

The Fifth Child (3)

Doris Lessing – 1998

Ben had been taken to a place in the North of England; it would be four or five hours' drive – perhaps more, if she was unlucky with traffic. There was bad traffic, and she drove through grey wintry rain. It was early afternoon when she approached a large solid building of dark stone, in a valley high among moors she could hardly see for grey drifting rain. The place stood square and upright among dismal dripping evergreens, and its regular windows, three rows of them, were barred.

She entered a small entrance lobby that had a hand-written card tacked on the inner door: 'Ring for Attendance.' She rang, and waited, and nothing happened. Her heart was beating. She still surged with the adrenalin that had given her the impetus to come, but the long drive had subdued her, and this oppressive building was telling her nerves, if not her intelligence – for, after all, she had no facts to go on – that what she had feared was true. Yet she did not know exactly what that was. She rang again. The building was silent: she could hear the shrill of a bell a long way off in its interior. Again, nothing, and she was about to go around to the back when the door abruptly opened to show a slatternly girl wearing jerseys, cardigans, and a thick scarf. She had a pale little face under a mass of curly yellow hair that had a blue ribbon holding a queue like a sheep's tail. She seemed tired.

'Yes?' she asked.

Harriet saw, understanding what this meant, that people simply did not come here.

She said, already stubborn, 'I'm Mrs Lovatt and I've come to see my son.'

Pick out all the key words which give you an idea of what this institution looked like.

It was evident that these were words this institution, whatever it was, did not expect to meet.

The girl stared, gave an involuntary little shake of the head that expressed incapacity, and then said, 'Dr MacPherson isn't here this week.' She was Scottish, too, and her accent was strong.

'Someone must be deputizing for him,' said Harriet decisively.

The girl fell back before Harriet's manner, smiling uncertainly, and very worried. She muttered, 'Wait here, then,' and went inside. Harriet followed her before the big door was shut to exclude her. The girl did glance around, as if she planned to say, 'You must wait outside, but instead she said, 'I'll fetch someone,' and went on into the dark caverns of a corridor that had small ceiling lights all along it, hardly disturbing the gloom. There was a smell of disinfectant. Absolute silence. No, after a time Harriet became aware of a high thin screaming that began, and stopped, and went on again, coming from the back of the building.

Nothing happened. Harriet went out into the vestibule, which was already darkening with the approaching night. The rain was now a cold deluge, silent and regular. The moors had disappeared.

She rang again, decisively, and returned to the corridor.

Two figures appeared, a long way off under the pinpoint points of the ceiling lights, and came towards her. A young man, in a white coat that was not clean, was followed by the girl, who now had a cigarette in her mouth and was screwing up her eyes from the smoke. Both looked tired and uncertain.