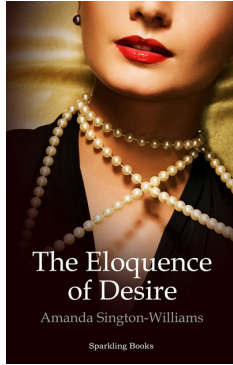


The Eloquence of Desire



Set in the 1950s, *The Eloquence of Desire* explores the conflicts in family relationships caused by obsessive love, the lost innocence of childhood and the terror of the Communist insurgency in Malaya. *The Eloquence of Desire* is written in Sington-Williams' haunting and rhythmical prose.

By Amanda Sington-Williams

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The author grew up in Cambridge and Liverpool. She has lived in Japan, Spain and Australia. She now lives in Brighton. Many of her short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies.

Amanda has an MA in Creative Writing and Authorship from Sussex University. For this novel she won an award from the Royal Literary Fund.

About the book

Richly descriptive and well-researched, the story told by Amanda Sington-Williams unfolds as George is posted to the tropics in punishment for an affair with the daughter of his boss. His wife, Dorothy, constrained by social norms, begrudgingly accompanies him while their twelve year old daughter Susan is packed off to boarding school.

Desire and fantasy mix with furtive visits, lies and despair to turn the family inside out with Dorothy becoming a recluse, George taking a new lover, and Susan punishing herself through self-harm.

Reviews

“I have just stumbled onto the nicest surprise” - *Susan Abraham*

“an atmospheric novel with thought provoking themes” - *Bookish Magpie*

“A good read” - *Book Pleasures*

“For those who know me, giving a book a 5 is something I don’t do. My belief is if a book receives a 5 rating, it better be worthy of a Nobel Prize in literature. *The Eloquence of Desire* is one such book. Ms. Sington-Williams has written a book that flows rhythmically, lyrically, like poetry or a song, but touches on every facet of human nature.

“This is not an easy read. Filled with emotion and every facet of human nature laid bare before the reader, this story will grip your heart and bring your emotions to the foreground. I don’t think anyone will come away from this story untouched.” - *Romance Writers United*.

“Wow! Amazing novel...” - *Ana Carter, Reviewer, Canada*

“I grew up in Singapore and Malaysia in the 1950s. This book evoked a whole world of sights, smells and sounds. It captured the fear and uncertainty of the times and the very needed stiff upper lips. I recall vividly traveling from Singapore to Ipoh in an armored car and stopping at each armed checked post. Other than that, this was an engrossing read and extremely well done. I found my book club recommendation for this year!” - *Genene Cote, Reviewer, USA*

“Set in the 1950s, *The Eloquence of Desire* follows the disintegration of a marriage and combines it with the heady descriptions of life in Ipoh, in Malaya. At the start of the novel we are made aware that George is being punished for an extra marital dalliance with the Boss’s daughter, by being sent abroad. George’s wife Dorothy does not wish to accompany him, but for the sake of propriety she agrees to leave their daughter Susan behind at boarding school in England, and goes with George. What then follows is the story of deception, infidelity and heartache.

“The story is well written and certainly maintains interest throughout with some creative descriptions of life in the tropics. The boredom and languor of the 1950’s colonial experience is captured as is the political unrest ... I didn’t really warm to the characters except maybe for Susan, who was I think badly treated by both her family, and life in general. - *Josie Barton, Reviewer, UK*

“*The Eloquence of Desire* is an engrossing and atmospheric novel. This story of a married couple in the 1950s banished to Malaya after the husband’s affair with the boss’s daughter has the sharp edge, clarity and narrative drive of a Somerset Maugham novel.

“But Amanda Sington-Williams brings her own distinctive voice to the material. The descriptions of Malaya evoke the people, landscape and climate vividly and sensuously. The sounds and smells are almost tangible and there is a palpable background of unease and tension as the political situation constantly threatens to explode into violence.

“At the same time the writer has a wonderfully compassionate and insightful view of her all too human and believable characters. This is particularly true with George, the husband. On one level, this man is a selfish serial adulterer but we are lead to understand his motives and he emerges as a complex, if fallible, human being. The same understanding is offered to all characters, major and minor.

“Thoroughly recommended!” - *Dr. Stephen Wyatt, Award-winning writer of *Memorials to the Missing*.*

“George is obsessed with the woman he has been having an affair with, but when her father, who is also George’s boss, gets wind of the situation he sends George and his wife off to do company business in Malaya. The couple opt to send their daughter Susan to boarding school. George’s wife, Dorothy is a woman of her time, the 1950's required that a woman kept her mouth shut, even when she knew her husband was being unfaithful. As time passes, Dorothy begins to slip into her own world and George, thought still obsessing over Emily, moves on to a new lover. Susan, meanwhile, is having problems of her own, she begins to hurt herself out of fear and frustration about her parents unhappy marriage.

“While the characters in this book were a little too self obsessed to generate real sympathy, I believe that that may have been the author’s intention. The vivid descriptions of tropical Malaya are evocative of a time and place long gone. **An absorbing read.**” - *Rosemary Smith, Librarian, USA*

Excerpt

Chapter 1

The tube rattled and shook. A punishing series of jerks swung George round into awkward, precarious positions as he clung onto a strap. The light bulb above his head flickered and swayed; the crossword clues jumped. Newspaper clutched in one hand, he took to watching his fellow commuters, observing their untroubled, ritualised state. At Chalk Farm, several seats were vacated; he squeezed past a man just about to deposit his mackintosh on the seat beside him. Their knees collided. They grunted apologies, acknowledgements; the other man resumed reading his paper. George lit a cigarette. Would he really miss this journey to and from work? Inconceivable to believe that this was the last time he would travel from a respectable job in the City. But he enjoyed this irksome form of travel: the daily struggle to find a seat, the jostling, the intimacy of strangers' bodies - a constant source of jocular comments with the secretaries when he finally arrived at work. Besides, the journey gave him a feeling of belonging, of fitting into place. Now, he would be left to flail, aimless, purposeless, without status or recognition. Exactly in fact what Moorcroft had in mind when he made his decision, when he chose the penalty for his employee; one that would mean there was no risk of them meeting again. George thought of Moorcroft's flattened tone, the anger held in, zipped up behind the doughy features. The plans for George's future in the firm useless, discarded, his place taken by a nodding, cheerful young man.

The tube had come above ground; it continued to roar along the track, as if desperate for this newly found fresh air. Finally, it stopped at Golders Green. George stepped out on the icy platform, buttoned his coat and started the walk home. But he took his time, ignoring the freezing temperature that was numbing the blood in his veins.

When he stood with his hand on the gate latch, he could not stop his hands shaking. Studying the house, he tried to calculate Dorothy's mood. There was a time when she would instinctively know when he was outside the house, the front door would open, a smile would welcome him in. He made his way up the path and stamping his feet on the doorstep, remained, fighting the impulse to turn and run. His fingers gripped and turned the key. No point in delaying further. He pushed the door open and stood on the mat, puddles forming at his feet. Not that he could be blamed for that, or the snow which he would soon be treading into the carpet.

"Darling," he said, when Dorothy appeared. "Sorry I'm a bit late."

"I was beginning to wonder...", she began.

She hung his coat and umbrella under the stairs, put his briefcase in the corner; everything as normal, routines maintained. Had she forgotten about his meeting with Moorcroft this afternoon? Or was this simply her way of coping?

Bending forward he went to kiss her on the cheek. The pleasure he felt when she turned her face towards him gave him renewed strength; a hurdle had been cleared. He followed her into the sitting room, watching her skirt ripple round her legs as she walked quickly across the carpet. Standing with his back to her, he poured out two sherries. Suitable ways of telling her ran through his mind; he wondered whether the letter in his pocket had become sodden and illegible, the message completely destroyed. He should have planned this moment more efficiently, now he did not know how to tell her, had not considered how to soften the impact of his news.

"What did Moorcroft say?" She was sitting on the leatherette sofa, her legs crossed neatly at the ankles, the toe of her black pump tapping the carpet.

Absurd of him to think she had forgotten, even momentarily. She extracted a cigarette from a packet and stared at him expectantly.

"You know that my firm has contacts all over the Far East?"

She nodded, placed her lit cigarette in a glass ashtray, where it balanced uncertainly. She rolled the beads of her necklace between finger and thumb. The smoke rose in twirls from her cigarette; she watched it deliberately, studying the patterns with wide eyes, waiting. It appeared to George she had not made the connection, did not think this fact relevant to their future.

He slid along the sofa towards her. "Moorcroft has found a new position for me in Malaya. A town called Ipoh. Export business." Done, he had told her. His shoulders slackened. A hand was placed on her knee. "Sorry," he said. "I'm truly sorry for..." She removed his hand and stood.

"Malaya!"

He could almost follow the trace of blood departing from her face.

"Malaya," she repeated. "Abroad. I've never been abroad before. No." She retrieved her smouldering cigarette from the ashtray, inhaled deeply, started to cough, moved unsteadily to the bay window. "No," she said again.

Swallowing hard, George kept his eyes on the bars of the electric fire, glowing like the devil he felt was in him. All he could think of saying now was the repeated apology.

"When? What about Susan?" She was standing over him now. "Can't he get you something different? Here?"

He shook his head, tried to touch her hand before it was snatched away. "I've got a letter."

The contents were memorised, but he extracted the letter from his pocket, unfolded the crumpled paper. "We have to leave quite soon. The boat departs on the tenth of January."

She stretched her hand out. He should have bought that box of Milk Tray, for once bypass his dislike for queues with dilly-dallying females, loitering, chatting to the shop-keepers. An attempt to sweeten the poison would have been worth the wait.

He watched her face as she scrutinized the contents. Her hair was neatly tied in a blue chiffon scarf, the same colour as her eye shadow. A wisp of brown hair had escaped from the scarf and tumbled down a cheek. She started to shake as she discarded the letter beside her. But if he tried to comfort her, she was bound to push him away. Suddenly he realised how cold the house was. There was no fire in the grate, a wind was whining down the vacant chimney; it blew the letter back onto the floor again where it lay, the spidery handwriting uppermost, the imparted news laid bare. Moorcroft's face returned to George, stubbornly remaining in his vision.

"And do you have any choice in the matter?" Her voice was toneless, measured.

"I could always turn it down. Try my luck back in Manchester."

"Start from the bottom again? Impossible. I won't let you." Her clenched fist landed on the arm of the sofa.

Relief passed through him. What would he have done if she had agreed to that? Manchester. Rain, grey, descending in icy torrents; colourless offices in gaunt, humourless buildings. No, he could not have returned to Manchester.

"Moorcroft is punishing us, George. Susan and me, for your actions. For your thoughtlessness, your selfishness... what you did. Does he realise that? It's us he's punishing. Not you."

Everything she said was true. His actions had disgusted, appalled everyone that now knew.

Moorcroft had said as much a few hours earlier. He picked up the letter from the floor, folded it,

replaced it in his pocket. He noticed how cold Dorothy looked; saw the tips of her fingers were pink. He asked her if he should light a fire. She stared at him.

“What about Susan?” she asked again. “Her school, her friends? What plans do you have for her? Where will we live? What about all this, our furniture? My new settee?”

Hands steady now, she poured herself another sherry. George waited expectantly, fiddling with the empty glass on his knee. No top-up was offered. A bauble on the Christmas tree caught the light as it turned. Fleeting, his eyes strayed to it.

“What will I tell my parents? Can you imagine Grace’s reaction?” She tugged at a strand of hair. So many questions. What else did he expect? But if there was a way of being transported back two years, of reliving the meeting with Emma, he would not be able to resist breaking the same rules. Only given a second chance, he would take more precautions, adhering to the principles of care, of secrecy. How many times had he relived the moment of discovery, reinvented the passing of events? And still he did not know how much Dorothy had told her family, her friends, the neighbours. It would not be like her to admit to her shame; for that is how she saw it, he knew that. Lifting the electric fire to one side, he poked at the ashes in the fire place.

“When is Susan due back?” Uncertain whether to build a fire, he traced a circle in the fallen ashes. Though he longed to feel some warmth seep into him, bring some cheer into their home, he replaced the poker against the surround.

“I’ll tell her.” Dorothy stood, moved away. “I’ll do all the explaining. She’s staying at a friend’s for tea after Guides. Not a word from you when she comes back. Not until I’ve spoken to her.” She was staring at a photo of Susan, taken the year before on Brighton Pier. George looked too, remembered the day he took it, the wind catching Susan’s dress, blowing it out like an inflated beach ball. She turned, so her back was to him and he wondered whether she was about to cry. Would she respond to a show of gentleness, the care he still felt for her?

“All day I’ve been thinking about this meeting. I even caught myself praying this afternoon.” There were no tears in her voice; instead she gave a forced laugh. “I thought they’d give you a second chance, simply not promote you for a couple of years. Perhaps even a transfer to another office. But this? I never imagined this. I don’t want to go to Malaya. I like it here. Why can’t he give you another job here?” Her voice was rising. “Can you ask him for an alternative?”

Best that she did not know how close he had got to joining the queues at the Labour Exchange, for that is how it might have been. He stared down at the rug and told her no, there was no point in that. “Moorcroft knew my father,” he said. “Said he was being lenient because of it.”

She said nothing to this, but stared blankly at the Christmas tree. “I’ll get supper.” A waft of her perfume caught him unawares as she reached towards the table for her glass. He looked up at her; their eyes met for a second, before she straightened and left the room, her petticoat rustling beneath her woollen dress.

The fireplace looked forlorn, abandoned, ash with dust forming a thin skin on the hearth. He shifted his eyes to The Times lying on the footstool, the crossword still empty, beckoning. Folding the newspaper carefully into four, he tucked it into his pocket and went through to the dining room. The hatch was closed and for a minute he hesitated, listening to Dorothy bustling in the kitchen, filling a saucepan with water, lighting the gas. He opened the hatch, peered through into the kitchen, watched her stir gravy on the stove, one hand resting on her hip. “We’ll have servants to do all that. An amah, a cook. You won’t have to lift a finger.” Surely, Dorothy would like that, at least.

There was no reply. He sat down at the table. The smell of steak and kidney pie grew more intense with her footsteps as they neared the dining room. Ignoring his eyes which followed her

every move, she settled the pie on the table, retrieved the plates from the hatch. "And boarding school's not so bad. It can be quite enjoyable." Perhaps the regime was not so cruel for girls. Involuntarily, his left eye started to twitch.

"You told me it was awful, that you'll never forget it. I remember you saying how the experience had affected you. Forever, you'd said." She was staring at the pie. Steam curled gracefully towards the ceiling. "Do you think she'll manage any better than you?"

He recalled the terror of watching his own parents disappearing into a cloud of steam, the friendly chug altered to a mean hiss, as the train moved away, taking them to India. But that was before the war, such a long time ago.

"It's different now. Susan will be fine. She'll like staying with Grace and Tom in the holidays," George said.

"Grace will think her prayers have been answered. At last an opportunity to have a child." Dorothy's tone was bitter, full of sarcasm. "A prime opportunity for her to mould her niece in her ways." A deep sigh followed. "Couldn't she come with us?"

He did not answer. He was remembering standing in the corridor outside the dorm: mid-winter, no shirt, bare feet. He jolted as she repeated her question.

"We'll have to see." Now was not the time to tell her of the drink with Jenkins, the information he had gleaned about Malaya, the reason he was late.

The potatoes and peas on his plate were growing cold. He picked at the pastry for a while, then gave up. Rubbing his eye he looked across the table; Dorothy was staring at her untouched food, her hand turning the fork over and over. Desperately, he wanted to confide in her, tell her what he knew about Malaya. It would be cruel not to give her some inkling, at least impart a proportion of what he had learnt. But he had to allow her time, give her that at least. The initial outburst was only natural, but he knew that tomorrow she would want to know more details. The newspapers carried so little news of British outposts, preferring only to relay the good, the ceremonial events; or, when they chose to report on disturbances in the Empire, embellishing the stories with tales of British heroes. And why would she bother scouring the papers for news of a country in the South China Seas? Of the Emergency in Malaya, even he had known very little, before his chat with Jenkins. A disagreement between the natives, he remembered reading in *The Times* that was dealt with effectively by the British Army. Too many wars, Jenkins had said. The public are sick of them, scared of the Communists, terrified of an invasion. Best to keep them unaware of the reality of the Emergency.

Dorothy collected the dinner plates. He touched her lightly on her arm, a token of their old bond. Her eyes closed briefly, before she returned to the kitchen. But she had not pushed his hand away, or lashed out at him, as she had a couple of weeks before.

A gust of wind rattled the window; he got up and drew the curtain back, listened to cats howling, scrapping in the dark. His face stared back at him, from a blackness he could not penetrate. Adjusting his focus, he caught sight of the frozen lawn. The snow had stopped, the branches of the apple tree were motionless. Shadows, elongated, wandering in the wind, gave an unfamiliar, peculiar look to the garden. And the door to his shed creaked and moaned; the place where he used to sit on sunny Sunday afternoons, thinking of Emma, dreaming of touching her silky skin. Dorothy returned with the coffee. No pudding tonight; he was tired of the after-taste of tinned peaches anyway, cloying, like paper glue.

"I hear there's a magnificent array of tropical fruits in Malaya. You might like them." He leaned across the table towards her. "You can learn to play bridge." There was a time, he remembered, when Dorothy's mouth would turn up, and dimples would form when he brought the cards out to

play his tricks for Susan. A sigh dispelled the vision. "It could have been worse," he said. Immediately, he regretted his futile remark.

Picking her knife up, she played with it, running her finger along the cutting edge. "Have you forgotten why you've been sent there?" She dropped two sugar lumps into her coffee, her features rigid.

In a curious way, her question was equivocal. The reason for his exile would never be far from his thoughts. He could not forget Emma, despite all his attempts to rid her from his conscience. Lately, he would attempt to remove the image of her face, he would try and replace her memory with a picture of Dorothy, her angular features, with brown eyes, deep and questioning.

The front door burst open and Susan's voice filled the emptiness between them.

"Not a word to her," Dorothy said, her voice low. "Understand?" She stood, gripped his wrist. Her face was devoid of colour. "Let me deal with this."

Turning to face the opening door, George watched his daughter as she entered the dining room, saw her smile slowly dim, as she looked first at Dorothy then at him.

Chapter 2

Dorothy stared at the gas jets burning in the open oven; at the blues and yellows merging, turning into a shimmering haze. Malaya: pink on the map like so much else; apart from that, she barely knew where it was. For a brief moment she felt sorry for George as she imagined him in Moorcroft's wood-panelled office, shuffling his feet, his head hung in shame. But why Malaya? Why so far away? Weeks after the telling, her mind still turned like the flypaper that hung in her parents' grocer's shop. Why had George not tried harder? Why not somewhere nearer? And would George have asked the same question of his boss? But he had sounded as if Moorcroft were doing them a favour; the mention of George's father, the old school loyalty.

A pile of newspapers, rescued from under the stairs, lay discarded on the table. Picking up the top one, she searched through the foreign news again, for the third time that morning. She glanced over an article about Yugoslavia and the UN vote, turned the page over. But there was nothing about Malaya. Before, she had always glossed over news posted from Reuters about countries so far away; now they all seemed to evade her.

Exhaled smoke filled the kitchen; a fog clinging to the ceiling. How many cigarettes had she smoked, sitting there since before dawn? She went to open the window a fraction. The snow was still thick on the ground, with footprints of birds running across the lawn. A robin briefly settled on the honeysuckle then flew off to better pickings. The postman was whistling Jingle Bells as he made his way up their path.

She heard Susan call out as she clattered down the stairs. Turning her wedding ring round on her finger, Dorothy wondered how Susan would react to the news. Quickly, she raked her fingers through her hair, threw the contents of the ashtray into the bin.

Susan stopped in the doorway and stared at the cooker. "Why have you got all the burners on?" "I'm going out in a minute. I was just cold. It's so cold, don't you think, darling?"

"Are you all right? Is everything..." Her eyes came to rest on the newspapers.

"Everything's fine. You'll miss your bus." A quick kiss. "Got your homework?" Susan nodded and studied the cold toast, butter congealing on the surface. Her eyes rested on the empty cigarette packet, nothing escaping her observation. Muttering goodbye, she left for school, dragging her satchel behind her.

The delay of telling Susan could not last another day. Dorothy decided she would sit her down that night, but first there would have to be some careful thinking, some planning, a way of getting it all in order. And Susan did not need to know everything. It would be better for her that details were scanty.

The windows had steamed up and the kitchen had an unhealthy warmth to it: a sweatiness, permeated by the fumes of coal gas. This is how Malaya would be; steamy jungles, unbelievable heat. What would their house be like over there? She remembered seeing pictures of houses on stilts with the staircase on the outside, the front door at the top of the stairs. Would she, too, live in an upside-down house with its innards showing for all to see? How would she sleep with mosquitoes whining round her, insects scratching at the walls? And would she have to tolerate one prolonged season? No winter in Malaya, no need to wear her fox fur and matching hat. No more snowmen, ducking snowballs, or sitting in front of a blazing fire, supping brandy egg flips. She tipped the toast into the bin, washed her cup and saucer. Servants to do all that, George had said, as if this would make all the difference.

"I'm going to the hairdresser's," she called up the stairs.

There was no answer. Again, she called out, her tone louder, more insistent. George appeared at the top of the stairs, naked from the waist up, a towel draped over his torso like a robe. His muscles appeared more developed, his shoulders broader, better toned than the last time she had looked at him properly and she wondered why she had not noticed before. As he came down the stairs towards her, she found herself gazing at his chest, at the curve of muscle, the hollow above his collar bone; the place she used to brush with her lips. Had Emma done the same? Turning her back to him, she put her hand to her eyes; she would not cry anymore. Her profile in the hall mirror looked no different from the usual one, as if the grief and anger of the past two weeks had forgotten to leave a mark, to change the shape of her features. She applied some more lipstick, dabbed her nose with powder and tied a scarf round her head.

"I'll be back a little late tonight. Things to tie up, then I'm meeting up with Jenkins. And that's the truth." He stayed on a step halfway down the stairs and put his hands out, imploring. "You must believe me. I'll get some introductions for Malaya," he said. "Make life easier for both of us out there if we have introductions." He reached the bottom step and the towel slipped off his shoulders. "Did you manage to sleep last night?" he asked, his voice concerned, innocent.

"No," she said and wondered how long it was possible to exist without sleep. Already, she felt the onset of unreality, an edginess that made her fidget and jump at sudden sounds.

He went to touch her face, then withdrew his hand suddenly. "If Susan's already in bed when I get back, say goodnight to her. Have you told her yet?"

Dorothy knew he was staring at her, felt his eyes fastened to her profile. "No," she said again.

"Maybe tomorrow. The two of us. Not fair to keep it from her for so long." He picked up the letter from the hall table. "This is from the new school, isn't it?"

She nodded, took it from him, dropped it into her bag. She would read it first, she told him, then she would decide.

"Decide what?"

But she chose not to answer and he did not press her. As she left the house, a pile of snow slid down gracefully from the roof with the closing of the front door. The air was thick with a greyish smog and the wind felt Siberian. She turned her coat collar up and headed towards the local shops. Tears, brought on by the cutting wind, fell down her face as she walked, head down, past the bread shop, crammed full of shoppers, yeasty aromas, spreading out into the street. She

opened the door to the shop next door, her hairdresser's. The sudden warmth, a nebulous perfumed mist of shampoo, of setting lotion and fragrant bodies was reassuring for Dorothy; a feminine space, a delightful haven. It was like visiting an old friend.

Adelina sat her down in front of the mirror. Dorothy patted her hair and put her head on one side. "I think I'd like something different today." She turned round and looked at Adelina "I want a complete change. A perm maybe?"

"A curl will suit you." Adelina lifted the hair up from her nape. "Something like this?"

Their eyes met in the reflection. "For Christmas? A present for your husband, yes?"

Dorothy smiled, moved her focus to her own face, noticed a darkness under her eyes.

"Yes, a perm is very fashionable," Adelina continued. "Would you like to put this on?" She held out a cape, the same pink as the marzipan wrapped round a Battenberg cake. Slipping it on, Dorothy continued to stare at herself, at her cheeks changing to a rosy colour, warmed by the artificial heat. Watching Adelina as she sorted through her hairdressing implements, picking out a fine-toothed comb for Dorothy, she wondered if she knew much about Malaya, had picked up information from a client, perhaps heard a reference to the colony on the television she was so proud to own. A blast of cold air from the opening door made Dorothy wrap her arms round herself. Another customer walked in. Adelina greeted the newcomer and escorted her to the back of the salon. Dorothy half-listened to their chatter about the weather and preparations for Christmas. The rhythmic hum of hairdryers bobbed in the background as she closed her eyes. Did she have to go to Malaya? Were there choices for her? There was always the possibility of divorcing George. Harriet, her school friend, had managed without her husband, had two children to take care of, though of course, her open-minded parents helped out. But could Dorothy do the same? There would be her sister to deal with: she imagined Grace's reaction if she were to divorce George. There would be references to the holy sanctity of marriage and implicit pointers to the physical comforts George had brought.

Adelina returned with a catalogue of photos of women in soft focus; their hair curled, faces glowing. Turning the pages, Dorothy stopped at a picture of a woman with pouting lips and pencilled eyebrows, happy, relaxed, carefree. Hair swept off her face, framing her delicate features. "I want to look like that."

"That'd suit you really well," Adelina said. Fingers flew through Dorothy's hair. Shaking her wrists like a magician about to perform a conjuring trick, Adelina flicked the hair, fluffed it out, drew it back from her temples, then led Dorothy over to a basin. A stream of warm water cascaded onto her head. The tears started, this time real tears. Impossible to stop them, unaided. She grabbed a towel, pressed it to her eyes, tried to concentrate on the sensation of gentle hands massaging soap into her hair, lifting the strands with well-practised manoeuvres.

If she divorced George, what would she do for income? Perhaps he might agree to only provide for the bare essentials. She could stay in the house in Golders Green, keep Susan at the local school, ask her parents to help her out, work in their grocer's shop. But she would not be allowed to forget all she had thrown away. Her father thought George a nice young man, still referred to him as such, even after their fourteen years of marriage. Her mother said he looked after her, gave the best to Susan. "At least you won't have to slice ham every day of your married life," she said on Dorothy's visits, as they sat amongst the familiar odours: cheese, biscuits, pork pie.

No, Dorothy could not bear the idea of going begging to her family, dealing with their disappointment, the cover up. For they were bound to tell their friends she was a widow; that is how they would cope, by eliciting sympathy and understanding. And if she were to try it alone, to leave George to deal with the tropical outpost without her, would she be strong enough to put up with the distasteful looks, the shuns by other women that Harriet had endured? More to the point

would Susan be able to defend herself? How would she handle being the only child in her class with a divorced mother, the wrongdoer? For that's how it would seem to them. Breaking up the family home; Dorothy would be blamed for that.

Adelina was dribbling cold fluid over the curlers. It smelt like drain cleaner, made Dorothy shiver unexpectedly, but still she carried on smiling at their two reflections. A net was pulled over her head, cotton wool secured, covering her ears.

"Are you looking forward to Christmas?" Adelina asked as she shepherded Dorothy to a row of dryers.

"Indeed I am." The gracious lie, well-practised of late. A magazine was placed on her knee. Her eyes fell on an advert for gravy powder, the happy family set round the table, all present and correct.

The alternative to divorce, thought Dorothy, was to grit her teeth and depart for Malaya. She pretended to doze under the hooded hairdryer.

It was eleven by the time she left the hairdresser's. A man was sweeping the streets, making piles of snow blackened by the sooty fog, filthy puddles forming where it was turning to slush. The sky was murky, ashen, the pebble-dashed houses colourless, their grey windows like closed eyes. No one she knew passed her by. More than anything she wanted to be invited in for a cup of tea, another ear, an alternative view point, but no opportunity arose. She leaned into the wind, and struggled home, keeping a tight hold of the scarf round her hair.

At home, she examined herself in the hall mirror. The curls were pretty, framing her face, accentuating the roundness of her eyes. But still she was disappointed; she looked nothing like the model in the magazine.

It was time to write to Grace. Sitting at the dining room table she doodled on the blotter, drawing spirals that expanded across the page. She wrote about the bitterness of the wind, the snowball fights in their neighbours' gardens, the Christmas tree glittering in their bay window, the pudding in the larder and how much she was looking forward to seeing both of them and having a family Christmas once again. She fiddled with her ring and sat staring out at the garden, at the bare trees, their branches bent towards the ground, the snow weighing them down. *I bet he's in St John's Wood now she thought, not at work, not making final arrangements, or meeting Jenkins.* All nicely clean shaven and smelling of Old Spice, his hair styled like Dennis Compton's.

She sighed, rested her head in her hands. The pen dropped to the floor. Pushing her chair back quickly, she stood, made her way into the sitting room and poured herself a glass of sherry. As she took the first sip, then the second, a warm glow spread from the pit of her stomach, a reassurance that her inclination, her decision on the matter was right. The middle road was a sensible option. Back at the table her pen hovered over her letter. *I have some news to impart to you she wrote. George has been very fortunate at work. You know how much he is appreciated there.* She chewed at the end of the pen. Words about apt punishment, the evil of telling lies, came back to her, drilled in by her mother. The sherry glass stood empty by her side. She fetched the decanter, refilled her glass. He has been offered a promotion to Malaya. *The opportunity is such that he has decided to take it. We will be sailing out there on 10th January, and we would like you to be Susan's guardians while she remains at school here.* She paused and drew a jagged Christmas tree on the blotter with a large-winged fairy to top it. She thought of George with Emma, all the trouble, the anguish he had caused. Now both she and Susan were paying for his selfishness, his narcissism, his sheer stupidity. An hour later, Dorothy was in the sitting room, perched on the edge of the sofa, her feet warming in front of the newly-lit fire. A tray was laid on a footstool, one cup and saucer, a glass, two plates, butter, raspberry jam and a dish of crumpets, steaming, fresh from the oven. The front gate clicked open and she heard Susan's footsteps

running along the path.

Susan said nothing at first when Dorothy told her. Stunned, she slumped in her seat, as if all her energy had been forcibly removed, and Dorothy was not surprised when she started to wheeze. The ghastly medicine, the vile spray, had been prepared, brought downstairs ready, just in case. With her arm round Susan; she helped her recover, stroking, patting her back as the sound in her chest quietened.

“Not much time, is there?” Susan said eventually when her breathing eased. “Jane’s parents were given six months before they went to Rhodesia.” She refused the freshly buttered crumpet. “Why can’t I go with you? I don’t want to go to boarding school. Why can’t Daddy turn it down? You’ve never said anything about him wanting to go abroad. Why now? At Christmas?” She stopped for a minute, drew a breath, her freckles pale, the colour of oatmeal. “Do you think there’s a chance he might turn it down?” Fixing her gaze on her untouched milk, she said, “I knew there was something wrong, something going on. I wish you’d told me before.” She took in another breath. A wheeze was still squeezing her lungs.

Dorothy reached out for Susan’s hand, and began rubbing it, caressing the fingers. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong. You mustn’t think that. It’s for the best. You’ll see in time.” The words sounded so convincing to Dorothy, she almost believed them herself. “And your school is so near to Auntie Grace and Uncle Tom, you’ll be able to visit them at weekends. Then you can visit us. Come out to Malaya. It’ll be fun, you’ll see.”

Susan’s eyes fell to the ashtray, to the letter from the school secured underneath, its school crest visible. “Can I read it?” she asked.

“Yes, of course.” A shard of coal spat from the fire as Dorothy waited for Susan to finish reading. Her hand shook as she lifted a cup of tea to her lips.

“I’m going to Carol’s house for tea,” Susan said suddenly.

“What do you think of it? Your new school?” Dorothy nodded towards the letter. “Looks jolly nice to me.”

“I’ll be back in an hour,” Susan said.

Shaking off Dorothy’s restraining hand, she stood and screwed the letter into a ball, threw it onto the floor. “It’s not fair.” Tears were bubbling in her eyes. “I don’t want you to go.” She rushed out of the room, slammed the door. The following silence was interminable. The only break in the quiet was the slow drip-drip of water as snow melted in the gutters, and the carefully constructed snowman shifted, its axis collapsing as the thermometer slipped above freezing. A throb started over Dorothy’s eye. No stopping now, she thought. The lie has been told. She rested her head in her hands, leant over towards the fireside, waiting for Susan, then George, to return home.