

ELIZABETH
JOLLEY

*Miss
Peabody's
Inheritance*

UQP

MODERN CLASSICS

The nights belonged to the novelist.

I have a Headmistress in mind, you know, a tremendously responsible sort of woman, the novelist's large handwriting was black on large sheets of paper. The name of the Headmistress is Dr Arabella Thorne; she is known as Miss Thorne. Every afternoon she walks down from the School House through the warm fragrance of a small pine plantation.

She always forgets about the pines and then suddenly she is in the middle of the sandy pine-needly place, walking on a little beaten path. She feels refreshed by the dry lightness of the air and the clean comforting scent from the sun-warmed trees.

It is surprising that she forgets because the school is called Pine Heights.

When Miss Thorne walks alone all kinds of things go through her head. Sometimes it is a line of poetry or a phrase from a piano concerto. Sometimes it is something wise to do with her policy in her school. She wants her students to study for pleasure and she wants them to cultivate an incredible hunger for books. She remembers something Samuel Johnson said in 1728:

The flesh of animals who feed excursively is allowed to have a higher flavour than that of those who are cooped up. May there not be the same difference between men who read as their taste prompts, and men who are confined in cells and colleges to stated tasks . . .

Perhaps it was Boswell who actually said this, Miss Thorne is not sure but she resolves to speak to Miss Edgely about it and ask her to type a memo for the notice board. She will have to check the memo as Edgely is inclined now to make silly little mistakes. Not so long ago she put a *c* where a *p* should have been and left out an */* and an *e*: '*... the copulation in the*

pubic schools is increasing at an alarming rate. The article, to be supplied by Miss Thorne to a journal for higher education, was entirely ruined.

Sometimes, when she walks, she thinks about the girls: the new one called Debbie in her clinging jersey dress, her hair cut long over her eyes and the way she has of throwing her head forward, suddenly, and then her shoulders, first one and then the other and then, with a curious wriggle, alternates these movements, matching them with a jerky swinging of her extraordinarily suggestive but childish hips, first to one side, then to the other; soundlessly, yet as if there is, somewhere inside her, a pulsing music, an irresistible beat, a music to which the girl responds with a rhythm so full of intense feeling that the dance to this outwardly unheard music takes all her concentration and all her energy.

She is a thin girl. I'll tell you more about her later. She has only been in the school a few hours. Her father is something suddenly big in cooking oils and heavy haulage road transport. He knows he is not *comme il faut*, he does not even know the phrase. Miss Thorne, with a wry twist to her mouth which passes for a smile, realizes that he knows and accepts what he is but for his daughter he wants the polish.

'She needs all the spit and polish she can get,' he leans forward in the large chintzy armchair.

'Spitting is not necessary, Mr Frome, and here, at Pine Heights, we do not encourage it,' Miss Thorne says, 'but polishing, that is quite a different matter.' Getting up easily from her desk she draws aside the heavy curtain.

'The gels,' she says graciously, 'are having their bra burning ceremony this evening. Would you like to stay. We have a guest room. There's the bonfire pile down there in the corner of our meadow.' She indicates a scrubby corner of a bald paddock known with affectionate pride throughout the school as 'our meadow'.

'Er. No thanks! I'd better be pushing off, er, thanks all the same.'

'It's not a compulsory event,' Miss Thorne lets the curtain drop, 'it's simply for those gels who wish it, and we only burn old ones you understand,' Miss Thorne explains, leading the way to the door. 'Matron checks them, ticks them off as being suitable, and for every one burned, a fresh one is put on the bill. It works beautifully. They have a system to help out those with all brand new underwear, you understand, a gel with two old ones . . .'

'Yes! Yes!' Mr Frome is not used to hearing about underclothes, especially from a lady like Miss Thorne.

'One year, the first I think it was,' Miss Thorne smiles dreamily, 'we all got rather carried away. Hurled everything on to the fire – stockings, singlets, petticoats, pantyhose, pants – one girl even burned her nightie. Tonight there will be toffee apples, absooty scrumptious, and a sing-song round the bonfire. You are very welcome to take part.'

Often Miss Thorne, at the end of afternoon school, pauses to watch the girls dancing. She has never, in all her years of experience, seen a girl dance as Debbie Frome, the new girl, dances. She seems to give off a ferocious sensuality. Some of the girls do not dance. Gwendaline Manners, a large fair skinned girl who has been a boarder since she was eight years old, never dances. She looks as if she would like to but is too shy. She is overweight and very tall for her age and is very quiet. Miss Thorne has invited Gwenda to accompany her to Europe during the vacation in May. Though she has not mentioned this to Miss Edgely yet, she has told her lifelong friend and travelling companion, Miss Snowdon. Miss Snowdon is matron of the Queens Hospital and a constant visitor to Miss Thorne's apartment, which she shares with Miss Edgely, on the upper floor of the Boarding House.

Both Miss Snowdon and Miss Thorne have the same kind of figure; a portliness brought on by years of responsibility, plenty

of money, comfortable accommodation and good meals. Both women have the education, the background and the capabilities required for their positions. Neither of them cares too deeply for other human beings and they are not dangerously touched or moved by the human predicament.

Miss Edgely shares some of the qualities but, by contrast, is small. She has no taste and far less money.

‘Dotty! Dotty!’ Miss Peabody heard her mother’s muffled voice calling, ‘Dotty! Dotty!’

‘Oh Blast! she wants her hot milk,’ Dorothy Peabody muttered to herself and she pushed the novelist’s letter under the embroidered cover on her dressing table. She would hurry up, she thought, and come back to the letter, back to Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon and Miss Edgely as quickly as possible.

As she lit the gas under the hateful little milk saucepan she let her mind wander pleasantly. Whatever would Miss Thorne do with Gwendaline Manners in Europe! What an idea to take a schoolgirl on an expensive holiday like that and to pay all the expenses! It was beyond Miss Peabody’s experience to understand why Miss Thorne should do this. What would the girl’s parents think? It seemed an impulsive thing for a woman in Miss Thorne’s position to do.

The milk frothed all over the stove.

‘Oh drat!’

‘Dotty! Dotty!’

‘Coming mother.’ Dorothy Peabody poured the milk into her mother’s special cup. ‘Drat the stove!’ She thought she had better wipe it clean at once.

‘Drat! and Drat!’

‘Dotty!’

‘Coming. Coming mother.’

All day long fussing through filing cabinets while surreptitiously nibbling biscuits and screwing up and throwing away countless typing errors, she looked forward impatiently to the evening and to the novelist's letters. Every time she reread the letters she found something fresh, something she had not noticed before.

Already her stocking and hanky drawer was full of the thick envelopes with their bright extravagant stamps. For, of course, the novelist replied by air mail. All this correspondence because of her timid letter sent some time ago:

Dear Diana Hopewell,

I am writing to say how much I enjoyed your book *Angels on Horseback*. I found it so moving and sad that I was unable to read the ending for a long time. All the same the story has given me great pleasure and a wish for more of your work. The beautiful young schoolgirls and their strange and wild riding lessons brought something exciting into my life. (Mother and I live very quietly here in Weybridge.) And, the loneliness and the harshness of the Australian countryside fitted so exactly with my own feelings . . .

Secretly Dorothy Peabody signed her letter and posted it to the publisher. She did not expect a reply.

While reading the novelist's first letter Dorothy seemed to see her, Diana, dismounting from her horse at sunset to open the gates leading to her property. The dry grass would be pink in the light of the setting sun, Dorothy thought, like in the novel, and perhaps the grass would sing too, monotonously in that lovely place.

In the surprise and pleasure of receiving a letter in answer to her own, she allowed herself, for some days, to think of the novelist. Always she thought of her in the act of dismounting from her horse. All the time at work, secretly, she enjoyed the luxury of returning, in her mind, to this handsome image.

Of course, though she, like the others, chattered and gossipped the whole day, she did not mention the novelist in the office. Miss Truscott and the other typists would never understand. A book, a literary work of art like *Angels on Horseback*, would be wasted on them. And she did not tell her mother about either the book or the letters. Her mother was unable to leave her room and this gave Dorothy a sort of privacy; though it was uncanny how her mother seemed to know what she was doing.

‘Dotty! You haven’t dusted the front room mantelpiece.’ And,

‘Dotty! Move the tins forward! You’re using the tinned soup in the wrong order.’

If Dorothy needed the bathroom in the night and crept there as quietly as she could, invariably her mother called out, ‘Dotty! Don’t forget to switch off the light!’

‘Who are you writing to Dotty? Who?’ she called across the landing almost as soon as Dorothy, in an entirely new experience of excitement, began to answer the first letter.

‘Who are you writing? Dotty? Who?’

‘No one mother! Just nothing mother. Just, er, tidying my hair clips. Coming mother. Coming!’

The invalid had to be helped on to the commode at night after her hot milk and when, at last, she fell asleep Dorothy was free to reread the letters and to quietly write her reply.

I work in a large office, she wrote, we keep the sales records. It’s typing and filing I do mostly. Miss Truscott’s ever so nice. She has her hair done Thursdays and she lets me go a bit early to get mine done. Then there’s Mr Barrington, Mr Bains and Mr Feathers and ever so many senior staff, it’s a really big business. I’ve been with the firm thirty-five years. Miss Peabody considered the last sentence and it seemed too revealing; she crossed it out and wrote, ‘for ever such a long time’, in place of the thirty-five years.

I am so interested, the novelist wrote back quickly. And do you know I love your handwriting. It excites me! Perhaps I should say I am in love with your handwriting.

The sentences plunged across the enormous sheets of paper. Dorothy was quite taken aback and, on the day of that letter, made a whole series of serious mistakes at work.

Images came one after the other. She saw the novelist, charmingly dressed, mounted on her horse and galloping, with passion and grace, alongside a fence made with round poles, like the one written about in the novel. The horse, in a few minutes, covered the full length of the long paddock and seemed to gallop straight towards Dorothy turning only at the last moment to a steady dignified trotting. Even the word 'paddock' said far more than either 'field' or 'meadow'. Thus occupied with the splendid horsewoman, Dorothy failed to notice that it was raining quite heavily as she walked from the station along the dark streets passing houses identical with her own. Though she had a plastic hood in her handbag, she forgot to put it on. Surprised, she stood for a few minutes in the dingy hall with water dripping through the dangling corkscrews of her ruined perm.

Are you in love? the novelist wants to know. What sort of dresses do you wear? Please tell me all about yourself!

Timidly she began to write an answer. Her dresses had meaningless blobby patterns on them; sensible dresses for the office. She was always anxious when she bought a new dress in case it was noticed. She went up to London every day to work, a short sedate train journey and a short walk at either end. The routine never varied. How dull this was in her reply. The same journey back to Weybridge in the late afternoon. In winter and the spring it was dark on the way home, and dark when she left in the mornings.

As for being in love. She threw away several pages. I expect my emotions are all frozen over she wrote. She found that she

could not describe her clothes to the novelist, it was like trying to write details about a dog and a cat to show by a written picture that they were different in appearance. Suddenly her clothes seemed indescribable. She did explain however that it worried her to have to choose clothes.

On the way home from the shops, she wrote, I keep thinking of the one I didn't buy and that's the one I keep thinking I should have.

Miss Peabody looked at her neat handwriting on the blue sheets of paper, blue ink, blue envelopes. It was true her handwriting was nice. She hid the novelist's letters carefully and she thought she would spend more time on her own handwriting, improving the loops perhaps.

'Love letters eh?' Mrs Brewer, who came in every day to sit with Mrs Peabody for a few hours, would enjoy asking, 'Love letters eh?' over the cut lunch, about Dorothy's love life. Everyone was expected to have a love life to relate in confidence. Dorothy had two variations depending on which kind of audience the question came from.

Making sandwiches for her mother and Mrs Brewer with tinned asparagus tips and a particularly tasteless cream cheese was simply one more thing to get through, as Dorothy put it in her thoughts, before she could give herself up to her letter reading and writing. It was with a kind of unaccustomed impatience that she pressed the triangles of soft white bread into a plastic box. Mrs Brewer would unpack them the next day and carry them cheerfully upstairs prepared to eat most of them herself.

The nights belonged to the novelist.

I live on the gentle slope of a narrow valley, she wrote. I live in a ring of trees, very old trees and tall, taller I suspect than your English trees. In between the bunched foliage of glittering narrow leaves there are spaces of sky. There is just such a clear

space between the trees like a harbour in the sky directly above my house and my sheds.

Even while Dorothy was still clearing up the breadcrumbs in the kitchen she was thinking about this harbour and how Miss Hopewell would look for it returning on horseback from the long ride she would have taken to inspect her fence posts. It was one of the favourite parts of one of the letters.

Diana, she hardly dared to think of her by this name, but she boldly did think and she murmured the name as she folded the bread paper meticulously with her fingers held stiff, careful, to make neat folds. She put the folded paper away in the drawer where she kept bread papers.

Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt, would be a tall woman graceful and shapely about the neck and breast. She would wear tall riding boots.

When I see the sky harbour ahead, I know I am nearly at my place, Diana wrote.

How wonderful, Miss Peabody did not notice how cold her bedroom was; how wonderful to know the way home by the tree tops and the paths of sky between the tossing foliage. Dorothy did not have to navigate. It was so simple to walk from the station. She did not even need a bus. The closeness of the station was the reason why her father, all those years ago, had chosen to live there. In his life he had followed the same drab pattern which Dorothy followed now. Every day, at the same time, leaving the brown painted front door and the solid wooden gate, going up to Peabody's Footwear For Men And Boys and, at the same time, in the evenings returning to open the gate in its dusty privet hedge and then to open the brown front door into the dark hall of the house. The only difference being that Dorothy made countless typing errors at Fortress Enterprises and did not sell shoes to men and boys.

Dorothy thought she would look at the sky and learn how to see shapes of it between buildings. This could even be useful

in London, to know the sky harbours of the city. Though she lived near all her life and went up every day, except Saturdays and Sundays, she knew it was not difficult to be lost in London.

Looking at the sky was probably easier on horseback. In the city, looking up made her neck ache and she bumped into people. In no time her hat and her spectacles were knocked crooked and several people had tripped, treading on her feet.

‘Excuse me!’

‘Ooops sorry!’

‘Ever thought of lookin’ where you’re goin’ ducks?’

‘Have more water with it.’

‘Hey watch it lady, your umberella got me right in the orchestra stalls.’

Little lines of pain deepened round her eyes. She had corns.

Scurrying to her place in the office she thought again of Diana. It would be evening over there. Diana would be dismounting from her horse in the sunset. Long shadows would lie across the house and the sheds. Dorothy, for a moment, thought of the possibilities of sheds. There must be astonishing things in sheds. There would be pleasure simply to stand in the doorway contemplating sacks of seed, sacks of poultry food, mysterious machinery and tools, things like mattocks and crow bars which could give a person superior strength.

Diana had written that darkness came quickly and with it a silence broken only, in summer, by the endless chirping and crackling of the cicadas and in the winter, by the croaking of innumerable frogs. Dorothy, at her typewriter, knew that Diana, after eating a roast shoulder of lamb, would get up, not worrying about the washing up, and move thoughtfully across the large room to her writing table.

Sometimes the letters were disjointed and the novelist sent only a fragment which Dorothy guessed would slip into

place sooner or later, unless, of course, it was discarded. Writers did not always use everything they wrote, the novelist explained.

Dorothy wished she had the letters in her handbag so that she could take a quick look. She tried to remember the last thing about Miss Thorne but was interrupted by one of the juniors placing a large file beside her.

Miss Thorne in the pines often looks back to solemn moments, the novelist's most recent letter needed attention.

Miss Thorne looks back to a solemn moment in the shower, in a newly built motel in a remote township in the wheat.

'Edgely's gorn for a walk,' she says stripping off her night-dress, 'so why don't we . . .'

'Oh Super! Prickles!' Miss Snowdon often adopts schoolgirl language when she is with Miss Thorne. (Normally Snowdon speaks in a kind of medical jargon and you will notice that she and Thorne say 'gel' and 'orf' instead of 'girl' and 'off', it's an affectation, but I don't think they are aware of this themselves. Excuse the brackets.)

'Oh Super! Prickles! A water fight! Oh rather! Come on! Race you!'

'This bathroom is very nicely tiled. Good strong jets of water too.'

'Mmm yes. Erotic. Rather. My deah this is madness!'

'Madness! But do go on!'

'Let's have the water just a bit warmer. Ah! that's more like it. Oh wicked! Prickles! Shall I soap you?'

'Of course you may do that again. As often as you like. You exquisite naughty. Oh indecently exquisite.'

'Prickles! This is Bigger than both of us!'

'We'd better hurry deah, I think Edgely might be coming back, it was only a little health walk, to settle her insides after

being cramped up in the car. She's been drinking hot water. No deah! nothing in it. Just plain, for the insides . . .'

Miss Peabody in her airless and virginal bedroom tried to make sense out of the letter which was scrawled in red and blue ink. She tried to piece together something of the lives of Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon. There was a lack of sequence and she realized she must take each letter as it came and hope that in the end she would reach some sort of understanding.

Miss Peabody did not touch alcohol but on this occasion she had a little of her mother's medicinal brandy in a cup of hot milk. It was soothing. The water fight had disturbed rather.

Love scenes are familiar, even repetitive, if you pick them out of context and read them all at once, the novelist ended her letter with a little lecture in green ink. But it is the circumstances, the going towards the love making and then the time afterwards, the thoughts, d'you see, and the feelings which make the scenes memorable. Love scenes should be a whole lot of things. They can even be ludicrous, I mean, there is something ridiculous isn't there about naked human bodies. Now, the novelist continued, tell me all about yourself. Have you a small straight brave back? And are you in love? Tell me about your love, for I am sure you are in love.

Miss Peabody, even with the two teaspoons of brandy in her milk, could not answer such intimate questions. It was exciting to be disturbed by the water fight, who ever heard of such a thing. She thought of the mess in the bathroom and then wondered if it was possible to have a water fight by oneself. And then, of course, in the motel, it was a shower. There was no shower in the Peabody house. The District Nurse washed mother in bed with a bowl and flannels and towels. Every once in a while a second nurse accompanied the usual one, and, together, they lifted Mrs Peabody into a hot bath while Dorothy changed the sheets on

her mother's bed. This was usually done at the weekend when Dorothy vacuumed the house and dusted the shelves and hung out the rather dismal washing they produced between them.

It was exciting too to be asked about being in love. Though she glanced at herself quickly in the hall-stand mirror before leaving the house every morning she had never looked long and deeply at or into herself. She did not know what her back was like. She knew her muscles were slack, horribly so round the regions of the waist and the buttocks but then she was, as she put it, on the wrong side of fifty and sitting at a typewriter all day did not help. Her skin too, she had let that go, or perhaps it had gone of itself without anyone noticing. Her skin was soft and toneless and colourless.

She blushed at Diana Hopewell's last question and at the statement it carried. Sitting at her dressing table, her hair in rollers and a hair net, Miss Peabody began to write. She wrote several of the large size air mail pages describing how, at the end of a gruelling day of conference at Fortress Enterprises, Mr Bains would emerge from the sanctuary of the inner office, wink in her direction and, with a special jerk of his head and a raising of his dark eyebrows, he has especially thick and dark eyebrows in contrast to his silver grey hair, she explained, he would elaborately hold open the door for her and they would go out together followed by the furtive, silent and envious looks of the other typists. Sometimes young Mr Barrington came too and she stood cheekily between them breathing in their maleness in the lift. She herself had 'Je Reviens' of Worth Paris dabbed on her wrists and behind the ears.

It never fails, she wrote, remembering Miss Truscott's fervent tribute to Worth one Christmas.

Fortress Enterprises patronized a tavern, she explained on a fresh page, The New Light, quite near, just on the corner of the street. On Friday evenings one whole section of the tavern was taken over by staff from Fortress.

Mr Bains was a very sensitive man, Miss Peabody wrote, he was married but his wife had never understood him. Miss Peabody put down her pen; all this was Miss Truscott's. Mr Bains was Miss Truscott's. They even spent the night together sometimes. Dorothy often heard him explaining in a tired voice on the telephone to Mrs Bains somewhere out near Box Hill in Surrey that he had to go unexpectedly to the Midlands for an executive meeting. They would leave the office together, Mr Bains and Miss Truscott. On these occasions Miss Truscott carried a little mulberry coloured overnight bag. They often stopped for drinks at the New Light and it was said by others who went there, Miss Peabody did not frequent the tavern, that Miss Truscott, letting herself go on those nights, was always drunk when she left the New Light on Mr Bains' arm. Thinking about those mysterious nights Miss Peabody, knowing Mr Bains to have a kind smile, imagined how gently he would put the dizzy Miss Truscott to bed in some comfortable hotel near by. She tore up the blue sheets of paper; Miss Truscott owned Mr Bains.

Starting afresh with clean paper Miss Peabody wrote briefly her other version of what she called 'her love life'; that her young man had been killed in the war before the complete blossoming of the romance which was to have been hers. The medals which should rightfully have been sent to her were grabbed by the young man's mother who had never really cared for him.

I still have nightmares, she wrote, about his beautiful and innocent young body being blown to bits on the battle field.

It was hard to wait in patience for the novelist's reply with poetic condolences about the spirit of bravery ever present in a lifetime of fidelity.

Every morning she hurried downstairs to see if a letter was on the mat in the hall. Days went by and no letter came, nothing was on the mat, not even a gas bill. Forgetting about the blown up young man, he was only in her mind briefly on occasions

when she had to furnish a love affair, she reasoned sensibly that the novelist was probably busy. It was, after all, February, and though there was plenty of rain and slush from unsettled snow in England, Diana's farm was suffering from drought.

From earlier letters Miss Peabody knew that Diana was hand feeding the horses at the fence and that she was trying to keep her fruit trees alive with frequent small offerings of brackish water carried in paint tins. Poultry too, Diana had written once, were often too foolish to drink even when fresh water was available in little troughs at just the right height. It was probably that Diana was having to stand and spray the hens, Miss Peabody thought, hoping that water would fall into their trembling gasping beaks. And of course there were the riding lessons, the girls in the novel *Angels on Horseback* were not entirely fictitious. The horses and the girls would take up Diana's valuable time.

Smiling brightly all day at the office and being endlessly patient with her mother every evening Miss Peabody began to suffer. She longed for a letter from Diana. She lay in bed shivering on the long bleak cold evenings after the bleak cold days. She withered. She made mistakes at work and could not concentrate.

Unable to go on waiting she wrote to the novelist just a short note asking about Dr Thorne and Gwendaline Manners. Did they leave for Europe or did Miss Thorne change her mind?

Yes they do go to Europe, the novelist replied in a letter which came quickly, and the schoolgirl too, but I am not up to that part yet. If you remember I sent a fragment some time ago, Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon having a shower. At present the three of them, Thorne, Snowdon and Edgely, are having a three day break driving through the wheat belt. Naturally Gwendaline is not with them; the shower part fits in on this trip. I do not

always write everything in the order in which things appear in a finished book. There is too thin a line between truth and fiction and there are moments in the writing of fantasy and imagination where truth is suddenly revealed.

Miss Peabody felt warm again, she glowed somewhere inside herself; here was a wonderful letter. She was reading too quickly, she would go back and reread slowly.

Perhaps it is in writing, the novelist wrote, that the writer remakes himself and his world.

The three unmade beds in the motel unit have a curious effect on the women.

Their three day holiday is short in time but long in distance. Distances here are tremendous, the novelist explained. They drive all day in a small car to get to a remote tourist attraction in the eastern wheat country only a few kilometres from the rabbit proof fence.

Starving emus race or plod, depending on their state of starvation, up and down on the other side of this fence till they drop. Not a pretty sight. The emus are incidental, they are not the tourist attraction. People travel to this place to see some extraordinary rocks and caves.

There is a certain tension during the journey. It is a hot day and the sun is pouring in to the car. Miss Thorne is driving. Miss Snowdon is wedged in the other front seat and Miss Edgely is in the back. The luggage takes up most of the room.

They are late setting off as Edgely was not ready. She was and still is upset by something Miss Thorne said the night before.

'Prickles deah?'

'Yes Snow?'

'I know you don't, when you are driving, like to stop *en route* but what say you to a little light nourishment at the next road house?'

'Oh Rather! What d'you say Edge?' Miss Thorne is a little too hearty.

Miss Edgely's round blue-grey head is rolling and bumping from side to side with a regularity which reminds Miss Thorne of Edgely's repetitive stupidity at all times and which, in matters of the secretarial work at the school, is getting worse.

'Hey Dey! de li'l gal she 'sleep I tink,' Miss Thorne, pressing her foot on the accelerator, pretends to be a negress.

The uneasiness, mentioned earlier, felt on arrival by all three at the sight of the unmade beds in the room they are supposed to have, is linked to their uneasy experience in a dirty roadside cafe where they try to have some tea.

'Could we have a pot of tea for three please, and some toast? You'd like toast?'

Miss Snowdon and Miss Edgely say they would. Miss Thorne smiles at the girl, who is waiting for the order. 'And some jam please,' she says.

The girl stands with one hip jutting higher than the other; all the time she is glancing over her shoulder, through her long hair, to a little group of companions who are near the counter.

'No pots. Only cups. Black or white?'

'No pots? Three cups then please. Black thank you and sugar.'

'Sugar's on the table,' the girl does not return Miss Thorne's smile. She simply shifts her hips so that the other one is higher, as though resting the first.

'Oh yes. So it is! Toast, please, for three.'

'There's only pies and up there on the board tells you what there is.'

The three women glance up at the chalked scrawl.

'Oh, I don't think I really want a bucket of chips or a cray-fish – it might not be perfectly fresh out here.' Miss Snowdon laughs, lowering her voice for the last part of her sentence.

'Have you, perhaps, a biscuit?' Miss Thorne asks.

'Just what's up there on the board,' the girl, tossing her hair, exchanges looks with the little group who are now gathered at one of the sticky tables.

‘Oh well, we’ll just have the tea then thank you.’

It is not a comfortable place for the three ladies to sip their tea. It is not the kind of place where it is possible to slip a little fortification into the beverage. Miss Thorne, self consciously, and it is not like her to be self conscious, tries to tap her foot in time to the terrible music. The music is worse than anything the girls listen to in their own sitting rooms at Pine Heights.

Dirty curtains obscure any view over the surrounding wheat paddocks. The young people seem to have made up their minds to stare at the travellers.

‘Of course,’ Miss Thorne, disconcerted, lowers her voice to Miss Snowdon, scalding her lips on the deceptively hot tea, ‘they have nowhere else to *be*. I mean *where* in this whole empty country have these young people got a place to go!’ At the words ‘whole empty country’ she makes a gesture with her free hand and sends Miss Edgely’s paper beaker of steaming tea straight into her unready lap.

‘Oh! My deah! I’m so terribly sorry!’ Miss Thorne jumps up spilling more tea as her large hip catches the corner of the wobbling chrome and formica table. ‘Are you badly scalded deah? I mean down there it’s . . .’

‘I’m quite all right,’ Edgely snaps. She is embarrassed and irritated as well as scalded. Miss Thorne, quite rightly, thinks she is near tears.

The beat and the whip crack and the thin haunting voice singing ‘I feel love’ fills the squalid little cafe as they get up to leave. The music disturbs Miss Thorne bringing back to her an event from which she has not regained balance. As they move towards the door there is a moment of confusion as to which of the three ladies shall go out first. Miss Thorne distinctly overhears unpleasantly rude remarks. She is sure they are being secretly jeered at. The uncomfortable feeling lasts for the rest of the long drive, and it is in this same frame of mind that all

three of them survey with dismay the three unmade beds in the motel room.

It is a dark room, newly built and heavily curtained against known heat. The rubbish of leftover food has not been removed. The only sounds are the buzzing of enormous flies and the harsh voices of crows in the distance. The harvested paddocks stretch from the dusty piece of ground where the motel is to the horizon. Sheep are feeding on the wheat stubble. They move slowly, keeping together and spreading out towards the sky. A thunderstorm shower falling in one place, has left the sheep and the wheat stalks looking stained and patched.

The unmade beds cause private thoughts of hitherto unknown erotic adventures to race and surge within the indignant breast.

'Men!' Miss Thorne says turning away in disgust. 'I've no use for them, especially the sort who go on agricultural outings.' She indicates the decorated mini-bus parked near by.

'Why isn't our room ready for us,' Miss Snowdon demands. They watch the men entering the swing doors leading to the office.

'Any way *à propos* . . .' Miss Snowdon jerks her head in the direction of the little file of male guests. 'They're half your age deah, all except the one at the end, and he looks American.'

'There must be another room,' Miss Thorne chooses to ignore Miss Snowdon's remark which is in very poor taste, 'if this room has been . . . er . . . used by three men it must be thoroughly cleaned out.'

It is after this, when they are settled in a cleaner, if not perfectly clean unit, that Edgely goes off for her walk, the novelist explained. For the whole of the long car ride she has been brooding on the awful thing Miss Thorne said the night before.
