

## The Fountain

Erica stood on the cracked concrete step outside the kitchen, her hands folded across her stomach. She looked down at her splayed feet in the worn sandals and then up across the brown flat earth that stretched to the corrugated iron fence. The two fig trees, leaves rust-edged and crackly, occupied one corner of the yard, while the chicken run ran down the left side.

Her glance moved. Her fountain, she always held her breath at this point, her fountain, when she acquired it, would go in the right-hand corner. She sighed deeply. Unfortunately that day was still some vague day in the future.

Her eyes glazed over. Her fountain . . . silver sequins in the sun. Her smile faded as she remembered other priorities. Their small sheep farm, never highly profitable at the best of times, waited for the drought to break properly. Some rain had fallen, raising hopes and then, perversely, the clouds had veered off in another direction.

For over twenty years Erica had been waiting for the fountain. She believed, no she knew, that it would ease her arid surroundings — the strength of the summer sun sucked every last thing dry — and moisten her parched spirit.

She concealed her longings with fair success, she hoped, but sometimes the desire to own a fountain burned like a passion. It wasn't as if she wanted to change her life, severe as it was, but merely to add a little luxury and beauty. She loved her husband, Walter. He was a good man. But that didn't stop her longing for the sight, the sound and the motion of water, water that would bring her a tiny step nearer to the seaside where she had been born.

They had the small dam, for so long now a dun cracked mat. Just a few centimetres of water rippled like melted chocolate across the bottom. But even when the dam was full it was a necessary utility, not a thing of beauty.

In a magazine she had once come across the picture of a fountain. From the wide bowl at the base, two other bowls, diminishing in size, rose. In the middle an angelic nymph clung to the supporting pole, its chubby hand curved in welcome.

"Agh," she sighed. "It's just what I want."

Overcome by its loveliness she pressed the picture to her breast.

She'd cut the picture out and put it in the kitchen dresser drawer. Hidden really. Every now and then, when she thought no one would see, her heart fluttering like a wing, she would take it out and look at it, imagine it in the yard.

Hot and sticky in her polyester overall, she would steal a break and let the fantasy roam. Cocking her head, she heard the soft splash of water, blinked at the glitter in the gossamer spray. And as the minute drops fell on her, her happy expression turned to one of ecstasy.

Walter, coming on her unawares, looked at her in a puzzled manner.

"Not again. Tell me, Erica, what would we be doing with such a thing in our bare old yard, hey?"

"It would make it less bare. Anyway . . . I just like it."

She spoke quietly just as she did on other occasions, not blushing as she had done the first time.

Walter began changing his boots.

“One day maybe, you’ll get your fountain, but don’t ask me when.”

He paused to rub his red-rimmed eyes.

“The cost of replacing the sheep is so high, not to mention the feed.” He rolled his head with his eyes closed. “We’ll be lucky if we keep a roof over our heads. I’ve noticed a couple of holes in it.”

“I understand, Walter. I was just looking.”

He worked so hard she could not bear to nag him. And, hopeless as the dream seemed of ever being realised, she hung onto it without bitterness because she believed in miracles.

She had been a primary school teacher for ten years. A long time ago she had read many books, studied poetry. A fountain, she thought, would be the answer to her drought, something pretty, promising, permanent. Besides, everyone needed something to look forward to.

She couldn’t confess her innermost feelings to Walter. They were beyond his comprehension, the words as well as the concept, but that wasn’t to say he was unfeeling. Sensible and practical as he was, he didn’t dismiss her fantasies. He accommodated them by saying, “After the tractor has been overhauled,” or, “When we’ve bought the children’s school uniforms ....”

The shimmering mirage dissolved. There wasn’t time to brood. Having little help in the house now, she swept, scrubbed, dusted, polished, cooked, cared for the hens and the vegetable patch. She also preserved fruit from the fig trees and from other fruit the neighbours gave or sold to her. Before she had the children to look after. Her day was as long as Walter’s.

That night, after they had sat down to eat their stew in the kitchen, Erica’s knife and fork clattered to the table. She put her fingers between her breasts.

“I — I feel — strange.” Her eyes, light blue, darkened. She looked bewildered. “Perhaps ... it’s the heat.”

Walter scraped back his chair. “What is it, Erica?” He stood, his knees bent, leaning over her.

“I’ve got a pain right here.” She pressed her fingers on the spot.

His shock mirrored hers. She had never been ill before and neither had he, except for minor ailments. He sat down with a thump. Neither spoke for a couple of minutes.

“Oh, my dear,” Walter murmured.

“It’s gone now.” At first her voice wavered. Then with more assurance she said, “Eat your food now or it will get cold.”

“Yes.” He felt for his knife and fork while he kept his eyes on her. “But you gave me a terrible fright.” He took a mouthful. “Maybe ... you should see a doctor.”

“No, it’s nothing. Like you, I just got a big fright.”

“All right,” he scratched the back of his neck, “but if it comes again — you must go.”

The pain did come again. The doctor in the dorp made an appointment for Erica to see a specialist in town. “Just to be on the safe side,” he said.

“Should we tell the children?” Walter wondered aloud as they left the doctor’s surgery.

The children. She took a sharp breath. Dirk, twenty-one years old was far away. Annette, three years older, was married to a farm manager and lived not far off.

They weren’t children any more, only memories of children, reminders of the fast passing of time. And now that her health threatened to break down, a sudden sense of urgency clutched her. She should be more conscious of life’s shortness. She mustn’t let life slip by until that “ever-rolling stream” carried her away too early. She cleared her throat. Walter was waiting for a reply.

“The children,” she repeated, hunching her shoulders. Why did Dirkie have to be a dancer instead of a farmer or, or a helicopter pilot? She recognised that they were a bit old-fashioned, she and Walter, but still ....

People in the area asked politely about Dirkie but she could detect their concealed disapproval, mixed with sympathy. But he was her son, she loved him. He was a compassionate boy. Poor Walter, he was the disappointed one. She gave his arm a quick squeeze.

She reminded herself again that everyone should have something to look forward to, big or small, concrete or abstract. *She* still had something to look forward to, her fountain. If only she could convince Walter that water, like time, cleansed everything. She had faith that the fountain could wash away disappointments, tears and fears.

“No use trying to contact Dirkie.” She smiled up at him, the thought of the fountain still trailing in her mind. “He’s on tour. It’s not so important, Walter.” Anyway, she didn’t want to worry Dirkie unnecessarily.

The specialist’s diagnosis hadn’t been too alarming. She had angina. She must rest more, take the tablets, lose a little weight. Report back to her own doctor. In a few weeks she should be much better. He ended up by saying, “right as rain.”

Right as rain. Rain, she laughed to herself. What did rain mean to him, except that he mustn’t forget his umbrella?

Before going home they drove to a big new shopping complex. While Walter poked among the spades and rakes, Erica wandered about the basement which, with its variety of treasures, represented an Aladdin’s cave.

And then she found it. To her utter enchantment she discovered a fountain very like her picture. Only, this one was working. The find, preordained, or the result of serendipity, she didn’t stop to consider.

Delight shone from her eyes. Her heart beat steadily but faster. Slowly the fountain, in all its Italianate glory, drew her nearer. The lower basin, shallow-fluted, had been mottled and instantly aged. The water whispered and gurgled from the upper bowl to the basins below. It was as if the water spoke.

“Be happy, stay cool, be calm. Peace and beauty.” The nymph entwined around the centre support, beckoned. Enraptured, Erica ran her rough fingers over the fountain’s edge, her light touch as nothing to the deep longing filling her. She let her fingers play in the miniature waves. If only she could have this splendour in her dry yard.

“Well, look at that. I must say it looks very nice. Hey, Erica, you must stop staring like that.”

She hardly heard him. He nudged her again, pushing his arm against her.

“Like a country bumpkin,” he joked, trying to break her trance. She spoke without turning her head. “It’s ... it’s beautiful, Walter ... I wish ... so much ... for a fountain.”

He sighed. “One day. I told you, one day you’ll get your fountain. Come, it’s time we started back.”

Taking a last lingering look at the fountain, she detached herself from it and followed him out of the store.

“You’re very quiet,” he commented as they drove along. “What are you thinking about? We got good news from the doctor, didn’t we?”

She nodded, her face placid, her body limp.

“It’s the fountain, isn’t it? You know it would be a big waste of money, I mean expense at this time.”

“It’s only the cost of the fountain. The same water pumps over and over.”

“Erica, wife, -” he banged the wheel — “it’s not like you. You have always been so understanding.” He had never known her to be so persistent, even in her gentle way. “Besides we can always use a new pump on the windmill.”

She placed her hand, the skin parched as a eucalyptus leaf past its prime, on his forearm. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t matter. It’s just that — well life is so short.”

“Later, perhaps. Don’t look so sad, man. Say in a couple of years. I know,” his voice rose, “on your sixtieth birthday. But I promise you, true as I’m sitting here,” he pressed the hooter, “you’ll get your fountain one day. Now give us a smile.”

She smiled but the smile didn’t completely smooth the faint lines between her eyebrows.

“I know, Walter. I believe you.” Then she turned to him and repeated with emphasis, “I’ll know.”

As they turned into the dirt road, churning up the dust, she glimpsed the green corrugated iron roof, the paint peeling, of their home. Shadows from the eucalyptus trees threw dark patterns on the whitewashed walls. Her eyes travelled from the baked ground to the feathery leaves of the pepper trees, their movement and colour softening the starkness. In the distance the cracked dam mocked her. But she was glad to be home.

Walter rode off at once to inspect his meagre stock and speak to Jacob the farmhand. Foraging hens encircled Erica in the back yard.

“Come, come.” She scattered the corn after measuring it off in an old tin. Suddenly she threw up her arms as if in supplication, the tin clonking to the earth.

“Agh, if only it would rain.”

She walked through the long bare passage of the house and out onto the front stoep. Sandy bursts along the road leading to the homestead, heralded the arrival of a car. Annette in her stationwagon braked hard. Erica put her handkerchief to her nose. Mother and daughter kissed on the lips.

“How did it go, Ma? What did the doctor say?”

Annette hitched her jeans and tucked in her shirt, scrutinising her mother all the time. Erica told her.

“So you can see you can bring the children around. It’s nothing catching.”

“Oh, Ma, you and your jokes. Still. I’m so glad.”

“But Annette, I must tell you about something wonderful I saw in that big store in town.” Animation rushed colour to Erica’s face.

“Well, come on, tell me.” Annette put her hands on her hips, as if ready to indulge her mother.

“I saw a fountain ... a real one, with water streaming out and, and sparkling under the lights.” She clasped her hands. “Honestly, you’ve never seen anything like it. Wouldn’t it be marvellous to have a real fountain here?”

She lowered herself, a slack bundle, onto the wooden bench. “I’m so tired of looking at dryness, breathing in the dust, suffocating in the heat — tired, tired, tired.”

“But, Ma, water is for dams, or irrigation or boreholes and windpumps. You know.” She laughed, putting her arm around her mother. “It would look, well, sort of silly here. You’re just dreaming again. Come, I’ll make you a cup of coffee and you’ll soon feel better.”

“I wish Dirkie would come home.”

Annette hid her alarm. It wasn’t like her mother to go all soft about that. Dirkie belonged to another world now. That was one of the things she admired about her mother, her willingness, her ability to accept what came along.

“You think he’ll approve of a fountain, hey? But New York’s a long way.”

She tried to cheer her mother up, but her wistfulness made Annette uneasy.

“A man needs to do what he has to do,” Erica said eventually. “We are all prisoners of something or someone, or even ourselves sometimes.”

“Ma, what a way to speak in riddles. You must rest. You are not yourself. I’ll send Annie over to help you.”

Erica pushed herself from the bench. “No. Don’t. Thank you but I can manage. I’m all right, Annette, really.”

After Annette had gone, Erica prepared the meat and vegetables and started the cooking. She leaned over the sink to look out of the kitchen window, focusing on the corner where the fountain would go. She thought she heard the swish of water. She blew through her lips making a whistling sound. The sound of water was only Walter washing at the outside tap.

Drops dripped from his fingers as he put his hand on her shoulder. There was a tremor in his voice.

“Feel the air? And the smell?”

She trembled at his touch. She did indeed feel a chill but by the expression on her face. It was only partly due to the weather.

“I think the rain is coming.” He pointed, “Over there.”

Above the horizon, like grey warships, clouds began to approach, moving ponderously in their direction. She shivered again. “I’m so happy for you — and for all of us.”

“Soon we’ll be out of debt and I’ll get you your fountain.”

As she had done many times before, she pointed to the corner where the fences met. “Thank you Walter. You have been

so patient. You know where it will go.”

He nodded, smoothed her still-dark hair. “I think the dinner’s burning.”

“Oh, my,” she hurried, stumbling towards the stove.

All night the clouds assembled until they formed a mighty bulk, lowering the ceiling of the sky. The temperature fell. A fog-like damp, seeking openings, seeped in. Erica put out extra blankets but her body became colder and colder. She never heard the rain that began with a patter and increased to thundering hoof beats on the iron roof. She died in her sleep in the big bed with an exhausted Walter at her side.

The day he put in the fountain, Annette, wearing a black dress, stood watching him.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, Pa. It’s too late now.”

But instead of looking grim, Walter wore an intent expression on his face, at times almost a calm one.

Isabelle Goodson

"It's better than a tombstone. And it's what she wanted."

"Still, if you don't mind me saying so, it seems a bit stupid now." She blew her nose, then dabbed her eyes. He looked up, his sorrow now apparent.

"Leave me now, Annette."

"I'm sorry." She kissed him on his tanned, lined cheek. "All right."

He checked that the cement had set. He did everything with much care. He was goaded by the guilt that gripped him when he had come across the magazine picture of the fountain. Perhaps he should have made a greater effort before. But how was he to know that ... Erica ...? He wiped his eyes.

He had promised the fountain to Erica. He still owed it to her. It wasn't for his daughter's ears that he knew Erica could see and hear the fountain.

"I'll know," she had said. "I'll *know*."

At last he could totally share the dream with her. She would always be close to him. He looked at the ornate fountain and then at the drab surroundings. It didn't look strange there at all. It looked lovely. The blue sky hung like an umbrella over it.

His boots squelched in the mud as he went to turn on the tap. The fountain flowed.