

The Little House

(Written for "The Listener" by PETER FREYBERG)

EVERY morning it was the same. Every morning she would come down the steps from the front porch just as a tram passed the gate. It was rather pleasant living opposite the second to last stop before the terminus; it meant that, by the time she had walked slowly down the path to the gate, the tram had turned round and would be on its way back again. This saved her waiting out on the street in the rain. To-day, however, it was warm and sunny, and little pools of water that had been left over from an early morning shower were still bright on the roadway. It was what people like to call "typical spring weather."

She stepped down off the pavement as a tram appeared round the bend. It came to a grating standstill a few feet away. She climbed up on to the front platform, passed through the open doors, and sat down in the third seat back. The tram lumbered off again.

She noticed that a young man sitting in the corner in front of her glanced up from his newspaper to see who she was. He was staring at her and she eyed him so coldly that, embarrassed, he turned away.

Only three or four of the seats were occupied so far out from town, but at every stop a few more people would clamber on. The conductor walked leisurely up and down the car, taking things easy while he could. He had just finished munching a sandwich and there was a slight odour of smoked fish moving with him up the passageway. His dark blue uniform was old and worn, like the man inside it, but it was kept clean and newly pressed. He seemed a cheerful little fellow, even so early in the morning, and had a word with all his regular fares. He said good morning to her as he took the sixpence from her outstretched hand.

She glanced down at her ticket and began to add up the figures at the bottom: they came to fifteen, which gave her a final total of six—her lucky number. She smiled at her superstition. Next she made a poker hand out of the best five numbers. If there had been anyone to play with she would have won easily. There was nothing more she could do, so she rolled the ticket between her fingers until it formed a tight cylindrical wad of paper. Then, realising that she was fiddling again, she put it impulsively into her pocket.

AT one time she had tried to read during the long journeys to and from town. Not for long, however. The constant jolting and jarring, together with the noise, made it almost impossible to absorb anything. She found she had to read a paragraph at least twice before it made sense—which made even the best written of books seem disjointed.

She preferred, instead, to gaze out of the window or watch someone getting on or off the tram.

There were always so many different people to study. She used to look first at their faces, then their hands—you could always learn things about a person by looking at his hands—and lastly at the clothes they wore. It was easier to decide details about men than about her own sex. Men seem to wear their occupation like an overcoat; women try to disguise it more. That well-dressed girl, for instance, might be a junior typiste, even though she looked like the manageress of some sort of shop or other. She speculated on the way these people lived, their interests and their hobbies. There was one man who always carried a couple of books to work, yet never so much as glanced at them: his wife must be a voracious reader. Another had a morning paper which was invariably open at the sporting page. These ones she recognised as regular travellers, the landed gentry of the tram; they could look round at the other occupants and say to themselves, "Ah, a newcomer!"

She was really a very pretty girl, she knew that—small but well-proportioned, dark and with short curly hair tucked underneath a little red hat. Her clothes were good without being obviously expensive and she wore them as clothes should be worn—with the knowledge that they look well, yet are not too conspicuous. Her face was what attracted people most, it was so serious-looking. The white forehead was creased with an almost imperceptible frown, always present, and her dark brown eyes seemed to be continually focused on some distant object, as though she were not looking at anything at all. She seemed, indeed, to be thinking of all the troubles of the world and how she could cure them single-handed.

Actually she was looking at the houses as they passed by. All that her eyes conveyed to her mind was that they were houses—in her mind they appeared only in comparison with one particular house.

It was a cottage, really, not big enough for more than a family of three. There was a low-cut hedge, a small lawn and flower garden, and then the house itself sitting quietly in between two large buildings as though it had sprung up during the night. The front door was on the left hand side, nearest the road, with a small verandah overhead and a crazy pavement of concrete slabs leading up to it. The whiteness of the newly painted walls, the roof as green as the grass on the lawn, made the place look tidy and well cared-for. It was a wonderful little house, just the one she had always wanted—not too far away from town, yet not too close.

SOMEONE sat heavily down beside her. It was an old woman dressed in that hideous black that old people think



The door opened suddenly and they were face to face

so becoming. The young man who had been watching her so covertly had given up his seat and was now standing on the platform outside. How she hated a crowded tram: it was even worse coming home in the evening when there was hardly room to squeeze on. Everyone would knock into everyone else or tread on their feet—apologising half-heartedly, not meaning or caring what they said. The conductor had to push his way through the congested passageways, elbowing past so that she found herself almost sitting on someone else's knee, or knocking his hat off with a stray parcel. The conductor would be tired and would thrust a ticket in her hand roughly, trying to push a couple of pennies into her palm at the same time. She would stand for a while, hanging tightly to a strap so that she wouldn't fall over. "If they're strong enough to work they're strong enough to stand" was the way one man commented on giving up his seat to a woman. So she would go on standing until suddenly someone realised she was young and pretty, and promptly tried to impress her with his good manners.

There was only one thing wrong with the little house: it was wrong with quite a lot of the houses nowadays. Never could you see a child playing on the lawn, nor a tricycle or pram standing about. It was a shame that such a perfect home should seem deserted. She wanted to see scooters and trolleys or an occasional doll left unattended for the moment out on the path; she wanted to see children playing in the garden, as there were next door. It seemed so wrong that there were no children. . . .

Of all the people she disliked most, as a group, the worst were crabby middle-aged women. She hoped fervently every time she saw one that she would never grow old. They took the attitude that everyone in the tram should consider only them—they sat in their seats with a proprietary glare and announced that they wanted such and such a window up, and would the conductor kindly stop that man smoking. Almost as bad, indeed, were the people who "would

never be using such a means of conveyance if it weren't for the petrol shortage"—people who tried to isolate themselves from their fellow-travellers. Sometimes, indeed, she didn't blame them, but most of it was just snobbishness. Not that she didn't like people as a whole, but there were some she couldn't tolerate. She consoled herself with the thought that everyone must feel intolerant at some time or other.

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THE tram stopped again, everyone tipping forward in their seats as the brakes took effect. "Move further along the car, please," shouted the conductor, and in a shuffling surge they moved. A man leant down and said "Good morning, Joan; how are you to-day?" and her voice in answering was pleasant to the ear, soft and low-pitched.

As the speed increased so did the jolting, and down the passageway people swung on their straps like frustrated pendulums. The air seemed to be mostly tobacco-smoke, and a musty smell of damp overcoats permeated everything. She felt sick of the continual travelling back and forth every day at the same time. All her weariness came back again, until she felt she could stand it no longer. It was the influence of that house, she knew only too well. The tram was approaching it now. She looked out of the window, intent on seeing it as soon as she could, almost fearful lest it might be gone. It was still there, of course, as it always was, basking contentedly in the sun. Her breath came a little quicker. As the tram passed it by she drank in every bit of the scene, until suddenly it became more of a longing than she could bear. She reached for the bell-push and the bell sounded harsh in the distance.

Out on the pavement she stood slightly bewildered, wondering at herself, watching the tram move quickly on. She had sat there day after day watching the little house slip by, and to-day she had stopped. She was still unsure that she was doing the right thing. Then, as though making up her mind