- Triple jobs while we fight on two fronts: Look at this stuff from the Ministry of Food! They seem to have no use for women except to tell each one how to make the best use of her individual rations in her own kitchen.

- It's going to change, it's got to, Lucia said. 'We're all different now, I know I am. I can't see how I could ever go back to the way I was before.

- The door's opened a crack, said Janet. - We've got our collective feet in, and by golly, they won't ever be able to close it again!

No, she could not go back to that old game of waiting, of dependency. But sometimes she would catch a glimpse of a man in uniform who reminded her of Chris. The slant of shoulders, or a momentary turn of a head . . . it was always a stranger. She did not really want to encounter him again. She did not wish to live the rest of her life in the past of his remembered glance.

Once she followed a soldier down a street because she thought it was her little Irish lad, the one she met in the cinema. But when she caught up with him, and passed him, and turned to look at him, it was a stranger. There was no way of going back to catch the tail of a potential love that had gone.

As time passed, she came to know various young men, and if she looked at each with a speculative eye it was only the same thing, at a more aware level, that she and her friends had always done in the past. And of all of them there was only one who she felt she might want to marry, but he has made it clear that marriage is not for him.

Plenty of the men she meets would like to pursue a more lasting relationship. Her youth and lively personality has improved with the self-assurance that she has now found. But she discourages them. Perhaps, subconsciously, she compares each one to Chris, with his sureness of step, his mature manners, and so she finds them wanting.

But Chris had taught her about sex, he had opened her up to the joy and satisfaction of sex; and so she discovers that women, too, may have desire without love; and that, like the men, it can be satisfied.

Even poetry could prove to be an aphrodisiac.

<u>Come to me in the silence of the night</u>

<u>Come in the speaking silence of a dream . . .</u>

Yes, he comes to her in her night time thoughts, but he comes always into her bed, as a lover. She tries to expel his presence, but once he has been admitted, if only for a few seconds, her body responds with the arousel of desire that he is no longer there to fulfil. Always as the lover, firm and ready to penetrate her. Desire becomes an intolerable itch. Inevitably she finds how to relieve it. The first time, pleasure and relief are subdued by feelings of guilt; not that she believes any more that you can go blind by touching yourself 'there'; but somehow the strongly-instilled feelings remain.

The next time there is less guilt, and proportionately increased pleasure.

One evening, dancing with a handsome young American officer, he clasps her very close as they move together to the dreamy music in the subdued night-club light. And she feels him stirring against her, and recognises her own body's swift response; she experiences a mild electric shock.

He is tall, very upright, his dark hair smoothed to a patent gleam. Everything about him is super-clean, his hands smooth, the nails showing white crescents. He looks as though he worked hard at being clean. He is pleasant and polite, and she suspects would be very boring if they spent much time together. But there is no time. She lets him take her home, aware of the inevitable intent; and finds, somewhat to her own surprise, that she responds strongly to the passion of this stranger who she does not really know and certainly does not love, and from whom she can part the next morning with no regrets at the thought of never seeing him again.

But she did not really want to indulge herself in these one-night encounters. The ethics instilled in her cannot be so easily discarded. It is as though she still hears Rose admonishing her: <u>those girls, the ones who let the men have their way with them, they make themselves cheap, they're promiscuous.</u>

Lucia does not want to be promiscuous. Somehow a part of her is still waiting for Mr Right.

She has glimpsed him. She is strongly drawn to him, and he to her. And he has told her not to love him.

* * * *

He moves in and out of her life at unpredictable intervals.

They met at a wedding celebration, literally exchanged glances across a crowded room. One of the young women who worked in the Ministry was marrying her sub-lieutenant before he went away to join his ship and win the war.

The party that evening was in a small room, it was crowded. Black-out curtains blocked out the fresh night, blocked in the stale air thick with cigarette smoke. Sitting in a corner, Lucia yawned a long yawn compounded of boredom and lack of oxygen; and across the packed room caught the eye of a man standing by himself and yawning at the same time. He smiled at her, she smiled in response. He came over to her.

- It's not the company, he said, - it's that I find it almost impossible to breathe in here --

- I know, so do I. By mutual agreement they went to get their coats and find some air.

- Friend of the bride or the groom? he asked as they walked down the stairs.

- The bride. She works in the same place as me. And you - glancing at his uniform and heavy coat - obviously it's the groom.

- Yes, poor fool!

- Why 'poor fool'? I think she is very nice, and he's lucky to have her.

- I shouldn't have said that. I don't know her, never seen her before. It's not her. I just think that anyone in our sort of position who gets married now is a fool.

They were at the front door. - We haven't introduced ourselves, he said. - I'm John.

- And I'm Lucia.

He took her hand and shook it, smiling. - Pleased to meet you, Lucia, he said.

It was raining a little outside. Not a hard, intimidating rain, but a soft one that swirled around them in the darkness. He took her elbow to steer her across the road.

-Mind walking in the rain?

- No, I love it. She could feel the cold air dispelling the stale smoke from her lungs. The feel of it restored her animation. Rain touched her gently on her cheeks and her uncovered hair. John.

She reverted to their stairway conversation. - You said anyone in your position . . . what did you mean by that?

- We're at sea. All right, I'm stating the obvious. We're off again in a couple of days. Our leave comes at infrequent and indeterminate intervals. We do work that's terribly risky - a high failure to return rate, if I can

put it that way.

- But the war won't last forever.

- No, it won't last for ever, but it's on now.

- And if they prefer to take a chance? Perhaps those short periods together compensate for the waiting. More than that - perhaps they make the other times more endurable.

- I would say just the opposite.

- Then you are suggesting that marriage as an institution should be suspended for the duration?

He did not reply at first, and they walked together in silence. Perhaps because he had so soon and so forcefully eliminated himself as a possible candidate for marriage (not that her mind had jumped that far, but he was a most good-looking man) she felt completely at ease with him, as though he were an old friend; no need to try and be bright and attractive. No need for twenty different ways . . .

After a while he said - It's not that I don't believe in any marriages while the war lasts. It's just that I don't believe in marriage for people like ourselves, in such dangerous occupations. I think we should wait.

- Why?

- Because it is so liable to lead to terrible pain and heartache.

- Anything can lead to heartache. Mavis - my friend - and myself, we're not in what you would term dangerous occupations, but still it's a dangerous time for us, just being here. We live with it all the time. He could come back, your shipmate, and find his wife is lying under a great pile of bricks and rubble. They both face risks.

- Then why take such a chance?

- Maybe they think it's worthwhile, even for a short time together. Preumably they are happier with that short time than without it.

Misty rain enveloped them, concealed the blacked out buildings in the near-empty streets, kept the night quiet and free from planes. He had taken her arm through his and walking together in this way, physically close, he matched his long stride to her shorter one.

- Shall I stry to explain? he asked. Do you really want to know, or are we just making conversation?

- I really want to know.

He began to talk, endeavouring to make it impersonal, but speaking about his own life, although he used the pronoun 'one', or when that became cumbersome, he would say 'you'. He did not say: I think, I feel, I cannot sleep.

- We escort convoys across the Atlantic. Our ship is a corvette. Sometimes it seems one does not sleep for days and nights on end. Four hours on, four hours off. But trying to sleep in a ship tossing around in a storm . . .

It's a rough bit of ocean, that. One walks around in such a state of absolute exhaustion that one wouldn't care if one were blown to blazes on the spot --

- From the moment you lose land - no, from the moment you leave land - you are pulled hard and taut like a wire. One doesn't loosen up again after getting back, not for days and days. It's physically very hard and mentally destructive. One loses all sensibilities. Love, beauty, flowers, landscapes, music - everything that draws on the emotions, everything touching and tender must be forgotten. There is no time for it, and there is no place. One finds it easier to keep going, there is no possibility of relaxation. One doesn't even read.

And finally, returning to himself, - If I had a wife, someone bound to me and waiting for me, I think it would destroy what little courage I possess. It would eat away at me. Instead of being a coward masquerading around in a cloak of indifference, it would all seep out, all my anxieties, my desire to remain alive, to survive it all. I think this side of me would come on top. I couldn't face it.

How could he ever tell her? This was the time of the destruction of the convoys. On their last run, sixteen ships out of a total of twenty-four had been lost. Sixteen ships, so few saved. The U-boats hunted them in packs, there was no defence, they seemed to be able to pick any ship they chose. He recalled the fine parade when they had first steamed out, and the ragged remnant that survived it to port.

He felt he had to develop a hard coating, a protection, which meant that he had to suppress, perhaps destroy, all sense of feeling in himself so that nothing would break him down any more, neither the cries of dying men in the slimy sea, the ghastly smell of the oil that choked them as they tried to swim to safety . . . nor the sound of music. Too long a sacrifice
Can turn a heart to stone.

- We pretend to be brave, he went on, - people expect us to be heroes, so we pretend. We know we are not, but we have to keep living up to this pretense. You know, sailors are supposed to dream of home. To have such an image would stand in my way, it would soften the heart.

- But tenderness, said Lucia, - a love affair or a happy marriage, surely that dilutes the ordeal of war, makes everything endurable, keeps a feeling of hope - that's what it's all about - in your mind?

They walked silently for a while. Then Lucia asked - And before the war? What was it like then? Did you enjoy being at sea?

- Up to a point. I've seen a bit of the world, tips of places. But it's a lonely and unnatural sort of life. I wouldn't choose it as a career now, if I had the choice. But I don't suppose I'll ever know how to do anything else.

- Why did you go to sea, then? Did you have romantic ideas about it when you were young?

-Not really. I might have had some. But I wasn't particularly good at anything. You know, the way some people are, they seem to know when they are very young exactly what they would like to do. The only thing I really liked, I couldn't make a career of - at least, not in my kind of family, it just wasn't possible. And I left school pretty young. So going to sea was a kind of escape - running away from home in a legitimate fashion, so's to speak.

He added, as though speaking to himself, - It was acceptable to them.

- And what was it you would really have liked to do?

- What a lot of questions! He squeezed her arm and laughed. - I'm going to ask you just as many, he said.

- I won't answer them.

-Then I won't answer any more of yours.

- Please! Just this one more. What did you really like best?

- Music, he replied unexpectedly. - Where it came from, I don't know. When I was young I fantasied being the conductor of a great orchestra. But I couldn't even discuss a musical career with my parents. We didn't have music in our home. I wanted piano lessons, but we didn't have a piano.

- But you still love it?

- Yes, above all. He patted his coat pocket. - I carry my orchestra around with me, in my pocket. I bought myself a mouth organ when I was quite young, a little one. Now I have a better one.

- Play for me?

He pulled it out of his pocket, put it to his lips, and played up and down the scale. - What do you want? I'm no Larry Adler. This isn't music, it's just fun.

- Anything.

He played Tit Willow and the thin gay notes dispersed without echo into the darkness, mingled with the rain. He played, she sang, and they walked all along the side of Regent's Park and back again to the tunes of Gilbert and Sullivan.

The only music Lucia had known as a child were nursery rhymes and school hymns and songs. All Things Bright and Beautiful; The Cuckoo; Barbara Allen; Oh Who will O'er the Downs so Free; And Three Kings. A friend who had piano lessons learned to play Für Elise, her only brush with Beethoven. Later she moved on to familiarity with the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata.

But it was Chris who began to open her up to classical music, with his collection of records, and sometimes he took her to a concert. Now she had her own gramophone and records.

- Would you like to hear some music? she asked John. - Come back to my place, we'll play some records.

- Can we? Isn't it too late?

- We'll play very softly. What do you like?

- Mostly choral music, Italian opera, Gilbert and Sullivan - I have records of all those operettas. As for other things, I like what I know -

- Not like people talking about modern art: I don't know anything about it, but I know what I like.

- That's it. I don't know so much, there's much more that I'm sure I would like. The more I hear, the more I like. But I love to hear the human voice, I suppose it is because with me, music started with singing. You won't believe it, but I was a boy soprano.

In the flat she could look at him properly for the first time. She saw no trace of an angelic boyhood face in features that were strong, clearly-defined. His skin seemed stretched to mould and define the underlying bone. He was a beautiful man, strong-faced and lean; deep-set dark eyes, with shadows below the cheekbones where the underlying structure fell away. There seemed in him energy contained, but unlike Ronnie all those years ago - so restless, so on edge - his was held quietly, a strength under control.

- At first I kicked against those choir sessions, I resented them. My parents didn't really care about my voice, or music or anything like that. They simply enjoyed the prestige. They were regular church-goers.

- You were a symbol of the church.

- I was their symbol. But somehow the beauty of the music came through, even to a stupid little seven-year-old boy. I had a good voice, he added. When it broke I thought I could still continue singing, but no one was interested in it any more.

They played records very softly. They lay on the floor, their ears close to the machine, and discussed the music, the recordings, the individual artists. He told Lucia that in peace-time he had rigged up a turn-table, suspended from the ceiling, in his cabin, to keep it level. But it was only workable in fairly calm conditions. - So music's another war casualty, she said, adding mentally: <u>like love.</u>

- Yes.

At four in the morning she gave him a cushion and a couple of blankets and told him to sleep on the sofa. He gave her a goodnight kiss, gentle and undemanding, but did not attempt any move or gesture that would take their new association any further. She was grateful, because it seemed to her that if they became intimate, she would love this man too much.

* * * *

There was another whole day together, for it was Sunday. She went with John to the officers' club where he stayed when he was in London, and waited for him while he shaved and changed. It was a cold grey day. They wanted to be together, but did not know where to go, except back to Lucia's two rooms. So they went shopping at a market for food for lunch, and inside the flat, played records, made lunch, talked.

She told him all the unimportant things about herself, in response to his questions. She did not tell him any lies, simply withheld some of the truth. When he asked her what she wanted to do most of all, she replied promptly - Travel. Write. And some time, to have a family.

- In that order?

- No, whichever happens first.

- Travel where?

- Everywhere. I want to go everywhere. I want to stay in places long enough to get to know people and the way they live, to live like they do, not going on tours and staying in hotels.

- And how do you propose to live - or have you a private income?

She laughed. - No private income. But I can work. I thought I would save first, then see if I could get jobs in the places I go to.

- You need to learn other languages if you want to communicate with people, not just to see a place from the outside.

- I thought of that. I learned a bit of French at school. I'm at the stage where I tell myself I intend studying French and Spanish as soon as I have time. There never seems to be any time. But when the war's over . . .

- Or marry a rich man with a yacht?

- Will you come and captain it?

- If I can have an affair with the owner's wife. And the family? How many children do you propose to have?

- Oh, I don't know. One at first. maybe two or three. Depends on the father as well, doesn't it?

- Have you someone in mind? You're not in love with someone?

- No.

- You've never been in love?

- Oh yes, many times! But . . .

- But what?

- I'm not sure what it means, being in love. Maybe I want something that isn't there.

- I suspect we all do. But we'll drink to your ambitions, and I hope you are not disillusioned. Yes, the world is fascinating and places are wonderful and beautiful, although I've only really seen small bits of countries. But they're just as ugly and greedy and pushful in towns all over the world as they are in this one.

- They eat different foods, and wear different clothes.

- Yes, and quarrel and fight in the same way. Man has an infinite capacity for self-destruction, and the destruction of others. It's all around you at

the moment, how can it be denied? But you keep your ambitions, I'll keep mine.

But what were they? All he wanted for the present was for the war to be over, to be able to see it out. But hard as it was, his life at sea did not present a state of indecision. The real problems arose when he was on leave, between journeys.

His parents were dead. His only living relative was his sister, Dorothy, who lived in Cheltenham. Dorothy was twelve years older than John and married to Reg, who was fifteen years older than she was. The gap of years between them had never been bridged in childhood, and now had grown to unbridgeable proportions. When he was a toddler she was an adolescent schoolgirl, and by the time he was five or six years old she was, to him, already grown up. Added to that she and Reg had spent some years on the Gold Coast, where Reg had managed a British bank. It seemed to John that those years in a harsh climate had dried her inexorably, not just her exterior but herself as a person. Or perhaps she had always been rather dry and remote, and her childlessness had contributed to this.

She kept a room for him always ready in her Cheltenham home, a large house sent in a quarter of an acre of beautifully kept garden. She spent a lot of her time in the garden, wearing a large straw hat and carrying a flat-bottomed basket and trowel as she planted or weeded; or standing for long periods in her greenhouse with orderly seed trays all carefully labelled, and little seedlings that never dared grow any way except in straight rows. She also played bowls, and she and Reg had two dogs, a cat and a budgerigar. Reg, who still managed a bank although he had been due for retirement, was in the Home Guard.

His room was large and light and furnished to give him comfort when he arrived; an armchair, a writing desk; the bed always pristine, with carefully ironed sheets and a flowered downquilt. He would travel to Cheltenham by train, then take a taxi from the station, and he would open the front gate and walk up the path with a sinking heart.

He would ring the bell - Dorothy always gave him a key when he came on leave, but prudently asked for it back when he departed - sometimes a maid in a black uniform with a frilled white apron and cap would open the door, sometimes it was Dorothy. After she had greeted him she invariably made the same remark: - Well, John did you have a good trip? He had at first tried to explain to her that when he was away it was usually not one 'trip' and could never really be described as good. Sometimes it had been not quite as awful as others. But it did not get through to her, and now he would say something no-commital in reply, something that would not call forth any further inquiry.

The trouble with spending his leave in Cheltenham was that he was always lonely and intensely bored. A colossal, gaping boredom. There was a radio which was turned on for the news but never for a music programme. Dorothy read The Lady and studied the advertisements in Country Life. Reg read the Telegraph and the Financial Times. There were few books. The house was always clean and tidy, the cushions plumped up and placed squarely on the sofa, the papers kept in a magazine rack, the vases of flowers always fresh. It was quiet, although not really silent. The dogs barked and rushed to the front door each time the postman or delivery boy came. The cat prowled and nagged noisly if he went near the kitchen, rubbing itself ingratiatingly against hislegs; or, if he sat reading, jumped onto his unwilling lap, purring loudly. The budgie twittered mindlessly in its cage. And outside, in Spring and Summer, the garden was full of birds whose dawn chorus would wake him in the early hours.

It should be right, it should be restful after the terrible unresting nights and days, weeks, at sea. it was not that he thought of himself as a man of action with a constant need for physical activity of some kind; yet in Dorothy's house he would long for action, for something other than this orderly procession of eventless days with its predictable, mundane meals. Reg at least had a life of his own beyond the house, he had his work, saw people, read reports, talked, was busy. But a day alone with Dorothy was endless; a time when time did not move.

Sometimes he would join her, she kneeling on her little pad, he crouching beside her, to help her with the weeding. He liked the smell of the earth when it was moist, and the soft tearing sound as the reluctant weeds yielded as he pulled them loose and shook their beards free of the clinging soil. And wanted to speak, wanted to tell her how his feeling had become blunted, that he no longer reacted to the fear and the loss and the horrific sights of the shocked, wounded, oil-soaked survivors reclaimed from the sea, only to die, as many did, in the deck; that the alarm-bell had become almost routine; that he had developed a hard casing to protect himself against the unremitting pain, the anger, the pity, that in itself could become so destructive and had led to breakdown in other men. And that all he was doing was protecting himself from the futility, the uselessness, of it all.

How could he explain it? For as Dorothy and Reg listened to the radio news, commenting on this or that promising sign, he knew he could not tell them that he had reached a point where the whole convoy system seemed nothing but a callous and inexcusable gesture, a throwing away of too many lives for too little return.

Because he was only in Cheltenham for short periods between fairly lengthy intervals, he had no friends there. If there was a concert he would go to it. He went for long walks by himself, enamoured with the surrounding countryside, especially if he were fortunate enough to be there in May and June. He sought out the woods with the expanding buds and new leaves of delicate and different shades and colours; the chestnuts alight with pink or white blossoms, the floating ethereal shimmer of young beech leaves; and beneath, in the woods and on the banksides, bluebells and primroses, the flower whose presence promised that winter had passed and the whoe world would be renewed. But sometimes when he walked in winter he thought it was even more beautiful when the leaves had gone to reveal the stark anatomy of the trees and open up vistas of landscape.

It was through circumstances, not through choice, that he had become so solitary.

In London there were brief encounters lacking sufficient time or the cirumstances of intimacy that could lead to any true liaison. His ship usually docked in ports far to the north. Only when there was sufficient time did he snatch a weekend, as he had done this time, to go to London. The wedding was a social duty that now had an unexpected and delightful outcome.

In the evening Lucia walked with John towards his club. He had to leave early in the morning.

The intermittent rain and stopped at last,and clouds parted to reveal a shining round moon.

They stopped and gazed up at it with delight.

- But let it be fleeting, John said. - It's a bomber's moon.

- It's a poet's moon, said Lucia. - <u>They beauty haunts me heart and soul Oh thou fair moon so close and bright . . .</u>

John looked at her and smiled. He said - <u>Thy beauty makes me like the child Which cries aloud to hold they light.</u>

- Oh, you know it! she cried delightedly, - you know W.H. Davies!

- The Supertramp? I found him in an anthology, and then I read his autobiography. What a marvellous way of living, after bumming around America, to settle down in the country on the basis of a legacy of a few shillings a week and spend the rest of his life writing poetry.

- Maybe I'll adopt that for my greatest ambition, Lucia said.

When they parted he asked - If you're not married yet when I get leave again, may I come and listen to some more music?

- Yes.

Then he kissed her on the lips and held her close to himself, and murmured - I could almost ask you to wait for me.

- Why don't you then? Her heart was thumping, her head pressed against his coat.

- I thought you had other things to do. What about having a family, for instance?

- I can wait.

He held her silently, gently stroking her hair. Then as though recovering himself - But you mustn't, you mustn't wait for me.

She wanted to cry.

- Don't wait for me, Lucia, don't wait. It won't be any good.

- But if I choose to?

- It won't be any good, he repeated, - for you and for me. I don't want the burden of it. I don't want to be burdened with a dream of you, with desire for you.

* * * *

Weeks, months, would go by with no word of him. Then one day there would be a phone call and she would hear his voice - Lucia! Are you married yet?

- Not yet. Her heart always gave a lurch.

- Prepared to help me kill some time?

He brought her little presents that he had collected from that time before the war: a small wooden box from Hong Kong that had no visible opening, yet had something inside it - it rattled; and left her to discover the way its hidden panels slid back and forth in a certain order to release the lid and expose the brooch inside; a beautifully embroidered kimino - I bought it for a girl I liked, he explained, - but when I came back to England she had gone and married someone else.

- Did you mind very much?

- For a little while. Hurt pride, mostly. Not for long.

His face could register amusement without any noticeable movement of his lips; as though he had some inner thought that illuminated it. Sometimes she wondered if she loved him for his looks alone, and if he would be so appealing if he were always in civilian clothes in a nondescript job. But he was inseparable from his background. It was the life at sea that had made him so quiet and contained and strong, and beneath the surface of amiable talk, a lonely and deeply troubled man.

She thought about him often in the long periods between the visits. Sometimes she took bread to the lake in Regents Park so that when the gulls came swooping and wheeling out of the evening mist to snatch the bread from her outstretched hands, she could remember his strong face, the skin faded brown from suns and winds of days gone past, eyes shielded and withdrawn.

She pictured him on the bridge of his ship, scanning the horizon through binoculars, two deep vertical lines cutting his brow. The dark blue heavy coat that swung from his shoulders, the gentle gestures from his strong hands, the calm on his face when he listened to the music he loved - all these were romantic memories woven around the times when she did not know where he was. Gulls, go back! Go to the sea and find him! But they were land-based gulls. They had forgotten the sea,.

There were nights when she dreamed about him, and it was always unbearably sad, something she was trying to reach and could not, something they were trying to say to each other that could not be heard. Or she would be going to meet him, and she would board a train that took her the wrong way, to some place she did not know, or to a desert where there were no trains going back. Always a sense of urgency, of no time left. And the great explosion of the war intervened and shook her awake. Her eyes would be wet. She lay and listened to the distant guns, and wished she had a god to whom she could pray for his safety.

He had only to say - Wait for me, Lucia. It would be enough; just to have asked would be a promise to her. He was not prepared to make it. So she could not, then, be faithful to so nebulous, so non-existent a future. She could have risked the burden of waiting, the uncertainty of his survival. But she could not risk the uncertainty of not being sure that he would want to come back to her.

* * * *

Rose is ill.

Aunt Hettie writes to Lucia saying: Your mother has not been in the best of health lately. I wonder if you can get some time off and come and visit us?

Lucia is shocked when she sees her mother. Rose has lost a lot of weight, she is thin, the colour has gone from her face. She seems tired, listless.

The first question is - And how is your husband? Where is he now? They know he is in the armed forces. That's all they know.

- Somewhere in England, she replies. - He seems to be enjoying life as a soldier.

- It's all right as long as there's no fighting. As long as he's safe. Although we don't know how long that will be, do we?

When Hettie serves lunch, Rose plays around with her food, but Lucia perceives that she eats almost nothing. A forkful stays in her mouth for a long time. She chews and chews, small amounts, forces a little down her throat, the act of swallowing an effort.

- Mummy, what's wrong with you? Why aren't you eating?

- I don't feel very hungry at present.

Hettie intervenes. - She's like this all the time. That's why she's getting so thin. You know you hardly eat a thing these days.

- It's my digestion, Rose explains, - I have such a lot of indigestion.

- Have you been to the doctor?

- Yes, well, I did go some time back. He gave me some pills to take but they don't seem to have helped much.

- You must go again.

- Oh Lucia, dear, it's probably just some passing upset. I'll be all right.

But she is not all right. Lucia crams visits into week-ends, whenever she can get some extra time off.

- Aunt Hettie, please see that Mummy goes to the doctor again. If you're worried about money, I'll pay, I have plenty.

- It's not necessary. Hettie is a little touchy about this. - We manage very well.

- I'm sure you do. But do please let me know if you need anything.

The doctor sends Rose to hospital for an examination, and Lucia manages to visit her there with the intention of seeing the specialist and asking him about Rose's illness. The cheerful, friendly nurses are evasive. One of their tasks is to keep relatives away from the doctors.

Rose comes home, but she is thinner than ever, able to eat only tiny

amounts of the almost-liquid food that Hette prepares for her. She no longer goes with Hettie to the local community hall to pack Red Cross parcels. She spends a lot of her time lying down..

Eventually Lucia writes to the doctor, and he agrees to see her. He is formal, hesitant, obscure. But finally, from what he suggests, it is clear that Rose is seriously ill.

- What can be done for her? Will she get better?

- It has been known, of course. Some of the most surprising cases . . . difficult to understand in medical terms. It's never possible to be absolute about this kind of thing.

- But in my mother's case?

- We must never give up hope, my dear. No, never give up hope. But I would say that in your mother's case it is unlikely that her condition will improve.

- It will get worse.

- I'm afraid so, that is likely.

- But is there nothing at all that you can do?

- Our present medical knowledge has not found a way of treating your mother's condition.

- What exactly is my mother's condition?

- My dear Miss .. . Mrs . . . (Lucia wears a wedding ring for her mother's benefit.) . . . as far as we can ascertain . .

- Yes?

Abruptly: - An internal growth.

- A tumour, you mean?

- Yes. Neither he, nor anyone else, uses the taboo word.

- Where?

- In the stomach.

Cancer. From the Latin: crab, creeping tumour, related to Greek karkinos, crab; sanskrit karkata.

Rose is at home, lying on the sofa, often evidently in great pain. Soon she is permanently in her bed. Hettie is a devoted nurse, preparing beef teas and trying to urge small spoonfuls down Rose's throat. Lucia takes off as much time as she can to hurry down and sit with Rose, her journeys made longer and more difficult by the dislocation of the railways in this time of war. She sits with Rose to try and share her suffering. Although the doctor calls from time to time, there seems to be nothing much that he can or will do to relieve the terrible pain.

Sitting quietly, holding her mother's hand, there is so much she wants to say, to ask, so much; but she doesn't know how or where to start.

- Lucia, Rose asks weakly, - tell me, is he all right, your husband?

- He's fine, Mummy.

- It seems so terrible - war coming again, I mean. I only hope, I pray, Lucia - she speaks slowly, with difficulty - I pray that you and your Chris will come through. War changes everything. Twice in a lifetime. It isn't right. You'd think that men could manage a world better than that.

- Perhaps it won't be long, Mum.

- You see, that kind of separation, it puts up barriers, it turns you into strangers.

Two days later, Rose dies.

Lucia is given time off again for the funeral. Hettie is contracted, shrunken with her grief. They are a small, black-dressed group in the churchyard on a late Autumn day, with the parson murmering something meaningless as the coffin is lowered into the grave, and great white clouds scud across the limitless blue beyond that he has promised for Rose.

Hettie collects together the few things that Rose has left, the small pieces of jewellery - brooches, a necklace of coral pieces, the only present, as far as she knows, that Rose every received from her husband, a wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. They sort out the clothes together, and make a pile of the better ones that the Red Cross might be able to use. The box of letters with a packet of photographs, mostly amateur snapshots, and another picture, like the one she had seen in Hettie's albumn, of Rose when young. Lucia holds the photo and gazes and gazes at the fresh, sweet face, eyes dark and glowing, lips slightly parted as though on the verge of speaking, dark hair piled high and out like wings on her head; the blouse with its high neck frill, the long trailing skirt, and the belt that pulls in her slender waist.

- Oh! Lucia exclaims, - She was so pretty.

- She was very, very pretty - beautiful really, says Hettie. - She had such a lovely complexion, a lovely rosy colour - like you. Oh yes, she was lovely.

For Lucia it is as though for the first time she thinks of this woman, her mother, not as that rather shabby figure in the winter coat with multiple mendings in the lining, or as she always seemed to be at home, in a flowered apron and comfortable slippers; but as a young, eager person full of expectations of the life ahead of her.

And she is overwhelmed with grief. Grief for the mess and disappointments of life, grief for the unfulfilled dreams, for the narrowing perspectives. Whatever she had dreamed about or wanted, there was so little choice for her. Perhaps not going with her husband was her one independent act, rational, not eccentric. She had lacked the education and the examples from others that could have taken her out of the mould and opened up new ways of living.

Grief for herself, for her lack of understanding, for the hostility of adolescence, the indifference of her adulthood.

Hettie is weeping now. - I loved her, she says, - I loved her even when we were young and I was jealous because everyone noticed her more than they did me. We were always close. I shall miss her so much.

They cling together, sobs rising painfully, faces distorted with grief, mingling their tears and their sorrow, their sense of loss and of regret.

* * * *

There was a large underground shelter at the Ministry, reasonably well equipped for when they had to spend several hours there. But on this night Lucia had left her office a little early, hoping to get home before the raids began. But not early enough. When the sirens sounded she stood for a moment, indecisive, staring at the sky where the searchlights criss-crossed against the dark and the ack ack guns were bursting into life. Then she ran towards the nearest underground, hoping that if the trains were till running she might get one that would take her closer to her home.

The platform was already occupied by the regulars, preparing the little ones for bed, the food for the family. She found her way to the edge of the platform, where a strip was always kept clear of the shelterers for the travellers.

As she stood there she noticed a tall young woman in uniform, someone she thought she knew. She said tentatively - Freda? And the tall girl turned immediately and looked at her with surprise. - Why, Lucia of all people! I thought you weren't here - I mean I thought you lived somewhere else, not in London. Are you down here again? How are you? Didn't you get married or something?

They stood talking for a while, and when the all-clear sounded they decided to go and have supper together so that they could answer each other's questions, and Lucia could hear all the gossip about mutual friends.

Freda was the ~~big~~, fair-haired Jewish girl who had once reacted so strongly to Lucia's association with the German boy, Karl. She had, indisputably, an aryan look: a small, straight nose, full cheeks with an English roses-and-cream complexion; blue eyes.

She was also short-sighted, and this had given her a reputation for being rather haughty and stand-offish. But it was only myopia. Because she hated wearing glasses, belonging to that generation on whom Dorothy Parker had inflicted her mortal blow - Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses - she would charge blindly through the streets where she lived, avoiding looking at people in case she would encounter someone who she knew but who she would fail to recognise. When she went to the cinema she kept her spectacles in a case on her lap until the lights went out, then slipped them on to bring the blurred screen into focus ; but she would take them off again as soon as the film ended. It was this short-sightedness together with her long limbs and rather large hands and feet that gave a certain blundering quality to her character, reinforced by her blunt, direct

manner. She was a big girl who dropped things and tripped over things. Ornaments flew off surfaces when she passed.

They had a wonderful evening together in which everything that Lucia said began with - What happened to - ? and Freda had all the answers. - Oh her! Her parents moved to the Midlands just before the war started. And that nice boy, you remember, Bill's younger brother who . . . She's in the WVS and he's a lieutenant . . . REg had flat feet, he works in some essential service or other somewhere in the country . . . She's married and she has a baby . . .He got killed right at the beginning of the war - hadn't you heard? Ronnie? He was really keen on you, wasn't he? Well, he got over it quicly enough, he got married quite soon after you went away . . . Raymond's a conscientous objector (Lucia knew this, he had continued to write to her) . . . And me? Well, I'm doing translations.

- You always were good at languages.

- I'm better now. I know Italian as well as French and German.

- Is it interesting?

- Sometimes. Gets boring like everything else when you have to stick at it endlessly.

Lucia told Freda that Chris was in the army, about her work, and that she lived in a small flat.

Freda said - I've been wanting to get a place in town for some time. I'm living at home, and travelling backwards and forwards to Hendon these days is a bind. And I often work late, and then there are problems. Sometimes I have to sleep in the basement shelter where I work. What do you say to us getting a flat in town that we could share?

- Will we get on together? Lucia asked, smiling.

- But why ever not? I like you Lucia, I always did, we'll get on fine. But you must come home with me to meet my parents.

- To be inspected?

- Don't be daft. They'll want to meet you, anyway, and I'd like you to meet them. Come on Sunday, if you're free. We always have a decent lunch on Sundays, it's a family affair.

- I'll meet you at the station, Freda had said, and there she is, with a big black umbrella, because it is raining, a gentle persistent rain that envelopes them.

- Friday's the important night for us Jews, Freda says. - My parents aren't terribly orthodox - my mother goes to the Reform Shool, the Synagogue, it's supposed to be more progressive. But they do keep up most of the customs. What they were brought up with. Hard to change habits of a lifetime. I don't believe in all that stuff any more, but I go along with it when I'm at home to please my folks. And to save endless arguments. My brother Sammy's the same, though he does sometimes bait them a bit with his intellectual arguments.

Rose had said - Jews are different.

- How?

- They don't eat bacon or pork. And they keep Sundays on Saturday.

- Why don't they eat pork?

- It's against their religion. They're different. They have different customs.

It was not a rampant prejudice, but it left Lucia with the feeling that this was not quite right, not perhaps quite nice. Besides, she loved bacon

and pork crackling was a special treat. There had to be something odd about people whose religion said they should not eat such things.

- I can't tell you how much I hated it when I was younger, Freda continued. - Hated it, because it made me different. I used to fight with my parents all the time. I challenged them on everything.

- But Freda, I never thought of you as being different.

- That's because I went to such lengths to be the same as the rest of you. I was ashamed of being jewish. I never took anyone to my home. They would have seen my father in his yamulka, and my mother would have pressed food on them, yes, it's true, jewish Mommas are like that. You like pancakes? Eat, eat, it's good for you. She mimicked the lilt of her mother's voice.

- But you were accepted by everyone at the club, weren't you?

- By some, not all. Sammy was more relaxed about it. But I fought them to get free. But then came Hitler, and with all the things that were happening in Germany, all the terrible things happening to jews, and many of them were people like me who didn't bother about the religion, they thought they were just good Germans - well, you understand, I couldn't then not be jewish. To deny it would be helping them, wouldn't it? Here we are. This is my house.

They are approaching a large, semi-detached house set on a grassy slope. -Modern Elizabethan, says Freda drily, - fake wooden beams and panels of diamond-shaped glass. Then she adds hastily as they open the gate - Don't be overwhelmed by them.

- Your parents?

- No, the rest of them. My aunts and uncle and cousins and my pestilential little brother, Benny.

But she is overwhelmed.

Freda's mother, Mrs Lewis, greets them in the entrance lobby. - So this is Lucia - come in, come inside. You must be cold; so wet! Give me your coat. Come, come and dry yourself by the fire. Your shoes - they're wet, take them off. Freda, get her a pair of your slippers.

- They'll be miles too big, Freda says. - She only takes size four.

- No, honestly, my feet aren't wet, says Lucia. - Please don't bother.

Mrs Lewis is small, not even as tall as Lucia, and she has copious breasts that give a top-heavy appearance to a body carried on surprisingly slim legs and shapely ankles. She is grey-haired, lively, warm, her movements are quick.

A round of introductions: my Uncle Morris; my cousin Issy; my father - Papa, this is Lucia; my Auntie Minnie and Auntie Yetta; and Benny.

Red-headed, barely thirteen, Benny is already head and shoulders taller than his mother.

- Come, bring up that chair, Freda. Benny, take your things off the chair, let the young lady sit down.

- You were at school together? Mr Lewis asks.

- No, Lucia replies, - We belonged to the same tennis club. That's where we met.

- Tennis! Benny addresses Lucia. - Bat and ball more likely. She couldn't hit a ball unless you first told her it was coming and then patted it gently towards her.

- Benny! Mrs Lewis rebukes him, shaking her head and smiling. - That's not the way to talk about your sister.

- As a matter of fact she was rather good, one of our better players, Lucia said.

- I know. Because she's a beanstalk. She could stand in one place and stretch out further. Freda makes a face at him, and he sticks out his tongue.

A big bowl of flowers stands in the centre of the table. Mrs Lewis explains: - My son Sammy sent them. It was my birthday last week. Fancy, he should remember when he has such important work to do.

- Such a good boy, Yetta murmers.-So clever. And he never forgets.

- Where is he stationed? Lucia asks.

- He's in Scotland. He's in charge of a special unit. Psychological. They plan everything, not the actual fighting, but everything else.

- Don't exaggerate, Mrs Lewis rebukes her husband. - You mustn't believe everything he says.

- Isn't he a Captain already? Mr Lewis demands.

- A Captain, yes.

- Well? He'll be a Colonel soon, you'll see.

- Such a clever boy, Yetta repeats. - Always top of his class at school. Good at everything.

- Except games. Benny addresses Lucia. - He's like Freda, he can't hit a ball straight.

- You should be as clever as Sammy, says Aunt Yetta.

- I'm a captain as well, Benny boasts. - I'm captain of our hockey team and I'm in the first cricket eleven.

- It's enough, Benny, Mrs Lewis says. - You should turn out like your brother.

The talk and banter continues throughout the substantial meal. To Lucia, it is like a party.

The aunts help clear the table. The cousins find packs of cards. They all settle down to play rummy. Lucia wants to sit and watch.

- You don't play rummy? Mr Lewis asks. - You prefer bridge?

- I don't play any card-games, says Lucia.

This is the cause of some astonishment, but Lucia explains that she grew up in a very small family - just herself and her mother, and her mother didn't play cards.

- But after you grew up?

- I never particularly wanted to play. I always preferred other things.

- Just like Sammy, Mrs Lewis says. - He won't play card games.

- He used to play bridge, says Mr Lewis.

- Not any more. He says it's a waste of time. Mrs Lewis turns to Lucia. - But he likes chess, she says, he's very fond of chess.

- He taught me how to play chess, Freda says.

- And me as well, says Benny. - He played with me a lot.

- But you stopped playing with me, says Freda - because I always beat you.

- I beat Sam sometimes.

- Only when he let you. He could have beaten you any time he wanted.

- That's not true! Benny is getting red and angry. Mrs Lewis says - You play well Benny, very well for a boy of your age. Don't tease him, Freda.

The table is ready, and they make room for Lucia. One of the cousins sits just behind her, to explain the game and advise her as to which cards to play. - We play for matches, not for money, they explain.

Mrs Lewis goes into the kitchen with Aunt Minnie. When they have finished the dishes, Aunt Minnie settles down with her knitting, while Mrs Lewis takes a book and sits reading in a corner of the room. From time to time she lifts her head to plead with them all to make less noise. They quieten down for a short while, but loud-voiced arguments soon mount up again.

Two hours later she is in the kitchen once more while a fight breaks out at the card table when Freda accuses Benny of cheating. He denies it angrily. - You're the cheat, he accuses Freda. She remains calm, but she reaches across and swiftly raises his arm, to reveal the card he has been concealing. - Not me, she says, - you.

Crimson to the roots of his orange-red hair, eyes tear-filled, Benny sweeps cards and matches onto the floor. All voices are raised at once, and Freda raises her arm as well, as though to strike him, but it is only a threatening gesture.

- You shouldn't upset him, Mr Lewis says. - He's still young, he's only a child.

- He's old enough to know not to cheat. He's just a bad sport. He can't bear to lose. Papa, you shouldn't let him get away with it.

- Quiet, all of you, says Papa, - my head is like a drum.

The argument is brought to an end by Mama, who enters the room bearing a tea tray, and behind her Aunt Minnie carrying a magnificent cake.

They all exclaim at the sight of it. - Three eggs, says Mrs Lewis, - real eggs, not dried ones. And real butter. She smiles proudly.

- Mama, where on earth did you get them?

- Black market, Benny says. The switch of attention has given him a chance to recover.

- Benny! Mama is shocked. She explains that she traded the fresh vegetables she grows in her back garden for a neighbour's butter ration; and that the eggs were a gift from one of Mr Lewis's clients, a man who keeps hens, and were in gratitude for the careful accounting that Mr Lewis did, that saved him money.

- Lucia, you like lemon tea?

- I've never had it.

- Never had tea with lemon?

- Only with milk.

- Try it, Mama says, - try it; you'll like it.

The tea is served in a tall glass in a metal holder, and a tiny saucer of cherry jam is put on a table next to Lucia.

- Take a spoonful of jam in your mouth, and then drink some tea, instructs Freda. - No, you don't put the jam in the tea. Just press the lemon slice with your spoon. Nice?

- Yes it is. It's very refreshing.

The cake is cut carefully into the exact number of slices for each to have one slice, except for a large =piece. When Benny has eaten his slice he holds out his plate for another piece. But Mrs Lewis shakes her head.

- Oh come on Mama, don't be so mean. He reaches out as though to take it.

Mama catches hold of his hand. - Did I bring you up with such manners? No. This piece I am keeping.

- You're going to send it to Sam.

She laughs. - It would be stale. When Sam comes down, I'll make another cake.

When it is time for Lucia to leave, Mama gives her two paper bags. - It's just a few little bits for your supper.

- But I don't need - really, I don't need it. And I've had so much to eat here, I won't want any supper.

- Never mind, never mind, you'll eat it.

The rain has stopped and Freda walks with Lucia to the station.

- Mama says you must come again next Sunday. - Could you stand it?

- Of course. Besides, I must learn to play rummy properly.

In the train Lucia looks inside the bags. In one there is an apple, some alices of meat wrapped in grease-proof paper, a tomato and a few peas. Inside

the second bag there are some hard, syrup-covered biscuits, and carefully wrapped in a flowered paper serviette, the large slice of cake made with butter and real eggs.

* * * *

In a couple of weeks they found a flat on the ground floor of a building in Baker Street, convenient for both of them.

- I have some furniture, Lucia said, - not much, a couple of chairs, a settee that you can make up into a bed, a small desk, some kitchen stuff, saucepans, cutlery, those things. And books and some records.

Freda said - I'll get things from home. - There's a divan - we've too much furniture in our house in any case; a table; a bookcase or two. We won't have to buy anything. What happened to the rest of your stuff? Or did you and Chris always live in furnished flats?

- Mostly; or semi-furnished. He took some of the books with him.

She could not say to Freda, He took his things back to his other wife, his legal one. And Freda did not remark on the absence of civilian male clothes.

- Books make the place, don't they? said Freda after they had moved in.

- I love them, said Lucia, - I hate to part with any of them. It's funny, we had so few books in my house. My mother bought me Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia, but most of it I never read, there they were, twelve of them I think, a formidable row in blue cloth binding. They weren't like books you could just take up and read. Too heavy to climb a tree and sit on a branch to read, or to read in bed.

- They were supposed to teach you things.

- Yes, I know, but so stodgy and old-fashioned, full of good sound common sense, and the illustrations . . .

- If you didn't have many books, what did you do with yourself, just you and your mother. I can't imagine it, no one to argue with and fight with.

- Oh, I don't know. I had plenty of friends. I used to ride my bicycle up and down our street and all around. We played outside when it was fine. We had a tree house, and there was a park near us with swings.

- And in winter? Long dark afternoons and evenings?

- My mother taught me to sew and knit. Sometimes it was fun to choose a pattern and lay the pieces out on the table, like a jigsaw, pin them all down and cut them out. But actually I hated sewing, still do, and I hated the fitting, standing on a chair and turning around slowly while my mother pinned up the hem -

- Her mouth full of pins.

- That's right. How did you know?

- Oh, my Mama was just the same.

- She used to peddle away fiercely on her treadle Singer machine, as though she was running a race. But she was pretty clever at sewing. She made all my clothes when I was young, she once made me a costume for a fancy-dress party and I won first prize.

- What was the costume? A fairy?

- No, no - half the other little girls were fairies with wings made of wire and gauze and a wand with a gold paper star - no, I was a Dorothy bag - do you remember those cloth bags with a string tie at the top? I was clothed in a floral bag, slits for my pudgy legs and arms, a tie-string round my neck, and another bag, inverted, on my head. But I was a bit confused because when the judges asked me my name, I said - Dorothy bag, so when they announced the prize winner they called for Dorothy Bagg!

- Oh Lucia! Freda was laughing. - But my mother didn't really care about sewing, it was one of those things she felt she had to do as a good mother. She didn't teach me sewing - I was hopeless at school at the whole Domestic Science bit. But I got the habit of reading from her. She's the same today - whenever she can steal time, she has her head stuck in a book. Mrs Bookworm, my father calls her. Sam's the same, they amaze me, both of them, they can read in a room full of people, join in the conversation from time to time and then go on reading. I like it quiet, I can't concentrate with a lot of talk going on. I used to go to my room. Unsociable, Sam said.

- I like it quiet, too. But it always was quiet in our home.

- What else did you do?

- I wrote little stories and verses. Childish stuff. I filled masses of exercise books with stories of great adventures, all very derivative.

- And the poetry? Do you still write?

- Well . . . Lucia hesitated. - I did for a while, but . . . she shook her head. - Not for quite a long time. It doesn't seem the right time for poetry now.

- Rubbish! Freda exclaimed. This is <u>exactly</u> the right time for poetry. You must start writing again.

She could not say to Freda, it's not just the war. Something dried up in me - not since the abortion, I just don't want to write poetry any more.

But there came a night when she said - You know, Freda, I was never actually married to Chris.

Freda was unsurprised. - I thought that might be the case, she said. - All this business of not using your married name, and saying you didn't like to wear a ring - and you've hardly spoken of him once. What happened?

- He was already married, you see.

- Oh? And he couldn't get a divorce?

- I thought he was going to. I think he did really intend to, at least at first.

So she related the whole story, everything; about the first weekend she went away with Chris, and the week that followed, and his confession that he was married and actually living with his wife. About their life in Oxford, and how there seemed to be a widening rift between the lives they led, the fact that she was on the outside, that he was so often away, that there was no way he could bring her into his circle, go to staff parties, meet his associates. Like a wife hidden away in a cupboard.

And then about the abortion.

Speaking about it all for the first time, she opened up again all the questions that had assailed her at first, and that she had subsequently shut away. Why did it all happen? Why did he change? Was it really because hey were not legally married in the first place? Why did he promise and promise about the future, and make her promise too? How could he have loved her so deeply, so urgently, and discard her so lightly? For they did seem to love each other, they were sexually compatible, they enjoyed so many things in the same way - was it love? And if it was not, why did it seem so much like it and why did it hurt so much to end it? What was love, after all? And if it was love, why had it retreated so speedily before a real challenge?

When she spoke of the abortion all the old pain returned, and tears came, without volition, to spill down her cheeks. She had expected Freda to be shocked, or at the least, disturbed, but she was not prepared for her calm acceptance and the way she dismissed it.

- I'm surprised how strong your emotions still are about it all, she said. What was it, after all? There are worse things happening all the time, every day, all round us - kids being slaughtered, whole families wiped out. So you aborted one foetus; look at Europe, Lucia. I read how the Nazis impaled Russian babies on their bayonets - yes, shudder over that. If times were different, perhaps . . . I know our own personal tragedy is the only really important one for each of us, but still, you can't ignore the rest of the world, Lucia, it must diminish the impact of the personal thing. I can understand how you felt at the time, but you can't go on for the rest of your life weeping over it. It's not something irreparable, like never being able to have another. You'll get married, you'll have other kids. Have you thought about what would have happened if you'd had it? I daresay it was all very shocking to you at the time, but the time has passed, and with all the other shocking things . . . Are you still in love with him? she concluded abruptly.

- I thought I was. Until now. I don't know. I don't know if I was ever so

much in love with him as I was crazy about being in love.

Oh but you were, said her inside voice, you were, you were. Don't you remember how you used to meet him sometimes during your lunch hour, and how your heart jumped when you saw him coming down the street towards you, just the way he walked, his hair flopping, the beginning of a smile as he saw you? And the love-making?

- He was so different from all those other wet-behind-the-ears boys we used to go to dances with, she told Freda. - He was a man, experienced, sophisticated. First I was flattered by his attention. But after that weekend, when we went to bed together, I was hooked. He taught me to enjoy the physical side, anyway.

- I envy you, said Freda gloomily. - Do you know, I'm a virgin? I've never slept with a man. I've never had the courage.

- You don't need courage, you need contraceptives.

- But honestly, I'm scared of it. Each time I think, the next reasonably presentable male who makes a pass at me -- then when he does, I fight him off. In principle, of course, I agree with you, a marriage certificate doesn't count for anything. And in practice I can't shake off my nice, conventional upbringing. I keep hearing my mother's voice - a nice boy wouldn't try anything --

- Mr Right. Your mother's 'nice boy' is my mother's 'Mr Right.'

- But they do all try, the 'nice' ones too, and then there's this feeling that you can't get rid of, that once you've given in to them they despise you for it, and tire of you, and go off and marry some pure, cold virgin - undamaged goods.

- Now you're going against everything you said you believed in.

- Yes! Because, she went on bitterly - I think that although we think that love shouldn't be dependent on the institution of marriage, men do still want and expect their wives to be theirs, their property, not devalued by someone else having occupied it. And I think your Chris felt the same way despite anything he might have said, he didn't feel any obligation to you because there wasn't that legal seal on your marriage. Then there's another factor, one outside the two people involved. This business of living with a man - one's own attitude is one thing, but you can't help being affected by the general attitude, the difference, the different values placed by others on the actions of the woman and those of the man. He has a social license to engage in sex without marriage, she has not. I think your Chris, deep down, probably felt the same. It was not legitimate and therefore it could be so easily discarded.

- I didn't want it to hold together through a sense of obligation. But it wasn't as simpple as that in any case. Being legally married didn't bind him

to his first wife, either, did it? I wanted it to be real love.

- But you don't know what real love is! You've said so. And don't you think that obligation can also impose its own pattern of love?

- If it does, you must feel it very deeply; there has to be some basis for it. I keep coming back to Chris. His obligation to his wife didn't hold him to her, and he had an obligation to me too.

In her mind's eye she saw her mother's hand resting on the box of empty envelopes. There was obligation there, but not so strong as to make him stay, yet strong enough to make him wish to continue to provide for his wife and child. Something else had been missing. And what of her obligation to him?

Freda was talking. - Think of arranged marriages - all right, don't react with horror, a lot of them turn out all right. Because all their own family expectations, their religion and their customs, everything, links them in harmony, so that becomes companionship and a real need of each other. Isn't that love?

- Companionship? Need? WHere's the flame, then? You denude it of all romance What about magnetism, and desire and passion? What about that one enchanted evening when your eyes meet across a crowded room?

- Well, I don't know. You're the one with experience. I know I've felt the flare of a spark every now and then. I suppose once in a thousand times that spark stays alight, and calls itself love.

If I had been my mother, thought Lucia, I would have gone with him. But perhaps she did not really know whether she loved him enough or not. Love was no longer simply love, that could not be doubted. There were these strange veils that fell and enveloped the bright wholeness of being in love.

She said after a while - So in the end we have to settle for something less. Or what started as a bright flame dies down. Is that what happens to marriages - a little warmth from the embers?

- What I think, said Freda solemnly, as though pronouncing an important discovery - is that for real love to survive, two people must be able to communicate on equal terms, and from the very depth of their being, they must be able to understand each other's deepest, most central emotions; and with most people this isn't possible, because men have single vision and women have double.

- What do you mean by that?

- That because we're brought up in a man's world, we can see things through their eyes, we're taught from the beginning to see everything the way the men see it. But women have their own, separate vision, and men cannot share that because they only see with their own, male eyes.

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- Freda, how did you get so wise? How do you come to know so much?

- Observation. Look, you grew up with just one other person, your mother. I don't know how you ever learned anything without all the clash of ideas and arguments and attitudes that went on in my family. I looked at my parents' marriage, I've seen all my cousins and aunts, all the women manoeuvering, arranging, fixing, the girls setting their sights on security, what they would call love - a home, children; and never really finding what they want.

- They get married.

- Oh yes, they get married. She paused. - My mother, she went on - she's so much stronger than my father - always has been. She has the strength, the fortitude. Women are stronger than men - do you know that? That's why they call us the weaker sex.

- What do you mean?

- Because they know it, so they must lie about it, they must deny it. But all those girls longing for love and marriage, they remain unfulfilled, because what they are seeking in men is something that men are incapable of giving. For love to survive there must be mutual respect.

- My father left home when I was four years old, said Lucia, and never came back. For some years letters would come from him. I did not know why he left, nor what he wrote. He went to a new job in a different town, somewhere up north.

- Then you knew why he left - to get a job.

- No, he already had quite a good job here in London. He just suddenly decided to work somewhere else. I never knew why my mother did not go with him.

- Why should she?

- Why? But she was - Lucia hesitated, seeing herself being drawn into a trap - she was his wife, she finished lamely.

- So? The wife has got to do what the husband wants her to do?

- No, but you have to consider my mother's own attitudes, her own morality. It was her belief that a good wife did conform, well, allright, was obedient if you want to put it that way. She wasn't rebellious, independent . . . she thought it was the woman's duty to make a home for her husband, and be a good wife.

- Well, perhaps she rebelled inside. Maybe she didn't want to leave her home and her friends and everything she knew to go and live in a strange town where she'd never been before. Or maybe she had a secret lover.

- Oh Freda! My mother? Not my mother!

- Why not? Do you think you would have known - a little girl?

- Oh, she was terribly conventional. It would go against everything she

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