

DIANE DODWELL

FRIDAY NIGHT IS FLOWERS NIGHT

To Dorothy it seemed as though many hours had passed and she had travelled many miles. In reality, she had simply walked up and down the aisles of the supermarket twice, as she always did before starting her Friday morning shopping. “Just getting the feel of things,” she said to herself contentedly, her eyes drifting through a maze of multi-coloured labels and lettering. Back at the turnstiles, she got out her list and geared herself for the actual buying. Passing the biscuit section first, she was glad her budget was not so tight as to rule out the occasional inspiration. “Choc Mint Creams!” – her mind sped forward to the ritual that would put a kind of seal on the pleasure of the morning. Home at last, she would put on the kettle, unload the bags from her jeep and settle down for a reflective cup of tea and a little something to eat – Mmmmm, heavenly!

Later that afternoon, only the ironing remained to be done. Dorothy’s arm moved to and fro across the ironing board, and again her mind was dreamy. She’d read in yesterday’s paper how some women thought they should be paid for housework. Fancy that! Getting paid for something you might really like doing – she certainly did! But how would they know if a housewife had done all her work properly? Dorothy imagined a man in a dark business suit with a clipboard under his arm knocking on the door. He would choose an unexpected moment, of course, when she was in the middle of making scones or cleaning out the linen cupboard. “I’ve come to inspect the housework,” he’d say, and walk down to the kitchen, his beady eyes darting here and there, taking in the dust she could not prevent settling on the hallstand, and that old stain on the lounge carpet. Then he’d check the dishes, open and shut the refrigerator door and run his eyes over the floor. This done, his keenly observant expression would mellow, and the autumn light touch his smiling dentures with a quiet gleam—like that on the fifty cent piece he’d placed on top of her cheque. Seeing it, Dorothy’s heart would

be full, she would be speechless. "It's about time you had a bonus," he'd say briskly, playing down the emotion of the occasion, "working yourself to a frazzle with all that scrubbing and polishing. 'Still," (with a sly wink) "I can't say we're not pleased with the results." And he'd be gone in a flash, tipping his hat to her at the front door and disappearing through the gate with a dry cough.

Yes, and they'd have to keep records of everyone's performance, Dorothy reflected, cutting up the blade steak for tea. She imagined rooms full of thousands and thousands of files . . . or would it all be on computer? And they'd need special spot checks to really test everybody's efficiency and dedication. Dorothy saw herself breathless from bending over to make the bed. She would just be smoothing out the candlewick bedspread when, with a sudden jolt, she'd notice the tall, neatly dressed stranger standing at the foot of the bed. He would be writing something very rapidly in a small notebook. "Sorry to intrude," he'd say with an apologetic nod. His eyes would be slightly friendlier this time, and as they looked into hers he would murmur, "Permit me to say, madam, how much I admire your technique." Then they would both turn to contemplate the beautifully made bed. Yes, Dorothy had to agree—she *was* a perfectionist. There was never a wrinkle in sheet or blanket, the ends always tucked in neatly. A good bed is like a work of art she would be thinking when her visitor, with just a touch of hesitation, would thank her politely then leave in a quiet, self-effacing manner.

Dorothy had begun to peel the potatoes for the evening meal. She felt the nights closing in. Autumn and winter stretched out before her like a long trail of potato peelings. Suddenly, she had shed her thick autumn woollies and was out in the garden in summertime, wearing one of her colourful print dresses and a straw hat. She thought modestly how this outfit became her—she really felt quite attractive as the breeze blew around her, slanting the sturdy couch grass of the lawn, and the sun warmed her neck. Then, bending to pluck out the weeds from her tomato patch, she was aware of a presence again. He was standing over by the fig tree, alternately watching her intently and writing at

a feverish pace on some ragged-looking pieces of paper. Dorothy stood to face him and was shocked by the dark and fathomless expression in his eyes. They looked at each other, enmeshed in a long, electric silence. Then, coming to herself, Dorothy asked,

“Why . . . why are you here?”

“They sent me . . . they sent me . . . to study you . . . they want a further report . . . I asked to be excused from the assignment but . . . they insisted.”

“Is there . . .,” Dorothy faltered, “is there anything *wrong* with my work?”

“No, oh no.” He seemed highly agitated, and stopped as if to calm himself. “No, they’re very impressed. You’re in the top category. It’s just that they wanted more details . . . to get a full picture . . . they regard you as something of a phenomenon, you see . . .”

He stopped again as if overcome by some powerful emotion, then replaced his fountain pen in his top pocket with a trembling hand. His clothes looked somehow dishevelled, his face was drawn and pale.

“I . . . I must go now . . . to make my report.” He stumbled in a daze towards the back gate which stood open. Reaching it, he turned to her:

“Goodbye, Dorothy, my . . .”

His voice and his face disappeared as she blinked away the moisture that had gathered in her eyes. Around her, the garden seemed to breathe its own stillness and freshness into the air. The wind touched the hem of her print frock like a gentle hand. Turning back to her tomatoes, she worked on until the cool of evening ran in slippery drops down the grass blades . . .

Dorothy drew her plum-coloured cardigan around her and went to set the fire. After lighting it she sat down for her second rest of the day. The pot full of vegetables bubbled on the stove. She allowed herself a minute sherry—“To warm the cockles of my heart,” as her mother used to say. When the doorbell rang,

the fires within and without had lit small flames in her cheeks. She walked up the passage without hurrying, feeling the dusk light penetrating the walls and furniture of the house.

She switched on the hall light.

He was there when she opened the door.

"Forgot my key again!" He smiled his shy, wrinkled smile at her then held his arms out to enfold her. "Missed you, dear."

As Dorothy responded, fleetingly she saw the sharp, sensitive profile bending down to her in the hall mirror.

"Missed you too, dear," she said brightly.

Then she smiled up at him, sniffing thoughtfully at the flowers he had brought her.

JUDITH RODRIGUEZ

THE GLOVE

Nobody takes hands seriously any more.

The days when a homecoming woman half-turned, arching her buttoned forearm — gone with the scaffolding of whalebone.

Never more, surprises of chapped inadequate hands pulled from anyway decent gloves, nor, unfolding, the unflurried palms and natural lotus-languor

of paler girls, still, each with a scar or wart half-healed, or lefthand index bitten to the blood.

This you take up, flung on a table in the vestibule —

its pair, yes, by the chair-leg — there's a hand;

kid, soft as the veined inner wrist, curl-fingered,

ridged with oversewn tendons. The gape buttonless.