

Fear. Nerves. Tension building.

frightened and she didn't know what to talk about and yet she wanted to talk. She liked talking; after all what else was there to do? But the thin woman didn't gossip much. You couldn't feel at ease with her, you had the idea all the time that she was thinking about something else.

The thin woman came and sat down beside her.

'Did you hear,' said the fat woman, 'that Malcolm Mackay was up on a drunken charge? He smashed his car, so they say. It was in the black-out.'

'I didn't hear that,' said the thin woman.

'It was coming home last night with the meat. He had it in the van and he smashed it at the burn. But they say he's all right. I don't know how they kept him out of the war. They said it was his heart but there was nothing wrong with his heart. Everyone knows it was influence. What's wrong with his heart if he can drink and smash a car?'

The thin woman drank her tea very delicately. She used to be away on service a long time before she was married and she had a dainty way of doing things. She sipped her tea, her little finger elegantly curled in an irritating way.

'Why do you keep your finger like that?' said the fat woman suddenly.

'Like what?'

The fat woman demonstrated.

'Oh, it was the way I saw the guests drinking tea in the hotels when I was on service. They always drank like that.'

'He's passed the Stewarts,' said the fat woman. Two houses to go. They looked at each other wildly. It must be one of them. Surely. They could see the elder quite clearly now, walking very stiff, very upright, wearing his black hat. He walked in a stately dignified manner, eyes straight ahead of him.

'He's proud of what he's doing,' said the fat woman suddenly. 'You'd think he was proud of it. Knowing before anyone else. And he himself was never in the war.'

'Yes,' said the thin woman, 'it gives him a position.' They watched him. They both knew him well. He was a stiff, quiet man who kept himself to himself, more than ever now. He didn't mix with people and he always carried the Bible into the pulpit for the minister.

'They say his wife had one of her fits again,' said the fat woman viciously. He had passed the Murrays. The next house was her own. She sat perfectly still. Oh, pray God it wasn't hers. And yet it must be hers. Surely it must be hers. She had dreamt of this happening, her son drowning in the Atlantic ocean, her own child whom she had reared, whom she had seen going to play football in his green jersey and white shorts, whom she had seen running home from school. She could see him drowning but she couldn't make out the name of the ship. She had never seen a really big ship and what she imagined was more like the mailboat than a cruiser. Her son couldn't drown out there for no reason that she could understand. God couldn't do that to people. It was impossible. God was kinder than that. God helped you in your sore trouble. She began to mutter a prayer and over. She said it quickly like the Catholics, O God save my son O God save my son O God save my son. She stopped of prattling in that way as if she was counting beads. She couldn't stop herself, and on top of that she was a foreigner. She knew it and she didn't want to cry in front of that woman, that foreigner. It would be weakness. She felt the arm of the thin woman around her shoulders, the thin arm, and it was like first love, it was like the time Murdo had taken her hand in his when they were coming home from the dance, such an innocent gesture, such a spontaneous gesture. So unexpected, so strange, so much a gift. She was crying and she couldn't look . . .

'He has passed your house,' said the thin woman in a distant firm voice, and she looked up. He was walking along and he had indeed passed her house. She wanted to stand up

humour
after
fat
woman's
comment
earlier

reinforcing
contrast
between them

Panic - tension building

Repetition
of 'God'

no

punctuation

counting
beads