VINTAGE

THE L-SHAPED ROOM

LYNNE REID BANKS

Contents

ABOUT THE BOOK

Pregnant by accident, kicked out of home by her father, 27-year-old Jane Graham goes to ground in the sort of place she feels she deserves – a bug-ridden boarding-house attic in Fulham. She thinks she wants to hide from the world, but finds out that even at the bottom of the heap, friends and love can still be found, and self-respect is still worth fighting for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynne Reid Banks has written a number of books for children and young adults. Her children's books include *The Adventures of King Midas*; *The Farthest-Away Mountain*; *Maura's Angel*; *The Indian in the Cupboard*, recently made into a major Hollywood film; *Return of the Indian*; *The Fairy Rebel*; and *The Magic Hare*. Her books for teenagers include *One More River, Sarah and After, My Darling Villain, The Writing on the Wall, Melusine: A Mystery* and *Broken Bridge*. In addition, she has written two historical books about Israel: *Letters to My Israeli Sons* and *Torn Country*.

Lynne Reid Banks

THE L-SHAPED ROOM

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

FOR PAT
WHETHER SHE LIKES IT OR NOT
AND IN MEMORY OF
JAMIE

Chapter 1

THERE wasn't much to be said for the place, really, but it had a roof over it and a door which locked from the inside, which was all I cared about just then. I didn't even bother to take in the details – they were pretty sordid, but I didn't notice them so they didn't depress me; perhaps because I was already at rock-bottom. I just threw my one suitcase on to the bed, took my few belongings out of it and shut them all into one drawer of the three-legged chest of drawers. Then there didn't seem to be anything else I ought to do so I sat in the arm-chair and stared out of the window.

It was a greyish sort of day, which suited the way I was feeling, and it looked greyer because the window needed cleaning. I registered this vaguely and thought I'd buy some Windolene tomorrow and give it a going-over; then I thought, what the hell, no one's going to see it. I had an empty sort of feeling and wondered if I was hungry. If so it would be the first time for a week I'd felt like eating. I thought about various sorts of food, but they all struck me as quite unattractive until I came to coffee. Almost all I'd had for a week was coffee. I got up and felt in my trenchcoat pocket to make sure I had my wallet and keys, and then went out, carefully locking the door.

My room was five flights up in one of those gone-to-seed houses in Fulham, all dark brown wallpaper inside and peeling paint outside. On every second landing was a chipped sink with one tap and an old ink-written notice which said 'Don't Leave Tap Driping'. The landing lights were the sort that go out before you can reach the next one. There were a couple of prostitutes in the basement; the landlady had been quite open about them. She'd

pointed out that there was even an advantage to having them there, namely that nobody asked questions about anybody. She dropped her eyes as she said that. Not out of modesty. She was looking to see if I were pregnant. Just because you don't ask questions, her look said, it doesn't mean you're not curious. But I had only been pregnant a month, so of course there was nothing to see.

I was curious, in a remote sort of way, about the prostitutes. I'd never met one; I'd never wanted to. They'd seemed like strange animals from another part of the forest with whom I had nothing in common. Now, since my own father evidently considered me one, I had to think again. After all, they were people. It might be rather interesting to talk to one.

However, they weren't around now. It was mid-afternoon and I supposed they were sleeping. As I left the house and walked past the area railings I looked at the basement windows, but the curtains were drawn.

The neighbourhood was completely strange to me. If I'd been in any mood to make judgements I'd have judged it to be pretty grim. The shabby houses fronted almost right on to the pavement, though some of them had front yards stuck with a few sooty bushes. Most of the windows lacked curtains and that gave the houses a blind look, or rather a dead look, like open-eyed corpses. They were decaying like corpses, too. Some of the front yards had dustbins instead of bushes, which would have smelt if it hadn't been drizzling. But the drizzle didn't do anything to reduce the dog-smell, which was foul. You had to watch where you walked. It hadn't been raining long and the pavement had that sweaty look.

I walked automatically in the direction of the only landmark I knew in the district – the paper-shop where I'd seen the advertisement for the room. The advertisement was still there, behind the cracked glass among the other

cards advertising second-hand prams, as new, and French girl gives lessons, phone after 6 p.m. Some rain had leaked into the frame and there was a yellow stain on the corner of the card; it looked as if it had been there for a long time.

The proprietor of the shop came out to put a new card into the frame. He was bare-headed and after a minute his scalp shone with rain through his thin unwashed hair.

‘That room’s taken,’ I said, pointing to the card. It was the first time I’d spoken since I made the arrangement with the landlady at noon. My father and I hadn’t said a word to each other when I went home for my things. He’d told me to go and I was going; he didn’t care where and so why should I tell him?

The old paper-shop man looked at the card, and then at me. He wasn’t very interested in either. ‘I expect it is,’ he said. ‘It could be. They come and go,’ he said indifferently.

He stuck the new advertisement up with two tarnished thumb-tacks. It said: ‘Photographer’s Model free evenings. Special poses.’ And a phone number. I looked at the phone number to see if it was the same as mine; perhaps one of the tarts in the basement had decided to invest sixpence a week in the hope of attracting new custom. But I couldn’t remember what my new number was; I could only remember my old one. I’d had the same telephone number for the whole of my life; twenty-seven years with the same telephone number. I said to the old man: ‘Have you got a telephone?’

‘Not a public. You could use it, though. Cost you sixpence. It’s in the back.’

Sixpence was what it cost to telephone from the big hotel in the West End where I worked. But still, it was too cheap for this call. Because I was wondering what would happen if I called my father and said to him, ‘I’ve found a place to live, Father. It’s one room in the worst part of

Fulham. There's one bathroom for the whole house, and two tarts live in the basement. Is that what you wanted? Is that where you think I belong?'

The old man stopped in the doorway and looked back at me. 'Well, do you want to phone, or don't you?'

'No, I don't think I will after all.'

He turned to go in and I said, 'Aren't you going to take the card down?'

'Which?'

'About the room. I told you, it's taken.'

'How do you know it's taken?'

'Because I've taken it.'

He came back to where I was standing in the rain, and put his face close to mine. 'You didn't put that card in, did you?'

'No,' I said, puzzled. 'I just saw the card and went about the room, and I took it. I live there now,' I said, the funny, unlikely truth of it coming real for the first time, 'so it's not vacant any more.'

'Who's paying for that card to be up there?' he asked me, jabbing at it angrily. 'You or somebody else?'

'Not me,' I said.

'Well then,' he said triumphantly, 'who are you to tell me to take it down? When you have a card up there, then you'll have the right to tell me to take it down. And when you come to tell me to take it down,' he went on, angrier than ever, 'maybe you'll pay me the twelve-and-six you owe me for having it up there twenty-five weeks since your deposit ran out. I'm not a bleeding charity, you know,' he said almost snarling through his little grey teeth, 'even the chippies pay up more regular than the bloody landladies. Those chippies, they know what it means to have a living to make. You can say what you like about 'em, that much they

do know. These old faggots letting off rooms to God knows what riff-raff, black riff-raff too, doesn't matter so long as the rent's the right colour – they think their lousy dirty houses are the whole world, they don't stop to wonder if there's other people outside trying to keep alive. 'You want to use the phone?' he asked in the same aggressive voice. 'Cost you sixpence, it's in the back.'

I shook my head and he looked at me curiously. I doubt if he'd really noticed me properly before. 'You can shut the door,' he said more kindly. 'No one can hear you.'

'No thank you,' I said. 'Can I get some coffee near here?'

His face closed again. 'I ain't running a cafe,' he said, but grumbling this time, not snarling.

'I meant –'

'Nor a bleeding information desk, neither.' He looked at me again in the same sharp way. 'You say you're *living* in that room?'

'Yes.'

He stared at me a bit longer, sucking his teeth. 'Bloody Commies,' he said suddenly. 'Why couldn't they leave the middle classes alone? Never did no real harm as I could see. Live and let live, I say, all except the bobos, you have to keep them in their place. *And* the old faggots with their bleeding houses. Sorry, miss.'

I realized with surprise that he was apologizing for saying bleeding. It was as if he were in the presence of a corpse – the corpse of the middle classes. He was looking at me as if I were its last twitch.

'Don't you go on paying your rent on the dot, miss,' he went on in a very kindly, confidential tone. 'You keep the old cow waiting, like she does me. And wait she will, don't you worry. It's not as easy as it used to be to find people so down on their luck they'd live in one of her rat-holes …' He

went on staring at me. I clenched my hands in my pockets. I felt like a piece of flotsam.

‘I must go,’ I said awkwardly.

‘That’s right, miss. You go and have a nice cup of something hot. There’s a place about five minutes’ walk from here. Round to the left at the lights. Not the first place you come to, don’t go in there, the stuff she calls tea’s nothing but dust, and the milk’s tinned. The second place. Frank’s, he’s a pal of mine; give you a good cuppa, Frank will, and you don’t get the rough types there like you do some places. Frank won’t have bobos in, and you won’t find none of the girls there this time of day. Shouldn’t go in there late at night, though. He does his best, Frank does, but you can’t put a sieve on the door, can you? You have to take what comes, same as the pubs. Pity they don’t divide cafes off into saloon and public, if you ask me. People like to be with their own sort. Not as how you’d find many of your sort around here …’ He went on staring at me and sucking his teeth. We stood there for a moment waiting for the conversation to start again, and then I nodded and turned away.

I found Frank’s. It wasn’t a bad place. The tables had yellow Formica tops which Frank wiped after each customer. The lights were yellow too, warm in the drab afternoon, not like the cold white neon ones. I was the only person there, except Frank, who was the same age as the old man. At first glance, he could have been the old man. I sat down at the table furthest from the door and Frank came and wiped my table. He didn’t ask what I wanted.

‘Could I have some coffee, please?’

He said nothing and didn’t nod, but finished wiping the table and then went behind the counter and drew off a cup of milk-coffee, turning the tap off very suddenly at just the

right moment. He carried it over without spilling any, and brought a bowl of sugar to the table.

‘Didn’t want it black,’ he said, without a question-mark.

‘No, that’s fine.’

‘Sixpence.’

Everything seemed to be sixpence. Again I heard myself asking:

‘Have you got a telephone?’

‘No. Two kiosks in the main road by the cinema.’ He went away and started wiping tables again.

I sat stirring my coffee. So far as I was capable of liking any place, I liked Frank’s. It reminded me of a similar place where I worked once.

It was years ago, when I was trying to be an actress. In spite of what my father thought, and said, I’d got my first job, in a repertory company up North – what they used to call a commonwealth rep before Actors’ Equity got teeth in its jaws and forbade such things. ‘Ever so common and no wealth,’ we used to tell each other. Commonwealth meant no one got a salary but at the end of each week we divided the profits equally. That was a very democratic idea, except that there never were any profits. We didn’t care. We got parcels from home and shared them, and money too if we had the right sort of parents, which I didn’t, but I made up for it by not smoking. Kind people in the town who believed we were starving thought we’d be insulted by offers of food (they were wrong) but were always pressing cigarettes on us. I used to say, ‘Thank you, I’ll take it for later.’ Then, when we all met at the theatre, I’d empty out my pockets and hand round my loot, bent at odd angles and leaking tobacco. In exchange I would get a share of the tinned soup or spaghetti somebody’s sympathetic mother had sent.

Of course my father didn’t know about that side of it. I wrote to him during the weeks when I was stage managing,

sitting in the wings waiting to strain my insides winding down the curtain which had a faulty counterweight. I told him I was acting big parts and that the producer was pleased with me, which was true some of the time, and I sent him cuttings from the local paper when I was mentioned there. I was extremely happy.

Then, one night, there was a terrible scene.

A man who was in the company, a queer called Malcolm, was in love with another of the actors. This actor wasn't a bit queer; he was in love with me. Malcolm rather pathetically thought nobody knew he was queer, and was very ashamed of it; actually, of course, you only had to look at him to know. I liked him otherwise, and he liked me; but he loved this actor, and that I found disgusting. So did the actor, and one evening we let Malcolm catch us kissing in one of the dressing-rooms after the performance.

We didn't think how he might feel. We just thought he would stop mooning about the actor when he saw how normal he was. It wasn't until I looked up from the kiss and saw him standing in the doorway that I suddenly got frightened.

I've always played a game in which I decide what kind of animal or bird or insect people look like. Malcolm always reminded me of a cat. A female cat, soft and affectionate but with something hidden deep that you couldn't get to know. As he stood in the doorway with his snub-nosed cat's face gone white, I knew suddenly that that hidden something was the savagery all cats have, even the very tame ones.

He came flying at me with his nails clawing and his mouth snarling. I was too scared to move, and the actor didn't move either. I still have two faint long marks on my cheek where his nails went. They don't show under make-up but when I'm upset or angry they come up red and

nothing hides them. I was lucky, really, because of course he was after my eyes, but he missed them through being too crazy to watch what he was doing.

When I felt the pain on my face I screamed and caught hold of his wrists, and then the actor gave a sort of jerk like someone waking up and threw himself against Malcolm, who fell over, and we lay on top of him until he stopped struggling and lay still.

It was very quiet then, all except the sounds of our breathing; I felt uncomfortable, lying half on the dressing-room floor and half on Malcolm's body with my face pressed against his chest. He smelled of paint and dust from the theatre, and of the talcum powder he put under his arms. I lifted my face away and left two streaks of blood on his woollen shirt.

He was lying on his back with his eyes open and his mouth panting and there was a little froth on his lips. Suddenly his face screwed up like a little girl's and he began to cry and say, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry …' The actor and I got off him very quickly and awkwardly and stood up, as if we were children caught by grown-ups doing something indecent.

I went quickly out of that dressing-room and up the stairs to the one all the girls used. I washed my face in cold water; then I was sick into the basin. Afterwards I washed my face again and put some peroxide on the scratches out of a bottle one of the girls used to bleach her hair. The scratches looked very bad because my face was so white; it looked frighteningly ugly, like someone else's face. I was crying and the tears kept running into the scratches and making them sting; but the peroxide stung so much worse that I couldn't feel anything from the tears after that. But I kept on crying while I was packing my clothes and stage tat into my big trunk. I didn't do it very carefully, but one spreads around a lot in three months so it took a long time

to sort all my things out. I wasn't finished when Malcolm knocked on the door.

He came in and his face still looked like a cat's, a cat that's caught in a trap and wants you to let it out. I didn't say anything and he leaned back against the door and watched me packing.

'You're going, then.' His voice had that gasp in it that comes after a lot of crying.

I didn't answer. I wished he'd go away. I thought if he stayed I'd have to tell him that we'd let him catch us purposely because we wanted to rub it in that we were normal and that he disgusted us. He didn't disgust me now; I disgusted myself. But he made it worse, standing there so defencelessly with his red eyes and hurt mouth. I rolled up the stained towel with my greasepaint in it and put it in the top tray of the trunk with my shoes. Then I picked the tray up. It was quite heavy.

'Let me help with that.'

'No,' I said sharply. 'Leave it alone.'

I put the tray on top of my things in the trunk and closed down the lid.

Behind me, he gasped again and said, '*Please* don't go.'

I faced him so that he could see the scratches. 'How can I stay after this?' I said. He looked at me. His soft, helpless face seemed to shiver. I felt sick again.

'Have you put something on them?'

'Yes,' I said, 'don't worry, I'm not going to risk getting blood poisoning.' His face became a shade more wretched, if possible, which was what I'd wanted. I wanted to punish him for making me feel so guilty.

He began to cry again, quite openly. He came towards me with his face screwed up and put his arms round me and sobbed, 'Please, don't go, I'll never forgive myself,

please …’ As I stood there with him hanging on to me, pleading and crying, I could imagine how, in a day or so, I would relive this scene and wish I had petted and comforted him and forgiven him and agreed to stay, making it all his fault. But at this moment I knew it was my fault, and so I stood there with my arms not moving to cuddle him and what I said was, ‘Will you ask two of the men to help me out with my trunk?’ And the way I said ‘men’ stopped his pleading because it was so insulting, and he let me go and walked out with something like dignity.

So I left the company, and as I’d expected I regretted it next day, but it was too late then. I gave a week’s notice at my digs and sat around in them wondering where I would go when it expired because the season wasn’t due to end for another two months and I couldn’t go back to my father before that. In a small town like that everyone knows the local actors and speaks to them in shops; there was no question *there* of having no curiosity – everyone was bursting with it, starting with my landlady and spreading to the street my digs were in and from there all over town. I couldn’t go out for a walk without being asked a hundred times why I’d left the company, and what had happened to my face, and was it true what Mrs Whatnot said, that this or that? The most widely accepted story was that I’d had a fight with one of the other actresses over a part, and I didn’t correct it. As to what I was going to do, I didn’t know, I only knew I couldn’t go home for two more months.

The actor who had thought himself in love with me wasn’t in love with me at all, and I wasn’t in love with him either. We discovered that when he came to see me. I wasn’t glad to see him although I tried to be, and he felt the same. We sat in the kitchen of my digs on the blue plush settee in front of the stove. We talked and drank the tea which my landlady always made for every visitor, and

we didn’t touch each other or look at each other much, because we felt like two people who’ve committed a crime together but are trying to behave as if it weren’t important or had never happened.

He asked if I were going back to London and I said no, I couldn’t tell Father what had really happened and I couldn’t tell him a lie either because he always knew when I was lying. So the actor said, ‘Well, what are you going to do?’ And I said, ‘I’ll have to stay in this town because of the postmark on letters to Father.’ That was the first time I’d thought of that.

The actor asked what I was going to live on, which was a good question, because at least the rep had paid for my digs as part of the get-out and that had included one meal a day and all the tea I could drink. I said, ‘Obviously I’ll have to get a job,’ and the actor said, ‘You mean, not acting?’– incredulously, as if there weren’t any other kinds of job, which is how all actors feel to begin with, and how I felt too until that moment.

That night after it was dark I went for a walk to a part of town I’d never been to, on the other side of the river. People around there didn’t go to the theatre much and nobody knew me. I saw a notice in a café window saying they needed a waitress. I went in and sat down at a table, and watched the proprietor wiping the table-tops with a damp cloth. They weren’t Formica. They were coloured oilcloth tacked under at the corners. There was a cruet and a bottle of Worcester Sauce on each table, and a bowl of sugar. I couldn’t decide whether I should apply for the job or not, and I thought, *I’ll order some coffee and if the cup’s cracked or there’s lipstick on it I’ll pay and walk out*. It wasn’t that I cared too much about things like that; at the theatre we’d drunk coffee out of jam jars and cooked in paint tins on top of the remains of what the person before

had cooked; it was just a way of deciding whether to ask for the job or not, like tossing a coin.

I ordered the coffee and it came. There was none spilled in the saucer and the cup might have been brand new for all the cracks or lipstick I found on it, though I looked carefully, half-hoping there would be. I drank the coffee and then went to the counter and applied for the job.

I'd played the daughter in a Yorkshire comedy the week before and I told the proprietor my name was Millie Braithewaite, speaking in a Yorkshire accent, but he said who did I think I was having on? I was the young lass from the theatre, the one all the pother was about; he'd spotted me right off as soon as I came in.

It took a bit of talking to convince him that I needed the job, and that I could do it if he gave it to me, but in the end he said I could start tomorrow. A day's unpaid trial and after that a week's notice on either side. I was to get £4 10s. a week, my hours being from ten in the morning till the customers went home at night. Four-ten sounded like a lot and I was very grateful, thinking he'd engaged me out of pity. What I didn't realize was that what I'd done was the local equivalent of Ingrid Bergman getting a job as a hat-check girl in the Regent Palace Hotel right after the Rossellini scandal.

The first week was a nightmare. The whole town came across the river to have a look at me. The café had never done such business. The proprietor gave up wiping the tables between customers: there wasn't time. He just stood behind the cash-register and grinned whenever he caught my eye.

I didn't try to hate all the interested gawpers who sat and joked and whispered while I fetched their egg and chips, tea, Tizer, and bread and butter; I just hated the

proprietor. I hated him quietly and steadily while I worked as I had never worked in my life before.

Every night I would hang my overall away in a little cupboard off the café kitchen and look at my face in a bit of mirror propped over a coat-hook. I would think about how I hated the proprietor because he was fat and because he had engaged me not out of pity but as a sort of side-show, and I would watch the two scratch-marks standing out redly as the humiliation thickened in my throat and the tears of tiredness came at last.

I would tell myself to go and tell him I wouldn't be coming next day; but at the beginning I thought it was too soon to give up, and after the third day I was too tired to say anything to anyone. I told myself I'd stick it till the end of the week and get my four-ten out of him before I told him I was never coming back.

Saturday was the worst day of all. Apart from the looks and remarks, the work itself went on for nearly twelve hours without a break, except half an hour at seven when I was supposed to have supper. I sat down in the smoky, greasy kitchen, and pushed the plate of fish and chips away and put my head down on my arms where it had been. I didn't go to sleep. I just lay there thinking over and over again, *Only five more hours. Only five more hours*. I had no other thought in my head at all. When the proprietor put his hand on my shoulder to tell me my half-hour was up, I opened my eyes and sat up suddenly. I must have been partly asleep because everything reeled and sparkled for a minute and the proprietor's face in the middle of it looked exactly like my father's.

It was after eleven when the last of them went. After the door slammed behind him there was a beautiful ringing silence. I stood in the middle of it and it was like bathing in warm milk. Then the proprietor opened the cash-register to put in the last customer's eightpence-halfpenny and I

thought that breaking that silence was the best reason I'd ever had to hate him.

I walked to him, where he stood behind the counter, gloating over the overflowing cash-drawer, and said: 'While you've got that drawer open, may I have my wages, please?'

He counted out my money, less insurance, very slowly, and, it seemed to me, grudgingly. Then he passed it over to me, but when I reached to take it he drew it back. He held it where I couldn't reach it, and weighed it in his hand, smiling at me.

I could feel the scratches burning on my face and I saw him looking at them. I wanted to open my mouth and scream until I had no lungs left, to scream right into his face until just the noise made him stop smiling that fat smile. But, unbelievably, he couldn't see from my eyes how much I hated him, because he said in quite an ordinary voice, 'Ah well, I suppose you've earned it,' and he gave it to me.

As soon as it was in my hand I saw that his smile was just the smile of a fat Yorkshireman who's had a good week's business and is having a joke to celebrate. It wasn't a torturer's smile at his victim. I put the money in my pocket and walked round the end of the counter to go into the kitchen for my coat. Then I remembered I hadn't told him yet that I wasn't coming in again. I turned to him but before I could say anything he said, 'You could have thirty bob more if you'd come in tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow's Sunday,' I said stupidly.

'Well, I know you're tired. But you won't be a novelty for ever. We want to strike while iron's hot. Then you can take it easy when the rush dies down.'

There was quite a long pause and I must have started swaying on my feet because his expression changed and he

said, ‘Are you all right, lass? You look a bit poorly.’ I suddenly shouted at him, ‘You can take your thirty bob and stuff it, you bloody thick-skinned slave-driver!’

He looked at me for a second with his mouth open, and then he started to laugh. He laughed until he grew weak and had to lean on the counter and wipe his eyes. ‘Ee well,’ he said at last, ‘Ee well, happen you’re right. Happen it’s a bit much to ask. Take your thirty bob and stuff it, eh? Ee, you’ll do, lass, you will. See you Monday. Don’t forget to turn lights out and lock door.’ And he went out, chuckling and shaking his head.

I went into the back of the café and took off my overall and put my coat on. Then I looked at myself in the piece of mirror as I always did. The red had died right out of the marks: they showed, but only because they had scabs on them. The skin round them was clear and they had a healthy look. I thought it was Saturday night, and at the theatre they’d be striking the set after the last performance of this week’s play. They would all be scrambling about on ladders and uncleating the flats and packing the borrowed props in boxes ready to be returned next day to their owners. The new little girl stage manager would be brewing coffee on the gas-ring in the cramped scene-dock, the ring that was used for cooking meals and heating up the foul-smelling size and boiling the kettle for tea. Throughout the work of the night, someone would keep feeding records to the panatrope.

I wondered what the actor would be doing. He hadn’t been to see me in the café. I had hoped he wouldn’t come, but when he didn’t I had been disappointed. I hadn’t seen any of the other rep people since the night I left. My landlady told me they’d got a new girl from Birmingham to replace me. During the week I’d been in the café, she’d been rehearsing Christina in *The Silver Cord*. On Mondays she would be playing it. It was two-for-the-price-of-one on

Mondays to make sure of a good first-night house; there were a lot of regulars who always came on Mondays and didn't mind about the missed lighting cues or prompts or people trying to open doors the wrong way, because they'd got in for half-price. It was always a full house on Mondays, even for a drama. I wondered if the new girl understood what a wonderful and difficult part Christina was.

I left the café, turning out the lights and locking the door. Then I walked back to my digs and asked my landlady if I could stay on. She was very pleased because not many people wanted that sort of accommodation and she hadn't found anyone else. She said I looked right fagged and that he had no business keeping me so late. She got a hot potato pie out of the warmer by the stove and dished some of it on to a plate of cold meat. I felt calm and very hungry; my landlady sat on the arm of the plush settee and chatted to me while I ate, passing me the ketchup and the bread and butter and the raisin turnovers to follow. It was very nice to be waited on for a change. She mentioned that her sister had happened to be passing the café and had popped in to see how I was getting on. She said her sister had said that I worked like she didn't know what, and that I'd make a grand waitress if only I smiled a bit more. She said I always smiled so lovely when I was taking a funny part in the plays, but that I looked so rain-faced in the café it fair put her off her poached eggs. I said I quite saw how it could. Then we both had a cup of tea and my landlady made me a hot water bottle because she said I looked shivery. She'd let me sleep in in the morning, she said; I could sleep all day if I liked. She'd bring my lunch up on a tray. I thanked her and gave her a kiss and she said she was right glad I was staying.

I slept until lunchtime the following day and went for a walk in the afternoon. When the neighbours shouted to me out of their windows to know how I was getting on in t'caff,

I shouted back that I was getting on fine, and why didn't they drop in some time. That evening I went to a film and got to bed early and read for a while before going to sleep. The next day I went back to the café.

It went on being hard work, but there was never another week like the first, chiefly because I didn't mind it any more. I learned a lot, specially the week the cook was off with her sinus. I'd never cooked before beyond heating things up out of tins, but now I learned how to make batter that fried golden, and how to mix welsh rarebits with dry mustard and grill them eight at a time, and how to make an omelette such as the customers had never tasted before because I used a French recipe out of a book I borrowed from the library. From this I also learned how to make baked beans taste special by adding chopped onion and brown sugar and some garlic salt, which had to be ordered from York by our local grocer. Not everybody liked it at first, but I didn't tell them what the funny taste was, and after a bit people were coming specially, not to look at me, but to eat.

I got on very well with the proprietor. I used to think up rich new insults to make him laugh. He thought I was a proper caution, but he said I was a good worker too. The week I was doing the cooking he got worried by the unusual smells that came out of the kitchen, but when custom increased and regulars came in asking for this or that 'cooked the new way', he raised my wages to £6 and let me help with the cooking even after the cook came back. She didn't care for the arrangement much, but when she complained he told her she could like it or lump it.

I wrote to my father every week and told him what play was being put on, and I invented other things to tell him and hoped he wouldn't notice that I'd stopped sending cuttings from the local paper. I didn't read the reviews and I didn't go near the theatre.

One night the actor came into the café. He was leaving the company and going back to London, he said. There was something rotten about the feeling in the company that he couldn't stand any more. The new girl had fallen in love with Malcolm. The actor had tried to tell her it was no use, but she wouldn't believe him. The actor told me the interesting thing was that Malcolm found it disgusting that a woman should want him, and he was quite vicious to her, screaming insults one minute and sneering with sarcasm the next. The girl kept having hysterics and threatening to kill herself. The actor said the whole atmosphere was unbearable; in fact he was fed up with the theatre generally and was going to try to get a job in journalism. He asked if I was all right and I said I was. He said would I have dinner with him when I got back to town, if he had any money by then. I said I'd see. There didn't seem anything else to say and there were customers waiting, so he got up to go.

'Good-bye,' he said. 'You're not missing much. The houses are dropping off and we're doing one Aldwych farce after another.'

'I know,' I said.

He hesitated, then kissed my cheek. Not the scratched one, the other.

'What was she like as Christina?' I asked.

'Ghastly. She played her like a games mistress.'

My spirits rose suddenly and I laughed. 'Good-bye,' I said. 'Good luck. I really would like to have dinner with you.'

But I never did. By the time I got back to London, he was engaged to be married.

Chapter 2

I WAS sitting in Frank's in Fulham, sipping coffee and remembering all this, for two reasons; one I didn't admit to myself, but it was to do with the actor. The other was because Frank's reminded me of this other place. I'd stayed on there for two months, till it was time to go back to London. I could have gone three weeks earlier because the company ended its season before it had meant to. But the proprietor offered me £6 10s. a week for as long as I'd stay on. £6 10s. wasn't bad pay for a waitress in those days; for the first time in my life I was saving money. So I went on for another three weeks, laying tables, cooking the specials, carrying food and cups of tea to the tables; and I went on writing lies to my father.

When I finally left, the proprietor gave me a present of £2 which brought my savings up to £15. I was filled with confidence. I remembered coming home in the train and listening to the wheels saying 'I can do anything – I can do anything –' Sitting with Frank's coffee fighting the cold inner emptiness, I thought of that feeling of triumph and excitement, trying to recreate it, but it was like being stone cold and trying to get warm by remembering what being warm was like. I picked up a teaspoon and let it drum on the table to the rhythm of those six-year-old wheels and whispered to myself, 'I can do anything … I can do anything …'

'Do you mind?'

Two girls in overalls at the next table turned round, twisting their mouths and rolling their eyes at each other. I stopped drumming. It wasn't doing any good anyway. But there was one thing – I could work as a waitress in a place

like this, if I had to. And do it well enough so that I needn't be too ashamed of it. I wondered how much they paid waitresses now. Or perhaps it would be better to be a cook, in the kitchen where nobody would see me. I picked up the menu and saw that Frank only did sandwiches and snacks. It wasn't important. I didn't have to start worrying about a job yet. I had one that I wanted to keep for as long as I could.

I left Frank's and walked back to the house. As I walked, I thought about my job. It was a good one. I'd had it for two years. I was assistant to the public relations officer at Drummonds Hotel, which is not so big as Grosvenor House but more expensive. Because it's so small it's considered exclusive and a lot of big wheels who used to go to the Savoy and the Dorchester were now fighting for the privilege of paying a few extra guineas a day for a suite at Drummonds. My job was to arrange Press receptions for the ones who wanted publicity, and fight the Press off for those who didn't. There were a lot of sidelines to the job too, but that was most of it. It was largely a matter of keeping people happy. I had a small office to myself next to the large plushy one my boss had on the ground floor of the hotel. My salary was twelve hundred a year and expenses. There were a lot of perks, too – quite legitimate ones. And it was great fun and very interesting. Not the way acting had been, of course. But I couldn't have earned twelve hundred a year on the stage if I'd hung on for the rest of my life.

Sooner or later I'd have to tell my boss. I couldn't predict how he would feel about it. Perhaps he would make me leave at once. On the other hand, he might let me stay on until the last moment. That seemed more likely, in view of the sort of man he was; but even the most broadminded men are apt to be funny about things like this.

I wondered how long it took to be really obvious. Three months? Four? I could save quite a bit in four months, living as I was going to live. That was the reason I gave myself for choosing such a scruffy place to live in; there was another reason, but I hadn't explained that to myself yet. On the other hand, some women begin to show almost at once. I was no sylph, but I was flat across the front. As I walked, I put my hand through the slit in my trenchcoat pocket and felt my stomach. It didn't feel any different. It seemed incredible that there was the beginning of a baby in there.

I wondered, too, when you start being sick in the mornings. That would make it more difficult to keep on working. Perhaps morning sickness was a mental thing, like travel sickness. Some women went through pregnancy without being sick at all. I decided it was necessary for me to be like that. I had to keep on working as long as possible at the job in the hotel. Whatever job I got after that, it couldn't pay anything like the same money.

But then there was afterwards. I hadn't let myself think too much about that. It was hard enough to imagine how I was going to get through the next eight months. I'd thought through every minute of it when I first began to worry – before I knew for certain. I didn't sleep for five nights; just lay awake until four or five o'clock, thinking, imagining. The days weren't so bad because I had plenty to do, but the nights were very bad. Each one was worse than the one before, because at first I could tell myself it would be all right in the morning. When in the morning nothing had happened I'd tell myself it would come during the day. Then another night would arrive and it would be that much more difficult to sleep than it had been the night before, because my doubts seemed that much nearer to becoming certainties.

On the fifth night I began to think about afterwards and I panicked. I began to cry aloud and I couldn't stop myself. My father slept in the next room. Both our doors were open and as my sobs rose I knew he must hear. I knew he would come and ask what was the matter, and I knew I would tell him. It was stupid because, although I felt sure, I couldn't be completely sure, and what was the point of telling him before it was necessary? I knew how he would feel about it. But in that moment I felt as if I were alone in a trap. Nothing mattered if only I could tell someone. If only I didn't have to be alone with it.

That was how it seemed before I heard him call from his room, 'Is that you, Jane? What's the matter?' And when I didn't answer, 'What are you crying like that for?' Then I heard him getting out of bed and grunting and fumbling for his slippers and my sobs stopped. I lay without moving and felt the ice of real fear freeze the artificial panic which had made me want to tell him. I lay still, with my face in my pillow. I didn't move or breathe. I felt him standing over me. He had never hit me in his life. I wasn't afraid of him that way. I was afraid of his disgust. I would have preferred anything now, anything at all, to telling him what I had so much wanted to tell him two minutes before.

'What were you crying about?' His voice was gruff and sleepy, and sounded kind. But I lay, motionless, frozen, willing him to go back to bed.

He put his hand on my shoulder and shook me a little.

'Come on,' he said. 'If you didn't want me to come in, what did you cry so loudly for? What's the matter, lost your job?' He squeezed my shoulder with his fingers. 'Mm? Is that it?' I was trembling and he could feel it. He sat down beside me on the bed. I thought, *Let me just die* … I dug my face deeper into the pillow. I felt as if I were suffocating.