



Lanugo
by Penelope Maclachlan

‘Hairs on arms? back?’ said Dr Zeus. Without waiting for a reply he rolled up my sleeves, then peeled away the three sweaters I was wearing. I snatched back the layers of protection. ‘Colour bluish.’

‘I’m cold.’

‘It’s eighteen degrees Celsius in here – ideal for a normal adult.’

‘I have poor circulation.’

‘You have a deadly illness, Malvina.’

Incredulous, I smiled. He frowned.

‘You will be hearing from Unthank Hospital.’

‘Why?’

‘To tell you when they have a bed available for you.’

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

It was three miles from my basement. I walked them, of course. Day-to-day life proffers opportunities for those who seek them. I smiled smugly at the thought of the seven flights of stairs I made myself climb every Monday to Friday morning to reach the open plan office. I did once take the lift. Fatima’s giggle as she chatted up head clerk Muhammad made me clench my fists till the nails drew blood from the palms of my hands. Henceforth I would take the stairs in pursuit of two goals: to hear that girl’s voice as rarely as possible, and the other thing.

I arrived at the basement shivering with cold, and hollow. Supper comprised a dessert spoonful of cottage cheese, watercress, and three glasses of white wine to numb my thoughts. In bed I continued to shiver, despite the old sweater over my nightgown and woollen socks pulled up high onto my mottled legs.

The alarm clock woke me at seven. As always, I asked myself,

‘What if I don’t go to work today and just lie here till I’m dead?’

As always, I forced myself up, and under the shower. I looked down at my body. Was that a bulge? I finished off with a cold splash to my belly, partly to prevent lingering, and partly to tone up lazy muscles. A rough towelling reddened the skin but discouraged flab. I pulled on my clothes and it was gratifying that the waistband of my skirt was so loose that it threatened to slither down my hips.

‘I’ll have to take it in again,’ I said, pretending that this was to be deplored.

Breakfast was, as always, black coffee and an orange. I read somewhere that oranges are the least fattening fruit. I walked to work. ‘Aren’t you lucky!’ said the others, bemoaning their journey from salubrious suburbs. The Buckup Engineering skyscraper loomed over my evenings and weekends.

On the way I called at the newsagent for the Guardian. Crooning from the radio irritated my ears: ‘All I need is the air that I breathe/and to love you.’ *No - I need scrambled eggs on thickly buttered toast and a mug of hot chocolate.* I slapped myself on the wrist, then walked the too familiar route until the gaping maw of that building once again sucked me in. Nobody saw me slip through the door leading to the stairs. *One foot in front of the other – come on, you can do it. You aren’t fat and lazy like some.* By the seventh floor I was gasping and there was a

stitch behind my ribs. I avoided the ladies' room. It would be full of giggling girls. One used an open safety pin to separate her eyelashes; I could not bear to watch.

On my desk teetered a tower of documents; everybody dumped their filing onto the office dogsbody.

For a moment I was alone with the computer. I found what I was looking for:

Lanugo ... is hair that grows mainly on the arms, chest, back and face of individuals with eating disorders.

You don't blame someone with measles for their spots. You care for them and sympathise with them.

Heavy footsteps pounded the floor. That was the only thing I liked about The Termagant – official name Miss Tart. She was so heavy on her feet, I could always hear her coming. I stood on a chair to reach the top of the paper tower of rubbish.

'Malvina!'

'Oh Miss Tart, you startled me!'

'You must not stand on office furniture!'

'Then may I have a stepladder?'

'Don't be a silly little girl.'

I jumped soundlessly off the chair, counterpoising her: Heavyweight versus Atomweight. Off she strode, and the floor shook beneath her feet. As soon as she was out of earshot the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and an unfemale voice said,

'Malvina Dolores, please.'

'Speaking.'

'I am the matron at Unthank Hospital. We have reserved a bed for you. You are to report here by 11-30am tomorrow. Give us your employer's details if you want a sick note.'

I complied.

'You will receive further instructions on your arrival. Alcohol is not permitted on the premises.'

Thank you, gracious lady, I thought when she rang off.

I went to find The Termagant.

'I'm going into hospital tomorrow.'

'You must give me a week's notice.'

'I've only just heard myself.'

'It's most inconvenient. How long are you going for?'

'I don't know.'

'You ought to have asked. As soon as you do know you must tell me. Which hospital is that?'

'Unthank Hospital.'

'Never heard of it.'

'It exists.'

'Don't be stroppy! What's the matter with you?'

'Anorexia.'

'A spoiled child's ailment. Well, don't hang about. The least you can do is leave things tidy.'

Remembering the stricture about alcohol, I drank half a bottle of wine that night.

Next morning I packed a suitcase with my size eight clothes, dismissing from my thoughts the possibility that the time might soon come when I could no longer get into them. I was so cold and tired that it would be a welcome change to let myself be fed and cared for.

Unthank Hospital was over an hour's journey from my basement. As I approached my destination a woman walked up to a tree, glowered, and walked back again, slamming the door of the hospital behind her. A notice on the front door told me to buzz for admission. I did, and was confronted by a starched white cap and apron.

'Malvina?'

'Yes.'

'I am Matron. Follow me ... This is the women's ward. You're not to go into the men's ward for any purpose whatsoever. Come to the dispensary. Dr Ameer wants to talk to you.'

She busied herself behind a computer. I felt restless with nothing to read, and after a moment I rose.

'Where are you going?'

'To fetch a book.'

'I told you Dr Ameer wants to talk to you.'

I sat back down again and looked at the high barred window. Did they think patients would jump out if they could see trees and grass and flowers?

A man came in and extended his right hand.

'I'm Dr Ameer. Come to my room.'

I had no time to assess the surroundings before the once-over started.

'Are you thin, Malvina?'

'Well, if you compare me to what I looked like ten years ago ... but I was overweight then ... '

'Who said so?'

'Everybody.'

'Everybody?'

'My father.'

'Did he use that word? "Overweight"?''

'He said I was hefty. Solid. I don't think he liked me much.'

I recalled the steely glint in his eyes and the clipped tone he used whenever he censured me for taking up too much space, for guzzling too many resources, for existing. My mother would scuttle from the room and bury herself in her pupils' homework. Decades later, she told us that she resented the role of family peacemaker.

'You use the past tense. What does he say about you now?'

'That my eating habits are weird.'

'Are they?'

'It's a matter of opinion.'

'What do you think of your figure in a bathing suit?'

'There's less of it than there used to be.'

'You won't say it, will you? You won't say you're thin. What do you do for fun?'

'Read.'

'For example?'

'Erich Fromm.'

'Erich Fromm!'

'He was a genius. I carry *The Art of Loving* with me everywhere I go. Before I read it I thought love was a lottery. I'd never thought of it as an art; he shows me that it is. If I want to achieve it I have to work at it, just as if I want to be a poet, I'll have to study language and imagery and the subjects I have chosen.'

Dr Ameer's eyes popped.

'It's lunch time.' Now he was back on safer ground. 'Mind you eat well.'

The next few days were fun. The men – whose ward I must not enter of pain of death (I smiled when I recalled Matron's admonishment) – showed me around. I asked one where you went to be alone.

'Alone?'

'By yourself. Private.'

'We aren't alone very much. We eat together, and we all do OT.'

'What's OT?'

'Occupational therapy. You've been to psychiatric hospital before, haven't you?'

'No.'

'Oh. The rest of us have.' He reeled off the names of institutions. 'If we don't get well there, they send us here. You've the first I've come across to get in just like that.'

He looked at me as if I had achieved some kind of distinction.

The fun ended on Thursday night, when they weighed us. The women were in their nighties, and the men were confined to their ward until it was their turn. I had lost half a kilo since admission, and the punishment was bed rest, all day as well as all night. I had to drink Complan (powdered food mixed with milk) with every meal, to boost calorie intake. Some of the others were on Nardil, and forbidden to eat broad beans or cheese, or to drink alcohol. My poison was Largactil. They dosed me three times a day. Just as the fog in my brain was beginning to clear, they made me take another dose. All I could do was eat and sleep. I would have been in denial but I was hauled out of bed every Thursday night to be weighed. Matron looked gratified as she clanged one iron disk on top of the other and the onlookers 'oohed' and 'aahed', relishing the spectator sport. Women love it when other women get fat.

One form of torture I was spared was ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), which zapped the brain with an electric current, inducing an epileptic fit. They inflicted it on depressives, hopelessness as heavy on their psyche as a dead weight, and agoraphobics, who feared going out. The woman I had seen walking to a tree the day I was admitted had agoraphobia; the tree marked her destination. What horrified me was that no one, not even Dr Zeus, knew why ECT worked (if it did. Since 2000 it has become less fashionable.) An agoraphobic subjected to it confused me with one

of the Spanish maids, and I became 'María'. Some patients and friends of patients defend ECT vigorously, proclaiming it a lifesaver. Stubbornly, I cling to my tenet: ***if you don't understand it don't trust it.***

The alcoholics were good company. They didn't have ECT either. Their treatment comprised being forced to take a sip of beer or wine or sherry or whatever they were addicted to, and then getting an electric shock to the hand holding the glass. There was a lot of electrification going on. When the USA replaced the electric chair with the lethal injection in 1977, perhaps the motive was mercy.

Every Friday morning there was the Conference. The library was unlocked for this solemn occasion. Dr Zeus would preside on his throne. Electric light dazzled the interviewee's eyes. The staff flanked Dr Zeus – fellow psychiatrists, occupational therapist, Matron, charge nurse, staff nurses, all sat and stared at the patient, the defendant. From her heavy gilt frame where Dr Zeus and his captive could see her, one of Rubens's fleshy females gazed into space.

I was fretting about being in a stupor all the time. Such wits as I had ever had, I wanted back. I felt like livestock, hauled onto the scales every Thursday, found wanting, and returned to captivity to be further fattened. One Friday morning I wrote to Dr Zeus:

Dear Dr Zeus

Please reduce my dosage of Largactil. It's far too strong. I can't concentrate. I can't think. I can't read. All I do is lie here and eat and sleep. How can I get better if I'm not allowed to move? It's time to give me less medication and more freedom.

Yours sincerely

Malvina Dolores

I put the note into an envelope and sealed it and asked Matron to give it to Dr Zeus.

'Why can't you just speak to him at The Conference?'

'I prefer writing.'

I knew she delivered the note, because at midday she rushed into the ward, eyes popping.

'You're to put on your dressing gown and slippers and go down to the Conference at once.'

I complied. Matron knocked on the door and the booming voice of the psychiatrist bade her enter. She ushered me to the hard little chair for interviewees. Dr Zeus sat godlike on his throne. My note was in his hand and he held it up, as disgusted as if it was a dead rat.

'Do you realise that you are grossly impertinent?'

'I don't mean to be.'

'I am the professional here. You are the amateur. I wouldn't argue with a professional tennis player about forehands and backhands.'

I missed my cue. Only later did it occur to me that tennis was not in question: my health, my appearance, my sanity, were.

He looked at my legs poking out from my dressing gown.

'Painfully thin. Disgusting.'

I covered up the offending limbs. It was weeks since I had been thin, and what was painful about it? My favourite film was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I thought of it then, and of how I too could defy authority, and perhaps I smiled.

'Don't look so pleased about it!'

I felt the blood draining from my face. He saw that he had frightened me, and adopted a musing tone:

'Can you guess my favourite artist?'

'Peter Paul Rubens.'

Dr Zeus looked almost as surprised as had Dr Ameer when I mentioned Erich Fromm. One up to me.

'Yes, indeed. Ah! Helena Fourment in a Fur Robe!'

I glanced up at her. She was all cellulite and dimples and reminded me of white blancmange with strawberry jam. I said,

'I wonder what her body mass index is.'

'You can go.'

A few days later, Matron dumped onto my bed a parcel.

'Some of your mother's clothes which she doesn't want any more. You can get up now. Mrs Bright expects you at occupational therapy.'

I tore open the parcel. A skirt with a drooping hem. Beige blouses. Two bras, size 36D, and four pairs of panties, almost as good as new. I rose and went to the wardrobe and stripped off my nightie and tried on my own underwear. Impossible to fasten the 32A bra, and the size eight panties threatened to rip if I yanked them up

any further on my thighs. I could get into my mother's cast-offs. They made me look like a bag lady and I certainly felt like one.

Mealtimes with the other patients were a penance.

'Complan? Why? you're not skinny. Three pieces of bread! You'll waddle down the road.'

To this day I regret not breaking platefuls of the horrible hospital food over the heads of my tormentors. I didn't mock them for being scared to go out of the front door, or for sitting for hours with their heads in their hands. Why did they have to comment on every mouthful I ate? My resistance was worn down. I was as passive as a rag doll. I kept so quiet they tired of plaguing me.

Mrs Bright, occupational therapist, lived up to her name. She told me how well I was doing, though I found occupational therapy boring when it comprised cutting up ceramic tiles to glue onto boxes. Some afternoons we had play reading. An alcoholic turned out to be a good actor, and an impudent Algernon to my haughty Lady Bracknell. Mrs Bright kept looking at me and nodding her approval.

'You come to life when you read a part that you like,' she said.

I didn't realise she had a hidden agenda.

Soon the secret was revealed: I was to be sent back to work.

'It was my idea,' said Mrs Bright proudly.

I went to see Dr Ameer.

'Of course I can't take Largactil any more,' I said.

'It's out of the question for you to stop.'

'But I've passed my weight target.'

'For a few days. You must sustain your new weight until we can be sure it's stable. You will take Largactil in liquid form in the morning and at night. For day time we will give you tablets.'

I was too browbeaten to protest. The drugs, the authorities, the rules had broken my spirit.

The following Monday morning I plodded to the station. All the seats were taken. For an hour I had to stand. When I reached the Buckup Engineering building I glanced at the door to the stairs, and took the lift. My reappearance at the office were greeted with cries:

'What a big girl!' 'There'll be no stopping you.' I sank into the chair at my desk, and one wit said, 'Don't break it, now!'

'Is this Malvina? I thought it was a new employee!'

This gem was from Isla Islington who had been covering for me. She carried box files and ring binders, which she dumped in front of me.

'You couldn't expect me to do all your filing as well as everything else.'

I wanted her to leave the stuff with me so I could get my head around it, but she pulled up a chair and rattled away, 'This is the San Francisco man hours report. Don't forget to separate the latest from the older ones. Mr Brown wants his temp for another week and then you're to check with him. The timesheets roster needs updating. You left the cupboard in a mess. Tidy it before Miss Tart sees it. She's doing her rounds but she'll be in to talk to you, don't worry. She won't recognise you! The computer printouts need distributing. ...'

My mind was befogged. I heard her individual words but made no sense of them.

'All right?'

She expected me to say something.

'Yes.'

'Good. It's nice to go back to having one job instead of two.'

Off she scuttled.

One of the ring binders slid off the desk, and its contents were scattered far and wide. I got down on all fours and started to gather the pages. They were unnumbered. What to do? I could read the material and try work out the sequence. I picked up a page and squinted at the last line. The words danced in front of my eyes. I snatched up everything and stuffed it into a box file, on top of whatever it already contained.

'Hello, heffalump!'

Miss Tart confronted me. She must have been proud of this witticism, as she repeated it a few times. I smiled weakly.

'What are you doing with an empty ring binder?'

'I found it here.'

'Why haven't you done the filing?'

'Isla was briefing me.'

'What a mess!'

'I'll sort it out.'

'So I should hope. Have you distributed the computer printouts?'

'I was just going to.'

'Hurry up and do it. They're a priority, in case you'd forgotten.'

I plodded to and fro to the accompaniment of more remarks such as 'twice the girl!' At lunch time I took the Largactil tablets from my bag. They were like round white pebbles and I had to have two mugfuls of water to swallow them. The canteen was crowded. With a feeling of 'just like old times', I bought three small apples. This had been my pre-hospital lunch. I pretended not to see or smell the bacon and cheese melts and steak-and-kidney pies. My usual corner was, as always, unoccupied because nobody else liked its darkness, and the hard chair with one leg shorter than the other three so it rocked. All around me was babbling and the odd shriek of laughter. I ate the apples slowly, savouring every mouthful, yearning for cheddar cheese in warm bread, thickly buttered, and dollops of sweet chutney. *You pig!*

I glanced at my watch. Fifteen minutes remained of the lunch break. A walk around the block would burn one or two calories. When the fifteen minutes were up, I returned to prison. I had to take the lift with crowds of others, but they were chattering among themselves and ignored me. My legs felt like jelly as I walked to my desk and dumped my heavy body onto the chair. I had managed to put most the files and folders somewhere so I had in front of me a clear space. My eyelids drooped as they always did after a dose of Largactil. I would put my head down for just a moment.

'Sleeping beauty!'

With my heart in my mouth, I looked up. A whippet-like secretary loomed over me and rapped on my desk with her knuckles.

'Wakey-wakey! Mr Ratcliffe wants his computer printout.'

I thought I had distributed them all and wondered why there was one left over. It would be Mr Ratcliffe's. The only time he ever spoke to me was to pull rank. I handed the document to the girl.

'He's said a couple of things about you,' she assured me, and bounded away.

Three and a half hours remained of the working day. People asked me questions I couldn't answer. Miss Tart scolded, but I couldn't absorb what she was saying. It was all I could do to keep awake, or partially so. The journey back to Unthank Hospital took two hours. The evening dose of Largactil was just starting to kick in when Dr Ameer appeared and asked me into his room.

'How did you get on at work?'

'Badly – very badly. It's the drugs. I can't concentrate.'

'You've forgotten some of the details, that's all. They will come back to you. You must continue on the same dosage.'

Although Dr Ameer was less ferocious than Dr Zeus, he became almost as excited whenever I questioned my need for a drug whose effects I hated and feared. The other patients were sanctimonious, telling me 'It's the same for all of us', but it wasn't. None of them had been ordered back to work on the say-so of an occupational therapist. There was no such thing as discussion between doctor and patient. They ruled; we submitted. I wondered why I was singled out, with extra discipline imposed. Perhaps they thought I was rebellious, though I did as I was told.

On Thursday night they reported me for losing a kilo. Dr Ameer questioned me on Saturday.

'What have you been eating for lunch?'

The three small apples came to mind.

'A hamburger in a bun, ketchup, chips and a fizzy drink.'

'Why have you lost weight?'

'I'm working hard to make up for the weeks I missed.'

'Then you must eat twice as much.'

Four months later they discharged me from the hospital. A psychiatrist saw me once a week, when she weighed me, and scolded me for any losses:

'You look ghastly. Nobody would look at you twice.'

She asked about my relationships.

'I'm seeing a man, but he bores me. His silly jokes get on my nerves.'

'Don't ditch him unless you can get someone else.'

One aspect of my job I liked and did well: the staff roster. To update it, I had access to details of other employees, including their salaries. I was as curious as the next person, but not friendly enough with anyone to gossip. Nevertheless it must have reached the ears of someone, perhaps Mr Ratcliffe, that a mere clerk knew of his marital status, qualifications and – oh horror! – how much he earned. Anyway Miss Tart told me that I was no longer to do the staff roster. The confidential files would be removed and put under lock and key, and I would never see them again.

'But that's the only part of my work I like!' I protested.

'In a paddy, are we?'

As the doses of Largactil became less hefty and then tapered off altogether, I recovered enough energy to feel restive and frustrated. Oh the joy of emerging from

the fog! I realised I was underemployed, though. For hours each day I had nothing to do. It was their fault. I pestered them for more work. 'Run away and play, dear,' were not their actual words, but might as well have been. They were wasting such abilities as I had. I ransacked the library. Engineering was the most boring subject in the world, but psychology fascinated me. I read that extra effort must always be recognised and applauded. Nobody noticed when I went beyond the call of duty, so I stopped doing so, and channelled my energy into seeking a job that was less stultifying.

I had a computer in my basement. Before I went to work in the morning, after I came in at night, and at weekends, I scoured the internet for opportunities. I found an advertisement: *Teach English as a Foreign Language to Executives From Overseas at Rainbow Ltd*. Previous experience was a must; I had three years of it. I applied. As a shortlisted candidate, I had to give a lesson in front of three assessors to a volunteer, a Brazilian executive called Raul Valente. Beforehand, I felt jolts in my solar plexus. His smile as he shook my hand reassured me. He was a model pupil, quick in the uptake with a keen ear. Afterwards he shook my hand again, and said,

'Muito obrigado.'

A week later an envelope with their logo plopped onto the doormat, and I opened it with trembling hands.

'Dear Malvina

We are delighted to offer you the position of Teacher of English as a Foreign Language ... '

When I told Miss Tart she was impassive. That day I got a terse note informing me that I need not work out my notice. She probably guessed that my well known

stoppiness would combine with crowing to torment her, and sensibly she got rid of me. Farewell present? Party? I got neither; nor did I want them.

At Rainbow I made a superhuman effort because I thought such an opportunity might never arise again. I had some bad moments in the first weeks. Most of the executives I taught had beautiful manners, but one smart Alec had enough vocabulary to say, 'The English are lazy.' 'You're entitled to your opinion' would have been a suitable answer, but instead I ranted about international relationships and how the likes of him ruined them. The other pupils sat in bewildered silence. One of them must have complained to my manager, Kenneth Roberts, who sent for me. He smiled, poured coffee, and said,

'You've made a splendid start, Malvina. Raul Valente says you're excellent. But you mustn't flare up at the slightest provocation. Most of the people here are all right and some are admirable, but there'll always be one or two rude so-and-sos. If you let them upset you, it will affect your relationships with the others, and relationships are crucial in your particular work. Don't let down those who respect you.'

'No, I won't. I promise.'

'You look upset. I meant to advise you, not to hurt you.'

'I've had it tough.'

As soon as I blurted this out I regretted it, but Kenneth persuaded me to tell him about my father's contempt for me, and incarceration at the psychiatric hospital.

'You came first out of two hundred candidates to land this job, Malvina. That's a remarkable achievement.'

In the days and weeks that followed I saw a great deal of Kenneth, and realised he was seeking me out. We talked for hours about politics and plays, and wine and dine. His bass voice was a joy to listen to. When he asked me to move in with him, I did so eagerly. It was a stormy relationship, with fights and reconciliations. A heart attack killed him on the tenth anniversary of our first meeting.

I am now married to Andrew. We have no children. While my contemporaries in their 20s and 30s were raising families, I was unintentionally sabotaging my fertility. Why do people fall prey to eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and compulsive eating? The fashion is to blame no one. On the other hand, families must take the utmost care with the attitudes they develop towards children and adolescents, in their formative years. Discipline is justified and necessary. Chronic irritability, blame, contempt and condemnation are another matter. They poison the atmosphere and irretrievably damage the victims.