

ANNE LLOYD

DR PAPANICOLAOU'S LEGACY

"It is unfortunate that by the time cancer of the cervix is visible to the naked eye, it is so far advanced that no matter what treatment is given, one woman in every two will be dead within five years. But if it is detected before it is visible, the disease is 100 per cent curable." — Derek Llewellyn-Jones.

"Ooh, Level three, very bad, very serious." He carves, caresses his scalpel-sharp ballpoint into my patient's card, too malleable lump of soap, sunlight soft and promising yellow: "Almost cancer. Not quite. Very bad." That tut of tongue.

Legs spread wide, clamped in his medical vice, I promise myself respite from three-monthly checks and "Level Three, very bad": that all clear without face or name, neatly crumpled on a piece of cardboard.

Calipered, I observe he's wearing a black bow tie today, a crisp white laundered shirt which flaps above the sheet: "Those long ones get in the way, you know, you understand?"

Outside, a slick and private racing machine is drumming its fingers on the top of an ancient hearse, preparing for an emergency getaway. It's his ebony I hate more than anything.

ANNE LLOYD

INSOMNIA

So Rip Van Winkle snored too. And did his wife then lie awake for thirty years? I practise deep-breathing exercises, try to make my mind divorce itself from worn-out limbs. Wriggle the big toe first, relax, let all the tension dissipate. Loosen the tightness of the next, force each body part to rest, go limp. I am the rag floppy doll, stretched out. I am a traveller on the longest escalator in the world. I can levitate across space.

Still he snores. Irregularly. Regularly. Not loud, but deafening in relentlessness. I toss and turn, frightened my brain will snap open, a scream escape to cut the night. "Oh shut your mouth," I sigh, exasperated, knowing his sleep impenetrable and the snore incapable of hearing. In the spare room, lying with wide eyes on the single bed, his snore knows how to walk around corners and follow me, sure as death. I can see the snore standing haughtily in the doorway.

Returned to the double, I remember the magazine story of a man who, conscience-pricked by talk of snoring, suffered his wife to sew buttons in a row down the back of his pyjamas. If he rolled over to snore, the buttons would wake him, so the theory went. He rolled over, but continued snoring. Snore snore. More snore. Light is stalking into the room.

I observe my own dear snorer more prone to bouts when spread-eagled on his back and try a different tack: "Roll over, darling," I say, softly touching a shoulder. The body rolls sideways. It breathes normally. The shoulders rise and fall in quiet empathy. Ah peace! Ah stuff of dreams!

The body rolls back rhythmically, shudders into its usual fit of snores..

ANNE LLOYD

THE TEN YEAR ITCH

I say, drifting into sleep after successful love-making, it wasn't half so good ten years ago, and you reply drily, sweeping into dreams yourself, I didn't read between the lines back then.

It's true. I read, but it was clumsy, cumbersome, too pure vernacular I had to try to understand. Your body, poems, didn't speak to me in salt-tough words when I was 22. I was only a sullied virgin learning, after all.