A FIRST CIRCLE

The Ending

Night has fallen, the play begun. A woman holds herself precisely in the centre of the front row. Her jewellery, her posture, her decisive hemlines are enough — within her mind — to distinguish her from the other parents.

Crowded by others into her seat, Linda sits very much alone.

She can only close her eyes. Beside her, her husband shakes. Drenching waves of humiliation shatter over her. Raucous chuckles and barely suppressed titters fall heavily into her ears, yet her smile remains firm, held rigid by supporting mortar.

Linda steals a glance at her second husband. She — he — doesn't need this laughter, not now. Not in his condition. Have these people no idea how she would feel if he had another heart spasm now?

Derek's large hand covers his face. Tears find their way through his pasty fingers. His shoulders heave, but there is no sound.

Mortified, Linda realises her husband is also laughing.

Too Many Words

Linda strode purposefully through the gate. Strewn across the lawn lay a family's flotsam, slowly metamorphosing with the years. Her sister-in-law nowhere in sight, Linda was forced to step warily through this childish chaos.

Katrina was, in fact, cleaning the chook shed. (Fall, thud, scrape of the hoe, muck and shavings gathering heavily around her ankles.) She paused to readjust the long, thick gloves gripping her arms. They were heavy and airless, and her skin sweated at their lightest touch. As she swung her pregnant weight into the hoe, a thought appeared.

I am happy. The words simply bubbled into Katrina's brain, bursting into awareness. Hers was a strange happiness, gurgling away like a stream, totally haphazard, always being somewhere. Maybe even reaching someplace someday.
Anne Harrison, "A First Circle"

The trouble is, (thud of falling hoe, scrape-thud-scrape), no one seems to know this. Or cares. Or even feigns interest that I willingly would-have-chosen entanglement within this first circle, and still be happy.

The pile of muck around her feet grew stickily high. Katrina shovelled it into a once red wheelbarrow. Pausing to rub the small of her back, she felt Linda looking at her, and saw behind those eyes.

What Linda saw was mutton poorly dressed: a tired, shapeless woman. Chook muck consumes elegance, especially when one is heavy with child — and Katrina was always one to be heavy. Removing a hand adorning a waist regained by sheer determination after her last — most definitely last — child, Linda waved in greeting. “Hi darling! Don’t you look well!”

“Mummy! Mummy!” A nappy galloped by to plonk itself amongst the waste at Katrina’s feet. “Loo!” A wealth of autumn leaves showered to the ground.

“Sweetie, they’re just beautiful!” Leaves of all colours, of all shades, drifted on the autumn breeze. Leaves to be crumpled between fingers, to be smeared through hair, to be pasted into books. “Which do you like best?”

The little one waved a leaf the colour of a spring sun shower. “Dis. Daddy.”

“Lovely! We’ll show it to him when he gets home.” Katrina headed over towards Linda, toddler on one hip, leaf delicately counterbalanced in her free hand. “You know what, Sam? I think this one’s my favourite too.” She wiped remnants of clover from the boy’s mouth. “So, Linda, how’s things?”

“Mummy, look what I did!” Sarah appeared from amongst the trees, pens and paper in hand.

“Where are the kids, Linda? Just lovely, Sarah. What a beautiful, ah, dolphin.” Somehow Katrina balanced two children on a protruding lap.

“It’s a shark, Mummy, in the rain.”

Linda fiddled with one of many rings adorning her elegant hands and looked for somewhere clean to sit. “Oh, I left them with the baby-sitter. I simply have too much running around to do without little ones in tow.”

“I did this one at school for Daddy, and now this one for you!”

“I like those colours. Can I get you something to eat, Linda? Perhaps a drink?” Hands full, she nodded towards some plates on the table.
“Thanks, ah, no.” Linda smoothed her skirt just so over her taut belly, her precisely curving hips.

“They’re both so beautiful, Sarah, I can’t decide which I like best. Shall we put them on the fridge?”

“I really can’t stay.”

“Is that for the play?” Katrina asked, eying the cloth in Linda’s hands.

“Yes, it’s part of Angela’s costume. I have this enormous favour to ask you. Could you be a dear ...”

“Mummy, two more sleeps ’till the play!”

Linda slowly lowered herself into a chair and held herself rigid, afraid of contamination. “Sarah’s going to make a wonderful, er, donkey, is it?”

“Will Daddy be there?”

“Of course, honey. Actually, Linda, Sarah’s a sheep. Wait ’til you hear her bleating. Simply perfect.” Katrina shook her fringe from her eyes.

“Do you think you could be a darling and hem this for me?” Linda hesitantly placed a fold of luxurious blue on the table. She feared trusting it to Katrina’s mucky hands. “I have another meeting tonight ...”

“Of course, I’ll just be at home. Angela will be so beautiful as Mary.”

“Yes she will, won’t she.” Of course she will. What other child has such eyes of blue, such luxurious ringlets of blond?

“Angela’s a stuck ...”

“Sarah, sweet-heart, could you go and get some juice for you and your brother?”

“Juice! JUICE!”

“Yes, Sam, it’ll be just a minute.” The patient tone of Katrina’s voice didn’t change between child and sister-in-law.

“Angela’s been practising her lines every night. She’s just so excited!” Linda thought proudly of the little rehearsals they staged those evenings she had free
at home. First they practised getting the words right, now they were onto little postures, how to sit and stand just so.

"I love it when they're still of an age not to be left out of the play."

"Of course, dear," replied Linda. "And how is little Sarah going with her lines?"

"Well, she's got the bleating down pat. Fortunately, it's the shepherds who do the talking, not the sheep."

"You know, Katrina darling, I sat at work yesterday and realised that, between us, Derek and I have been away for meetings for nearly seventy nights this year. That's over two months!"

"Here you are, Mummy."

"Thanks, princess. Just pop them on the table. Ever thought of simply using a phone?" She was too busy feeding Sam to meet Linda's icy gaze with her own of pregnant peace. She knew when thoughts would never meet. Absent-mindedly Katrina picked up a biscuit and began to nibble.

"You're so lucky you can eat," came an eventual reply. "I swear, I threw up throughout both my pregnancies. Anyway, Katrina darling, I must go. You're sure this won't be too much trouble?" Suddenly she felt hesitant leaving such richness of colour victim to this chaos.

"I'll bring it to the play."

Linda waded once more through flotsam, and for a while there existed as much quiet as a backyard with young children can possess. Everywhere Katrina looked, tiny birds darted amongst the grass, and their chirping sounded all around. Red patches on their crowns and bottoms bounced across the lawn. A wattle bird landed on a tiny grevillia, the bough doubling over beneath his weight. A pause as the tree bounced back and forth, a drink, then off again in a flurry of soundless wings.

Sam climbed off Katrina's lap to crawl after them. He chuckled the whole way, a sound of pure pleasure. He sat and looked and laughed, the rolls of his belly shaking, before heading off again, chasing another wren as it hopped by. A champagne cork flew over his head.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Sarah charged towards her one true love. The galloping nappy wasn't far behind. "Daddy, Daddy!" filled the backyard, as Sarah was scooped
and thrown into the air, hands spread wide as she was flying, flying, strong arms waiting to throw her high again.

Katrina smiled. This was not the first circle. This was paradise.

**The Play's The Thing**

Linda snapped her mobile into her bag. Never a moment's quiet. How hard was it for a baby-sitter to get a toddler to sleep? “Now, darling,” she continued, caressing her darling's darling curls, “why don't we practice those lines one last time?”

They could barely hear each other. All around echoed the bustle of a primary school preparing for their big night of fame. Angela watched with envy as a foray of friends crept noisily across stage to peek around a curtain into the hall, only to whoop and squeal back to the dressing room. Parents and teachers alike were charmingly terrorised.

Linda looked down at her daughter. “That's right, sweetie, say it the same way as Mummy.” Angela's hair had curled so beautifully after a day of rollers. The blue of the mantle highlighted her eyes, and the dress with its endless petticoats suited her so fine. “Just stay still now while I fix your lipstick.” A quiet bubble grew amongst the chaos, and slowly their own audience formed. The sighs, the envy, all were joyfully tangible.

The cape fitted perfectly. Katrina had done a good job. She arrived so slow and tired this evening, a tiredness which carries the soul down through the feet, sliding it firmly into the earth. Linda needed but a glance before enunciating loudly, whilst settling the cape around Angela's shoulders, “Don’t expect any sympathy from me, Katrina. I’ve had my share of difficult pregnancies. I more than know what it’s like!”

**The Beginning ...**

Finally, finally, the curtain opens on the kindergarten class. Gasps and smiling gushes rise from the audience. Such a beautiful stage. Someone has actually brought in a donkey. The thought of it! And in the centre stands Angela, her Angela, cradling Baby Jesus in her arms, her mantle falling in luxurious folds. The red ribbon in her hair sparkles under the lights. She looks so beautiful, just like her mother at that age. Too exquisite a Mary to be found in a stable.

In stomps Joseph, and the centre of focus widens. A rustic lad. A little thug is Linda's immediate thought. With great theatrical deliberation, the boy plonks
Anne Harrison, "A First Circle"

his staff heavily on the stage then grounds his feet, never to move. "How goes it, Mary?"

And Mary freezes. She glances around the room, lip trembling, desperate to find a reason for being there.

"Well, Mary?" asks Joseph, his child's voice wavering. "How is our blessed Baby Jesus?"

Hearing his voice, the little girl turns to Joseph. She casts around desperately for the right thing to say, and so, as a six year old does, repeats those first words which fall into her mind.

She holds out the baby to Joseph. "Here, you take him, Joseph. I need a drink. He's been a little bugger all day."

And Linda just sits there. As titters and laughter fall into her ears.

For once, she sees with clarity the crystals of her life as they shatter and fall around her.

Crystals of one colour.