

Anna Bianke

TUESDAY, THE SEVENTH OF NOVEMBER

Dear Lisa and Will, Thank you for the lovely flowers. It is very pleasant in here. Everyone — My biro, aimed upwards, dries up. Its blood congeals somewhere in the end, down near my stomach where the morning's poached egg also lies in sullen defiance.

"Mrs Sanderson," I shout, fanning the biro wildly out over the bed, "have you got a pen?"

Mrs Sanderson, tensely flat on her bed, looks confused.

"A pen, a pen. That writes."

Carefully Mrs Sanderson transfers the signal cord from her right hand to her left and feels among the magazines on her night-table. She shakes her head on the pillow and grasps back the cord. One day when her pains start again, when the rays explode from her heart, zipping into her arms, she will press it; one day when doom clutches at her chest she will buzz, leaving her finger pressed down hard so that life will come running down the corridors, be wheeled in on thin-limbed silver machines and snatch her back. Meanwhile she is building up her account.

I spiral with my pen at the top of the letter. Indentations turn into blue ink.

It is very pleasant in here. Everyone — What? Everyone is trying to digest congealed egg. Everyone is urging their bowels to move. Everyone is relieved this morning — relieved to have lasted through the night.

I have forgotten to date the letter.

"Mrs Sanderson, what day is it?"

"The seventh," she replies feebly.

"The seventh of what?"

"November."

November. Oh not November. I had forgotten that month. November should be erased. Each year I wait for it, steel myself against its coming, and then it arrives — abruptly — while I'm not looking.

Tuesday the seventh, I write. Then add a challenging full-stop.

But November is still there, stinging me.

Norman said, on our fiftieth anniversary: we'll still be together on our sixtieth. We weren't. Six days later, in windy, heaving November,

he was gone. Six days later men dressed in professional gravity took him away and a mound of earth was covered in circles of wilting flowers.

The seventh, I write, of September.

They gave him morphine and those pills that make you sleep. I stayed awake. Hearing sounds I turned on the lamp. Chilly, blowy November and he sat on the edge of his bed stark naked, soft white belly gently swaying against weedy chicken thighs.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Going for a walk."

"Why have you taken off your pyjamas?"

"Don't be silly," says he, swinging authoritative calves against the sheets, "you don't go for a walk with your pyjamas on."

And then he leaped from the bed. A satyr capering, his knees jutted into the air, defying, for a moment, the magnetism of the earth.

And then he fell to the ground.

Three hours it took me to get him back into bed, and although he grumbled and hummed and giggled as I grasped his limbs one by one, trying to reassemble the Norman I knew, he never spoke to me again.

How dare you leave me, Norman, to the empty shed lined with your saws and hammers and woodshavings, to the husks of evenings filled only with the whispered tick of the mantel clock. Eleven Novembers ago.

Voices, people in ordinary clothes fill the doorway — conducted by Nurse.

"This is Mrs Cornwall, who has come to stay with us. Mrs Sanderson over there, and this is Mrs Telford."

"Hallo," I bellow, "you'll like it here. We have congealed breakfasts."

Mrs Cornwall is whisked behind a curtain to shed her past. Nurse emerges with bundles of her clothes and bottles of her medications and carries them off. Curtain back. Tarah! Mrs Cornwall clicked into her plastic arm-band lies in state.

"Hallo again," I say conversationally, "have you come here to expire?"

"Now, now," says Nurse, returning with thermometers, "there's no call to be gloomy."

"To pass away," I say. "A happy release, to be taken, to snuff it. Be lost on the table or sing our swan-songs while trying to get our bowels to move. To fly too high in our chariots, touching the sun. Do you think we are touching the sun, Sister?"

Sister pauses as she neatens us, packs us in, smoothes the

awkward edges. "Elijah," she says, "went in a chariot of fire up to heaven."

"Did he fall back to earth?"

"No. He went to glory."

She leaves the new patient to us. Mrs Sanderson leans up on one elbow and whispers hoarsely. "You mustn't upset them. That's my advice to you. Don't complain. And don't use the call button." She breathes conspiratorially. "I never press mine and they appreciate that. When I need them, they'll come really quickly and it will be all right." She shuts her eyes with the effort and leans back. Mrs Cornwall smiles uncertainly.

Lunch is trundling down the corridor.

"A pre-dinner drink?" the hostess will ask, her voice distant in the vapours of engine noise.

"A gin-and- tonic, thanks." My voice will be distant too, refined by the rare atmosphere.

"Lunch is coming," I tell Mrs Cornwall. "Tuesday special. Chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy." She nods prettily.

"Wednesdays grey stew, Mondays brown stew, but Tuesdays chicken. Chicken and gravy. Chicken and gravy. Gravy. Gravy. Gravy and chicken." I am turning it into a song. "Stew, stew, stew. Chicken and gravy. Gravy, gravy, GRAVY. Yuk," I say, "I hate gravy."

Lunch clatters slowly down the aisle. Lunch always took too long to come. I was a fat child, greedy for everything. A stuffed tomato, spooning in ever more, I filled my skin till it turned red with the strain of stretching. Billowing along the street, arms raised, I could take up a whole pavement. Then I was a plane about to take off, zooming noises dribbling from my mouth. But I never did take off. My huge weight stuck me to the ground. Adolescence hunched me over lolling breasts and even the noises stopped. Until Norman came. Suddenly I was festooned with ribbons which flew in the wind as a golden steed galloped over the earth and my fat buoyed us all up into the skies.

"Here's your nice lunch, Mrs Telford." Oh yum. The metal warmer, dented with service, lifts into the air and here is a grey clot of gravy.

"Take it away," I yell. "I don't want it."

Now, now. It's good for you.

No. I shan't eat it. No.

You've got to keep up your strength. You'll be hungry later. What would Doctor say?

Away, away! Off with Cook's head!

Just a little bit to please us.

Drive on, James. I can't be bothered with such petty bickering.

We soar off, leaving them behind, below. Sometimes we went for picnics in our hamper of a VW, Norman strapped upright with his seatbelt tight around his middle, me spilling over on the rough roads. Sometimes we drove for hours, nowhere in particular, stopping or not stopping, propelled along the road in spite of ourselves. Sometimes I laughed, bursting against the restraint of the seat harness. And sometimes I cried until the tears dried on my cheeks and Norman kissed me and the tears cracked as I smiled.

I cry here too sometimes — at night when the arrows start shooting under the skin, needling down the veins, tightening the muscles. But it's not the pain nor the fear that provokes the tears; it's knowing that the journey's nearly over so that there will be no more difficulties, no more soaring hopes. Here I am sans eyes, sans teeth, sans shoes, dresses, handbags. Sans the knick-knacks of a lifetime. Yet poor, naked animal that I am, they forgot to strip me of my passions, my little vanities, my dreams. Visitors come bringing their children because they will cheer her up. I do my hair specially, tearing at what's left of it with curlers because I think they will be pleased to see that the old lady is still making an effort. The children eat my cherries and discover the loose toilet rolls in the bathroom. I smile, smile, sweet old lady, so appreciative of them coming, giggle the coquette when they compliment me on my appearance. Meanwhile my hair flattens against the pillow. Ah old lady, if only you were what you look to be, with your neat pearly strands of false teeth. If only in the shrunken body, the fat girl wasn't still struggling to burst out.

"What was it all about?" I wail out loud.

Mrs Sanderson is gingerly dialling her radio. To protect it from the sun, she keeps it on her lower shelf where the reception is poor. Strands of sound dangle into confused knots.

"What have we done? Where have we got to?" The new patient is asleep, twitching in her own private dream-journey.

"We were kidnapped!" I shout. "Kidnapped."

On my night-table is the letter and the biro. Damn. I haven't finished it.

Dear Lisa and Will. Thank you for the lovely flowers. It is very pleasant in here. Everyone. I pause. Everyone is so kind. There is a new patient in the ward who seems very agreeable. We must all count our My pen runs out.

Someone is shouting. "Kidnapped!" It is me. "Kidnapped! We were all bundled into the back of a car and driven off against our will. We never saw anything. Had to conform. Do the right thing. Were

never allowed to see what it really was — the pity of it, the glory of it! Drove along back streets, took the safe roads. Never looked at the sun. Never got burned by the sun.” The two other women are staring at me. “I want to get burned!” I grab the buzzer.

“Hostess!” I shout as I press. “Service!” Nurse hurries in.

“A pen,” I shrill. “I need a pen. This bloody thing won’t work.”

“All right, all right,” she soothes, handing me a pencil from her pocket.

I slash with it across the letter, scoring out words so they are no longer recognizable.

“Right,” I say, and there is fire in my voice. “Right!” Across the top of the paper I scrawl: *Tuesday, the seventh of November*. The pencil is flowing easily.