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She's dreaming then she's awake her heart still beating with the aftershock of the vision. Flight. A sensation of falling. Fetching up in a place she's never been yet which she unaccountably recognizes. *Déjà vu*. She knows that's what the feeling is called. You didn't have to be asleep to have it either.

She opens her eyes. Sunlight falls in long stripes across the floor and over the bed. It's quiet: still early she guesses. She lies for a long minute or so thinking about the dream her gaze moving around the room noting its familiar objects—the mirror the door the clothes flung across the chair the book open at the page she fell asleep reading. It strikes her that something about the room has changed—although it all looks the same as it did the night before. It is as if while she was asleep everything had been removed and replaced with its exact replica. To the naked eye the difference is imperceptible and yet. You can't prove it isn't so.

She gets out of bed and pads across the room to open the shutters. At once the room is filled with dazzling light. From outside comes the smell of damp earth and flowers. The sound of a sprinkler. For an instant she feels perfectly happy: *to be here and nowhere else*. Then she turns from the window and catches sight of herself.

The face in the mirror wears a hangdog look as if it knows it is not the one she would have chosen if she had had a say in it. A long oval with eyes set too high in a long thin face: the face of a knight in a medieval painting. St Joan her mother said when she cut her hair. But the eyes are the wrong colour. Joan's eyes she knows would have been brown not blue. Her eyebrows are too pale—bleached by the sun. In certain lights they look invisible. And her teeth are crooked—she'll probably need a brace. She heard Vivienne talking about it the other day.

The water in the shower is cold its icy droplets sting her into wakefulness. She turns the jet on full and the water batters her face momentarily blinding her—filling her open mouth with its rusty taste. Her wet hair lies flat against her scalp—a swimming dog she thinks. She scrubs her teeth so hard flecks of blood appear in the foam. She will not wear a brace. They will have to kill her first.

Getting dressed is a process of compromise as always. Left to her own devices she would wear what she likes—shorts and an Aertex shirt. Her snake-belt. Sandals. No socks. But because it is school she has to wear a stupid dress and slides to stop her hair getting in her eyes. It would be simpler just to cut her hair shorter but Vivienne says no. If she'd wanted a boy she would have ordered one she says.

When she has wrestled herself into her dress tied the sash any-old-how and pulled up her socks she goes outside to where her mother is waiting.

Vivienne sits on the veranda holding the letter she has just opened like a picture of a woman reading. The sun falling through the wire-gauze screens that cover the windows at the front of the house throws criss-cross patterns on her face and hair. A faint smile touches her lips as she turns the page.

Vivienne is beautiful Tony knows—she has heard Jack says so. Jack is Tony's stepfather. When he and Vivienne first went to Acapulco he'd be sitting in the hotel bar waiting for Vivienne to join him and he'd known from the way everyone went quiet that she'd walked in.

Tony remembers that time—although she wasn't allowed to go to Acapulco. Instead she stayed with the Rileys. They had barbecues almost every night. Peter Riley taught her how to play mah-jong. It was fun for a while but it got a bit boring after the first week. She missed Vivienne coming in to kiss her goodnight.

Her mother glances up.

'Morning, Antonia. Sleep well?'

'I had a funny dream.'

'Poor darling. You should have called me.'

'It wasn't a bad dream. Just strange. As if...' Tony thinks a moment. 'Can you have other people's dreams?'

But Vivienne is no longer listening. 'Mm-hmm,' she murmurs returning to her letter.

'Is that from Granny?' Tony shakes cornflakes into her bowl and pours on milk already souring in the heat.

'Yes. She sends her love.' Vivienne frowns suddenly. 'Have you brushed your hair this morning?'

'Sort of.'

'Well, sort of do it again. Guess what?' Vivienne says. 'Your uncle Julian's getting married.'

'Who to?'

'Her name's Phyllis Skeffington. Her people are in Kenya. Granny says she seems very suitable...'

'What does that mean?'

Vivienne laughs and shakes her head. 'Ask Granny' is all she will say.

Tony tries without success to summon up an image of her mother's younger brother. She knows what he looks like from photographs of course; but the memories she has of the time before they left England are becoming increasingly vague. Julian exists only as a single memory: a face smiling down at her; a voice saying somewhere above her head, 'What a funny little thing. She doesn't say much, does she?'

'You remember him, don't you?' Vivienne asks. 'He was always so fond of you...'

'Was he the one who used to do card tricks?'

She shakes her head. 'You're thinking of Grandpa...'

She sounds so disappointed that Tony makes another effort to salvage the situation. 'Of course. Uncle Julian. He took me to the zoo once, didn't he?'

And Vivienne smiles. 'Fancy your remembering that. You must have been no more than four or five...'

In fact she has no memory of the occasion. It's something she's been told about that's all. Now she comes to think of it there's even a photograph somewhere of her and her tall skinny uncle standing in front of the lion's cage. An out-of-focus image—as if the person who took it were standing slightly too close or had moved at the wrong moment. Through the criss-crossed wire of the cage you can just make out the shaggy massive shape of

the crouching beast.

Thinking about the lion makes her think about the last time she went to the zoo in Caracas. She'd been looking forward to going but when they got there all the animals were asleep. It was the heat Jack said. She felt sorry for the lions in their tiny cages. Their tails twitched as they slept flicking away flies. There was a bear that walked up and down swinging its head from side to side. The poor thing was crazy from being locked up so long Jack said.

She eats her cornflakes trying not to scrape the bowl too much because it gets on Vivienne's nerves. Vivienne sits silently beside her. Together they gaze out over the garden with its orange trees mangoes and acacias. Things grown like wildfire here. Fan-shaped palms and purple hibiscus; scarlet poinsettias orchids and red-hot pokers. Everything steams with moisture and the smell of decaying vegetation mingles with the sweeter scent of flowers. The January sky is a clear intense blue.

The veranda where they're sitting is the coolest place to be at this time of day: the sun hasn't yet moved round to this side of the house and the wire screens which keep out the mosquitoes make it pleasantly dark. If there's time before school in the morning Tony likes to curl up with a book in one of the bamboo chairs with the rose-patterned chintz covers Vivienne got from Heal's while Consuelo clears the breakfast things and Vivienne does her face.

It's the time of day Tony loves most—with everything cool and peaceful and just the two of them together. Vivienne making that intent slightly frowning face she always makes as she peers in the little round mirror of her compact. Arching her eyebrows as she pats the loose powder over her nose and forehead—'taking the shine away' is what she calls it. Making a smooth round 'O' of her lips as she puts on her lipstick. Red Velvet by Max Factor.

But today there's no time. As Tony swallows the last mouthful of cereal the honk of a car horn signals the arrival of Mrs Porter's big green Packard.

'Here's Joan,' says Vivienne starting out of the daydream she's fallen into. 'Better get your skates on...'

Tony's satchel is in her room; she runs to fetch it. As she passes the mirror she sees that her hair—now dry—is sticking up on end. She seizes the brush to flatten it down but to little effect. Her face stares mournfully back at her. *I told you so.* She doesn't know what she's done to deserve a face like this. When they're trying to be kind people tell her she's like her mother. She can't see it herself. She supposes she must resemble Ralph—her father. It's hard to tell from the one photograph she's seen: a snapshot of him in uniform taken just before his plane went missing over Germany.

She rushes back through the house towards the veranda. In her haste she's left the buckle on one of her sandals undone. The shoe flies off nearly tripping her up. Muttering under her breath she stoops to fasten it.

In this position half-hidden by the screen door she overhears Mrs Porter talking to Vivienne.

'Ronnie says Jack really tied one on last night...'

'It's the same every night,' Vivienne says.

'Of course it's none of my business,' says Mrs Porter, 'but—aren't you just a teensy bit worried about what might happen?'

Vivienne shrugs. 'Oh, Jack's a very good driver. Even when he's half-cut...'

'I didn't mean that. I meant, well, *vis-à-vis* the company. These things get about, you know.' Mrs Porter lowers her voice conspiratorially. 'It might affect his chances of promotion. I mean, when Jim Lang retires...'

'That's Jack's affair,' Vivienne says sharply. She gives a little toss of her head. 'Besides, you don't imagine anything I say would have any effect...'

'But surely...' Mrs Porter starts to reply but then Vivienne catches sight of Tony and makes a warning sign to the other woman.

'*Pas devant l'enfant,*' she murmurs. 'Come on, Antonia, what are you waiting for?' she says.

'Hello, Tony dear,' says Mrs Porter heartily.

'Hello, Mrs Porter.'

As Mrs Porter starts down the steps towards the car Tony glares at her fat back. Only her friends are allowed to call her

Tony. She decides after what she's heard that she doesn't like Mrs Porter any more. She has no right to tell tales about Jack. Mrs Porter is fat and has BO. When she smiles there are flecks of lipstick on her teeth. And she dyes her hair. Vivienne says ladies don't dye their hair. Vivienne wears her hair in smooth blonde waves like Grace Kelly. She wears skirts that almost reach the ground and smells very faintly of eau-de-Cologne.

Tony sits in the back seat of the car which smells of leather and Ronnie's pipe and Mrs Porter's sweat as they bounce over the uneven jungle roads through plantations of banana trees with enormous ragged leaves; beneath tangled creepers which turn the road into a green tunnel.

'How's Ronnie?' Vivienne always asks about Ronnie. Which is strange because Tony doesn't think she likes him very much. 'An awful little man,' she called him once talking to Jack.

'Oh, he's tickety-boo,' says Mrs Porter helping herself to a Player's from the packet on the dashboard. She offers one to Vivienne, who shakes her head. 'Looking forward to lovely leave, of course. Just think. Two whole months in GB, away from this hell-hole. Cream teas. The Light Programme. *Hell's teeth!*' The car swerves suddenly to avoid a small black pig which has wandered into the middle of the road. 'Pardon my French,' Mrs Porter says.

Next year there's going to be a new road to join up with the brand-new four-lane highway that goes to Maracaibo; but until then there's no alternative to this winding unreliable track which is bordered on one side by a precipitous drop into a ravine filled with trees; on the other by a wall of soft red rock which turns to mud in the rainy season blocking the road with landslides.

'I had a letter from home today,' Vivienne says. 'My brother's getting married...'

'How lovely,' croons Mrs Porter. 'When's the wedding going to be?'

'Oh, not for a while. They'll wait until after the celebrations, I should think...'

'Yes, I imagine June will be rather a quiet month for weddings *this* year,' Mrs Porter chuckles. 'Such a pity we couldn't get our leave extended by a couple of weeks, but there you are. Of

course,' she sniffs, 'it helps if you've got people in high places to pull strings. Naming no names, but still...'

'If you mean the Lumsdens, I gather their leave was booked months ago. It's pure coincidence that they'll be at home in June.'

'It can't hurt that *she's* so thick with the consul,' Mrs Porter retorts. 'Her brother was at school with him, apparently. A word in the right place, don't you know...'

Vivienne does not reply. She examines her fingernails as if she has suddenly noticed a chip in the smooth polish. 'Have you got your French grammar with you, Antonia?' she asks without turning round. 'Because I think I've left mine at home.'

'French verbs,' says Mrs Porter cheerily—apparently not at all put out by Vivienne's silence. '*Ooh là là...*'

They reach the outskirts of the town passing the wooden shacks where the native workers live and then a row of newly built bungalows for the company employees. All these houses look the same with a sloping roof and a window on either side of the door like a house Tony might have drawn when she was little. They're arranged in neat lines exactly the same distance apart—like Toytown Jack says—but Tony thinks it must be fun to live in a house exactly the same as all her friends' houses. They pass the company store with its Calor Gas canisters and five-gallon containers of water lined up on the porch outside then the still-unfinished hospital and arrive at last in front of the school. This is a white one-storey building with windows on one side. A few trees cast their inky shade over the yard which surrounds it.

Mrs Porter stops the car. 'Well, cheerie-bye,' she says. 'Jack picking you up this afternoon?'

'That's right.' Vivienne lifts the bag containing her school-work from the back seat. 'Thanks, Joan.'

Mrs Porter toots the horn cheerfully and the car disappears down the road in a cloud of white dust. Mrs Porter works too—one of the few company wives who does apart from Vivienne. She does the company accounts. 'So she can keep an eye on what everyone else is being paid,' Vivienne says to Jack and then reproaches herself for her unkindness. Joan has a heart of gold she says.

No one else has arrived yet of course. It's one of the disadvantages of being a teacher's child Tony thinks: you're always the first to arrive and the last to leave. Vivienne busies herself setting out the books for the first lesson and then goes to check that the generator for the air-conditioning is still working. It's always breaking down. Last month they had a day off school while it was being fixed. No such luck today though. As Vivienne returns a car pulls up and the Wilson girls—Jane and Valerie—get out. From where Tony's sitting she can hear them bickering.

'I didn't,' says Valerie.

'You did,' says Jane.

And then there's a thin scream as one of them—Jane probably—pinches the other. Jane is the elder. She's eleven—the same age as Tony. Tony quite likes Jane but she can be spiteful. Last week she puts a stick insect down Mary McBride's back.

'Good morning, girls,' says Vivienne as they come in.

'Good morning Mrs Lindberg,' they chant in unison.

They sit in their usual places at the back of the class. The desks are arranged in two rows with their seats fixed on metal runners which can be moved forward and back. Museum pieces Vivienne calls them. They came from a prep school in England. Their wooden tops are scarred with the names of boys who have sat there over the years and the holes where their china inkwells sit are black with use.

As Valerie goes to sit down she gives a little gasp. Jane has put something on her seat.

Vivienne glances up. 'What's the matter, Valerie?'

Valerie's cheeks go red. She looks at the floor. Jane is gazing innocently out of the window.

'I... I... Nothing,' says Valerie.

'Well, just sit quietly until the others get here,' says Vivienne in a tone of mild reproof.

At half-past eight she calls the register. Geoffrey Brown and Michael Brown—present. Belinda Johnson—absent (the Johnsons are only just back from leave). Antonia Lindberg Mary McBride and Jennifer Riley—present. Annetje van Wel—absent. Karel van Wel Jane Wilson and Valerie Wilson—present.

'What's the matter with your sister?' Vivienne asks Karel. 'Not

her eyes again, I hope...'

He looks uncomfortable. 'Her eyes—bad,' he says painfully. 'Her head too. Very bad...'

'Poor child,' Vivienne murmurs. 'Let's hope she feels better soon...'

Something about the way she says this makes Tony think that maybe Annetje isn't really ill at all. Last time Annetje was away from school she overheard Vivienne telling Jack about Annetje's mother. 'She keepadmitted as much when I spoke to her about it...'

'I don't see what's so bad about staying at home,' Jack said.

This was the starting point for another argument about work. Jack wants Vivienne to give up her job. He can't understand why she should want to go on working now she's married to him. She should stay at home and take it easy he says. The doctor says so too. Last year Vivienne nearly died. She was going to have a baby but then she lost it. It was working too much in the heat the doctor said.

Vivienne says it's the first time she's had a school of her own. Something she's built up from scratch. If she goes the school goes too. It means too much to her to let that happen she says.

Jack says the company can always get another teacher. It won't be so easy for him to get another wife.

You never had any trouble before Vivienne says.

Jack's been married three times counting Vivienne. Once was to a girl in Texas called Mary-Jean; the second was to a Venezuelan. Her name was Dolores and she ran away with one of Jack's friends. This is one of the things Tony isn't supposed to know about.

'Antonia —' Her mother's voice breaks into her thoughts. 'Are you paying attention? We're on page fifty-three. Start reading, please.'

Sometimes Tony thinks she's stricter with her than with the others.

She opens her book. 'I wandered lonely as a cloud...'

'A little louder, please,' says Vivienne. 'I don't think Michael can hear you...'

Michael Brown freezes in the act of flicking an ink pellet at

Karel van Wel. The class settles down. Soon the only sounds which can be heard are Tony's voice and the dry whirring of cicadas in the long grass at the edge of the playground.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze...

'Go on, please, Jennifer,' says Vivienne. She gets up from her chair at the front of the class and begins to pace slowly up and down the room between the desks. As she passes her chair she rests her hand briefly on Tony's shoulder.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way...

Jennifer is stumbling to the end of her stanza when there's a knock on the glass panel of the classroom door. It's Mr van Wel: Karel and Annetje's father. Vivienne goes to speak to him. Tony can't hear what they're saying but through the glass she can see his face as he explains something to Vivienne and the expression on Vivienne's face as she listens to what he's saying. She looks serious—even worried—so Tony guesses the news isn't good.

Karel must be thinking the same thing because when the door opens he gets to his feet in a rush.

'It's all right, Karel,' says Vivienne. 'No need to be alarmed. Your sister's got scarlet fever. I've told your father you can stay with us for a bit, to make things easier for your mother.'

Karel's father appears for a moment in the doorway behind Vivienne. He's tall and thin with a bony face and a big nose like a beak. The strangest thing about him is his hair. It's completely grey—although he can't be that old Tony thinks. It's hard to tell with grown-ups. Jack's over forty and his hair's still dark, except for a bit at the edges.

Karel's father says something to him in Dutch and after a

moment's hesitation Karel goes back to his seat and sits down. Mr van Wel looks at Vivienne.

'Thank you,' he says. It sounds more like *Sank you*. Vivienne smiles slightly—the way she does when she's embarrassed.

'It's no trouble,' she says. 'Really.'

When the door has closed behind Mr van Wel Vivienne picks up *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* from the desk. After looking around to see that everyone is paying attention she begins to read aloud. Her voice is beautiful: low and melodious with the slight huskiness she always gets when she's sad or pleased. It's the way her voice sounds when she talks of home Tony thinks—or about the way things were before the war.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

When she stops reading she stands for a minute with the book held open in front of her looking out over their mute upturned faces at the view from the window behind: the cracked earth yard blazing white in the heat; the dead black shadows of the dusty trees.

At midday when school finishes Karel stays behind sitting silently at his desk while Vivienne collects up the books and cleans the blackboard and Tony sharpens pencils. Usually it's a task she enjoys. There's something satisfying about the exactness of the movements necessary to achieve the perfect point: neither too blunt nor too sharp. The clean scent of wood shavings is nice too; and the way they fall in fragile spirals from the revolving tip.

But today her mind's not on it; several times she even ends up breaking the newly sharpened point right off. She's distracted by the presence of a third person—what a nuisance it is having him around. It's not even as if he were one of her friends.

'Would you like a drink, Karel?' Vivienne asks starting to

unscrew the top of the thermos flask of Rose's Lime Juice Cordial she packs every morning for the midday break. Despite the air-conditioning which hums all the time in the background it's already stifling in the classroom and it'll be even hotter outside.

To Tony's surprise Karel shakes his head. No. As if he were angry with her mother for asking such a stupid question.

Holding her breath the curl of shavings trembling on the end of the pencil she's sharpening she watches them both.

'I expect you're worried about your sister, aren't you?' Vivienne goes on calmly as if she hadn't noticed Karel's rudeness. 'But you mustn't worry. Everything will be all right, you'll see...'

She pours lime juice into three paper cups and gives one to Tony. Another she sets in front of Karel. 'Drink it,' she tells him. 'It'll make you feel better.'

Then she sits down at her desk and begins to go through a pile of exercise books making small neat marks with a red pencil. After a while Tony sees Karel's hand snake out towards the cup. He picks it up and with another furtive half-angry look at Vivienne he starts to drink.

At quarter-past there's the scrunch of tyres on the dirt road outside and the honk of a car horn as Jack arrives. Tony waves to him from the window and he raises his hand in mock salute from behind the wheel of the bright red Chevy. It's the latest model. Whitewall tyres and a fold-down top. Vivienne says he cares more for that car than he does for her.

'Jack's here,' Tony tells her—thinking perhaps she hasn't heard the car.

'I know.' She carries on with what she's doing frowning a little as she spots another mistake in Jennifer Riley's French composition. 'Tell him I'll be right out.' As Tony reaches the door of the classroom Vivienne remembers Karel. 'You can go too, dear,' she says to him.

When they step outside it's like opening an oven door. So hot it burns your lungs to take a breath. Midday's the hottest time. It's when everything stops. The company offices close and the factory shuts down. There's a song Vivienne likes to sing when she's in the mood. *Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-*

day sun... It's meant to be funny of course—but Tony knows it's not true. No one goes out in the midday sun. Even the Guajiro Indians stay at home.

They cross the yard where the sun beats down their shoes scuffing up white dust. On the backs of Karel's legs are marks like bruises: red fading to purple fading to brownish-yellow. Karel's nine—a lot younger than Tony. His father works for Jack. It's his first contract and Karel and his mother and sister only came out to join him a few months ago. Before they were living somewhere in Holland. Tony can't remember where. Things were very bad for them there Vivienne says.

'Hiya, Sport,' Jack says to Karel as they reach the car. He leans across to open the rear door. 'Hop in. Where's your mother?' he asks Tony.

'Just coming.'

She climbs in beside Karel who's huddling timidly in the far corner as if he's trying to make himself invisible. The ridged leather seat feels hot against the backs of her legs and a trickle of sweat runs down her back between her shoulder blades as she wriggles around trying to find a cool spot. By the time they reach La Soledad her dress will be sticking to her—even though it's only a short ride.

Jack turns to smile at her. His teeth are very white in his brown face and his hair is combed straight back in crisp waves. A long time ago when he was a kid in Texas someone broke Jack's nose in a bar-room fight. Over a woman he says when he tells this story. When he was a kid Jack used to box. He was featherweight champion of El Paso when he was sixteen years old. You can still see the scar where he split his upper lip defending the title.

'Hey, Princess,' he says. 'Guess what? The spare parts for your mother's sewing machine arrived today. Wanna come along with me and pick them up from the factory?'

'You bet.'

'That's settled. First thing after lunch.' He winks at Karel. 'Maybe Sport here wants to come along too.'

Karel returns Jack's gaze without smiling. He doesn't say he will come but he doesn't say he won't either. Tony hopes he

doesn't. She likes going to the factory with Jack. Having somebody else along would spoil it.

At that moment Vivienne comes out of the building carrying an armful of books. She stands for a minute on the porch shading her eyes with her free hand as she looks around for the car. In her pale blue gingham dress with its wide skirts and narrow waist she looks very cool and remote.

Jack gets out of the car and takes the pile of books from her arms. He opens the passenger door and waits until she's seated before handing them back to her. Then he gets back in and starts the car.

It's true that Jack drives faster than Mrs Porter but somehow when he's driving the journey seems to take no time at all. The Chevy flies over the dirt road scattering rocks and torn pieces of liana and once a flock of parakeets which rise up from the road in a blur of yellow and blue wings.

At intervals along the edge of the road are small structures of brick and whitewashed plaster resembling miniature houses with panes of glass set into the front or an iron grille through which you can see what's inside. Sometimes it's no more than a jar full of withered flowers and a roughly fashioned cross; other shrines are more elaborate—containing statues of the Virgin or even photographs of the dead. When Tony first came here she used to call these makeshift memorials 'chicken chapels'; but even then she knew what they really were. Maracuchos are crazy drivers Jack says. Every so often one of them takes a corner too fast and goes over the edge.

They turn off the road into the drive that runs for perhaps a quarter of a mile through the stretch of cleared jungle which forms the outskirts of their garden. A stream runs through it; most of the year it's just a trickle but it gets quite deep in the rainy season. When they first came to La Soledad two years ago and Tony was only nine she used to try and jump across in one go. She remembers the time she lost her balance and how cross Consuelo was with her for getting her frock wet. Now she can step across quite easily. It's hard to believe she ever found it difficult.

She gives silent Karel a nudge. 'See that poinsettia bush? I

found the most enormous snake there a few days ago. Dead, of course. One of the gardeners had chopped its head off with a machete...'

Karel's only response to this friendly overture is a look of horror. He shrinks further back into his corner.

'That's enough, Antonia,' says her mother sharply.

Then the red-tiled roof of La Soledad appears above the screen of bushes. This isn't like the rest of the company houses at all but much larger and built of stone not matchwood—which is what Jack says the company houses are made of. La Soledad has big cool rooms with stone floors and shutters on all the windows to keep out the flies. It has beautiful gardens and stables—a real *hacienda* Jack says. The man who built it owned all the land for miles around. One of Gomez's boys—reaping the benefits of services rendered. And then they found oil—and old Gomez suddenly wanted his gift back again.

The car pulls up in front. Jack gets out and goes round to open the door for Vivienne but she's already getting out of the car dropping exercise books all over the place in her hurry. As fast as she drops them Jack picks them up and there's an undignified little scuffle as he tries to relieve her of the rest of the pile.

'Give me those.'

'I can manage, thank you.'

Both of them seem for the moment to have forgotten about Tony and Karel. She looks at him and sighs. After the snake episode she doesn't feel much like starting a conversation but she resolves to give him one more chance. She reaches across and opens the car door taking him by surprise so that he almost tumbles out onto the gravel. She slides across the seat after him.

'Come on,' she says to him. 'I'll show you where you're going to sleep...'

But at this reminder of his displaced status his face crumples and his eyes fill with tears. He blinks and looks away. Fortunately at that moment Vivienne remembers him.

'Karel,' she calls from the veranda steps.

Obediently he follows her.

Inside you can feel the coolness rising from the stone floor as

your eyes adjust to the darkness. Here the sun penetrates only through the mesh of the mosquito screens: blurred golden circles scatter the worn red tiles as if someone had thrown down a handful of coins.

Through the open double doors is a sitting room that runs the full width of the house and is separated from the rooms beyond by a stone arch. Unlike the Spanish colonial style of the rest of the house the furniture in the sitting room is modern. The chairs are light-coloured wood, upholstered in a black and yellow zigzag pattern resembling lightning bolts. The tables are triangular with glass tops. There's a tall black metal lamp with a pleated parchment shade and a set of bookends carved to look like galleons in full sail.

In the corner is a bar with a black and gold speckled top and a ridged front painted to look like bamboo. It's Jack's bar—where he keeps his sets of cocktail glasses and liqueur glasses and high-ball glasses and the shaker for the cocktails and the chrome ice-bucket you can see your face in. In the evenings when Jack and Tony are waiting for Vivienne to finish dressing he fixes them both a drink and they sit there just the two of them. Jack puts a record on the record player—he likes Frank Sinatra but Tony prefers Harry Belafonte—and lights up his first cigarette of the night and then they talk.

Sometimes Jack tells her about his day at work—about the troubles they've had with the Number Five drilling rig at La Concepción and the fresh seepages they've discovered at Mene Grande and the problems they've got with the union—the CTP—about the increased productivity bonus they're demanding for their workers—although you can't blame them for wanting a piece of the pie Jack says. Production was two million barrels a day last year. This year it looks as if it might be even better.

If he's in the mood he might tell her a funny story. The one about the man who was teasing a parrot and the *guacamayo* got hold of his nose with its beak and wouldn't let go. 'When we got that thing off him at last he looked like hell,' Jack says. 'His nose all purple and swelled to three times its size.'

Tony laughs—more on account of the way Jack tells this story than because she finds it funny. She's seen what a parrot's bill

can do to a stick. The thought of that pincer grip on flesh and bone is almost more than she can bear.

Jack has other stories like that—which are funny and horrible at the same time. Once he saw a man electrocuted in the factory yard. It was during the rainy season. The man was spot-welding a piece of equipment and stepped back into a puddle with the welding torch in his hand. ‘Dead before you could blink,’ Jack says. ‘And the darnedest thing was, the metal fillings in his teeth had welded themselves together. Like he was laughing all over his face,’ Jack says, ‘only nobody else could see the funny side.’

Tony prefers the stories about when Jack was a boy. The time he was fooling around in the back yard peeling potatoes for his Mom and picked up an old umbrella spoke that was lying around and fixed a potato to it and bent it back and let it fly. ‘The darn thing went over the wall and straight through the storefront window of the Excelsior Carpet Company. The first plate-glass window in town. What a licking I got...’ The time he played hookey to watch the poker game at the saloon and the preacher caught him. ‘I didn’t think to ask him what *he* was doing in the saloon...’ The small town where he grew up—‘Nowheresville, Texas’—with its church its schoolhouse and its drugstore is as familiar to her through Jack’s account of it as if she’d grown up there herself.

‘You know it’s a funny thing,’ he says to her one evening. ‘But when I look back, it seems like a different world. I guess it *was* a different world... but hell, it wasn’t that long ago. I’m talking about twenty, maybe thirty years...’

‘Before the war,’ Tony reminds him.

‘Sure. Before the war. I guess that about says it all...’ His voice tails off. It’s as if he’s forgotten she’s there.

‘What was the war like?’ Tony asks him when he has been quiet for a while. She doesn’t really want to know the answer to this question but it’s the only way she can think of to get him to go on talking.

Jack looks at her and laughs. Not the way you laugh when someone says something funny but a different kind of laugh. As if he can’t quite believe what he’s heard her say.

‘What was the war like?’ He takes a deep drag on his cigarette.

Thinking about it. 'I'll tell you what the war was like. The war was a mess.' He frowns as he says this as if he were angry about something; Tony doesn't think it's her he's angry with but she's not sure about this. 'You're too young to remember,' Jack says with a look that reassures her a little 'but a helluva lot of terrible things happened in those years.' He taps the ash from the end of his cigarette into the Lucky Strike ashtray at the end of the bar. He has a collection of ashtrays with different designs painted on them. Tony's favourite is the one with the Black Cat Girl. 'I lost a lot of friends,' Jack says. 'So did a lot of people. Why, your Mom...'

He breaks off what he's about to say as Vivienne appears in the doorway. She's wearing her green silk dress with the pattern of angel-fish swimming around the skirt and the gold brooch in the shape of an orchid Jack bought her when they got married.

'My, my,' says Jack softly. 'Do I know this good-looking gal?'

This is the best part of the evening—with Vivienne still in a good mood and Jack still on his first drink and everything the way it ought to be. If they're staying in this is sometimes how things stay. Friendly and relaxed—the way people are in other families. With no one getting upset no one drinking too much or crying.

Tony can remember an evening like this not long ago.

More often than not Jack and Vivienne are going out—or they're having people in. And then you can be sure something will happen to spoil the mood. It's a feeling in the air like electricity. People are laughing and talking but underneath you can feel the tension. Somebody says something—or thinks somebody else said something—and the mood changes as suddenly as if somebody flicked a switch.

It was different when Jack and Vivienne first got married Tony thinks. Then they never used to quarrel. Tony'd come in and find them sitting opposite one another at the breakfast table not saying anything just looking at each other. That's what people did when they were in love. One night when she'd got up to go to the bathroom she'd seen them dancing. There'd been music coming from the lighted room and when she went to investigate she saw them: Vivienne in Jack's arms laughing and protesting

as he whirled her around the room to the strains of 'In the Mood'.

Tony goes into the kitchen where Consuelo is making lunch.

'What is it today, Consuelo?'

'Soup,' Consuelo says. It's always soup. 'Quick,' she frowns. 'Your Mama's waiting. And your little fren'.'

'He's not my friend.'

'Go wash your hands,' she says before Tony can say anything else. She turns back to her cooking.

When Tony goes into the dining room Vivienne and Karel are already seated. Jack has gone for his shower. He seldom eats with them—preferring to grab a bite to eat on his way out. Sometimes Tony sits with him while he has his meal. Consuelo always puts something by for him: a bowl of the hot spicy soup which is her speciality or a leg of cold chicken which he eats with his fingers—tearing at it with his strong white teeth.

Today it's Tony's favourite—shepherd's pie. When she first came to live with them the only things Consuelo knew how to cook were *arepas* and *chachapas* and *pabellón criollo*. It took Vivienne ages to teach her how to cook English food.

When Consuelo's in a good mood she sometimes lets Tony watch her get the supper. Consuelo sleeps in the room next to the kitchen. Her family lives a few miles away in one of the shacks on the edge of the *pueblo*. One day Consuelo brought her baby with her to work. He's a nice baby Tony thinks. Consuelo's mother looks after him most of the time. He's called Jesús María. Vivienne says Catholics always have those kinds of names.

Vivienne unfolds her starched napkin with a little shake and spreads it across her lap. This is the signal for them to begin eating. They don't say grace like they do at Mary McBride's. Her father's going to be the vicar when the church is built. At the moment the nearest Protestant church is in Maracaibo, but the main one is in Caracas. Tony went there with Vivienne last Christmas. It was nice; they had a crib with carved wooden figures. And the service was in English; it reminded Vivienne of home.

Last Christmas in Caracas they stayed for a whole week at the Hotel Tamanaco. It's one of Tony's favourite places—all clean and white and modern with terraces like an Aztec ziggurat and

waiters who bring you drinks on silver trays. There's a swimming pool with turquoise tiles on the bottom instead of painted concrete and a proper diving board. Round the edge of the pool are little tables with striped umbrellas to keep off the sun. On Christmas Day Jack and Vivienne sat at one of the tables drinking dry Martinis while Tony practised her diving. Later they got dressed up and went out to eat at the Country Club. Its golf course is the best in the city. Jack says he's going to teach Tony how to play.

The best part of the whole trip was when Jack took her for a ride on the *Teleférico*. It's scary at first until you get used to it: the way the little car lurches forward and you find yourself suspended with nothing between you and thin air but the flimsy compartment you're in which rocks and sways with every gust of wind. But then you start to move steadily and smoothly along the humming cables with the city spread out beneath you all white and glittering in the sunshine and the distant mountains seeming suddenly close enough to touch.

'When are we going to Caracas again?' Tony asks her mother.

Vivienne looks at her a moment before replying. 'Why?'

'I just wondered, that's all.'

'It depends,' she says vaguely. 'In a few weeks' time, perhaps. Karel dear, you're not eating. Aren't you feeling well?'

He shakes his head angrily not looking at her.

Vivienne reaches out her hand to touch his forehead. He flinches away. 'You don't feel hot,' she says gently. 'Perhaps you're just tired. Would you like to go and lie down?'

Maybe it's the heat or the fact that he's in a strange place but something seems to have upset Karel. Suddenly without warning he starts to cry. Pushing back his chair he runs out of the room. A moment later they hear the screen door slam.

'Oh dear,' says Vivienne giving Tony a look that's half-way between a smile and a frown. 'I was afraid something like this might happen. Go after him, will you, sweetie?'

She's about to say that she's probably the last person Karel wants to see when Jack appears. He's shaved and showered and changed his shirt. He winks at Tony.

'Ready, Princess?'

She pushes back her chair. 'Ready.'

'Are you going somewhere?' Vivienne asks without looking up.

Jack answers for her. 'Tony and I are going to stop by the factory. Don't worry, I'll make sure she's back in time for afternoon school...'

'Antonia has something to do first,' Vivienne says. 'Don't you, Antonia?'

Tony gets up and walks reluctantly to the door. 'See you outside,' she says to Jack.

From the raised platform of the veranda she scans the garden—narrowing her eyes against the glare. Karel is nowhere to be seen. Stupid boy. Trust him to spoil things. She goes down the steps to the gravel drive looking around to see if she can spot him.

The trouble is there are so many hiding places in this garden. It depends how far he's run. She checks the shrubbery at the front of the house first then goes round to the back. There's a clump of acacias not far from the house where she goes when she wants to be on her own. But he isn't there either.

Feeling more and more annoyed with each minute that passes she runs to where the garden with its flowering shrubs and carefully tended grass which Juan the gardener waters twice a day becomes the jungle. It's not really a jungle of course—just a thicket of bamboo and razor grass so sharp it can slash your hand if you touch it—but that's what she's always called it. If she wanted to hide this is where she'd come. It doesn't look as if anyone's passed this way recently though. The green shoots of bamboo are unbroken and the grass blades stand stiffly upright like a forest of knives.

A dry rustling sound makes her turn her head—but it's only an iguana startled by her sudden appearance. It looks at her with its golden eye—flicking its long tongue in and out as if tasting the air before darting away into the grass.

She turns back to the house. If she doesn't find him soon there won't be time to go to the factory with Jack.

Then she sees him skulking by the low stone wall at the edge of the patio. She must have passed him as she came this way—

unless he was hiding somewhere else watching her all the time. For some reason the thought makes her angry. She rushes up to him and grabs his arm.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she hisses giving him a little shake.

He doesn’t answer but she can see he’s scared of her. His lower lip trembles as if he’s going to start crying again. Tony lets go of his arm.

‘Look,’ she says as nicely as she can. ‘It’s all right. No one’s cross with you, or anything...’

‘I want to go home,’ Karel says suddenly.

Tony can’t think of anything to say.

At that moment Jack comes round the side of the house. He sees them and waves.

‘Let’s go,’ he says to Tony. ‘Your mother wants you back in an hour...’

‘OK, but...’ She looks at Karel. ‘What about him?’

‘Oh, Sport can sit in the back, can’t you, Sport? You never know,’ says Jack already walking away. ‘I might even buy him a soda pop...’

In the big factory shed everything’s quiet. The men who operate the machine shop are off somewhere having their lunch or resting. It’s too far for most of them to go home so mostly they just hang around until it’s time for work to resume. There’s a group of them playing cards in the open door of the shed. Dark-skinned men with gold teeth. As Jack and Karel and Tony walk past one of them shouts something in Spanish and the others laugh.

Without missing a beat Jack calls something back over his shoulder. There’s another burst of laughter.

‘What did he say?’

‘He said why didn’t the boss take a siesta like the rest of them, and I told him I was too busy thinking of ways to work him and his friends into the ground...’

They cross the wide empty floor of the vast shed which smells of spilled oil and creosote and something else—a rich smell like rotting fruit or sugar cane—which might just be the smell of the air itself blowing in from outside. It’s here that the repairs are done and equipment stored—although most of the actual drilling

machinery for the site is shipped in from abroad. There's a small airstrip out back where the weekly supplies plane from Maracaibo unloads its crates of whisky and Coca-Cola and bolts of dress material; its spare parts for American cars and English sewing machines.

On the far side of the shed is a door. This is Señor Hernández's office. He's the site manager. Jack doesn't bother to knock but goes straight in. Señor Hernández is leaning back in his swivel chair with his feet on the desk in front of him and a handkerchief over his face. When the door opens he lifts a corner of the handkerchief to see who it is. The minute he sees it's Jack he swings his feet down off the desk and reaches for his jacket.

'Hey,' says Jack parking himself on a corner of the desk. 'No need to get up.'

But Señor Hernández puts on his jacket just the same. He holds out his hand. '*Señor*,' he says clicking his heels together in a way that reminds Tony of Jack when he's being funny. Except that Señor Hernández isn't being funny. Proud as Lucifer Jack says like all his kind.

The two men shake hands.

'So how's it going, Ramón?'

Señor Hernández shrugs and clicks his tongue. 'As you see,' he says.

'And Señora Hernández and the children?'

'All well, praise God. Señora Lindberg too?'

'Never better,' says Jack.

'Ah, *la niña*, says Señor Hernández noticing Tony for the first time. 'With her little *amigo*.'

'Van Wel's kid,' says Jack.

The other inclines his head. 'Of course.' His dark eyes rest thoughtfully on Karel's thin face anxious beneath its helmet of pale hair. For a second it seems as if he might be about to forget himself—to reach out and stroke Karel's head the way he would if Karel were one of his own children. But in the end all he does is light a cigarette after first offering one to Jack.

'Any news from La Solita?' Jack wants to know.

Hernández shrugs. 'They let one boat leave the terminal this morning. That's all I know...'

'Those bastards at the CTP are pushing their luck,' says Jack. 'Comunistas,' says Hernández. '*Hijos de puta*.' He makes a face as if he's about to spit.

'Couldn't agree more,' says Jack. 'The question is—has there been any infiltration at the plant?'

Señor Hernández opens his mouth then closes it again. His eyes move just a little so that they're no longer looking at Jack.

'Oh sure,' Jack says. He reaches in the pocket of his khaki slacks and pulls out a handful of small change. 'Hey, Princess,' he says to Tony. 'Señor Hernández and I have some business to discuss. Why doncha go get yourself a soda pop? And whatever the kid wants—OK?'

She doesn't need telling twice. She takes the money from him and walks out of the room. As she crosses the shadowy floor of the factory shed she hears footsteps behind her a ghostly presence and knows Karel must have followed her. She feels a surge of anger—she's not a baby-minder after all—and wonders what he'd do if she yelled at him to get lost. But she decides it's not worth the effort. He's nothing but a kid. Better to act as if he didn't exist.

Walking just a little faster than she suspects he can comfortably manage she reaches the door of the shed where the game of cards is still in progress. She crosses the threshold with Karel at her heels just as one of the players throws down the queen of hearts.

'*Epa, chiquita*,' he says softly whistling between his teeth. The others laugh.

Tony wants to run to get away from that laughter. She turns and says sharply to Karel, 'Come on,' and they cross the concrete yard on which the sun beats down so fiercely you can feel the blood sing in your ears.

The doors of the wooden hut which is the site canteen stand open but it's no cooler inside. Flies circle around the broken ceiling fan. At metal tables along the walls groups of men in sweat-stained khaki work clothes sit around eating *empanadas* and drinking *café negro*. There's a strong smell of cigarettes not the filter-tipped kind either—*Cool as a mountain stream*—but the full-strength hand-rolled kind. After a few minutes the smell of

them gets in your mouth and nose and stays there.

Tony takes two bottles of 7-Up from the cooler and gives them to the woman behind the counter who smiles at her with her gold-capped teeth. She removes the metal tops with the bottle opener which hangs from a chain on the wall and hands them back.

‘Muchas gracias.’ Tony pushes the handful of *bolívares* across the counter. The woman takes two and pushes the rest back. As Tony starts to walk away she calls after her holding out two paper straws. *‘Gracias,’* Tony says again as she takes them from her. The fluted bottles feel nice and cold in her hands. She’s so thirsty she could drink them both. Instead she hands one to Karel standing mutely beside her. He mumbles something.

‘That’s OK,’ she tells him shrugging off his thanks. ‘Jack gave me the money. Come on. I know a place we can sit and drink these, out of the sun...’

On a strip of waste ground by the chain-link fence which surrounds the perimeter of the site is a stack of empty oil drums. Once when Tony was little she crawled inside one that was lying on its side and hid there in the rusty-smelling dark. Now she’s too big for such games. She squats down on the grass in the shade of the steel mountain and motions Karel to do the same. It’s not exactly cool and the grass feels dry and scratchy against her bare legs but at least they won’t get sunstroke.

For a few minutes they sit in silence drinking their 7-Ups. Tony holds on to the last mouthful as long as she can. The ticklish feeling you get at the back of your throat is nice and peculiar at the same time. It’s the same kind of feeling you get when you drink beer only the taste is nicer than beer. The time Jack offered Tony a sip of his Solero she pretended to like it so as not to hurt his feelings but really she couldn’t understand what the fuss was about. Whisky’s worse—the smell of it on Jack’s breath when he kisses her goodnight some nights almost knocks her over. Everything about grown-ups is strange Tony thinks—even the things they do for fun.

She sits back on her heels squinting at the scene in front of her through half-closed eyes. The site looks deserted; nothing moves or stirs in the heat. Across the glaring white of the

concrete lot which is stained here and there with glistening patches of oil from unloading trucks is a wide expanse of scrub-land. Earth baked the colour of an *adobe* wall when you scrape off the whitewash with your nail. Yellow grass sticking up in tufts. Black thorn trees like crouching witches. Heat haze shimmering above the invisible lake.

‘Is your sister very ill?’ Tony says to Karel.

He stares at her dumbly.

She tries again. ‘I was quite ill once,’ she tells him. ‘When I had the measles. I had to lie in a darkened room for days and days...’

An image of the room floats into her mind. It was in Haslemere—near the school where Vivienne was teaching. Tony was six so she doesn’t remember much about it. She remembers the wallpaper though. It had pictures of huntsmen on horseback going up and down in stripes. She used to lie and count them up one side and down the other. One day Vivienne drew a picture of her: a smiling face covered with spots. It made her laugh so much it hurt her throat.

Karel looks as if he might be going to speak. Tony waits for a minute to see if he will. He says nothing.

‘You don’t die of scarlet fever, you know,’ she reassures him. ‘At least—not usually. So I really don’t think you have much to worry about...’

Karel scrambles to his feet. He is making a funny sound—a sort of panting. As if there were not enough air for him to breathe. Before Tony can ask him what the matter is he turns and runs away back towards the factory building where they left Jack talking to Señor Hernández.

‘Hey -’ She’s so surprised she just stands there staring after him. ‘What the blazes?’ It occurs to her to let him go—serve him right if he gets himself lost—but then she remembers she’s supposed to be looking after him. Muttering under her breath she follows him.

At that moment Jack and Señor Hernández emerge from the dark mouth of the factory building and go over to where Jack’s car is parked in the shade. They must have finished talking business because as Tony gets nearer she can hear Jack telling

Señor Hernández about something someone said to him at the poker game last night. Señor Hernández laughs and claps Jack on the back.

‘Epa, hombre...’

Jack sees her walking towards him and makes hurry-up gestures.

‘What’s got into the van Wel kid?’ he asks her. ‘A minute ago he ran by here like a scared jackrabbit...’

Tony shrugs. ‘All I did was ask him how his sister was...’

‘Well go find him, will ya? We ought to get going. On second thoughts,’ Jack adds, ‘maybe I’ll go find him. He probably had to run to the can...’

He says something in Spanish to Señor Hernández who grins. Then he disappears leaving them together. Señor Hernández is still wearing his jacket although it’s hotter than ever out here. Beads of perspiration are standing out on his forehead. He whistles softly between his teeth. Tony wishes he would leave her there to wait by herself but she knows he’d be offended if she suggested it. Once or twice he catches her eye and smiles politely but mostly he just stands there studying his shirt cuffs. They’re the whitest shirt cuffs Tony’s ever seen.

Luckily it’s not very long before Jack returns with Karel tagging along behind him. Something about Karel’s face makes Tony think he must have been crying. He doesn’t look at her.

Jack claps his hands. ‘OK, Tony—let’s hit the road. Hop in, Sport. We’re gonna have to step on the gas to get you back in time for class...’

‘What about the spare parts?’ Tony reminds him.

He tousles her hair. Mostly she hates it when people do that but with Jack she doesn’t mind. ‘In the trunk. Any more questions? No? Then let’s get outa here. *Adiós*, Ramón.’

‘Adiós, señor.’

They shake hands again and Señor Hernández clicks his heels. He winks at Tony. Jack says he’s got a daughter just her age. She goes to the convent in Maracaibo. Next year Tony’s going to boarding school in England.

They drive back along the lake road. Even though she’s seen it lots of times before Tony still likes looking at the view across

the lake—its mass of offshore drilling rigs with their towering derricks like a forest of metal trees each sprouting a ghostly flame. It's even more beautiful at night. Then the glow of the flames and of the electric lights festooning the wells is reflected in the water a thousand lights shimmering in its pitch-black surface. Thirty years ago there was nothing here Jack says. Fishing villages. A few huts on stilts. Now it's the biggest single oil field in South America. Black gold it's called in Texas. The blood that keeps the world's heart pumping.

As he drives Jack rests one arm out of the open window whistling under his breath. Tony recognises the tune—it's an old one of Frankie's: 'In the Blue of the Evening'. It makes her think of hotel terraces and men in white tuxedos and ladies in satin gowns with gardenias in their hair.

'When are we going to Caracas?' she asks Jack.

He shrugs. 'Search me. When your mother wants some shopping. Why?'

Grown-ups always want to know why. As if you needed a reason for everything.

'No special reason. Can we go on my birthday?'

Jack laughs. 'Maybe. See what your mother says, OK?'

'Will you take me to the racetrack?'

'I said maybe.' He glances over his shoulder. 'Are you a horse-racing fan, too, Karel? Or do you prefer baseball?'

Karel does not reply. His eyes are closed and his breathing is deep and regular. His eyelashes are quite dark even though his hair is almost white—bleached by the sun. His face is pale too—with bluish shadows under his eyes and a scattering of tiny freckles like pinpricks across the bridge of his nose. He's still clutching his empty 7-Up bottle.

'He's asleep.' Tony takes the bottle out of Karel's hand and puts it on the floor.

'Poor little guy,' says Jack. 'He must be worn out.'

After a few more miles they turn off the main road and begin the climb toward La Soledad. Some days if there's time they stop at the sugar-cane factory which is on this road a mile or so along. Jack knows the foreman there—he's called Rómulo. Once or twice he's let Tony work the machine that presses the sugar juice

out and he always gives her a piece of freshly cut cane to suck on the way home.

The rich dark smell of molasses is one of the best smells in the world Tony thinks. Even the sound of the word is enough to conjure up the smell of it the steam rising from the vats of molten sugar the wooden trays divided into squares where it cools into blocks as moist and crumbly as earth. The men tending the fires which keep the sugar boiling are stripped to the waist their skin shines like gold in the light of the furnace.

Sometimes they get so hot they have to cool themselves down with a swig of moonshine Jack says. They keep the still out of sight because the feds might come calling but when Jack drops in Rómulo always brings out the jug. Jack laughs and tells Rómulo no thanks—that stuff packs a helluva punch. You need to be born and bred to it he says.

When they get back to the house Jack leans across the back seat and scoops the sleeping Karel into his arms. Tony follows him up the steps to the veranda where Consuelo is waiting.

‘Ah, *angelito*,’ she murmurs looking at Karel. She sees Tony and frowns. ‘Go change your dress,’ she says.

Tony’s room is at the back of the house. It’s quite small—it used to be a maid’s room Vivienne says—but it’s got everything she needs. There’s a table where she does her homework and a round chair like a basket on spindly metal legs where she likes to sit and read. There’s a shelf to hold her collection of shells and glass animals. The shells are mostly ones she found on the beach at Chichiriviche. There’s a piece of coral which looks like a tiny tree but scratches your fingers if you pick it up the wrong way. It was a beautiful pink but the colour’s faded and now it’s as white as bone.

‘Is that you, Antonia?’ Vivienne puts her head around the door. Her hair is damp from taking her shower. ‘Fifteen minutes on the bed, please. And don’t forget to change your dress...’

‘No, Mummy.’

‘Oh—and have you a book I can give to Karel? *Tiger Tim*, perhaps...’ She reaches up to take it down from the shelf.

‘How long is he staying?’

'Who, Karel, you mean? I don't know exactly. A week, Perhaps two. It depends,' she says vaguely. 'They might have to fly the child to Caracas, it seems. Complications. No need to say anything to Karel just yet, though...'

Then she's gone. Tony takes off her dress and lies down on top of the bed in just her knickers. It's cool in the room because of the air-conditioning but she can't sleep. She tosses and turns thinking about what she's just learned. A *week*! Or even longer. She doesn't know how she's going to be able to bear it.

When afternoon school is over they go swimming. It's the club pool and everyone who uses it works for the company. There's a wall around it with bougainvillea growing over and a patio with deck chairs for sun-bathing. Some evenings they hold parties here—with all the women in their best dresses and no one under the age of sixteen to spoil the fun. But at this time of day it's just Tony and her friends.

Usually it's a time she looks forward to: the air's cooler but the water's warm. And that first sight of the pool—its oblong of blue like the blue you get in a new paintbox before it gets mixed up and spoilt—is the nicest thing in the world Tony thinks. The moment when you first get into the water and you feel it close around you and you glide with no more effort than breathing through that shimmering glassy coolness—if there's anything which feels better than that she doesn't know what it is.

Some days if Vivienne's finished her marking they go straight from school and arrive at the pool before anyone else. Then they have the place to themselves and they swim and swim until they're tired. Vivienne's a good swimmer. Her parents used to rent a house in Bexhill every summer so she learned to swim in the sea. The sea in England isn't like the sea here she tells Tony. It's cold all the year round and grey not blue.

But today they're the last to arrive because at the last minute Vivienne finds out that Karel's mother forgot to pack him any bathing trunks and so they have to stop by the McBrides' house and borrow some old ones of Stuart's that Mrs McBride thinks might fit him.

Jane and Valerie and the others are already in the water when

Tony comes out of the changing cubicle. Mary is lying on her stomach on the diving board seeing how far she can lean over before she falls in. It crosses Tony's mind that if someone crept up behind her and gave her a fright she'd lose her balance; then she realizes that's exactly what Jane is about to do. Jane's good at playing tricks. She has a way of looking as if the thing she's planning to do is the last thing on her mind.

Tony watches as Jane edges around the pool towards her quarry. It's a creepy feeling knowing what's going to happen. Half of her wants to laugh and the other half feels almost as if it's going to happen to her—that horrible moment when you feel yourself losing your balance and it's too late to save yourself and you open your mouth to scream but no sound comes out only bubbles as the water rushes in.

But at the last minute Valerie who's floating on her back in the middle of the pool sees what's happening and lets out a yell to warn her friend. Although it's not so much that she and Mary are friends as that she and her sister are enemies. It must be strange to have a sister. Brothers are much better Tony thinks—if you have to have anything that is.

She dives in and swims a few strokes under water slipping for a moment into the old game where she's the Little Mermaid getting back her beautiful fish's tail after walking on knives and red-hot pokers for the sake of her human lover. She hates that story almost as much as the one about the Red Shoes. The dancing feet capering away by themselves along the street with the poor cripple limping after them on her wooden stumps.

When she surfaces again in a shower of bubbles Jane is dancing around the edge of the pool chanting in a low voice meant for Valerie to hear:

Tell-tale tit, your tongue will split,
And all the doggies in the town will have a little bit...

'Don't care,' says Valerie from the middle of the pool.

Don't-care was MADE to care,
Don't-care was HUNG,

Don't care was put in the pot
And boiled till she was DONE...

Tired of her balancing act Mary McBride dives into the pool and surfaces beside Tony. She swims around her in slow circles. 'Want to know a secret?' she says at last.

'Depends what kind of secret.'

Pinching her nostrils between thumb and index finger Tony sits down on the bottom of the pool. Above her in a clear turquoise shot through with flickering golden lights she can see Mary's legs waving up and down like two strange white fish. It's peaceful here in this underwater world—the only trouble is you run out of air so quickly. She rises to the surface where Mary is waiting.

'My mother's going to have a baby.'

'Oh.' Tony lets herself fall back against the water until she's lying flat. Spread-eagled. The sun makes a rainbow blur through her half-closed lashes. 'Is that the secret?'

Mary swims closer. Her hair fans out on the water in long pale strands. All the rest of them have short hair but Mary wears hers in two thick plaits. Her mother washes it every night with Johnson's baby soap to stop it going green. All of them have green hair from swimming. It's the chlorine Vivienne says. Mary puts her mouth next to Tony's ear. 'I know how babies come out,' she says.

'Oh *that*.' Tony closes her eyes. 'That's not a secret. I've known for ages. Kate Riley told me.'

'But,' Mary insists, 'do you know how they get *in*?'

'How do what get in?' says Valerie appearing suddenly from under water.

'Never you mind,' says Mary in her most withering voice. She seems annoyed that Tony's not more interested in her stupid secret and after a moment she swims away.

Tony lets herself drift. Weightless. A leaf or a passing water beetle brushes her cheek and slides out of sight before she can turn her head. Sounds reach her as if from very far away. A faint shrieking like a flock of parrots or only the voices of her friends. Above her the sky is as blue as the water; she floats between the

two feeling—as she lazily spins—as if she might just as easily swim up into the air to look down on the bobbing heads of her companions.

She amuses herself with this thought for a while imagining how the world would look from very high up with its bright blue swimming pools its red-roofed houses its forests and mountain ranges. She pictures the looks of surprise on her friends' up-turned faces as she swoops low enough to brush them with her fingertips then soars out of reach.

She hears her name being called.

Vivienne is standing at the far end of the pool wearing her new black and white Mexican-print swimsuit and her dark glasses. Tony wonders why she hasn't come in for a swim yet and then she sees that Karel is standing beside her. Even with the tape on Stuart McBride's swimming trunks tied as tight as it will go they're still far too big for him. He looks ridiculous.

She swims slowly towards them. She thinks she knows what's coming.

Sure enough when she's almost at the edge of the pool Vivienne says, 'Why don't you and Karel play together for a bit? You can help him with his swimming.'

'Aren't you coming in?'

'In a minute, perhaps,' she says already starting to walk away. 'When I've finished talking to Nancy...'

Tony knows this means she will not be coming in at all. Mrs Wilson is one of the mothers who never swim—although she spends every afternoon at the pool as they all do. But she never ventures far out of the shade. The heat doesn't agree with her. Vivienne says it's because she's got red hair; but Tony doesn't see why that stops her from going swimming. Jennifer Riley's got red hair and she swims every day.

She watches as Vivienne joins the group under the awning. Apart from Mrs Wilson who's wearing a white cotton cardigan over her dress and an enormous sun-hat made of pink raffia there's Mrs McBride in the red and white polkadot sunsuit she always wears—because she's too fat for a swimsuit Jane says—and Mrs Riley in a turquoise swimsuit with a pattern of yellow starfish. Mrs Riley paints her toenails and smokes menthol-tipped

cigarettes from a tortoiseshell holder. Tony quite likes Mrs Riley. She once gave Tony a pile of *Picture Posts* to keep. And she uses French perfume—Diorissimo—Tony's seen it on her dressing table.

She looks at Karel. He hasn't moved. It's as if he were frozen to the spot staring after her mother with a look of dumb misery. Tony suppresses an urge to grab him by the ankle and pull him into the water. She knows Jane Wilson wouldn't think twice about it.

'Are you going to swim or not?' she says to him—more crossly than she'd intended.

He drags his gaze away from the group of laughing women under the awning. Then he shakes his head. 'I can't swim.'

This is the last straw. Tony glances across to where her mother is sitting but fails to catch her eye.

'Well, you might at least get in,' she says to Karel—resigned to having her afternoon spoilt. 'You can stand at this end. It's not deep.' She demonstrates by standing up herself showing him the water level reaching just above her waist. But still he seems reluctant to try.

'What's the matter?' asks Jane swimming up to where they are. Tony explains.

'Come on,' Jane says to Karel. 'It's all right really. You won't drown.'

Karel does not look convinced. They are joined by Mary.

'Those are my brother's swimming trunks,' she says accusingly.

'I suppose that's why they look so peculiar,' says Jane. 'Go on,' she urges Karel. 'I dare you—jump.'

'Jump,' says Mary.

'Jump,' Tony says—adding her voice to this chorus of voices.

Karel jumps. It's so unexpected that none of them has a chance to stand back. One minute he is standing on the edge the next he has disappeared in a boiling mass of bubbles at the bottom of the pool leaving only the sudden noise of the splash behind him.

Jane cheers and they wait for him to surface. It seems a long time and then Tony remembers: *he can't swim*.

In the time it takes to think this thought Karel's head appears from the water blinded and gasping. His hair is plastered down across his face and there is water running out of his mouth. He starts to choke and in a minute Tony knows he will start to scream.

'Well done,' she shouts in his ear as he stands there choking and shivering. 'That was jolly brave.'

'Jolly brave,' echoes Mary patting him on the back.

It's no good though. As soon as he has breath to he starts to cry. It isn't the quiet kind of crying either.

'What on earth is going on?' says Vivienne from somewhere above their heads. Tony can't look at her.

'Please, Mrs Lindberg,' Jane says innocently. 'Karel's swimming trunks have come off...'

Nothing is said in the car on the way home. Karel sits in the back still wrapped in the towels in which Vivienne has swathed him. From time to time a shuddering sob escapes him. Tony sits in front next to her mother who is driving. Behind the dark glasses her expression is hard to read. But when they reach the house she says in the polite voice she uses when she is angry, 'I'd like a word with you, Antonia. In my room.'

'I don't know how you could be so cruel.'

She doesn't sound angry any more—only disappointed. For some reason this makes Tony feel even worse. She looks at the floor and says nothing. Her mother looks at her.

'I mean—*really*, Antonia...'

'I'm sorry,' Tony says flatly.

Vivienne sighs. She sits down on the bed patting the space beside her. Tony sits down fixing her gaze on the zigzag pattern of the Mexican rug as her mother explains why she has to be nice to Karel.

Karel's parents had a very hard time in the war Vivienne tells her. His mother's family were killed by the Germans. She was the only one who escaped. His father was put in prison. 'He's lucky to be alive,' Vivienne says. After the war there wasn't enough to eat. People were starving. 'Don't you think that's terrible?' Her voice sounds as if she's going to cry. 'People dying of cold and

hunger. Children, no older than you, scavenging for food...

Tony nods her head but she still doesn't see what Vivienne's getting at. It was all such a long time ago. She was three when the war ended and she can't remember anything about it. She's tried of course—but all she can summon up is a vague memory of holding her grandmother's hand in the air-raid shelter and the sickly taste of concentrated orange juice.

'It's hard for you to understand,' Vivienne says as if she knows what Tony's thinking. 'But when you live through something like that it changes you forever. It's as if...I don't know...your life just stops.'

'Was it like that when Daddy was killed?'

Vivienne smiles so sadly that Tony wishes she hadn't asked.

'Yes,' she says. 'Exactly like that.'

'All right,' Tony tells her. 'I'll try and be nice to Karel.' Although it seems to her it's Karel's parents they've been talking about.

Vivienne seems satisfied with this. She gives Tony's hand an absent-minded pat. 'That's my girl.' She gets up and walks across to the closet where her dresses hang in rows: cotton ones for daytime silk for evening. Frowning she picks out a dress and holds it at arm's length. 'I wonder if I can get away with this old thing one more time,' she says.

'Are you going out tonight?'

'Just for an hour or so. The Johnsons are back from leave.' She yawns and throws the dress on the bed. 'I think perhaps that's one for Consuelo, don't you?'

'Jack likes you in that dress.'

'I know, but the seam's already gone under the arm. Look.' She shows Tony the place. 'They don't make frocks to last here, the way they do at home...'

'*Señora...*'

'What is it, Consuelo?'

But Consuelo doesn't answer she just turns in the doorway and walks away as if she expects Vivienne to follow. Vivienne raises her eyebrows at Tony. Consuelo's silences can be unnerving until you get used to them.

When they go into the sitting room Mr van Wel is there. He

jumps to his feet when he sees Vivienne.

'I'm so sorry,' she starts to say. 'I didn't realize...' But he cuts her off.

'Forgive me,' he says. 'It's a bad time...'

'Not at all.'

He indicates the battered valise at his feet. "I bring some more clothes for Karel."

'Oh good,' says Vivienne.

There is a short silence. Tony wonders what their visitor will say next. He seems very nervous and ill-at-ease. Maybe being in prison does that to you.

Vivienne doesn't seem to find his behaviour at all strange. She smiles at him.

'Would you like a drink?'

'Please,' says Mr van Wel. 'Thank you,' he adds.

'Sherry, gin, whisky?' says Vivienne. 'I believe there's some vermouth, if you'd like a dry Martini...'

'No, please,' says their guest. 'Don't disturb yourself. A small gin,' he murmurs unhappily, 'would be very fine.'

'A small gin it is,' says Vivienne. 'I hope you'll forgive me if I don't join you. It's a little early for me.'

'Of course.' Mr van Wel takes the glass and raises it towards her. '*Proost*,' he says. 'As they say in my country...'

Vivienne smiles. She takes a cigarette from the box on the table and looks around for her lighter but Mr van Wel is too quick for her.

'Please,' he says taking his own lighter out of his pocket. He flicks the tiny wheel with the ball of his thumb and a jet of flame shoots up. Vivienne puts the cigarette between her lips and inclines her head to take a light. At that moment Jack walk in.

'Well, well,' he says. 'I guess the party started without me.'

'Hello, Jack,' says Vivienne. 'Mr van Wel stopped by to see Karel...'

'Sure,' says Jack pouring himself a drink. 'How's it going, Piet?'

'Very good,' says Mr van Wel. 'Except my wife...'

'How is your wife?' says Jack. 'And the little girl?'

'Very sick.' Mr van Wel shrugs. 'Maybe we have to fly her to

the hospital, I don't know...'

'Well, you know Karel can stay just as long as he needs to,' Jack says.

Mr van Wel bows his head gravely. 'I don't know how to thank you,' he says.

'Don't mention it,' says Jack. 'Sit down, why don't you?'

Karel appears in the doorway.

'*Vader*,' he says.

'Hello, Karel. I hope you are a good boy,' says his father.

Karel says something in Dutch.

'You must speak English, Karelkje.' Mr van Wel smiles apologetically at Vivienne and Jack. 'How will you learn if you don't speak English?'

Later when Tony's in bed Vivienne looks in to say goodnight. The stiff layered skirts of her new black dress rustle excitingly; as she bends to kiss her Tony can smell her faint but unmistakable smell of face powder lipstick and eau-de-Cologne.

'What's that you're reading?' she asks as she straightens up.

'*The Lost World*. Peter Riley lent it to me.'

'Any good?' says Vivienne carelessly glancing at herself in the long mirror on the wardrobe door. She flicks an invisible speck from her skirt and adjusts the silver-tissue folds of her evening stole.

'Quite good. It's about explorers. They find a land where there are dinosaurs and things...'

'Vivienne,' Jack calls from their bedroom. 'Help me with this damn bow-tie, will ya?'

'Don't read too late,' says Vivienne blowing Tony a kiss. 'Sweet dreams.'

She hears their voices in the next room; a murmured protest from Vivienne at something Jack has said; a burst of laughter from Jack.

'C'mon, we'll be late.'

Then the voices recede. She hears the engine start. They drive away leaving her to silence. Almost silence. There's the sound of insects whirring against the screens and the calling of a parakeet in the orange grove. She turns once more to Professor

Challenger:

So tomorrow we disappear into the unknown. This account I am transmitting down the river by canoe, and it may be our last word to those who are interested in our fate...

She becomes aware of a new sound above the insect whine and the parakeet's harsh shrieking. This is a softer sound than either of these but harder to ignore.

I must hark back, however, and continue my narrative from where I dropped it. We are sending home one of our local Indians who is injured...

The sound continues—breaks off—then starts again. It comes from the room on the other side of the passage which is usually empty. It's where Karel is sleeping. Or not sleeping it seems.

I am committing this letter to his charge...

Unable to read any further she switches off the lamp and listens eyes wide open in the darkness until the sound of Karel's crying dwindles into silence.