

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Year of the Lucy

Anne McCaffrey

About the Book

Mirelle Martin was a Company Wife - her husband, her children, her home were all held in thrall to the Corporation that owned their lives. She tried - desperately - to conform, hiding the secret of her illegitimacy, her talented father, and her own gifts which might prove embarrassing in a conventional world.

And then came the year of the Lucy - the year when everything happened, everything big and wonderful and exciting, when Mirelle turned into the woman she had always wanted to be.

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Also by Anne McCaffrey

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About the Author

The Year of the Lucy

Anne McCaffrey

*This book is affectionately dedicated to
Dorothy Rathje, Betty Phillips, Isabell Worrell,
and all my Breck's Mill Cronies,
and to the memory of Elsie Watson.*

1

The year is 1961

MIRELLE STRUGGLED AGAINST returning consciousness because it would end the delightful sequence of dream. Eyes half-opened, she lay on her stomach, feeling out the day ahead of her as she often did, trying to decide if getting up was really worth the effort. Sometimes she knew in advance that it wouldn't be. Today, the coolness from her open bedroom window, a patch of brilliant blue sky seemed propitious auguries. Something else, however, niggled and she cast her mind back to the lingering aura of the dream that she had been so reluctant to leave.

She mumbled with pleasure to herself as she recalled the fleeting part of the sequence. It was a dream that she had often had before, reaching only a certain point before wakefulness dissolved it. When Steve had been away on a long swing around his territory, or when she was particularly annoyed with him, she would deliberately conjure the opening scene of that dream in erotic revenge.

This morning it had merely arrived within her unconsciousness. Mirelle closed her eyes, hoping that she had not passed sufficiently into the day that she could not return to the dream. She imagined herself back where she had left and tried to progress to the next episode.

'Mom!' A strident yell shattered her efforts. 'Where are my clean socks?'

'That tore it.' She rose to her elbows, turning her head over her shoulder towards the bedroom door. 'In your drawer. Probably under the school pants you crammed in there yesterday when I told you to straighten your room.'

'They are NOT . . . oh, yeah,' and Nick's voice, starting from a roar, dwindled abruptly to a chagrined mutter. If Nick were dressing, she'd better rise.

Well, thought Mirelle, I'll pick up the dream tonight where I left off. She threw back the blankets, grinning at her reflection in the mirror over the double chests. Seeing Steve's unused bed in the reflection, she wrinkled her nose at it. *Never around when you want him. Why can't he have a promotion into the main office?* She sighed, turning on the hot-water tap to soak her face-cloth. Grumpily she regarded herself in the cabinet mirror.

The face that returned her sleepy stare had a livid crease mark across one cheek where she had lain on a blanket fold. She rubbed at the mark with the hot cloth, reddening her prominent cheekbones. Subjectively she hated this inheritance from her Hungarian father. The clear ink-blue eyes and corn-silk hair were also his legacy but these were common enough. She wore her heavy hair straight, just below shoulder length, clipping it back from a center parting with barettes. No hairstyle, elaborate or plain, would ever soften the set of her eyes above those distinctive Magyar cheekbones.

When she reached the kitchen, the floor and cabinets were already awash with mushy designs of cereal and spilt milk. She blinked furiously, trying to clear sleep from her eyes as she filled the kettle, measured coffee into the pot. She could hear the TV set going and only hoped that the troops were well supplied so that this morning, at least, she might have the first cup of coffee in quiet.

She was not, by nature, an early riser like Steve and Roman, her eldest son. Fortunately Steve enjoyed pattering bright-eyed by himself in the morning and Roman was now

old enough to use such energy delivering morning papers. When Steve was away, as he was so often, Roman could be relied on to wake the children in time to dress for school, now that all three went full time. The years of dutiful rising with alert babies had been endured and were now behind her. In Mirelle's estimation, the luxury of an extra half-hour's sleep was well worth the messy kitchen. And there were even mornings when riot and rebellion did not erupt before she had consumed the first of her many morning cups of coffee.

'I want Channel 3,' screamed Tonia in a piercing treble.

'Well, you can't have it,' replied Nick in a bellow which provoked Tonia to repeat her order an octave higher.

Will he never learn to handle her as Roman does? Mirelle squirmed, wondering how long she could ignore the wrangling.

'No one can hear a thing,' cried Roman, loud enough to make himself heard, but in a placating voice. 'Tonia, you have fifteen more minutes to watch than we do. You sit and eat.'

'But that isn't fair.' 'Eat,' Roman repeated authoritatively.

He sounds just like his father, Mirelle thought, holding her breath, wondering if Tonia would subside, and adoring her diplomatic Roman. *If Nick will only keep still, all will be well.*

The kettle whistled inopportunistly though she got it off the heat with amazing speed. Not quickly enough, however, for she could hear footsteps on the TV room steps: Tonia coming to deliver her complaint in person now that Mommy was among the living.

As she poured water into the drip pot, Mirelle realised that she had hunched her shoulders in anticipation of Tonia's demands.

'Not a word, Tonia,' Mirelle said, taking the initiative. The injured expression on Tonia's pretty face altered to incredulous. 'You do have more time before school so they have choice of channel now.'

Immediately her daughter's face crumpled but seeing that Mirelle regarded her with stolid impassivity, Tonia retired in sulky tears to the TV room. Apprehensively, Mirelle held her breath but all she heard was the scuffle as Tonia arranged her chair. She wondered if Roman might be gagging Nick with a firm hand or a subtler form of fraternal blackmail.

There was something to be said in favor of the English system of nursery and nanny, Mirelle told herself. Something, the same observer in her mind replied drily, but not too much, ducks. Mirelle's nanny had been a Yorkshire lass, stern, impartial and unaffectionately devoted to her charges. As Mirelle raised her own children, she'd often noticed, with grim amusement, her tendency to do the diametric opposite of what Nanny would have done. Abruptly, Mirelle cancelled this train of thought, as she always did when vagrant reflections brought back associations with that period of her life.

The coffee had dripped down and, as she carried pot and mug into the dining-room, she caught the flash of yellow between the buildings on the crest of the hill two blocks from their house.

'Bus, Roman!'

Her summons precipitated a thudding on the steps, a slap-slap of hands on the wall by the closet door, more thumps culminating in a rattle and the decisive bang of the front door. From her view out of the dining-room window, she saw the lanky form of Roman charging down the lawn. He and the bus converged on the corner of the street. There was no perceptible halt in the vehicle's movement as Roman swung through the open door and the bus maneuvered past the stop.

'Well, he never does miss it.' Half an hour more and the house would be hers until 3:30. The joys of motherhood consist mainly of the times the children are NOT in evidence. 'Not precisely true,' Mirelle amended candidly

because she did enjoy her children's company: only not all three at once.

'My hair won't part,' sobbed Tonia from the doorway. Automatically Mirelle held out a hand for the comb and concentrated on Tonia's hair, as thick, silky and tawny as her own.

'Wear the corduroy jacket, duckie, it's chilly,' she said as she fastened the heavy barette in place.

'It'll be boiling by lunchtime and then I'll have to carry it home,' said Tonia in a petulant voice.

'So, be hot by noon but wear the jacket now when you need it. 'Sides, the day I see you carrying anything home . . .' Mirelle leaned around to glance at the pert face and smiled. Tonia tried to glower but failed. Exuberantly she threw her arms around her mother's neck, kissing her cheek. Some of Mirelle's irritation with the early-morning hassle vanished with the sweet pressure of her daughter's arms.

'There. You're groomed and lovely. Go watch Channel 3. Nick!' Mirelle raised her voice to a tone loud enough to pierce the canned laughter on the TV. 'The bus'll be here any minute.'

'Aw, Mom, Roman's just left.'

'And if Roman's just left, can yours be far behind? Get going.'

Another sequence of clatter, thud, slap, rattle, bang and Nick, sauntering indolently, made his way to the bus stop.

'Two down, one to go,' Mirelle said in an effort to rouse herself. The coffee was just cool enough to drink. The morning paper had been strewn over the dining-room table by either Nick or Tonia because Roman always left it folded for her. She managed to restore the sheets to order and started leafing through as she sipped her coffee. Another flash of yellow through the trees, a grinding of gears and Nick was off.

Mirelle blinked again and again, trying to clear her eyes of sleepy winkers enough to see the print. Nothing horrendous caught her attention in the main section. She arrived, unstimulated, at the funnies and forced herself to read all the comic strips. Thus she saved the daily horoscope until the last. A bad forecast would spoil the lingering pleasantness of her dream. She grunted over the ambiguity printed under her zodiacal sign, and decided that her initial impression of a nice day was not going to be star-crossed.

'Tonia, turn off the TV and get out to the bus stop. Now!' 'Aw, Mother.' 'I am not, I repeat, I am NOT driving you to school again this week.'

'Gee, Mother, in the middle of such a good cartoon.' But the fact that Tonia's voice was coming towards her indicated that the child had given in to the inevitable with only a token struggle. Mirelle caught a glimpse of Tonia in her jacket, heard the door politely closed and then saw Tonia, skipping across the lawn. Her bosom girlfriend of the moment waited at the bottom of the hill and the child's wide-armed gesture of greeting proved that TV was already forgotten.

Mirelle poured herself more coffee, flipped the paper over and started to re-read it with considerably more attention and understanding than her initial attempt.

There wasn't much of interest in it and she sat brooding over the classified section. Maybe, Mirelle mused, she should have taken on that substitute teacher's job. In time, she'd have got used to being stared at by the children. She might even learn how to talk in front of groups. The hours were compatible with her desire to be home when her children were, and the salary was tempting. But, there was the other side of the coin: the necessary 'education' courses to be taken at night to qualify for the Delaware teacher certification, the tales of the rougher elements in all high schools, her own antipathy to large groups and its necessary social involvement. She didn't need to work: they were

finally solvent and there was always her inheritance which Steve would only let her spend on herself anyway.

Let's get away from that topic, Mirelle told herself sternly, wondering why her mind kept wandering into controversial areas this morning.

No, she didn't need to work. She needed to get to work, down in the studio. There was no excuse for her malingering. She had promised herself during their early infancy and childhood that, once the children were all in school, she would spend some time each day in her studio. Here it was spring of the second year in which Tonia was a full time student and she had turned out no more than a few soup bowls, some figurines for the family creche scene and obligatory gifts.

All those years when she had had to balance duty and desire, when she had had no special place to work or store incompleted pieces, those times accused her of present procrastination.

Mirelle looked out of the window. The day with its fresh lovely blue sky, the burgeoning chartreuse of leaves filming the woods beyond and the young trees of the development, the moist freshness of the air, was not to be wasted on brooding. She rose with a sigh and went down the steps to the lower corridor. The left-hand door opened to the TV room: the right one to her studio room was ajar. The unfinished clay bust on the potter's table accused her, too. How long ago had she started that? She grimaced. It was not a day to cope with 'him'. 'He' was not behaving. When inanimate objects of your own creation flout you outrageously, let them sit neglected until they have learned the error of their ways and become pliant.

Mirelle flexed her long fingers thoughtfully as if they were shaping the recalcitrant material and then she shook them to get rid of the unconscious urge. She knew this was not a day for modeling. Her inner restlessness was not in that direction.

'I'll go horseback riding,' she announced to herself out of a totally unsuspected longing and realised that physical exertion was exactly what she needed.

'Of all the half-baked procrastinations,' she was exclaiming in disgust a few hours later. She was sprawled on the ground, looking up at the chestnut gelding who had just managed to shed her. 'I might as well have fought the clay all morning instead of you, you clayhead,' she told Boots.

She got up slowly because the toss had knocked the wind from her. The chestnut eyed her coolly, shifting his front feet and snuffling as he jiggled the bit in his mouth.

'It isn't as if we didn't know each other well, Boots, or maybe that's why,' Mirelle said, half-scolding. She gathered the reins, pleased that she had at least remembered to hang on to them when she felt herself tumbling. 'You might warn me that this is your week for shying at logs you know as well as your own stall. Come on, Boots.'

She reached for the stirrup iron and the gelding sidled away from her, but she had her fingers around the metal and, with a quick forward step, she vaulted up, only then aware of a lack of resilience in her left ankle. But she was mounted and quickly jammed her feet into both stirrups.

On her way back to the stable, she concentrated on Boots' manners, bringing him on the aids in every pace, making sure that he played no more silly tricks on her. He was fresh, having had no exercise since the previous Sunday, and he was still young enough not to be as jaded as most riding-school hacks. Mirelle was a capable rider, and thoroughly enjoyed the tussle of skill over brute strength. When she dismounted in the stable yard, she realised that she must have wrenched her ankle badly in the toss for it would barely support her.

'Boots shed you?' asked Mac, the stableman, without a trace of sympathy. 'You're all covered with leaves,' and he

obligingly started to brush them off. The operation took longer than Mirelle felt necessary.

'Thanks, Mac,' she said, adroitly turning. 'This is Boots' week to spook logs.'

'He's fresh, he is,' Mac agreed while Mirelle mused that the chestnut was not the only one. She fished in her jodhpur pocket for her money and paid Mac.

'Be back again soon, Mrs. Martin? You haven't been as steady as you used to.'

'Takes money, Mac, and I prefer to see Roman and Nick riding. I'm getting too old to risk the occasional toss now.'

'Pay attention then,' Mac said with a snort.

'I know. My fault. See you.'

He waved her off as he led the gelding into the dark barn. She limped over to the Sprite.

As she eased herself into the seat she grimaced at the thought of having to shift with the bad foot. She drove out of the stable yard, evading the muddy pits and enjoying the Sprite's light handling.

At least you can't throw me she thought and just as instantly regretted the statement. The sudden sharp crack and explosive whistle could mean just one thing. She grabbed the wheel tightly as the car, which she was swinging onto the highway, bucked against the deflating tire. She fought the wheel, slowing down on the shoulder of the road. Swinging her legs out from under the steering wheel, she stood up, immediately losing her balance as the weakened ankle collapsed. Swearing under her breath, she limped back to look at the flat.

'Of all the unkind cuts.' She appraised the damage with disgust. 'Well, pal, we're both lame.'

Mirelle balanced herself against the low chassis and began to unscrew the spare tire. The sound of crunching gravel attracted her attention and she was startled to see a blue Thunderbird coming to a stop just behind the Sprite.

'Hi, there. Saw the tire go. Then, when you started hobbling, I realised that the female was truly in distress,' said the driver as he got out.

In a slim-cut, finely tailored black top-coat, a jaunty snap-brim Stetson on his head, her rescuer looked an unlikely type to respond to her situation.

'I'm usually a disgustingly competent female,' she said, grinning in appreciation.

The man was taking off hat and coat, poking them into the open window of his car.

'Such independence puts Boy Scouts out of business,' he said good-naturedly. He crouched down by the damaged tire, trying to determine the point of puncture, then straightened, dusting his hands off. Instinctively she glanced at them, noticing the very short clipped nails, the blunt tips of the long fingers. 'The wheel's covering the puncture. Nail probably, because your tread is still good. Where do you hide the jack for this overgrown bathtub?'

'Boy Scouts are supposed to be polite, not condescending,' she said, grinning maliciously, 'not that you should talk with that overbuilt, overpowered, overpriced . . .'

'Yah, yah, yah,' he said, laughing back, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his grin boyishly lopsided.

Steve's eyes used to crinkle like that, Mirelle thought irrelevantly. But Steve used to laugh a lot more than he does these days. Silently she cursed competitive business and sales quotas.

'I'll get the keys,' she said, shifting balance so she could make her way along the side of the Sprite to the driver's side. Her good Samaritan touched her shoulder lightly.

'Get off that ankle and make like a lady executive,' he said. He took her by the hands and assisted her to the grassy bank above the shoulder.

Her laugh turned to a groan for an injudicious movement tweaked her foot as she sat down. It took a moment's hard concentration to fight back the tears. When she looked

again, he was opening the trunk and getting out the necessary tools.

'You don't seem to need explanations,' she said.

'Oh, I had one of these runabouts. Surprising how quickly one remembers the idiosyncrasies of the beasts.'

'I see you've also graduated to the tender mercies of the AAA.'

He glanced up startled, and then looked over his shoulder at the telltale emblem on his car license plate. He grinned.

'There's a difference or two between this bathtub and that behemoth. Particularly when it comes to wrestling jacks and tire-lugs.' He had removed his suit jacket and, although Mirelle thought he must be in his forties, he was lean and quick of movement. 'It does me good to recall, however briefly, my lost and carefree youth.'

He made short work of loosening the bolts, raised the car on the jack, and removed the flat. Mirelle's sculptor's eye noticed the play of muscles across his back, the long line of his leg in the stretched fabric of his pants. A receding hairline emphasised the shape of his handsome head. His dark brown hair was worn long in the back and showed silvery at the temples and above his well-shaped ears.

'Do I pass, ma'am?' he asked and she realised that he had become aware of her scrutiny without being embarrassed by it.

'I only patronise well-dressed mechanics . . .'

'One does have confidence in the dapper workman . . . ' . .
. Who uses Brylcreem . . .'

' . . . Smokes filter-type cigarettes . . .'

' . . . Brushes when he can with Gardol . . .'

' . . . And drives the wide-track Pontiac . . .'

They laughed together. Then, with a flourish, he released the jack and the Sprite settled to the ground with a puff of dirt. Mirelle tried to rise, struggling awkwardly. He was at her side in one long step, holding out his hands.

'You really have wrenched it,' he said with a low whistle.

Suppressing an irresponsible yearning that he'd sweep her in his arms and deposit her, preferably in his car, Mirelle allowed him to help her limp to the Sprite. When she started to swing her legs under the wheel, he caught her by the knee and, over her protests, deftly removed the jodhpur boot. She pressed her lips against the pain. Under the heavy athletic sock, the swelling was apparent.

'I got tossed,' she said ruefully as they both regarded the injury.

'The beauties of the spring, no doubt, distracted you,' he said, grinning up at her, his lean attractive face alive to the humor of her situation. His eyes, she noticed, were grey-blue and he was tired.

'No, it was Boots' week to spook dead tree branches.'

He rose in a lithe movement and retrieved his coat from the back of the Sprite. He took the handkerchief from the breast pocket, a large red silk square. Deftly folding it into a length, he tied it in a brace around her foot.

'That's a good handkerchief.'

'We Knights of the Road use nothing but the best,' he said glibly, fastening the knot securely. He rose, brushed off his dusty knee, and regarded her expectantly.

'It does feel better strapped up.'

'Do I give the old scout master's words of wisdom on sprains?'

'Hardly necessary,' Mirelle said with a laugh, suddenly at ease again with his flippancy. 'One of my favorite pastimes is ankle-bending. I'm surprised they bother to swell anymore.'

She swivelled around and put her foot gingerly on the clutch pedal.

'Your boot, madam.' With a cavalier bow, he presented it.

'Monsieur, vous êtes un vrai chevalier,' she heard herself saying.

'Enchanté,' he replied and his lips twitched as he noticed her flush. 'Seriously, though, shouldn't I follow you to make

sure you can drive all right?’

‘Oh, I haven’t all that far to go,’ she said hastily. ‘I’ll make it. But your handkerchief . . .’ He waved aside that consideration. ‘Remember me the next time you play tisket-a-tasket.’

Before she could protest, he had turned and was striding back to the Thunderbird. Gingerly she started the car, wincing with pain as she pressed the injured foot down to shift to second.

He did follow her down the highway, all the way to Silverside Road where she turned off. She saw his farewell salute as the Thunderbird proceeded straight on, towards town.

2

ALTHOUGH SHE ALLOWED Roman to practise first aid on her and was grateful for the strapping as she hobbled about, Mirelle made light of the incident. By Friday, when Steve returned from his trip, the swelling of the ankle had subsided, leaving a high tide mark of deep purplish blues and yellow-greens from instep to heel. Prompted by the children, she gave the now equally colorful version of the spill, flat tire and the courtesy of her Knight of the Road.

Passive with the fatigue of the long train trip home and well-fed, Steve listened politely, amused by her narrative, but disgusted by her injury. A natural athlete, Steve had a curious attitude towards physical injury of any kind. In the sixteen years they'd been married, Mirelle had yet to see him cut a finger on his tools, bang his thumb with a hammer or fall heavily when he played touch football with the boys. On their family camping vacations, he had always emerged unscathed and disdainfully insisted that the cuts, bruises, sprains and abrasions suffered by everyone else were due to unnecessary carelessness or ineptitude. Steve was a slow and deliberate workman, possessed of great patience in contrast to Mirelle's mercurial work habits. Yet his craftsmanship, his insistence on perfection appealed to the artisan in Mirelle.

One of the reason they both hated the constant long business trips was the impossibility of starting any of the mutual projects they had both enjoyed during the earlier years of their marriage, when Steve's territory had been smaller and he'd been home every night. The price of promotion was less private time.

Mirelle had known by Steve's face and his lingering welcome kiss that his trip had been successful. He was tired, yes, but neither defeated nor frustrated. The same conscientiousness that he turned to private projects was given to every one of his clients, often involving him in unnecessary research to satisfy the particular needs of a special contract. This perseverance was annually rewarded by the Company with a bonus. Mirelle never felt that that compensated for the hours which Steve devoted to a small account or the frustration he suffered when, for no reason, he failed to get the contract and took an official reprimand. Nor did that bonus compensate Mirelle when Steve took his irritation and disappointment out on her and the children.

Lucy Farnoll, with her marvelous earthy humor, had taught Mirelle that this was part of a wife's function: to bear the brunt of her man's irritability, redirecting it if possible, but always recognising both his need to sound off and the source of his frustration. Sometimes though, Mirelle cringed at the prospect of Steve's temper: he could be vicious, physically and mentally, wounding her where she was most vulnerable. Sometimes, despite an intellectual understanding of his need, it took Mirelle a long while to reconcile his rash angry words and actions.

Now, as she roused him to laughter at her caricature of her Knight of the Road, wielding the lance of a trusty tire-jack, she was unbelievably relieved that he was in a good mood. He'd feel like getting out into the yard this weekend, instead of poring over reports and analysing old orders. They wouldn't have to spend Saturday wrangling over decisions that she'd had to make in his absence, decisions which he'd sometimes insist could have waited for his return. They could putter amiably in the yard, clear away the winter mess from the new growth. There might even be a movie in town which he hadn't seen. Sunday, instead of being a day of apology or brooding, would be pleasant: church, a leisurely dinner, a comfortable evening. She'd feel

at ease with him, not having to watch every word she said for fear he'd take exception. The children wouldn't be clumsy with nervousness, or disappear all day to escape his unpredictability. Tonight had gone well: the weekend would be fun.

'That was a good dinner, hon,' Steve told her as she shooed the children away. She poured more coffee, enjoying his company without the distractions of the youngsters. He stretched luxuriously, grimacing abruptly as a muscle tightened across his back. He rotated the shoulder against the cramp.

'Have time to get into the yard this weekend?' she asked.

'I need to. I'm winter soft.' He groaned, rubbing his shoulder, looking up as she laughed. 'You? Never.'

At forty, Steve was as solidly muscled as he had been at twenty-four and he looked scarcely a day older. He had the type of facial structure and regular features that would retain a boyish quality when he reached seventy. Not so much as a single white hair grew in the thick brown wavy crop that he kept brushed back from his high, broad forehead. Any extra flesh that he put on during the winter, and he tried to stay in hotels featuring indoor pools and gyms, was burned off on the family camping jaunts. The only signs of ageing were the minute lines around his green eyes and the slight grooves which disappointment had traced at the corners of his full-lipped mouth.

'By the way,' Mirelle told him, 'I'm afraid the white azalea by the northeast corner is winter-killed.'

'Damn,' Steve said irritably, sitting up, 'I'll check that first thing tomorrow. He swore all those plants were field grown.'

That next week, Mirelle washed and ironed the red silk handkerchief and absently put it in Steve's drawer when she sorted the laundry. Between preparing the yard for summer, getting out lighter clothes and planning weekend camping trips, Mirelle had no occasion to recall her Knight of the

Road until late June when Steve discovered the handkerchief in his drawer.

He'd had an inconclusive and hurried trip south, missed a plane connection on the way back. He'd arrived late in the office and had been called down by his immediate superior for some insignificant detail. The appearance of a strange handkerchief had shattered his tenuous self-control and he had flared up at Mirelle with a ridiculous accusation. Mirelle knew, as well as he did, that his boss's wife slept around constantly, brazen enough to have once flirted with Steve, but for Steve to accuse Mirelle of infidelity was outside of enough.

With resigned patience, Mirelle defended herself, trying to keep the incipient brawl under control. She succeeded only in goading Steve into a fully-fledged scene. He denied that she had ever mentioned a sprained ankle or a flat tire until she retorted with menu of the meal they'd eaten that night, the discussion of the winter-killed azalea, and forced him to admit he was mistaken. And that was equally a mistake.

'I don't need to fool around just because that's the current suburban pattern,' she'd flared. 'I've got better things to do with my spare time.'

'Yeah, yeah,' he was snarling with frustration, 'you and your cultural superiority over we poor colonials; but you can't tell me you take all your frustrations out in that muck . . .'

'I'm not frustrated, Steve,' she interrupted hastily, wearily. When he started to drag her sculpting into an argument, he wanted to hurt her because he was hurt.

'Don't take that long-suffering attitude with me,' he'd cried, grabbing her. He used her that night with the bruising urgency that was his custom when he was troubled.

He needs me, she consoled herself the next morning, not entirely displeased. At least he hadn't stalked out of their room, which would have meant that the matter was serious. As long as she could get him in bed with her, things would

work out. But oh, how Mirelle hoped he'd abandon the idea that she'd ever even been tempted to be unfaithful, Barnhill's sluttish wife notwithstanding. Probably, thought Mirelle, Barnhill got feisty because his wife had taken a new lover whom Barnhill hadn't had time to identify. He'd taken it out on Steve. But for Steve to accuse her of infidelity? That was a revolting development.

Despite her disclaimer, Mirelle knew that she did take out her frustrations in sculpting, but she also got rid of them in a positive, creative fashion. She'd always considered that preferable to the usual activities open to suburban housewives with time on their hands. Constant transfers from town to town, eight of the fifteen years with the Company, had made Mirelle very chary of forming close attachments to anyone. There was always the painful break when they had to move away. At first she had tried, but after they had been transferred from Ashland and her deep friendship with Lucy Farnoll severed, she had given up. Naturally introverted, Mirelle had ceased to make even casual acquaintances, pleading the care of her family as an excuse against the desultory attempts in each new neighborhood to involve her. She spent her free time worrying over and perfecting the few pieces of serious sculpture she attempted.

Fortunately Steve was a home-abiding man. What entertaining they did was limited to fellow salesmen visiting the main office to whom Steve offered hospitality, knowing how sterile a hotel can be and how much a few hours in a home can mean to the transient. Mirelle enjoyed cooking for any reason and Steve was proud of the fact that invitations to his home were eagerly sought. Otherwise, she and Steve were content to stay at home, listening to music, reading and working on family projects.

After the Great Handkerchief Debate, Mirelle brooded over his accusation all day. She was utterly disjointed by his

joviality when he got home that night. All his dissatisfaction with self and circumstance had dissipated.

'Management broke its heart and anyone who's been with the firm ten years or more gets a huge four weeks vacation,' he announced at dinner, his eyes sparkling.

The kids let out a concerted shriek of triumph. Roman broke into a wild war dance around the table, scaring Tasso out of several of his remaining lives, while Tonia's piercing treble rose to the coloratura octave. When Steve finally got them under control, there was a scramble for the touring maps, pencil and paper. As Mirelle listened to the scope of the intended trip, she irrationally realised that she would have no time whatever for the studio until August at the earliest. It would take her from now till they left in late June to prepare for the trip. The sane observer reminded her that she'd had all winter in which to work, undisturbed. It was neither Steve's fault nor the children's that she'd made no use of that time. She resolutely thrust aside her irritation and took an active part in the discussions.

She and Steve had designed and built the interior of their Volkswagen camping bus. Two years later in Canada they'd been offered double its cost by another camper, struggling with his more expensive, less efficient equipment. He'd suggested that Steve patent some of his innovations and sell the plans to one of the camping magazines but, to Mirelle's disappointment, Steve had never done anything about it. It had been very hard for her to refrain from calling his attention to the commercial imitations of some of their bus' unusual features when they were camping last year. Cleaning and stocking the bus were her responsibilities: the others organised the details of the trip. And this year's plans were well-laid, avoiding some of the fiascos of the previous year and inaugurating no new ones. They had a marvelous trip.

Halfway through the projected traverse of the country, they had blithely discarded the rest of the itinerary to settle

in a wild Wyoming valley. A torrential summer storm had forced them to seek refuge in a valley ranch north of Caspar. By the time the roads were passable two days later, Jacob Overby, the rancher, had hinted broadly that there was no need for the Martins to take off in such an all-fired hurry. Plenty to see and appreciate right there in the valley. His two boys, providentially the same ages as Roman and Nick, clamored enthusiastic seconds to the invitation. Overwhelmed by the genuine welcome, Steve and Mirelle had accepted.

For two ecstatic weeks, Roman and Nick had their own horses, and Tonia a stubby-legged pony. When Mirelle wasn't lending Lena Overby a hand with cooking or cleaning, she sketched every aspect of the valley ranch and all its inhabitants, fowl, equine, bovine, canine and human. She had ridden, too, with a fleeting memory of Boots' insurrection and a determination to avoid a repetition. A toss on the mountain meadows or rough trails could spoil everyone's holiday. Mirelle, trained by an English riding master, found the relaxed western posture hard to imitate at first. Steve, disgustingly at ease on horseback, laughed her out of her self-consciousness until she was as comfortable sitting the jog trot of the quarter horses as everyone else.

But mostly, Mirelle sketched: especially Jacob Overby whose weather beaten face fascinated her. The craggy nose, the brow-hidden eyes, the gaunt cheeks stained deep brown by wind and sun, the jutting jaw and the curiously mobile mouth were translated into endless studies. Perhaps this was the face for the unfinished head that languished, unfeatured, in her studio.

Steve, with Jacob, Roman and Roger Overby, had gone off on two pack trips, business for the Overbys, pleasure for Steve and Roman. Steve was beginning to realise that Roman was rapidly approaching manhood. Nick was left behind, disconsolate. Unfortunately Nick tended to irritate his father with his darting shifting ways. Mirelle had always

seen the similarity between Roman and his father: a preference for method, a delight in physical prowess. Nick, on the other hand, wanted to do a thing immediately, too impatient to develop necessary skill. Nick was apt to be wild to finish a project in the morning and by mid-afternoon would forget that he had started something at all, a tendency which infuriated his father and weighed against his joining a camping trip which had certain hazards. Yet Mirelle recognised, even if Steve hadn't yet, that Nick was the more imaginative of the two boys, often providing the inspiration for many of the projects which Roman, in due course, finished. This summer was Roman's, not Nick's. He'd have to wait to find a basis on which he and his father could meet. And Roman needed his father's companionship now.

For Steve and Roman, the vacation was an unqualified success. Tonia was oblivious to everything once she was introduced to the grey pony, so Mirelle and Nick were odd-men out. If she managed to cajole Nick into a semblance of good nature, she failed to lighten her own inner discontent. She held herself sternly in check, trying not to dampen the others' pleasure, hoping that she didn't seem aloof. She had the most curious sense of disorientation, as if she were marking time. She was extremely careful to dissemble with Steve in the rare moments they had together in the full life of the valley.

It wasn't until they were driving home that Steve told her one of the department heads was retiring in October.

'There'll be a shift?' she asked, trying not to let anxiety creep into her voice. A departmental shifting invariably meant transfers and they'd been transferred so often.

'Yeah, there'll be a shift,' Steve said, glancing absently at the endless Kansan wheatfields through which they were speeding. 'A big one.'

'Oh! Out?'

Steve gave her an encouraging grin.

'I don't know and I couldn't find out a thing before I left. You know how tight security can be when they're rearranging the T.O. You'd think it was plans for a communistic coup or a take-over of the Board of Directors. Barnhill gives you that jolly farmer slap on the back and the old coach's go-get 'em team cheer and your guess is as good as mine. One thing is, they've developed a new product which they're about ready to merchandise . . .'

'The one you've been studying?' Mirelle snatched at any glimmer of continuity.

' . . . Don't interrupt me,' but Steve was only mildly irritated, '. . . so there may be quite a reshuffling. My record has been good, if I say so myself, and I am the senior sales rep on the isocyanates.' He shrugged with pretended indifference which only underscored his hopefulness. 'We'll see what happens when the old boy retires.'

Mirelle gave a deep sigh and Steve reached over to pat her hand reassuringly.

'We could stand a little settled family life, hon, couldn't we? The last weeks were just great. Improved the old man's temper no end, didn't it?' When she laughingly agreed, he threw an arm around her shoulders and drew her closer to him on the wide front seat. She snuggled into him willingly. 'That Jake Overby, now, he went on, 'there's a man who knows what settling down is.' Steve clicked his tongue in a wistful manner.

Carefree, relaxed, boyishly hopeful, Steve was recreated in the image which she cherished from their early months of marriage.

'Fundamentally, he is just too good and honest, she thought, looking sideways at his clean-cut features in bold profile against the sulphur-blue hot sky. He should never have followed the lure of big business, big money and all its big headaches. The war had given Steve what peace would never have offered, a chance to go to college and a compulsion to produce on a higher level than his parents.

But Steve worried too much, straining against management directives that shaped policies which were repellent to his basic integrity. Unable to reconcile inconsistent attitudes from his management and still represent his customers' need to the Company, Steve took unnecessary blame on himself that other, more calloused or diffident salesmen ignored. Steve would have been happier running a small business just as he wanted to, or a ranch, like Jake Overby. Then he'd've been at peace with himself. But he kept insisting that he had to make something of the opportunities that he'd been given. Mirelle knew the source of that compulsion, and though she was powerless to counteract the basic fallacy, she tried her best to buffer its effects on Steve.

And here he was, having thoroughly enjoyed his vacation, optimistically returning to what would no doubt turn into another illusion-shattering disappointment, all in the name of Big Business. Mirelle ached for him, loath to try now to temper his hopeful approach with her cynicism. Grimly she began to steel herself to cushion his inevitable disenchantment. The sane observer reminded her that Steve was a very capable man, that same honesty appealing strongly to many of his customers. There was always the chance that his abilities would be recognised by management in the fall. *There was that chance*, she told herself, unassured.

The prospect, however, remote, of remaining in one town, even Wilmington, for longer than two years was unbearably tantalising. To settle, to dig down roots, to develop continuity had assumed the proportions of discovering El Dorado to Mirelle. In their courtship, Steve's reminiscences of his childhood, comfortably spent in the Allentown Pennsylvania house that his grandparents had built, had cast the rosy glow of happily-ever-after on her future as his wife. They'd join his parents in that huge rambling house, and she'd finally know what 'belonging' felt like.

When her mother had sent Mirelle to live in America with her childhood friend, Mary Murphy, to escape the bombings in London, living and life had assumed a quality of all things good and wonderful to Mirelle the child. But Mary Murphy had lived in a succession of comfortable rented apartments. And Mirelle had never thought to discount a European-based generalisation of the American smalltown life, nor the exigencies of an increasingly transient, technological business age, and the happily-ever-after-in-the-family-home was an exploded and explosive myth. When she had unexpectedly confronted the reality of a basically conservative, narrow-minded, settled community outlook, Mirelle had bitterly discovered that transiency could be preferable to mental stagnation.

She had also assumed that Steve's broad-mindedness was deeper and that his cultural base had been firmer. His sophistication turned out to be a thin veneer, actually little more than contempt for every aspect of his smalltown upbringing whose limitations he had realised during two years in the occupation forces in Vienna. Close brushes with death as an infantry officer had sent him in desperate search for an anodyne to the horrors of the war. He'd found this in Vienna in the beautiful works of art, the opera, classical music, all removed from the ugliness that he had to erase from his mind.

After his Army discharge, a return to the pattern of his youth had been abhorrent to Steve, and he had welcomed a job that took him to new places constantly. It didn't matter to him where he lived geographically, nor how often he moved. His job was the constant, and his family the anchor: or so he thought. Mirelle had painfully come to accept that: she had no alternative. But, if they could and did stay in Wilmington . . .

What could be, would be, Mirelle told herself. But Steve's announcement thoroughly dampened her spirits. The sense of marking time all summer now developed the cadence of