

SINISTRAL

House. She patted its warm flank as she went by.

House, Home. But there was element of fantasy about this house, with its huge untameable bathroom, its narrow kitchen, its living room that went round a corner and lost itself.

The mirror image of its neighbour, it had a strange left-handed feel about it, a through-the-looking-glass sensation that sometimes gave her the notion that she was just about to step through the veil of quicksilver into the real world.

She woke early that morning. The elm tree painted its quivering leaf shadows on the bedroom wall. Her husband slept heavily, with his back to her, a tuft stood up from the whorl of hair at the back of his head. A right-handed whorl, a mousy-brown tuft?

Those were not her things on the dressing table. Crystal, old silver — she had Wedgwood, white and rose. The long white curtains stirring in the morning breeze were unexceptionable, the walls lilac-grey, as they should be.

But on the antique bed table were no cigarettes; there was a Margaret Drabble novel she hadn't read, and a white digital clock unlike her own gilt timepiece. By some horrible error she was in bed in the wrong house. And the man beside her? She leaned carefully not to wake him; indeed it *was* Harvey Brown. They had all been drinking the night before, but surely none of the four would have drunk to sodden irresponsibility.

Sitting up she looked at her face in the dressing table mirror. *Not* her face, but the face of Felice Brown.

Harvey stirred, rolled over, spoke without looking at her.

"Too early, darling, too early. Lie down and love me."

"No," she said, "no," and heard Felice's deep contralto, not her own light voice with its English accent.

Harvey, only half roused, slept again. She, Joan, continued to stare at the face of Felice.

Then she rose, and shivering, ran to the bathroom. She showered, amused at the blond fuzz of pubic hair, towelled herself dry, made lavish use of Felice's expensive toiletries, hunted for a long peasant dress she had always admired; dressed, she went softly into the garden. Its scents pleased her; she picked the Browns' roses, and then, hearing the front door of the next house open, walked up their shared drive with the flowers in her hand

to face herself, coming down her own front steps, wearing her own blue denim dress.

"Felice," she said tentatively.

"Joan," as tentatively asked the other.

They stood, stared, in the Sunday morning sun.

"What's to be done?" said Joan who looked like Felice.

"What's to be done indeed?" said Felice who looked like Joan.

"They'll never believe us."

"It's that damned left-handed house. Remember I'm left-handed."

"Surely we can explain. Persuade them."

"Even if we can, what about the rest of the world? Wife-swapping isn't exactly acceptable in the circles we frequent."

"Perhaps we are dreaming. Perhaps tomorrow. . ."

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm making breakfast darling," called Harvey.

They looked at each other, a look of complicity. Each had the same thought. I am about to enjoy another woman's husband. Each was silent, excited.

The day slid by. Each couple ate, drank, cooked, gardened, according to habit. If the husbands seemed busier than usual, if they talked longer over car polishing, it only made things easier for the woman in a not entirely familiar house. At dusk a shared supper under the elm at the rear kept time flowing without obstacle. Then they sat long into the dark, laughing, joking, keeping to the surfaces.

But the night's lovemaking, though happy enough, seemed no different from any other night. Each maverick husband used the old familiar tricks, the same endearments. Just as each woman had found her new body accustomed to the house and its furnishing, she found nothing unfamiliar in the unfamiliar body that embraced her.

Their bodies stilled, they slept.

Joan woke early and lay for a while motionless, looking out at another beautiful summer morning. Time to get up, she supposed, if John — Harvey was to get to work on time.

The long body beside her stirred, moved and blue eyes looked into her face with strange intensity, probing, sad.

"Please," she said softly, "look at me. Look deep into me. Do I look different to you? In any way, in every way?"

"Yes. I always thought you should have yellow hair."

"John, John." She cried and clung, while he murmured into her hair, "Joanie, Joanie." They rocked with love, relief.

Later the thought might come, why was he/she so willing to go to

bed with her/him; but now there was only the return of confidence, of love.

They breakfasted from the Browns' stock and discussed the future. In *their* kitchen the Browns were doing the same. A conference seemed essential. They could perhaps keep the situation under wraps at home, but at work?

Both men were accountants, by chance each in business for himself. Amalgamation seemed the only solution. Harvey's office was a loose fit; it could contain John and his small staff. An announcement of imminent change would account for any unusual presences; the game would have to be played by ear, but with sufficient verve it could be played successfully. After phoning their offices the men declared a day of holiday.

They exchanged mail, went out in each other's cars to shop, met in the Blacks' house for dinner. The meal, its preparation shared by the two women, was good, the wine relaxed them. They began to let down, to find a piquancy, a challenge, in the situation.

How permanent was this change? How to deal with legalities? Should they exchange properties, policies? What about signatures? They were surprised to find that the borrowed body in each case co-operated, remembered, and that signatures would pass.

Friends? Both couples were new in Melbourne, and acquaintances as as yet were casual. "We'll just have to keep together, and prompt, cover up."

It was obvious that changing houses was no answer. The houses had already revenged rejection, they might do so disastrously a second time. Yet, each woman had a feeling of ease in the new house which helped her forget her changed body, perhaps a boon had been intended.

Over the weeks certain heirlooms changed place, but basically they accepted each other's furniture, as they had been forced to accept clothing for purely physical reasons. But Joan's Siamese and Felice's blue Persian had not been deceived; they changed houses the very first day of what came to be known as "The Renaissance," a nickname which sometimes led to mystification of a chance listener.

Neighbours and friends noticed only a certain absentmindedness, and the increasing intimacy between the two households. Black, Brown, confusingly alike. Joan brightened her hair and Felice bleached hers; they began to know each other so well they might have been siblings. "How did I scar my knee?" and "What have you been doing for this back of mine?" "Your sinus is such a nuisance." "I'd have it back in exchange for your migraine." Each body totally familiar to all of them, down to the little mole on Joan's shoulder that Harvey had always kissed, and sometimes

wanted to kiss again.

And so they live. Who knows when John will forgetfully enter
101 late one night? Who knows when Joan will wake one morning to
find a blond head on the pillow beside her again?

Who knows why it happened in the first place?

Who knows if it ever happened? Only John, Joan, Felice and Harvey
could tell us, and even they are growing a little confused.

PAMELA J. THOMAS

MOMENT

White porcelain statue
Under prunus blossom
Gazes
Mutely sharing our precious meeting.
She too
Dares not breathe
Lest the spell be broken
And petals fall too soon
On our moment in time.