married some time, but now he's cooling off, and, and, you know, she thinks she's pregnant, she doesn't really know for sure, but she spoke to me, and I said I'd try to find out if there's anything she could . . . you know, she thought she might be able to take something, or . . .

All the time Lilian looked at her with an expression that could only be described as quizzical; her sparrow-head, with its frame of dark straight hair held on one side, her small eyes very knowing and bright, as she watched Lucia fumbling through this woolly nonsense.

- What on earth makes you think that I would know anything about that?
Lucia was crimson with embarrassment.

- Oh, I'm sorry, it's not that I thought you would know, it's just that I keep thinking about it, about her, and I really spoke without thinking.

She was afraid she had offended Lilian.

Softening a little, Lilian said - Well, I don't know, but I could ask someone, I suppose, I might be able to find out - and she shrugged her shoulders as though to say, if you want to pretend, I can also pretend.

- Oh, could you really - do you think - then once more their discussion was interrupted, and they went on with their work.

At the end of the day they went to the small washroom to wash their hands and powder their noses before going home. In the little room filled with pipes, buckets and brooms and crammed with a congestion of coats. Lilian

traced the outline of tightly pursed lips in a small spotted mirror fixed to the wall, and murmured to Lucia, her handbag balanced on the edge of the wash basin, - We can't really discuss this properly in the office, can we? What about going out for a cup of coffee at lunchtime tomorrow?

Lucia said this was a marvellous idea.

Next day they squeezed themselves into a corner of Lyon's teashop, where there was a table for two and waited for their slopped cups of liquid. When they arrived Lilian put sugar in her cup and stirred and stirred, and then said - Well, come on, tell me the whole story.

- There's nothing to tell really. Only what I told you yesterday.

- But if I'm to help, she said, unsmiling now, but watching Lucia carefully with those very bright eyes, - I need something more to go on. How far gone is your friend? That's important, isn't it?

There was the slightest possible emphasis on the words 'your friend.'

Lucia said - Oh, I don't know exactly. Not far, I would say.

- Well, that's not much help, is it? Do you think it's more than a month? Two? Three?

- Oh no, it can't be as much as that.

- When was the last period?

- Nearly six weeks ago.

Lilian sat back with a smile. - Well then, there's not so much to worry about, is there?

- Isn't there?

- Course not. No. She shook her head. - The earlier, the better, that's what my friend told me. And your friend, she's only just started, see? I mean, if it's six weeks since she had a period, she can't be more than a month gone, maybe less.

- Why less than a month?

- Tell me something, Lilian said, leaning forward and ignoring the last question, - how often did she sleep with this chap. Lots of times? Or was it only once?

- Does it make any difference?

- It might.

All the time they had been sipping their coffee and speaking in low voices so that people at the tables crammed close to theirs could not overhear the conversation. Now Lucia was trying to catch, with her spoon, the skin that had formed on top of her coffee and deposit it in the saucer. She held the spoon against the side of the cup to let the liquid drain away, but the skin dodged around the spoon and fell back into the cup again.

She said - You know it's not for a friend that I spoke to you, don't you? You know it's for me. With brimming eyes, she tried again to catch the skin.

Lilian put her hand on the table and leaned across. - Don't take it so hard, she said, - cheer up, Lucie girl, course I knew it was you, what do you think I am, thick or something?

She pulled out a handkerchief and offered it to Lucia, who had to look up and smile at the bright eyes. - No, she muttered, - I am an idiot I know, but I've been so sick with worry and no one I could possibly talk to about it . . . I didn't even plan to talk to you, it just came out.

- It was the first time, wasn't it?

Lucia nodded.

- Did you use anything?

- Use anything? Lucia asked. A fool is a fool is a fool.

- A cap or something?

She shook her head.

- Douche yourself afterwards?

-No.

- Did he use anything, then?

- I don't know - I don't think so; you see, it was the first time, I'd never . . . I didn't want it to happen, he sort of forced me, it was not as though we had talked about it and decided to - it was all unplanned and it was unwanted. It's not that I'm blaming him, I know it was my fault as well, but I couldn't stop him, it wasn't what I wanted.

- All right, she said, - all right. She pursed her mouth and shook her head. Then she asked - Tell me, what was the date? How long ago?

- It was a Sunday, Lucia replied. - It must have been more than four weeks ago - she took out a diary and began to turn pages. - Sunday the tenth.

- And your last period began when?

- About the second. I don't remember the exact date. But I usually go for only four days, and I remember I'd only just stopped three or four days before.

- And it was definitely only once? Only that time?

- Only that time. Honestly, Lili, it only happened once. I couldn't . . .

- I believe you, thousands wouldn't, she said; then went on - Well, now, I'll tell you what I think you should do. I'm sure this will do the trick for you; it doesn't work when you're really far gone. Then they'll tell you all sorts of things, like drink a pint of gin -

- A pint of gin!

- Yes, gin. Don't you know it's called mother's ruin? Drink gin then soak in a boiling hot bath - I know some girls nearly burned their skin orf but they never got rid of it that way. Or have an accident, fall down some stairs or something, jump from a flight of steps an 'undred times. Well, I don't know. Never 'ad to try it meself, and I won't, neither.

- I have read about women losing their babies after a bad fall.

- When they want them, they lose 'em, and when they don't want 'em, they stick. It's always the same, isn't it? But life's like that. But you'll be all right. She patted Lucia's hand. - Now listen. You go to a chemists and ask for a black draught, and drink it there on the spot -

- Any chemist?

- Any chemist. They'll know what it is. You drink it down, then go 'ome and go to bed, and everything'll be all right. I promise you.

- What does it do?

- It won't do you no harm. It makes your tummy work - rather fierce, but it makes it work. People take it when they're all gummed up. It loosens the whole works. Take it and go 'ome. You'll see.

And she looked at Lucia with her little, friendly smile and those small, dark, knowing eyes.

* * * *

She stopped at a chemist's shop in town, not near her home. She said to the young man in a white coat behind the counter - Could you give me a black draught?

- A black draught? Certainly.

He went to the dispensary and came out with a small glass filled with a dark brown liquid. She drank it down quickly - it tasted awful, but that was all right, it obviously would not do any good if it tasted nice; and she paid him - a sixpence, or a shilling, something like that.

She had supper with her mother and went to bed early. In the night she woke with stomach cramps. The pain was quite severe, and she had to get up and go to the lavatory two or three times.

When she had relieved herself, the pain had still not gone entirely. Later in the night it settled down to a duller but more familiar ache in the pit of her stomach. She was menstruating.

Lilian did not tell her what she knew, how she had calculated from the date that the probability was against pregnancy, and only the intense anxiety had interferred with her normal period. She simply looked at her when Lucia arrived at the office the next morning and said - -Ullow. Ow's things? and Lucia had replied happily - Fine! You were an angel.

There was just one knowing flash from under her fringe, and a smile before she turned towards her typewriter.

* * * *

The standards she now set for herself were rather prim and conventionally correct; hence they only enhanced her standing with her essentially conventional social set. She was not one of those girls who got a bad name for themselves. Holding hands and nudging knees at the cinema, a chaste sisterly kiss on the doorstep - these were permitted, nothing more.

She went out with many different boys. Each one who came to her home was scrutinised by Rose as a potential life-mate. - What's happened to that nice boy - George - you know, the one you went to the pictures with a couple of week's ago? Don't you see him any more?

- Oh yes, I see him. He comes to the club. Lucia knew what her mother meant and knew also that in her impatient and irritated way, that answer would not silence her.

- But he hasn't been round here lately, has he dear?

- He bores me stiff. There was emphasis on each word.

- Oh dear! And I thought he had such nice manners! Rose lowered her voice as she bent over her sewing. - Never mind, dear, she said consolingly, - don't worry. Mr Right will come along, you'll see. One of these days you'll meet Mr Right.

- I'm not worried, said Lucia, gritting her teeth.

- No, I know you're not worried. But every girl wants to meet the right man -

- Oh Mum, for heaven's sake! I don't want to get married yet! I go out with boys because I want to, but I'm probably not going to marry any one of them!

She infuriated Lucia. What had happened to her own Mr Right? He came along but then he went away again; or perhaps he was not Mr Right, in which case, who was?

She still read about handsome young lovers who went away (to the jungle, or the Crimean war) and never returned, while she who waited grew faded and old and lonely with nothing but the merest memory of that brief but joyous interlude alive in her heart, faithful to the memory because the one who left had been Mr Right. Yet some part of Lucia, something feminist and less passive, very much resented this and rebelled against the drippy droppy idea that women must sit and wait for a lover who may never come, faithful and virginal and sterile and utterly deprived and dull. She liked to think that she herself would have gone after the missing lover at the very least, perhaps putting on a uniform and pretending to be male, enlisting in the same army. Or else to become the first female explorer to cross the roof of the world into Tibet. Perhaps she would be lost for months or even years in that unknown world, and when the search-party eventually fought their way through to her, she would have been accepted by the primitive natives (for her obviously superior qualities, viz: one really second-class English education) as a sort of mentor or queen - Mrs

Livingstone, I presume?

Through it all she would have retained her essential femininity. The Hollywood myths had fastened onto her imagination like leeches. She did not really believe she could emerge after months in the jungle wearing a beautifully tailored and recently pressed khaki skirt and jacket, with her hair elegantly trimmed and set; but still the mental image showed a feminine fastidiousness and if her hair had grown to waist-length, it would be tied back. With a tendril? a flower? No, that was the South Sea Islands, you idiot. For although she envied men their freedom of action and was bitterly jealous of the things they could do that were denied to women, she was not a masculine woman, and as she grew older and discarded her childhood ways, she had no real desire to be a man.

But she did not want to become the little woman to any man. The love she sought was one of a union of identified spirits, not a dependency. But because she needed love so much, so deeply sought it and desired it, so longed to arouse feelings of love in the men she met, she began to become involved in situations that seemed to snarl up and become messy, not knowing how to extricate herself.

She became virtually engaged to three different men at the same time.

* * * *

She had not wanted such a state of affairs. She did not want to marry any one of them, when it came to the point. She panicked and looked for some way to escape.

There were many eligible young men, fair or dark, tall or short, endomorphs or ectomorphs; young men who worked for low wages in banks with classical pillars - 'paupers in marble halls' - or in offices, the white-collar brigade, one up on the grease and overalls, but still young men with two little training and no professional skills. Young men called Phil and John and Arthur and Dereck and George, Jimmy and Brian and Bill; young men who went to work on the tube or the Met. line, who lived in semis in the suburbs and played tennis over the week-ends in white flannels; and sucked pipes over their beer in pubs while the girls drank fizzy lemonade; hand-holding, cheek-pecking, cold narcissistic young Englishmen of mediocre background and indeterminate class, neither up nor down, neither working nor middle. Among all those who crossed her orbit in those pre-war years, somehow these three became more closely involved with her: Ronnie, thin, dark, good-looking, ambitious; Raymond, fair, artistic, romantic; and Mr Rossiter - Erefst, but she could never quite get used to calling him by his first name, because he was quite a bit older than she, a widower with colourless and thinning hair.

All three, quite without her intention, came to feel they had an 'understanding' with her. She liked them all, she even wondered if she was in love with each one, but when she thought about it, something was missing in their relationship, she could not see any one of them becoming the great-lover-to-become-lifemate.

Ronnie travelled for a firm that manufactured kitchen equipment. He selected her as his partner on one or two occasions, and it was quite obvious that he manoeuvred to be near her at other times. Sometimes he phoned her at her office - she did not have a phone at home - when he was somewhere in the Midlands during the week, and asked her to reserve the coming Saturday night for him, when he would be home again. He was popular with the other girls, she was flattered by his attentions. He had a face that seemed habitually sulky in repose, although he was quite friendly and open in his behaviour. Perhaps the young women were intrigued by that discontented, dissatisfied look, each wanting to change it, to make him happy. Or perhaps it was his quick and twitching gestures, his nervous habit of jiggling a leg when sitting so that tables trembled and cups clicked; giving the impression of some extra energy, a barely contained force.

One day in May, when London was under the spell of Spring, filled with the falling gold of laburnam, the scent of lilacs, the pink froth of flowering cherries, Ronnie took Lucia on a trip to the country. He had been away all week, and had the unusual privilege of his firm's car for the week-end.

When they had released themselves from the octopus spread of London's suburbs, when they had discarded the main roads and shaken off the built-up areas, they reached at last the country lanes, and Ronnie parked the car near a small village. They walked towards a hill where there were the ruins of an old castle; they passed through fields of brilliant grass glowing with intense colour, filled with buttercups and sorrel and rich with great spreading trees.

Where did it come from, such happiness? For a while life burned with an incandescent glow, they were immersed in a day of gold and joy, they were away from the world, but deeply part of it. A duet of feeling created harmony between them, but more than mere harmony, the pleasure of tentative discovery of each other, the tender and bewitching interlude of courtship. Down a road, passed an avenue of trees; up again, climbing the hill along a country lane that was hedged and rimmed with flowers of May - stitchwort and campion, cow parsley, late bluebells, even a few primroses and violets, and many spires of foxglove almost ready to flower. They walked to a chorus of birds, and in the surrounding fields the great still trees arising from

shining slopes as in a dream, stirred by the massive dark trees and the painful sweetness of the nostalgic setting of those narrow and burdgeoning lanes. They were two young people selfishly unconcerned with the troubles of Europe and the world, yet even in their ignorance and lack of interest, they felt the touch of transigence that rendered the countryside more poignantly beautiful than it had ever been, passing out of sight in a darkening and destroying time.

They reached the top and walked around the sullen grey stones that had fallen among the flowering bushes and concealing trees. The broken arches framed and limited the sky, they sat together on grass that ticked and murmured with insect life. They talked about themselves, and what they wanted from life, and Lucia felt the moment of becoming, or thinking she was becoming in love, and directly after that, contention.

Ronnie had unbuttoned his shirt to the warmth of the sun and tied the two front pieces into a knot around his middle. And suddenly she was overcome with an urge to touch the revealed flesh of his chest, where dark hairs curled; and she leaned towards him and placed the palm of her hand between his ribs. They had been half-sitting, half-lying against the grassy bank. When she touched him he turned immediately towards her and siezed her hand; and fondled it, and placed it against his cheek.

- Lucia, he said softly, - dearest - I want so many things for you.

She blushed and drew her hand away, embarrassed by her own impulse; and she plucked grasses while she sought to keep them talking; silence now seemed dangerous, a vacuum bound to be filled by more physical advances.

- What sort of things?

Then he lay back again in the grass, but still watching her, he said - Oh, a home, a nice place - where do you think you would like to live? Where shall I put you? And although this was becoming a kind of game, at the same time it was a kind of proposal, at least in terms of the relationship they had at that time.

She replied then - I want to see the world before I settle down anywhere. I want to travel. Don't you?

He frowned. - I get sick of travelling all week. When I come home I'm very happy just to stay in one place.

- But I don't mean that kind of travelling. I mean going to other countries, to far places.

- Like - ?

- Like Zanzibar and Peru; like Timbuctu and Tibet.

She had been reading old copies of the National Geographic magazine and had fallen irrevocably for the romance of distant and unreachable places.

He laughed and said - You do want to go far, don't you? What on earth would you do in Zanzibar or Peru?

- What can you do in Zanzibar or Peru? What can you get in a place like Tibet? Do they sell candies high up in the Andes? Oh, what rhymes with Timbuctu, anyway?

They both laughed, but she went on earnestly - Ronnie, I want to see. I want to see what it's like. I don't want to stay in one place in one country all my life. I want to see the world. There are too many interesting things.

- Well then, when I've made my fortune, I'll take you on a world cruise.

- Not on a cruise! she cried, feeling an immediate cold withdrawal from him; that he could so lack any sensitivity as to reduce the romance of world travel to a ticket on the P & O line!

- Why not?

- It's too . . . I don't want to have things all arranged, and just go for short visits to places for a few hours each day. I want to live in different places and find out what people are like.

He said - Let me tell you, people are all alike, everywhere. They don't differ all that much.

He sat up and reaching for his jacket took some folders from the pocket. He spread them in front of Lucia on the grass. They were the products of his firm, the ideal kitchens they built, and peopled in the pictures by young and smiling housewives.

- Which do you like best? he asked.

They examined the brochures together, and discussed them. When they had agreed about the kind of kitchen that appealed to them both, he folded the brochures and said - I get thirty-three and a third off. I'm thinking of starting to put money down on some of this stuff now. I can just picture you all day pottering around in a pretty little kitchen like that -

- Except that when I get married, Ronnie, I'm not going to potter around in a kitchen all day!

- You're not? He was smiling, the sort of smile that said from the great unfeeling heights of his male superiority he could indulge her little whims.

- Well, for one thing, I'd like to go on working. What would I find to do all day in a house?

- Look after the children.

- Hey, stop it! You're going a bit fast, aren't you? I'm not even married yet, not even - She had nearly said 'engaged' but drew back, feeling she was creating too much of an opening - not even - and you've already saddled me, not with one child, but with a whole family of children.

- Don't you want a family?

Oh yes, of course, one day. But not for ages and ages. I want to do lots of other things first. She had not even thought about having children.

It was all too far ahead. She had accepted that she would have a child or maybe two, some time; but at that moment, that time was out of sight.

Ronnie then said firmly - I wouldn't want my wife to work after we're married.

- Why not? What's wrong with it? Would you rather she sat at home being bored?

- A woman can always find things in a home to occupy her. Sewing -

- I hate sewing! she interjected.

- cooking. She said - You can't cook all day.

His face darkened to its habitual sulky expression, but there was puzzlement in his eyes. - I would not let my wife work, he insisted. -Do you think I couldn't support a wife? I'm earning enough already to have a home, and to keep two. I could get married tomorrow. I would be ashamed if my wife had to go to work.

- You don't understand, Ronnie. It's not a case of having to go to work. You men are full of yourselves and your arrogance! I like my job. I'm not going to stop work the day I get married. I'm not going to become a full-time housekeeper for any man.

- Home's a woman's place.

- A woman's place! she spat out in disgust - a lifetime of domestic service?

Then he laughed. - Oh, Lucia, I love you when you are angry. But don't let's fight today, it's just such a lovely day. They'll be lots of other times when we can argue about these things. Let's just enjoy ourselves.

So they did, running down the sloping fields, having lunch in the village pub, driving around deep country lanes. But the banter had been a way of finding out about each other. Lucia knew she could get a formal proposal of marriage from Ronnie any time that she wanted. Ronnie cared for her very much, he felt she was the chosen one for him, but he did not want any rebuffs. He was not in a hurry. He was not disturbed by what she had said, confident that her childish dreams of travel to far places would gradually be discarded; and that when the time came, she would keep his kitchen shining and bright, dark-haired in her flowered apron, and changing every evening into something flowing and scented, to greet him with a loving kiss and savoury meal and all the sterile glory of a well-ordered home.

She now knew that under the cover of that tantalising frown and fidgetty energy beat a truly conventional heart, and she was not the one to fulfil Ronnie's dream.

But they continued to go out together whenever he was in town, because he believed that there was an understanding between them, and she did not know how to disengage from him without hurting his feelings. It was just fortunate that his work took him away most of the time

While Lucia had welcomed Ronnie's attentions and had been flattered when he selected her form among the girls who flirted with him, her feelings for Raymond arose in the first place because she did not find him attractive. She was sorry for him. He seemed to lack the ability to join whole-heartedly with whatever the others were doing. He never paired off with any particular girl and somehow he seemed to succeed in isolating himself. He also attracted jokes against himself, a target for mild torment. He would not retaliate with anger, but would retreat into himself, inviting further attacks. He was a plain and ungraceful young man. His face bore the marks of the severe acne that had only recently begun to recede, and there always seemed to be a plaster on the back of his neck, around an area inflamed with a boil.

Lucia also teased him, but sometimes she felt sorry for him, and could feel his loneliness, so perhaps it was a motive of kindness, but perhaps also the vanity that compelled her and the other girls to seek 'conquests' that caused her to set out to bring him closer into their circle. She was patronising. She did not anticipate any real resistance on his part. After all, she was one of the most sought after and popular of the girls.

Poor Raymond! His monosyllabic replies discouraged even her dogged perseverance. She had used all the magazine ploys that she knew: forty ways to attract interest; twenty conversational openings; making the most of your best features; how to make him want to know you; how to be popular; ask him about his work, his family; always look as though you are deeply interested in what he is saying, even when you are bored. Still he shied away from her, a timid horse.

One night, accidentally, she found how to reach him.

On a warm evening at someone's house, she noticed him wander away from the lighted room filled with noise and chatter, and walk through the French windows into the garden, where he sat by himself on the lawn. She followed, and sat down beside him.

- It's nice out here, isn't it?

He replied - Yes.

- It's too stuffy inside. I thought I'd come out to get some fresh air. The sound of laughter came to them from the open doors.

A long pause. - Quiet, isn't it? she asked, beginning to feel desperate. Now at last he spoke two whole sentences. - It's the trees, he said. Don't you think all those bushes and trees make it quiet and mysterious at night?

- They're elms, she said, and then like an opening chord on a piano, the music of a poem came into her head and without thinking about Raymond she said out loud:

When I'm among a blaze of lights
 With tawdry music and cigars,
 And women dawdling through delights,
 And officers at cocktail bars -
 Sometimes I think of garden nights
 And elm trees nodding at the stars.

He said - It's beautiful. Is there any more?

I dream of a small firelit room
 With yellow candles burning straight,
 And glowing pictures in the gloom
 And kindly books that hold me late.
 Of things like these I love to think
 When I can never be alone -
 Then someone says, 'Another drink?'
 And turns my living heart to stone.

Under a spell, Raymond repeated the last two lines slowly and with a sense of awe. - Who wrote it? he asked.

- It's Siegfried Sassoon.

From that moment, Lucia held Raymond in thrall.

- There's a poem by Sassoon in an anthology I've got, he began, and Lucia broke in - I know! Everyone suddenly burst out singing- it's in all the anthologies.

They proceeded from there with swift and easy steps. Are you very fond of poetry . . . favourite poets . . . know that one that begins . . . have you read . . . what do you think of . . . The silent and dull Raymond chatted on and on, as though she had pressed a little button that started the whole machinery of speech. When the others came to interrupt with their usual facetious remarks, she was irritated, and thought them in poor taste.

She agreed to meet him one night the following week.

Their problem was - where to go? They simply wanted to sit and talk together, somewhere quiet. Usually if a boy asked her out they went to the pictures where the dark seats at the back under the balcony were convenient for small personal advances, hand-holding, knee-touching, and where the films - usually two of them - made it unnecessary to try and find something to talk about. But she and Raymond wanted to talk.

She could bring him home, but there was only one room in which they could sit, and Rose would be there; they could not possibly discuss anything as intimate as poetry with Rose as an extra presence. She would intervene with irrelevant remarks. Raymond would clam up again, awkward and dull.

If it was a nice night, they could go for a walk; but it was cold

and wet.

Eventually they had an inspiration. They took a bus and went upstairs and talked while the bus jiggled its way through London. It took an hour to reach its terminus, and then they took another bus home. Two hours of talking.

- I brought something to show you, Raymond said abruptly, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolding it, handing it to her, then averting his head to stare at an advertisement.

It was a short poem, about love.

- It's lovely, Raymond, she said when she had read it. - Who wrote it?

- Do you really like it?

- Oh yes, I do, I think it's a beautiful poem.

- Really? You really think so? You're not just saying that?

- Why should I say that if I didn't mean it? She saw the expression on his face. - Did you write it? she asked him.

He blushed and replied - Yes.

She was genuinely surprised. A delicate little poem had come from this clumsy plain youth with spots and dandruff.

- Have you written others?

- Yes, but you're the first person I've ever shown one to.

- You're like me.

- You write poetry too?

- Yes. And I've never shown them to anyone.

- Would you let me see them?

- I suppose I might. If you showed me some more of yours. But I must tell you I didn't write them to show to anyone. I wrote them for myself, for my own satisfaction.

- Oh, I understand that, he replied. - That's the way I write, too. But haven't you felt sometimes that you'd like to know what someone else thinks of them? Discuss them with someone? You know . . .

- No, I've never wanted to show them to anyone. I don't think they're good enough. It's just my own private way of expressing my feelings. I'd be afraid to expose them to any kind of public gaze.

She had no confidence at all in the ability of these private creations of hers to stand alone as poems that others could read. She felt they would shrivel away if exposed. But once she and Raymond had read each other's poems and shared their diffidence and their pride, she found his interest and his praise immeasurably sweet.

He treated her poems, and she his, with tender solicitude, trying to be critical without being discouraging. She would read what he

had written: If I have learned so little about love That holds its
~~GOLDEN~~ golden mollusc to my ear Straining for tunes of tides on
distant shores . . .

So little about love. Love. Love. Love and loneliness, which was perhaps their own isolation from any real world around them, their own ill-articulated sense of exile, alienated from their times, from their limited and constrained and dull and orderly lives. What else did they know to write about, except this sense of internal discord? They were not rebels, either of them, they conformed; yet found no satisfaction in their conformity, aching for something that lay outside the sphere of their own experiences, nostalgic for a suffering they had never endured. The poems echoed the sound of songs they longed to hear.

They were happy in this, their shared secret, but as a potential lover Raymond completely lacked appeal. It was not only his general physical appearance, the unromantic acne and boils, the total lack of any sophistication; he had even less self-confidence than she had. Socially he was clumsy, a permanent misfit, always the target of the others' jokes and mild bullying. She would marvel that such exquisite and often mystical lyrics could emerge from someone so physically unattractive.

- My mother wants me to ask you to have tea with us, Raymond said. one day after they had met a few times in the evening. His sister had seen them, he explained, and teased him in front of his mother - I saw you out with a girl the other night, I did! And Mrs Smithson had said - If you have a friend, Raymond, I trust you are prepared to invite her to your home?

The home, in what was considered a better part of the suburb, was a large, semi-detached 20th-century Elizabethan house with fake timbers and diamond panes in the front door, approached from a path of standard roses, protected by the privacy of a thick privet hedge.

- So this is your friend, Raymond. How do you do, Miss Campbell. She shook hands, regarding her with a dry, unsmiling face, while Lucia murmured diffidently - I'm very well thank you, not having yet learned that the correct answer was simply How do you do? Raymond's mother wore a tweed skirt and a brown jersey. Lucia had put on what she considered the best possible dress for going out to tea. It was dark red velvet, with a lace collar, a row of little buttons down the front and a full gathered skirt. Her mother had made it for her.

They went into the lounge. - Do sit down, Miss Campbell - oh, not there if you don't mind, that's Raymond's father's chair.

The room was full of furniture. There were cut-glass vases with flowers, and cut-glass ashtrays, and an ash-tray raised on a stalk to chair-level; a clock on the mantelpiece, with gold spikes all round it like a sun's rays, and family photographs in gilded frames. There was a glass-fronted cupboard with china sheperdesses and large shells, and little boxes with raised flowers, known as barbola work, and a china cat, and decorated plates. Lucia wanted to inspect all the things in the cupboard, but was much too shy to do so.

She sat on the edge of a large sofa covered in chintz.

- It was good of you to come. We so rarely have the honour of meeting any of our son's friends. I hope you take your friends home?

- Oh yes, but I suppose it's different for a boy, she said feebly.

- I can't see why it should be, Mrs Smithson said sharply.

There were long pauses while Lucia searched for threads of conversation, and Raymond sat dumb and silent.

Eventually it was tea-time. - Would you care to wash your hands, Miss Campbell. Lucia said yes, although she thought her hands were quite clean enough to handle a cup of tea.

Raymond's mother conducted her upstairs to the bathroom saying - There are guest towels on the rail.

When Lucia had washed her hands, she looked for a towel, but could not see one. Hanging on the rail were what appeared to be two starched and pressed table napkins embroidered with flowers and leaves in lazy-daisy stitch. She would not have dreamed of soiling them with her wet hands, so finally in despair she lifted her velvet dress and wiped her hands as well as she could on the slippery stockinette petticoat that she wore underneath.

Raymond's father arrived for tea. Raymond stood up as he entered the room. - This is Raymond's friend, Miss Campbell, said Mrs Smithson.

- Campbell. That's a Scottish name. Did your parents come from Scotland?

- No, I don't think so, that is, I know my mother didn't.

He sat in his chair, then burst out angrily - I would like to know just who has been messing around with my things?

- Your things, Gerald?

- Yes, my ashtray, to be exact!

Silently Mrs Smithson took an ashtray from the mantelpiece and put it on the small table next to his chair.

He went on irritably - I fail to understand why things have to be constantly moved from one place to another. Surely it's not asking too

much of you to see that my pipe and ashtray aren't stuck out of sight every time I come into this room?

He took his pipe, and after a prolonged ceremony of filling and tamping and lighting and drawing and puffing, he addressed Lucia again. - So you play tennis with my son, Miss Campbell?

- Yes, but I'm not very good, I'm afraid.

- Oh? Well, you must be an excellent match for Raymond then. He can't hit a ball straight over a net. What sport do you prefer - riding?

- No, I've never been riding.

- It's a good, healthy sport for a girl. Bit expensive, though. Not everyone can afford it. Raymond spends too much of his spare time indoors, closeted upstairs in his room. You must get him to play more games.

He glanced at Raymond, who was staring down at his feet.

- Did you hear me, Raymond? he went on loudly, puffing aggressive clouds into the air.

- Yes, sir.

- Well, then. Not so much time shut up in that room reading. You can't learn about life from a book. You have to be prepared to go out and face the world. You must be able to deal with the realities of this world.

- Yes, sir.

Raymond's mother was pouring tea from a silver tea-pot. In the silence Raymond's sister said - I do love velvet, and that's such a lovely colour. Isn't it a pretty dress Lucia's wearing, don't you think so, Mummy?

- Very nice, dear, she replied in her dry and constrained voice, - but not exactly pretty. Pretty means something . . . well, dainty. I wouldn't say pretty.

She handed Lucia a porcelain cup decorated with pink roses and rimmed with gold; a pretty cup. - Do you take sugar?

- Yes please. Lucia put out her hand to reach the sugar on the tray which was placed in front of her; and the sleeve of her frock caught the little milk jug, and knocked it over. The stain on the hand-embroidered tray-cloth spread no more rapidly than the colour in her cheeks.

* * * *

- You see, my father doesn't like me to sit and read. And if he ever knew that I read poetry he would be horrified. As for writing it - !

- Why horrified?

- He would think it effeminate. It's all right for girls to like poetry, not boys.

- But the greatest poets were men. Think of Byron and Browning. Could you call them effeminate?

- I suppose the classics would be barely acceptable, but certainly

not modern poets.

- Auden? Spender? My parents kept me from children who were rough . . .

- My parents would keep me from children who read poetry, more likely.

Then Raymond's firm transferred him, and for a while he went away to work in a provincial town.

They wrote to each other. It was easier to write than to talk.

- My father once found me reading a book of poetry, he wrote. He snatched it from me and threw it away. When I was a child and made up little stories he told me I was a liar and afraid to tell the truth about anything.

She replied:

My father went so carelessly and easily out of my life, he must have cared so little about me. He never came back to see me again. Wouldn't you have thought that any man would be curious enough to come and see his own child?

My mother believed you must always control yourself, he wrote, always. She is so controlled and discreet herself that there is no room left for any emotion, for the self-indulgence of expressed love, for the excitement of temper or tears. I never heard her raise her voice in anger, nor was it ever raised in joy.

This formulation of his thoughts about his parents was the first draft of a future poem that began: My mother never raised her voice in anger or in love . . . and ended with the words: I see her sitting always in a silent room.

The ferocity of Raymond's hatred of his father and indifference to his mother was a revelation to Lucia, and deeply disturbing. Parents, as a general rule, loved their children and all children loved their parents. Blood is thicker than water.

But if Raymond sought escape from harsh reality in books and dreams, then they were birds of a feather. In her letters to him she could build her own fantasies, for Raymond believed in the romance of lands beyond the sea, in distance and discovery and climbing the high Andes. He believed in the idea of a life beyond the mundane, beyond offices and routine and the grinding destruction of uninteresting work. One day, he wrote, they would get on a train and go away, leaving it all behind them, the city with its ugliness that trampled on their sensitive souls, the imposed timetables of routine work, the limitations of suburban homes fronted by little squares of gardens, hedges, gates. A dream of open spaces, sun, jungles, seashores, far-away places . . .

This century chokes me under roots of night
I suffer like history in Dark Ages where

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