

THE LORDLY ONES

Keith Roberts

*'How beautiful they are, the Lordly Ones,
'Who live in the heart of the hollow hills.'
—William Sharp, Rutland Boughton, 'The Immortal Hour'*

When I was very young I was given a pedal car. That must have been just before the War, as such things later became unobtainable. I mean by that World War Two. People of my generation still call it 'The War', though of course there have been many wars since.

It was a very fine car indeed, much larger than was common and with a door on one side that could be opened. It was painted a bright golden brown, with three smart red flashes on either side of its bonnet. It had streamlined headlamps let into its mudguards and its wheels had rubber tyres and chromium hub plates, though the hub plates could not be removed. I became very skilled at driving it, though perhaps I should not say such a thing, and could negotiate the narrowest gates and doorways without scraping its paint. I also learned to steer it in reverse, and was able to turn it round in very small spaces.

I do not know why my father gave me such an expensive present as we were a fairly poor family. I was an only child, and lived in an end terrace house in a back street of the town in which I had been born. Both the terrace and the street in which it stood have been knocked down now for many years.

It was a small house, though as a child I was not conscious of this, but it had a long garden. I remember the garden particularly well. It was closed off on both its sides, partly by solid fencing and partly by trellis work fixed to stout posts. The fences and trellis were painted with creosote, which the summer sun bleached to a pleasant brown. At the bottom of the garden was a tall, untidy hedge of hawthorn. The hedge had gaps in it low down through which you could see allotments dotted with little sheds, and pig pens made of corrugated iron. On a sunny day the allotments and the men working on them looked like little bright pictures

seen through the stems and leaves.

The garden, though narrow, was further divided by two long paths made of some pinky ashy stuff and edged by a grey-leaved creeper that grew star-shaped flowers in summer. Near the house was a little paved part my mother always called The Patio. Beyond The Patio was a rose plot, then another with Lane's Prince Albert apple trees, then the vegetable patch and some raspberry canes before you came to the cold frame and the compost heap. There was a little greenhouse too, built close up to the hedge so that one side of it always grew green spots on the glass no matter how often they were scraped away. The greenhouse had an iron rainwater butt. During the War my father put it outside in the street and wrote FIRE on it in big red letters, though we were never bombed.

I remember the garden so well because of a game I played there. All the paths had names I had invented, the long paths and the little ones that went between the plots, the hard, beaten patch by the compost heap, the turning place beside the cold frame. The borders had their roadways too, places that were not often dug and where my tyre marks did not show, but only I knew what they were called. On summer afternoons when I did not have to shop with my mother I would sit on The Patio and plan my travels through the country I had invented. My choice of routes was wide. For instance, I could take the North Road or the South. The North Road, the first of the long pink paths, led to Foxglove Close, or if I travelled its full length, to Cold Frame Garage and the greenhouse. Behind the greenhouse were old bricks and rotted boxes, and a pair of great spoked wheels my father told me had once belonged to an aeroplane. The bindweed crawled over them before climbing up into the hedge. The Road ended here. It was a dangerous place, frightening and a little dark. Or I could cross The Patio to the South Highway. Clumps of violets grew between the flags of The Patio, where the cracks were widest. I knew exactly the locks to apply to steer my wheels between them. From the Highway I could swing right into Mornington Crescent. The grass path in front of the raspberry canes curved a little, and it was here the sun came first in summer. I do not know where I had heard the name I chose for it, but it seemed right.

Wherever I travelled though, I would always end up in my favourite place of all. I called it Daisy Lane, from the big mauve clumps of Michaelmas Daisies that grew close by each year. Here, by careful reversing, I could slide myself right out of sight between tall bushes. Once in position I could not be seen from the house at all, but *I* could see. I

could stare down through the gaps in the hedge at the men working in the field, easing the car backward a little by the pressure of a pedal if one of them paused and seemed to glance my way. The sun struck hot on my face and arms, and the bushes broke the breeze. It was always still in Daisy Lane, and wasps would come and bite at the old wood of the fence posts, little beetles would run across the earth.

In winter or when the weather was bad I would oil the motor ready for fresh journeys, and polish its headlamp rims. Newspapers would be spread on the living room rug and my father would turn the car on its side for me so I could reach the pedal bearings. I had been given a little oilcan, round, flat and with a long, thin spout, to have for my own. I kept it with my cleaning rags in a tin with an overlapping pattern in brown, gold and orange. The oilcan had to be stored upright, or the oil would spill.

I do not know why I have begun to write down my thoughts, or why I should think first of my toy car, and the games I played when I was small.

It is very still today, with hardly any wind, and the Station is quiet. Recently a skylight ventilator has taken to rattling, several times it has woken me in the night. Yesterday I got the big steps out and climbed up to it but I could not see what was wrong. I wonder if a strip of draught excluder would be a good idea. If I put it along the top of the frame by the catch it would stop the noise, and also prevent the rain getting in. At least it would do no harm. I am always careful about undertaking actual repairs, as I know I am not very good with my hands.

I did my first piece of writing last night. I have read through it, and do not quite know what to think. I am not really sure what I am trying to do. I am certainly not writing my life story.

Even if I was capable of such a thing, it would not be of any interest. Nor am I keeping a diary, I did the writing in an old ledger I found when I first cleaned my office out. So I suppose I must have started a hobby. I must be careful not to let it interfere with my work. I do not think I have ever had a hobby before.

The writing took a long while. Three hours, from locking the Stations until nearly midnight. I was amazed when I looked at my clock and saw how much time had passed. If I am to write regularly I must rearrange my schedule so as to take more advantage of the light. I have a good supply of

candles but it seems a waste to burn them unnecessarily.

I read parts of what I had done several times. I was surprised at how much I had remembered about being small. I could never be a real writer of course but I find I can put my thoughts down clearly, and in the proper order. That will have to do instead.

I must spend this afternoon filling the water tank. It is a good tank and has been very useful, but filling it takes a long time. I found it behind what I think is an old factory on the far side of the Car Park. It was thrown out on a rubbish heap with a lot of used bricks so it seemed quite all right to take it, though it was very hard work getting it to the Station. I was afraid to drag it in case I damaged it but it was so heavy that carrying it took most of a day. It had a tap already fitted that I thought would be very useful, though when I got it back I realized it would have to be lifted up onto something before I could fill buckets from it. So I fetched some of the bricks and made them into two stacks for it to stand on. I was very pleased when I had finished as it seemed to be quite firm. The night after I fixed the tank was the first time I saw the camp fires on the hills.

A stream runs past the Station, within a yard or two of it, but the banks are steep and slippery and it is difficult to reach the water. For a time I did not know what to do, then I found something in a shed by the rubbish heap that I thought would help. It was like a little crane with a pulley and an arm and a sort of foot, a metal plate with holes at the corners for fixing. I do not know what it was for originally. There was some rope too. At first I did not like to borrow it as I was afraid it would look like stealing, but there was nobody I could ask. There is a bridge across the stream, where the cars used to come into the Car Park. I managed to fix the crane to its parapet with baling wire. The pulley was very stiff at first but it ran quite freely after I had oiled it. It was difficult for a time getting the bucket to fill. Instead of turning over and sinking it would float, and the current would carry it off along the stream. I found after several tries that it was best to drop it the last little way with a bump, and sort of jog it over onto its side. Of course I only have the plastic buckets that were supplied for use on the Station. I wonder if metal ones might work better.

I was very worried when the water went off. I did not bother so much about the electricity as I had a box of candles in the office and have been able to get more since, but without water the Stations could not do their job properly. There was water in the small cisterns of course, but the big

one my side used to flush automatically every twenty minutes and without the sound of it the whole place seemed different. I got the steps and filled it with a bucket. I found it would still work when the water reached the proper level. At first I filled it several times a day but with nobody using the Station any more that was not really necessary. But it is still done twice a day, last thing before I lock up and first thing in the morning.

I have been thinking some more about when I was small. I have been trying to remember the very last time I used the car, drove down the South Highway or into Mornington Crescent. There must have been a last time, but I cannot remember it. This seems strange. I found the car a long while later, when I was cleaning out the wash house after my mother died. It was very rusty, it needed a good clean up and a coat of paint. There were new people next door, with young children. I asked them if they wanted it but they said no so I put it back where it was. It was hard to believe I had once been small enough to drive it. By that time most of my Roads had gone anyway, as my mother had been ill for several years and I was never very good at gardening. It disappointed my father, as he had wanted me to be a gardener like himself.

I did not get on very well at school. Everybody said I was slow, though I was never sure just what they meant. One time when it was very bad I started trying to do all sorts of things, like eating and tying my shoelaces, quicker than usual to show I was not slow at all. My father visited the school several times. I met him once in the corridor, it seemed very strange to see him there. Afterwards the Head sent for me, from one of my classes. I was very frightened. He asked me a lot of questions about the sort of things I did at home. I could not answer him properly as I did not know what he meant. It was a new school, built nearly outside the town, and his study was very new with light green walls. There was a cream-painted cupboard behind his desk, I knew that was where he kept his Sticks. They were canes really but we called it getting the Stick. There were also tall glass doors with a flagged courtyard outside, like The Patio at home only much tidier. He said he wanted to help me and that I was not to worry. I was very glad when he told me I could go.

After that they put me into a Special Class. They said it was to help my reading. We all sat round on funny-smelling straw mats with bright patterns on them and took it in turns to read aloud. I could read quite well although I was never very interested in books, but I could not answer questions. They confused me, I could never understand what I was

supposed to say.

Afterwards the Head sent for me several more times and asked what I was doing at home to help my mother. I could never think of what to say to him either. He said he wanted to be my friend but I never really liked him much.

I think not being able to remember the last time I drove my car is really odd. It has made me think of doing other things for the last time. I did read a story once, about a man who was going to be shot for spying. Only they did not do it till the morning so that he could see his last sunset. But if you were going to be killed there would be a lot of other things. Like the last time you cut your nails, or the very last time you ever combed your hair.

Things always seemed to get harder for me, not easier. After I left school my father got me a job at the Council nurseries. I had to go and see a man called Mr Sanderson. I thought I was going to like it at the beginning. It was not far to go, just the other side of the allotments. There were three big greenhouses about 30 yards long. I could see the roof of our house and the big hedge at the bottom of the garden, it looked quite different from the other side. But I did not do very well. I kept breaking plant pots, things were always going wrong. And there was a girl who worked in the office. She used to follow me about, try and get me on my own in one of the sheds. She made me afraid to go to work. Then she said a lot of things about what I had done to her. They were not true but everybody believed her. Afterwards I worked at the Tip for a long time, then I was on the carts. I did not like that at all.

I was nearly 45 when I started at the Station. It had not been built very long then. I knew they wanted someone to look after it but I did not think they would give the job to me. I had to see a man called Mr Ireland. That was at the new Council Offices. He asked me a lot of questions, it was nearly like being in the Headmaster's study again. Then he said that I had worked for the Council a long time and that apart from one small incident I had a very good record. He said that he had known my father for many years and that he had been a good worker too. He made some notes and sat and thought for a minute, then he said he would let me know. He was very nice to me.

The letter came next day. It upset my mother very much. I was really

happy, I could not understand why she was not pleased as well. She kept saying, 'To think a son of mine should be a lavatory attendant.' But I never thought of it as a lavatory. It was the Station almost from the start. I heard a lady say one afternoon, 'Thank God, a Comfort Station!' It pleased me very much, it seemed such a good name. I think she was an American.

There are two Stations really, built on to each other, one for Ladies and one for Gentlemen. The Ladies side was looked after by someone called Mrs Stevens. She was rather short and had hornrimmed glasses and very yellow hair. On sunny afternoons she used to take a chair outside and sit by her door and knit. I used to say good morning to her but we never talked much. She did not seem very friendly.

I expect it will sound silly but I think the Station is very beautiful. It stands to one side of the Car Park, very close to the stream. It is low and plain and built of a sort of fawn-coloured brick, with narrow windows along the side that have muffled glass. Inside, all the tiles are white and the walls are a very light grey with more white on them in little splashes. It is always cool, even in summer. At the end farthest from the stream there is quite a large room with one door into the Station and another that opens outside. This is my room. It has a chair and table and a ring for boiling kettles, a sink and two big cupboards and quite a lot of shelves. There is even space for a bed, which is very fortunate.

I made a mistake about the room the first time Mr Ireland came to the Station. I had been there nearly 2 weeks then. When I took over it was in a terrible mess, with cigarette ends ground out all over the floor and dirt everywhere. I scrubbed it out, using the disinfectant for the Station floor, and got everything tidy, and Mr Ireland came to see what stores and equipment I had and what new things I would need. I said, 'If you will come into the office, sir, I will show you,' and he laughed. I felt myself going red at that, like I used to at school when I had said something stupid, but he put his hand on my shoulder. 'That's all right,' he said. 'If you want it to be your office, that is what it will be.' I do not know why, but I felt better almost at once.

The next time he came it was because I had written him a note. One of the channels was stained, it annoyed me as the rest of the Station was spotless, but although I had scrubbed it with the disinfectant for a long time it had not done any good. Also people kept writing things on the cubicle doors. Horrible things, sometimes. I had been rubbing them off

with hot water and Vim but the paint was wearing away as well in places and the doors were looking a sight. He brought me a can of special cleaner that worked very well though he told me to be careful not to get it on my hands. He said he would get some special paint put on the doors. He even asked me what colour I would like. I said I thought dark blue would look very nice and he laughed. He said it was up to the architect really but he would see what he could do. I felt confused. Nobody had ever asked me a thing like that before.

I asked him if he would like a cup of tea. I do not know what made me say such a thing as it was hardly my place. I was sure he would refuse and that I had made another mistake but he said, 'That would be very nice.' I was a bit nervous, I gave him the cup with the big crack in it, I did not realize till afterwards. But he did not seem to mind. He sat in the office and smoked a cigarette. Then he said a most surprising thing. 'You know, Tom,' he said—he always called me Tom, right from the start— 'if everybody on the Council was as conscientious as you, we'd have no call for complaint.' I did not know what to say. I felt really embarrassed, being praised like that. I had never realized there was anything I could do well.

After that I started coming down to the Station very early. It opened at half past eight in the summer and I was suppose to be there an hour before, but I took to coming down at half past six. It gave me a chance to do a lot of extra cleaning jobs, like the door catches and the windows. It was a lovely time of day, with nobody about and the sun on all the buildings and the parked cars. There was mist on the stream sometimes, but the hills all round the town were very clear.

Sometimes I would stay on late as well, after the Station was closed. Then I would not want to go home at all. My mother had died by this time and they had moved me out of the old house. They gave me a flat in a new building overlooking the Cathedral Close. It was very nice, there was a bedroom and a place where I could cook, but I did not like it. I was always happier at the Station.

I thought about it a long time, then I bought a little air bed. They had a sale of camping things at one of the big shops in the town centre, that was what gave me the idea. After that I could sleep at the Station and get up and make my breakfast and start whenever I liked. Each morning I rolled the bed up carefully and put it away at the bottom of one of the cupboards. I did not tell Mr Ireland. I did not think he would approve.

After he brought the cleaning stuff he started calling in quite regularly, sometimes twice a week. He always had tea. He would sit and talk about his job, and how hard it was to keep everything going with the money getting tighter all the time. One day he even brought some tea of his own, he said it was to replace all mine that he had drunk though that did not matter. It was a very expensive brand, one I had never bought. I still have some of it left.

I do not know how to describe Mr Ireland. He was about 2 inches taller than I am, with grey hair combed straight back and very bright blue eyes, but that is not enough. There were other things, and I cannot find the proper words for them. Nobody was ever as kind to me as he was.

I have been trying to remember how long it has been since anybody used the Station. The Trouble came at Easter, and it is nearly autumn now. So it must be at least 5 months, perhaps more.

I have fixed the skylight, though I do not know yet whether it has worked as it has not been windy. Also, I looked out of the office window tonight before I lit the candle. There seemed to be a lot more fires than before, and some of them were closer.

I must stop now, as the candle is nearly out. I did not mean to go on for so long, but there was more to say about Mr Ireland than I realized.

I want to try and write something very difficult. I have started twice already and had to cross out what I had done. I think perhaps this is the first really hard thing I have tried to say.

There was a song we had to learn at school, about the Lordly Ones. Miss Chaston, who taught us music, said that meant the fairies. It was a strange song and puzzled me very much at first. It said they lived in the hollow hills but I thought the other children were singing 'the Harlow hills' and that all fairies lived at a place called Harlow, wherever that might be. I often used to make mistakes like that.

I did not think about the song again for years. Then when I was working on the dust carts there was a man called Smudger. I never knew his proper name. He was a big man, much bigger than me, and had a lot of friends. I used to go with him sometimes to a hotel near the town centre to have a drink. I would never have dared go to such a place on my own.

The Public Bar was up the yard and to get to it you had to pass a room lit by candles where all the guests were eating their dinner. The first time I looked in I thought some of the ladies were the most beautiful I had ever seen and for some reason I remembered the song at once. I knew they were not fairies of course, just very rich people, but afterwards whenever I went there the song always started in my mind.

Then when I had my flat I used to sit quite a lot looking down over the Cathedral wall at the grass and driveways inside, especially if there was a wedding there or some other big function, which often happened. The people who came were very grand. Some of them even wore top hats like in the films, so I thought they must be the Lordly Ones too. So although I was always getting shouted at for being clumsy or in the way, I thought if I could get the job at the Station some of them might come there and see the towels all clean and soap in the dispensers, and be pleased. I wonder if Mr Ireland knew that, and that was why he set me on.

I have had an idea. There is some old lead piping on the rubbish heap where I found the water tank. If I could somehow fix a piece of it to the edge of one of the buckets it would tip over automatically when it went into the water, and filling it would be a lot easier.

I cannot do very much tonight. I feel tired. I wonder if it is the writing, and having to think so hard to find the proper words.

It works! I went over to the factory first thing this morning, as soon as it was light, and brought the pipe back. I cut a piece off, using a saw that was in one of the cupboards in the office, and knocked it flat with a hammer. Then I bent it round the edge of one of the buckets and hammered it again till it was tight. After that I did not have to jiggle the bucket about each time to make it sink, and filling the tank took a whole half hour less!

After I had finished I went and sat on the bank of the stream for a time because I was still feeling shaky from having had to use the saw. I do not like saws. I was playing with one once when I was small and it slipped, I remember looking down and seeing all the white bone. I could not feel anything at first so I thought I had not hurt myself very much, then the blood all came in a big red spurt. I think everybody in the street came out to see when I was taken to the hospital. My mother kept shouting, 'I told him not to touch the saw! I told him not to touch the saw!' I do not think I

was so frightened of the blood as of being shouted at again if the saw had slipped. It made me feel really sick. But it had not slipped, I had not had an accident at all, and after a time the sickness went away.

It is a very beautiful stream. There are notices on the bridge saying it is the River Avon so I suppose it must be, but it always looks like a stream to me. Under the bridge the water is quite deep but by the Station there is a shallower part where there are great masses of starwort. The underwater leaves are long and thin like hair but those on top spread out like little light green roses. There is duckweed too. In the very shallowest parts the leaves throw their shadows onto the bottom, each with a little bright rim. Hart's Tongue Ferns grow on the banks. Their leaves are bright green and wavy, and the tips of the longest nearly touch the water. There are small trees too, mostly alder. When I first went to the Station I bought a book of plants, and can now identify nearly all of them.

I was always afraid they would do something to the stream, dredge it or culvert it. I remember when they cut the hedge behind the old house. It was only waist high when they had finished, all the branches woven in and out like a fence, and the dark places underneath it had gone. Everything looked different, it did not seem possible there had ever been that great mound of leaves.

I used to sit by the stream a lot, early in the morning and in the evening when the Station had closed. I was there when the Trouble started. It was a fine evening. It was a Sunday, so there were not many cars in the Park. I did not understand what was happening at first. There was some shouting, and bangs and rattlings like a lot of cars all backfiring at once. I only realized later it was shooting.

By that time I was sleeping at the Station nearly every night. I had bought a little gas cooker as I was afraid to use too much electricity, and I had a saucepan and some tins of soup. When I heard the shooting I was very frightened. I could not think what to do. In the end I decided to stay in the office and wait. I locked the doors and went to bed. Some people came in the night and took the rest of the cars away, but they did not come near the Station.

The noise went on all next day, and most of the next. The third morning was very quiet, and there was no electricity.

Two days later the water stopped running. I knew I must do something

then, as it had to be reported. Also I was very hungry, having used up all my soup. There was a telephone box in the main street, at the top of the little lane that leads to the Car Park. I made sure I had some twopenny pieces and walked up to it. My throat felt rather dry as I do not like using telephones.

The main street was empty. There were some cars parked, one with its doors standing open, but nobody was moving about. Also there was a big cloud of smoke coming from somewhere behind the Cathedral. It was all very odd.

I rang the Offices. I had the number in my pocket book. I was going to ask to speak to Mr Ireland but the telephone did not answer. It did not even make those little clicks and buzzes you usually hear. I read the instructions to make sure I was doing it right, and tried again. But nobody spoke.

After I had tried several more times I went back to the office. It was a sunny morning, quite warm for the time of the year. I made some tea. I had to drink it without anything as I had run out of both sugar and milk. I did not know what to do, I had been relying on speaking to Mr Ireland.

It was afternoon by the time I had decided. I walked round to the Offices. The doors were all closed. I banged on them but nobody came. I felt more confused than ever and went on toward the town centre. I had not gone very far when I saw a body. I mean a dead person. He was lying on the path with his arms spread out and there were dark brown splashes all round his head. I had not seen anything like that before.

I kept on walking but I soon saw some more. One was a lady. She had some shopping with her, it had all spilled out across the path. Something, cats I expect or perhaps birds, had been scratching at it so that all the cartons were spoiled. I did not go very close.

There were a lot more bodies in the town centre and more cars, one with its windscreen smashed. The bodies were mostly on the pavements, so I walked in the road. I kept looking round. I was expecting somebody to shout at me to ask what I was doing. It took me a long time to realize that there was nobody left.

On the way back I passed the supermarket where I used to do my shopping. Its doors were standing open and one of its windows had been

broken. I went inside. I was not hungry any more after what I had seen but I knew I had to get more food. I took a basket and went round some of the shelves. They were all still full. I took some corned beef and some tins of fruit salad, which I have always liked. I knew it was no use taking the bread as it would have gone stale but I found some things called oat cakes that were just as good. When I had filled the basket I went back to one of the checkouts. I did not know how much I had taken and am not very good with figures, so I left a 5 pound note in the clip on the front of the till. I hoped that would be enough.

I went back again when the food was gone. It was horrible. There were big crows flapping about in the streets and the whole town was starting to smell. I knew I had to have a lot of food this time as it might be a long while before anyone came back, so I took a shopping trolley. I tried to add it all up but I kept getting different amounts. In the end I just walked away. I knew that was stealing but I was very hungry, and somehow it did not seem to matter any more.

I do not know why the Trouble happened. There was a lot on the telly about the black people fighting the whites, and the Unions trying to take over, but I could never understand it. I do not know why black people and white people should fight. I knew a black man once when I was on the carts. He was a very quiet person, and used to bring small fruit pies to work that his wife had made. He shared them with me sometimes. They were very nice.

I have done more than I intended to again, the ledger is starting to look quite full. But it seems when I think of one thing it makes me think of others, and then they have to be put down as well.

I am glad I have written about what it was like in the town. I do not feel quite so worried now, though I do not know why that should be.

I had a bad dream last night. It was very frightening. At least I think it was a dream. It certainly started out as one.

When it began I was sitting by the back door of the old house in my car. I remember it very clearly. There was a patch of dark blue shiny bricks and a strip of earth to one side with ferns in it and a big flaky seashell the size of a football. The outhouse door was painted dull green and had a horseshoe nailed to it. I never liked to get too close to the outhouse as

there was something inside it that frightened me. I found out later it was an old washing dolly but in the half light it always looked like an animal, with a long neck and big sticking-out ears. In the dream I knew it was going to come out and get me but I could not move. My mother was knocking on the living room window and shouting something, but it was as if the pedals of the car were frozen solid.

Then I do not know how it happened but I had moved and was rushing across The Patio very fast. Only the garden was not as I remembered it, there was a great hill beyond that kept getting steeper and steeper. The pedals started going quicker and quicker, then just as I was going to crash there was a great shout of 'Whoa, back!' It woke me and I sat up. I was sweating quite a lot. I was frightened because the shout had been right too. I mean, something I remembered. The house I used to live in was on a little slope and there was one Co-Op man who never used to set the handbrake on his van, and that was how he would shout at the horse when it kept walking on. The noise still seemed to be echoing, though why he should come back and shout in my office again after so long I could not understand.

I lit a candle, but there was nothing there. Then I thought the sound might have come from one of the Stations, my side or the Ladies, so I got the keys and a torch and unlocked them. But everything was all right. It was a beautiful night with a full moon. The hills showed clearly, and I could hear the stream running in the dark.

I did not go into the other Station till nearly a month after the Trouble. Mrs Stevens did not come again, though with all that had happened I hardly expected her to, so while my side was still opened and closed at the proper times hers stayed shut. Then one morning, I do not know why, I tried my outside key in the other lock. I did not think it would fit. But it did, and the door opened.

I was very startled by that. For a moment I did not know what to do. Then I put my head inside. Naturally I had never been in before. It was just like my side, the same light grey walls, the same basins and roller towels and white tiles. It smelled a little musty though, from having been shut up so long.

I went farther in. I was worried that I was doing wrong, but very curious. There were no channels, naturally, just the cubicles, but everything else was just the same, with a door at the back to another little

office. It was open, so I went in. It was the same as mine, only not so tidy. There was a raincoat on a hanger and a corner cupboard and a table with some keys on it. I took them and put them on my own ring. I was not worried any more as I had come to a decision. Since nobody was looking after the other Station it was clearly my duty to take it over myself. This time I was sure Mr Ireland would agree. I went back and stood in the main part again by the cubicles. It still seemed a little strange, everything the same as my side only the wrong way round. But I soon got used to it.

My first job was to clean out the office, which was really in rather a mess. I tidied all the stores I could find and washed the floor, and stood the doors open for it to dry. Then I started on the rest. I cleaned the pedestals, flushed all the cisterns and refilled them by hand. There was a dispenser on the wall that I did not like to touch at first but finally I unlocked it. I did not know what I would see inside but it was quite all right, just a stack of little white cartons. I had found some while I was tidying the office and had not known what they were. I filled the machine right up and checked that it was working properly, then I started on the floor. A lot of dust and stuff had blown in under the door, I swept it out and gave the Station a good scrub through. Then I got the steps and cleaned the windows, inside and out. It was a hard day's work but when it was finished I was very pleased with myself.

Next morning I went back to the town. I had realized while I was doing the cleaning that the other office would make a useful store room, and since my food was running low I had better get a really good supply. The streets did not smell quite as much as they had, though in the supermarket it was worse. All the food in the refrigerators had gone bad and there were rats scuttling about. They had even chewed the labels on a lot of the tins so it seemed I was only just in time. I spent a long while going forward and back with the trolley. When I had finished the office was really full. Then I went looking for other things that would be useful, like spare gas cylinders for the cooker. It was easy, as nearly all the shops had been left open. I had got quite used to taking what I wanted by this time, it hardly seemed like stealing any more. After all nobody else wanted it. Then I went to my flat. I had some more tinned soup there, I took it all and some clothes and blankets.

Nearly the last thing I did was go to the Cathedral. I had wanted to see inside it ever since I could remember but I had never dared, and now seemed as good a chance as any. When I got up close I realized how big it

really was, with the spire going up and up in the sunlight and all the windows staring down. It made me feel quite giddy. I half expected it to be locked up but it was open too. There was a big door at the side, standing ajar. I went through and there was another door with a huge iron handle. I turned it and pushed and it opened a little way. The air inside smelled funny, very musty and cold. There were great tall columns like trees and a big window with the light all pouring through. But I could not go in. I stood on the step a long time but in the end I had to walk away. It frightened me. Places like that are for the Lordly Ones, not the likes of me.

I spent this afternoon sitting by the stream again. The doors of both Stations were open, ready for anybody who might come, and there was nothing else to do. It was a warm afternoon and very still, the sort of day you often get in September. The hills looked yellow in the sunlight, and some smoke was going up a long way off. It was really quiet but from time to time there was a sort of dull booming, like guns being fired miles away.

I suppose it will sound funny, but I felt at peace. I have been feeling like that a lot since everybody went away. I cannot really find the right words to describe it.

When I wake up in the mornings the sun makes a patch low down on the wall by my head, always in the same place. Birds are singing in the trees by the stream and I know if I go to the window the sun will be on the brick wall round the Car Park, and the hills. As it moves round through the day all the shadows change until they point the other way. Sometimes if there is a wind the dust blows across the Car Park in little whirls. When I lock the doors last thing at night the moon is coming up. The moon makes shadows too of course, and they change as well as it goes across the sky. The moonlight makes the Car Park look nearly white but the shadows by the stream are black, like velvet. At night it always seems you can smell the water more clearly. The mist usually comes when it is starting to get light. It makes long streaks that reach as high as the bridge parapet. Nothing else happens. I do not want anything else to happen, ever again.

Being on my own was strange at first but I soon got used to it. I was sorry for a while that I would not see Mr Ireland again but I do not think he will come now. I do not think anybody will come.

I have had an odd thought. I think I enjoyed the garden so much when I was small because I could be on my own there. Nobody knew about the secret places except me. I wonder if perhaps that is what I have always

wanted. Just to be alone, and not have people always telling me off. Perhaps that is why I wrote so much about the garden, and my pedal car.

The tune about the Lordly Ones has been in my head again all day. There must be a reason for it. I wonder if they are the only people left, if they own everything now. I think it is their fires I can see on the hills.

If they do come, the Stations will be ready. They will see that I have been doing my job.

The water is running again!

It woke me in the night. At first I did not understand, then I could not believe it. The pipes were knocking and banging all round then I heard the big cistern flush, and the hissing as it started to fill again. I got up and went outside. I still could not believe it, but it was true.

I unlocked the Stations and went in with my torch. I was afraid of something overflowing or getting blocked. But everything was working perfectly. I flushed all the cisterns, both sides, again and again; and as fast as I flushed them, they filled back up! It was like a miracle.

I could not go back to sleep. I made some tea instead. As it was a celebration I used the special packet Mr Ireland brought. I even opened some tinned milk I was keeping for a special occasion.

I cannot write any more just now. It is getting light already and I have a lot to do. Both Stations must be cleaned right through, from top to bottom. I expect somebody will be round from the Offices soon, to see how I have been getting on.

I have made another decision. When Mr Ireland comes, I am going to show him what I have written. I expect some of it is silly but I know he will not laugh. I would not show it to anybody else. Nobody in the whole world.

I cannot understand what is happening. The water is still on and the electricity came back this afternoon, I kept trying the switches just in case. But nobody has been to the Stations.

I worked all day. I did everything, the tiles and channels, the pedestals, the downpipes, the windows and floors. I wanted it all to be looking its

very best. But nobody came.

I kept telling myself they would be very busy, they would have a lot more important people to see than me. But when it got to evening I started getting anxious again and went up to the telephone box. It was just the same as last time though, the telephone would not answer however much I tried. So I went round to the Offices. They were still shut and big drifts of paper and rubbish had blown up against the doors. So nobody had been there after all.

It was getting late when I came back and I noticed something else. All the hills were dark, there were no fires showing anywhere. So the Lordly Ones have gone away as well.

I do not know what to think. I want to see Mr Ireland again of course but I am getting worried now about all the food still in Mrs Stevens' office. I had to have food if I was going to keep on doing my job but I am afraid if he does come now he will think I took too much. But I did not know how long I would have to be here and it was only spoiling anyway. I did not take anything that was not necessary. I even returned the trolley when I had finished with it, I can show him where I left it. And he will see the water tank and the crane and know I did the best I could.

There have been noises in the town for hours now. Queer noises. It sounds like the shooting again. But that surely cannot be right. It is all over.

I am going to leave the lights on in the Stations tonight, and the doors unlocked. I know it is against the rules but if there are people about again someone might need them.

I think maybe the Lordly Ones came down from the hills and turned the water on for me. I suppose I am really hoping they will come here. I wonder what they will be like. Beautiful of course, as it says in the song. I wonder if they will be black.

They have been to the Station!

It was some time during the night, I do not know when. After I had finished writing I put the office light out and lay down on the bed. I felt very tired but I did not think I would sleep. I must have done though

because when I opened my eyes again it was early morning.

I got up at once and went outside. The mist was still hanging over the brook, the trees looked quite ghostly with it floating round their trunks. The first thing I noticed was something lying on the Car Park. It was a piece of cloth, all covered with blood. There was some more near the Station door. I went inside and had a nasty shock. There was blood everywhere, on the basins, on the floor and splashed down one of the walls. So they must have been badly hurt. If only they had called me! I have bandages in the office, proper bandages, I brought them back when I fetched the spare gas cylinders. I could have helped.

I got started right away cleaning the mess up. I got it off the floor and the basins easily enough but it would not come off the wall, it still left stains however much I rubbed. I wish it had not gone on the wall but I do not suppose they could help it.

There has been shooting in the town all day. It is still going on. And there must be a big fire somewhere close because clouds of smoke keep blowing across the Car Park. The sunlight coming through it makes it a funny ginger colour. Sometimes I can hardly see the far wall, and the hills are quite blotted out. I was going to try and get to the Offices again but I did not dare. I wish I knew what was going on.

I had a sleep this afternoon. It was only a short nap but I had a very strange dream. It was as if I was standing a long way off looking at the Station. It was all on its own in fields, no buildings near at all, just the big green hills all around. It is still very clear in my mind. I wish I could draw a picture of it just as I saw it. But I was always very bad at drawing, even at school.

I wish that was how it could be. Just the Station on its own, miles away from anywhere, and me to look after it. I could have a stove for the winter, and curtains I could draw. And I could get up every day and polish the copper pipe under the cistern and do the channels, and the people would come and go from the hills and I could see them. And nothing would change for ever, there would be no more worries at all.

They are here again!

I do not know what the time is. It is still dark. I have lighted a candle to

write this, as somehow I did not want to turn the electricity on. I am very nervous, though I am sure there is no need.

Although it is still night I can see the Car Park. There is an orange, flickery light like the light from a bonfire and I can still smell smoke. It must be coming from the burning building.

They are all round the Station. I can hear their feet scuffling and their voices, but I cannot make out what they are saying.

It is silly to be nervous. After all I am not important, they are not interested in me. But if they really are the Lordly Ones, come down from the hills, I am not sure after all that I want to see them.

They are calling something. It sounds like, 'Come out, wherever you are.' That is very strange. They surely cannot mean me.

There is something else now. They are all shouting it together. 'Dan, Dan, the shithouse man,' But that is not right. This is a Comfort Station, and I am its attendant.

This is terrible! They are shooting, at the Station! I can hear the glass going in the windows. They must not do that! It is special glass, I cannot replace it!

There must have been a mistake. They think there is someone else here, someone they do not like. I will go out to them, I should have gone before. I shall blow the candle out first, then open the door. When they see me it will be all right.

I have had a silly thought, the silliest of all. I would like my little car back again now. I always felt safe in it, I could pedal it through the door and they would laugh. They would see I was only a little child after all.

I am putting the light out now.