

Jane Downing

## THE LITTLE MOTHER

They told her at Reception that the family was in Number 9, through the arch, right at the pool. Why motels provided pools for their overnight it inerrant traffic, small pools usually in full view of the public highway and invariably unused, was something Judy had never understood.

But the guests in Number 9 were not the usual travellers of trade or recreation, and the children would in fact have loved a swim. They were sitting, neatly dressed, hair brushed, waiting quietly outside the open door of the room. They were expecting her.

"Hello, are you taking us to the airport?" asked the largest of the three, in a precise four-year-old lisp.

"I am indeed" smiled Judy.

Files tell only half the story, though reading that there were four children under the age of four had indicated a potentially explosive family situation—one that had exploded the night before in a suburban apartment block, in a tiny third-floor flat.

On hearing the gun shots, concerned neighbours—not such a rarity as popular perception expects—rang the police. The officers, never comfortable attending "Domestics," were relieved to find husband and gun gone. Fled. Still, on consideration, it wouldn't be right leaving the wide-eyed woman in the flat, while he was at large in the dark with that gun and a key to the front door. To their naive surprise, the Women's Refuges were full and they had to try several on-call numbers before they could hand the whole thing over to Welfare.

"It's not usual" complained a tired voice on the phone, "but I suppose under the circumstances ... We have the Special Fund to pay. You sure it's urgent? I'll meet you there."

By then the little ones, who had been comforted back into sleep, had to be reawakened for a ride in the nice police-car. Now they were at last tucked between motel sheets. Judy called through the open door of the room before stepping in. The baby was almost indistinguishable in a bunny-rug on one bed; the mother moved slowly in front of the small sink, carefully, needlessly, washing the breakfast dishes.

"The housemaid will do that," protested Judy into dark eyes. Dark from lack of sleep. Dark from bruising.

"It won't take long," was one of the woman's few contributions to the morning's conversation. So while Judy worried about traffic and plane timetables, Sissy Bond stuffed the empty individual boxes of over sugared cereals into the bin and swept away crumbs and milk stains.

Lillian, the four-year-old at the door, filled in the gaps in the story. Her eyes missed nothing and her tongue commented like an investigative journalist.

"I had Cocopops and Cynthia had Frosties and June had Froot Loops and Mummy had Sultana Bran and Walter just had milk the same as always. We never have these at home but, they cost too much money."

Lillian's mother closed the suitcase and zipped up a pastel fitted plastic baby bag. She was fleeing to another State, taking her children home to her parents: her life fitted easily into the boot of the car. The children were more of a problem. Judy hadn't thought. She didn't have children, her friends didn't have children, she was not normally a taxi service. The message to get the Bonds to the airport was left with the keys to the Department's sedan on her desk at some unknown hour of the night, the first thing for her to deal with when she got in. At the motel Judy belatedly realised that little bodies into big seat belts do not go. Space age capsules and formula-one harnesses flashed into her memory. There were rules ... laws ...

As a perfunctory concession to safety, Judy asked Sissy to sit in the back rather than the front, as she would have to have the baby on her lap. Sissy did not comment. Cynthia and June were strapped in as tightly as possible beside her and Lillian quite naturally took the seat up front. In her adult position, she undertook to answer all questions and carry all conversational leads.

Throughout the trip Sissy Bond sat silently on the back bench, her Nordic blonde hair falling like a curtain about her slight frame. Judy watched her in the rear vision mirror. There was something missing. Her blue eyes neither looked out with fear nor stared inward in remembrance or apprehension. They looked nowhere, as if there was nowhere to look. It concerned Judy, this quiet, calm acceptance. As did little Lillian's substitute maturity.

"We're going to stay with grandma and pop. They live in Adelaide. They're Mummy's mother and father from when she was a little girl. We'll have to share a bed like last time, in the room near the kitchen and be quiet when Pop says." Judy couldn't suppress a smile at the thought of Lillian being quiet.

"We've never been on a plane before. Look, there's one. It must be taking off. Even Mummy has never been on a plane. I'll be able to tell everyone at school. Next year I'm allowed to go to school."

The hum of aircraft engines invaded the car. It was an exciting sound, filled with nostalgia and promise. Terminals, for Judy, were not endings, but beginnings. She shepherded her charges onto the concourse and left them as she went to park the car somewhere legal. Ten minutes later they were still as she had left them, a set of blonde steps, a human scale, and they stayed that way as she approached the ticket counter to collect the tickets that some minor bureaucratic miracle had prepaid. Others milled about; the children stood with their mother, a still point in the flux.

"Do your parents know what time your flight arrives?" Judy remembered to ask.

"The woman last night said we'd ring."

So they moved across to the bank of telephones. Sissy rummaged in her bulging baby bag and produced an address book festooned with butterflies. She opened it to one of the very few pages containing her small rounded writing and handed it to Judy. And she took a step back.

"I'll ring?" Judy hesitated, which seemed what Sissy expected. She was very young, only twenty-three, but not a teenager slinking home to angry parents. Her husband had tried to kill her for godsake. She had a right to request shelter and refuge ...

When the phone was lifted across in South Australia, Judy tried to sound confident. She explained herself in her best professional voice.

"It's for you Phyllis" shouted the old man into Sissy's family home. To him this was obviously a woman's problem, to be dealt with by them. Sissy's mother was quickly on the other end, and she was far from reticent.

"It's not the first time. We knew it would come to grief. Sixteen when she ran off with him. He took advantage, Sissy being simple and all. Never stayed put in one place long, always trouble. Did marry her legal and all though. Kids okay?"

Judy answered with flight details.

"But what are we to do? Can't keep them all here. She won't lay charges, and he'll be back sure enough. Then what? He's her husband."

Unprepared for a crisis counselling session on the phone, long distance, Judy gave the grandmother the names of appropriate agencies to contact closer to home, agencies that in fact already knew the family situation. Phyllis, who did not really want anything more practical than a sympathetic ear, continued with the details of past violence, a far from pleasant history requiring many, many words.

Judy stared from the pay phone at the dwindling coins in her hand.

"Look, I'm awfully sorry, I'm completely out of change and will have to ring off. The plane lands at 11.30. Good-bye."

She replaced the receiver with relief, but as she returned her jangle of coins to her purse, she felt a set of round eyes upon her. Lillian watched. Judged.

She's only four. It was only a white lie. Judy blushed deeply.

"I think we have time for a drink," she announced over-brightly. Lillian may or may not have accepted this as a bribe. She took the worker's proffered hand and the group moved to the restaurant, each woman with a baby on the hip, a toddler on the hand.

Judy remained self-conscious as the girls were settled around the table. People must think at least some of the children were hers. Did she look like a mother in her navy skirt and starched white blouse? Could she be a mother? An uncomfortable though not a new thought: herself as a mother. It wouldn't be like this of course. Her partner was supportive and gentle. At thirty-four, it was nonetheless an unimaginable role.

A carton of milk was bought. Out of the bag came a trainer cup (Mickey Mouse half-erased, nozzle chewed and misshapen) and a bottle for Cynthia and June. Lillian had matured to juice, sipped through a straw, as she supervised her sisters' spills and upsets. And Sissy accepted a coffee as she gently put the baby to her breast. Judy just watched. And listened to Lillian.

It was June who precipitated the next mass movement. For a two-year-old she was doing very well, but suddenly she demanded a toilet, quickly. Ushering the family into the facilities was like an invasion by sheer weight of numbers. Everyone was asked to empty their bladder. Obediently they paraded in and out of cubicles. Judy felt deep inside herself and still found no blood. She suddenly felt very irritable as she pushed towards the sinks.

Sissy was setting little June up on the bench and in a few swift movements had her in a disposable nappy for the flight. The hot-air machine provided

entertainment while Walter received similar treatment. Judy wanted never to do this. Wiping little bottoms, a slave to the nappy, countless times, day in, night out. Yet Sissy made it look simple. Everything necessary was in the Mary Poppins bag, a skilful change, despite a background of high girlish giggles from her daughters ... and the anguish of the night before. Simple, her mother had said. Yet Judy couldn't help but admire the competence with which she prepared her offspring for their flight.

Then there was nowhere else to go except to the waiting lounge, where there was not that long to wait for the flight.

She could have left them, technically they were delivered, but, perversely, her encroaching bad mood kept her there. Lillian was still talking—her family was not the audience she wanted. She talked about them, her world, and the big, wide world. But not a mention of the man they were fleeing. It was as if her father had ceased to exist. When would she be able to talk about him too? Her potential was so great: she was intelligent, sensible, bright, lively, gentle, curious, and likeable. She had none of Sissy's "simplicity." But, in the circumstances, was this such a good thing?

Judy smiled nonetheless. And Lillian smiled. And even little Cynthia offered a shy quirk of the lips when Judy caught her eye.

As the flight was announced June tripped against a table and began to bawl. Lillian immediately went to her, and picked the not-much-smaller sibling up for comfort. Soon they were both laughing, their bright faces turned to her as Judy called "time to go." She handed Sissy the tickets and June moved toward her mother.

Judy had them almost to the Departure gate before she realised Lillian had not joined them. Lillian was rooted to the middle of the emptying lounge, alone and very quiet. She did not respond to a beckoning hand.

Judy was still some feet from the little one when Lillian burst upwards and slammed against her. No laughter, no smiles, but huge sobs hit Judy's shoulder. Only one thing was articulate through the wailing. "Don't leave me" was the plea. Judy could not put her down: Lillian clung too tightly, determined and afraid. She had to carry her like a baby, and it was baby Cynthia who held her hand as they finally arrived at the Gate and the professionally smiling steward.

"You are not going with them?" the attendant hissed over Lillian's head at Judy. "Only one adult and all these lap children? It's not permissible."

Sissy stared down at her children as Judy was left to argue through the pitiful cries, letting a cool bureaucratic tongue order the outcome.

The other passengers were ushered ahead. Eventually a second attendant was summoned to help transport the family, the still uncontrollable eldest daughter was prised away, and two dark and helpless eyes were carried across the tarmac.

Judy had no chance to say goodbye. She turned away, fingering the sodden limp side of her business shirt. Paying for the time in the car park at the red and white boom, Judy realised she wouldn't be going into work for the rest of the day. She'd just drop the car off and go home. By the chemist, where she could buy one of those pregnancy predictor kits.

As the boom was raised, a plane roared into the clouded sky.