

DIGS

by Gertrud Strauss

I am a student in my second year at university. I have a room to myself. So has the servant woman next door. My room has two big windows facing north and east. Her window is six feet off the ground and faces south. If it were facing north or east or west it would be facing neighbour's properties or the street. I look out onto her room. She does not look out at all. Which I'm told she likes. My two outer walls have a double layer of bricks. Her four outer walls have one layer of bricks. My room still gets damp with mould settling on clothes and shoes. Hers must get a lot damper. In Durban's sub-tropical dampness.

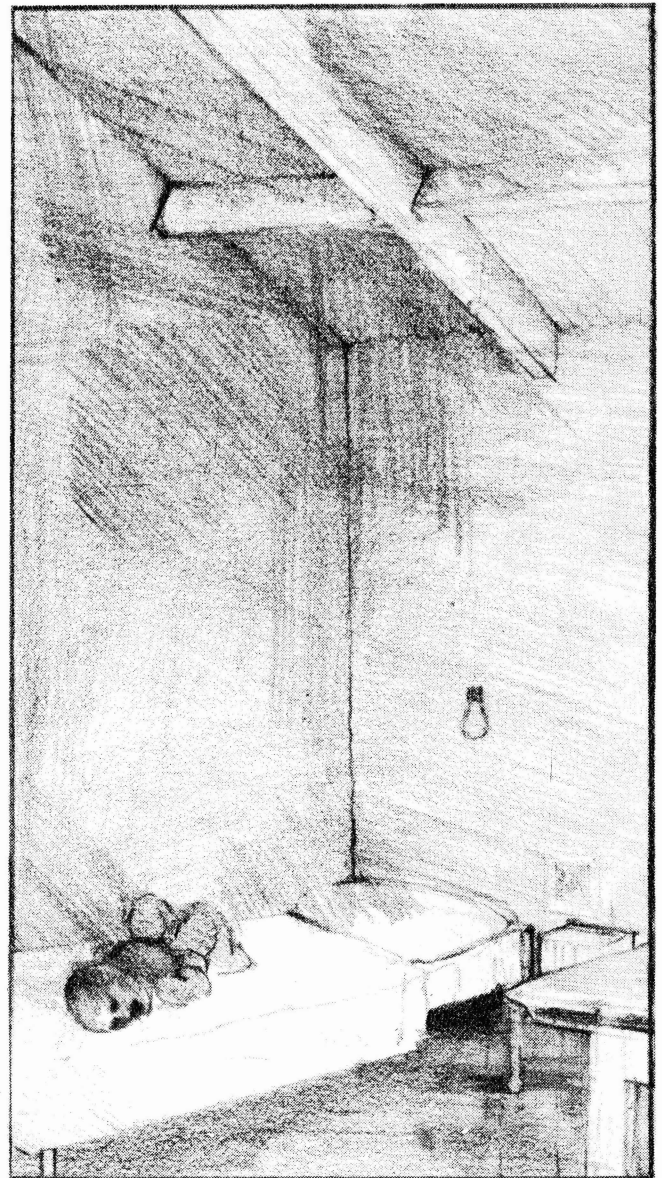
I have books and records and assignments to look after. She has the housework. To which she seems dedicated. I spend a lot of time in my room. She spends a lot of time outside her room. I have mine to myself. She has an infant in hers. Because I can hear it crying.

I work all afternoon at the desk in front of my east window. North's too bright. I try to think clearly. And cannot. The baby is crying. I watch for the mother to come out of the kitchen next door. Which isn't often. The baby cries often enough. The Hoover machines cut out the noise. For her.

I am closer to the baby than anybody else. I must be. Not that I've seen it. Or that her window is open. But the screaming streams through the ceilingless roof.

I reach a conclusion. Maybe the infant is being neglected. But then I hope: maybe not. All babies cry a lot. Especially healthy ones with colic. So says my landlady. I don't know about babies. Which frightens me. I don't know much about mothers either. I have one though. Whose love for me comes natural. She says. I'm not so sure. Perhaps she had support. And this one doesn't. Mothers don't care for babies. When nobody cares for them. It's in the newspapers. I can even deduce this from my lectures. An elementary law. And I should act on it. Go over and make friendly contact. But I hate to get involved. And I dislike her so much. For her unconcerned stroll across the lawn. When the child has screamed for hours. In the damp twilight of that room. And I hate my useless concern.

Should I tell the employers about the crying? I could do that. At five-thirty when they come home. Would they not dismiss the woman? Who knows? Would this save the child? How could it? Would my landlady like it? No, she would



not. Does she interfere with her next-door neighbours or their servants? Out of the question.

Whose fault is it if the child dies? Mine of course . . . though it's absurd. The mother's perhaps. Though she wouldn't admit it. The father's certainly. But who is he? The people living next door maybe. Though they never hear the crying. My landlady's to be sure. Though she's right out of it. The architect. He'd blame the corporation building laws. Circumstances in the end.

Who's to blame for circumstances?□ (Copyright)

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